The Prisoner of Nurmengard
by FiveFarthings

Summary

Someone unexpected picks up the pieces when Hermione's marriage collapses

Notes

All characters belong to JKR. Thank you, Ms Rowling, for letting us play with your toys.

Weekly updates
She should have seen it coming

She should have seen it coming. She really should.

The past few weeks he had been morose and secretive. The charity gala had brought it to a head - or maybe it had just provided him with his opportunity.

He hadn't wanted to go, and had complained bitterly on the bus journey about his time being wasted. Nor had she: exhaustion was a constant feature of her life now, and she would far rather have gone to bed. But she was a trustee of the charity, and must show her face - haggard though it was. So they'd shown up, him sour and unwilling, her on edge, hoping he wouldn’t make a scene again.

The hope was unfulfilled. The chair had just introduced her to a donor, turned with a smile to Ron, and said, "And this is Hermione's husband, Ron." Ron, without a word, had turned and walked out. Hermione, mortified, had apologised for him, made a quick circuit, then taken a taxi home. She’d arrived to find him sitting in the hall, bags packed, awaiting her.

He gave her a stony glare as she closed the door. "Sorry, Mione, I've had enough. I'm leaving."

The words hit her, stabbed into her. Her heart pounding, her head swimming, she staggered, a hand at her throat.

He sprang up. “Damn it, girl, pull yourself together!” He helped her into the kitchen, sat her down and made her tea.

"But why? Why, Ron? I know things between you and me aren't as good as they could be, that you're upset about losing your place on the team, that money’s going to be even shorter, but … it's not as if it's the first time this has happened; we can work through it, surely?"

"We can't, Mione. I'm sick of it. That stupid woman tonight was the final straw. Am I Ron Weasley? No, I’m Hermione’s husband. Well, sorry, but I’m tired of living in your shadow."

“Oh, Ron. She was just identifying you, saying why you were there. Because you are my husband. She didn’t mean anything else by it.”

“That was enough. She basically meant: this is Ron, who tags along behind Hermione. Ron, who’s got no other claim to fame. Everyone forgets I was one of the golden trio too.”

“They don’t, Ron, of course they don’t. Its just that …”

“What? That I’ve done nothing since? Third division Quidditch is nothing? It is to you, I know that. You want me to match up to my wonderful brothers, to Auror Harry.”

“I’ve never said that, Ron. But if you wanted to, you could, you have the ability.”

“Oh, lay off, Mione. We’ve been through all that rubbish.” He wagged his head and said, in a high pitched voice, ‘If only you’d apply yourself, Ron, love, if only you’d give it a chance, it just needs a bit of dedication, Ron, love.’"

She flinched at the sarcastic parody: he’d never been this hurtful before. If this was what their
relationship had come to …

“I’ve heard it a million times: you, Mum, Ginny. But Bill, George, Charlie, Harry, even my hotshot lawyer sister, they all had lucky breaks which gave them the edge they needed. I’ve never had one.”

Being bitten by a werewolf was a lucky break? Losing your soul-mate twin was a lucky break? Having your parents murdered was a lucky break? But they’d been through that before: he could not see it. “I’ve never had a lucky break, Ron.”

“Exactly. My point exactly. You just had the ability to work hard, and where did it get you? You’re just a housewife!”

She stared at him. How could he, of all people, say that - she was ‘just a housewife’ for him!

“But people are too stupid to see that. They just see the Gringotts’ director, the business tycoon, the international dragon consultant, not to speak of King Harry the ninth, and forget the lucky breaks which gave them those jobs. Am I Ron Weasley? No, I’m George’s little brother, I’m Harry’s mate. But the worst is you! ‘Oh, look there’s Hermione Granger, the brains of the Golden Trio. Who’s that with her? Oh, that’s Ron What’s-his-name, the tag-along, you know.’ All I am is the husband of a mere housewife.”

She shrank back. He’d been bitter about his brothers before, but had never struck at her like this, so … nastily. Were these his true feelings?

“And I supported you. You’ve never even offered to get a job. You’ve just lived off my earnings, contributing nothing.”

“But Ron, I thought that was what you wanted. To provide for our family. To be the bread-winner.”

“I wanted a break, a chance to go my own way, without being over-shadowed by my wonderful family, my magnificent friend. Instead I got you.”

She closed her eyes. This was too painful; she must stop him, stop him stabbing at her. “And the children?”

He shrugged. “They don’t need me any more. Rose is nearly grown up.”

(Of course they do-” She stopped. They did, but also they saw the tight-lipped smiles; the silences, hers nervous and despairing, his sullen or angry; the - oh, admit it, girl – the joylessness. You could fool yourself, but you couldn’t fool your children. They knew, and it caused them pain. Especially Rose. Hiding her hurt and her fears, she carried burdens children should not have to carry.

She looked away. She’d tried so hard. Right from the first, she’d known how he felt and she’d tried to keep low, behind him, not to outshine him. It was fine, oh, it was fine for a husband to outshine his wife, but not the other way around. And how hard it had been. She, who’d always striven to excel at whatever she attempted, had to force herself not to, to deny her nature.

She’d been offered an auror internship and had accepted, delighted. But after she’d seen the look on Ron’s face, she’d written and refused it, telling everyone she thought she wasn’t up to the demands of the job. Ginny, incredulous, had pounced on her at once and interrogated her. She’d hedged, Ginny had become suspicious, and, with her sharp mind, had guessed the truth.
She’d been appalled, saying if Ron couldn’t handle it, Hermione must dump him. For all that he was her brother, she said, she knew he was not up to Hermione’s levels of ability - or standards, for that matter. If he could not accept that, his resentment, his envy, would poison the marriage. And if that did not, her, Hermione’s, sacrifice, especially in such an unworthy cause, would eat away at her and, sooner or later, sour the relationship.

And Hermione had flared up. Ron was not inferior, and she could handle it. It would not be such a great sacrifice. She could handle it. It was her business, her and Ron’s. She’d had a furious row with her best friend, and Ginny had backed down.

But, of course, Ginny had been right. She’d never mentioned it again, steered away from it, but every time Hermione had given way to Ron, Ginny had looked away.

Hermione had become a housewife, determinedly refusing anything which might bring her into competition with her husband. How many job offers had she turned down? Offers with salaries of three and four times what he made.

She had only one job, she told herself, and that was to make her marriage work. And how hard it had been, harder, far harder than anything at Hogwarts. She’d put him first, supporting him and encouraging him in his chosen career, offering sympathy and commiserations on his failures and admiration on his successes, making ends meet as best she could on his earnings. They’d had ups and downs of course; all marriages had those, though sometimes it had seemed they had more downs than ups.

Sometimes she’d felt he could be putting a little more into making the marriage work, spending a little more time with the children and her, but then: Quidditch was a demanding job. Younger, talented players were appearing all the time, and it was all Ron could do to hold his own. He could have tried something else, he had the ability, she knew, but Quidditch was the one field in which none of his brothers were. He’d wanted to excel at something, so she’d done her best to help him do that.

Now, seventeen years on, she felt … drained, worn down by the effort. The constant feeling of exhaustion, the migraines and the nagging pain in her back didn’t help. It all seemed such a burden, and that she alone was carrying it. Couldn’t Ron help a bit, when she needed him? She’d given up everything for him. Couldn’t he give something back?

Or … didn’t he want to? She was thirty-seven now, and the strains of the marriage showed on her face. She looked haggard, aged beyond her years. Small wonder he didn’t want to spend time with her – but where was he spending it?

“Ron, is there someone else?”

He dropped his eyes, and no answer was necessary.

“Who is she, Ron? What does she do?”

“She’s a student charms beautician and make-up specialist.”

The magical equivalent of a trainee hairdresser, which meant a nineteen year old who had failed her OWLS. But of course that was exactly what Ron wanted. A girl who would not, could not ever outshine him. And with his glorious past, she would worship him.

And her? Seventeen years of sacrifice, and for what? The scrapheap? She looked at him through her tears. But … finished was finished. “You want out, Ron?”
He stared at the floor, then looked up at her and nodded once, dumbly.

“You have it.” A whisper, throwing away seventeen years.

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Alone. Silence. Just the traffic on the high-street. No one next to her, shifting, snoring, keeping her awake. Only her with her pain, in mind and body, too worn out to sleep, drifting in and out of slumber.

Consciousness returns. Awake, lying still, eyes shut. Birdsong outside. Safe? Another nightmare about the werewolf? They came when she was upset or feeling insecure. Often, recently. She put out her hand to feel for Ron, then withdrew it. No Ron. No Ron ever again. A pang passed through her but it was followed so quickly by such a feeling of relief that she felt guilty. Had Ron meant so little to her? Had the past seventeen years weighed on her so heavily that all she could feel was gladness that it was all over?

But she did. Never again would she have to guard every action, every word, almost every thought. Never again would she have to push aside her feelings, her common sense, her logic and reason, to avoid petulance, angry silences, rows. Never again would she have to caution herself, to step back, to make herself small so she would not outshine someone else. She could be Hermione Granger again.

She stretched, fully, luxuriously, exuberantly – and stopped, grabbing the sheets. Silk? And no traffic noise, hooting, engines revving? And bird song? And ... was that the smell of coffee? Sidamo coffee? How could … She opened her eyes.

She was in a fourposter bed: was she back at Hogwarts? She reached out and drew back the curtains. White walls, a low ceiling with projecting wooden beams, a window with leaded lights on one side and roses creeping round the frame on the other. Had she been abducted? Her heart started pounding. Greyback? Had it really been – had her worst nightmare come true? But Fenrir Greyback was still in Azkaban, she was sure. And if he had her, she’d be in a cave in the woods somewhere, or at best a desolate hovel, or … dead. Her heartbeat slowed.

She sat up and looked down. Her eyes widened, and her heart began racing again. She was wearing what looked like her old cotton Tee shirt: but was actually a copy made of silk with full length sleeves and – she lifted the sheets – reaching to her ankles. Someone had undressed her and redressed her - which was both outrageous and frightening - but had taken the trouble to duplicate what she had been wearing, and to extend it to cover her body completely. Was that meant to reassure her?

Then she had another shock as a movement on a window sill caught her eye. But it was just a cat, a large, dark tortoise-shell with shaggy fur and a long, fluffy tail. The cat sat up, stretched and stared at her.

“Hello, cat. You are a pretty tabby, aren’t you. I don’t suppose you can tell me where I am?”

The cat’s tail went up, then she turned and jumped out through the open window.

A few moments later someone tapped at the door. Hermione reached for her wand on the bedside cabinet, but - no wand. She was defenceless! She drew back, clutching the sheets to her.

“Miss? Miss?” The squeaky voice of a house-elf. “It’s Winky, your maid. I have your coffee, Miss. May I come in?”

She croaked some sort of response, and the elf came in, followed by the cat, tail erect.

It was, it was Winky. Relief soaked through her.

“Miss Hermione, here’s your coffee. Breakfast is set at the lochside, Miss.” The diminutive maid was carrying a tray set with a white cloth, a plate of croissants and a white china cup from which
steam rose.

“Winky, where am I? What’s going on? And where is my wand?”

“Safe, Miss Hermione, you are safe. That’s all Winky may tell you. The master will tell you everything else, Miss.”

She jerked upright. “What? Who? Have I been abducted, then?”

“Oh no, Miss, nothing like that. That would be a very Bad Thing. It was a Good Thing that brought you here. Your good. But, please, Miss, don’t ask me any more, I’m not allowed to tell you.”

“But.”

“He sent me because you know me, and so might be less frightened, Miss, but I’m not allowed to tell you the What and the Why and the How. The master wouldn’t punish me, he doesn’t do that, but he would raise his eyebrows, and that would be a Bad Thing, Miss.”

“Raise his eyebrows?” What was this, some arcane non-verbal spell?

“He would be disappointed, Miss. And no one wants to disappoint the master.”

That sounded mild – or very ominous! What happened if this master was ‘disappointed?’ But it wasn’t fair to ask the elf. “What can you tell me, Winky?”

“Just that you are in Bansith Cottage, Miss, and safe. This is Miss Sash, Miss, “ and she pointed to the cat. “She is the cottage cat, and she will look after you.”

“Oh.” Being looked after by a cat was meant to be reassuring?

The cat’s back arched slightly: had she picked up Hermione’s scepticism and taken offence? She must be a very sensitive cat.

Winky obviously had. “Miss Sash is no ordinary cat, Miss Hermione. Besides being good company and giving good advice, if you need help, she will get it.”

Was there a reason why she might need help at Bansith? And just how would a cat give advice?

Still, she smiled at the cat and held out her hand. Miss Sash’s tail went erect and she walked across to sniff at Hermione’s finger.

“She is just being polite, Miss. She has already made your acquaintance, while you were asleep.”

Had anyone else ‘made her acquaintance’ while she was asleep? So many questions. “Can you tell me anything else, Winky?”

“Just that you are safe as safe, Miss. Bansith Cottage is on the Bansith Estate. It is very remote, and is warded, Miss. As long as the wards are up, no one can get in, Miss.”

Or out? Was she a prisoner? And why should anyone want to get in? Safe from what? But Winky’s presence, the way she spoke, more than what she said: it all portended something much milder than she feared at first. And her dress: the tiny elf wore a white holland apron over a plain black cotton gown, with white lace collar and crochet cap perched on her hair completing the impression of an Edwardian upper servant. It was all very stately and genteel. And the cat seemed happy, confident, cared for. A place when there was love and affection could not be a bad place, surely. Anyway, Greyback keeping a cat? Improbable. And even more: Winky working for Greyback?
Inconceivable. And Greyback dressing her demurely in silk? Impossible. But, still: “Winky, who put me to bed and er ... changed my clothes?”

“Oh, that was me, Miss, me and Sofy and Bruny, the housemaids, Miss. And I ran up the nightdress, Miss, because what you were wearing, Miss, it wasn’t right for Miss Hermione, Miss, not at all, not here, Miss.”

That took a bit of deciphering, but perhaps explained the neck to toe covering. “And, er ... no one else?”

Winky’s eyes widened. “Oh, no, Miss, that would be a very Bad Thing. The master would never allow that.”

It was the master she was worried about: but Winky’s earnest negation seemed to rule that out. “All right, Winky, I won’t ask any more.”

The elf brightened. “Coffee in bed then, Miss?”

So tempting, but: … “No, Winky, thank you. I’ll get up now.”

“May I help you dress, Miss?”

“No, Winky, thank you. I’m used to dressing myself.”

Winky’s face fell. “You don’t want a lady’s maid, Miss? I’ve been an abigail and dressmaker to many fine lady witches. And,” she ran her eye down Hermione’s figure as she rose from the bed, “your old clothes won’t fit any more.”

What! She wasn’t, she couldn’t be – her heart began to pound again and she placed her hands on her abdomen, sensing, seeking.

“Oh no, Miss, no, no, I don’t mean that, no, not at all. Nobody has …” Winky was waving her hands in denial, her eyes big.

Hermione nodded and let out her breath. She could sense no budding life.

“No, Miss, it’s just that your shape has changed. You’ll be needing a new wardrobe, Miss.”

Now what? But she didn’t want to put any more pressure on Winky. She forced a smile. “All right, Winky. My old clothes will do for now, though.”

“I’m sorry, Miss, we don’t have any. And I need measurements before I begin your new wardrobe, Miss. But the master said to Carry On, so I guessed sizes and went to your department store and bought four blouses, two skirts and some underwear.”

She had a vision of the diminutive elf hurrying into M & S in Kensington High Street at ten in the morning, selecting garments with an earnest frown and then levitating up to the counter to put down galleons to pay for them. Eyes goggling all round, but the staff too polite to comment, other than to say, “I’m afraid we don’t accept foreign currency, er ... madam. Do you have Visa?”

But a skirt? She didn’t want to wear anything but trousers until she knew more about who this master was. “You didn’t get any jeans, Winky?”

“I did, Miss, just in case, buy a pair of the cotton workman’s trousers called jeans. And a workman’s top called a tee shirt.” She wrinkled her nose. At the idea of Miss Hermione wearing
workman’s clothing?

“I think jeans and the tee shirt, Winky. What colour is it?”

Winky frowned. “White, Miss, but … well, jeans if you must, Miss, but the tee shirt, Miss, if I may say, Miss, is not right for a lady. Those tops, Miss, are too, too – I’m sorry, Miss – too clingy, too revealing. For your old life, Miss, I’m sure they were fine, not immodest at all,” and she turned bright pink – not at all fine, and very immodest, clearly, in Winky’s opinion, “but here they would not be right, Miss. I’m sorry, Miss, it is a Bad Thing for a lady’s maid to say these things to her mistress, but you don’t know where you are and I’m not to tell you, so I must protect you until you do.”

Hermione must have looked her alarm at the word protect, for Winky added hurriedly, “Bad word, bad word, Miss, not protect in that way, but you are a lady, Miss, and so you must be dressed like a lady.”

She’d go along with that. She had no intention of going bra-less, as she did sometimes around the flat. Winky would probably have a fit if she so much as suggested it. But lady or not, she wasn’t going to give in on the jeans. “All right, a blouse then.”

She took a sip of the coffee. Yes, Sidamo. She closed her eyes to concentrate on the aroma and the taste. How long had it been? Expensive luxuries like ground coffee had been struck from the shopping list ten or twelve years ago. Would ground coffee be considered a luxury in this place? Probably not.

“When you are ready, Miss, the bathroom is there.” Winky pointed to a narrow blue panelled door, “and I’ve put new underwear on the shelf. Oh, and Miss, the bath water is tawny brown because it drains from the heather, not because it is dirty. It is peat water, but clean as clean, Miss.”

It was, both tawny and clean. Whoever the master was, he had the environment in mind. And that was another good sign. She held onto it. The bathroom reassured her further. A claw-foot cast iron bath with stainless steel fittings, a ceramic tiled wet room shower, porcelain sanitary fittings and handbasin: all far better quality than they’d had in Brixton, all in plain white and all spotlessly clean. The master seemed to be both ascetic and aesthete: nothing to excess, but everything of the best. It spoke of wealth sufficient to indulge such tastes.

Who was wealthy and might abduct her? The Malfoys sprang to mind immediately. Not Draco, surely: They moved in different circles and never met, but they did nod to each other at Kings Cross Station: his son was at Hogwarts with her children, Rose was in the same year. Besides, she’d heard he’d turned his back on everything and anyone to do with the Dark Arts. Lucius? Yes, a possibility: they’d seen him once in Diagon Alley. He’d scowled and turned aside into a narrow side street. He was rumoured to still practice the Dark Arts. But, and she looked around: this was surely too spartan for Lucius Malfoy. He came across as a sensualist. He’d have a powered jacuzzi, a shower with multiple jets, gold fittings rather than stainless steel.

Not a Malfoy then, and that was a relief. And maybe she was deluding herself, but a man with such tastes could not be violent, could he? More and more she felt secure. And with that, she began to feel angry. What right had he to do it?

When she returned Winky had laid out a pair of Levis and a white lacy fronted M&S blouse. She looked at the jeans label. Oh dear: she’d not worn that size since before Rose. She’d worked rigorously to keep her figure, but as with anyone, the years had demanded their toll. She’d lost
weight over the past two years but even so, Winky’s guess had been too flattering. Well, she might just squeeze into them. If she held her breath while she did them up.

She gave the elf a smile, sat down on the bed and pulled on the jeans. Perfect fit – in fact, a little loose around the waist. She looked at Winky, and the elf grinned and said, “I told you you’d need a new wardrobe, Miss.”

What was going on? “Winky, I want a mirror. The bathroom hasn’t one.”

Winky’s grin vanished and she said, “No, Miss, it’s been taken out but it’ll be back tomorrow.”

Someone didn’t want her looking at herself. Why? She ran her finger tips over her face: it felt just the same. She looked down at her stomach and … stared: the bulge had all but gone and the skin looked more elastic, smooth, youthful, dipping gently down into her navel. Ron had been obsessed by her navel on their honeymoon, he’d – no, forget Ron, he was the past. But her body curved in smoothly from her hips to a small waist. And her arms: slender, shapely, and fresh. It was the body of a woman in her twenties. Hers, for the appendix op scar was there, but hers as a girl. Not a thirty-seven year old woman with two children at Hogwarts, one who had just sat her wizarding O-levels.

Winky was looking at her nervously. “Miss, if you’ll come to breakfast, the master will explain, Miss. I’ll just brush your hair, Miss.”

But Hermione had had enough. She ran her fingers through her hair and said, “Breakfast, Winky, now, please. Someone has been doing things to me, and I want to know who and why.”

“Oh, I told them, Miss, I told them you’d notice, I told them you’d be angry. This way then, Miss.”

Walking daintily, Miss Sash led the way though a small sitting room and sat down beside a pair of French doors. Winky opened them and Hermione stepped through, onto a veranda.
Soul to the Devil?

The Scottish Highlands: she could be nowhere else. The chill air, the leaden sky over the black waters of a loch, the purple heather covered hills rising beyond. Glorious - or it would be if she were there by choice.

Under the spreading branches of an enormous oak on a green sward, a table was spread with summer fruits on a white tablecloth. At one end, in a wicker chair, was an old man in a panama hat and a cream linen suit with the corner of a green handkerchief protruding from the breast pocket. He rose and stood leaning on a cane, removing the hat as she strode up to him. He was tall and stooped, more ancient than old, sunken cheeked, seams of age like ravines cleaving his face. The patriarch of a noble family, he looked like – and quite probably was. Certainly that stern face looked as though it had never been softened by anything as frivolous as a smile. Winky was right: for this setting she should have been wearing a floral frock, curtsying, eyes demurely downcast. But this was just a flash of imagery. She wouldn’t have cared if she’d been wearing a boiler suit.

She stopped in front of him, ignored his outstretched hand and said, hands on hips, “Well?”

He raised his eyebrows and said, “Please be seated, Miss Granger,” and he gestured to a chair on his right.

“There before you tell me what is going on, and who is responsible for this.”

“I can tell you just as well if you are sitting, Miss Granger, and you will be more comfortable.”

“I don’t care about being comfortable. Who are you?”

“Aha, the blessings of youth. Miss Granger, you might not care about being comfortable, but at my age, I’m afraid I do, and I cannot sit while a lady is standing.”

Hermione threw herself into the nearest chair and glared up at him.

He remained standing. “Miss Granger, I apologise for the inconvenience, but I am extremely deaf in my left ear. So if you were to sit on my right hand side, we can communicate more effectively. I can of course move myself, but then I would be next to you rather than across from you, and you might find that less palatable.”

She moved to his other side, muttering, “Sorry.”

He made a slight bow. “No apology necessary, Miss Granger. You weren’t to know. Now that we are in the appropriate positions, the lady seated and the man standing, let me introduce myself. My name is Abraxas Gaius Malfoy, Miss Granger.”

Her heart began racing again. She sprang up and swung her chair so it was between them. “A Malfoy! Why have you abducted me? What have you done to me?”

He raised a hand. “I am here to tell you that, but I can tell you better seated than standing. I would also add that I am over a hundred years old and, unfortunately, completely harmless. So please, resume your seat.”

He spoke calmly and gently. Perhaps he was benign. Anyway, what else could she do? She sat down again, saying, “No Malfoy is ever completely harmless.”
He lowered himself into his chair and said, “Thank you, though I know you do not mean that to be a compliment. May I pour you orange juice? Coffee?”

She looked around. The table was spread with wooden bowls of peaches, nectarines, oranges, a sliced melon on a china plate, a silver pot of coffee, carafes of different fruit juices. All very gracious, and in the right circumstances she’d have luxuriated in it. But with a Malfoy across from her?

“No, thank you. All I want is explanations, then to leave.”

He raised both hands. “Please. Let us at least observe the niceties. Also, we all dehydrate overnight, so need to replenish our fluid levels. The peaches and nectarines are from the Magaliesberg in South Africa. So are the oranges, and Waldi will squeeze them while you watch. The coffee is Ethiopian Sidamo, from the southern Abyssinian highlands, freshly ground and brewed. May I tempt you?”

He certainly could. But … how could he know her preference for Sidamo? Were the Malfoys spying on her? And if so, what else did he know? And, more importantly, why? What could it possibly benefit anyone to know what type of coffee she liked? Whatever the reason, if it was associated with the Malfoys, it would be to hurt her. But she would not ask: Abducting her and … doing whatever he had done to her was much worse than spying. “A glass of water, please.”

“Miss Granger, I am disappointed. You are acting predictably. Nothing here is drugged or tainted in any way. Everything is pure.” He winced, and added, “Poor choice of word, especially from a Malfoy. But if I intended to harm you in any way, would I not already have done so?”

She leant forward and said, “That is the question, Mr Malfoy. The last Malfoys I met tortured me. What have you done to me?”

He winced again, then got up, limped around the table to pick up a carafe of water, and filled her glass. “The opposite, I hope. What do you think I have done?”

What did that mean? “I went to sleep last night in my, in our flat in Brixton. I woke up here. You abducted me. And you have taken my wand. And you seem to have made me young.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “And sold your soul to the Devil for that youth, Miss Granger? For certainly my soul would be worthless, by your estimation.”

How was she to take that? Was he serious?

“A soul like yours, Miss Granger: forged for almost ten years in the dark flames of the Voldemort conflict, then hammered on the anvil of self-sacrifice for a further seventeen. Yet still retaining its purity, its innocence, its freshness. Surely that would be worth more than a paltry ten or fifteen years of youth? The Devil would exult in such a trade. A diamond for a piece of coal.”

What was he on about? Were the Malfoys closet devil worshippers? Or what was he saying?

“Do not look so concerned, Miss Granger. If there was such a creature, he would have to abide the rules, the first being that souls can only be gifted, sold or bartered by their owners. Though, as we have seen, many are willing to gift their souls to evil for nothing.”

That, she could agree with. So was he just toying with her? “This is all nonsense, Mr Malfoy. And please stop calling me Miss Granger. I am still Mrs Weasley.”

His eyes narrowed and his voice took on a hard edge. “Never. That other name is no more, should
never have been. Miss Granger you are and will remain, until …”

Her heart constricted. His … metaphysical digression had led her into thinking that, though a Malfoy, this was a man of intellectual, of philosophical interests, of humour. Had she misread him? Was this the fist within the velvet glove, revealing that this was a common abduction and would follow the common, brutal course? Like Greyback? “Until what?”

He spread his hands. His voice softened again. “Until you choose to change it, Miss Granger. You … choose … to change it.”

She began to breathe freely again. Against a physical attack, she had no defence. In a verbal disputation, she had.

“As to the alleged abduction … I am talking like a lawyer. Forgive me. I did not abduct you, Miss Granger. You initiated the transfer from your … from the place where you lived to Bansith Lodge yourself.”

“I did not! I never-” She stopped. Initiated.

She pointed a finger at him. “You! You had something in place, an activation spell, so that when I did a certain action, I was transported here.”

His mouth twitched at one corner. “Girl’s quick. One word and she has it. As expected. Yes and no, Miss Granger. A double barrelled spell. And in one barrel: not an action but a thought, a decision. And long years I waited. You are tough, Miss Granger. Tenacious. Determined. A fighter par excellence. That marriage … you fought to make it work. Hour by hour, day by day, year by year. While he …” He stopped.

“That is nothing to do with you, besides being irrelevant. The point is that you did abduct me. After spying on me for years, by your own admission. You brought me here without my consent, against my will. And you took my wand.”

“Monitoring the situation, not ‘spying on you,’ Miss Granger. Likewise your ‘abduction:’ I enabled you to extricate yourself from a situation which was no longer palatable to you. Nothing would have happened unless you were ready.”

“I was not ready, Mr Malfoy. If I had wanted to leave I would have done so.”

“Miss Granger, you initiated the transfer yourself. So the time was on you, whether you consciously realised it or not.”

“I don’t agree. But what you are saying is that this spell was to bring me here when I decided something: ended my relationship with … my husband?”

The old man frowned - at the reference to Ron? - and said, “That spell was active. Such spells are based on magic which is tens of thousands of years old, developed in Paleolithic, in Stone Age times when neighbouring hunter-gatherer tribes would raid a clan for wives. The terror felt by a woman would activate her transportation to safety. I modified it slightly to enable a decision catalyst, but the principle is the same.”

She’d felt terror in her dream. But he’d said it was not triggered that, but by her ending her relationship with Ron. He’d … grabbed her, because she was no longer attached to another man? Talk about Stone Age! “Mr Malfoy, what you did was abduction. Pure and simple. Just because I am not with Ron anymore-“
He raised his hand and she stopped. “Miss Granger, it was more than that. You were in danger. I knew of threats. I wished to ensure your safety.”

“What threats?” Was this a new tack? She’d make short work of it. “What threats could there have been that were suddenly there because of our breakup, and not before? And why should a Malfoy, of all people, care what happens to me?”

“Several threats. Miss Granger, our world is a dangerous place. Magic may be used to amplify both good and evil to an extent unimaginable in the muggle world. As the events of the recent past have shown. For that reason we have developed safeguards to protect the individual, or to alert others to a threat to that individual. The clock in the Weasley kitchen which shows the safety status, health status and whereabouts of each family member is such a safeguard.”

“I know about Peverell Clocks, Mr Malfoy. I am on the Weasley Peverell. So if danger really did threaten me, Arthur Weasley would have been alerted. And he was not.” As far as she knew, anyway.

“That is my point, Miss Granger. While you were married to a Weasley, your name was on the Weasley clock and you had the protection of the - formidable - Weasley clan. But now? You have severed the relationship. Your avatar may no longer be on the Weasley Peverell Clock.”

Would Ron’s family have rejected her just because he had? That would hurt, really hurt. She loved them, all of them, as if they were blood family. And a week ago she would have scorned the possibility. But now? Ron’s rejection had shaken her confidence and her certainties. But that was between her and the Weasleys. Was this man trying to side-track her? “That still has nothing to do with why I should need protection now. And if I do, I can provide it myself if you return my wand.”

A movement next to her made her start back, but it was just a cat. This one was even bigger than the tabby, and a light tawny colour, so pale it was almost cream. He sprang up onto the table, then walked up to her and stared into her face. His eyes were golden.

“Miss Granger, this is Mister Lumpy, the Bansith Lodge cat. Mister Lumpy, this is Miss Hermione Granger, our guest at Bansith.”

She was a guest? Well, good. But a guest of so low a status that she was introduced to the local cats? Or were the cats high status cats, so addressed as Miss and Mister? Though Lumpy was not exactly a name brimming with cachet. “Hello, Mister Lumpy. I think I’ve met your … cousin?” They were both obviously the same breed, big and robust, with long shaggy fur and pointed lynx-like ears.

“Sister, we believe, but they’ve been here so long nobody really knows.”

She reached out a finger for the cat to smell. He sniffed at it, then pushed his head forward, against her hand. She stroked him and his tail went up like a bottle brush.

“You meet with his approval, Miss Granger. Not everyone does. His sister is even more particular, but I understand you are considered acceptable there too.”

The cat turned away, sniffed at a bowl of nectarines, then walked across to the old man and sat down on the table in front of him, staring at him.

“Mister Lumpy, you are making a bad impression on our guest. I am sure she never allowed Cruikshanks up on the table.”
“My mother would have been horrified.” Why was she exchanging small talk with this man?

“Indeed. No doubt I am overindulgent, though cats are clean animals. But we will not strain your sensibilities, Miss Granger. Mister Lumpy, you shall eat on the ground,” He twisted the top off a small black tin labelled *Pur Arabica coffee beans*, poured out a measure of dried cat-food pellets onto a saucer and placed it on the ground. The cat leapt off the table and started feeding.

The old man screwed the lid back on, saying “Keeps them fresh. He does not like stale food. Threats, Miss Granger. As soon as Weasley protection was lifted, you became more vulnerable. Do you think all have forgotten the events of eighteen years ago?”

“Revenge?”

“For some, yes. For others, revenge mixed with other base motives. Revenge for your part, for the fact that you, a mere girl, were able to counter, to bring to nothing the plans of powerful wizards. That you, a muggle-born, played a big part, an indispensable part, in bringing down the most dangerous dark wizard of the past millennium. And the form of revenge: I apologize in advance for such a direct reference to this, but you must be made aware of the seriousness of your position. As a woman, you don’t need me to remind you that you are vulnerable to a particularly degrading mode of revenge. Degrading meaning, to such people, satisfying.”

She paled. Greyback! “But they could not hope to get away with it.”

He shook his head. “Deluded by past glories, angry and vengeful, they might believe they would not be discovered. And with a muggle, they probably would get away with it. Even with a lesser witch, they might. With a witch of your stature, they could not. There would be an uproar. Mr Potter would erupt. Ministry forces would be mobilized. You would be traced and found, and retribution would follow. But that would be of small comfort to you: you would have already been subject, at the least, to traumatic experiences. I don’t wish to alarm you, but you must understand that you were exposed to the actions of ill-wishing people.”

It sounded ominous – but was it real? “I find this a little implausible, Mr Malfoy. After all, it is almost two decades since this happened. Surely immediately afterwards would be the most likely time?”

“It would. But the most likely perpetrators were in custody or already in Azkaban. Some served seventeen years. They are now free.”

“All right, I accept that. But do you have any proof?”

“I do. The Lestranges two years ago and the Goyles this year attempted to put spells in place. And others, unidentified as yet, have employed more direct methods.”

Her eyes widened. “What! Are you sure?”

He raised his eyebrows. “I do not make statements I have not verified, Miss Granger. Complex spells like these have signatures for those who know how to find them. As one would expect, the Goyle signature is like a gorilla beating his chest, the Lestrange one is more subtle.”

“But why didn’t you inform the authorities?”

“Miss Granger, please! Would you feel safe with Mr Fudge and his ilk looking after you?”

“They are not all like him.”
“Sufficient are. Public servants are the same the world over, Miss Granger. Some are excellent but many are barely competent jobsworths, their main aim being to protect their … corners. Cocooned in the Ministry, with what little accountability there is easily deflected, many have never experienced the real world. In any event the authorities move slowly and reactively. Dynamic, proactive action was vital here.”

“You could have told me, or at least my friends.”

“How would you have reacted, Miss Granger, to being told by a Malfoy that you were in danger? Would you have regarded it as a well-meant warning or an ill-meant threat? And your friends would have reacted in the same way. Mr Potter would have given us even shorter shrift than you. So what was I to do, Miss Granger? Knowing that malevolent eyes were on you, waiting to strike? Knowing you would have regarded any warning from me with suspicion and scepticism at best, knowing your stress level was near breaking point anyway? Given all this, should I have just left you, just sat back and said, like a Gryffindor, ‘We don’t do that sort of thing’?”

“A Gryffindor would have found another way, Mr Malfoy, one that did not involve abducting me.”

A corner of his mouth lifted: the Malfoy sneer. But on him it seemed to portray amusement rather than contempt. “I concur, Miss Granger. Gryffindors are reactors. A Gryffindor would done nothing until you were abducted, then he’d have charged in waving his sword and rescued the damsel in distress. Very heroic, very dramatic, and certainly, very much too late.”

She paled and nodded. It was true. Gryffindors did tend to be reactors.

“Slytherins work differently, Miss Granger. We are not interested in theatre, but in achieving what we set out to do, as effectively and efficiently as possible. Preferably with the minimum of bellows, bangs and bright flashing lights. We observe, assess, analyse and act. We, like you, know the value of preparation. We, like you, sit down and think about what might happen, given the circumstances, and plan accordingly. I do not trust the safety of those I am concerned about to others.”

Concerned about: what did that mean? But why was she just accepting his version? He was a Malfoy! “So you abducted me before the Lestranges and the Goyles could.”

“Touché, Madam. But I do not intend you harm.”

“So you say.”

“So I have proved, I hope, Miss Granger, by the fact we are sitting here talking, and not … anything else.”

Her heart lurched again. Was that a threat? But what he said was true - so far. Let her take the plunge and test it. “Mr Malfoy, if this is so, if you really mean me no harm, will you let me go? You have called me a guest. A guest is free to go if she chooses. I am now aware of the dangers you mentioned and can guard against them. Will you let me go? And return my wand?”

The old man closed his eyes for a moment. “Miss Granger, I will let you go, as you describe it. You are free to walk out of here. I will not stop you. But I advise against it. Strongly. Besides the threats we have discussed, there are other factors of which you are not yet aware, and leaving would have an adverse effect on your health, your physical and mental wellbeing. If you will stay, I will explain over dinner tonight. You will observe it is already approaching midday. I, being old, and you, being not as well as you might feel, need rest before we explore this further. Will you trust me on this?”
Trust him! “You abduct me and then expect me …” She looked into the ancient face. Green eyes. Slytherin green. But the cast of his features, though haughty, contained nothing of the sneering superciliousness that marred the faces of his offspring. “Why should I trust you, Mr Malfoy? You have ignored my request for my wand about half a dozen times. How do I know you have no ulterior motive?”

“I do have an ulterior motive, Miss Granger. Ulterior but benign. And yes, I have avoided the subject of your wand the three times you have raised it. I do not have it and it is not in your flat. I will explain what I may tonight. Miss Granger, I rely on your judgment. You may leave if you wish, but I ask you to stay and hear me out. Will you trust me?”

Could she? The cat trusted him. Cats had an innate sense of good and bad, of whom they could trust and whom not. Could she trust a cat’s instinct? Over her own misgivings? She … she wanted to. “Very well, Mr Malfoy, but I hope your reasons are sound. People will be worrying about me.”

“Indeed they are. Tonight we must discuss that too.”

“Discuss! I intend to go home tonight, Mr Malfoy.”

He pushed himself to his feet. “Seven for seven-thirty, Miss Granger? For lunch and tea, please tell Winky what you would like. I eat but once a day, so shall not join you. Winky, your mistress: carry on, please. The usual with the breakfast. Miss Granger, if you would excuse me? I am rather tired.” He made her a little bow then limped off, leaning on the cane.

She watched him go, then put the heel of her hand to her forehead. Was she crazy? He’d offered to let her go, and she’d agreed to stay! And why? Because he’d asked her to trust him. She’d agreed to trust a man who had abducted her, who had prevaricated when she had asked why, who’d admitted he was withholding information. What was the matter with her! Relying on a cat’s judgement rather than her own? Who in their right mind would do that!

She heard a mew and felt Mister Lumpy rub against her legs. She reached down and stroked him, then watched him walk away, tail erect again. No, it had not just been the cat, though ever since Crookshanks she had known cats were more than just ‘dumb animals.’ It had been him, the old man.

He’d been gentlemanly, amazingly so, with his formal, slightly archaic way of speaking: ‘Miss Granger’ this, and ‘Miss Granger’ that, with bows and stately nods. He had abducted her, but he had spent much of the morning explaining why. All right, some of his reasons seemed far from watertight, but the fact that he was bothering to explain at all was reassuring. His manner, his vocabulary, his arguments showed a philosophical nature: he seemed learned and thoughtful. His irony showed a sense of humour. For a person like her, these characteristics were more reassuring than anything he could have said. He had offered to let her go. She was totally in his power, but he was treating her like a guest. Winky was here. The two cats. All reasons to trust him.

And, really, she wanted to trust him. He seemed so … stable. Like a rock outcrop in a riverbed, life’s currents would divide to flow around him. Unlike Ron, tossed hither and yon by every eddy. And her and the children, along with him. But this man stood solid, immovable. And she so yearned for stability. Trusting him seemed … right. She just hoped it wasn’t for the wrong reasons.

She turned to check he was out of sight, then poured herself a cup of coffee.

“Miss?”

She jerked guiltily, and some coffee slopped into the saucer. But it was just Winky standing there,
looking at her.

“Miss, you also need rest if you are to recover well.” Winky gestured to the cottage.

Hermione drank the - now luke-warm - coffee, and rose. She did feel tired. Perhaps a hour’s nap? Then she’d like to look around, see where she was. He’d said he would let her ‘walk out of here’, but he may have meant it literally, and if the nearest habitation was fifty miles away… Hadn’t Winky said Bansith was remote?

She glanced at the table. A banquet of fruit: she’d had two nectarines. What would happen to the rest of it? It looked to her like a year’s fruit budget. “Winky, what is the usual with the breakfast? It seems an awful waste to throw it away.”

“Oh no, Miss, we don’t throw it away. That would be a Bad Thing. It goes to a hospital, Miss, a children’s hospital.”

What! Strange behaviour for a man who would abduct a woman. “Which one?”

“Great Ormond Street, Miss. Perhaps you’ve heard of it?”

“But, but… that’s a muggle children’s hospital, Winky.”

“Yes, Miss. The master says they need it more than St Mungo’s does.”

Ten Brownie points for Mr Malfoy.
The lady's maid

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She was wakened by a paw gently patting her face. Miss Sash was sitting next to her. From the foot of the bed Winky said, “Six o’clock, Miss, six o’clock.”

So late? So much for her ‘hour’s nap’. Half a day she’d had, but she felt really refreshed. Automatically she lifted a hand to her forehead, then stopped. No migraine? She stretched cautiously. No backache either. And, thinking back, nothing the whole morning either.

“I’ve run your bath, Miss,” said Winky. “I’ve added avocado oils, Miss, because that’s what you used to use at Hogwarts. I’ve just added a drop or so of orange blossom.”

“Thank you, Winky, that sounds perfect.” Winky’s shy smile broadened to a beam. “But how did you know what I used at Hogwarts?”

“I know what all the girls used, Miss. Miss Ginny, Miss Parvatti, Miss Cho, even Miss Luna.” She wrinkled her nose at the memory. “I made it my business to find out, Miss, because you never know what the future holds. When Mr Abraxas comes to Hogwarts and says, ‘I am looking for a lady’s maid,’ all the girls were clamouring, Miss, because it’s a plum job. Well, not clamouring really, because elves don’t clamour, but you could hear all the hearts beating. And then when he says it’s to Miss Hermione Granger, well, Miss, it was like all the hearts stopped. An elf gets a chance like that once in a century, Miss. And then he says, ‘And she’s just broken up and is very fragile.’ And we all look at each other, Miss, because then we know it’s not about us and a plum job with a mistress we’d die for, it’s about you. And they push me forward. They all know how you helped me, Miss, and stood up for me, and fought for me, and they all say, ‘Winky, got to be Winky.’ And Mr Abraxas, he looks at us and says, ‘You’ve decided?’ and we all nod, and he says, ‘Excellent choice,’ and then, ‘Let us go, Winky.’ And your bath is getting cold, Miss, while I ramble on.”

She came out of the bathroom towelling her hair dry, and stopped dead.

Winky had measured her before she had slept, but … this? In six hours? Laid out on the bed was a jersey knit dress in light charcoal. Rainstorm patterns in dark blue and grey were splashed across it. The neckline was scooped and draped in dark charcoal folds. The hemline was calf length, but undulating.

The length and colours were perfect for the image she wanted to convey: severe, businesslike. But, and she shook her head, the cut, the lie, the arrangement, the patterns: this was a evening dress for a sophisticated woman, one who intended to impress. And anyway, it was a designer dress: way, way out her affordability range. “I can’t wear that.”

Winky’s face fell. “It’s all I’ve been able to make in the time, Miss. I’m sorry Miss doesn’t like it.”

“Oh, Winky, it’s not that I don’t like it. I do, it’s lovely, it really is. But it’s much too fine for me.”

Winky put her hands on her hips and glared at her. “Miss, nothing is Too Fine for Miss Hermione Granger. Nothing. Perhaps Miss could try it on?” She lifted it off the bed and held it out. “I’m not sure I got the waist right.”
She had. The dress was a perfect fit, curving in but not hugging her figure too tightly. Miss Sash walked around her, looking up at her. Her tail went upright after the first circuit.

“I still don’t know…” It did suit her colouring, but … did it show her off too well?

“I do, Miss. And so does Miss Sash. It fits neatly. It’s just right for dinner with the master.”

“Oh? Does he often dine with young women?” Just interested, that was all.

“Not for the past half a century, Miss.” Hardly a philanderer, then. “It has been very lonely for the master. The staff are so pleased you are here, Miss. Now your hair. If you’ll just sit here, Miss, on the stool…”

“Just brush it, Winky. That’s all it needs.”

“Yes, Miss, that’s all it needs, I’ll just spray on a little water here and here and … here, and a little spray of Winky’s hair conditioner here and here and… here, and support it here while I brush it down here and curl it up here, and we’ll have a -”

“Winky, really, it’s not worth the effort. I have fly-away hair and it has defied all attempts to control it.”

“Yes, Miss, to be sure, very true, no doubt, yes, very true, and we’ll have this lock free on this side and now we’ll define the parting and -”

“Winky, I don’t have locks.”

“You do now, Miss, and if your hair has been fly-away before it’s because you haven’t had the right hairdresser. No, Miss, keep sitting, please. Make-up now.”

“Oh no. No make-up. Definitely no make-up. This is not a date, Winky. I just want some information from Mr Malfoy, then I’m leaving. I don’t need feminine allure, Winky.”

“Not in the slightest, Miss.”

“Winky, that’s not what I mean. I mean this is not a man-woman thing.”

“Whatever you say, Miss. Now please, sit still while I do the make-up.”

“Winky, if this is not a man-woman thing, it means I don’t need make-up.”

Winky stepped back, put her hands on her hips and frowned at her. “Miss is making Winky do a Bad Thing. Miss is making Winky explain to Miss what Miss already knows, deep down. Miss, it is always a man-woman thing. It is always somewhere on the measuring tape between just friends at one end and arms wrapped around lovers at the other. And with the master and Miss, it is not at the just friends end. The master admires beauty, and that is good, because Miss has deep and feminine beauty.”

“Winky, I do not. What do you mean, anyway? Every woman is feminine.”

Miss Sash looked at her, then turned her back and sat down. What did that mean? The feline equivalent of rolling the eyes?

“Winky, I do not. What do you mean, anyway? Every woman is feminine.”

Miss Sash pursed her lips, reminding Hermione of McGonagall. “Winky will be on bread and water for a week now, because she has to do another reminding Bad Thing. Miss, every woman is female. Not every woman is feminine, and those that are, are feminine in different ways. Some are
giggly, some are in-your-face, some are eyes-over-the-fan. With those the master would sigh and 
turn away, no matter how beautiful they appeared, for it would be only skin deep. The master 
admires only deep beauty. The master knows Miss is beautiful the whole way through.”

“Winky, please! Anyway, how do you know what the master thinks?”

“You wouldn’t be here otherwise, Miss.”

This had gone far enough. “Winky, I think we are losing the point here. And I don’t want you 
putting yourself on bread and water, Winky.”

Winky shook her head. “Winky did Bad Things. Winky must do Penance.”

“No, Winky, you did not do bad things. No penance is necessary.”

“Miss Hermione cannot be wrong. So Miss is telling Winky that reminding Miss that she is 
attractive and feminine and beautiful is not a Bad Thing. So it must a Good Thing. Winky will 
remember that.”

How did she get trapped into this? “Winky, it is speaking your mind that is not a bad thing. 
Expressing your opinion is your right.”

Winky’s face darkened. “Winky will not discuss Elf Rights with Miss Hermione.”

Oops, she’d forgotten: Winky was one of those who had been horrified by Dobby’s attitudes.

What could she salvage out of this? “I meant, Winky, that while you are working for me, 
expressing your opinion is a good thing.”

“For Winky to say what she thinks to Miss Hermione is a Good Thing?”

Oh dear, what was she letting herself in for? But she couldn’t retract now. “In the right 
circumstances, Winky.”

“ Oh, of course, Miss. Winky would never tell Miss Hermione that her slip was showing when Mr 
Abraxas was there. Of course, Winky would never have let Miss Hermione go out with her slip 
showing in the first place.”

House elves were so literal. Which reminded her: "Winky, I hope I am feminine, but attractive and 
beautiful? I don't think so."

“Miss, you are Hermione Granger. All know what you have done. All know the virtues you have: 
high principles, fortitude -”

“Winky, that’s enough. No more of that, please.”

Winky shook her head. “Miss Hermione said that for Winky to express her opinion is a Good 
Thing. Winky’s opinion is that just as Miss Hermione makes the most of her other virtues, so she 
should make the most of her good looks.”

“Winky, that’s ridiculous. My face is too square, my jaws too prominent, my hair too bushy-”

“Not bushy any more, Miss, not while Winky looks after you. And the others: that’s character, 
Miss. Character is beauty that can be brought out by the right hands.”

“Winky, you cannot bring out what is not there.”
Miss Sash turned away again, and began washing herself. Another eye roll?

Winky sighed. “It came out at the Hogwarts Ball, Miss. Even without Winky.”

“That was completely different. I was a young girl then.”

“But you wowed them there, Miss, if you’ll pardon the expression. You showed you have beauty as well as brains.”

“Winky, that’s enough. I do not have that and have no wish to have that.”

“In Winky’s Good Thing opinion, Miss does have that, though she tries ever so hard to hide it. And in everybody else's opinion, though the only opinion that matters, is that of the master.”

Here we go again. "Winky-"

“Anyway, Miss, make-up which I put on will be so subtle that the master will not know it’s there.”

“Then what’s the point?”

“Because you will know it’s there, Miss. You will know you are looking your best. And in dealing with a man like the master, that gives any woman an advantage.”

“Winky, this is not a date. You know that, don’t you?”

“Miss, will you trust me on this? There are other reasons, which I know of, though I shouldn’t, and which I may not tell you. I have given this Due Consideration, Miss.”

“Everybody expects me to trust them here. All right, Winky, I’ll trust you. But you said subtle, remember.”

“The master would consider anything else to be Gilding the Lily, Miss. Now just tilt your head this way, into the light, Miss …yes … good. And now the earrings, Miss.”

“Oh no. No earrings, Winky.”

“Miss, are we going to go through this for everything? Trust me, Miss. They are black pearls, very small, very subtle. And it’s already ten past seven.”

“What!” She stood up, but Winky pressed her down again.

“If a lady doesn’t keep the master waiting, he’d be disappointed, Miss. Seven twenty five is the earliest he would expect you.”

“Winky, this is not a … a date, I told you. It is just a … a …”

“Of course not, Miss, but you are a lady. All done now, Miss. Just the heels.”

“Oh no. No, no. No heels. Flat courts, Winky.” Heels meant, well, showing off her … the legs, emphasising the physical. She had never done that and was certainly not going to start now.

Winky looked at her face and said, “Just three and a half inch, Miss.”

She would not give in on this. “Flats.”

“Miss, flat courts are not right for this dress. If you insist on flats, I will have to lengthen the dress
to hide them, and that is an hour and a half without magic. And it’ll be a makeshift job. He won’t
be able to see it, of course, but you will know. And Miss will be sitting there in the ruins of
Winky’s dress, feeling all wrong and trying to hide it, and trying to persuade him at the same time.
In fact, Miss won’t because Winky will have thrown the dress away, because flats cannot go with
this dress in any form. Miss would be sitting there in her… jeans.”

And clearly even Miss Hermione would accept that wearing jeans to dinner with the master would
be the ultimate sartorial and social disgrace. In fact it would send exactly the message she wanted
to Mr Malfoy, that this dinner was strictly business, that she wanted information and then to go
home. But how could she say that to Winky after all the labour and love she had put into the dress?

At the word ‘jeans’, Miss Sash leapt onto the chair on which Hermione’s jeans lay folded, sat
down and spread her paws, claws out, over the cloth. Over my dead body?

“Three inch, Miss. And that’s Winky’s Last Offer.”

Hermione glared at her and the diminutive elf glared back, her hands on her hips. Then she
laughed, reached out and pulled Winky into a hug, knocking the crochet cap askew.

“Miss!” A shocked, muffled squeak.

Hermione let her go. “I know you’re doing this for me, Winky. And I’m glad you can now be
forceful. Three inch, then. But I’m not going to let you talk me into this again.”

Chapter End Notes

Elvish grammatical eccentricities would not have fitted the serious part Winky plays
later in the story, so I have switched them for emphasis eccentricities. In all other
respects the elvish character is as JKR set out.
As she stepped out onto the veranda, a small figure dressed as an Edwardian footman came forward into the light and bowed. His face was as lined as Winky’s, which meant he must be ancient, for elves aged slowly. “I am Waldi, Miss. If you will follow me, I will lead you to the Great House. We have to cross the boardwalk, Miss, but the master had it lit and close boarded this week, so it is safe to cross in ladies’ shoes.”

And a good thing: she hadn’t worn such high heels for years and felt rather unstable as she tottered along. She hoped she wouldn’t have to walk far once she’d arrived, because Winky’s desired effect on Mr Malfoy would be rather spoilt if she toppled over. In one way Winky had been right. She knew she had not looked as good as this for years, really, and with Waldi walking ahead and Miss Sash walking alongside, escorting her, she felt both confident and … rather special.

“This way, Miss, through this little copse, and minding the branches, if you please. There is the Great House, Miss. Just a little further now.”

A Jacobean fortified manor loomed up before her, dark against the sky. Great House was an apt description: three storeys in rough-hewn sandstone, with wings at each end, one square, the other a circular tower. The click of her heels became sharp as the boards gave way to smooth stone slabs. Warm glows spilling through tall narrow windows lit the paving, and she glanced in through a window of the square wing as she passed. A room lined with shelves, floor to ceiling, stacked with books. Oh! She’d like to get in there and explore. She almost stopped and peered in, but caught herself in time. You are a lady, Miss. A lady, in Winky’s view, would not stop and stare in at a window, however tempted. She wasn’t at all a lady of course, but disillusion would come for Winky soon enough. No doubt Miss Sash would disapprove also, and would show it. Just as she was showing her approval of the effect that she and Winky had achieved - against their mistress’s better judgement - by her erect stance, upright tail and deliberate, almost prancing steps.

A lamp each side of a large studded double door marked the entrance. Both leaves swung open as they approached.

“Mind the sill, Miss, if you please.”

They passed into a hall lit with wall lamps - were they gas lights? They had that mellow glow. Waldi led her to another great door to the right. It also opened as they reached it. The footman stepped through and announced, “Miss Hermione Granger, Sir.”

The room was walnut panelled, lit by gas lamps all around the perimeter, with a great log fire at one end. Mr Malfoy rose from an armchair to one side of the fireplace. “Good evening, Miss Granger. Welcome. You look-”

She narrowed her eyes at him and he raised one eyebrow, then said, “May I take your shawl?”

As he lifted it from her shoulders, Waldi hurried across to a long narrow table in the centre of the
room and lit two tall candles overlooking a set place for two at one end.

No, she was not having that. She marched across, blew them out, turned and stood glaring at Malfoy, her hands on her hips. “Mr Malfoy, this is not a date.”

“Ah, Miss Granger, I’m flattered that you should think such a thing even possible.”

“Well, I don’t really, but everyone else seems to, and it is not.”

“Then you should sack your dressmaker, Miss Granger. And your parfumeur and your hairdresser. Retain someone who does not present you so, make you look so, so-”

Quickly she forestalled him. “I’m strongly tempted to. Winky and I have been arguing for the past hour.”

“And she won, I see. To your annoyance. You would have chosen jeans, Miss Granger?”

She glared at him. Either he had been eavesdropping – which she found inconceivable with this man – or he was unusually perceptive for a man.

“You would have carried your points even in jeans, Miss Granger, but, dressed as you are, I am bowled over. Ah, and the colour, high in your cheeks, is very becoming.”

“Mr Malfoy, I am going to walk out of here right now!”

“Miss Granger, I plead provocation.”

“You plead provocation! What provocation?”

“I do. Come with me, Miss Granger.” He held out his arm and she placed her hand on it, thinking: I’m just playing along with this! Why? Then she almost pulled it away, for a warmth was flowing from his arm to hers where they touched. She looked down. So did he, one eyebrow raised.

Two beads of light were circling their joined forearms. Threads trailed behind them, emitting a mist of coloured light. She felt her anxiety and annoyance draining away, a sense of security, of being safe, replacing them. Dark magic, it must be!

She jerked her arm away, and he shuddered as if she had poured cold water over him. Odd dark magic, if it hurt the perpetrator as well. But he made no comment, just led the way to where something tall and narrow stood draped next to the fireplace. He motioned that she should stand in front of it, then pulled off the drape. It was a full length mirror, and instinctively she turned away. A mirror was no friend to her.

“No,” he said. “Look.”

She turned back. Waldi was standing next to the mirror, holding a candelabrum, lighting her. Looking back at her was Hermione Granger, but a younger, healthier Hermione Granger than she was used to seeing. She had pale, flawless skin and a willowy figure, chestnut hair flowing smoothly, framing her face to ear level, where it burst out into a profusion of curls. An errant lock hung loose on one side of her face. She stepped closer. The haggard face was gone: the frown lines, the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, the creases at the ends of her mouth – she particularly hated those, for they came from pursing her mouth, a symptom of her frustration with Ron – all gone. The skin had a fresh, soft glow to it. She lifted her chin. The slight sag was no longer there. Her neck was a slender white column, the faint creases gone. How could this be?
She turned. The old man was just behind her, a look of … she could only describe it as pain, on his
face. She’d surprised him. He drew back, the expression vanishing. Mental, emotional pain, then?

But that was not her concern. “Mr Malfoy, what have you done to me?”

“Ah, Miss Granger, if I could take credit for the way you look, I would rank with Michelangelo.
But I cannot.”

“Somebody has done something. Mr Malfoy, I am thirty-seven, almost middle-aged. When last I
looked in a mirror, I looked like an haggard fifty year old. And now, this,” she gestured to the
mirror. “This is not natural. Have you used dark magic on me?”

“I have used nothing on you, Miss Granger. If you suspect dark magic, seek within yourself. Dark
Magic leaves an oily tang, a sense of being unclean within oneself, a feeling of disgust. Can you
sense any such pollution, any such emotion?”

She sought, imagining a sheet of light passing through her from her toes to her head. “No, no sense
of that.” Then: why was she trusting him? He’d obviously done something to her. Trusting him was
like trusting Lady Macbeth when she told you not to bother bolting your bedroom door at night.
“How do you know about dark magic, Mr Malfoy?”

“Through experience, Miss Granger. As do you.”

What! She drew herself up. “I have never used dark magic, Mr Malfoy.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Nor I, Miss Granger. One experiences the effects of dark magic by it
being used on oneself, as the victim. You, at the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange, I at the hands of
another.”

Of course. She was being silly. And he was right. She remembered taking bath after bath at Shell
Cottage, trying to get rid of the feeling of … being befouled. Only, of course, it had been inside
her. It had taken four or five days to dissipate. “Sorry.”

“Not at all, Miss Granger. You are having new concepts hurled at you in rapid succession. It takes
time for the mind to process and catch up. And, Miss Granger, thirty-seven is not middle-aged, nor
anywhere near it, especially in our world.”

“All right, I accept that, but I don’t look anything like thirty-seven, even in our world. I look …
twenty-five, twenty-six.”

He bowed. “I am delighted to agree with you, Miss Granger. And so, my point acknowledged, shall
we sit down?”

“What point? Oh, provocation? No, I don’t concede the point at all. My age is not relevant.”

“I agree. But how you look is. Do you wish me to detail the points?”

She turned to the mirror. She did have to admit that she looked, well … beautiful. And Winky’s
dress did set off her figure delicately. Have him _detail the points_? He’d just love to have her
blushing, wouldn’t he!

She glowered at him and turned to the elf. “Thank you, Waldi,” she said and held out her hand for
the candelabrum. Then she marched back to the table, heels clicking on the floorboards, plonked it
onto the tablecloth and sat down, her arms folded.
Mr Malfoy sat down opposite her and said, "Well?"

"Well, what?" She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Does my plea of provocation stand up?"

"I’m still here, aren’t I? Don’t push your luck, Mr Malfoy."

He shook his head. "Ah, Miss Granger, I wished only to awaken you to what you are. I will not ‘push my luck’, though if I were seventy five years younger …"

"Mr Malfoy, this is business: only, entirely and exclusively. Otherwise …"

"Otherwise you will hold me to my promise and ‘walk out of here’?"

Well, at least he still considered himself bound by it. "Yes, I will. And if I stay, I want answers to my questions, and not, as happened last time, just the ones you feel like answering. All of them, and the first of those is why I look like I do."

"You shall have your answers, Miss Granger, but may we enjoy our meal first? I find that mixing business with dining results in cold food, and that would insult the time, effort and skill Ceannard has put in. Our entree is wild mushrooms in chive sauce, both gathered this afternoon, the fish is salmon from the loch, the main course grilled venison from last year’s cull. Ceannard already knows you like your venison done on the rare side of medium, though of course should you wish to experiment, feel free to do so. French Burgundy or Constantia Chardonnay, Miss Granger? Burgundy for the venison, I’m told, but I’m no purist, and I prefer the Chardonnay myself."

If she was dining with him, she might as well be a lady, as Winky would call it. Besides, having had no more than two nectarines for breakfast and a wholewheat salad sandwich for lunch, she was ravenous. But she knew any alcohol would go straight to her head. And if she missed his adroit sidestepping of questions when she was stone cold sober, he would run circles round her if she wasn’t. She really needed to keep her wits about her. "A small Chardonnay, please."
As Waldi poured out the coffee, she said, “Thank you, Mr Malfoy. That was delicious. Ceannard is a wonderful cook, er … chef.” Which was the right word?

“He will be delighted to hear your compliment, Miss Granger, and will not care how you describe him. Neither do I. Know the difference, or care. And so, to your questions. You wished to leave and I said I would not stop you, but that it was inadvisable considering your state of health. I am honoured, Miss Granger, that you trusted me.”

“Only until tonight, Mr Malfoy. Now I am waiting for the promised explanations. Firstly, how and why I am looking so young.”

“Yes: I will tell you what I can, though few women would complain about such a thing.”

If he thought he was going to sidetrack her again … “My answer, Mr Malfoy.”

His lip twitched and he raised an eyebrow. “We are on the way there, Miss Granger. If I may ask: how are you feeling? I am not making a polite enquiry. I would like to know and have a reason for asking.”

“Well, actually, I’m feeling very well. I slept for about five hours this afternoon, and am feeling very refreshed.”

“Better than you have done for some time?”

“Well, yes. Much better.” Should she be admitting this to him?

“No migraine, no backache, no all pervasive exhaustion?”

“Mr Malfoy, how do you know I have been suffering from those things?”

“The healer believed you must have been. Severely. So severely you must have been suppressing the pain with spells.”

“Well, yes, I-” Wait a minute - why was she justifying herself to him? And: “What healer? I haven’t seen a healer in four or five years.”

“Considerably longer than that, Miss Granger, or so the healers believe. If you neglected a child as you have neglected yourself, Miss Granger, the child would be taken away from you.”

What was this now! “I have not neglected my children!”

“I believe you. Wholeheartedly I believe you. I believe you have sacrificed yourself for your family, rather. Miss Granger, why have you neglected yourself? Surely your symptoms would justify further investigation?” He spoke gently.
She looked down. “We seem to have had a lot of expenses over recent years. Fees for Hogwarts, textbooks, new school robes, it all adds up. And healers are so expensive.”

“Indeed. But a sick mother is far more costly in all but monetary terms.”

She looked up angrily: what business was it of his – but he went on. “My spell brought you here, Miss Granger, but you looked so ill, even to my inexperienced eye, that I took you to St Mungo’s to be examined.”

She stood up, thrusting her chair back. “You what! That’s outrageous. First you abduct me, then you have me examined, all without my consent. How dare you!”

Malfoy pushed himself slowly and painfully to his feet. “I dared, Miss Granger, because I was alarmed. And with justification, it proved.”

She glared at him. “What justification?”

“May we resume our seats, Miss Granger?”

“Sorry,” she muttered, and sat down. He waved the apology away.

“Not at all, Miss Granger. I would feel the same in the circumstances. It was a liberty, but I assure you, you looked so very ill. As you have admitted yourself. The healer called her consultant. She examined you and the scan results also.”

*Her consultant. She examined:* at least the healers were women. To have been examined by a male healer would pile insult on injury.

“And?”

“Well, to cut a long story short, Miss Granger, the consultant said you were ill, but she could cure you. So she did.”

“She cured me? Just like that?”

“Not quite ‘just like that’, but she certainly cured you. The back-pain, the migraines, the tiredness, they no longer trouble you?”

“I’ve only been here one day, but I have had none of them. I feel much better. Mr Malfoy, this must have been expensive. Are they billing me, or did you pay? If so I must reimburse you.” Even if she had to borrow from Harry to do it. And she would: private health treatment from St Mungo’s was not cheap. And anything which could heal her like this was sure to be mega-costly.

“There is nothing to pay, Miss Granger. In view of the situation and who you are, St Mungo’s made no charge.”

“I find that difficult to believe. They have always charged us in the past.”

He shrugged. “Not this time. There was no charge. However, the healer specified that no magic should be done around you during the recovery period, both to allow your magical strength to rebuild, and to avoid disrupting the healing field currently around you. Unfortunately, Miss Granger, that means no wand.”

Well, that made some sense, even if she did feel vulnerable without it.

He went on. “She was also emphatic that about the recuperation period and location: here.”
“Oh? I can see that a certain period may be necessary, but surely the location is irrelevant.”

“This is a very tranquil place, Miss Granger. You have none of the distractions, the tasks that you would convince yourself were duties and needed attending to, that you would have in London.”

He seemed to read her well. First the jeans and now this. “This is true. But there are other equally tranquil locations. Ones in which I would not be wondering about the motives of my host.”

He nodded. “I agree,” and she stared at him. “You need not look so surprised, Miss Granger. Although a Malfoy, I am capable of empathy. You have reason to ‘wonder,’ as you delicately put it. On one pan of the balance scales goes your experiences of my family: pain and suffering, physical and mental; on the other, my assurances: mere words, lighter than air. I would not blame you if you rated my trustworthiness below that of a Florentine prince.”

She looked at him. “Actually, I don’t. I believe you might not tell me the whole truth, but I don’t think you would lie to me.”

“You surprise me, Miss Granger. No, in fact you don’t surprise me. I knew you were perceptive. You are correct in both observations. But my motives are benign, Miss Granger.”

She sat back. “As you have said, Mr Malfoy, I have reason to distrust your family. I have trusted you so far, but I need more than assurances if I am to continue to trust you. Though it should be irrelevant. I expect to go home tonight.”

“I must grasp this nettle. Miss Granger, the healer recommends you spend three weeks convalescing at Bansith.”

She sprang up. “Three weeks! That’s ridiculous. I can’t spend three weeks doing nothing. And if I could, I certainly wouldn’t spend it here. No, that is out of the question. No, never!”

He pushed himself to his feet, saying, “Miss Granger, I understand your reluctance-”

“Mr Malfoy, it is not reluctance. It is a refusal. I am going home, now. Please direct me to your floo fireplace.”

He shut his eyes and leant on the back of his chair. “Miss Granger, that would waste …” he stopped and looked at her. “Miss Granger, what would convince you to stay?”

“Nothing. Nothing you can do or say would make me stay. I am holding you to your promise. I am going. And you just admitted there is a cost, by saying it would be wasted. I demand that you tell me how much it is. I will not be beholden to a Malfoy.”

“Waste in the sense of lay waste, Miss Granger, the pointless destruction of something of value, great value.” He was breathing heavily. Did that mean his heart was labouring? Surely that could not be good for a man of his age.

“Mr Malfoy, please, let us sit again.”

“He winced, then said, ““There was, Miss Granger, but the cost was not monetary, or indeed in a
form or of a nature that can be repaid. So it is meaningless to talk of it. Regarding your convalescence, Miss Granger: would a visit from Miss Patil, confirming what I have told you, convince you?”

“Parvati Patil?”

“She was involved, but the actual healing was done by her sister, Padma. The Ravenclaw.”

Well, that made some sense. Whatever had been wrong with her, no standard healing could have wrought such a transformation. So it was quite probable that healers like the brilliant Patil twins were involved. Both were consultants and researchers, the Gryffindor in modern medicine, the Ravenclaw in arcane medical spells of the past.

“Well, I suppose… No, I could not in conscience take them from their work for something as trivial as this.”

“Hardly trivial, Miss Granger, if it makes you abandon your healing process.”

She shook her head, feeling Winky’s curls flying around. “As consultants, they are always in demand. It would be better to leave them to their work. Anyway, I can look in my medical records for confirmation myself.”

Mr Malfoy’s eyebrows lowered. “That could present a problem.”

Well, of course. Any obstacle would do! “And why? I have the legal right.”

“Indeed. And the moral right. But … they contain certain information …”

“Information? Mr Malfoy, have you seen my medical records?”

“Of course not, Miss Granger. The Misses Patil would never breach patient confidentiality. But I know what is in them.”

“That’s outrageous. You know what is in my medical records?”

“Miss Granger, please. All I know is what relates to your recent healing.”

“And why should you know that?”

“Because I was there.”

“They discussed my illness with you because you were there? That is certainly breaching patient confidentiality. Why couldn’t they wake me up and discuss it with me?”

“You were sedated for the tests and the healing.”

“Mr Malfoy, there are too many loose ends here. I don’t see why they discussed it with you, a person unrelated, with no connection whatsoever to me. I don’t see why they could not have waited until my sedation wore off. I don’t see why this - whatever it was - was done without my involvement at all, let alone consent. What I do see is that this - whatever it was - must have been a major treatment to achieve the effect it has, as confirmed by the involvement of two very high powered - and expensive - consultants, and that you are refusing to give me any details.”

“Miss Granger, you are driving me into a corner. Or rather you are driving me towards an open door through which I believe you should not pass. For your own good.”
That did it! She stood up again. “I am a thirty-seven year old woman, Mr Malfoy. I am quite capable of deciding what is and what is not for my own good. I demand that you direct me to your floo fireplace.”

He buried his face in his hands. “Miss Granger, I have your records here, copies of them, sealed and spelled, accessible only to you. But please, please believe me when I say that you should not see them, that they contain information which would cause you disquiet.” He lifted his face and spread his hands. “There, I have already said too much. You have refused the Patils. If I were to bring Mr Potter here and show the records to him, would that satisfy you?”

She looked at him. His face, normally pale, was blotchy red. Again he was breathing heavily. This could not be doing his heart much good. And suddenly, he was beseeching her. As if she was in control. More than anything, this reassured and calmed her.

She sat down again. “Mr Malfoy, I would be prepared to let Ginny, Mrs Potter, look at my records, but the Potters have been in Albania for the past twelve months, and out of contact, and there is no one else -” She paused, for he was shaking his head.

“They returned four days ago, Miss Granger.”

“Really?” Why hadn’t Ginny been in contact? She felt a little hurt. “Well, in that case, perhaps she could come here and look at my records. I don’t promise that I will stay, at all, let alone for three weeks, but I trust her and am prepared to hear what she has to say.”

“If you will write her a note, Miss Granger, I will send an owl first thing tomorrow. I thank you for this. I know you are making a great concession, and I am grateful.” He took a deep breath. “Will you join me for more coffee in the drawing room?”

That would help him wind down. “Just one cup, Mr Malfoy, then I think we should both get to bed.”

“Thank you.” He stood up and held out his arm, then lowered it as she drew back slightly.

She should take his arm, for she had stressed him twice, no, three times, considering his shudder when she had jerked her hand away the last time they had touched. He was an old man with, more than likely, a heart that was none too strong. She had a responsibility here. But this …

“My apologies, Miss Granger. Force of habit when with a lady. But I see you do not like it. I shall not do it again.” He spoke quietly and gravely: she’d hurt him. Again.

“I do not … dislike the … your gesture, Mr Malfoy, but what seems to occur as a consequence. And even there, it is caution rather than dislike. I don’t know what it is. I have never experienced it before. It makes me feel …” She stopped. Had she been about to tell him that, whatever he was doing, it was working?

“If it is any consolation, Miss Granger, neither have I, and am likewise ignorant as to what it is. But as it is associated with you, I take it to be benign. And it invokes feelings in me too. I don’t know if these are in response to yours, but I feel … protective. If you are feeling nervous, or perhaps even a little frightened and, given the circumstances, it would be surprising if you were not, then that suggests we are responding to each other.”

What? “Oh, but then you are not …”

“Yes?”
“Not doing it?”

“Indeed no, Miss Granger. No more than you are.”

“But then what …” She stepped in front of him and looked up into his face. He raised his eyebrows slightly and gazed back at her.

“You are telling me the truth.”

“I would not lie to you, Miss Granger.”

“No.” She believed him. And he had already told her he had never done dark magic. “Then you think we should trust this … mutuality?” We? Did she just say ‘we’?

His lips twitched. Was that his smile? “A well chosen, non-committal word. The delicate touch again. I am prepared to, Miss Granger, but then I have reason to have absolute belief in your … goodness, and you have reason to have the opposite. I also stand to gain, by having a … an entrancing young woman on my arm, and again, the opposite is the prospect facing you. I am content to be guided by you. You decide.”

More trust? Of both him and this … unknown magic which seemed to link them. Was that wise? But … she wanted to. She raised her arm, then lowered it onto the one he quickly proffered. Immediately the glowing beads appeared and, moving in opposite directions, began circling their joined forearms. Behind them flowed a short tail of braided threads, yellow and blue which, as before, began shedding a fine mist of coloured light. The glowing beads left a trail, a trace of their passing, a thread of white light, so fine it was barely visible. They were like tiny orbiting comets, with each orbit slightly offset from the last, so the trails created a delicate net of light enclosing the falling mist.

Again she could feel the warmth where their arms touched. Now more trusting of the situation, she could look at her reactions. Yes, again a feeling of being protected, but this time she was aware of a sense of being valued, of being respected, in the background. As she watched the colours changed, the blue mist shading into orange, the yellow taking on a green tint.

She glanced at him. His eyes were closed, as if he were shutting out everything else to concentrate on the feelings. As she watched, he lifted his other hand and placed it, cupped, on top of hers. Now more than merely protected, a sense of being cared for. Safe. The glowing beads sped up, the braided threads parting and a bright white core shining between the blue and yellow. The mist became lighter as a silvery white mixed with the green.

She half turned towards him … the feelings deepened … she was responding … more than cared for now, a sense of being … No, no, this could not be, he was a hundred years old, and a Malfoy, she was … she must stop it. She coughed. He opened his eyes and removed the other hand.

“My apologies, Miss Granger. At my age one has learnt that many of life’s gifts are transient, so to be delighted in while they are there. I was feeling that, for a few brief moments, a most precious creature had been entrusted to my care, a bright eyed songbird, but that soon I must open my cupped hands to let it fly back into the world where it belongs. An old man’s folly, Miss Granger. Forgive me.”

She longed to reassure him, to tell him that she had felt like the little bird, but - to say anything would be to say too much. They had different lives to lead. Instead she just increased the pressure of her hand on his for a moment.
And if her heartbeat was anything to go by, this experience was anything but calming. Her intellect told her she was in dangerous waters, that she should lift her arm, but she knew that would hurt him. Still, she must do something: “I think … I trust it, but that some restraint is needed.”

“I agree. I shall apply self-discipline, Miss Granger.”

She glanced at him. An uncommon phrase, but one which seemed to spring readily from his lips. Was self-discipline a driving force with him? She could believe it: It went with the stiff, patriarchal face, the hints of the ascetic she had noticed. She could see it: gentle with others, stern with himself. She’d love to make him smile: a proper smile, not a mere twitch of the lips. And to make him laugh, an open, joyful laugh, and she was sure he could, even if the ability was overlain by years or even decades of self-imposed austerity - stop, stop: she was letting herself be whirled away. She couldn’t, she mustn’t. Self-discipline, girl, you too. Break away, now, you dare not risk this any longer.

Gently she lifted her arm from his. “It … it is rather late, Mr Malfoy. Perhaps we should leave the coffee?” She sensed his shoulders sag. No, she couldn’t just leave him like this. “Perhaps … would you walk me to the cottage, Mr Malfoy?”

“Of course, Miss Granger.” He placed the wrap over her shoulders, and they walked, his hands clasped behind him, hers holding the wrap - unnecessarily - in place.

At the cottage he bowed and said, “I bid you a good night, Miss Granger. Breakfast is at your convenience.” She stood and watched him limp away.

“Miss Sash, why am I still here?” Hermione was lying in bed propped up on a pillow. The cat was sitting on the windowsill, washing herself. “I started the evening determined to get my answers and be home by ten. But here I am, back in the cottage, and fighting off a … a something.” A something she couldn’t define, but something she shared with a man seventy years older than she was.

“I was fine, Miss Sash, I was balanced and in control - mostly - until we touched.” Or rather, Touched, for it was more, much more than just physical contact. “Then feelings seemed to take over. It was almost as if logic was switched off and emotion switched on. That should ring an alarm bell the size of Big Ben, Miss Sash, it really should.” Miss Sash’s tail flicked.

“Not only does it not, the feelings seem perfectly natural, perfectly right. I feel safe and cared for, I feel respected and valued. How can that be wrong? How can that be bad or even dangerous?” The tail flicked again.

How? How? Something which gives you exactly what you long for, from a man who abducted you? How could it not be dangerous! Had he spiked the wine with a commonsense depressant? Get a grip on yourself, girl.

“I must be crazy to trust what is going on here, Miss Sash. All right, I trust him … I think. He said he’s not doing it, no more than I am. I’m sure it’s not dark magic, so not bad and dangerous in that sense. But I’d be crazy not to treat it with suspicion. And scepticism.” The cat turned to look out of the window.

“What do you think, Miss Sash? A little less heart and a little more head? And no more Touching!” The cat stretched, yawned, then leapt from the window sill to the foot of the bed. She put a paw on
a curtain, looking at Hermione.

“Sleep on it?”

Miss Sash’s tail gave a flick, she curled up in one corner and closed her eyes.
A sound dreamless sleep, and again she was wakened by a paw gently patting her face.

“Hello. Miss Sash. Time to get up, is it?” The cat’s tail flicked, and she turned and jumped through a gap in the curtains.

Hermione stretched. Just a few days ago she’d have been facing the prospect of getting up with drained resignation. Today she felt refreshed and cheerful, full of energy. When last had she felt like that? Years and years ago. And she’d be seeing Ginny today. Harry too, of course, she thought guiltily, but Harry was such a powerhouse she sometimes found him a little overwhelming. Ginny, bright, articulate, feisty, handled him perfectly.

Ginny would look at her records and she’d be away with them before lunch. No matter what had happened to her, no matter what treatment she had undergone, she could not imagine any circumstance which could keep her here.

Though she had to admit it was pleasant. More than pleasant: soul settling described it best. Tranquil, quiet, unhurried. And where would she go? Back to Brixton? She shuddered at the thought and had to remind herself: Brixton is home. You are here because a Malfoy abducted you. So why did she feel a pang at the thought of leaving? She swished back the curtains of the four-poster and looked around. The white walls, the bare varnished floorboards, the projecting wooden beams, the dark green curtains, it went beyond plain to stylish. And she had thought: no luxuries, but the silk sheets, the down duvet, the firm mattress: not luxuries, no, but exactly, perfectly enough. An enough which made luxurious look cheap and common.

The few pieces of furniture were heavy and old: the four poster, the chest of drawers, the wardrobe, and - what was that? A cane backed chair and a writing bureau: those hadn’t been there yesterday. She jumped out of bed and looked at the writing bureau. Also old, and that carving: Was that Jacobean? Her grandmother had had something similar – not the real thing, of course, a modern copy. But this, this looked like the real thing: the carving was worn and damaged in places, like the screen in a medieval church. And the same style of carving was on the rest of the furniture. The wood, it was all close grained. Not pine, she knew that. Was it oak? She wasn’t sure, but it had those tiny flecks she’d seen on oaken church doors.

What was sure was that was that all this represented a world she hadn’t experienced and one that she was, rather guiltily, enjoying. She was enjoying the attentions of her host too. Gentleness, consideration, respect. When last had she been treated like that? It made her feel valued again.

No, he wasn’t her host, he was her abductor. She shouldn’t be enjoying his attentions at all. And that dangerous Touch thing. She stretched. Well, if this was what abduction was like …

She opened the bureau: a quill, a little ink well and a sheaf of parchment on a hinged lid. She lifted the lid and gasped: a small pensieve lay before her. She’d only ever seen the one in Professor Dumbledore’s eyrie, but there was no mistaking the granite basin, the heavy liquid, silver grey and viscous, like mercury. Her host must be incredibly trusting of her: pensieves were both rare and valuable. This would have bought her flat five times over.

A soft knock came at the door and she closed the bureau.
“Seven-thirty, Miss, and your bath is ready.”

She came from the bathroom to find an anxious-looking Winky. On the bed lay a calf length floral frock: light cream with pale red roses and green leaves scattered seemingly randomly, a high scoop neck and shoulder capping sleeves. Another designer dress. She shook her head, caught Winky’s expression crumbling and said, “Oh, it’s lovely, Winky, but I do hope you’re getting some sleep.”

Winky’s look transformed to a glow. “Thank you, Miss, I’m so happy that you like it. Elves don’t need much sleep, Miss. If Miss will try it on…”

Miss did, feeling a little sinful. Her life until now had been so … well, utilitarian. Oh, she and Ron had always had enough to get by, but there had been no money for the quality of furnishings and clothing her parents used to buy. And all this was another two or three levels higher.

“Fits neatly, Miss. If you’d like to see?”

She turned. Winky had swung back the wardrobe door, and revealed a full length mirror. Surely that had not been there yesterday?

She looked at herself. Fits neatly: Was that Winky’s euphemism for a dress which showed off her figure without being, well, too … emphatic? Because it did, the belt clinching it around her waist, the bodice not too much nor too little, the skirt with a slight flare around her calves. “Thank you, Winky. It fits very neatly.”

The cat, walking around her with tail erect, looking up at her, evidently agreed.

“Thank you, Miss. If you will sit, we’ll do your hair now, Miss. No make-up for breakfast.”

Hermione sat down at the dressing table. A single oval mirror, missing yesterday - clearly by intent - faced her. “I’m glad we agree on that.”

“Winky would never disagree with Miss Hermione. That would be a very Bad Thing.”

Well! “Winky, what about last night?”

“Oh Miss, that was not disagreeing. No, and Winky has been giving Due Consideration to what Miss Hermione said. Winky believes that it would never do for Winky to Express her Opinion to her mistress. But what Winky can do is to show Another Point of View. Is that acceptable to Miss Hermione?”

Where was this leading? "Yes, Winky, if that's how you feel."

"Thank you, Miss Hermione. Winky feels that showing Another Point of View is a Good Thing, and Expressing her Opinion is not a Good Thing. Unless, of course, she feels that Miss Hermione needs reminding about Certain Truths that Miss Hermione would rather not be reminded about."

"It sounds like you're having your cake and eating it, Winky."

"Winky is not familiar with that expression, Miss. Winky is just trying to cover all options. Otherwise she has to do Penance, and she knows that Miss Hermione believes that is a Bad Thing."

"A Very Bad Thing, Winky." What else could she say? But if Winky was not manipulating her, the difference between that and what she was doing was as fine as the distinction between Expressing
an Opinion and showing Another Point of View.

“Thank you, Miss. And so, yesterday Winky was just showing Another Point of View. Mostly.”

Anyone who thought elves were simple, straightforward creatures could never have had one as a maid.

“Now, which earrings would Miss like to wear? The black, the white or the ruby, Miss?” The elf pointed to three pairs laid out on the dressing table.

She looked at Winky in the mirror and said, “That’s such an old trick, Winky.”

“Miss?”

“I used it on my children, Winky. ‘Which vegetable do you want with your dinner: broccoli or beans or sprouts?’”

Winky grinned. “Did it work, Miss?”

“About twice. I’ll have the white pearls, Winky.”

“Good choice,” and when Hermione raised her eyebrows at her in the mirror again - was she picking up habits from Mr Malfoy - Winky said, “Sorry, Miss. But it is a good choice: the master likes simplicity and understatement.”

“Winky, I am not-”

“Of course not, Miss. It is your taste, entirely … and his.”

“Winky, he is a hundred years old!”

Winky sighed. “Actually, a hundred and nine, Miss.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Miss. But that’s outside. Inside he is younger, much younger.”

“Yes, I can see that. Little sign of age when he talks.”

“None, in fact, Miss, if I may say so. White sandals, Miss?”

Hermione turned to look at the elf. She felt light hearted enough to be a little wicked. Was that because of him, or… no, of course not. Why should it be? Nothing to do with him or the touch – or Touch, as Winky would surely capitalize it if she knew about it. No, she was just revelling in her new-found health, that was all. Still … “Or should I go barefooted, Winky?”

Miss Sash leapt into the air and batted at an imaginary butterfly.

“Oh Miss!” said Winky. “Be a wood nymph? That would be such a Good Thing. He’d love that, he really would, it would be so … But it wouldn’t be kind, Miss, no, it wouldn’t, he’s already head … And who knows what will happen today, whether Miss will still be with us tomorrow?”

What? Had Winky eavesdropped? Inconceivable! “Winky, how do you know that?”

“Miss is very cheerful, Miss. She wouldn’t be if she didn’t think she’d be going with Miss Ginny.”
Miss Ginny! “How do you know Ginny is coming?”

“Master told Waldi to bring the Jacobean lady’s bureau with quill and parchment, for Winky and Bruny to put into Miss’s bedroom. So Miss will be writing a message. Master told Waldi to bring Europa to the breakfast table. So Master will be sending the message to someone. Miss trusts Miss Ginny more than anyone in the world, so to who else would Miss be sending an owl? Europa is an eagle owl, big, strong, swift. So Master considers the message top importance and it must be safe. So a portkey must be with it, because Master does not tell anyone where Bansith Lodge is. And that is how Winky knows Miss Ginny is coming, Miss, and probably Master Harry too.”

“I’m amazed.” How could she phrase this without sounding accusing? “Do the elves discuss the, er … doings of Mr Malfoy and, er … me?”

“Of course we do, Miss. In the elf hall, after hours. We care, we all care, so what else would we discuss? It would be a Bad Thing if we did not. Waldi, Ceannard, Jacobus and the others are so pleased to have you here, Miss. The master is Pater Familias, Miss. He carries everything Family, and it weighs him down, and he’s been so alone for so many years, Waldi says. But his heart is much lighter now that you are here, Miss, in spite of everything. And that is a Good Thing.

“Elves talk, Miss, but we never hide round corners, put ear or eye to key holes, lean ear out over banisters, Miss, oh no, no elf would stoop to that. And Winky will never repeat to others what Miss says to her, never. That is Sealed Lips, Miss. But when elves attend the Family, Miss, we look and listen, we work out, we read the heart. Otherwise how would we know what to do, how to help, which way is best? But only after Due Consideration, Miss. And no gossip, never gossip. Gossip is snigger behind hand, gossip is sneer, gossip is nasty. Gossip is a Bad Thing. And no interfering, Miss, oh no, that would never do. And the master will be at the table in ten minutes. Will Miss write to Miss Ginny now or at table, Miss?”

“Oh, now, Winky. And yes, the white sandals, please.”
The old man’s beam of welcome was proof enough of Winky’s dressmaking skills as well as her words.

“Miss Granger, I could almost say Lady Aurora, welcome. I can see without asking that you slept well. Business before pleasure this time. Your note to Mrs Potter is complete? If so we can send it immediately, and have breakfast while we await her arrival. Though I doubt that Mr Potter will allow his wife to grasp a portkey to an unknown destination alone. Not with his experience of portkeys. Particularly with his Hermione and an unknown Malfoy at the other end. I expect them both.”

“I am not his Hermione, Mr Malfoy.”

“No in the sense of a lover, certainly. But after all you have been through together? He would ride through Purgatory for you, Miss Granger. As you would for him. Only death will break the bond between you.”

She smiled at him. At a hundred and nine, he was still a romantic. Wasn’t that sweet!

As the great owl disappeared into the sky, Hermione said, “How long do you think it’ll be before they arrive.” She was still a little suspicious. He’d been so obliging, almost too obliging.

“The Potters? Miss Granger, a galleon to a knut they will be here before morning tea.”

Reassured, she laughed. “I don’t know whether you consider that to be good or bad, caring or impetuous.”

“I wish all your questions were as easy to answer, Miss Granger. Good for them, bad for me, perhaps. Both caring and impetuous, because that is their nature. Mr Potter is the archetypal Gryffindor and he will roar in like a thunderstorm. Likewise Miss Weasley, even more so, but equally with more finesse. She will sweep in like volcanic hail, both fire and ice, burning and freezing.”

She looked at him. What a way to describe them; though both descriptions sounded apt.

He went on. “However, I hope they will mellow to spring breezes. I have great respect for them both, and am more than happy to abide by their decision.”

Well, that said something for him. He was a Slytherin though, so his reply was sure to be double pronged. She glared at him. “If you say that, you mean you are sure they will support you. Remember, even if they agree with you, and I don’t see how they possibly can, I haven’t said that I’ll stay.”

“I accept that, Miss Granger. I am happy to rely on their judgement, and yours. Without reservation.” He looked back into her eyes.

“Well, all right then.” She must sound awfully suspicious. But she had a right to: he was resisting letting her go, and there was this Touch thing and … his eyes were so green.

“Now, it will be some time before the owl reaches them, so will you have a full English breakfast,
Miss Granger? I have no doubt that you would normally regard such a thing with horror, but you need good, solid food to help the recovery process.”

“Mr Malfoy, I haven’t felt so well for … I don’t know how long.” Oh, she was doing it again: being open and trusting with him, the man who had abducted her. But it was so difficult to remember not to.

He beamed at her. “I cannot express how gratified I am to hear that. However, the fact remains that you have been ill and you need to rebuild your strength. Carbohydrate, fat, protein, all are necessary. The eggs, bacon and sausages are from our own farms: free range and organic, Miss Granger. The tomatoes are also organic. Will you order?”

She laughed. “With such a pedigree, I dare not, not order. Yes, Mr Malfoy, a full English breakfast, please.”

“Excellent. Waldi, see to it, please. Miss Granger, if you please,” and he gestured to the chair on his right hand side.

All right, she’d trust him, but she’d make him earn that trust - if he could. As she spread her skirt and sank into the chair, she said, “Mr Malfoy, yesterday everything was new and happening at such a pace that I didn’t have a chance to consider it all. Now I have, and I have some questions.”

“Ah. Loose ends, as you said. And perhaps, holes in my arguments that you could fly a dragon through? You’d like to put me through the ringer?”

She must not respond femininely to his little jokes. This was serious. On Winky’s measuring tape they were just acquaintances. Remember that – and no Touching! “Well, I hope not, Mr Malfoy. Now, you implied that you had this spell in place for many years. Yet the dangers you spoke of have become relevant only since certain prisoners were released from Azkaban. So that implies another motive. And I still don’t understand why you, a Malfoy, are trying to help someone who brought down the man you supported.”

“I supported? I fought Voldemort, Miss Granger. It was my misguided son who supported him, and dragged his unfortunate family along behind him.”

“You fought Voldemort? I’ve never heard that.” She’d never heard anything about him at all, now she thought about it.

“You fought Voldemort? I’ve never heard that.” She’d never heard anything about him at all, now she thought about it.

“Is that one of your questions, Miss Granger?”

“No. No, it is not. But it is related.” Why was she justifying herself to him. It should be him to her. “So it is now, Mr Malfoy.” She spoke firmly.

“Very well, Miss Granger. I will tell you what is relevant. I fought him early in his rise to power. Years before you were born, Miss Granger. By the time you and Mr Potter entered the fray, I was ancient history. For the years of your thwarting, let us call it, I was, let us just say, unable to participate. I will tell you the whole tale sometime in the future, should the occasion arise and should you wish to hear it. But it follows from this that your opposition to Voldemort would be an incentive to me, not the opposite, particularly as it was successful.”

If he was a hundred and nine, ‘ancient history’ made sense. “All right. But the same could be said of rest of the wizarding world, more or less. Only you chose to put these spells into place. Why, Mr Malfoy?”

“I could argue that altruism was enough. And you would remain sceptical, if not disbelieving. So I
will tell you that my initial motive was not altruistic, though equally it was not malign.

“When I returned, on the fall of Voldemort, my daughter-in-law told me what had been happening. She told me of how a schoolboy, supported by a schoolgirl and another schoolboy had brought down this powerful dark wizard. Intrigued by this trio who had been able to do what so many others, including me, had not, I studied you all. I saw a boy with daring, skill and courage. I saw a girl with brilliance, perseverance, determination, an abundance of commonsense, and courage which rose like a wave when necessary. And I saw another boy, also brave, also daring, but whose qualities were of an order lower than the other two.

“And I thought: those two: what an asset they would be to any family they chose to marry into. But who would, who could match them. Then the boy found his match: a girl with exceptional qualities as well as devotion to him. But the girl: to my consternation, she married the second boy.”

Well! What right-

But he raised his hand. “You will feel it was none of my business, Miss Granger, whom you chose to marry. And of course you are right. But the point is irrelevant. We are not exploring whether I had the right to do what I did, but why I did what I did.”

“I still think-”

“And you are right. Right to feel offended, but wrong to think it matters here. To put it bluntly, Miss Granger, we are not examining your bright concept of right and wrong, but my sullied, convoluted one, and how it lights my actions.”

Was he being sarcastic? “I don’t quite see your point, Mr Malfoy.”

“You asked me, Miss Granger, why I put your rescue spells into place. I do not, as a rule, explain my actions because I am not, as a rule, concerned about what anyone thinks.”

If that was his attitude … She started to rise, and he raised a hand to stop her. “In your case, Miss Granger, I am concerned by what you think, so I am grateful that you asked, and happy to explain. Please observe that I use the word explain, not justify. Many people seem to think that explanations are meant to be justifications. So my point is that while I do not expect my motivations, my morality, to meet with your standards, I hope that you will see that they meet with mine.”

“They are not just my standards, Mr Malfoy. Everyone has them.”

His nostrils flared. “I would not insult you by agreeing with that statement, Miss Granger. Conventional morality is as shallow as a rain puddle. And about as muddy.”

“You have a low opinion of people in general, Mr Malfoy.”

“I do. But if I have clarified our terms of reference …” he paused, she nodded, and he went on. “Then we may proceed. I will continue to tell you what I did and why I did it, and you, Miss Granger …”

She narrowed her eyes at him. Was he going to tell her what to do?

The corner of his mouth lifted. “You, if you please, Miss Granger, will enjoy Ceannard’s breakfast. Waldi has already replaced it once and is standing there looking hopeful that he will not have to do so again.”

She looked down. There it was steaming in front of her. Her face reddened. “Sorry,” she muttered,
then looked across at Waldi and said, “It looks delicious, Waldi, please tell Ceannard, and that I apologised for wasting the first one.”

Waldi bowed.

“To continue then. I felt, Miss Granger, that you were throwing yourself away.”

What! She choked down a bit of bacon and opened her mouth.

“Young outrage overcomes your rationality again, Miss Granger. It is an understandable reaction, but if I am to answer your question on why I did what I did before Mr Potter and his lady arrive, I think you must exercise discipline.”

It was true, but he was being provocative. She speared a quarter tomato and thrust it into her mouth, glaring at him.

“Well done, Miss Granger. Perhaps that is the way forward. You rebuke me with your bright brown eyes, I accept the rebuke and we proceed.”

Bright brown eyes. She shut them for a moment. Was he taking her seriously? And no, her heart hadn’t given a little flip when he’d said that, had it? She was thirty-seven, not a teenager. And he was half an aeon older. Remember!

“Let us move on then. I will endeavour not to provoke rebukes, tempting though it is. The matter is too serious.”

Really? Then why did he drop in little flatters like tempting though it is. She should be angry at his presumption, and instead he was confusing her. Deliberately, no doubt. She glared at him again.

He nodded. “To proceed. That marriage was doomed from the start, doomed from before the start, doomed from the moment you met him, as a child, and he insulted you.”

No confusion now. He was taking advantage of her, of her agreement to listen to him without comment, to say what he liked. He was pushing her to the limits, seeing how far he could provoke her. And she hadn’t even actually agreed, she had just not disagreed. She glared at him steadily and furiously. Cut, spear, lift to mouth, chew, swallow. She had no idea what she was eating.

“But you believed in him, and so, by your moral code, did everything to support him. Driven by your integrity, you fought to make it work. Hour by hour, day by day, year by year. But him! That flat: as a starter home for a year or so, fine. But after that? And especially once a baby came? Miss Granger, it showed the value your husband placed on you. That flat,” his lip curled, “above a shop, a convenience store on a busy road, in Brixton. Not even owned, but rented! Was that all he could offer the woman who had given herself to him? And no ordinary woman, but Hermione Granger? Was that all he could offer her children? A place where the shop door bell downstairs would disturb their sleep at eleven o’clock at night? Because their daddy choose to squander his earnings on the latest broomsticks instead of providing a proper home for his family?”

Oh, this was too much. The words stung her, more so because what he said was true. But she couldn’t let it pass. “The flat was … adequate.” Even stung, she couldn’t bring herself to say more than that.

“As a shelter from the elements, yes. As a home? No Garden of Eden, Miss Granger. Traffic round the clock. Boy racers at three in the morning. Drunken altercations in the street below at midnight, your children - and you - trembling at the violence because their daddy was not there to protect them, being in Florida again for Quidditch trials?”
She glared at him. It was true - but how did he know of it? “It wasn’t all that often.”

“Often enough. And this for the children of the brightest, the best witch of her generation? It makes me angry, Miss Granger. The only thing which makes me more angry, Miss Granger, is the folly of my own family in all of this. That, that makes my blood boil.”
A woman of worth - outraged

Good! Let him suffer a bit. And she’d prod him as he had prodded her. “Why, Mr Malfoy?” She spoke softly.

His nostrils dilated and his lip curled. Very patrician-like. He must have cut an impressive figure once. She could imagine him striding through the halls of the Ministry, small portly figures like Fudge scurrying after him. “Because they saw but discounted the brightness in front of them. Because they were too bigoted, too wrapped up in seven hundred years of Malfoy pedigree, too concerned with what their fellow no-chins thought. Too blind, in short, Miss Granger, too superficial to realize that purity is not the same as quality. Purity of breeding is for animals, Miss Granger: artificial, arbitrary, meaningless. What, are we to judge a fellow human by whether he has tufts of hair between his toes, whether his ears have the correct degree of perkiness, whether his tail lines up with his backbone when he points?”

Hermione’s lips twitched at the picture, and the old man inclined his head.

“If I have served to amuse you, Miss Granger, I have not lived wholly in vain. But no, this is serious, and I would not have you think I do not regard it as such. What matters is what is here and here.” He tapped his temple, then his chest over his heart.

“Well, obviously I grant your point about purebloods and their obsession with birth and pedigree, Mr Malfoy.” He frowned. At the word purebloods? She went on. “But I think you overemphasize my abilities. I was simply good at learning, that’s all.”

He leant back and steepled his fingers. “Do you really think so? No brilliance, no courage, no determination and perseverance, no unusual presence of mind, enabling you to react instantaneously and appropriately to circumstances, no commonsense out of the ordinary?”

“No really, no. Cho Chang regularly bettered my marks at Arithmancy. Ginny Weasley has quicker reactions, and was far braver than I ever was. Perseverance: who could match Susan Bones for that? And commonsense is, well, common.”

“Really? So high marks equals brilliance, impetuousness is the same as courage, plodding is equivalent to perseverance? And no doubt Misses Chang and Bones would have handled your invasions of the Ministry and of Gringotts with far more style than you, not to speak of escaping from Voldemort at Godric’s Hollow.”

“Well, perhaps not.”

“Indeed not, Miss Granger. They would not have dared venture within a mile of those places, and would have panicked had they found themselves there. And even if Miss Weasley would not have panicked in those situations, would she have had the right blend of courage and caution to handle them as you did, not to speak of a reservoir of spell knowledge to draw on? Would she have had a flight bag ready at her brother’s wedding? During the months of hiding, could she have held the group together, smoothing the bickering, soothing the insecure egos, keeping Mr Potter on track, advising him, encouraging him, guiding him, not to speak of finding campsites, getting the food and cooking it? I have a high regard for Miss Weasley, Miss Granger, but there can be no doubt that the answer is … no.”

“Many are just little things.”
“The little things, Miss Granger, without which the big things will not happen. The truth is, Miss Granger, that while there may have been one or two girls who could have handled one or two incidents better in the situations in which you found yourselves – Miss Bulstrode against the giant snake, for example, even odds on that, I’d say – overall no one could have done what you did. No one could even have approached what you did.”

“Really, you exaggerate, Mr Malfoy. Yes, I was able to help Harry, but to say my qualities, such as they were, were unique, is too much.”

“Is it? If one strips out the virtue, Miss Granger, I might concede the point. In my children’s generation I can think of one whose loyalty, tenacity, steadfastness and skill - though certainly not intelligence - equals yours, indeed exceeds it in pure ferocity. But one cannot strip out the virtue, for it is that which drove your valiance. Poor Bellatrix’s psychotic behaviour was driven by trauma.

“No. Miss Granger, it is not just the individual qualities but the sum, the blend, the balance of them, how they complemented each other, the principles they support, and in the ultimate, the woman they built. I know you discount them – indeed, modesty is one of your virtues – but I assure you that no other girl of your generation could have supported Harry Potter to success as you did. Without you he would have failed.

“Courage, daring, the ability to react instantaneously and appropriately to a situation are not enough – and, as an aside, you displayed those as much as Mr Potter. A campaign does not succeed on brilliant or courageous tactics alone. It succeeds because the resources to support those tactics are in place. Food, water, shelter, a place of refuge, emotional support, you supplied all of those. I do not wish to take anything away from Mr Potter: clearly he was the keystone to defeating Voldemort. But a keystone will fall if it is not supported.”

“Ron helped too.”

His face hardened. “Mr Weasley abandoned you. He ran out on you both in a time of desperate need.”

Hermione flinched and he said, “I regret causing you pain, Miss Granger, but we must face the truth. He let his emotions, his sense of inferiority, overwhelm him. He caused you both, but you in particular, great pain and distress at a time when you could ill afford such a draining.”

“But it was because he was wearing the horcrux!”

“I grant you that. Magic as deep as that, invoked by a man as malevolent as Voldemort would have a malign effect on anyone who touched it. Fears and insecurities would be magnified. It would take a strong mind with deeply rooted integrity to resist it.”

“Ron is not weak!”

“By normal standards, Miss Granger, no, he is perhaps not. But measured by the benchmark of Potter and Granger, he is. This is the crux of the matter between you and him. You should have left him to Miss Brown.”

Hermione snorted. “Won-won.”

“I take it that that unladylike sound indicates disgust, or at least scorn and distaste. I agree, but better her ‘Won-won’ than yours. Better for you, better for him. She was a better match to his level of attributes and abilities.”

“She was clingy and infantile.”
“Indeed. Both good feminine tactics with the right person and at the right time.”

She wasn’t going to discuss feminine tactics with this man. “The point is, Mr Malfoy, that Ron did help Harry. Harry would have died without Ron.”

“The point is, Miss Granger, that unique qualities were not necessary for the help he gave. Anyone else could have done it. He happened to be in the right place at the right time, but replace Ron with George or William or Charles and you get the same result. Who could you replace Miss Granger with? It is as simple as that.”

Was this relevant? Or was he just sidetracking her. Again. “You have built up a pretty picture of me, Mr Malfoy, which puts a gloss on my skills and abilities, but still does not answer the question of why you put these spells in place years ago.”

“Miss Granger, do you think the Malfoys were the only ones who had – let me not skip about the words, so you will understand the seriousness – the only ones to have their eye on you? The publication of Percy Weasley’s tomes opened the eyes of many to the vital part you played in those events.”


“Those books. I think many in the magical world had never heard the term ‘logistics’ before The Rise and Fall of Voldemort, but they certainly knew about Hermione Granger’s groundwork, preparation and foresight by the time they reached Volume Three. In fact, inspired by you, Mr Weasley has introduced a new word into the lexicon – or rather an old word with a new meaning: fixing. ‘Miss Granger fixed it so that the death-eaters caught sight of them before they disappeared.’

“I have never read Percy’s books.”

“They must be the only ones in the library then, Miss Granger. Volume Four deals with the final days, and Mr Weasley does justice to your sagacity, courage, steadfastness-”

“Mr Malfoy, what has this to do with what you claim threatens me now? Do not think you can sidetrack me by embarrassing me.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “Add tenacity to the list if it is not already there. Background, Miss Granger, without which the focus spot is meaningless. I, recently returned from … where I had been, had assessed the events and characters involved well before Mr Weasley published his magnum opus. I knew well that Miss Granger would be an asset to any family she chose to join, an asset such as one gets once in two or three generations.”

“Mr Malfoy!”

“My purpose is not to raise the colour in your cheeks, Miss Granger, though I must say it becomes you. You would deny your qualities, and hence the validity of my case. But Mr Potter would sit there nodding. Yes, he would. All right, to focus the spotlight: your qualities were noted by others as well as the Malfoys. You chose to marry Ronald Weasley. After a few years the whole of the magical community could see the stresses of that marriage. Some watched with distress, others with glee. Some, driven by less than honourable motives, attempted to put abduction spells in place.”

This was just more of the same: vague threats and generalities. “Why? What ‘less than honourable motives?’ Please be specific, Mr Malfoy. As before, I am getting a hazy picture but no solidity.”
The old man sat back and steepled his fingers. “All right. Your high-mindedness shields you from what is obvious to others. My point is that you and Mr Potter are an order above that of others of your generation, Miss Granger, and that whichever family you married into would reap the benefit. All this misguided obsession with purity results from an obsession with bloodlines which in turn is to do with family. Family past, present and future. Future, Miss Granger, is where you come in. Not to put too fine a point on it, your children."

“What! Is that what this is all about? My breeding potential? You wanted to use me as a broodmare, to use my body as an incubator, my genes to improve the Malfoy bloodline? That’s beyond outrageous!”

He sighed. “I knew it would be like this. The muggle world is so full of romantic idealism. Love counts for all, sweeps all before it. Nothing else matters. Miss Granger, putting aside the dramatic language and unfounded slave-girl implications, is it outrageous? To seek the best for one’s family? After all, do we not all select our mates? Do we not choose someone whom we believe is of similar intelligence, integrity, values, who would be a good father or mother?”

“No, we don’t! We fall in love. We don’t sit down and calculate it out.”

“I see. So you would be happy for your daughter to marry anyone she loved, even someone like, say, Mundungus Fletcher.”

“Well … no … of course not.”

“But why? Surely, if they love each other, that’s all that matters?”

She folded her arms and glared at him. “All right, Mr Malfoy, I admit it is not all that matters. Integrity, values, even prospects do matter.”

“In fact, Miss Granger, you were right. To the couple, being in love is paramount. The other attributes come some way down the scale. But the parents, the family, see the wider picture. They see the future, if not the bloodline. In truth, your daughter is highly unlikely to fall in love with someone like Mundungus Fletcher because she has learned, by example, to value honour, integrity, principles and so on. A child absorbs her parents’ values simply by being with them. But certainly you would nightly pray that she would choose someone who had, at the least, matching values and abilities, because you want the best for her. And what I was doing was just the same, just a little more … actively. Except, of course, that if you examine what you believe to be my nefarious plan, you will see a glaring flaw.”

“How would I … marry?”

“Yes. Draco: married. Lucius: married, apart from being too old and your feeling of total antipathy towards him. So it never was viable.”

Well, it could have been. If they had really abducted her, hidden her away and really just kept her as a broodmare. One of them could have fathered children on her, and passed them off as Draco and Astoria’s. It happened in the muggle world, she knew. And quite probably Lucius would be capable of it, but Abraxas? She couldn’t believe that.

But Draco as a husband? “Even before I married and Draco married, it was not an option, Mr Malfoy. I could never have formed a relationship with the boy I knew as Draco Malfoy.” She did not want to tell his grandfather what she really thought of him.

“The delicate touch again. I agree with your unstated reasons, Miss Granger. Draco’s main
characteristic at Hogwarts was arrogance, and of all unpleasant traits I dislike arrogance the most – not that you would care what my likes and dislikes are. He was also spiteful, dishonest, manipulative – I could go on. Some of those traits were inculcated by Lucius, some were the result of distorted innate propensities. But whatever the source, they were present and the dislike between you grew from the moment you met. He was beneath consideration, I agree. But, as an aside, he has changed. You yourself saw the self-torture he endured that final year, when Death Eater depravity warred with finer instincts, instincts which his father had long attempted to bury. He is not the person you knew. The experience of his final years at Hogwarts shook him, made him re-examine his values. But as he was, no woman of worth would look at him.”

“Some did,” murmured Hermione.

“Women of worth, Miss Granger. Not shallow girls impressed by wealth, looks and haughtiness.”

She smiled. “I cannot disagree, Mr Malfoy. But the point is, however he might have been under different circumstances, he was what he was at the time, and I married Ron.”

“Indeed. And he, to his great good fortune, was accepted by Astoria.”

“But you still set the spell in place. Was that because you still had hopes, that my marriage might-”

His face went still. “No, Miss Granger. I did not hope your marriage would fail. I would not wish you pain, directly or indirectly, for any reason. I desired the opposite, but I knew that suffering would be your lot, given the choice you made.”

Well! “That is so … you say you dislike arrogance and yet you make a comment like that?”

“Miss Granger, did all your friends think you were doing the right thing by marrying Ronald Weasley?”

She looked away, and he went on. “I set up the spell and kept it in place because of threats from others. I did not wish you to fall into their hands. And the more I learnt of you, the more determined I became. Also I was intrigued. Why had this brilliant girl who did everything so right, made so wrong a marriage?”

“Oh! You are so full of yourself!”

“Am I? Have I made a factually incorrect statement?”

He kept pushing her. Oh, she’d love to empty the water carafe over him. Sitting there drenched, he wouldn’t be so smug. But he’d probably commend her for her spirit, then ask her why she’d never done that to Ron. He was full of adroit twists like that.

No, rather than play his game, she’d push back. “The more you learnt of me: so you spied on me?”

“Please, Miss Granger, nothing so coarse. I merely observed from afar.”

Oh yes? “But you knew my marriage was … rocky.”

“Miss Granger,” he said gently, “all of magical Britain knew that the Granger-Weasley marriage was rocky. You were, are still, public figures.”

“I hate the thought that others were gossiping about our private affairs: it is so intrusive, so invasive …”
“So common and so distasteful, Miss Granger, that I never did it. And neither did my family, I believe.”

She shook her head. “Mr Malfoy, your family hated me, and probably still do. I cannot believe that they took no pleasure in my … troubles. It is human nature to gloat about the misfortunes to those you dislike.”

“It is. And I admit I do derive some satisfaction from the misfortunes of certain individuals who have acted malignantly against my family. But an innocent like you? Never. I made my feelings on that clear to both Narcissa and Draco, and I believe they were respected.”
An innocent. Was that how he saw her? But she was still smarting from *so wrong a marriage*.

“Your feelings, Mr Malfoy? What were they, pray?”

“That any subject of gossip would arise from a matter which was painful to you, Miss Granger, and that while I wished to be aware of that matter, I did not wish to dwell on it.”

“Even if I accept that, I cannot believe that Draco and Mrs Malfoy did not gossip about me.”

“I can understand that. But both Draco and Narcissa had enough troubles of their own to occupy them. They have changed, Miss Granger. Draco is no longer the arrogant, self-centred brat you knew all those years ago. Narcissa never actually was the person you believed her to be. You will find that when you meet them again.”

When? That would be never! “I still feel that you were presumptuous.”

He bowed his head to her. “A lady to the core, Miss Granger: few would use so gentle a word. Your feeling is justified. Someone from a family you regard as antipathetic watching you, following the events of your life. It is not easy to believe that the watching was accompanied with well-wishing and sympathy, and not gloating. We Malfoys are well acquainted with the feeling.”

She reddened. “I suppose you are.”

“The difference being that we are cynical about it and shrug it off, whereas cynicism is an alien emotion to you.”

“Yes. Cynicism sneers at the world but does nothing to try to improve it.”

“Indeed. Though I would say that trying to improve human nature is futile. But certainly your refreshing lack of cynicism is a significant part of your-”

“Mr Malfoy, we are drifting from the point.”

“Not really, Miss Granger. The point was why did I set up the spell many years ago. The answer is that while my initial self-interested motive was more or less stillborn, it resulted in a benign interest which deepened the more I knew of you. I saw and admired your virtues. Others have these virtues but no one has them in such abundance, such perfect balance, complementing each other. Upright, moral, intelligent, resourceful, strong, yet still feminine, every inch a woman. And amazingly, beguilingly innocent. My purpose now was to save a precious jewel from befoulment. I realised that others might have fewer scruples about how they got those qualities into their bloodline. I wished to protect you.”

She stared at him. It was all exaggeration, of course. Yes, she had helped Harry, but to say her actions were pivotal, her support crucial, that was too much. But … he believed it. *Who could you replace Miss Granger with?* He believed Harry would have failed but for her. He believed she was
the brightest, the best witch of her generation. He believed in her. All these ‘virtues’, in perfect balance, every inch a woman.

She turned away, her heart swelling, tears prickling in her eyes. He believed in her, that she was a person of value. All those years with Ron, she realized now, had eroded her sense of self-worth. She’d pushed herself down so much that she’d begun to believe that was where she belonged. She’d treated her abilities as second rate for so long that she’d begun to believe they were. And here was this man respecting her, believing she was a precious jewel. She could have doubts about his motivations and even more about his actions, but she could not doubt his high intellect, deep character and profound wisdom.

“Mr Malfoy-” She had no idea how she was going to continue, but fortunately he gave her no opportunity.

“You would continue to deny them, Miss Granger, I know. Your modesty merely adds another reason why warning you would have been futile. You would have distrusted and disbelieved. I knew my action was for your good. I needed no approval from anyone. I have no regrets for what I have done.”

And nor had she.

What! Just a moment, girl, before you swoon at his feet! All this emotion and you’re not even touching him? Last night you had at least the excuse of that … glowing thing. Switch the heart off and the mind on, all right?

It was all hanging together prettily, but it was still all assertion. She was swayed, yes, very much, and she wanted to believe him. And that was another alarm bell; no, two. The first was that what mattered was the truth and not what she wanted the truth to be. The second was that her feelings were trying to entice her down a totally inappropriate path. And that was just not on.

So, just assertion or could he offer anything else? He pushed her, all the time. Could she push him back? Be sceptical? She didn’t want to be in the middle of an argument when Harry arrived, which must be any minute now. But this was crucial.

“Mr Malfoy, you have painted a picture which shows your actions in a benign light, but there is no proof of any of this: all I have is the fact that I’m here, where I did not ask to be, and with restored health and youth, which is so wonderful as to be highly suspect. Putting that … immensity to one side, and given your family’s reputation, it is difficult to believe that your actions were really for my good.”

“Ah, Miss Granger, what would make it easy to believe?”

She fought down the impulse to chuckle. That would be going along with him. “Nothing would make it easy to believe. But my friends at least tried to help, took the children away for a weekend so I could have a break.”

“How would you have reacted to a similar Malfoy offer?”

“All right. So you’re saying you didn’t offer because I would have rejected your help?”

“I am.”

“So, really, it was my fault.” It was true. What else could she expect? Her heart sank.

“Miss Granger, you are blaming yourself, unjustly. I am sure that is what you usually do, but it is
… not healthy. Anyway, that is not what I mean. I can tell you, but …”

“But?”

“I have no wish to put you under any obligation, Miss Granger, but if this is the only way to convince you that my interest was benign … Just because I did not offer does not mean I sat back and watched you struggle. Just as I did not ask you before I brought you here, so I did not ask you if I could help. Did you ever wonder why your rent never increased, why the upper floor became available, why Mr Patel put in double glazing at no cost, why the convenience store became a haberdashery with normal working hours?”

She stared at him. How could he know all this? “I … did. I dreaded the annual rent review. After four years of no increase I plucked up the courage to ask the agent why, and yes, he was a Mr Patel. He told us the landlord was a little old lady who didn’t want the trouble of changing tenants. He said that she preferred to let it to one family and that the upper floor had little commercial value. That made no sense as obviously the landlord was losing rental by letting us use it at no extra charge. I wanted to offer something, but we simply couldn’t afford it. He said she wanted to improve the property, so put in the double glazing. But I do know that little old ladies have a fondness for haberdasheries.”

“They do? I shall tell Narcissa.”

“I didn’t exactly have her in mind, Mr Malfoy.” She could imagine the Ice Queen’s reaction to being described as a little old lady.

He waved it away. “Mr Patel was always friendly and helpful?”

“Mr Patel was a godsend. He was a developer as well, and had a whole string of brothers and cousins who could fix boilers, do plumbing, decorating, unblock lavatories and so on. He’d never bill us until I insisted, and then he’d send in one for five pounds or so. Are you saying you were involved in that?”

The old man inclined his head.

“Because you were concerned about … me and my family?”

“You and your children, Miss Granger. I could not help you with your marriage, nor wished to, but I could make your home life a little easier, take away some of the little worries. Mr Patel was instructed accordingly.”

“Mr Patel was a renter’s dream. If I called his mobile, he’d be round in half an hour. If he wasn’t in his office, he’d be ‘working just round the corner.’ Once we had a stone though the window at two in the morning. He rang me ten minutes later - I don’t know how he knew - and arrived half an hour afterwards with a plywood patch. He assured me it would never happen again, and it didn’t. Our little street became quite respectable.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“But Mr Malfoy, are you really telling me you were behind all of this?”

“I bought the freehold two years after you moved in, and installed Mr Patel a year later. He lives on the other side of the street, two doors down.”

“What can I say but: thank you.” Her heart was swelling again.
“Not at all, Miss Granger. In fact it proved a good investment. Over the years I have bought more properties nearby and Mr Patel has developed them for me. With the gentrification provided by Mr Patel’s ministrations, property values locally have gone up.”

“I know. We never managed to save much, but a ten percent deposit for a mortgage became even further out of our reach.”

“Ah: every silver lining has a black cloud within it. You considered buying the flat above the store?”

“I wanted a home which was ours. I wanted stability for the children. My standards declined as the years passed. But we couldn’t afford even that.” She dropped her eyes.

“Being poor is nothing to be ashamed of, Miss Granger.”

She glared at him. “Says a man who has never experienced anything remotely like it. It should not, Mr Malfoy, but it is. Society does not base its values on morality, Mr Malfoy, it bases them on gut instinct. Society has decided poverty is shameful, so it is.”

“Justification for my low regard for people in general, Miss Granger, and my rejection of your belief that they share your values. You however have the armour of knowing of your intrinsic worth as well as of philosophical detachment. Why would it bother you what little minds think?”

“Because I am a mother, Mr Malfoy. My children have no such armour, and they spend much of their time in one of the most savage social environments known to man: school. Children are merciless, Mr Malfoy. Any one who is different: culturally, socially, physically, mentally, racially, is a target for bullying. Adults have a veneer of civilized behaviour. Children do not.”

“I am sorry, Miss Granger. My scope for help was limited.”

She leant forward and touched his hand. “You lightened my load as much as you could, Mr Malfoy. Please don’t think I’m ungrateful.” The impulse was a mistake: she had forgotten what happened when they touched. She could feel the warmth and the comforting feelings sweeping through her. The glow was yellow.

He placed his hand on hers. “Miss Granger.”

“Oi! What’s going on here?” A yell from across the lawn. She turned. Harry was striding towards them, Ginny beside him.

Oh dear: she’d not wanted to be arguing with Abraxas when they arrived, but holding hands was much worse. What would they think!

Abraxas withdrew his hand, saying, “The Potter thunderstorm roars in, Miss Granger. And here you are fraternizing with the enemy.”
Harry was indeed looking thunderous, but Ginny was also frowning. Hermione’s heart sank. Was it Abraxas or … Ron? She’d taken it for granted that their friendship would survive the break-up of her marriage to Ginny’s brother. Had she presumed too much?

But as she rose and stepped forward, Ginny broke into a run, holding out her arms. “Mione!”

“Oh, Ginny, I’m sorry, so sorry, about Ron-” she said as they hugged each other.

But Ginny put a finger across her lips. “It’s final, then?”

“I’m sorry, yes. Ron’s left and even if he hadn’t, I wouldn’t go back. I’m so sorry, Ginny.”


They kissed each other. Then Ginny held her at arm’s length and looked at her. Her eyes widened. “Mione, what’s happened?”

What? Oh, her new ‘look.’ “I’m better, Gin.”

“More than ‘better,’ Mione. You look … vibrant, youthful. In fact you look like you did before you married Ron, almost. And before we left you looked … so worn out. The treatment at the clinic couldn’t have worked that well, surely? You look … ten years younger!” Her eyes were sparkling with tears.

Hermione hugged her again. “Er… actually, no. I, er … didn’t actually take it, in the end. No, it’s the treatment Mr Malfoy arranged that made me look like this.”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed. “I know of no treatment that does that. Women would be clamouring for it, otherwise. And men.” She glared at Abraxas. “It’s got to be dark magic.”

Hermione shook her head. “It’s not, Gin. I wouldn’t, I couldn’t feel as I do if it were.”

Harry had been standing scowling in the background. He came forward, hugged and kissed her, then stepped back. “Of course it’s dark magic. Conning you is part of the game. He’s a Malfoy, what d’you expect! Come on, we’ll take you to a proper healer and get you checked out.” He took Hermione’s hand, but she pulled it free.

“Harry, it is not dark magic. Padma Patil did the healing, at St Mungo’s.”

“You saw her, spoke to her, agreed it with her?”

“Well, no. I was under sedation for the treatment. Mr Malfoy told me.” Even to her it sounded weak.
Harry snorted. “Mione, the fact that you are believing what a Malfoy tells you proves you are under his influence. He’s even dressed you like a doll!”

The heat rose in her cheeks, but before she could say anything, Ginny turned on Harry. “Rubbish, Harry! She does not look like a doll, she looks like a beautifully, tastefully dressed young woman. I wish my husband would buy me clothes like that! Though,” and she looked at Hermione’s dress, “that’s never off the shelf. That’s designer. And bespoke. And unless he,” and she flicked a glance towards Abraxas, “is Karl Lagerfeld in masquerade, I can’t believe he’s been dressing you. Who’s your designer, Mione?”

“Winky. Dressmaker too.”

“Wow. Well, there you go, Harry. And she did spend time at St Mungo’s, we know that very well. And with Padma, who would as soon fly to the moon as use dark magic. So let’s not jump the gun here.”

“Thank you, Miss Weasley.” Abraxas was speaking, for the first time. He had been standing there, leaning on his cane, Hermione realised guiltily, ever since they had arrived. “Miss Granger?”

“Yes?” He was looking at her with a raised eyebrow, then gave the slightest nod towards Ginny. “Oh, yes, sorry. Ginny, may I introduce Pater Familias Abraxas Malfoy; Mr Malfoy, may I introduce Mrs Ginevra Potter.”

He gave a measured bow to Ginny. She stared at him, then, to Hermione’s amazement, dropped a curtsey. “Charmed, Mrs Potter. Thank you for attending so quickly in response to Miss Granger’s note.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “We weren’t going to leave her in your hands, Malfoy. Especially not after what happened at the flat. Our Peverell Clock goes wild, mortal danger alarms clanging all over the place, then swings to going home, which turned out to be a pack of lies, because she’s not at home. Then she’s at St Mungo’s undergoing treatment, from what the hospital won’t say, and we can’t see her. Then the hospital tells us she’s gone and is convalescing, refusing to say where, just that it is safe. Then suddenly we get Mione’s note saying she is here. Hell of an interpretation of the word safe, and St Mungo’s will be hearing from me, as will you, Malfoy, or at least from my lawyers. We’re going to throw the book at you, old man, with criminal and civil charges.”

“Harry, stop it!” said Hermione. “Mr Malfoy has treated me with nothing but respect and consideration.”

“He abducted you, Mione! I’ve got your ’port trace records: from Brixton at midnight to an unplottable destination, from the unplottable destination to St Mungo’s at one in the morning, from St Mungo’s back to the unplottable destination three days later. Little did I think the unplottable destination was a Malfoy bolthole.” He glared at Abraxas. “Even if the second trip here was with Hermione’s permission and consent, there’s no way in hell the first one was.”

“Neither was, Mr Potter. Both were without her knowledge, let alone consent.”

“You’re admitting it? Abduction?”

“I’m admitting nothing, Mr Potter. I’m stating that she consented to nothing. She was under sedation the whole time. But safe. Where were you at midnight that first day, Mr Potter?”

“In Albania, in bed, Malfoy. And where were you!”

“You were thousands of miles away, in bed. Quite. Where was I? Keeping Miss Granger safe, Mr
What was this? Quibbling about who, when and where? But she was the ‘who’ and she had more important questions. “Three days?” She stared at Abraxas. “I was in St Mungo’s for three days? You didn’t tell me that.”

“No. I have told you as little as possible about your stay in St Mungo’s. That is why Miss Weasley is here.”

“And everything else, I’m sure,” said Harry. “Come on, Mione, let’s get out of here. Ginny can look at your records at St Mungo’s. At least we know they will not have been tampered with. And then tell you what’s what. I’m damn sure the only reason for all this secrecy is for his sake,” and he jerked his head towards Abraxas. “And we’ll get you checked over. Karl Lagerfeld dresses or not.” And he frowned at Ginny. She scowled back and shook her head.

Abraxas turned to Hermione. “As I told you, Miss Granger. A typical Gryffindor response. Gaze at the sky until something drastic happens, then gallop in on your white stallion, yelling, guns blazing, and drag off the damsel, willing or no. Lightning and thunder, much shouting and rushing around, but all a little late.”

Ginny giggled and Harry turned on her, glaring. “What?”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it. That’s what happens in our home. Much of the time.”

“Oh, of course it’s not true. It’s smooth, manipulative, lying Slytherin talk and he’s a smooth, manipulative, lying Slytherin. Look at her! He abducted her and is she angry? No, she’s half on his side! Skilled persuasion, and if that doesn’t work, coercion. Come on, Mione.”

She hesitated, looking at Abraxas. Harry did have a point. It had seemed reasonable, agreeing to stay here, the way it had happened, step by step. But standing back now and looking at the whole, it looked more like she had been manipulated. Coercive? No, he would never be that. But persuasive certainly. Had she been weak to allow him to persuade her? Certainly the temptation to go back to London with her friends was great.

He looked back at her. “I believe we have an agreement, Miss Granger.”

“That Ginny would look at my records rather than me, yes.”

“That Miss Weasley, rather than you, would examine your records, here.”

“I can’t see that it makes any difference where it happens.”

“It does, to me. And it does to you.”

“But I can come back, if the records say I must be here.”

“You may. The cottage will be here for you. Winky and the staff will be here for you. But I will not, Miss Granger, for you will have broken our agreement. Without trust there can be nothing.”

“What the hell, Malfoy!” said Harry. “You abduct her and then you sit there making conditions? You abduct her, then talk about trust? Come on, Mione, let him do what he wants. The hospital records will not have been tampered with, we know that.”

She looked at Ginny, who said, “I really can’t see how it can make any difference where we look at the records or where you are at the time.”
Hermione looked at Abraxas and he looked back at her, his eyebrows slightly raised. She thought of their meals together, his gentle, polite responses to her aggressive questioning. She thought of his beam of pleasure when she told him how well she was feeling, of his distress when she demanded to be allowed to leave, of his pain when she broke the Touch. She thought of Winky saying: ‘His heart is much lighter now that you are here, Miss.’ She thought of what he had done for her with the flat. Something brushed against her legs. She looked down. Mister Lumpy. He looked up at her and mewed. Trust. She looked back at Abraxas and gave a very slight nod. “I will stay, as we agreed.”

He shut his eyes for a moment, then opened them, took both her hands in his. “Your life, and mine, Miss Granger.”

What? What did that mean? Then she could feel the warmth surging between them. She glanced down. The light beads were orbiting like meteors, the trailing threads a whirl of bright blue and yellow lit from within by a white light, the glowing rain violet with a sprinkling of silver white. Could others see it? She glanced across at Ginny. She was staring at their joined hands, wide-eyed. Oh dear.

Harry, though, was glaring at Abraxas. “Hey, lay off, Malfoy,” he said. He stepped forward, but Abraxas had already released her hands and stepped back.


“Hell, Mione, he’s about a hundred years old!”

She glared at him. “I. Know. That.”

“But what about Ron?”

What? What was Harry reading into this?

“Ron has burnt his bridges,” said Ginny. “Ron is history.”

What! That was very final, from his own sister.

“But … but you were saying, just this morning-” said Harry.

“Yes. Even then I knew the chances were slim, Ron being what he is. But now I know it’s too late. By an aeon. The bird has flown, to another nest. Is that not so, Mr Malfoy?”

“Miss Weasley, much as it pains me to contradict a lady, I must agree with Mr Potter. He has the right of the matter.”

She put her hands on her hips, glaring at him. “Where there is light there is fire, Mr Malfoy.”

“Embers, Miss Weasley. Soon to be ashes.”

Ginny pursed her mouth and shook her head. He nodded his head back at her.

“Hey, what’s going on here?” said Harry. “You’ve only known each other five minutes and you’re talking in a secret language already? Is this pureblood stuff? Because neither Mione nor I know what you’re on about.”

That was not quite true. It was something to do with the glow, Hermione was sure. Ginny seemed to recognise it, to know what it meant. If she could get to a library, she’d research it. But was
Ginny also seeing something between her and Abraxas? Something that was not there? Definitely not there.

“We don’t use that word at Bansith, Mr Potter, not even in the cultural sense, as you did. What passed between Miss Weasley and me is of no consequence, and anyway is irrelevant to the matter we must deal with.”

Harry glared at him. “It might be of consequence to me, Malfoy. Miss Weasley is my wife. You seem to … to seduce to all the women you meet.”

Hermione’s face flamed, but Ginny burst into laughter. “You want to take lessons, Harry? You could use a few.”

It was Harry’s turn to redden. “Ginny!”

Ginny laughed again, and Abraxas said, “I regret to say, Miss Weasley, that at my age the term has figurative use only.”


“I hope you will,” said Ginny, grinning. “And not figuratively, either!”

Hermione looked down to hide her smile as the red in Harry’s face deepened.

“Clearly all is well in the Potter marriage,” said Abraxas. “Now, if we may, to the matter in hand. To clarify, Miss Weasley, your task is to examine the documents which Miss Granger shows you, to determine whether or not, in your opinion, she should remain here under my care. That, and only that. No justification for that advice is required. None of the information contained in the documents is to be divulged to Miss Granger. Agreed, Miss Granger?”

Hermione nodded. "That's what we agreed."

"Good. The documents are under the St Mungo seal, and must be resealed after examination. Miss Weasley, if you will accompany Miss Granger to the drawing room, Waldi will conduct you to the spell safe. I have Appeared it. The door is closed but the safe is Unlocked. Waldi knows the sequence that must be followed, and I’m sure Miss Weasley – I do beg your pardon – Mrs Potter knows it too.”

Ginny closed her eyes. “Open the door, take out the document, close the door. Hermione places her hand on the document within five seconds to Legitimise it, otherwise it self-destructs. Break the seal and read the document. Reseal it, open the safe door, replace the document, close the safe door. Harry, I’ll need your seal.” She held out her hand, and Harry put his signet ring into it.

“I am impressed, though I would have expected nothing less from the daughter of Arthur Weasley and great-granddaughter of Lucius Prewett.”

“You know my dad, Mr Malfoy?”

“Only by reputation, Miss Weasley. I admire his inventiveness and follow his work. Your great grandfather, however, I knew personally. He was my commander. I was beside him when he fell in the Black Forest.”

“You fought against Grindelwald?” said Harry.
“I was too young to fight, Mr Potter, but did service as a runner, a messenger boy. I was fortunate: privileged to stand beside men like Albus Dumbledore and Lucius Prewett; and lucky to survive. Grindelwald was a formidable opponent. To business. The safe door does not just activate and deactivate the spells protecting the documents, it also activates and deactivates the Protection Wards of this estate. So it is doubly important, for Miss Granger’s safety, that it be kept closed. Miss Weasley?”


“Far less than anywhere else, Mr Potter.”

Harry folded his arms. “Explain.”

Abraxas raised his eyebrows. “You know what happened in Brixton, Mr Potter. Should you need further explanation, may I suggest we postpone it until you have examined the documents? I believe that will allay some of your concerns. Miss Weasley, the safe?”

“Door closed, understood, Mr Malfoy. I shall make double sure.”

“Thank you. Miss Granger, as soon as you have Opened the document, your task is done and you return here. Agreed?”

She nodded. “Agreed.”

“Thank you. Does Mr Potter accompany you?”

“Harry, you are only to look at what Ginny chooses to show you, all right?”

Harry stuck out his jaw. “I think I should see everything. Only then can I judge if Malfoy has put you under a dark spell: and maybe not even then.”

She’d had enough. “Then you can go home right now, Harry Potter! You’ve done nothing but embarrass me since you arrived. My note was to Ginny, and I trust her judgement absolutely. Obviously I was delighted to see you too, and Mr Malfoy said you would come, and didn’t mind, but you’ve been aggressive and abrasive, as well as disrespectful. Yes, Mr Malfoy is about a hundred years old, almost three times your age and I think that alone deserves some respect, don’t you? How about addressing him as Mr Malfoy, as he addresses you? And I don’t care how old he is, so put that in your pipe and smoke it! Come on, Ginny,” and she took her arm and strode off to the house.

“Please go with them, Mr Potter,” she heard Abraxas say. “I for one would be happier if you saw at least what Mrs Potter feels able to show you.”
After an hour, Hermione said, “What are they doing? How long can it take to look through, what was it, ten or fifteen pages?”

Abraxas shrugged. “Perhaps they are studying the references. The Misses Patil are scientists, so I assume anything they write would be referenced.”

“Peppered with them, probably. But surely Ginny can’t access reference books from here?”

“Our library here has a selection. I also activated a link to the library in the Manor, Miss Granger. It is not a science or medical library, but it is one of the most comprehensive libraries outside Hogwarts, St Mungo’s and the Ministry. If a book that the Misses Patil refer to is in the Manor library or the Bansith library, the reference will glow. Miss Weasley has only to touch the words with her finger and a ghost copy of the relevant passage will appear on the table next to her. Should she wish to see the book, she holds her finger on the words for a few seconds. The book itself will then appear, with a bookmark at the passage referred to.”

“It sounds like a researcher’s dream. And when they have finished?”

“She may Dismiss the ghost copy or Return the book by touching the reference in the document again.”

“I wish we’d had that at Hogwarts.”

He shook his head. “The system would have functioned properly for you, Miss Granger, and quite probably the Ravenclaw, perhaps even the Hufflepuff girls. But the others? The Gryffindor and Slytherin girls? And worse, the boys? Chaos. Ghost copies floating around, missing books: it needs an orderly mind, a quality few students have. Ah, Miss Weasley is returning.”

She was, marching across the lawn.

Ignoring Abraxas, she stopped in front of Hermione, taking her by the shoulders. “You told me you weren’t ill! You told me you’d seen a healer. You told me you were following her prescriptions. Not once, but many times! How could you tell me that when you’d done none of it. None of it! And I believed you. I believed you because I couldn’t believe that Hermione Granger would lie, let alone lie to her best friend. Yes, lie!”

“Oh, Gin, what else could I do? You were nagging me.”

“Of course I was nagging you. You were wasting away before my eyes. You’d been to a healer, so you said, and yet you didn’t seem to be getting any better. I thought it was a slow treatment, or an ultra-cautious healer, but it was no healer at all! Why, Mione, why?”

Hermione dropped her eyes. “You know why.”
Ginny squeezed her shoulders. “Because of my waste-of-space brother? I suspected that. That’s why Harry and I arranged those consultations and that course of treatment before we left for Albania. And you didn’t go. Why?”

“Oh, Gin. A Harley Street clinic? How could we afford that?”

“But it was all arranged. I told you. And they billed us. That was the only reason I didn’t tell Dad to come and break down your door when you started avoiding the family, months and months ago. They’ve been billing us, so I thought you were undergoing treatment and that you were avoiding Dad and everyone because of Ron problems.”

Hermione stared at her. “I didn’t know that. I thought we’d have to pay.”

“But I told you. I told you. All you had to do was turn up!” Ginny took her arms. “Oh, Mione. I want to shake you.” She hugged her instead. “Taking the bus instead of a taxi to save money is one thing. But neglecting your health! And for so long!”

“Precisely what I said to her, Miss Weasley,” said Abraxas.

Ginny turned on him, putting her hands on her hips, glaring at him. “And you! You’re not much better! How could you! After all that – after everything you’d done, how could you say that?”

“Miss Weasley?” Abraxas seemed so stunned he’d forgotten to stand.

Ginny stabbed a finger at him. “You threatened to desert her if she went to London with me and Harry. And you know very well what effect that would have had.”

“Miss Weasley-“

“And you said that even if she came back, you wouldn’t be here. That was … that was despicable!”

Hermione gasped. “Ginny! Ginny, I don’t know what you’re taking about, but that is a very strong word!”

“Not strong enough! Despicable, despicable, despicable!” And she prodded his chest with a finger, harder with each repetition. “What have you to say, Abraxas Malfoy?”

Harry had come up, and was watching, a slight frown creasing his brow.

Abraxas pushed himself to his feet. Then, to Hermione’s astonishment, he leaned forward and took Ginny’s hands. “I could not have done it, Miss Weasley.”

She still glared at him, but left her hands in his. “Well, I hope not! You were lying? You were making false threats?”

Abraxas winced. “I do not lie, Miss Weasley. Sometimes I … skip around the truth a little. I do not make threats, false or otherwise. I would have been here, but I would not have seen her.”

“Huh. That’s bad enough.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, Miss Weasley, I assure you that any such separation would have caused me great suffering, greater than that endured by Miss Granger. Knowing she was there, but that I could not approach her? Torture, Miss Weasley.”

He was still holding her hands. Hermione looked: no glow at all. Good. But why wasn’t Harry
making a fuss? The ‘seducer’ was holding his wife’s hands. She raised her eyebrows at him but he just shrugged.

Then Ginny pulled her hands free and threw her arms around Abraxas, hugging him hard, her face on his chest. Hermione jumped to her feet. “Ginny!”

But worse was to come: Ginny reached up, took Abraxas’s face in her hands, pulled it down and kissed him on the lips.

“Ginny! What’re you doing!” And Harry was just standing there!

What! Did Ginny actually say that? “Harry, Harry, what is this? What is going on? Why aren’t you saying something, doing something about … about this?”

Harry scowled. “What should I say? Miss Weasley is saying it all, in her own, inimitable, Ginevra way, almost acting it out. Mione, bottom line: you’ve got to stay. Sorry. You’ve got be near-”

“Harry!” Ginny barked. “Harry, no names, no pack drill, right?”

She turned to Hermione. “Mione, what can I say? You asked me to come and look at your records, because a Malfoy came up with this story that you’d been ill and needed to recuperate here, and that you couldn’t look at them for some reason. Harry and I didn’t believe a word of it: Malfoy trick, dark magic, evil intent etc etc etc. But it’s true. Mr Malfoy …” She looked at him and he shook his head. She stuck out her tongue at him and the corner of his mouth twitched. She turned back to Hermione. “You have been ill and you do need to stay here.”

“What! Are you …but what can …”

“Maybe not the full six weeks, but that depends on Padma and your progress. I’m really sorry, Mione.”

He had done something! Well, she knew that, of course, just from looking in the mirror and how much better she felt, but Ginny’s response to him meant it must be something good, not dark - of which she had a lingering suspicion because the effect was so huge - and really big, and that he was responsible for it. He’d done it for her. He’d helped her in the flat and now this, some healing thing, a thing so big she had to stay and recuperate, for -

“Six weeks!” She looked at Abraxas. “You said three!”

“I doubt I would have been able to hold you, Miss Granger, had I said six weeks.”

She glared at him and then looked at Harry. “But why? Why do I have to stay at all?”

He shrugged. “Can’t say. Sorry.”

Typical informative male response. “And a wand?”

“Can’t have one. Sorry.”

So helpful. She glared at him then looked at Ginny, “And why can’t I see my own records?”

“What has Mr Malfoy told you?”

“Nothing he could avoid. He let slip something about causing me disquiet, whatever that means.”
“He’s right. I can’t add anything, except to say-” and she glanced at Abraxas. He shook his head, but she rushed out the words, “It’s nothing to his discredit.”

Hermione looked at Abraxas. He was frowning at Ginny, then turned to look at her, his eyebrows raised. She glared at him and put her hands on her hips. “Everyone here talks in nods and winks, and codes which mean Don’t tell Hermione. But I agreed to abide by Ginny’s decision. I’ll stay. But three weeks, no more.”

Abraxas bowed to her. “Miss Granger, thank you. I know you want to leave. It is a measure of your sense of rightness that you accept the judgement of your friends so calmly.”

Not all that calmly. But: “It’s not that there is anything wrong with Bansith, Mr Malfoy. It’s a paradise of peace and tranquillity. And you have been really… It’s just that my life is back there, in Brixton.” Though her heart sank at the thought of going back there.

Harry frowned at her. “Not any more it’s not, Mione. Hasn’t he told you? The place went up in flames the night you …” he glanced at Abraxas, “disappeared. We fixed it to look like a gas explosion to the muggles, but it was arson.”


She felt two hands rest gently on her shoulders. What? Who? Then a sense of security began seeping through her. The Touch. Abraxas. She was protected, she was safe. She reached up and put a hand on one of his. Warmth and calm spread through her from the contact point. She was safe. He would look after her. She took a breath, and turned her head to look up at him. Out of the corner of her eye, the glow, brighter than ever; a yellow-green. “You didn’t tell me.”

“I did not tell you, Miss Granger. I did not wish to add to your fear and confusion. You had enough to cope with.”

Harry was staring at them, narrow-eyed and frowning. Of course: the glow. She saw him glance across at Ginny, saw her shake her head. Not now. He turned back. “We got there at one in the morning. Flames coming from the widows, the roof collapsing. Nothing left. We knew you weren’t in there, but it came as a hell of a shock.”

“I kept checking the Potter Clock,” said Ginny. “It kept saying you were home and safe.”

The punch of shock was wearing off. “Am I on your Peverell Clock?”

“Of course you are.”

Hermione looked at Abraxas. He’d said she would be off all the clocks.

He raised an eyebrow. “Peverell Clock magic is deep and ancient, and is tied to the feelings of the Clock family. If you matter enough to them, you appear on it. Clearly you are held in high regard, Miss Granger.”

Harry stared at him. “You know about Peverell Clocks? You have one?”

“Two, Mr Potter. One here, one on permanent loan to Hogwarts, since 1817.”

The stare became a glare. “Still. Only seven in existence and the Malfoys have two of them. Why am I not surprised.” He turned to Hermione and went on. “Arthur was there too. The Weasley
Peverell had gone off, same as ours did, and he’d brought it along too. It also said *Home and safe*, which was contradictory, because your home was a fireball. But our human-presence spells showed the place was empty. So we didn’t know what to think.”

“But then suddenly both Peverells said you were in St Mungo’s,” said Ginny, “We rushed across, and the hospital confirmed you were there, but they wouldn’t tell us anything.”

“Except that you hadn’t been assaulted,” said Harry. “And it took some leaning on to get that much.”

Hermione stared at him. “Assaulted? Why might …”

“Intruder. Arson took place from inside, Mione. Not a firebomb flung from outside. He broke in, then trashed the place before setting it alight. But maybe you had already been … disappeared.”

Her heart began racing and she could feel Abraxas’ grip tightening on her shoulders. “She had not, Mr Potter. Miss Granger, the nightmare you had was in fact no nightmare. It was the intruder. The rescue spell was activated by his presence.”

Trembling, the terror rising up again, she shut her eyes, gripping his hand with one of hers, hugging herself with the other arm. “He was there, in my home, violating …”

He turned one hand over, taking hers and squeezing it. The other tightened on her shoulder. Comforting feelings surged through her, driving back the terror. She could sense the glow brightening, the white core in the braided tail shining out. Ginny was staring wide-eyed. “You are safe, Miss Granger. No one can reach you here. And he never touched you, Miss Granger, he never even reached you. You were apparated when he was two feet away. And you are safe now. Even Mr Potter could not Discover Bansith.”


“Vigorously. Miss Granger, the rescue spell incorporates a mild sedative, to smooth over the trauma. Hence you did not wake when you arrived here. And, to forestall Mr Potter’s next question, you could not identify the intruder. Just that he was big, and smelled of wood smoke.”

“The neighbours!” said Hermione. “What about the neighbours? Mrs Singh and her children, next door?”

“All safe, Miss Granger. Currently staying with her sister in Southall, while her flat is being renovated. Likewise Mr Jones on the other side, with his daughter in Pontypool.”

Harry stared at him. “You seem to know a hell of a lot about it, Ma – Mr Malfoy.”

“Still suspicious, Mr Potter? I did not break in, lay waste and set fire to Miss Granger’s flat. However, I do own some property in the area, and my agent keeps me informed.”

“To a very high level of detail.”

“Indeed, Mr Potter. We Slytherins are careful about details. Fortunately.”

“I do wish you two would stop sniping at each other,” said Hermione. “I’m the one who has lost everything.”

“All, Miss Granger? Your children are safe and unharmed, you are safe and unharmed, Mr Weasley is safe and unharmed. Everything else is a mere material possession.”
“Rose’s first ABCs, Hugo’s first stickmen drawings. The presents they made me when they were little, a memory cord from Rose, an embroidery colour strip from Hugo.” She stopped. Ginny was nodding, but to the men it would sound silly. “My wand.”

Abraxas surprised her again. “Those are irreplaceable, Miss Granger, I agree. But you carry them in your memory. The loss of your wand is unfortunate, but wands are replaceable. As soon as Miss Patil agrees, you may have another one.”

“If I can afford it. Well,” and she gave a weak smile, “I’ll just have to get used to not having a home.”

Abraxas stirred, but didn’t say anything.

“Didn’t say that, Mione,” said Harry. “George has two houses in Richmond in his property portfolio. He’s put one into your name. Victorian, three storey, five bedroom, up on the hill, overlooking the Thames. His maintenance team are giving it the once-over right now.”

“So it’s for you, Mione?”


“He loves you, Mione.”

What! She stared at him.

Behind her, Abraxas lifted his hands from her shoulders. A slight feeling of loss came over her.

Ginny gave Harry a glare and said, “We all love you, Mione. You’re family to us. We all want to help. You know that.”

“Yeah, but what you don’t know, because we didn’t tell you,” said Harry, blithely carrying on in his bull-in-a-china-shop way, “is that seven years ago the board of Weasley Enterprises voted you a three percent share of the company, and made you a director. Directorship’s been dormant in the interim, but George has been investing your dividends. Nice little nest egg waiting for you. A new wand should not be a problem, and you won’t have to stand outside Richmond Station flogging The Big Issue for a while yet.”

She coloured and said, “Oh, Harry. Thank you. I’m really grateful. And touched. To know I’ve a place of my own to go to. And Richmond Hill is a lovely location. The Brixton flat …”

“We know, Mione, we know. That’s why we offered help before.”

“And I was grateful for the offers, Harry, really I was. But Ron always felt he wanted to make his own way, and I was his wife and … well, you know all that.” Harry frowned, and gave an abrupt nod. "And, er …," how could she approach this? But she had to know. “And, er, Ron?”

Harry frowned deepened. “What about him?”

“I was just wondering if George had … er, given Ron a house and all that. Because, you know, he won’t have a place to live either, so …” She looked from Harry to Ginny. Ginny shook her head and gestured to Harry to go on.

Harry snorted. “The only thing George would give Ron is a kick up the backside.”

“Oh.” She might as well bite the bullet. She looked at Ginny and said, “So the family isn’t angry with me …”
Ginny ran across and took Hermione in her arms. “When Ron is swanning around with a twenty
two year old bimbo on his arm? And even if he wasn’t, they all know where the fault lies. The boys,
every one of them, have been on your side for years. So has Dad, though he kept quiet so as not to
upset Mum in her illness. Only Mum, fond mother, refused to apportion blame. She’d apportion it
now, if I could tell her about your stress-induced cancer.” She gasped, then clasped both hands
over her mouth and looked at Abraxas. “Sorry, sorry, sorry, it just slipped out. I didn’t mean … I’m
so sorry!”

Abraxas looked at her, then shrugged.

“No names, no pack drill, hey?” said Harry, grinning. “Pack drill for Miss Weasley, Mr Malfoy,
don’t you think?”

“Not at all, Mr Potter. Miss Weasley is a Gryffindor and a redhead, so we have heart, head,
courage and fire. The second pair counterpoint the first. A harmony, Mr Potter, that inevitably
enriches the life of any man fortunate enough to meet her. Such as me. But sometimes fire strikes
off heart, we get a flame and something gets singed.” He shrugged. “It is a small price to pay for
such a symphony of virtues, Mr Potter.”

Harry stared at him. “Hell, where do you get this stuff?”

Abraxas just raised an eyebrow, and Ginny said, “I wish I knew, Harry. I’d buy you the Kindle
edition and leave it on the bedside table. Mr Malfoy, I really am sorry. Now, I think we’d better go
before I blab even more.” She turned to Hermione and hugged her, whispering. “I’ve already said
more that I should, so a little more won’t hurt. We all love you, but I didn’t know how much until I
realized we’d almost lost you. That’s why I was so cross with you. It was the shock.” She had tears
in her eyes.

What! “Was it that serious?”

Abraxas stood up, and Ginny said, “We’re leaving, we’re leaving, blabbermouth Ginny is leaving,
Mr Malfoy, don’t worry. Now, you look after her, all right? If you need me, you know where to
find me. Anytime. Two in the morning, anytime at all.”

He bowed. “I will and I do, Miss Weasley. Meeting you has been a pleasure and a delight indeed.”

She curtseyed to him and Harry said, “Yeah, so we saw. A symphony of virtues. Saw likewise that
the feelings are reciprocated, Mal – Mr Malfoy.”

“The presence of such ladies, Mr Potter, causes such phrases to generate spontaneously. Regarding
Miss Granger, I know you still have reservations, though I am heartened beyond measure that Miss
– Mrs Potter does not share them. Miss Granger, if you will touch this parchment, it will give Mr
and Mrs Potter access to the same, but original, documents at St Mungo’s. It also gives your
permission for them to discuss the relevant matters with the Misses Patil.”

“Mr Malfoy, if Ginny is satisfied, I am satisfied. That was the agreement.”

“You interpret it magnanimously, Miss Granger. And I thank you for the trust implied therein. But
for my own peace of mind, I would like Mr Potter satisfied, completely. I would rather not have
him rumbling in the background.”

“Rumbling, Mr Malfoy?” said Ginny, grinning.

“Like Vesuvius, Miss Weasley. Casting a pall over everything for miles around,” and he winked at
her. Ginny burst into laughter.
Well! He’d never winked at her!

Harry shook his head and took Ginny’s hand. “Come on, girl. Any longer and you’ll fall in love with him too.”

Too?

“Miss Granger, the signum manus, if you will?” Abraxas held out the parchment and she pressed her hand against it.
They stood and watched Harry and Ginny walk up to the portkey, an eagle owl feather protruding from the trunk of an old yew tree. Abraxas was right next to her, and for a moment she thought he would put an arm around her shoulders and hold her to him, one couple saying goodbye to another. But he didn’t.

Instead he said, when they had gone, “Shall we walk, Miss Granger,” gestured to the loch and held out his arm for her. Well, if that was all she was being offered, she’d take it and a little more. Instead of just placing her hand on top of his, she linked her arm through his first.

Then: what? Why had she done that? She was supposed to be avoiding the Touch. And why had she just accepted his comforting when Harry had told her about the flat? He’d held a chair for her, then put his hands on her shoulders. Well, that was fair enough, but then she’d responded by putting her hand on top of his. Doubling the Touch. No wonder Harry and Ginny were jumping to conclusions. Though it would have been nice if, instead of the chair, Abraxas had just held her to him and wrapped his arms around her. That would have been really comforting. Then: what! Where did that thought come from? It had better go back. And stay there!

And … what had she meant by *And I don’t care how old he is*? He was her host, that was all, and for some reason she had to say here, under his care. And she might like it here, and … and not dislike his company, but there was no need for anything else.

And … since when did she think of him as ‘Abraxas’ rather than the less personal ‘Mr Malfoy’? She’d been doing that for all of Harry and Ginny’s visit, ever since he told her what he had done for her in Brixton. It had been subconscious. Well, her subconscious had better sort its ideas out and decide whose side it was on. No more of that, please. Get a grip, girl!

But it seemed so right, so natural, so comforting. Couldn’t she indulge, just a little? There was that warmth again. She looked down. The glowing beads were orbiting slowly, the white trailing threads creating the fine transparent network, encasing their arms as the orbits moved from a circle to an ellipse. For the first time she noticed that each tiny comet gave off a different coloured mist, one blue, one yellow, and that when they met, they twirled around each other, creating a sort of knot, bronze in colour, before continuing on their way. What did the colours mean? The yellow and blue now were different from the yellow-green before, when Abraxas had put his hands on her shoulders. Apart from the colours being different, the mist then had been uniformly yellow-green, whereas now the glow was composed of a yellow mist and a blue mist; intermingled, but each distinct from the other.

Should she ask him about it? She could accept - had to accept - it was some form of an indicator of emotions, either his or hers or both, but what if it meant more: a bond, an emotional bond, between them? Would she rather not know? That wouldn’t be very Gryffindor. Knowledge was always better than ignorance. Wasn’t it?

“Mrs Potter handles her husband very well.”
Too late now. Anyway, he’d said at dinner he didn’t know what it was.

“Oh she does, she does. She’s exactly right for Harry.”

“Some thought, after all you had been through together, that you and he might make a couple.”

She shook her head. “That would never have worked. Harry is too forceful, too much the action man. He would have dominated me.”

“And yet he needed you.”

She laughed. “As a sort of instant reference book: ‘what spell will do this?’ And his little mobile library, standing safely behind him, would provide the answer.”

“You belittle your part, as ever. He needed you for a myriad of things, psychological as well as practical. I have listed them.”

“Please don’t again,” she murmured.

“I won’t, but we’ve just had a good example of how he needs a check on his impulsive actions.”

She sighed. “He certainly always needed that. Sometimes he was so reckless.” She stopped. Was she being disloyal to Harry?

But Abraxas was nodding his head slowly. “Impetuous. He was driven.”

“That describes it exactly. The night he lost Sirius … But he always listened. Well, he’d listen, then go his own sweet way. He’d suggest a course of action, I’d say how dangerous it was, and what we needed to do to prepare, and he’d say, ‘We’ll do it tomorrow.’ And somehow he always brought it off.”

“With your help. You were the perfect foil for him.”

She shook her head. “Only in those situations. I suppose I balanced him, my caution and his impulsiveness, his drive and my knowledge. But when it was time to act, he flew: no one could match him, no one could stop him, no one could touch him. But it was terrifying for me, dragged along behind him. Lightning and thunder indeed, and us in the middle. I was a bundle of nerves all the time I was with him. And he could be dictatorial, bad tempered, and aggressive.” Why was she admitting this, even to Abraxas?

Again he looked for the source. “He had lost his parents, then a man who was both father and elder brother to him. Dumbledore, another substitute father, seemed to be manipulating him for his own purposes. Mr Potter was hurt and bewildered.”

“He was, oh, he was. And he took it out on those closest to him.”

“Those he loved, Miss Granger.”

“Yes, you’re right. He did. And I loved him. But as brother and sister. And we complemented each other in those times because we were so different. In these times, our differences would push us apart rather than draw us together. Ginny is the perfect match for him. If he’s abrasive, she’ll turn on him and tell him so in no uncertain terms, whereas I would crawl into my shell, hurt. And she’d beat him at his own game. They were in the Tyrolean Alps last year, learning hang-gliding, muggle style. She was a natural, learning fastest, soaring around him, above and below, laughing at him. And he growled at her, but loved it.”
“Whereas you would rather have been in the Tiroler Landesmuseum in Innsbruck.”

She laughed. “Exactly so, Mr Malfoy. Certainly not a thousand feet up in the air with nothing but a carbon fibre frame and stretched nylon between me and a painful death.”

“Exactly so, Miss Granger. My choice would have been similar, perhaps the Innsbruck Altstadt in the morning and the museum in the afternoon. The attraction of danger thrills wore off in my late thirties. Intellectual wonders are now far more satisfying. And the natural world. Look,” and he swung round, taking her with him. “Did you see it? A kingfisher, look, there it is again.” A flash of colour between the trees, and it was gone.

“Oh! Yes, I saw it.” She restrained an impulse to clap her hands. When had she last felt so … free? The glow was a violet-blue hue now, with the blue shading into indigo at the core edge. What did that mean? “I haven’t seen one for … I don’t know how long.”

“Not common in London?”

“Oh yes, you see them at The Elephant and Castle all the time.”

He chuckled – she’d never heard him do that before – and he said, “Thank you, Miss Granger, for the spirit behind the words. Only after you have had a few, I imagine. Now I have a request which you must feel quite free to turn down.”

Oh dear, what was coming? Had she been too … friendly?

“It relates to my family. I have to attend a funeral this afternoon. Normally I would invite the family here for tea afterwards. Would you mind? Would you act as hostess? Just the immediate family, and just for an hour or so.”

Lucius and Narcissa: the most deeply etched memory she had of them was when they had tortured her at Malfoy Manor. And Lucius’s sneering face when he had tried to kill them all at the Ministry. And Draco: seven years of spite and sarcasm, of being called mudblood, of malevolence. Did she want to meet them again? Of course not! But…

“I shall tell them it is not convenient, Miss Granger. I apologise for asking. Some wounds run too deep for healing.”

“But no. No, Mr Malfoy. This is your home. They are your family. If you wish me to, I shall be your hostess. Will … will you be there, all the time?” She felt like a child, asking this. But Lucius Malfoy: he still frightened her.

He did not smile, for which she was grateful, but nodded emphatically. “Indeed I will, Miss Granger. Lucius has a sharp tongue, but the poison has been extracted.”

She doubted that. Lucius was a nasty piece of work through and through. But if Abraxas was there, he couldn’t do or say much, presumably. And a Malfoy tea would probably be a starched collar affair.

Her experience of teas had been with the Weasley family: boisterous, relaxed, easy going. Not bad manners: Mrs Weasley would not tolerate that, but with five sons and innumerable grandchildren, the corners on good manners had been worn down, and the term now had a very loose and flexible interpretation.

A Malfoy tea, she imagined, would be very sharp edged: formal to the extent of brittleness. And with her there, brittle politeness would very soon become icy politeness. Apart from the history
between them, she dreaded anything going wrong: she could imagine Narcissa’s pencilled eyebrows lifting at slopped tea or a broken biscuit: *what else can one expect of a mudblood.* Though, to do her justice, she’d never heard Narcissa use the term. But that would be due to her disdain for slang, rather than for this form of discrimination. Well, she couldn’t back out now.

She smiled. “I’m sure I can cope with him, for a tea. If I need help, I will ask. Will you instruct Waldi, Mr Malfoy?”

“Waldi knows what is to be done, Miss Granger. I shall confirm to him that the visit is taking place, and that you are hostess. Also, only Astoria, Lucius, Draco and Scorpius will attend. You presumably know that Narcissa and Lucius are separated?”

She shook her head and he went on, “Shortly after the events of eighteen years ago. Narcissa has her own wing in Malfoy Manor, though she spends much of the time in her apartments in Kensington and the Haut Marais in Paris. She has asked if she may wait on you at another time, if you will so allow.”

“Oh. Yes, of course.” What else could she say? But she said it with trepidation. She could hardly expect Abraxas to … to … what could she call it, to *protect* her, from another woman, or even be there. But having tea with Narcissa would be rather like having tea with Lucrezia Borgia. Except the poison wouldn’t be in the petits fours but in the facial expressions, the hand movements, everything. Why did the Ice Queen want to see her alone? Surely she must see the awkwardness of such a visit. But she could not refuse.

It had been a stressful morning and she’d like to burn off some of the adrenaline.

“Would you mind, Mr Malfoy, if I went for a run? The hill behind the cottage looks so inviting and I feel the need for some brisk exercise.”

“Miss Granger, I am delighted that you feel well enough to even contemplate such a thing. Feel free to do so whenever you like. When you feel stronger, you may wish to circuit the loch. The path extends the full perimeter and it is a pleasant run. And in the future, Ben Nevis awaits. I wish I could join you.”

Her run turned out to be a breathless slog up the hill and a jog down again: she’d been run down for so long that her fitness was rock bottom. Still, the slow pace meant she was able to think of other things.

She’d had cancer: the draining, dragging tiredness made more sense now. Serious cancer, enough for Ginny to believe her life was threatened. Abraxas had done something. Ginny’s reaction showed it was a big something. Her outrageous comment showed she felt an extraordinary obligation. But she, Hermione, was the beneficiary, so an even bigger obligation was hers. What was this big something? Nobody would tell her.

It was interesting how Ginny and Abraxas had established an affinity so soon after meeting. She’d been as hostile as Harry at first, and she wasn’t one to forgive easily. *Fire and ice,* he’d said, *burning and freezing.* Yet, astonishingly, she’d thawed within a few minutes of meeting him. Obviously they had a shared culture, but it was more than that. The glow had meant something to her, but that had come later and seemed to confirm what she already felt. She’d seemed to have instinctively recognised certain qualities - virtues - in him. That word again. She’d made it clear she didn't like him using it about her, and here she was using it about him. But it seemed right: besides his innate intelligence and clear-mindedness, and the philosophical approach that life had
taught him, he had virtues: integrity, compassion, kindness. Even humility, though no excess of that.
The laying of a ghost

She reached the cottage feeling pleasantly tired and relaxed, ready for a shower, a light lunch and an afternoon nap.

She awoke to find that Winky had laid out a calf length skirt and a three-quarter sleeve alpaca pullover with a shallow but wide scoop, both in deep purple, with mahogany suede boots.

She smiled at the elf and said, “It’s lovely, Winky, but you going to make me two new outfits every day?”

“Well, just until we have built up a wardrobe, Miss. After that it’ll just be for special occasions.”

“Well, I won’t be here forever, you know. I’m not sure that a ‘wardrobe’ is necessary.”

“Miss cannot wear the same outfit for three weeks, Miss, and Miss must be properly dressed.”

Was there a ‘for the master’ hovering at the back of that? Though no doubt Winky would say - and fervently believe - that what was good for the master was good for Miss Hermione. Hermione did not want to get into that again.

A wardrobe for Miss being ‘properly dressed.’ By her standards or by Winky’s? They’d be very different, in content and quantity. And quality. Her frock this morning for example. “Where are you getting the material, Winky? It looks very expensive.”

“Miss Narcissa’s elf Dubi knows where to get everything, Miss. She calls it sourcing. Miss Narcissa insists on local sourcing wherever possible. The boots are English leather, handmade in Northampton, the cotton from a little bespoke mill in Lancashire. If we import, Miss Narcissa uses cottage industry manufacture.”

Oh? Narcissa Malfoy had always been a bit of an enigma to Hermione. Even before the final battle, the woman had seemed too intelligent, too deep and complex to be written off as merely narcissic. Her inexplicable action in saving Harry’s life had confirmed this complexity. Her clothing did too, in a rather less momentous way. It had none of the … excess Hermione associated with shallow minds. It was simple and plain, but so perfect in its simplicity and plainness that it was the epitome of stylishness. And here she was concerned about matters like local sourcing and supporting traditional crafts? Abraxas used heather water for washing and baths, but was the rest of the family environmentally conscious? Or was it quality she was concerned about? “Does Miss Narcissa get involved in the design of her clothes, Winky?”

“Oh, yes, Miss, every aspect. Materials, sourcing, creative and detailed design. Dubi makes all Miss Narcissa’s clothes to Miss Narcissa’s designs. So Dubi knows exactly what is appropriate, and what is not, for a lady.”

Hermione might be wary of the ice queen’s views in other matters, but not this. “And so does Winky, I am sure.”

Winky glowed.

Hermione picked up the alpaca pullover. Light and fine, with no label. “Do you make everything, Winky?”

“Oh no, Miss. We only make the fitted and semi-fitted garments, sometimes the classic, and of
course the specials. Miss Narcissa says it’s not cost effective to make overgarments such as coats and cardigans, ruanas, ponchos and kimonos.”

She didn’t even know what a ruana was. Still, she didn’t need to, not being Narcissa Malfoy.

Today’s outfit had just the right touch, she felt. Slightly sombre, but stylish. Good. Her mind on the coming ordeal, she dressed quickly and sat down in front of the mirror so Winky could apply makeup.

“The white pearl earrings, Winky?”

“I think so, Miss. The Regency purple is enough dark. Especially with the choker.” She pointed to an inch wide purple band on the dresser.

“Do I need that? I’ve not worn one before.” It looked very dressy.

“To offset the scoop, Miss, for respect. Otherwise I wouldn’t suggest it. And a single strand ebony bracelet to confirm the respect, Miss.”

She wasn’t going to argue. Winky’s choices had proved faultless so far. Miss Sash had done her tour of inspection and also approved.

She’d like to ask her about Astoria, but it wouldn’t do. Winky expected her to behave like a lady, and a lady wouldn’t ask. A lady would expect her social skills to carry her through, but this lady had not gone to the Malfoy finishing school. The skill set at the Weasley school had multitasking, diplomacy, crisis avoidance and management as majors rather than etiquette. Modules were strictly experience based, and included changing nappies on the next chair while convincing Great Aunt Bertha, without referring to her bladder problem, that a fifth cup of tea was really, really inadvisable; stopping toddlers from putting a Hungarian Horntail egg in the fireplace to see if it would hatch while trying to persuade Charlie (still a bachelor) that bringing the baby Horntail next time would really not be a good idea; and serving builders’ tea in chipped mugs to the boys. How to ensure the petits fours were served uncracked was not on the curriculum. She didn’t think the skillsets were transferable.

Nor would dress be. She knew, from the Weasley boys’ reaction to Fleur, that if she had gone to a Weasley tea dressed as she was, in fact dressed as she had been for any meal with Abraxas, she would have received a lot of *wows*, and the boys would not have been able to keep their eyes off her all afternoon. Fleur, accustomed to little competition in the appearances department, would not have been pleased.

Well, she’d just have to do the best she could. And if she committed a few social blunders, so what. Abraxas wouldn’t mind and she didn’t care what the others thought.

Tea was in the lodge dining room. A table for six had been set, with her at one end and presumably Abraxas at the other. Everything looked in order, but how would she know what was appropriate for a Malfoy tea? Still, she could trust Waldi to get it right.

The bell tinkled, announcing the arrival of Abraxas and their guests. They filed in and lined up just inside the room – rather like toy soldiers, she thought. She curtsied, Astoria curtsied and the men all bowed, and there was a murmur of names. She looked up and saw she had been wrong to distinguish between the Weasley men and Malfoy men: they were all men, and all stared at her. Even Scorpius goggled. Draco’s eyes widened as he looked at her, but Lucius’s narrowed. His lip
curled and he looked her up and down. Wrong, Abraxas, she thought. The poison might not be in
the fangs, but it was still in the mind. He had become shrunken and hunched, with eyes hooded. He
looked more evil than ever.

Abraxas made a small opened handed gesture: over to you.

“Welcome and please, be seated,” she said. “Mrs Malfoy, next to Mr Malfoy senior, Mr Lucius
Malfoy opposite, Mr Malfoy junior next to me, Master Malfoy, next to me, on this side,” and she
gestured as she spoke.

They sat, placed the linen serviettes, and Draco said, “Well, Mrs Weasley, what a surprise to see
you here. We were astonished when Grandfather told us this morning. Or are you Miss Granger
now? I heard talk …”

She might as well take charge. “Rumours must spread fast, Mr Malfoy. Technically I am still Mrs
Weasley, but I no longer think of myself as such. Tea, Mrs Malfoy? It’s Earl Grey, which I
understand everyone drinks.”

“Please, Miss Granger,” murmured Astoria. She was watching Hermione surreptitiously. Why?
Was the girl shy? With her patrician looks, she shouldn’t be.

“Actually, I don’t feel like Earl Grey today,” said Lucius, leaning back in his chair.

Hermione ignored him and poured out a second cup, half full then topping it up with hot water.
“Mr Malfoy, your tea, weak and black. Scorpius, if you would be so kind as to pass it up to your
great-grandfather.”

“We usually use house elves for that sort of thing, Hermione, if I may be so bold,” said Lucius.

She looked at him for a few seconds, expressionless, then said, “I don’t think you may, Mr
Malfoy. I would prefer you to address me formally. As I shall continue to address you. You may
use your staff at tea, Mr Malfoy, but I prefer a more personal touch. What sort of tea would you
like?”

Lucius reddened, then half swivelled in his chair and said over his shoulder to Waldi, “Bring me
China.”

Waldi did not move, and Hermione said, “On this occasion, Mr Malfoy, you are my guest, so
Waldi awaits my instructions. Would you like China Plain or China Green?”

He glared at her and said, “If I wanted Green, I would have asked for it.”

Abraxas straightened in his seat, but she gave him the slightest shake of her head. It would be
humiliating if she could not handle blatant rudeness.

“Father,” murmured Draco. “You are being impolite.” Astoria’s eyes were fixed on her cup, but
her cheeks were flushed.

“Thank you, Draco,” Hermione said, “but I don’t mind. It relieves me of the necessity of being
polite in return. Waldi, please make a small pot of China Plain for Mr Lucius. Draco, perhaps you
will excuse the informality of address in the interests of identification. Earl Grey for you? Weak,
medium or strong?”

“Please, and medium, Miss Granger.”
“That’s another brownie point for you, Draco, and two brownie points earns you the right to address me as Hermione. Should you so wish, of course. There’s your tea.”

“May I, Miss Granger?” said Astoria.

“Of course. We will reciprocate, Astoria.”

“You are very at ease, Miss Granger,” said Lucius.

“Should I not be, Mr Malfoy? I am a guest in your father’s house. As are you. Are you aware of any reason I should feel unease?”

“Yes. Yes, I must say I am. You should feel your position, your status, as a muggle-born among a group of … wizards and a witch who measure their magical status in hundreds of years.”

“I see. You mean as a mudblood among purebloods.”

Three grasps and three heads swung to look at Abraxas. Scorpius just goggled at Hermione, his mouth open.

Abraxas’s words were calm and measured. “Those terms, Miss Granger, are not used at Bansith Lodge. I ask you not to use them again. Lucius, if you cannot be polite to my guest, please leave.”

She inclined her head. “Mr Malfoy, please do not ask any member of your family to leave on my account. In fact, from my point of view, I would rather Mr Lucius Malfoy stayed. I would like to analyse his observation. Regarding my terminology, I respect your wishes, Mr Malfoy. I simply wished to clarify the categories that Mr Lucius Malfoy was referring to.” She looked at Lucius.

“Am I correct, Mr Malfoy?”

He glared at her, then nodded curtly.

She smiled at him. “Thank you. Now you say I should feel my status, as a member of one category, relative to you, Mr Malfoy, as a member of the other. My status: would that be a superior status, because I have achieved a level of skill at least equal to yours in less than one lifetime whereas it has taken you many generations? Or because I am welcome in the homes of every wizarding family in the country, except those who were Death Eaters, while you are not?”

Lucius leant forward. “Don’t try to be clever, Miss Granger. You are muggle-born, and so inferior.”

Abraxas stirred, and again she glanced at him and gave a slight shake of her head. She turned back to Lucius and smiled at him again. “I see. That is like saying a dog is inferior to a cat, an elephant to a flea, a blade of grass to an ear of wheat. Or vice versa. Whatever you believe your superior qualities to be, Mr Malfoy, I suggest you do not number logic among them. Superior and inferior implies a gradation of a shared quality. This may be intelligence, wisdom, strength, the ability to kick a ball accurately, and so on. To whom you were born is not a quality, so cannot be graded.”

“But it is. You are inferior because you are muggle born. Can you not understand that?”

“You seem to be confusing assertion and repetition with rational analysis. I understand what you are trying to say, Mr Malfoy, though your statement is illogical. To move us forward, let me rephrase your statement so that it makes sense. Because I am muggle born, I have qualities inferior to yours, who are not. Physical or mental qualities. Is that correct?”

“You are inferior, Miss Granger.”
“Well, as I have all my body parts and they function as well as yours, I cannot be physically inferior. Presumably then you believe I am mentally inferior. Perhaps you can tell me in what way?”

“You have no breeding.”

She laughed. “Mr Malfoy, my genetic heritage is as long as yours. Otherwise we would not be sitting here together. Again, let me tease this out so we can take it forward. My ‘lack of breeding’ results in some deficiency. What is this deficiency, Mr Malfoy? Am I, say … rude to guests at tea? Am I bullying and manipulative? Do I use force rather than persuasion to make others accept my point of view? Or in what way do I display my inferiority?”

“Do not think you can try to trick me with words, Miss Granger. I do not need to define your inferiority. I know you are inferior.”

“Trick you with words? Are you saying my skill with words is superior to yours, that I am able to trick you? Or is this your way of refusing to debate your claim of my inferiority with me. If so, what does that say about you and your claim? That you do not because you can not. That your statement is mere assertion and prejudice, unsupported by logic or evidence. Perhaps you have already found that intelligent people are unimpressed by your arguments, hence you no longer put them forward.

“Your original point, Mr Malfoy, was that I was very at ease, and should not be, due to my inferiority. I am prepared to feel inferior and ill at ease, but you need to persuade me. You are convinced, but if you wish to have the satisfaction of seeing me sitting silent, head bowed, subdued by the knowledge that I am surrounded by superior beings, you must convince me.” She made an open handed gesture. “I am ready and waiting, Mr Malfoy.”

She did not pause but turned to the others. Abraxas gave her a tiny nod. Good: she was afraid she had gone too far. Astoria still had her eyes fixed on her cup of tea, but was no longer red cheeked. Draco was leaning back – out of the line of fire – his arms folded, his head tilted towards her, watching her with a raised eyebrow and one corner of his mouth lifted.

Scorpius’s gaze had been also been fixed on his plate, but his glances had been flicking from Hermione, as she spoke, to his grandfather, then to his father, great grandfather, and mother.

“Scorpius,” she said, and he drew back, his eyes wide. Perhaps he thought he was next. “Chocolate cake for you? A double slice, if you are anything like Hugo. Boys always have a healthy appetite, and Ceannard’s cakes are rich and buttery. Then tuck into the biscuits. They are scrumptious. Draco, cake or biscuits? And your tea will be cold. Waldi?” The elf stepped forward. He already had a fresh pot in his hands. “And another pot for Mr Lucius, Waldi, please. I fear his has grown cold.”

But Lucius shoved back his chair and strode out, saying as he passed the door, “I shall be by the lake when you are ready to go.”

Draco spread his hands. “Sorry, Miss Granger. Father … he’s still living in the past. Old prejudices die hard.”

“No you find that, Draco?”

He flinched and said, “Not personally, Miss Granger. Most of my illusions were dispelled in my seventh year at Hogwarts. In the eighth I was just trying to stay alive, keep below the parapet. Afterwards I had every expectation of serving time, and as you know it was just my mother’s
action that saved Father and me from a deserved punishment. My mother’s courage and Harry Potter’s integrity. With help,” and he nodded towards his grandfather, “I was able to recognise that for what it was, and not deform it to mean something derogatory, as the boy you knew at Hogwarts would have done. So, although you may find it hard to credit, given your experience of me at school, I agree with what you said today. What matters is the individual, his or her character and abilities, not what his or her roots are.” He sighed, “I warned Father he’d come off worst if he tackled you. Your mind has not lost any of its acuteness, Miss Granger, but your verbal skills have sharpened into incisiveness. Every word finds its mark, and the barbing is a lesson in the art. I suppose it’s a skill learnt in chairing committees on the Weasley Foundation?”

How did he know that? “You’ve seen my name somewhere?”

He smiled. “It’s difficult to miss, Miss Granger. The Saturday Prophet Charities subsection: Mrs Hermione Weasley, spokesperson for the Weasley Charitable Foundation said this, attended that, indicated support for the other. And of course your service on the Witches’ Rights and Muggle Interaction Commissions are not exactly low profile.”

Inwardly she winced. No doubt Ron thought the same. But what could she have done? She’d avoided any magical profession because of him. She’d avoided the business world because of him. She’d had to do something, and charity work seemed the most inoffensive and least likely to be seen by him as competing. And witches’ rights and muggle interaction were such vital areas and ones to which she could bring unique experience.

“Oh committees waffle, don’t they, Miss Granger. They will spend two hours on knut items, then rush though the galleon items in the last fifteen minutes, unless they are controlled.”

She looked at him. “You speak from experience, Draco?”

“Yes of it, in business, and of course our own little charity. No outside charities: no charity wants a Malfoy on its board.”

“Would you serve if a position was offered?”

“Are you offering, Miss Granger?”

“I know of many charities which need, desperately need, someone from the real world to focus them, to strip away fat and dead wood. The world is full of charities set up with noble aims, but which now seem to function solely for the purpose of giving a paying occupation to their employees. To paraphrase your words: galleon aims and knut performance, with no accountability. In the real world they would not last five minutes. They need, in a nutshell, Slytherin single-mindedness and ruthlessness.”

“Ah. Would they accept a Malfoy?”

“On my recommendation, yes.”

“Will they pay me any attention?”

“They had better if they wish to continue to receive Weasley funding. If you’re serious, send me your CV, I’ll look it over and find three or four compatible charities. I’ll send you details so you can choose one. All right?”

“Rehabilitating Malfoys, Miss Granger?”

“If the Malfoy has the right skills and I trust him, certainly.”
“And do you?”

“Enough to give you a trial run. Should you wish it, of course.”

“I do wish it. I’ll modify my CV appropriately and send it to you.”

Abraxas spoke. “Not until after Miss Granger’s recovery is complete, Draco. She is recovering well, indeed she went running today, but… nothing for say six weeks.”

Draco nodded. “Sir.”

Hermione glanced at him. Sir? Respect wasn’t one of the qualities displayed by the Draco Malfoy she recalled from Hogwarts.

She turned to Astoria and smiled. “I’m afraid I have been neglecting you.”

Astoria smiled back. “If you can get Draco onto the board of a charity where he feels he is doing some good, you may neglect me all you like, Miss Granger.”

“I thought we were on first name terms, Astoria.”

She raised a pencilled eyebrow. “I wasn’t sure that I dared, Hermione. After …” She glanced towards Lucius’ chair.

Abraxas said, “Scorpius, it seems to me that these subjects are boring for any young man. Shall we join your grandfather and take a stroll by the water? The recent rains have revealed a fresh array of skimming pebbles, and I would be interested to see if you can better your record of seven bounces.”

“Yes, Sir.” The boy pushed back his chair, and was about to rise when Draco said, “Aren’t you forgetting something, Scorpius?”

“Oh. Yes.” He looked at Hermione and said, “May I… er, we be excused, Miss Granger?”

“Of course, Scorpius, Mr Malfoy. My son Hugo also loves skimming pebbles on water.”

The boy bowed. “Thank you, Miss Granger.”

At the door Abraxas turned and nodded to her. Approval for her conduct of the tea? She smiled back.
As the glazed doors closed behind them, Draco said, “Skimming stones on water is a traditional pastime for boys, though not something I ever did. Grandfather has taught him to fly a kite, too.”

An inner door opened and Lucius stepped in. “Whinging again, Draco? Complaining because I did not bring you up like a muggle peasant? Where is your pride? A thousand years of Malfoy heritage, and what a disappointment you turned out to be.”

“Listening at keyholes, Father? Not much to be proud of in that.”

“Shut up, boy. I haven’t come to speak to you, but to this mudblood woman.”

“Father, do not use that term. Nobody uses it except you, and Grandfather has expressly banned it.”

“I said shut up, boy. I know the views of my saintly father all too well. Yes, I have been listening. Listening to this female try to weasel her way into my family. Offering to help you in useless jobs, encouraging my grandson in childish pastimes: it’s so transparent, but you fall for it open-mouthed.”

Draco stood up. “If you think you are going to subject Miss Granger to another outburst of insulting bigotry, you are wrong. I’m going to get Grandfather.”

“Sit down, boy!” And when Draco began walking to the door, he said, “I am not interested in insulting your precious muggleborn, boy. I just want to know what she is doing here.”

Draco stopped and looked at Hermione.

“Perhaps we should find out what it is that your father wants, Draco,” she said, looking at Lucius.

He sat down again and said, “All right. But if you start insulting her again, I’m calling Grandfather.”

“Mr Malfoy, would you like to sit? Shall I order more tea?”

He leant his arms on the back of the chair. “No, I do not want to sit at your table and I do not want any of your tea. What I want is to know what you are doing here. By what right do you host a tea at a Malfoy dwelling, and carry on as if you own the place?”

What was he getting at? “Your father asked me to act as hostess.”

“Do not try to be coy, woman. It does not suit you. You are too bookish. Even in that outfit. I know you understand me very well. The lady, or shall I say the woman, as there is no lady in this case, who acts as hostess is the lady of the house. So answer the question. What are you doing in my father’s house?”
“I am here at your father’s request and as his guest.”

“Oh really! And just how did that come about?”

“I think, Mr Malfoy, that is not your concern.”

“Oh, you do. You think what happens to my father is not my concern?”

“It may or it may not. That is between your father and you. But what I do is nothing to do with you, Mr Malfoy.”

He strode across and stood over her. “That is not good enough, woman. He is my father. I demand to know.”

She sprang up, adrenaline pumping, and Lucius stepped back. “Then ask him yourself! I am no longer a schoolgirl whom you can terrorize, and you are no longer backed by a paranoiac megalomaniac and his band of killers. Don’t think you can threaten me and get away with it.”

Draco had also risen. He put his hand on his father’s shoulder. “Father, back off. Sit down. Miss Granger is right. She can have the law on you if you carry on like that. Not to speak of what Grandfather would say.”

Lucius shrugged off the hand, but went back to his chair and sat down. “I don’t trust her.”

Hermione took a deep breath and sat down again. Her heart was still racing and she was furious. “Trust is not a word I ever associated with you, Mr Malfoy. Except, I suppose, that I trusted you to do your utmost to further the aims of your master, up to and including the murder of schoolchildren.”

“That is irrelevant and in the past, girl. Here and now is what I am concerned about. Let me tell you something, Miss Granger. I haven’t seen my father for several months, meet him today and find he has aged considerably. He tells us you have been recently severely ill, but have recovered, so miraculously that you are able to go running. And when we visit we find you well settled in, looking like a courtesan.”

“Father,” murmured Astoria. “There is no need to be insulting.”

“Look at her. If that is not a come to bed getup, I never saw one.”

Hermione reddened, but Draco said, “Don’t be silly, Father. It is just a beautiful outfit on an attractive young woman. I would say it’s rather modest, in fact.”

“It is,” said Astoria. “In fact it looks like a Tamsin Tiwania arrangement. She doesn’t do that sort of thing.”

“What would you know, girl? She looks like she belongs in a sleazy nightclub. Two in the morning, looking for a client.”

“I’m sure you would know, Mr Malfoy,” said Hermione.

He ignored her. “Attractive young woman? She looks jailbait.”

“Father, that’s ridiculous,” said Draco. “Miss Granger looks younger than her years, but not that young.”

“And Abraxas looks older. There is dark magic here.”
“If there is, Mr Malfoy,” she said, “you would be the first to recognise it. Let me tell you something. I have been here two days, and before that I did not know that Mr Abraxas Malfoy existed.”

“Let me tell you something, young woman. Araminta Malfoy, whose funeral we have just attended, lived to a hundred and thirty. Bathilda Bagshot was a hundred and fifty when…”

“When Voldemort murdered her?”

Lucius glared at her and the others flinched. At hearing the name? “The point is that my father still has a long life ahead of him.”

“I’m delighted to hear it.”

He leant forward. “You are an upstart, girl, an underbred, vulgar parvenu, who thinks she can slime her way into an ancient family by manipulating an old man’s gullibility and failing powers.”

Hermione laughed, then looked at Draco and Astoria, saying, “Sorry. But honestly, Mr Malfoy, which name carries more cachet in the wizarding world today, Malfoy or Granger? Not to speak of Weasley, a name as old as yours and rock-solid in the cause of right.”

“In a century, woman,” he hissed, “the Malfoy name will still head the list in wizardry, whereas the Granger name will be dust.”

“Ozymandias, Mr Malfoy. The Blacks, the Prewetts, the Crouch, even the Founders all thought the same thing, no doubt. All their names are extinct. And on the subject of an old man’s gullibility: should you believe I am gulling him, ask him. Better still, subject him to any test of senility you choose. From what I have seen he will pass all with flying colours.”

He glared at her. “Once and for all, are you sleeping with him?”

“Father!” said Draco, and Astoria pushed back her chair, got up and walked out.

Hermione shook her head at Draco. She must handle this, even though her face was flaming. “Is that all you can think about, Mr Malfoy? To even consider it possible shows you know little of your own father.”

“I wouldn’t put anything past you. Everyone knows you and your spendthrift husband don’t have two knuts to rub together.”

“Ah, Father, that’s rubbish,” said Draco. “Miss Granger might not have two knuts to rub together right now, but her earning potential is enormous. Knowing her abilities, I’d employ her on twenty thousand with no hesitation.”

“Thank you, Draco. But in fact I do have two knuts to rub together. Mr Malfoy, I own a five bedroom house on Richmond Hill. I also own three percent of Weasley Enterprises, and am a director. I have no idea what all that is worth, but more than two knuts.”

“About half a billion times more, for the house alone,” murmured Draco.

“Really? Thank you. And if you know anything about me at all, Mr Malfoy, you will know money has never motivated me. I do not want more than what I need to provide for my family.”

A voice came from the door, and Abraxas walked in and stood, leaning on the back of his chair. Astoria and Scorpius, behind him, took their seats again. “Miss Granger will also have ten percent
of the income from the Anaconda bauxite mine in Brazil, and the ownerships of Blackthorn Farm in Devonshire and the Bansith Estate. So if you wish to mount a legal challenge, Lucius, now is the time to do it.”

What! She swung round and stared at him.

Lucius slapped the table. “This is exactly what I expected. A gold digger exerting undue influence, earned on her back.”

Hermione opened her mouth to deny it, but shut it again on seeing Abraxas’s face. It was expressionless, but his eyes were narrowed in a way she had never seen. He said nothing, just stood there staring at his son. In the silence, Draco thrust back his chair and strode around to stand by Astoria, putting his hands on her shoulders. Protecting her from the coming storm? She reached up and put one of hers on top of his. Just like her and Abraxas, that morning. No glow, though. Draco and Astoria both looked at Abraxas, then Lucius.

Lucius glanced at Abraxas, then dropped his gaze. “I’m sorry, Sir, I didn’t mean…”

“Lucius,” said Abraxas softly, “Apologize to Miss Granger. Otherwise, believe me, you won’t be mounting any legal challenges. You will be the one without two knuts to rub together.”

Staring at the tablecloth, Lucius said, “I apologize, Miss Granger, for suggesting there was anything improper in the relationship between you and my father.”

“And Draco and Astoria,” said Abraxas, “you will bear witness to my invitation to my son to mount a legal challenge now, while I am alive, to the behest of those three items.”

Hermione stood up, glaring at him. “And you can also bear witness to the fact that I am refusing them. I haven’t earned them and there is absolutely no reason to deprive your heirs.”

Abraxas sighed. “I knew this would happen. Draco, what is the value of those behests in relation to my full estate?”

“Are they for Miss Granger’s lifetime only or in perpetuity, Sir?”

“Bansith and the mine income for her lifetime, Blackthorn in perpetuity.”

“The income from the Anaconda: ten percent of say fifty percent of five percent; Blackthorn: value and growth potential loss: point one five; Bansith: value and leisure utility plus heritage loss for a century: point one. Total nought point five percent.”

“There you have it, Miss Granger. You are depriving my heirs of half a percent of their inheritance. I think they will survive without, as Mr Potter would say, having to sell The Big Issue on street corners.”

She took a deep breath. “Mr Malfoy, please. I am grateful for your offer, though I don’t understand at all why you are making it. But I cannot accept it. I really cannot. I have done nothing to deserve it, and obviously could never earn it in a hundred lifetimes of work. If I were a relative, it would be different. But I am not. So please, don’t try to force it on me. And if you leave it to me without my consent, I will just give it back to Draco. Really.”

Lucius was gaping at her. “Is this ploy, Miss Granger, to get more?”

“Oh, don’t be so stupid, Father,” said Draco. “After what she has just said, you’d have a field day in court challenging any behest. Miss Granger,” turning to her, “or Hermione, as you said I may
address you, you leave me even more ashamed of my conduct at Hogwarts. I was a nasty little scab. Scorpius, your great grandfather has spoken to you of honour. That was honour.” He gestured towards Hermione. “Pure and simple. Principle before anything and everything.”

Hermione flushed. “Draco, stop it. You sound like – a house elf.” She had been about to say, your grandfather, but that would have been too revealing.

Draco smiled. “Unlike you and Potter, Hermione, I have never experienced their adulation. Deservedly.”

“Miss Granger,” said Lucius.

He was looking at her with a twisted smile. What now? “Yes, Mr Malfoy?”

“I suppose you know that Fenrir Greyback has been released?”

Her reaction was instinctive, and so, she believed, was Abraxas’s. She stepped towards him, he towards her and put his arm around her. She felt the warmth, sensed the glow. Yellow-green, and bright.

What had she done! If Ginny knew what this glow meant, so would Astoria, at the very least. Her face flamed and she glanced at Astoria. Her eyes were wide.

Oh dear: the image of herself as a mere convalescing guest - detonated. The image of herself and Abraxas as mere indifferent acquaintances - detonated. The image of her and Abraxas as two people who meant more than a little to each other - framed, nailed to the wall and spotlighted.

Lucius’s eyes narrowed, but before he could speak, Abraxas said, “I think that is enough for one day, Lucius. Your portkey is waiting.”

Lucius scowled, but just said, “Yes, Father.” He glared at Hermione, then turned to Draco. “I’m going. Don’t gossip about me behind my back, boy. Hear me?”

Attention away from her, Hermione stepped away from Abraxas. He lifted his arm as soon as she moved, but she could not look at him.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Grandfather doesn’t do gossip, Father, you know that. Anyway, there is nothing I would say about you behind your back that I have not already said to your face. Off you go now. I’ll see you tomorrow at the meeting. Don’t forget you have to brief the Board on the new seam at Auric mine.”

When Lucius had gone, Draco said, “I apologise for my father, Hermione. You are seeing the worst side of him. He does actually care deeply about Grandfather. It’s not just the money. Hermione, Grandfather, if you will excuse us, we need to get Scorpius back to school. May Scorpius give your daughter a message, Hermione? Send your love, say you are well?”

She dragged her thoughts away from her embarrassing blunder. Draco was kindly covering for her. Should she? But her children thought she was in Brixton. They knew nothing of the break-up. Rose would want to know where Scorpius had seen her etc, etc, etc. “No, Draco, thank you. There are too many … complications.” She’d have to think about how she was going to handle breaking the news.

“Pity. I think he is dying for an excuse to chat up one of the prettiest girls in his year.”

“Dad,” murmured Scorpius, reddening and looking at the floor.
“Is she?” said Hermione.

“Yes, but ...”


“’A bit scary though.”

Hermione kept a straight face with some difficulty, but Draco and Astoria laughed.

Draco said, “We’re laughing with you, not at you, lad, because we know the feeling. Like mother, like daughter. Did I ever tell you that Miss Granger clobbered me once?”

Scorpius lifted his head, glanced at Hermione wide-eyed, then stared at his father. “No! Did she?” Then he looked at Hermione and coloured again. “Sorry, Miss Granger. I know it’s rude to use third person when the person is present.”

“Yes,” said Astoria. “She did. And he deserved it. But we won’t tell you the circumstances because they still make us cringe.”

After they had gone, Abraxas said, “Shall we walk?” and held out his arm. She shouldn’t, really. Enticing though it was, the Touch had caused nothing but trouble every time they had company. But they weren’t in company now, so perhaps they could indulge.

She linked her arm through his, resting it lightly. The intermingled mists, one yellow, one blue, appeared again. What did they mean? But she had more pressing matters to think about. The colour rising in her cheeks, she said, “I am sorry I embarrassed you, Mr Malfoy, by coming to you like that, but Fenrir Greyback ... terrifies me. I had nightmares about him for years after those times.”

“Those times were our doing, and any trauma suffered by you is our fault and our responsibility. I would shoulder it if I could, Miss Granger.”

A warm feeling, and the colours brightened.

“But you need not fear. Once up, the wards at Bansith are impenetrable. And you did not embarrass me. You gave me the opportunity to show my family that you are my guest and I shall protect you to the best of my ability.”

Was that all? Then: silly - what was she expecting! “Thank you,” she murmured.

“It is I who must apologize, for my son's behaviour. I did not expect him to be so … unpleasant.”

"I think he was enraged because I had the effrontery to argue with him. Perhaps he was expecting the timid schoolgirl he knew eighteen years ago, just as I was expecting an intimidating, forceful ogre. We were both surprised and certainly the situation enabled me to lay the ghost of that time.”

“You handled him perfectly and you were right to stop me from intervening. It would have lessened your victory. I must also apologise for leaving you. We were returning anyway as soon as it became apparent Lucius was not at the loch side, but Astoria waving hastened us. I was only in time to hear your reference to two knuts, obviously in response to a comment from Lucius. I trust he was not too objectionable?”

She wasn’t going into are you sleeping with him? “No more than I could handle, and Draco and
Astoria were supporting me.”

Abraxas sighed. “It may sound a bizarre term to apply to man in his sixties, but I believe that Lucius is jealous. He sees you here, and imagines he is being further supplanted in my regard. Which brings me to my third apology, for causing you stress and embarrassing you, Miss Granger, with my proposal. It was, I admit, a little exploitative of me.”

She glanced at him. What now?

“My proposal was double barrelled. The second barrel contained a three fold purpose, Miss Granger. The first was to show my son his fears are groundless, the second was to dispel any doubts Draco and Astoria might have had, the third, and by far the most important, was to turn a spotlight on your character so the family, but especially Scorpius, could see honour in action.”

“Please, no more of that, Mr Malfoy. But you mean … you mean you expected me to refuse? You didn’t mean it?” Her heart sank. The glow became duller.

“I did mean it, Miss Granger. But you responded as I thought you would.”

“Then you didn’t mean it. You can’t have it both ways.”

“Why can’t I?”

“Well, if I had accepted it, you would have given away a fortune, and got nothing for it.”

“That was the first barrel, Miss Granger. Had I been able to persuade you, I would have got the satisfaction of knowing you were well provided for. I meant it, believe meMiss Granger, have no doubt of that.”

A warm, looked-after feeling, again. She turned to look at him, “But why?”

“Let us put the why to one side for the moment. Accept that one way I would have had that satisfaction, the other way would achieve my three fold purpose. So you can see that I was in a win-win situation. And in fact, win-win-win, because your rejection was so dramatically emphatic that my grandson verbalised it to my great-grandson. Scorpius will never forget it. Nor the defeat of bigotry by logic. And, Miss Granger, it didn’t cost me a penny.”

She smiled and shook her head. “Machiavellian.”

“I would not aspire so high, Miss Granger. Not even Talleyrand. Let us just say: Slytherin.”

She laughed.

“Now, I’m sorry to say that I have to spring another surprise on you. I have a lawyer arriving in half an hour.”

She pulled a face. Did this mean she would have to spend the evening alone?

“His field is divorce.”

“For me?”

“Yes. I realize this is a little sudden, and that perhaps you might feel you’d like to give the matter some thought before meeting him. But in things like this, particularly in things like this, I feel it is better to do it the other way around. See the professional first, hear what he has to say, and what usually happens in terms of settlements, and then consider what you might like to do differently.
That way you don’t spend a lot of time in painful introspection just to reach the same conclusions which hundreds of others who have been in the same position have reached.”

They walked silently for a few minutes. He was right on her reactions: her initial feeling was that she would like to think about it first, but on second thoughts, seeing the lawyer first would save her anguish and tears. He could guide her.

“Will you be there?”

He inclined his head. “If you wish me to be.”

“Please. The lawyer will give me good legal advice, but I’m sure I’ll need personal advice as well, from someone who is not emotionally involved.”

“Indeed. I am happy to be of whatever service I can, Miss Granger.”
She sighed inwardly. This was so, so tedious. She’d been trying to concentrate, but really, she just wanted it over, him gone, and a stroll in the moonlight with her host.

All evening the lawyer had droned on about deadly dull settlement matters. He’d wanted to know about the Gringotts account (almost empty as far as she knew); investments (she’d almost laughed at that: they’d lived hand-to-mouth - where would the money come from for investments? Ron had ten shares in the Chudley Cannons, a wedding present from George, and he was welcome to them as far as she was concerned); what to do about shared ownership items (there weren’t any, everything had gone up in the fire), and so on, boringly, tediously, interminably. His name was Slaughter, and a more inappropriate name for a bowed, mumbling, white haired old man she couldn’t imagine. Abraxas, about forty years older, seemed far younger, with his quickness of mind, his grasp of implications and his general alertness.

All she cared about was making sure the children were all right: they would live with her, but Ron would have access rights. Fortunately she did not have to worry about money, thanks to George’s generosity. But Abraxas had suggested she still require that Ron pay half of all the children’s expenses. And when he had explained why: divorced men tended to drift away from their children, and requiring his financial contribution would keep him involved and give him an interest and a stake, as well as allowing for all eventualities, she’d agreed. He’d also insisted she deal with the other matters as well. An hour’s tedium now would save days of sorting out loose ends later, not to speak of acrimony, possible heartache and stress, he’d said.

Mr Slaughter had made a big fuss about her Weasley Enterprises shares and the house on Richmond Hill, said they really complicated everything, and he should have been consulted first. The problem seemed to be that they could be considered part of her and Ron’s joint assets. She’d said she was sure Ron would not demand that, and Mr Slaughter had raised an eyebrow and said that goodwill was often the first casualty when a marriage collapsed. Then Abraxas had suggested sworn statements from George, Harry and the other directors that the shares had been held for her without her and Ron’s knowledge, and that the house had been gifted only after the break-up had occurred. They thus could not be part of the joint assets. And the lawyer had grumbled and mumbled but finally said that might do the trick. He had brightened when Abraxas mentioned Ron’s determined independence, and that Hermione, succumbing to marital coercion, would probably have returned the gifts on his insistence had they known about them. That should do it, he said. And when she said Ron could not force her to do anything, he replied that that was not material, the intention carried all before it. She didn’t really follow that, but Abraxas seemed satisfied, so she’d left it.

In fact, more than once she’d lost the thread of the lawyer’s convoluted, droning argument, and when he had concluded and asked for her approval, she’d looked at Abraxas for guidance. If he said, “That sounds all right, don’t you think, Miss Granger?” she’d say, “Yes, that’s fine, Mr Slaughter.” If he said, “Perhaps we should …” and suggested a further or another approach, she’d follow his lead.
And right at the end, Abraxas had said, “Time is of the essence, Mr Slaughter. Miss Granger would like this wrapped up in two to three days.”

She’d looked at him with raised eyebrows, and he’d nodded to her.

The lawyer had pulled a long face and said, “We can get our bit drawn up, despatched and delivered by tomorrow lunchtime, including the Weasley Enterprises depositions, Mr Malfoy, but we have to await the response of the other side.”

“If you have no response by Day 2, 10am, find out why. Should the delay be the lawyers, call my grandson. Should the delay be their client, call this lady. Should you not have received the depositions by Day 2, midday, call her husband.” He wrote two names on a slip of paper and handed it to the lawyer.

He looked at it and his eyebrows shot up. “Is this …?”

Abraxas nodded. “Yes. I shall call and brief the lady tomorrow. She will brief her husband.”

Mr Slaughter went red, rubbed his hand over his face, then stood up and bowed to her. “Then I must apologize, Miss Granger. When Mr Malfoy instructed me, I thought: this must be the Miss Granger. Then when I arrived and met you, I thought: No, this lady is too young. It must be another Miss Granger and another Mr Weasley, improbable though that might seem. But now I realize that you are indeed the Miss Granger. I hope I have not shown any lack of proper respect?”

She looked at Abraxas - what was this about? - then back at the lawyer. “Not at all, Mr Slaughter. You have been very respectful. I’m sure you are to all your clients.”

He bowed again, muttered, “You are very gracious, Miss Granger. I assure you that every attention will be paid to this matter, and I shall personally ensure it is expedited.”

After the lawyer had gone, Abraxas said, “I’m afraid that’s our evening gone, Miss Granger. Shall I walk you to the cottage?” He held out his arm and she linked hers through it. She knew she shouldn’t, but told herself that the cottage wasn’t far, so they wouldn’t be Touching for long. Again the yellow and green glowing mists, but the silver thread in the tail seemed brighter, shining between the others. She pushed the thoughts away: deep down she knew the Touch was trouble, and right now she just wanted to enjoy the few moments they had.

As they crossed the boardwalk, she said, “Thank you for that, Mr Malfoy. It’s a relief to get it underway. Mr Slaughter seems very experienced as well as … meticulous.”

“I thought you were going to say pedantic.” She could imagine his lips giving a twitch, and smiled in response.

“The word crossed my mind, but also that it would have sounded ungrateful and ungracious.”

“Don’t worry about that. In fact Mr Slaughter would probably take it as a compliment.”

“Good in a lawyer, but perhaps not in a dinner companion?”

“Not if one wants scintillating conversation and witty repartee.”

She laughed and he said, “With luck the next meeting should be to just sign the documents, so we shouldn’t have to entertain him again.”
We. That warm feeling again. “I wondered why you pressed him on the time. Isn’t two to three days awfully short for something like this?”

“It’s short, yes, but achievable, and in my experience it is best to wrap these things up quickly. If they drag, it is wearing on everyone.”

“I see. And presumably the names you gave him were Ginny and Harry?”

“They were. Miss Granger, I apologise for the short notice, but there are various matters in town that I need to attend to tomorrow, among them contacting Miss Weasley and explaining the situation to her. I expect to return in the afternoon, so please do not delay your lunch on my account.”

“I shall take the opportunity to have another run, Mr Malfoy.”
Could there be a better place in the world to run? Surrounded by purple hills under a leaden sky, the wind whispering through the heather, wavelets lapping on the pebbles, mist wisps spiralling up from the black waters. The air was chill and raised goose bumps on her bare arms and legs, but within half a mile she had warmed. The path round the loch was perfect too: wide and level, surfaced in sand and small pebbles, broken here and there by the roots of the oaks and scots pines which grew by the lochside. She felt as though she could run forever. Well, jog, rather, but even yesterday’s hillwork had made a difference.

She was two miles around the lake when she saw a small figure running down the path to meet her. Winky? Yes, it was.

“Miss, Miss. Someone has come to see you, Miss. At the cottage.”

“I’m not expecting anyone, Winky. Who is it? Are you sure its not Mr Malfoy they have come to see?”

“It’s Miss Narcissa, Miss. She says she has an appointment, Miss, but I told her Miss Hermione is out running for her health and she says she’s happy to come back another day.”

“Mrs Malfoy?” She turned and stared across the dark waters. Yes, she could just make out a tall figure standing at the waterside. Abraxas must have forgotten to tell her. How embarrassing.

“Winky, can you take me back? Please?”

Winky took two steps back, her hands raised. “By magic? No, Miss, no. I can’t do that. No magic around Miss Hermione, that’s the rule. That’s why I apparated to half a mile up the path, Miss, before coming down to meet you.”

“But this is an emergency, Winky. I can’t keep Mrs Malfoy waiting.”

Winky’s eyes widened. “Miss, with respect, that is not An Emergency, no. Winky will not risk Miss Hermione’s recovery for that, Miss.” She was shaking her head all the time. “To do that would be a very, very Bad Thing. Winky would deserve Clothes, yes, she would, if she did such a Bad Thing. Miss Hermione’s health is more important than anything, Miss.”

Winky knew best, in Winky’s opinion, and no flighty mistress would persuade her otherwise. “Then can you apparate her to me?”

Winky gave her a beaming smile. “Of course, Miss. Winky is more than happy to run back the half mile up the path, to apparate back to Miss Narcissa to pick her up and to apparate again to half a mile up the path. Then Miss Narcissa can walk down to Miss, talk to her, and then Miss can go on with her health run. I am sure Miss Narcissa would be happy with that, Miss.”

Did elves understand irony? This was laying it on with a trowel. To ask the Ice Queen to put herself out at all, let alone by walking half a mile along a stony path, and all to attend another woman at least twenty years younger than her, a woman whom she probably disliked intensely anyway - it didn’t bear thinking about. “Winky, I’m going to run back. Please, as soon as I’m far enough away, apparate back to Mrs Malfoy and tell her I’m really very sorry I wasn’t there to meet her and I’m coming as fast as I can.”

“But what about your health run, Miss?”
Hermione turned and started running down the path, calling over her shoulder, “I’m doing it, Winky. I’m doing it now, I’m running fast to get good exercise.” And she was. She’d been doing ten minute miles coming, but the thought of Narcissa Malfoy standing there, haughty, a head of affronted steam building up as she waited, drove her so the pebbles flew out from under her trainers. She was sure she was running at eight minute miles, maybe even seven. What must such a woman be thinking: that Hermione had deliberately set out to insult her, her host’s daughter-in-law?

The last time she had seen her had been in court, when she been a witness for her husband and son. She had stood there, the embodiment of good breeding: tall, slim, beautiful, collected and poised, dressed in a plain white blouse, pale blue scarf and dove grey skirt, answering the prosecutor’s questions in a low, clear voice. She had, Hermione had to admit, been a dream witness for the defence. She was articulate, succinct and precise, answering every question in such a way as to imply that both husband and son had been coerced into Voldemort’s service; that, while not actually under the Imperius Curse, they had been daily threatened with torture and death, and had carried out his orders only because of that. Harry, sitting at the back of the court room with her and Ron, had whispered to her that if he was ever accused of anything, he’d want Narcissa Malfoy in his defence team.

The Malfoys had got away with suspended sentences, community service and a million Galleon fine. But it had been a paper trial, though the Malfoys hadn’t known that. Narcissa Malfoy had saved Harry’s life and Harry had said he would like her and her family acquitted. Harry’s wish was law. _The Daily Prophet_ had howled, but the moral standing of a newspaper that had poodled itself to Voldemort was rock bottom, and the sentence had stood. Ron had been outraged, but Harry had just shrugged. He owed her, they all owed her. End of story.

And now she had come to see her. Why?

She arrived back out of breath and stopped in front of the older woman, gasping out, “Mrs Malfoy, I’m so sorry. Mr Malfoy said you might be coming to visit, but never mentioned a time or date. I really am sorry for keeping you waiting.”

The older woman raised both hands. “Miss Granger, all apologies are due from me to you. I know Grandfather is forgetful. I did suggest a date and time, and he did tell me that you said you would be happy to see me, but I have no difficulty in believing, have indeed no doubt at all that he discussed my visit in principle, that you agreed in principle, and that no details were mentioned. I know enough of your character to know that, Miss Granger.”

What! Was this the Ice Queen? But before Hermione could reply she went on.

“I should have confirmed with you, Miss Granger. I should have checked with Winky that you had actually received my message, that my visit would be convenient.”

Narcissa Malfoy, conferring with a house elf?

She went on. “The fault is entirely mine and I apologize for causing you to rush back. As I explained to Winky, I would have been quite happy to return another day, and indeed am still, should you wish to continue your run.”

“Of course not, Mrs Malfoy, I would never do that. I can run at any time.” How could she phrase this without appearing rude? “Was there anything specific you wanted to discuss, Mrs Malfoy, or can you wait a further five minutes while I shower? I cannot receive you properly like this, dripping perspiration, but also I don’t wish to waste more of your time should you have other commitments …”
“Nothing specific, Miss Granger, purely a social call, and please don’t hurry on my account. I have no other commitments today - I live very quietly these days - and my time is at your disposal. Really. I will wait under the grandfather oak, Miss Granger. I am quite at leisure. Please, take your time.”

She didn’t, of course she didn’t. But she wondered as she sluiced off the sweat, why? Because Narcissa had been party to torturing her all those years ago, and she was still a little scared of her? Or because, as she gave herself a perfunctory towelling, she was slightly in awe of one of the most striking women in the magical world, her beauty, if anything, maturing with age? Or because, as she slipped on the pale blue Levis and cream tunic that Winky had laid on the bed - just right: witches always wore dresses, and she wanted to show Narcissa that she was proud of her muggle heritage - in spite of the disgrace still clouding the Malfoy name, Narcissa was still held up as a model of grace and dignity? Her beauty and poise would daunt any woman who could not match them - and Hermione knew of no-one who could. Or because, as she looped the rust tassel belt around her waist, because Narcissa was linked to one of the richest families in England? That shouldn’t make any difference, but it did. Or because, as she slipped on the ankle length tan suede boots, Narcissa was family? And that brought her up sharply. Of course Narcissa wasn’t family. She was Abraxas’s family. Not hers. Abraxas’s family was not her family. And she didn’t know why she was hurrying: probably all the reasons played a part. All were reasons to feel apprehensive about the prospect of tea with her. Except the last one, of course. That was silly and illogical, and she had no idea where it had come from. But it should go back and stay there.
"Why did you save Harry?"

Chapter Notes

Updated 30.3.18

She hurried out, still towelling her hair. Narcissa was sitting in a chair looking out across the loch. She was dressed in a lacy white blouse and a calf length dove grey pleated skirt, a paisley henna silk scarf around her neck. Tall, slender, erect, she looked … regal. Though almost sixty, her porcelain skin, high cheekbones and long, narrow nose would still turn men’s heads.

She turned as Hermione crunched across the pebbles, and Miss Sash leapt from her lap. The cat walked to Hermione, paused to be stroked, then continued on to the cottage.

Narcissa rose, saying, “I miss her whenever I am not here. Do you find her a good companion?”

“I do, certainly, and I’m so sorry to have kept you waiting like this, Mrs Malfoy -” but the older woman held up both hands to check her.

“Miss Granger, I hoped you wouldn’t hurry, but knew you would. Your considerateness has always been a feature of your character. Please, do not apologise.”

“All right. Thank you. Would you like tea, or,” seeing the older woman glance along the shoreline, “would you rather walk?”

“Miss Granger, if it is all the same to you, if you are not too tired after your run, may we walk?”

“I am not at all tired, Mrs Malfoy, and would enjoy a walk. The weather is too fine to waste.”

They began walking and Hermione grasped at the first topic that came into her mind. “Have you known Miss Sash long?” Oh! What a question to ask the Ice Queen. How long had she known a cat?

“All my life, Miss Granger. She is a part of this world, this little haven of peace and safety. A part of it for me, certainly, until I married.”

Narcissa must have misunderstood. Cats do not live for sixty years. “Miss Sash? The Bansith cottage cat?”

“All my life, Miss Granger. She is a part of this world, this little haven of peace and safety. A part of it for me, certainly, until I married.”

Narcissa must have misunderstood. Cats do not live for sixty years. “Miss Sash? The Bansith cottage cat?”

“Miss Sash, Miss Granger. The Bansith cottage cat. Of course, it is possible that the current Miss Sash is different to the Miss Sash I knew, but I believe her to be the same. When we were children we pretended she and her brother were mau cats.” She glanced at Hermione to see if the term meant anything to her, and Hermione nodded. In the mythology of magic, mau cats were descended from Bastet, the Egyptian cat goddess, and could travel to spirit worlds. Narcissa smiled. “Though I have to admit she never showed any supernatural powers, just an extraordinary empathy. Does she listen to your spoken thoughts, and respond? Dance for you? Pat your face to wake you?”

Hermione felt a touch of jealousy, as well as disappointment. Miss Sash showed empathy and danced for others? Others like Narcissa Malfoy? “Yes, she does.”
“When I was a child, she did for me. Gradually she grew more reserved. As, I suppose, I did.” Sadness and regret in her voice. “After I married she ... went away, with her brother, only returning after ... returning nineteen years ago.”

Oh. The wisp of jealousy turned to guilt. She’d misjudged both cat and woman. This was fragile ground; best to move on. “We all change, I suppose, as we mature. I’m sure Draco found me as different as I found him, yesterday.” Oh dear, that could be interpreted in any number of ways, and few of them complimentary. She was making a right hash of this. She rushed on. “I trust their return home was without mishap? And your grandson’s return to Hogwarts? And Mr Lucius Malfoy, of course.” What a blundering, disjointed mishmash. She could not be impressing the Ice Queen with her conversational elegance.

The older woman inclined her head. “I thank you. Yes, Scorpius returned safely, and Draco and Astoria as well. My husband I see little of, but have had no report of ill-health. Just of ill-temper. Grandfather does not allow him house-elf staff, fortunately, but I understand his man-servant, his muggle man-servant, has just given notice.”

“I am sorry if his ill-temper is related to his visit here, Mrs Malfoy. I never intended-”

Narcissa lifted her hand. “Please do not apologize, Miss Granger. I am not at all sorry. Astoria has told me what happened, that Lucius lashed out with his customary aggressive, arrogant bigotry and that you, calmly and politely and with devastating reasoning, showed his opinions to be ridiculous, illogical, not credible to any intelligent person. It was a mortal thrust, Miss Granger. Lucius wears his prejudices with pride, but you stripped off the covering to reveal them as merely silly, indicative of an inferior intellect. That you defeated him poured acid into the wounds: you, a mere woman; you, a despised muggle-born; you, the hated nemesis of his master. And after you had shredded his arguments, you turned away and dismissed him as if of no account. I wish I could have seen it, but Astoria described it graphically. No wonder he fled the field. What did surprise me though, was that Grandfather allowed Lucius free rein. I would have expected him to be more ... protective of you. Not that you needed it.”

“I asked him to. I mean, I said that if he wished me to host his tea, I should be allowed to handle it in my own way. Not that I had Mr Lucius Malfoy in mind, though I was feeling nervous about meeting him again,” and here Narcissa dropped her gaze, “but I think Mr Abraxas Malfoy interpreted my request to mean I would ask for help should I need it. And he would have interfered more than once, but I was able to let him know I was coping.” Narcissa’s head rose and she looked at Hermione. Of course, this would convey a level of intimacy between Abraxas and her that might surprise his daughter-in-law. Though if Astoria had told her about the glow, anything else would pale by comparison. She winced inwardly, and went on. “And I think perhaps Astoria exaggerates both the effectiveness of my arguments as well as Mr Malfoy’s sense of defeat. Certainly he came back later full of fight. And there, in fact, Mr Abraxas Malfoy did defend … me.” She had almost said my honour, but it would have sounded too dramatic and too … Regency. Though it had been exactly that.

“Yes. I heard about that too. I apologise for Lucius’ … coarseness, Miss Granger.” Hermione made a slight gesture of dismissal, and the older women went on. “I thank you, Miss Granger. Nothing else but a perceived threat to his inheritance, I think, would have forced Lucius back to the fray. Though in all honesty I must say he does care for his father. But this time, I understand, you acquitted yourself in so exemplary a manner as to drive Lucius from the field with his tail between his legs, and leave my son, daughter-in-law and grandson in awe of you. And no doubt Grandfather also.”

“Oh, Mrs Malfoy, I don’t know what Astoria has been telling you, but I assure you that she greatly
exaggerates.”

She smiled. “Your modesty becomes you, Miss Granger, but the bare facts alone would be enough to produce the reaction she describes. Still, this make you uncomfortable. Let us move on. You may wonder, incidentally, that I call my father-in-law ‘Grandfather.’ It is because I spoke of him to Draco for all his youth, and so grew to associate that name with the man.

“And so,” Narcissa waved her hand towards the loch. “Lovely, is it not, Miss Granger? The beauty and tranquillity of the Highlands are unmatched anywhere in the world, I feel. Sometimes, when I am weary to the bone, I close my eyes and try to recreate this view. After a few moments I am refreshed. But being here again is … rejuvenating. I’m sure you must find it so.”

“Oh, I do, I do. I love the Highlands. And Bansith is …” She paused. This was Narcissa Malfoy she was talking to. While the ice queen image was already … melting, she did not know how much she could say, how much she could trust her.

Narcissa nodded, as if distrust was all she expected. “Relaxing, yes.”

Hermione winced inwardly. She’d not meant to hurt. And Narcissa was being open and trusting towards her, astonishingly so. “Oh, more than that. Rejuvenating is right, invigorating, the beauty showing there is still good in the world, the tranquillity that peace can still be found. You described Bansith as a haven, and I feel that too.” Was she saying too much now, to compensate?

Narcissa smiled. “Thank you for that, Miss Granger.” She gestured to the path before them. “As you do, Miss Granger, I run. I have circuited this loch more times than I can count.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Does that surprise you?”

“Well, yes and no. I never imagined you as an athlete, but looking at you now, no, it doesn’t surprise me.”

“Thank you. I will take that as a compliment. The circuit, if you have not yet done the whole distance, is just under ten miles, Miss Granger. It is a beautiful run. At the outlet a little hump-backed bridge spans the burn. Time was when I could do it in seventy minutes.”

“That’s impressive, Mrs Malfoy. To average seven minute miles over rough paths and for so great a distance. You must have been very fit.”

“Very driven, Miss Granger. I used my running to burn away the stresses of … of the bad years. I would leave the Manor, apparate here and run, run, run. It helped. I could think and see more clearly.”

Hesitantly, Hermione said, “When was that, Mrs Malfoy? After the death of … um…?”

The older woman’s face creased, closing in on itself. Her head fell forwards and her voice dropped to a whisper. “I cannot blame you, Miss Granger. A question like that is natural, appropriate, just, coming from Hermione Granger to Narcissa Malfoy.”

Oh dear. And this was a much worse hurt than last time. “I’m sorry, I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean … I just don’t know how you feel about those times.”

“You could not know, Miss Granger. I will tell you. I used to come here before, when my husband and son seemed determined on self-destruction, when each day brought us closer to hell-on-earth.
Bansith was the only place where I could tear off the mask and scream my despair and anguish at the sky. Afterwards, after Mr Potter had killed him, those were the good times, Miss Granger. I could breathe again, my heart freed from the clamps of fear. I could live without the dread every day had brought, the dread that my son or husband, or both, would be slaughtered on a capricious whim, or coerced into participating in some murderous act. I could sleep without the menace of the two a.m. summons. Those were the good times, Miss Granger. You may believe me on that.”

Hermione did, though it turned her image of Narcissa Malfoy upside down. The voice was quiet, but the passion and pain were clear. And ... if she felt like this ... could she ask her The Question? She might never get another chance. “Mrs Malfoy, I have always wondered about this. Why did you save Harry?”

The blonde woman glanced at her. “I’ve been waiting for that question from you or Mr Potter for eighteen years, Miss Granger. I will answer it, gladly if not happily. It is not a tale of which I am proud.” She hesitated a moment, then said, “My defence counsel carefully avoided it during my trial. And so, to my amazement, did the prosecutor. I have often wondered why.”

“That was Harry. We discussed it and Harry spoke to him, the prosecutor. He felt that delving into motives might have complicated matters. You saved Harry. He just wanted to discharge his debt.”

“I suspected that. That he would honour the deed without seeking further. For which he has my lifelong gratitude. Though I have often wondered, Miss Granger, if I did actually save him.”

“Of course you did. Voldemort’s first avada just destroyed the horcrux.” The older woman flinched. At the name or the curse? Hermione went on. “A second, unopposed by Harry, would almost certainly have killed him.”

“We’ll never know. Even Mr Ollivander doesn’t.”

“Ollivander wasn’t sure, Mrs Malfoy, but in his testimony he said that on balance, he believes the Elder Wand would have implemented Voldemort’s curse.” The older woman flinched again. The name, definitely. The man had been dead eighteen years, and still his name invoked fear.

Hermione went on. “Remember that Harry was wandless and in … the dark lord’s power. But anyway, if the wand had not done it, the dark lord would have killed him in some other way. So there is no question: you saved Harry’s life. Yet before that, in your house that night, you were still … loyal to the dark lord. Loyal enough to tell him we were there, in your hands.”

The blonde woman’s head fell forward, her gaze on the ground. “I was. I regret it, and will do so to my life’s end, Miss Granger, but am aware it was so evil an act that a mere apology is meaningless. How can one say sorry for offering another person up to a monster for sacrifice? One can’t. All one can do is live with the remorse and the guilt. But how much greater would that remorse and guilt have been if the monster had arrived in time to take the sacrifice? To have been personally responsible for three young lives, including the only one capable of stopping him? And in particular, you: given to a subhuman creature that would have subjected you to unspeakable depravities before killing and devouring you. I don’t think I could have lived with that. Particularly considering the state of terror and degradation that would have surely followed his ultimate victory, and knowing I had helped him. But you escaped, for which I am daily grateful.

“I was never loyal to him, Miss Granger, not in the conventional sense of loyalty. I never believed in what he believed or, rather, said he believed in. I claim no moral superiority in this - quite the opposite. His followers, some of them, believed he was achieving ‘the greater good.’ Their moral values were twisted beyond belief, Miss Granger, but at least they believed in something. I believed in nothing. Right and wrong had no meaning for me. I was morally bereft, Miss Granger, and have
always been.”

“But then why…”
A tale of spinelessness

“You, Miss Granger. That night, you saved Harry Potter. It was you, your courage, that fanned in me a tiny flame of ... I don’t know what ... not courage, certainly. I have always been a coward. But I was able to tear the veil of terror which stifled me, and see him for what he was.”

“I? But I just screamed as ... as Mrs Lestrange tortured me.”

Narcissa looked at her, then shook her head. “You are a rock, Miss Granger. Even after all I have done to you, you still try to spare my feelings. I see why Grandfather is so ... You need not be afraid of saying your sister, Miss Granger. That nerve has been hammered until it is numb. Yes, you screamed, but you still had the courage and presence of mind to lie to her.”

“You knew?”

“Of course I knew. I am a woman. I can tell when another woman is lying, even under those circumstances.”

“Your – Mrs Lestrange didn’t.”

“My sister had almost ceased to be human, let alone a woman, Miss Granger. Sometimes I wonder if she herself had not become a horcrux to him, so permeated with his psychotic megalomania had she become. Her every thought, her every act was filtered through the slime of that creature’s evil like gas bubbling up through a tar pit. But you, all three of you, three ... three children, really, stood there defying one of the greatest monsters of all time. While we adults, we lined up behind him. Why? I ask myself that from time to time. Bigotry, expediency, fear, leavened with weakness and cowardice. Weak in mind and spirit, too terrified, too cowardly to even face what was happening to our world, how the monster was destroying everything that gave life worth. That was how I was before that night. Then you came, a slip of a girl, a shy, retiring girl, a girl whose spiritual home was the library. And you stood there and defied the monster.”

“You describe it dramatically, Mrs Malfoy, but so did Harry and Ron.”

She waved a hand. “They are male. Oh, I don’t wish to take anything away from them, they showed courage and fortitude beyond anything my son had ever shown, though it pains me to say so. But it was you, a girl, a female, that I identified with.”

“Really, I don’t understand. I screamed and I lied. How could that be enough to turn you against ... the dark lord? After all, you must have seen far worse things.”

The older woman dropped her eyes. “I had. Though in my cowardice I avoided them as much as I could. But if we were available, he demanded we attend him in his perversions. Partly to show us what would happen if we strayed, but more, I think, because he took pleasure in inflicting pain, on both his victims and us.” She raised her eyes to Hermione’s. “Do you wish to know, Miss Granger? If you do, I will tell you, though it is a tale of spinelessness.”

“No, not if it will cause you more pain.”

“Miss Granger, the pain of a humiliating confession to you will be less that the pain of knowing I was, once again, too lacking in backbone to do what I knew to be right. You do want to know, you have a right to know, and I will tell you.

“You have already seen enough of wizarding society, Miss Granger, to know that it is more
chauvinistic than the world outside. What you may not know is that the higher up the social scale you go, the worse it gets. At the top, women are trophies to adorn their men, to be looked at, admired as works of art, then put away and ignored. And of course broodmares, upon whom the heir is sired.

“Black, Malfoy, Lestrange, Rookwood, Greengrass are, or were, at the social pinnacle, the so-called Great Families, and determined to do whatever it took to stay there. Wealth, the bloodline, the society in which one moved, were paramount. Conventional morality was not on the scale at all, just the appearance of it. The Weasley family was held up as a living example of the consequences of letting values slip, of having sympathy with or even, greatest of horrors, associating with muggles.

“The Weasleys, it was said, lived in poverty and squalor, in a ramshackle barn held together with spells, sackcloth and string, the children without shoes, malnourished, wading through slime and cow-dung to reach an outdoor privy. This was the image held up to us children, and what we believed awaited us if we strayed. Not that it was left to us to choose. Independence of thought was not tolerated. You behaved according to the rules your family laid down, or you were punished. If you didn’t go into the mould willingly, you were forced in.”

“Sirius didn’t conform.”

“Sirius was a male, and strong. The occasional rebellious boy proves the stock is still healthy. But a girl? No, there rigid conformity is demanded. I tell you this, Miss Granger, not to win sympathy, but so that you will understand the background. I leant early that rebellion brought only pain. I did what was expected of me, learnt the frivolous skills required of a woman who will merely hang as an ornament from her husband’s arm and bear his children. I knew my destiny was that of a parasite and broodmare, and accepted it.”

She spoke quietly, but her voice was so hard and cold that Hermione flinched.

Narcissa continued. “Cynicism comes early for girls in the Great Families. Forty year old eyes gazing out of a six year old face, Miss Granger. Those dreams that every girl has, of marrying for love, of the giving of her heart, her soul, her everything, into the keeping of her beloved: I knew they were not for me. All I could do was to make myself as marketable as I could, in the hope that that would give me some choice when the time came. Fortunately I inherited my father’s hair, my mother’s looks and my great grandmother Black’s intelligence. Certainly my family gave me little else but a roof over my head.”

Now the carapace was cracking, and Hermione could hear the bitterness. She laid her hand on the older woman’s arm, but Narcissa withdrew hers. Gently but firmly.

“You spoke of my cousin Sirius. He and his friend James Potter, and the winsome, vivacious Lily Evans. Watching them I understood what beauty was: Talented, courageous, free, they loved life and lived it to the full. But such beauty was only for the brave.

“And the Weasleys: Arthur was four years ahead of me at Hogwarts. I expected a brute, knuckles dragging, speaking in grunts. What I saw was an intelligent, selfless, considerate young man. Not the flash and fire of Sirius, but quiet integrity, thoughtfulness and courage. When I compared him to Lucius … How I envied Molly. But an impassable gulf divided our worlds, and I doubt he even knew I existed. The brutes, they were those around me, the Lestranges, the Goyles. My life had been built on lies, Miss Granger. But even when I knew the truth, I was too fainthearted to act on that knowledge. So I can blame only myself. Well, let me go on.

“Like all the great families, Blacks and Malfoys mixed socially, indeed had been intermarrying for
generations. My sisters and I holidayed here, at Bansith Lodge, many times. We slept in your bed, Miss Granger, as children. We played games with Miss Sash and Mister Lumpy. It was here that I first met Grandfather, Abraxas, and, aged four, told him that I was going to marry him. He was a surrogate father, Miss Granger, showing all the love and kindness my own father - and mother - never did.

“It was here, aged ten, that I met Lucius, a tall, handsome boy of twelve. I fell in love with his looks, as girls will, but soon saw that the outer beauty of manliness was not matched by inner qualities. He was … less than mediocre: small minded, weak, easily lead, unable to distinguish between nobility of character and nobility of name, between self-respect and arrogance, between principle and prejudice. The crown prince of our world, Miss Granger, but with a crown of gilded lead.

“Unlike his father: in him were compassion, wisdom, integrity, fortitude, blended in perfect measure. All the qualities that the Great Families pretended to aspire to, though in reality the opposite values held sway. How many times have I wished I could exchange the son for the father.” A faint blush spread across the porcelain skin. “Dreams come of their own volition, Miss Granger. But: the father was unattainable, the son, however imperfect, was not. I set him as my goal, hoping that, eventually, the one would grow more like the other.”

She sighed. “When I was fourteen, my world … shattered. Grandfather disappeared, no one knew where. Killed, we suspected, by him. I wept, in secret: my family had hated him and his high principles. He had been my rock, Miss Granger, to which I had anchored my real, hidden self, the Narcissa behind the mask. As long as he was alive, I could believe there was some goodness in the world. Now I saw only shadow, with greater darkness coming, and myself drifting among the shoals and reefs of my world.

“But my plans remained unchanged, indeed became reinforced. As a female I needed an anchorage, and I saw Lucius as the best available. I hoped I could lead him. My contrivances worked. I did lead him to choose me. I built my little world with care, Miss Granger, but of such poor materials that in the first gust of wind it was already shaking and unsteady. And the winds became stronger. The monster was already growing in strength, seeking prey, corrupting.”
Bellatrix and the monsters

“My sisters were even less able to guide their destiny. Andromeda, next oldest, had a lovely nature, but inherited her looks from our father. In a girl, looks are everything, so my parents soon saw her marriage value was low. They ignored her. In that way she was luckier than poor Belle. Belle had both looks and her grandmother’s raven hair. She also had rebelliousness.”

“The youngest often does. But also, as the lastborn, more tolerance from parents.”

“Not in the Black family. She was whipped, frequently. You would find it difficult, Miss Granger, to believe that the … the madwoman who tortured you was once an innocent, happy child, marvelling at a dewdrop on a leaf, laughing as she splashed barelegged in the loch shallows, weeping over a ladybird she’d trodden on while skipping down a path.” Tears were trickling down her cheeks.

“Oh, Narcissa!” And Hermione took her into her arms and hugged her. She never envied the purebloods at Hogwarts, but now she saw reason to pity them. Was this why Pansy had hung around Draco, why Daphne had taken so much trouble with her make-up? She’d seen it as evidence of their shallowness, but perhaps it had been … survival. Perhaps Pansy’s bitchiness towards her had been due to envy rather than spite.

Gently Narcissa extracted herself. “No, Miss Granger, you must not. It is gone, like last Spring’s blossoms.”

“No, Narcissa, it is not. She lives on, in your memory, what she was once, for whatever reason she became what she did.”

“Rudolfus Lestrange was the reason. I hope he rots in Azkaban forever! Violent, brutal, sadistic. Even at school I could see it. If there was anything dirty or underhand going on, the Lestrange boy would be involved. I warned her but she had little choice: my parents signed the marriage articles just before her seventeenth birthday. They sold her. Whipping did not break Belle’s spirit, but the Lestrange beast did. He was incapable of love, and merely sought a victim for his perversions. A woman, a wife, was just perfect. Someone who could not hit back, could not escape, could not … who was helpless, defenceless, isolated. He was cunning: he never hit her face. No, that would be public and embarrassing. The Families wouldn’t stand for that. But under her clothing? Bruises, burns, bites, cuts. Her eyes held terror from the first month.”

“But, but… couldn’t you help her?”

“I did. I brought her to Malfoy Manor. Lucius was reluctant, but accepted it. Then the Lestranges brought an action against Lucius. Dumbledore’s equal rights campaign was in its infancy then, strongly opposed by all the Families I might add, and women were still subject to their husbands. Using private funds, I fought the action, to Lucius’ annoyance. I lost, of course. Oh, I won guarantees of restraint against Lestrange, but they were of less value than the parchment they were written on. She had to go back and live with him under his roof. After that she was virtually a prisoner. I was never allowed to see her, so I don’t know what brutalities and depravities he subjected her to. Though knowing him, I can guess. Then he came along, and she, already half crazed, became his most devoted servant. Lestrange, no doubt terrified of an even bigger brute than he was, let her alone. When next I saw her, I scarcely recognised her. She was… she was … her eyes … Oh, Belle, Belle,” and she buried her face in her hands, her shoulders heaving.

Again Hermione took her in her arms: she could not help herself, but after a few moments Narcissa
took a deep breath, straightened and gently put her away again.

“No, Miss Granger, you must not comfort me. My true sister died long ago, leaving a shell to be filled with evil.”

“And Andromeda?” said Hermione, hoping to drive the pain of her youngest sister’s fate from Narcissa’s mind.

“Andromeda. Dear, sweet Andy. Least blessed in looks, most blessed in happiness - until the wave of hatred and corruption spewed by the monster engulfed even her. Her intended fate was to marry to a Flint, one of Lestrange’s gang of thugs. But my father left it too late. For once, neglect worked to her advantage. She reached her majority, fled, married a muggle-born. Her name was never spoken again, was excised, scorched from the Black family tree.

“But this is not answering your question, Miss Granger. And I am not trying to engage your pity. I made my choices, poor as they were, and I must live with them. And Lucius was not violent, for which I was grateful. Our first years were, well, almost happy. It is a woman’s nature to love, Miss Granger, and I did grow to love him, turning my face away from his failings. When I fell pregnant my cup of happiness seemed full - or at least as full as it was ever likely to get. Even before we married, I knew Lucius was involved with him, though not how deeply. Lucius, always impressionable, had been ensnared by his talk of the rights of purebloods, of their superiority, of the need to maintain purity in magic. While we were courting, his attention was given to me, and I put thoughts of him away. After we married, Lucius showed me his dark mark.” She shuddered.

“Too late, far too late I tried to point out the false arguments, the inconsistencies, the downright lies. Not that it would have made any difference: I was only a woman, what could I know? My arguments weighed little. If only Grandfather had been there.” She sighed.

“Abraxas?”

Narcissa turned to look at her. “Is that what you call him?”

Hermione flushed. “Not to his face. But I was just making sure I knew who you were talking about.”

“Yes. Abraxas.”

“You said he’d vanished about ten years earlier. Where was he?”

“If he has not told you himself where he spent those years, Miss Granger, I may not. It is his business. But I can assure you that the reason for his absence was honourable, as honourable a reason as ever there was. But I have wished, oh so many times, that he had put us first. If he had kept below the parapet, had concentrated on his role as pater familias, guided his son, insulated us, took us away, how different would life have been. But - men don’t. They try to fix things, and sometimes it all falls apart. But I am drifting from the point again and I apologize.”

“Please: you have already made much clear that I didn’t understand. I am reassured to learn that Mr Malfoy is a good man.”

“You don’t say which Mr Malfoy, but there is only one to whom that appellation could be applied ... Though I am a little surprised that you are prepared to accept my word, Miss Granger.”

“Didn’t you just tell me that a woman can tell when another woman is not telling the truth?”

She’d hoped to raise a smile, but the older woman sighed. “Only when she is as accomplished a liar as I am, Miss Granger, and as I am sure you are not. Let me go on. Grandfather disappeared and
Lucius, drifting, was hooked, skilfully played, then reeled in by him. My husband went to the bad, and I, loyal wife, prepared to follow him. Not, as you will have gathered by now, from any belief or conviction in the psychopath’s cause: my inbuilt cynicism saved me from that. No, I was pregnant, I could see disaster looming and my husband would not listen: if I stood back I would achieve nothing. If I followed, I might avert dangers: I could not prevent anything but I might be able to deflect the worst from our family. My amorality will shock a person like you. What was right or wrong did not trouble me, only what was good or bad for me and mine.”

“Sometimes one has to put survival first.”

“First and last with me.”

“You are hard on yourself, Mrs Malfoy.”

The older woman’s head dropped. “You called me Narcissa, before.” Her voice was barely audible.

Did it mean something to her? “Narcissa, then. And please, call me Hermione.”

The bowed head shook. “I cannot. I cannot. It would not be…”

“But why?”

The head reared up, the patrician face turned towards her, the crinkled eyes gazed at her. “Miss Granger, I and mine tortured you. We would have thrown you into the werewolf’s pit and walked away. As a person, I am … Morally, you are … I am not … not worthy. You should find my presence … repulsive.”

Hermione put her arms around her again. “Narcissa, you are a woman who has gone through hell, and survived. Who am I to say I would not have made the choices you did, given your situation?”

Narcissa leant her head against Hermione’s shoulder for a moment, then said, “No, this is not right,” and moved away. “You would not, Miss Granger. You would have turned away at the first step I took on the path which led me to where I am today. Even as a three year old you would have turned away. All my life I have been a puppeteer’s doll, dancing on strings others pulled. You would have broken those strings, Miss Granger, or died trying. Let me go on, and let me cut it short, it is too draining.

“The dark lord was winning everywhere, success followed success, the whole Death-eater movement was avalanching, then, O’ glorious day, he vanished, gone, no one knew where: dead, I fervently hoped. He whose magic was so powerful that no adult could stand against him, had been vanquished by a baby. Using my pregnancy and then feigning post-natal problems, I’d been able to keep Lucius away from the worst massacres. Now my aim was just to gather mine to me and deflect as well as I could the storm of retribution which must follow. We concocted the story of the Imperious Curse and I coached Lucius in what he must say. We opted for trial by jury and I influenced the selection as much as I could, so that a third of the jury were sympathetic to the family or owed us favours. I pressed for an early trial, knowing that the longer we waited, the more likely it would be that we would get a fanatic like Crouch as prosecutor. I hoped to do the same for my sister, but one meeting with her showed me she was a lost cause. She ranted and raved about him, which even had she no black deeds to her account, would have got her Azkaban. With her record, witnessed by many and attested to with alacrity by plea bargainers, she stood no chance at all. I visited her in Azkaban from time to time, and arranged for treatment, but to no avail. Her mania persisted and she believed with every fibre of her being that he would return. He had saved her once … the human mind is unfathomable in a sane person, Miss Granger. In a psyche that had
been subject to all but geological forces of distortion, who can say what was there and why.”

She took a breath. “Well. Lucius and I escaped, and went home, regarded as traitors by all who did not regard us as closet death eaters who had cheated their just deserts. But we were free. Besmirched, to put it mildly, but free. Free to rebuild my world again, a shoddy builder using the same shoddy materials. As soon as we got home I resurrected Grandfather’s charitable giving programme.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, the Malfoys have always supported charities, though not always with the purest of motives. Grandfather gave anonymously but that would not do for us now. Everyone knew what we were doing and why, but money is money. They accepted our donations and invited us to galas and expensive dinners. We sat with the good and the great. Sordid, is it not, Miss Granger?”

“Narcissa, you were just trying to repair what had been broken, through no fault of yours.”

“You are kind, Miss Granger, but you would not have done it. Even in the unlikely - the impossible - case that you found yourself in that situation, you would have found another way. No, you would have,” she said, as Hermione spread her hands. “Let me go on. Soon we needed that goodwill, however grubbily obtained. As part of his inner circle, my husband had had power and prestige that he had never had before. Now that he was gone, Lucius missed the status. He was also half convinced by Belle’s ravings, that he was hiding somewhere, damaged but not dead, rebuilding his strength. He wanted to look for him, but I managed to dissuade him – if he was not dead, I would prevent his return if I could. If I could not prevent it, I certainly would not aid it.”
Narcissa sighed. “Whatever my wishes, I could not prevent my husband dabbling. Perhaps he was influenced by the diary the monster had left with him. Of course, we didn’t know it was a horcrux. I knew little of dark magic, had no desire to know more, and had no idea that such evil objects existed or indeed could exist. But I find it difficult to believe that such an object, saturated in the vilest, darkest magic and quickened by murder, would not emanate a malign influence.”

“They do, of course they do. Don’t you know what happened to Ginny Weasley?”

“I heard she was under a spell. That Mr Potter rescued her. That’s what Lucius told me. Though not in quite those words.”

“He skipped a few details. The horcrux … pervaded her, mind and body. It took control of her. She did things she had no later recollection of. Vile things, like writing in blood. And at the end, in the basilisk’s lair, it almost drained her life force. Drained it and gave it to … him. She was a hairsbreadth away from death. Harry destroyed the horcrux just in time to save her.”

The older woman covered her mouth with both hands. “I didn’t know that. How horrible. Poor child. And Lucius … No wonder the Weasleys hate us.”

“I experienced the effect myself, to a small extent, with Slytherin’s locket. I always felt depressed as soon as I put it on: overwhelmed by the enormity of the tasks before us, the hopelessness of it all, what a miniscule chance we had of success. Harry got tetchy. Very tetchy. Ron, well, it affected Ron worst. He got mild paranoia.”

“Thank you, Miss Granger, for telling me that. If pure, strong minds like yours were affected, how much greater must have been the influence on a mind not strong, and already tainted. You might think it wrong, pathetic, even repulsive that I should be seeking to justify my husband’s behaviour, Miss Granger. Especially now, after our ways have parted. But he is the father of my son. Draco is half Lucius. I have always accepted that Lucius is vain, arrogant, superficial, easily led. But I have never accepted that he is fundamentally evil.”

“Only you can judge that,” said Hermione. But she remembered his treatment of Dobby, and how he had tried to kill them in the Ministry. And Draco had been no angel.

“No doubt you believe I am wilfully deluding myself.” Narcissa tilted her head to one side slightly, looking at Hermione. “Wives have that tendency, Miss Granger.”

Hermione blinked. That thrust brought her up sharply. “True.”

Narcissa went on. “Deluded or not, I do not deny that he was open and receptive to such an influence. Well, for whatever reason, Lucius began to collect dark objects. I had the cellars built to contain and hide them. But the years passed, nothing happened, and I was lulled into believing we were safe, that if he returned, at least it would not be in my lifetime. Then in Draco’s first year at Hogwarts, and yours and Mr Potter’s, disaster struck. He was still alive, maimed beyond recognition, unable to survive as a separate being, but alive.

“Lucius was elated. I was all but suicidal. I could see it all happening again, the downward spiral, the descent into a dark world of terror and chaos. Dumbledore, the only wizard capable of destroying him, would not act. With terrified apprehension I saw that all that stood between him and the collapse of my world again was a child. A child who, away from his home, was not
protected by the powerful ancient magic invoked by his mother’s sacrifice, but only by his own skills and abilities. A child, clutching a spell book primer, supported by two other children, challenging the most powerful dark wizard for a thousand years. The gods must have looked down and laughed.

“And Lucius would not be restrained. I argued, I wept, I pleaded, I begged. No, the greatest wizard of all time was returning, and Lucius would be his right hand man. He slipped the horcrux diary into the bag of the Weasleys’ daughter. If I had known, Miss Granger, I would have slipped it out again. Perhaps not for the same pure motives that you would have had, though I would not wish harm to anyone’s child. Molly was a good woman, and if Belle had killed her daughter, in the final days … It was better the way it happened. To be dead and soul-lost is a terrible fate, but I’d rather Belle were that than rotting, deranged, in Azkaban. Unlike her husband. Long may he bide there.

“Let me go on. Aided by his companions, Mr Potter thwarted him again. And again. The gods must have been scratching their heads by this time. But inevitably it happened. Lucius meddled once too often, and this time he was caught. My husband was sent to Azkaban. Deservedly, Miss Granger, I don’t deny it. He tried to kill you. Cold bloodedly.

“All I had left was my son. And Draco was already following in his father’s footsteps. Again I argued, pleaded, begged. But his father had been put into Azkaban and hatred for those who had done it was all he could feel. All I could do was what I had done before: tread behind him lightly and try to protect him. To little avail: he dragged my son in, deeper and deeper. But the depravity which the monster forced my son to witness was gradually awakening his grandfather in him. Slowly Draco became more and more revolted at what he saw and experienced. But terrified as well: he knew what had happened to my cousin Regulus when he tried to turn away. He probably saw it and delighted in it: hence he ordered Draco to kill Dumbledore, not caring either way, I am sure, who killed whom. Terrified, I bound Severus Snape in a Unbreakable Vow to protect him. He did, playing a double game which convinced everyone of his allegiance to him. That man had unbelievable courage. Sometimes it seems to me that Severus showed the greatest courage of all.”

“Harry thinks so. He says that Dumbledore was the strategist, but it was Severus who went out into the dark. Again and again, risking everything.”

“And yet Severus led, or seemed to lead, such a … a desiccated life. Maybe it was that monkish existence which gave him such courage and humanity. What had he to gain from his oath to me, other than yet greater risk? Yet he agreed, and fulfilled it. So much do I owe, Miss Granger, and so little can I ever repay. Well, let me go on.

“That last year, chaos, corruption, treachery everywhere, my husband returned to me. You might think I welcomed it, Miss Granger, but in truth I wished he was back in Azkaban, safe from the monster, and Draco too. But no, we were as exposed as everyone else to his rages, his increasing megalomania and psychotic behaviour. From the start I could see the future for us was bleak if he succeeded in achieving his ambitions, but more and more the image was solidifying into a vision of Hell. But I was too terrified to face it, for more and more I could see that the slightest scent of disloyalty would bring torture then death. And that was how things were when the werewolf and his thugs captured you, and brought you to Malfoy Manor.

“And in the aftermath, after you escaped, after he had come within a hairsbreadth of killing us all, I crept down to the cellar. I went in and sat in a corner, my eyes shut in the darkness, and trembled. The following morning I apparated here, and ran around the loch. And while I ran, I thought. I thought of what I had almost done: stood by while a young, innocent, defenceless girl was given into the hands, the claws of a depraved werewolf. Was this what Narcissa Black was come to? And
of this same defenceless girl who, tortured and terrified, was still fighting, still defying the overwhelming odds the monster now had. Your desperate valour spotlighted my moral degradation and spinelessness, Miss Granger, and gave me the courage to tear the veil of terror enveloping me, and to look beyond it, to see what was happening, what it all meant, and to look at him. And then, for the first time really, I could see the monster for what he was. Before that I could see only how his actions affected me and mine. You, your example enabled me to rise above that.

“I could see the world that the monster was set on creating. A world with one all-powerful master, where all others would be his minions, to be sported with, tortured, killed, at his pleasure. A world of cruelty, of misery and horror, with no safety for anyone, magical or muggle. A world where gangs like the werewolf and his thugs would roam the streets, looting, raping, killing, with no respite, let alone any holding to account. Where there would be no law, no justice, no right and wrong, only his caprice: unpredictable, whimsical, fickle and paranoid. A world, in short, of terror and chaos. That the dark lord felt nothing and cared nothing for anyone but himself; that he,” and she took a deep breath and shut her eyes, “that Voldemort was a monster, that he was evil, evil, evil.

“And then I thought: what can I do? Would my husband and son listen? Lucius was blind and Draco terrified. Lucius had shown himself incapable of seeing beyond tomorrow time and time again. Draco was only a boy, little more than a child. I shut away the thought that Hermione Granger, Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley were also little more than children. I despaired of being able to do anything. Armageddon was coming with the inevitability of nightfall: what could one terrified woman do? Then I thought: what would Hermione Granger do? And I knew the answer. Hold on and hope. Wait, watch, and be ready.

“When he told me to check if Harry Potter was still alive, I knew: the moment had come. No matter what the cost, for once I must do right.

“I would not try to apportion my motives, Miss Granger. I don’t know that I could even define ‘right’. Can hatred be ‘right’? But hatred was a driving force: hatred for him for what he had done to me and mine, and for what he was trying to do to the world, both magical and muggle. But I think the strongest was revulsion for him as an inhuman being, a creature without virtue, without any redeeming feature. He had no heart, no compassion, no love, Miss Granger, and it is the ability to love that defines us, that makes us human. And here was this creature, this empty shell, trying to enslave humanity.

“You may recall, Miss Granger, that Mr Potter called him ‘Riddle’, before he killed him. His purpose was to deflate his aura, to show he was just another person. But Mr Potter was wrong. Tom Riddle had been a human. Depraved, yes, on the evil spiral, yes, but still human. What Mr Potter killed was not human. It was a monster in human form. For that monster the phoenix would never sing. I could not destroy the monster myself, Miss Granger, but if I could aid someone else to destroy it, I would.

“When I looked down at Harry, at this boy who had thwarted him again and again, this boy who was everything the monster was not, I realized that I loved him, loved him as my own son. And that I could no more betray him than I could betray Draco. Love and hatred. Strange how they were linked that day. But the love was new, the hatred was old. It had taken birth, instinctively, when I first heard of the monster.

“And it is strange that hatred should be a cleansing emotion, Miss Granger, but after I’d said, ‘He’s dead,’ I felt … light, as though my soul were floating away. I kept my face down when I went back to my husband, for I was sure I could not keep my elation from my face. And when they all moved forward, I took Lucius’ hand, and held him back. I dared not tell him. But I knew, I knew that I had
given Harry Potter another chance. I couldn’t know the future, of course, but deep inside I believed that would be all he would need. The monster had had to learn his magic, and his lore and power were great, but Harry Potter, because of his deep capacity for love, invoked power without effort. It flowed around him like an aura, there, waiting to be tapped.”

For the first time, she took Hermione’s hand. “My tale has been long, Miss Granger, and wayward and ragged edged, but I hope you understand now why I did what I did.”
The return of the Patriarch

Hermione took her in her arms and hugged her, and for the first time the woman did not withdraw. Tentatively she returned the embrace and said, hesitantly, “I feel … light, Miss Granger. I have not felt like this since that time. Why?”

Hermione hugged her again, then stood back, but still holding her arms. “It is the confessional. By telling me, you have purged yourself. You have lightened the burden on your soul. But most of all, Narcissa,” and she waited until the older woman was looking her full in the face, “most of all the reason you feel light is the same reason you felt light when you saved Harry. And that was because you had had the courage to do right. Nothing to do with hatred, everything to do with courage.”

The older woman shook her head and dropped her gaze, but Hermione gave her arms a little shake and said, “Yes, Narcissa, it is true. That lightness you feel is joy, an emotion which you have probably not experienced since you were five years old.”

“You are very kind, Miss Granger, and understanding.”

Hermione shook her head. “I am grateful to you, Narcissa. Not just for answering my question so fully and clearly, but also for revealing my own narrow mindedness, my own lack of empathy to me.”

“You? Narrow-minded? And lack of empathy? You have shown me nothing but understanding and sympathy all this long morning, Miss Granger.”

Hermione shook her head again. “I thought: Narcissa Malfoy: beautiful, clever, talented, wealthy, never wanting for anything. She has all this and still she supports the dark lord? Now I know it was not a silver spoon given to you at your birth, but a poisoned chalice. I never realized how fortunate I was.”

“Again, you are very kind, very understanding. I made choices, Miss Granger. Perhaps if I had shown that courage you say I displayed with Mr Potter, I would have made better ones. Miss Granger, please feel free to repeat what I have told you to Mr Potter. I could never face him, but even if I could, confessing to you, a woman who has experienced anguish herself, is far less humiliating than confessing to Mr Potter would be.”

“Harry has experienced anguish, Narcissa. He would be understanding.”

She shook her head emphatically. “Tolerant, perhaps yes, understanding, no. Mr Potter is a searing flame, Miss Granger. He burns away any evil that touches him. Of course, so do you. But Mr Potter cauterizes his own pain, then moves on. Women carry their pain within themselves.”

“Men do too.”

Narcissa took her hand and looked into her face. “Miss Granger, does Ronald Weasley feel the pain of the breakdown of your marriage as you do?”

Hermione dropped her gaze, and Narcissa went on. “Yes, of course men carry pain within them. But it is a man’s nature to act, then move on, putting behind him what he cannot change. A woman is more likely to simply endure the pain. Miss Granger, I must leave you. Grandfather said I should not take up more than an hour or so of your time, that you needed rest for recuperation. I have taken up three hours and I apologize.”
“I don’t know when I last spent three more worthwhile hours. Narcissa, will you come and see me again?”

The older woman looked surprised. “Do you wish me to? You have been kind and understanding, but surely my presence, after all I have done to you and yours, must be abhorrent?”

“No, Narcissa, it is not. What you did, you did to survive. Nothing you did was directed at me, personally, only at the ally of Harry, the enemy of one your husband supported. And at the end, you risked everything to help Harry. And I benefited. What would my future have been under him, as a … mudblood?”

Narcissa flinched and looked over her shoulder, half fearfully. “If Grandfather heard that word, even from you …”

“Narcissa, I would enjoy your company. You show compassion, sympathy and understanding. You are intelligent and thoughtful. I would like you to come to tea, the tea we did not have today, but most of all, if you would, I would like to go running with you.”

“Oh. I am flattered, Miss Granger. More than flattered, I am moved. Tea is formality, politeness, but running - running is soul. I will come, if you wish it. Willingly.

“And that reminds me of another matter for which I must thank you, Miss Granger, fortunately of a lighter nature. Your example to my family. As one who takes daily exercise herself and experienced the benefits, I have encouraged them to do so for years, but to little avail. But after their visit here yesterday both Draco and Astoria spent an hour and a half in the Manor health centre, setting up a exercise schedule, then starting on it. Draco has been ‘pumping iron’, I believe they call it, and Astoria has been on the treadmill, even this morning, before I left. Their attendance prior to their visit here was desultory, to say the least. I understand that even Lucius has been out walking around the Manor Estate, no doubt wilting the flowers with his scowls. Having seen you on your return from your run, I now understand why. You were glowing, Miss Granger, a picture of youthful, feminine health.” Then, at Hermione’s blush, she said, “I beg your pardon, I have no wish to disconcert you, but I have been trying to persuade them to exercise more for years, to little avail, so I did want to thank you.”

To divert the subject away from herself, Hermione said, “I have the same problem, Mrs Malfoy. Ron-” She stopped. “Had the same problem. Fortunately Rose and Hugo are quite active. I presume Scorpius is the same?”

“Er … not normally, no. But he ran thirty laps of the Quidditch pitch yesterday.”

Hermione went scarlet. “But … but I’m old enough to be his mother.”

“Yes. But you are not his mother, and you look … mid twenties, if that. I beg your pardon, Miss Granger, but the truth is that, apart from the other effects you certainly had on my family, you are a very attractive young woman, and if you have forgotten from your own school days the preoccupation of a sixteen year old boy – though obsession describes it better – your own son will soon be reminding you. Hormones, Miss Granger. But it may well be that seeing you reminded him of your daughter. You do look rather like her elder sister.”

“I hope so,” murmured Hermione, then thought of Rose. “Or maybe not.” Then, in a louder voice. “He mentioned her at tea.”

“He mentions her to me at tea and breakfast and dinner. Rose Weasley was ‘tops’ in Transfiguration, Arithmancy and Defence against the Dark Arts. Rose Weasley was furious
because he had beaten her in History of Magic and Potions. Rose Weasley can cast a corporeal patronus, a lynx. Rose Weasley oppugnoed a flock of canaries on Zabini for jeering at her red hair. Rose Weasley plays Seeker in the Gryffindor team.”

Hermione laughed. “She certainly didn’t inherit that last one from me.”

“Perhaps not. Certainly she is a credit to you, Miss Granger.”

“As is Scorpius to his family, Narcissa. He came across as a thoroughly nice boy, hormones notwithstanding.”

Narcissa smiled and Hermione, encouraged, went on. “And one final request, Narcissa. Could you find it in your heart to call me Hermione?”

“Miss Granger, I can find it in my heart, but not in my conscience. Perhaps on a future occasion. Perhaps if we run together, it will move from one to the other.”

“I hope so. And ‘when’, not ‘if’. I would like to have you for a friend, Narcissa.”

The older woman shook her head, saying, “It never crossed my mind that you would feel this way. I owe you so much, Miss Granger.”

Hermione shook her head. “You don’t. No, really. I’m not being modest. If you think about it, you took one act of mine, interpreted it in a way flattering to me, and used that to awaken latent courage and a belief in right in yourself. You had already shown that you have fortitude beyond common measure. No, don’t shake your head. You stayed in there, fighting for what you believed in, for twenty years. How many people could have done that? All my ‘example’ did was to waken what was already there.”

“Again, you are very kind, as well as generous and forgiving. I made choices, and most of them poor. It is ironic, Miss Granger, that all the bad decisions I made resulted in anguish, in mental pain, and far worse than the transient physical pain that followed the one good decision I made. If I had learnt that when I was child, how different might my life have been.”

“Saving Harry resulted in physical pain?”

“Well, yes,” and she lifted a corner of her blouse to reveal two thin white stripes across her collar bone.

“Those are Sectumsempra scars! But how? The dark lord had no opportunity. And all of the death eaters were too busy fighting for their lives. Or did one realize and …”

Narcissa hesitated, then nodded. “Yes. A death eater realized. My husband.”

“What! Your own husband tortured you?”

The older woman sighed and said, “Yes. At Hogwarts I managed to keep Lucius away from the battle, and afterwards we fled to the Manor. Lucius wanted to go on, into hiding, but I knew we would be caught sooner or later. And life on the run – I was already a wreck, I couldn’t face it. I persuaded Lucius to stay, reminding him that he had got off once before, pointing out that neither he nor Draco had killed anyone. Sometimes I think I should have let him go, alone. But all my life, almost everything I have done has been to hold my family together. So he stayed and we went to bed, expecting the aurors in the morning.

“All that night he paced the bedroom, talking to himself, asking what went wrong, how it could be
that the dark lord, at the pinnacle of his power, had been defeated. I pulled the covers over my head, and tried to sleep. In vain: I knew, eventually, he would realize. And at three in the morning he shook me and asked if the Potter boy had been dead when I looked at him.”

She sighed. “Perhaps I should have lied, as I had always done in the past. But I was sick to death of lying. So I said: No, Harry Potter had been alive. He repeated the question, because he couldn’t believe my answer. Then he took out his wand and crucioed me.

“My screams woke Draco. He rushed in and threw himself across me to try to protect me. So Lucius crucioed him as well. His own son. I thought he was going to kill us, Miss Granger. I was shrieking, and Draco was yelling and Lucius was screaming crucios, then sempras at us both. Then the door burst open.

“My terror doubled, for that should have been impossible. Every Malfoy property, Miss Granger, is warded. If the wards are up, only a Malfoy, by blood or marriage, can enter. But the man standing there was a stranger. Tall, emaciated, pale as death, dressed in a tattered robe: him, I was sure, having cheated death yet again, and come to avenge himself on me for my betrayal. Such was his mystique that I could believe anything possible for him. And when he took Lucius’s wand from his hand, I thought: This is it: he will use the wand for the death curse on me.

“But he didn’t. Instead he snapped the wand in two and flung it into a corner. Then he spoke: I will never forget his words, for they were the lifting of both a death sentence and a life sentence from me. His voice was little more than a hoarse whisper. ‘I come from twenty-eight years in Nurmengard to find my son crucioing a woman and a boy. I come from Hell to my home and find another Hell. Tell me why I should not kill you, Lucius.’ It was Grandfather. The curse that held him prisoner had died with its caster. Free, he had come home to find a crazed son torturing his wife and child.

“You might think, Miss Granger, that it was not a good start. In truth, for my son and me, it was dawn after an endless night. It was the start of a life in Paradise. A life in which the head of the family was not a weak, petulant, despotic child, but a man, a strong, wise, patient and gentle man. He took charge, immediately. When you think about it, it shows the strength of his mind and spirit: to have been imprisoned for—” Her eyes widened and she raised both hands to her mouth. “I shouldn’t have told you. Oh, I shouldn’t have told you.”

“I’m really sorry, Narcissa: by the time I realized what you were telling me, you had already told me. Will Abraxas be angry?”

She shook her head. “He is never angry. Not with me. But he will be disappointed, perhaps even hurt, and that is much worse. He has done so much for me and Draco that I can’t bear the thought of hurting him. I must wait for him, so I can tell him what I’ve done. I must confess.” She wrung her hands.

“I’m so sorry, Narcissa. I’m sure he …” She paused, having no idea how to finish in a reassuring way that would not seem trite and insincere or even insulting, as it might suggest that she knew Abraxas better than Narcissa did. But a movement near the lodge caught her eye: Abraxas was limping across the lawn towards them. Her heart gave a little jump. “There he is, Narcissa. I will leave you. But please, come and see me, and bring your running gear.” She hugged and kissed the older woman, then turned, dropped a curtsey to Abraxas and walked away to the cottage.

He bowed in return, then stopped and waited while Narcissa hurried up to him. And next to her was Miss Sash. Good.
She went to her living room and waited. He would come to her, she was sure, as soon as he had spoken with Narcissa.

So he had been in Nurmengard. That was where Dumbledore had imprisoned Grindelwald. Why had Abraxas been imprisoned there? He’d said, he’d told Harry he’d been in the battle that had brought the dark wizard down. Had he been lying? No, never, Abraxas would never lie. But then why would he have been imprisoned? And for twenty eight years? That meant a really serious crime. Only dark wizards, dark mages, got sentences like that. Her heart sank. He’d claimed to have fought Voldemort too. Was that a … a … a lie, too?

She sat down and put her head in her hands. Could this be true? Could she be so wrong about him? What she felt when they Touched, was it blinding her? Surely, surely not. A mere hour ago she’d believed he was one the most moral men she knew. Ginny believed in him, and so did Harry – and who could fool Harry? Could there be another explanation? Think, girl, think. Are there any loose ends?

Yes, dark mages, for one. There had only been two in the past century: Grindelwald and Voldemort. So if Abraxas had been imprisoned for dark wizadry, it must be in association with one of those two. And that threw up another loose end: the dates. If he had been in Nurmengard for twenty eight years, that would have put the date of his imprisonment at 1970. Grindelwald had already been in prison for twenty five years. Voldemort was rising, but only those with foresight - which by definition excluded the Ministry - saw the threat. So Abraxas could not have associated with Grindelwald and association with Voldemort would not have been seen as a reason for imprisonment. And, another loose end, why Nurmengard rather than Azkaban? Grindelwald had been send there because he was too powerful to be kept in other than isolation. No way would the ministry put another dark wizard with him.

She sighed. It made no sense – which usually meant there was an error in a foundation assumption. So, go back and start again. What had Narcissa said? That he’d spend twenty eight years in Nurmengard and was released when the curse died with its caster. Well, some Ministry officials had died in the Battle of Hogwarts - though most had been hiding behind their bowler hats - and she could have meant them, though an imprisonment spell would not normally have been called a curse.

So … it hit her like a slap in the face. Voldemort. Voldemort had been the caster, Voldemort had died. *I fought Voldemort, Miss Granger.* He’d told her. She’d assumed he meant he’d resisted Voldemort’s rise, along with many others, but he’d meant it literally: he’d fought Voldemort wand to wand. Fought him and lost. Voldemort had imprisoned him in Nurmengard and there he had stayed until Voldemort’s death.

That was it, that had to be it, the truth. Oh, she was glad! And how disloyal had she been to have even considered anything else!
In prison for twenty eight years: how had he survived? She couldn’t imagine Voldemort providing food and water on an ongoing basis. But Grindelwald had survived. How? Dumbledore had imprisoned him: she couldn’t imagine Dumbledore locking someone in a cell to starve to death. Voldemort, yes, without a second thought, but Dumbledore? Never. But Abraxas had survived. No wonder he ate only once a day, and then not much.

And why had it been kept quiet? A Malfoy had fought against Voldemort; he’d been imprisoned for almost thirty years – so had endured great suffering in the cause of right: surely that would have gone more than a little way towards rehabilitating the Malfoy name. But it had all been kept quiet. Why? There’d be a good reason, she was sure.

The minutes passed and no one came. She even got up and went to the window to see where he was, feeling both silly and guilty. She was not a little girl, unable to contain her impatience at a promised treat. And what was the treat? A walk along the lochside with a man for whom she should be feeling gratitude, nothing more. But she felt more, much more. She enjoyed being with him, enjoyed the feelings flowing from the Touch, thought about him incessantly when she was not with him. She had not wanted this, had argued against it, was trying to fight it. She was losing the battle.

A light tap on the door and a soft call, “Miss Granger?” had her springing to her feet.

Abraxas was standing at the steps. His face lit up when he saw her and he bowed his head in greeting. “Miss Granger. Shall we have tea? I believe you have had nothing all day.”

“Oh, er, Winky left a sandwich for me.” She paused, appalled at herself. Lying, and to Abraxas? But they couldn’t link arms at tea. “Shall we walk first and have tea afterwards?”

He looked at her intently and she blushed: could he see her lie?

“I think it might be better if we had tea, Miss Granger,” he said, gently.

“Oh. All right, then.” In fact it would be better, because she really wanted to talk to him about Narcissa, and she always seemed to lose her clear-headedness when they walked arm in arm. And, anyway, what was she about? She was supposed to be suppressing those feelings, not encouraging them.

“You made a considerable impression on Narcissa, Miss Granger. She speaks of you in the way a devout Catholic would speak of Mother Theresa.”

“Mr Malfoy, please. She greatly exaggerates the effect of a single action of mine in awaking her latent courage and sense of right. But,” she hurried on before he could respond, “I feel so sorry for her. She is carrying such a burden of guilt.”

“You think she should not be carrying that burden?”

“I’m not saying she should feel no guilt. But even setting aside her great act of expiation, and the penance she has already done, what she is carrying is out of proportion to what she did. She seems to be carrying everyone else’s guilt as well. She was, after all, a minor player. Her sins, for want of a better word, were passive, of not preventing evil, rather than actively causing it or even encouraging it. She carries the guilt of her sister torturing me, as though she were the one doing it; of throwing me to Greyback, as though she were the one who proposed it; of alerting Voldemort as though she were the one who did it. And certainly she could not prevented Bellatrix from torturing
me or Voldemort from being told that we were there. And so many other things: it’s almost as if she blames herself for Voldemort’s rise. And her upbringing: that was a revelation to me. She and her sisters were pawns, to be disposed of wherever gave most advantage. I had no idea you ‘Great Families’ were like that, treating your daughters, in particular, as expendable, as bargaining chips.”

He flinched. “Some do, Miss Granger. But this happens in the muggle world also, as you well know.”

She glared at him. “Such an attitude from you astonishes me, Mr Malfoy. You think that evil in one world justifies evil in another?”

“Not at all. I conveyed the fact without the relevance, and I apologize. The point I was trying to make is that bigotry, backwardness and exploitation exist everywhere.”

“They certainly do. Poor Narcissa. One expression she used shocked me: Forty year old eyes looking out of a six year old face. A thousand times better to be a mudblood than suffer that.” And she glared at him again.

“Point taken, Miss Granger. I did not bring her up: I saw it, it was all around, and I tried to provide a haven for those I knew.”

She touched his arm. An orange glow flared briefly. A touch was all she dared do, but she did want to let him know that she sympathised and didn’t hold him responsible. “I know. She told me. You were her surrogate father, the rock to which she anchored her belief in good in the world. Until you disappeared.”

“I didn’t realise I was that important to her.”

“Parents often don’t. They don’t realize that everything, absolutely everything they do or say, makes an impression, for good or bad, on their child. She had no proper parents. Only you. And you abandoned her when she was fourteen.”

“Miss Granger!”

“I know you didn’t. But to a fourteen year old, that would be how it appeared. She had only you, and you left and never came back. She was left to face the world alone, no help, no support, no one she could turn to. Is it surprising, given her upbringing, that she made some of the choices she did? Perhaps the only surprising choice she made was to save Harry, and so the wizarding world.”

He was silent, then said. “You think I should have stayed?”

She touched his arm again and said softly, “I think that sometimes men don’t realise that being a good father is the most important thing they can do, that sometimes the best way to save the world is to stay home and care for your children.”

He was silent for a few minutes, then said, “We acted for what we thought was the best. We saw a new Grindelwald arising, and thought we could stop him before he became too powerful. Dumbledore was doing nothing. He just sat in his ivory tower and stared at the stars, waiting for nobody knew what. We didn’t even tell him, just set out, four of us, all mature and skilled wizards, to find Voldemort and kill him. It sounds ruthless but we felt desperate times demanded desperate action.”

“‘Who will rid me of this turbulent priest.’”

“Indeed, Miss Granger, but in this case the archbishop was an arch-devil, and fought back, using
his usual methods of treachery. At my insistence, Yaxley, the son of an old friend, was one of the
four. It was a fundamental error for which my companions paid with their lives. Yaxley had been
suborned in England and led us into a trap in the Black Forest. Perhaps Voldemort too had a sense
of history, for he set enchanted swords on us. Once he had finished torturing us, he threw us into
Nurmengard. You already know this, Miss Granger.”

She shook her head. “Just that you spent twenty-eight years there.”

"Do you wish to know more?"

"I would like to, Mr Malfoy, but only if you wish to tell me."

"I do not so wish, Miss Granger, but you will speculate if I don't, and I wish that even less. I will
tell you."

"Thank you, but ..." He’d not been offended when she’d reproached him about Narcissa. He’d been
willing to listen, almost receptive. Could she push him further? She’d not get another such opening
and ... Narcissa was near breaking point. “Narcissa was distraught when she realized she had let
that slip.”

“I know. She takes such things to heart too much.”

“Especially where you are concerned. I would dearly like to hear about Nurmengard, but …” She
must dare this, for Narcissa’s sake.
“Mr Malfoy, may I … may I speak plainly? About Narcissa? And … you?” She looked up into his face. What would he make of such a request, from a person who had known him only two days and Narcissa, the real Narcissa, three hours? And a request that could be interpreted in so many different ways? But she owed it to Narcissa.

She need not have worried. He inclined his head and said, “Miss Granger, I would value the opinion of an intelligent and perceptive young woman.”

“Thank you. And if at any stage you think I am being impertinent, please stop me. Mr Malfoy, everyone I have met here has a high regard for you, but with Narcissa, it goes well beyond that. She speaks of you in such glowing terms, and her trust in your goodness and strength are absolute. She loves you, Mr Malfoy, as a loving daughter loves a loving father. Her belief is almost … I don’t want to say childlike, because that suggests a child’s understanding and maturity, and Narcissa is far from that. But her belief in you has a childlike innocence, that you are incapable of doing wrong or acting unjustly. Surrounded by men of … a very different calibre for most of her life, she has placed you on a pedestal far above them. She has been betrayed so many times. Never let her down, Mr Malfoy. It would break her heart.” She glanced at him: would he take offence?

But his eyes were glistening and he said, “I thank you, Miss Granger. I knew, I could not help knowing, that she had a high regard for me. But I did not realise the extent of that regard. I would never intentionally let her down, and now I shall be vigilant that it does not happen inadvertently. Please continue.”

“Winky told me you value beauty.” The colour rose in her face: he would realise the context of such a discussion with her maid. But she went on. “Narcissa is beautiful, you already know that. But not just physically beautiful, also in her mind and values. Her mind is clear and incisive, so much so that it acts to her disadvantage: she sees too starkly, analyses too critically, then blames herself disproportionately. She believes herself to be morally bereft, but she is not. She is simply a person whose natural sense of right and wrong was twisted and warped throughout child- and girlhood by her upbringing. She refused to let me comfort her, at first, because she believed that she was not worthy. Such feelings, however misguided, show she does have strong sense of right and wrong. But as a child, following those values in her home would have brought rebuke, then punishment, from parents who lacked such values themselves. No child, seeking love and approval as all children do, could withstand that. So she distorted the values to mean good and bad for those she cared about, her sisters, then, after she married, for her family. Everything she did was for the good of those she cared for. She is not morally bereft; she was fighting forces hugely beyond her strength.

“And she is tough and resilient: she had to be to survive all life has thrown at her. For years she fought, fought and lost, and rose and fought again. For her sister, her husband, her son. In retreat, she kept fighting. And it was a dispiriting retreat, a demoralising retreat, with no help or support. Wizarding society stood by while her sister was destroyed by a violent, malignant pervert.
Wizarding society wrung its hands as Voldemort corrupted family after family, but did nothing to help those who were being dragged in unwillingly. She fought alone.

“But the fighting retreat took its toll. Desperation, despair, grimly hanging on, drained her. Demoralized, beaten, betrayed, alone, exhausted, she still found the courage to save Harry. But she refuses to give herself credit even for that: she believes her motives were negative, hatred for an inhuman monster rather than love for the world he was destroying. And then you returned, just as …” She paused.

“Just as my son was crucioing her. She believed I was Voldemort, you know. She believed I was going to kill her. Yet she still pushed Draco out of the way so he wouldn't be harmed.”

“Protecting him was all that kept her going, I think. I don’t know how close she was to breaking at that time, but when she described the events to me, ‘death,’ ‘terror,’ and similar words occurred frequently, perhaps showing her state of mind.”

He nodded. “That night was the only time she has ever displayed overt emotion. She clung to me, weeping, calling me by my name, over and over. I recognised her as soon as she swept the hair from her face to look at me, to see who I was. The beauty of the child and girl had come to fruition in the woman, but I could see the lines of pain also. I tried to comfort her, I suppose. I remember little of what I said that night.”

“She remembers. She remembers word for word what you said when you came. She describes your return, Mr Malfoy, as the lifting of both a life sentence and a death sentence from her, as dawn after an endless night.”

He was silent moment for a few moments, then said, "I don't know what to say to that."

She touched his hand. "You don't need to say anything, Mr Malfoy. You just need to remember how important you are to her."

“She told me little of what had happened, until I asked her, then just gave me the bare facts, nothing of what she had done or experienced or felt. But what you have told me supports my impressions, and perhaps I should have probed more. We spent time together, for she was of invaluable help in putting the - very neglected - estate in order. In that she was as you describe: clear minded and incisive.”

"Good. And does she still help? Do you still spend time together?"

"She helped me with a complex matter just a few days ago. But overall, less so over the past decade or so. Draco runs the family businesses now. I am reluctant to impose on Narcissa's time."

"Has she shown that she considers it an imposition?"

"On the contrary, she has always been ready and eager to help."

"Then I think you may take it that ready and eager is how she feels. Involve her, Mr Malfoy, it is what she wants and what she needs. How has she been, in herself, since your return?"

“She has been reserved, quiet, self-contained. This was in contrast to the girl I remembered, who would talk to me openly and freely, but I put it down to maturity, the difference between a adolescent girl and a mature married woman. As a child, she was a delight, full of the joy and wonder of life. She would take my hand to show me flowers, beetles, a circle of mushrooms. She once brought me a tiny frog she had found on the loch shore. And afterwards returned it to the place where she had found it, with almost reverent care. But gradually she quietened, though she
would walk by my side and talk to me, for hours on end, whenever she visited here. Is that normal for a girl of thirteen or fourteen?” He looked at her.

“Every girl is different, Mr Malfoy, but I think part of her growing quietness resulted from her realization of what was expected of her, of what her life was to be. I think her walking and talking with you was unusual, and an expression of her love and dependency. You were her safe harbour, the anchorage she could rely on, that was always there, always good, always kind and understanding, always supportive.”

“I see. I wish I had known. The extent of her dependency, I mean. Perhaps I could have made some provision for her before I went off. But I would still have gone: at the time it seemed the right, the only thing to do.”

“Yes. What really concerns me is what has happened since your return.”
Abraxas raised his eyebrows. “Nothing has happened to Narcissa since my return, Miss Granger. She has safe been under my protection. The threats have been removed. She has separated from Lucius, at my suggestion and with my blessing.”

She touched his hand. “She can live again, Mr Malfoy. That is not nothing. But that is what has happened outwardly. Inwardly is what worries me. She has reviewed her life and found it wanting. A moral person forced by circumstances to do immoral things, she carries guilt, and in the nature of such people, blames herself and carries far more guilt than is warranted.

And…” She paused. She did not want to make him feel guilty, but she had to make him understand that physical protection could be both not enough and too much.

“Yes, Miss Granger?”

“Time can heal physical wounds, Mr Malfoy, but psychological wounds? You will know yourself: a loss wound like bereavement never fully heals. At best time draws a thin layer of scar tissue across it. But a guilt wound, where one feels one has betrayed oneself or loved others, worsens with time.”

“I can see that she would be feeling guilt, but do not see why it should worsen.”

“Guilt is all about perception, and in a sensitive person the perception of magnitude, of bad our action or lack of action was, grows whether we like it or not. I do not mean the wounds grow bigger, but that they cut deeper. Do you not, Mr Malfoy, have incidents which happened, perhaps decades ago, little incidents, but which you remember keenly and with regret?”

"Indeed I do, and some not so little."

She touched his arm again. She wanted to do more, but resisted. “We all carry guilt wounds, but fortunately, for most of us, they are not overwhelming. But for Narcissa, due to her circumstances, they are. They have grown in her mind. She carries too much guilt and she has carried that for far, far too long. She is in pain, Mr Malfoy. At the very least she needs to talk those out. Talking this morning with me helped, but she needs more.”

“I see now that I have failed her. She needed help and I did not give it. Of course, I will talk to her, but I am only a man. May she talk again to you? I know you have invited her, for which I am very grateful.”

“You did not fail her, Mr Malfoy. You saved her. You are still her rock and her safe harbour. Please, never forget that. And you did what you could, what you saw, what she did not or could not hide. Of course, she may talk to me as often as she comes and as often as she likes. And after … after I leave here. I would value her friendship, Mr Malfoy. But you must encourage her to talk to you. She may be reluctant at first, because she fears your disapproval for what she has done. I
believe that is why she has not spoken to you in the past. Your understanding and approval will mean more to her than anyone’s.”

“I will, Miss Granger. Please, go on.”

She took a deep breath. “I spoke of Narcissa’s burden becoming greater. But that is not all. Her ability to carry that burden has become less. When she was striving against the darkness, she was active, doing what she could. And though she was not succeeding, she knew that matters would be worse if she did not resist. That and the fact she was active, supported her self-esteem. But that is now gone.”

“But is that not because there is nothing for her to strive against?”

“It is, but the fact remains that now she is passive, with nothing to strive against and too much time to dwell on the past. And that is corroding her self-esteem.”

“Well, I don't see how we can generate something to her to fight, if that is what you think we need.”

“Not to fight. She has had enough of fighting. Fighting is breaking down. Narcissa needs building up. We need something else to build her self-esteem. A vital element in that rebuilding is counterbalancing her sense of guilt, but let’s look at that later. Mr Malfoy, you have been very … tolerant. I can tell you what I think, but you may think I am being nosy and impertinent now.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Why should I think that? Everything you have said has made perfect sense. My only feelings are amazement that you have observed in three hours what I have failed to observe in years, anger with myself for that failure, and gratitude that you are prepared to share your insights with me. Narcissa has always been important to me, and what you have told me makes her more so. I have felt at times that she was not happy, but, not knowing the cause, feared to intrude.”

She shook her head. "Narcissa opened her heart to me because our relationship, though unusual, is relatively straightforward, and because I am a woman. With you the relationship is far more complex. The implications and, even more, the possible consequences would make her very reluctant to tell you what she told me.”

“Miss Granger, even if she had told me, I would not have been able to identify the underlying problems. So please, go on.”

“All right. But do stop me if you feel I am being too prying and meddlesome. Is Narcissa financially independent?”

He looked surprised. “Why, no. I pay all her bills.”

“Her flats in Kensington and Paris?”

“Are in my name. She lives there rent free, of course. I take care of everything. She lacks for nothing, Miss Granger.”

She touched his hand again. “Mr Malfoy, forgive me. She lacks for nothing but that vital element everyone needs: self-esteem. She needs to be independent, Mr Malfoy. She needs to control her own destiny.”

“But then she has to handle all that paperwork herself.”
“She can ask you to help her.”

“Then what is the point? I am already doing it, Miss Granger.”

“The point, Mr Malfoy, is that currently you are not responding to a request for assistance. You are taking it out of her hands. It is all about control. If she asks, she is in control. If you do it for her without asking her, you are in control. This morning she described herself as a puppet dancing on strings pulled by others. Mr Malfoy, she is still.”

“Miss Granger!”

“I know it is not the same, Mr Malfoy. Those strings were tight and malign, yours are loose and benign. But they are still strings. For her self-esteem, there must be no strings. She needs you to be there, all your family need you to be there, both as the family foundation stone as well as for when they need help and support. But she needs to be her own woman. She needs her own home and her own income. Inalienably, indisputably, legally hers.”

“She has never indicated any wish for independence to me, Miss Granger. Quite the opposite. She separated from Lucius only after I urged her. She refused to divorce him.”

She glanced at him and he said, “Ah. That look, Miss Granger. Having seen it several times now, I can interpret it. It means that Hermione Granger is amazed that Abraxas Malfoy cannot see what is blindingly obvious to her.”

She coloured and laughed. “Actually it means that Hermione Granger is wondering if she dare be even more impertinent than she has already been, and how far Abraxas Malfoy’s tolerance can be stretched.”

“All that has been stretched so far is his mind, and for that he is very grateful. So please, Miss Granger, enlighten your acolyte.”

“All right, though I think it will be your tolerance this time. Narcissa’s world before you came home, Mr Malfoy, was spiralling into darkness. Violence, danger, threat of torture and death faced her and those she was trying to protect every day, and grew worse day by day. When, by her courage, she saved Harry, she enabled the world to be rescued. The world, but not herself. For her the dark spiral intensified, became a plunge with only one possible ending. Then, at the penultimate moment, when she believed she was about to be killed, dawn came. The darkness retreated. You brought it, this dawn. You drove the darkness back. But, and this is crucial, without you it would return.”

“Surely, Miss Granger-”

She raised her hand, surprising herself, and he stopped, eyebrows raised. At her effrontery or in query as to the point she was about to make? “Of course, it would not, or not in the same form. Draco is a man now, and able to protect his mother. Laws are more liberal. But Narcissa, I am sure, believes that without you, darkness would return. She sees you as many in our world see Harry, as a bastion of light, a man of such strength and integrity that darkness dare not even show its face. And not only that. She has always regarded you as a surrogate father, one she loved and respected far more than her own father. The one thing that terrifies her, far more than anything else, is losing you. Not just in the sense of you … dying, but also of being alienated from you.”

“I don’t see how that could ever happen. Particularly after what you have told me today.”

She touched his arm again. Again the glow flared, each time a yellow or an orange. “I don’t either,
considering your integrity and moral values, Mr Malfoy. But look at it from her point of view. She loves you as a father, and you regard her as a daughter, but there is no blood tie between you. She bore and raised your grandson, but he is a man now, so her care is no longer needed. Those are the two most powerful bonds which tie a woman to a family, and she has neither. Why would she risk damaging what ties she has left? She has separated from Lucius, but at your urging, so that tie is not greatly weakened. But if she divorced him? That breaks the tie legally, and cannot but weaken it emotionally. Also, public marital discord is frowned upon in our world, so she has already brought condemnation on you by separating from your son. Dare she risk alienating you by disgracing you more?

“And asking for independence: she would never do that, because it goes against tradition and she fears bringing more shame on you; because she is grateful to you for what you have done and hesitates to ask for more; but greatest of all, because she is terrified that you might think that, in rejecting your control, she is rejecting you.

“Even if it came from you she would resist it, fearing that in the future, ties weakened, your feelings towards her might change. But if you persisted, slowly and gently, reassuring her, she would accept it and be far happier for it. But, please believe me, she needs that independence for her self-esteem.”

“Well, this needs some thought.”

“I can understand that, Mr Malfoy. You see it challenging a moral code which you have followed all your life, that women are to be cared for, protected, sheltered. I don’t think it does. Few women object to being cherished, to having a shelter where they feel safe, protected by men they know, trust and love. It goes wrong when that shelter becomes a cage, a prison, when men take it on themselves, in the guise of protection, to deny to women what they would never deny to themselves: the right to run their own lives. Women know the world is more dangerous for women than men, due, I have to say, to men. But women are as capable as men in assessing what is safe and what is not. More so, because we are the victims. Again, it is about control. We want the protection to be there, available. But we must decide when to use it, not you. We must run our lives, not you. I am digressing into the broader issues of women’s rights, and that is not my intention. What I am saying is that Narcissa, child, girl and woman, has never been allowed to run her own life.”

“So you think I should make the apartments over to her, and give her a monthly allowance to use as she sees fit?”

“Mr Malfoy, I have already hugely overstepped the bounds of appropriate behaviour for a guest. It would be even more impertinent of me to give specific advice.”

“Not if I ask you, Miss Granger.”

“Then, yes. Though perhaps just Kensington or Paris, not both. That would be too much of a burden. A gift of that magnitude to your daughter-in-law is entirely appropriate from a man of your wealth and standing. But rather than giving her an allowance, help her get a job. Supporting herself will raise her self-esteem immensely.”
His eyebrows went up. “A job, Miss Granger? Malfoy wives have never worked for a living.”

“I beg your pardon, Mr Malfoy, but Malfoy as well as all other wives have always ‘worked for a living.’ Who do you think ran your homes, raised the children, cared for you? What you mean is that they were never paid, they never received the recognition or the reward that men do, for their work.”

He started to speak, and she, surprising herself and him, again, raised her hand to stop him. “I know you didn’t mean that, Mr Malfoy, but I interpreted it in that way just to remind you, as many men forget.” Like Ron. No, forget Ron.

“At your level in our rather patriarchal society, Mr Malfoy, I can see that it might reflect poorly on the husband, or the provider in this case, if a woman dependent on him were to work for a living. It is just ‘not done.’ However, I cannot believe that that would matter to you. I think your response was part of your protectiveness attitude. Which we have already discussed.” And disposed of.

“I did not consider my statement before I made it. Yes, it is ‘not done’ and yes, it would not cause me a moment’s disquiet were I to ‘do’ it. And so, yes, I suppose it is part of my protectiveness attitude. Which I must, as you say, apply after consideration and not instinctively. Consideration as to what is in Narcissa best interests. So, point taken. Narcissa is already a trustee in our small charity. I could convert that into a salaried position.”

“Then she couldn’t be a trustee, a position that is already helping her self-esteem and, vitally, helping the society she considers she wronged, so reducing her guilt. And it would raise questions about nepotism, vested interests and accountability. Charities must be above suspicion. No, in fact I have thought of the perfect solution. Fashion: Narcissa is always perfectly dressed, and clearly has a natural talent in that field. I know from what Winky told me, that she already designs much of her own clothing. You could fund her start-up. She handles the creative side, Draco could be a partner and handle the business side.”

"Wouldn't the Malfoy name be a hindrance?"

"’Narcissa Malfoy’ is a byword in elegance. Even in my secluded backwater, I knew that. The only reason she does not feature in the society pages of the Prophet is that she chooses to be reclusive. Which in fact adds even more to her mystique. Couple her reputation for elegance and good taste with ethical sourcing and workshop conditions, and witches will flock to her fashion shows.” She shook her head. "I really cannot see how she can to fail to succeed. Narcissa Creations. Yes, some will draw back, but most will be intrigued, and when they see her designs, happy to let bygones be bygones. This will have a triple pronged effect on her self-esteem: supporting herself, being very effective at what she is doing, and gaining acceptance as well as respect from society. Also, vitally, she will be repaying some of that debt she believes she owes to society.”

“Really? The link between fashion and the well-being of society seems rather tenuous to me.”
“Fashion can be a frivolity, Mr Malfoy. But Narcissa will be creating more than clothes. Just by being herself, she will be marketing a life-style in which one’s moral values are shown in what one does and makes, and how one lives. Her designs will illustrate that elegance and taste can be shown by simplicity, that ‘just enough’ is stylish, that gaudiness is gauche. She will be a role model for women, not just because she has shown endurance and courage, but because she shows that one can make mistakes, serious mistakes, yet still come back, wiser, better, stronger.”

“I see your point. You are right, Miss Granger. Both light and dark influence their surroundings according to their intensities. Anything else?”

“Yes. More on reparations: to my mind, saving Harry more than repays what she owes, but her perception of her guilt, her debt, is hill-high. So she would feel better repaying more. What about a parent governor at Hogwarts? I am one.”

"Draco applied and was rejected by the parents, overwhelmingly."

"Harry would be proposer and I, seconder."

"Would he?"

"After I have talked to him, and he has met Narcissa, yes."

"It will raise a few eyebrows."

She smiled. "Raised eyebrows have never bothered Harry. You and he are similar in that respect, Mr Malfoy, as in others. Also, I think we need something independent of the family. Again something in which she will be helping people, one in which her intelligence and clear mindedness, her depth of character and sense of right and wrong would be used. The ideal, and very appropriate for one of her sensitivity, life experience and skills of articulacy and persuasion, would be as a marriage guidance counsellor or, if she wants to be one step removed, a mediator."

“I can think of another who fits that description even more perfectly, Miss Granger.” She coloured and shook her head, and he went on. “But, yes, I agree. Anything else?”

“Yes, but I am going to be even more … intrusive.”

“I and my family have benefited from your ‘intrusions’ so far, Miss Granger.”

“I hope you still think so after this one, Mr Malfoy. Your son, and Narcissa.”

“You believe they should divorce.”

“You must believe that too, Mr Malfoy. Without conviction, you should not urge it on her. But what happens if … if something happens to you?”

“Draco will take care of her. That is the way it has always been in the Great Families.”

She shook her head. “It is not enough, not sure enough. Though separated, they are still married. In our world, that still gives him significant control over her. You know what happened to her sister.”

“Hmmm, yes. I see your point. You think Lucius will make trouble for her, Miss Granger?”

“I’m sorry, Mr Malfoy, because he is your son, but … you know he will. He has never forgiven her for saving Harry. She needs to be financially independent for that reason, as well. While you are here, Mr Malfoy, she is safe. But afterwards? He septum-sempraed her, Mr Malfoy. She still bears
the scars. He has not changed, not fundamentally, you know that. If she goes to live with Draco, for
protection, that causes strains in Draco’s marriage.”

“Acting as devil’s advocate, Miss Granger, let me say that Narcissa and Astoria get on well.”

“Do you know what the Chinese pictogram for strife is, Mr Malfoy?”

His lip twitched. “I shall know within the next ten seconds, Miss Granger.”

She laughed. “Two women under one roof. Well, in fact, it is not. It’s a myth, but one that has
spread because it strikes a resonating chord. For everyone’s sake, Narcissa needs to be detached
from Lucius.”

"Yes, I see that now. It would also free her to remarry should she so chose, though I see no sign of
that.”

Probably he did not, but she did. There seemed to be a tiny flame for Arthur Weasley, and she
would fan it. But that was for the future, and certainly not for mention now.

“Miss Granger, I hear what you say. I understand your logic. It makes sense. But again acting as
devil’s advocate, this has been the situation for almost eighteen years. It surprises me that this is
coming to a head only now.”

*Coming to a head.* Was that all he thought it was? She’d tried to be gentle with him, dealing lightly
with the trauma so save his feelings, then moving quickly onto alleviation. She didn’t want to alarm
him, but for Narcissa’s sake he must be made to understand. And, as he was a man, she’d have to
spell it out.

“I think she has approached breaking point before, Mr Malfoy, but something has … turned her
back from the precipice.”

He stared at her. “Breaking point? The precipice? You mean … ?”

She nodded. “I believe so. Mr Malfoy, I don’t know Narcissa well enough to state that as a fact, or
even to say that she is at breaking point now. What I do know is that if my state of mind were such
that I poured out my heart to another woman as she did to me, I would be close. She is strong: if she
weren’t she would have broken long ago. But most of that strength is being used to cope with the
guilt and anguish, the desperation she is enduring. As you say, that situation is not new, so I
believe she has approached the precipice before, perhaps more than once, but each time something
has caused her to draw back. Someone in the family needing her, something like that. We want to
draw her back and keep her back, or rather, as the actions must be hers, we want to create the
conditions in which she will turn and walk away from the cliff edge.”

“Yes. Yes, we must. I did not realise … I should have paid more attention … another woman might
have …”

She pressed his hand. “She would not have revealed it to you, Mr Malfoy, or to Astoria. She did to
me because … I asked her.” That was only part of the truth, but she had exposed Narcissa enough,
perhaps too much, already. “And … I am not feeling very comfortable about what I am doing, Mr
Malfoy. She trusted me enough to pour out her heart to me, and here I am discussing her with you
behind her back. She may well feel that I am abusing her trust. But against that I must weight her
desperation, and an uncertainty about how close to the edge she is. On balance, I feel I must speak
out, even at the risk of hurting her, offending her, of alienating a woman whom I respect and
admire.”
“If it is any consolation, Miss Granger, I believe that she would do the same in your position. When I say ‘I believe,’ I do not mean in my judgement, which, as we have just seen, is so faulty as to be all but useless, but in my actual experience of her. She would care enough to risk your, someone’s, regard if she felt there was a vital imperative. Miss Granger, what you have told me makes perfect sense and I see the urgency. I must act. How should I approach this? Speak to Draco and Astoria first?”

She shook her head. "No. Speak to Narcissa first. Ask her, but do not accept her refusal. You must lead her, but gently."

"I am not good at this. You would do it far better than I."

Most women would. But only he could do it. He would blunder about, certainly, but Narcissa would see the intention behind the words, and make allowances. "It is a family matter. I would not have dared to speak to Draco and Astoria as I have spoken to you, Mr Malfoy, and I spoke only because we are … because I sensed her desperation. You need not couch this in terms of her need for independence for her self-esteem. You can express it in terms of looking into the future, of the practical need for her independence, in case … in case something happens to you. And then at a later stage, for example, ask her if she would like help with her tax return and so on. I can also come in at that stage, if you both wish, with practical help."

"Excellent. I shall use the ‘practical need’ approach. But she may suspect …"

"It doesn't matter. If she does suspect, she will also realise that you're using this approach to make it clear that your relationship has not changed. You are not rejecting her, and she will not fear that you will feel she is rejecting you. And that is all that matters."

“I understand. I must do this soon, mustn’t I?”

It always amazed her that men who could make decisions on matters involving hundreds of thousands of galleons were so helpless when it came to personal relations. He knew he should do this soon, but still he vacillated, wanting her reassurance. “Yes, as soon as you can, Mr Malfoy. Narcissa is suffering.”

“Yes, as you have just made clear.” He took her hand and held it for a moment. The glow flared and she glanced down. One of the threads was a bright yellow, and trailing a blue mist. “Again your presence here has resulted in a wave of benefit to my family, Miss Granger. If I may reciprocate in a minor way: rumour, innuendo and imputation are hard on your heels. No doubt you would like to acquaint your children with your current situation before the world does.”

“Oh. Yes, of course. I’d thought of that, but hadn’t settled on how much to tell them, and where and when.” And who was vacillating now?

“On the ‘when’, Miss Granger, I would advise as soon as possible. Pictures of your gutted home were on the Prophet front page, late afternoon edition, together with rumours of your stay at St Mungo’s. Your divorce must by law be advertised, and you may be sure will also make front page news. That will be in the late morning edition of the Prophet tomorrow. To forestall rumour reaching them first, I suggest tomorrow lunchtime. On the ‘where’, I would suggest here. You will have complete privacy as well as a tranquil environment. I wouldn’t presume to advise on the ‘how much’, except …”

She looked at him. “Except?”

“Except to say that Narcissa tells me your daughter is considered exceptionally mature for her age.
Shall we send a note to Professor McGonagall tomorrow morning, requesting a visit tomorrow for luncheon? If you like, you can spend the morning deciding what to say.”

“No. No, you are right. As soon as possible is best, and I will tell them everything. I owe them that.” Everything relevant, anyway. Everything about her and Ron. Nothing about her and Abraxas. That was all confusion in her own mind anyway. She kept having to remind herself that he was seventy years older than she was. Having seen the effect of the glow on Ginny, she would steer well clear of that with Rose.

“Excellent. And, ah, if I may broach a delicate subject, Healer Patil wishes to carry out a post operational assessment, to check your recovery is going as it should. She is due tomorrow afternoon at three. Is that acceptable?”

Perhaps she could get some information on what had happened to her. “Of course, Mr Malfoy.”

He bowed his head. “Thank you. Miss Granger, the day draws on. May I tell you of Nurmengard over dinner?”
Coffee steaming in front of them, he began the tale.

“Nurmengard, Miss Granger. I have never told anyone of my experiences there, for people are quick to condemn behaviour in situations about which they have no understanding. The judgement of the common man, Miss Granger, is rooted in ignorance and prejudice. His grasp of the complexities of situation is directly proportional to his depth of character; to wit, generally as shallow as a rain puddle. His gullibility is matched only by the strength of his conviction.”

“You have strong views, Mr Malfoy.”

“Based on a lifetime’s observation of my fellow humans, Miss Granger. In Nurmengard Grindelwald helped me survive and I helped him. That would be held against me, regardless of any moral justification I might have. While that would not cause me one moment’s disquiet, it would be a stick to beat the rest of the family, including my great grandson. So I keep silent and live quietly here, largely in retirement. Do you know anything about Nurmengard, Miss Granger?”

"Only that Dumbledore imprisoned Grindelwald there. I always thought it out of character that Albus Dumbledore would throw a man into prison and forget him for fifty years."

"It would have been if indeed he had done so. But Grindelwald was imprisoned by the leaders of the alliance of wizards who had defeated him. Dumbledore, obviously, was one of them, and voted for imprisonment, but after some years, campaigned for his release on parole. By this time the European Federation of Wizards had taken on the role of jailer. They brought Grindelwald before a parole board and interviewed him. He sneered at them."

“Really? Why would he do that?”

“Arrogance, Miss Granger. All three of them, you know, Dumbledore, Grindelwald and Voldemort, towered above us in ability, though beyond question, Dumbledore was the most intellectually brilliant, Voldemort the least. Voldemort’s greatest skill, buttressed by his amorality, was manipulation of people. They were all arrogant in their superiority, but only Dumbledore was able to learn from his mistakes. Arrogance brought both Voldemort and Grindelwald down, and arrogance kept Grindelwald there.

“He told the Board that men of such pygmy intellect had no moral right to imprison a mental giant like himself; that no, of course he did not recant, why should he when he was right; that yes, of course he would return to his old ways if they released him, because that was the only way forward. So in Nurmengard he stayed, the sole inmate.

“And Nurmengard was where Voldemort discarded us, tossed us like refuse onto the stone walkways one winter’s night. We did not know where we were: a black granite keep, with battlements and a central cell tower, apparently deserted, was all we knew. All we could see over the walls was mist. The ground could have been three feet or three hundred feet below. He left us
to die, but cast enchantments imprisoning us, just in case we survived. Torn, bleeding and broken, we crawled into the lee of the wall and huddled together. By morning, Shacklebolt was dead, whether from his wounds or exposure, I do not know. We took most of his clothes and used his body as a bench, to insulate us from the cold stone. It sounds heartless, but pointless conventions fall away when survival is at stake. Even so, we knew we would not survive another night: we had no food and Voldemort had taken our furs. I walked around the battlements all that day, knowing that if I stopped, I would freeze. Dagworth walked with me for a few hours, but then lost heart. I had been wounded in the shoulder, he on his side and thigh. I think he had lost more blood and was in more pain than I was.”

“Dagworth?”

He looked at her. "You know the family? Of course, Dagworth-Granger. He could have been a distant relative of yours. I'm afraid I left him to die, Miss Granger."

What! "I can't believe that, Mr Malfoy."

He sighed. "It's true. Dagworth stopped, sat, then lay upon Shacklebolt's body, and seemed to drop into a stupor. I tried to rouse him two or three times, but then gave up: it was all I could do to make myself keep walking. One would think, Miss Granger, that motivating yourself to keep moving would be the easiest thing: after all, if you stop, you know you will die. But hunger and exhaustion drains one, and as the cold seeps in, willpower seeps out. Lassitude and apathy permeate your spirit. You get to the stage where giving up is such a great temptation, and so easy. It becomes a minute by minute battle to keep walking. Even with the example of Dagworth lying there, his life energy draining away. You tell yourself: I'll sit down for a hundred heart beats, then get up and walk again. But deep down you know that once you sit, it is over: you will never get up again. You simply won't have the strength of will. The only way is to keep walking, one step in front of the other, slow but moving. I stopped thinking of my companions: they were just something against the stone wall, as meaningful as a block of granite, something to be walked past, a marker.

“Night had fallen and in spite of my movement, the cold was seeping into me, my feet turning slowly to blocks of ice. My steps became a shuffle. I kept on telling myself, just one more circuit, but ever louder came the questioning: why, what was the point, I was going to die anyway. I knew I couldn't survive the night. Then a hazy glow appeared in front of me, an oil lamp, and a voice spoke to me, called me "Prisoner number two," and said I must come to my cell.

“You must have thought it was a hallucination."

"I would have, had I been capable of thought. I was beyond it. I just obeyed, mindlessly and dumbly. I followed a small creature through a doorway that had not been there before, along a corridor, and into a cell. Along one wall hung a bed, a wooden shelf slung from two chains tying it back to the bare stone wall. The creature, which I now recognised as a house elf, gestured to the shelf, and I collapsed onto it. The elf then brought me furs, a loaf of bread and a pitcher of cold water. I had enough sense left to wrap myself in the furs, but just stared at the bread until the elf pointed at it, and told me to eat it. I did. I sat on the bed with the furs clutched the furs around me and ate the bread. Not twenty paces away Dagworth, my brother-in-arms, was dying in the cold. I knew that, but didn't do anything to save him. I didn't even ask the elf to bring him in. I was too weak, morally, to try to help him."

It was a dark tale and, like Narcissa, he took all the blame on himself, with no consideration for the circumstances. “Oh, Mr Malfoy, surely you can’t blame yourself for that. You were so physically weak ... I mean, you just told me your mind was barely functioning. You couldn’t have been that far from death yourself, surely.”
"I knew he was out there. At some point there is always a choice. My choice was not to act. Yes, I think he was dead, or too close to death to be rescued, but the point is that I did nothing, attempted nothing, to help him. Whenever I am tempted to condemn others for weakness or cowardice, I think of my own."

She touched his hand, and an orange glow appeared in the candle light. "I cannot imagine, in that extremity, that anyone else would have acted any differently."

He shrugged. "I can only speak for myself. I was tested, and found wanting. The men whom I had persuaded to join me were dead, their families fatherless. I was alive."

"Because you fought to stay alive, and from what you say, you couldn't have saved them. You were in an advanced state of hypothermia, and you had been active for what, six hours longer than him? He was already … dead, I'm sure of it. And if any penance was due, you surely paid it by being imprisoned for twenty eight years."

He pressed her hand. "Well. To proceed. By the following morning I had recovered enough strength, both moral and physical, and stood at my bars and shouted for the elf. The only reply I got was from the next cell. A human voice answered, told me that my companions were dead, and demanded of me who I was and what I was doing there.

"Too weak to consider anything else, I told him the truth, about Voldemort. He laughed, and immediately I recognised him, for I had heard him laugh at his trial, twenty five years before. Grindelwald. I didn't know what was going to happen then. I had fought him in the Black Forest, was his enemy, had been one of those who brought him down. If he had the power to rescue me, presumably he had the power to reverse that. But, of course, like Dumbledore, Grindelwald’s actions were determined by other than normal motivations. He assessed me, and, for reasons I could not fathom for a long time, found me adequate. In fact, after three or four years he seemed to develop a reluctant loyalty towards me. Certainly he nursed me through some illnesses, and I him. But for the first few years we were together, Miss Granger, I believe that had I not met his standards, he would have withdrawn his support, and I would have been left to die."

"That must have been nerve-wracking and frightening. Knowing your life depended on his whim, all the time."

"Strangely, it wasn't. You see, I did not know what his criteria were. So all I could do was to be myself, to be open and frank. And, strangely enough, I think that was the key. He respected honesty, and I spoke my mind. "

"Really? Logically, that sounds dangerous, and likely to offend him."

"Had he considered me an intellectual equal, that probably would have been so. But he was so far above me that when I disagreed or questioned him, it irritated rather than angered him."

Could she lighten his spirits now? "And he would explain why, where and how you were utterly and completely wrong? Your faults of logic and deduction, your ignorance? In exhausting detail?"

His lip lifted. "Excruciating detail."

She laughed. "I have met clever men like that. And women. They take great pleasure in meticulously pointing out one’s errors."

"Grindelwald certainly did. Perhaps that was why he kept me alive. As a hectoring post. Though he grew tired of me from time to time. He’d yell at me to shut up, saying the sound of my voice made
him want to puke. I’d have a week of silence, then hear his voice, swearing at me, telling me to speak, that my pathetic patterings were better than the flatulence of the rats, though only marginally. But for whatever reason, he did keep me alive. And that first night, he went cold and hungry. The furs were his, the bread was his. Later he told me what had happened: he had seen us arrive, but knew he could save only one: So he left us alone until there was … only one. And even for one it would be touch and go. He had bread for himself only."

"He sounds very … single-minded, ruthless. But if there was only food for one, how did you both survive?"

"Rats, Miss Granger. We trapped them, we skinned them, we ate them. We cured their hides, we used their sinews to sew their skins together. It was painstaking, tedious work, but time was the one commodity we had in abundance. I used the skins to patch a moth-eaten set of furs which I found in my cell."

"It sounds a very hard life."

“We survived by rigorous discipline. Physical and mental. Two hours of exercise every day. Two hours of memory training, using a method he had devised. Discussions, except when he was … sulking. Our cells were not conducive to healthy living: tiny, draughty, moisture running down the walls. Hygiene was maintained by use of a slops bucket and a central floor channel which was flushed using a bucket of water once a day."

“It sounds terrible. And in all those twenty eight years, nobody came? Nobody visited the prison, nobody who could release you? Who brought the food? I mean, surely there must have been some contact with the outside world. You just needed one person to know. Then we could have broken Voldemort’s spell."

He pressed her hand again. “I thank you for the thought. Nobody came. If any sought us, they failed to find us. Miss Granger, it grows late. May I escort you to the cottage? I shall tell how we survived as we go.”

Peace, everywhere and everything. Just the faint light of the stars, silver spots on midnight velvet blue. Just the sounds of her heels tapping on the boardwalk and the rustle of leaves in the breeze. Just the Touch of her hand on his arm, the glow muted, adjusting itself to the darkness … or to her feelings of contentment? Safe, that was what she felt; safe, valued and in harmony with the world.

Looking up, he said, "The skies above Nurmengard are clearer than our Highland skies. All I knew about the stars was what I had learned in Divination at Hogwarts, and as my opinion of the worth of that field of magic is similar to yours, Miss Granger, that knowledge would not have filled an egg cup. Grindelwald, though, while having equal scepticism about our ability to divine the future, still knew all the constellations, and taught them to me. I used the North Star and Mintaka in Orion’s Belt to guide me home after my imprisonment ended.

“To return to my tale. Our jailer was an ancient, one eyed elf named Fasgair. Elves, as you know, are very single-minded. They have a specific job to do and they do it. The boundaries are set, and they consider those to be inviolable. Fasgair farmed a plot in the forest, growing wheat, harvesting it, grinding the flour in a small watermill, and then baking the bread. He farmed vegetables also. Bread and vegetables for one prisoner and himself, those were his orders, so that was what he did. But his instructions about rats were just to keep their numbers down, so he was happy to trap, cook and feed them to us. Prisoners were allowed out of their cells for one hour of exercise a day. In summer we would spend it on the ramparts, in winter walking the stairs of the tower. Always we
would set traps.

"No one came, even from the Council of Wizards. Grindelwald’s parole had been refused again, shortly before I arrived, and his life sentence reaffirmed. Within a year of my arrival Voldemort’s power and the fear it evoked had grown to the extent that freeing Grindelwald was not to be contemplated. No one wanted two dark lords free at the same time, to join forces."

"I suppose that makes sense."

"Not at all. From you the comment is understandable. From his jailers: foolish, short-sighted and unforgivable. Grindelwald would have never have joined Voldemort. But … that is another story. Well, here we are. Good night, my dear,” and he stepped back, lifted her hand and kissed it.

“Good night, Mr Malfoy,” and she watched from the doorway as he walked away. ‘My dear’. He’d not called her that before. She could warm herself on ‘my dear’ in bed.
When she came from the bathroom, Winky had laid out a white M&S blouse and a camel cablespun cardigan. But next to them was a a calf length lace skirt in plain ivory with floral patterns and a scalloped hem.

“Oh, Winky, I’ve never worn anything like this.”

“Oh, not by itself, Miss. The underlayer is under the skirt, in tulle, Miss.”

“I didn’t mean that, Winky, just that I’ve never worn such lovely lace before. It is handmade, isn’t it? Is it from Belgium?”

“Oh, no, Miss. Locally sourced, made in Marston Moretaine, near Bedford. Miss Narcissa would be happy to visit the lacemakers with you one day. The cardigan is made of alpaca wool from Methlick, here in Scotland.”

Handmade English lace, handmade English boots, alpaca wool cardigans: what must all this cost?

And who was paying for it? She couldn’t afford it – well, actually she probably could now, from what Harry had told her. But she would baulk at the thought of spending so much money on herself, let alone on something as frivolous as clothes. By her old standards, the cost of this skirt alone was probably equivalent to six month’s groceries budget. It was awkward: obviously Abraxas was paying, obviously he took pleasure in seeing her beautifully dressed, and equally obviously he would deny that she had any obligation and wouldn’t hear of being reimbursed. She would prefer to dress herself, but if she did, it would be M&S, plain, simple and much cheaper.

And there was another aspect: she didn’t want Abraxas to see her as ‘an entrancing young woman’, but as a person with a mind to be respected. Actually, that wasn’t quite true: she wouldn’t mind if he saw her as both. What she didn’t want was her clothing and makeup showing her off as something she wasn’t. She wasn’t a dressed-up doll. Could she speak to him about it at breakfast?

She hadn’t the opportunity. Instead of the usual display of summer fruits on the breakfast table, a picnic basket sat on the white cloth, and Abraxas, limping forward on his cane from under the oak tree as soon as she appeared, said, “Miss Granger, as we have much of the morning free, I was wondering if you care to see a petroglyph. We can row across, breakfast there, see it and be back before your children arrive.” He gestured to a small rowing boat tied to a jetty.

“Oh, er, yes. That would be delightful, Mr Malfoy. But…” she looked down at her dress: lace and a rowing boat did not seem to go well together.

“Ah, yes. Enchanting, but not quite the … clothing for this use. Perhaps we should leave it for another day?”

“Indeed, no. Mr Malfoy. I should like to see the petroglyph and having a picnic breakfast sounds
wonderful. I can change into my jeans. I’ll be just a minute,” and she hurried back towards the cottage.

Winky met her, frowning. Angry. At her?

“Winky, I’m awfully sorry, but-”

“It’s Waldi who will be sorry, Miss, for not telling me about the boat. I would never have put out the lace for Miss had I known. I’m really very sorry, Miss.”

“Winky, why are you apologizing? You couldn’t have known.”

“It’s my job to know, Miss. It’s my job to anticipate. It’s my job to get it right.”

“Winky, I’ll just change into my jeans, it’s no prob-”

Winky’s eyes bulged. “Jeans, Miss? Sofi and Bruni will already be wide-eyes over Winky’s faux pas. Winky will never be able to look them in the face if she lets Miss Hermione go out with Mr Abraxas in jeans. No, Winky ran up a Shetland tweed skirt yesterday, for Just in Case, Miss. Here it is, Miss, with a cornflower blue M&S top and a loden cape in case the wind get up. They will do very well for the boat, Miss.”

“Winky, I’m not ‘going out’ with Mr Malfoy. We are going to see a rock carving, that is all.”

“Yes, Miss. Here they are.”

Why did she feel she could never convince Winky of anything? Provided ‘Miss Hermione’ wore what Winky thought she should, and allowed Winky to do her hair and her make-up as Winky thought fit, ‘Miss Hermione’ was allowed to think whatever she liked.

“And your white sandals, Miss. Waterproof glue and one eighth inch leather. Immersion won’t damage them.”

She’d never have thought of that. Winky looked after her better than she looked after herself. And Abraxas’s response to that would have been, “Quite, Miss Granger.”

“Where is the petroglyph, Mr Malfoy?” She was amazed at how strongly he was rowing. In consideration of his age, she’d suggested taking the oars herself, tentatively, as she had been afraid of offending his masculine dignity. He’d merely inclined his head in acknowledgement and said, “Perhaps on the way back, Miss Granger.” But she needn’t have worried. He’d laid his jacket on the bench beside him, rolled up his sleeves to reveal muscled forearms, and taken the oars like an experienced sculler.

He nodded his head backwards. “See the two trees behind me?”

A pair of towering conifers stood on the far shore, their height and staggered branches revealing the characteristic beauty of scots pines.

“They mark the beaching point. A narrow path leads up through the heather to the petroglyph. The pines were planted there for the purpose by Urquart Maelfee, as our name used to be pronounced, about 1650.”

“Your family has been here for a long time, then?”
The pace of rowing slowed. “Norman French, as I’m sure you already know from the name. We came over with the Conqueror, but fell out with King John, and fled north. We settled in these parts and pronounced the name Maelfee to blend in. These lands were granted to the widow of Augterlee Maelfee by Robert the Bruce in 1314. Maelfee and his sons killed the seven giants that formed the vanguard of Edward’s army in the Battle of Bannockburn, leaving the Bruce free – and alive – to defeat Edward’s human army. Maelfee himself did not survive.”

“Oh.” Should she offer her condolences? But it happened seven hundred years ago. A little late for expressions of sympathy. “How did he defeat them? Many of our spells have little effect on giants.”

“Quite clever, I think. He set himself up as a weather mage, as many of them did in those days, to survive local prejudice. The local rock is limestone, and as you may know, some forms dissolve readily in water. When this happens, you get a geological pot, a deep and wide hole with vertical sides. So he found a pot on the Bannockburn and he and his sons diverted the river upstream by building an embankment across the bed. The water in the pot seeped away quickly through channels in the limestone, so that it emptied. When the English army passed nearby, Augterlee caused a rainstorm, with the rainbow ending in the pot. The giants, as greedy for gold as ever, abandoned the march and jumped down into the pot. Then Augterlee’s sons breached the diversion embankment and flooded the pot. The giants drowned. Unfortunately so did Augterlee. One of the giants had not been quite as stupid as expected, and had left a rope anchored to a boulder in the river bed so that he could climb out again. Augterlee was busy cutting it when the flood came down.”

“That was brave of him.”

“Suicidally brave. He’d have probably been in Gryffindor, Miss Granger.”

“Mr Malfoy, I believe you are laughing at me.”

“Ah, thank you, Miss Granger. That observation implies a level of ease and trust I did not dare to hope we would reach.”

Nor she, considering where they had started from a scant three days earlier.

By the time he’d drawn the boat up onto the sand and made it safe, she had breakfast spread out on the white cloth: a silver flask of coffee, two sets of cutlery and crockery, wrapped croissants and rolls, still warm, and marmalade, cheese and butter. “Waldi has looked after us, as usual. Coffee, Mr Malfoy?”

He sat down opposite her, crosslegged. “Thank you, Miss Granger.”

She handed him his cup, and he said, “Yes, my staff are remarkable. I couldn’t ask for better. I trust Winky’s service is satisfactory?”

“Embarrassingly so, Mr Malfoy.”

He raised his eyebrows at her.

“Hermione Granger, founder of the Elf Rights campaign, drafter of the Elf Service Contract legislation, with an elf lady’s maid? It’s bad enough that Hermione Granger, common or garden sparrow, has a lady’s maid at all. My name will be mud, Mr Malfoy.”

His lip twitched and he said, “Follow the old maxim: Never complain, never explain, Miss
Granger. If forced to explain, to the Press, for example, express your surprise at such a question, mention your belief in self sufficiency and that your campaigns are to ensure the rights of elves are acknowledged and respected, not to take away their livelihoods. If elves choose to be in service, that is their right. That you employ one is your right, and gives you first hand knowledge of what you are campaigning about. And once you have explained once, refuse to do so again. But while I am pleased you have told me this, my question related not to the fact of her service, but the quality.”

“Embarrassingly so covers that as well, Mr Malfoy. I feel embarrassed - and guilty - that I enjoy her pampering so.”

“Excellent. Not to the embarrassment or the guilt, but to the pampering and your enjoyment of it. I’m sure you have had little enough of it. And the, ah … output? How she helps you present yourself? To the world?”

She looked at him. How was she to answer that? ‘The world’ was him. Who else saw her? Only Harry, who thought she looked like a doll, and Lucius, who thought she looked like a courtesan. Ginny and Draco had been more complimentary, but Abraxas saw her more than anyone. And his compliments had been fulsome every time he had made them, and he would make more now if she let him.

“Embarrassingly so covers that too. Mr Malfoy. She makes more of … me than I can. More, in fact, than is really there.”

“A physical impossibility, Miss Granger,” he murmured, but she ignored that.

“To tell you the truth, she doesn’t ‘help me present myself’ as much as ‘presents me.’ I have little say in the matter. Given the choice, I would dress far more simply.”

His lip twitched. “You could refuse, You are, after all, the mistress.”

“Oh, I couldn’t. She would be so hurt. She fervently believes it is all for my own good.”

“And you don’t?”

This was his way: to take a simple comment of hers, turn it inside out and invite her to expose her soul. But she was learning his ways and how to counter them. This one she’d sidestep, and turn to her advantage. “I have never been one for physical appearances, Mr Malfoy. But,” she rushed on before he could comment, “It does raise a topic I wanted to discuss with you. My clothes, Mr Malfoy. Winky has made me some beautiful outfits, far more beautiful than I have ever had before. It is embarrassing enough that you have done something, an unknown something, but big, to heal me; that you have arranged for Winky to be my maid; and that I trespass on your hospitality, without you paying to have me dressed in this high style.”

“What I have done or not done regarding your healing is irrelevant, Miss Granger. You most certainly do not trespass on my hospitality. Your presence has brought Spring to Bansith and me, have no doubt of that. Regarding Winky’s service, it was felt that help during your convalescence is advisable. Regarding your clothing, it may well be that the materials are … spare from Narcissa’s or Astoria’s stocks, or from one of our farms or associated companies, I really couldn’t say. If you like we can find out. But as regards Winky: If you tell her you want simpler clothes, I’m sure she will oblige.”

And she was sure Winky would not. Or not as she interpreted simplicity. The garments would still be handmade, with a simplicity so stylish as to nullify any cost saving. Which, in fact, was what
she was getting now. The conflict, she realized, was not of style but of values. She considered that spending vast quantities of time, effort, care and money on clothing for her was a waste. Winky did not. And Winky loved doing it, that was plain. This skirt had triple sewn hems. She’d just have to accept matters as they were.

But - oh, clever: another of his tricks. He’d adroitly switched the emphasis to Winky, and she had made it clear that him paying was the main source of her embarrassment. Well, she’d just switch it back again.

“Yes, if you find out where the materials are coming from, please, Mr Malfoy. I would really rather reimburse … whoever it is. It’s not that … it’s just that …” She hated speaking about money, and especially to this man. But she must, especially to this man.

He raised his hand. “Miss Granger, your peace of mind is paramount. I shall find out and let you know.”

“Thank you,” she murmured. The money meant less than nothing to him: he was doing it for her. Again. “I’ll just pack away the breakfast, then shall we go and see the petroglyph?”

“There you are, Miss Granger. A cup and rings.” She lifted her arm from his, stepped forwards and knelt to look at the rock carving. A hollow the size of her thumb centred on five rings like planetary orbits, each about a hand’s breadth apart.

“What age is it, Mr Malfoy?” She turned to look up at him.

“Late Neolithic is the closest we can come. I believe all Scottish petroglyphs are. Not as showy as a mammoth, but far more intriguing to an enquiring mind. I find it fascinating to speculate on the man who chiselled it out of the boulder: why he did it, what his place in his society was, how he and his family lived, what became of him and his clan. His blood might run in our veins, Miss Granger. Did you know that more than seventy per cent of our genetic makeup comes from the late Neolithic, Bronze and early Iron Age settlers who arrived in Britain long before the Romans came? Less than thirty percent has come from the subsequent successive waves of invaders that have rampaged across these lands. Bede gives the impression that the ancient Britons were practically wiped out by the Anglo-Saxons, yet even in south-east England that heritage accounts for only a quarter.”

And Ron’s sole interest was Chudley Cannons’ place in the Quidditch league table. She doubted he would even know what Neolithic meant, let alone petroglyph, genetic makeup or who Bede was. It was mortifying – or rather, would have been mortifying had they met Abraxas socially in the past. But it was a compliment that Abraxas took it for granted that she would know all these terms.

“I suppose all records from early medieval times are very subjective.”

“Indeed. And sparse. Much of it merely word of mouth, handed down from generation to generation. And certainly Bede was promoting an ecclesiastical agenda. But when considered together with information from other sources, knowledge of the flow of peoples, genetic analysis, archaeology, and changes in the structure and use of language, we get a fuller picture. As you, I find history and indeed, prehistory, fascinating.”

How did he know that? And it was a bit ambiguous: He was as fascinated by history as she was, or she was as fascinating as history, to him. Either way worked out as a compliment, though, one intellectual, one ... personal. Though not necessarily: from someone else it might mean the
opposite. ‘You are fascinating as history’? Or even worse: ‘as fascinating as prehistory?’ She could imagine Ginny breaking into a huge grin at that one, and her saying, “Oh, she is, Mr Malfoy, she is.”

“Informed speculation is endlessly interesting, Miss Granger, and the more one learns, the more fascinating it becomes.”

“And no one knows what the purpose was?”

“No. Some religious function or symbolism is all that the archaeologists can suggest. However, that category tends to be a basket for everything they can find no other explanation for. My feeling is that it is some sort of a calendar for determining the right day for festivals. It’s an ancient tradition, after all. As you probably know, one finds primitive sundials inscribed into the walls of many Saxon and Norman churches.”

She didn’t.

“Ah. Miss Granger, stand up, very quietly.”

Now what? She slowly straightened. She was standing in front of him. She glanced over her shoulder. He was looking up the hillside.

“See it?” A whisper, close behind her.

See what? All she could see was the dense heather, green darkening to purple. “No. Where? What is it?”

He took her shoulders, angled her slightly. Then his voice in her ear, softly. “Straight ahead.”

She looked straight ahead and now saw, not far away, a clump of small trees in a tiny dell on the hillside. Was there something in there? But she was more conscious of his hands holding her and his head next to hers. She could feel the warmth, sense his closeness. It was … distracting.

“Can’t you see it?”

She shook her head and her cheek touched his. “What is it?”

“A stag.”

His hands, warm on her shoulders; his breath, hot in her ear. This was heady! Then, suddenly, she saw it. The head she had taken for a clump of leaves, the antlers for a forked branch. It was no more than thirty yards away. Then, warned by some instinct, it broke cover and galloped away across the hillside.

“Oh, wonderful!” The stag or the situation? He was still holding her, his head still next to hers. She could feel the warmth of the Touch, see a reddish glow out of the corner of her eye. Her heart was racing. Her knees felt weak. And now? Would he turn her and take her in his arms? Kiss her? It seemed … right.

But he released her and stepped away. “We should return to the lodge, Miss Granger.” His voice was flat, formal. “Your children are due in less than an hour. Shall I lead the way? The path is rather narrow.”

It wasn’t. It wasn’t at all. Coming, it had been wide enough for them to walk side by side, her hand on his arm. Going, it wasn’t. Why? Had he felt what she felt, and shied away? And what had she
felt? More than she should have, more than a young woman should be feeling for a man seventy years older than she. What was the matter with her? She mustn’t start feeling—whatever it was she was feeling—for him. She mustn’t. The precipice was there, she could feel it, and she must stay well away from it. But she kept losing control, every time they Touched.

*Get a grip on yourself, girl. You know it’s a non-starter. What’s the matter with you! Every time it happens you tell yourself how ... inappropriate it is, but then something else happens and your silly heart flips a somersault and you have to argue the whole thing out again.*

You’ve reached a turning point together, and he’s turned away: he doesn’t want it. If he did, he’d have kissed you. So it’s definitely not going to happen, no matter what you might want. That’s best for you, and you know it. So accept that and put the whole thing out of your mind!

*No matter what you feel ...*
Rose paused just inside the dining hall door. Why was everyone staring at her? All the Slytherins, anyway. All except Malfoy. Rose’s eyes narrowed. What was this? He’d not reported her for that little jinx this morning, had he? No, he’d never do that. That was not his style. And whatever else she might say about Malfoy, she could not deny that he had the style of a gentleman. So far.

Then McGonagall’s Cheshire Cat avatar appeared in front of her. "Rose and Hugo Weasley, please come to my office, now."

Oh! Maybe he had. Which would give her the satisfaction seeing a flaw in his character which she knew was there - must be there in a Malfoy, a family which tortured teenage girls - but which she had, for five years, probed - and prodded - in vain for. Yes, she’d be punished, but that was a price worth paying if it showed Malfoy in his true colours. A little voice asked her if a boy reporting a girl for jinxing him after being jinxed every second week for years on end - and never, ever, retaliating - was really a character flaw, but was shushed. Of course it was, particularly in a Malfoy and even more, in that particular Malfoy.

But … Hugo too? If she was in trouble, why should Hugo be involved? Had something happen to Mum? She gestured to Hugo to come, and hurried off to the seventh floor.

As they arrived in front of the gargoyle, the cat face of the avatar appeared again, glanced at them, then turned to face the wall. The wall split and the spiralling staircase appeared before them.

The office door was open and McGonagall was sitting behind her desk. "Rose and Hugo, come in. I received an owl this morning. Your mother has asked if you can join her for lunch. She has something important to tell you. As I expect you know, she has not been well, but I understand she is better, and convalescing away from home. Hugo, please take the portkey and wait in the anteroom. Your sister will join you shortly." She handed him a large feather.

When he had gone, McGonagall said, "Rose, you have seen a Peverell Clock, as both your grandfather Weasley and your aunt and uncle Potter have one. What do you know about them?"

What had Peverell Clocks to do with her mother? "They are very rare, only seven, I think, in existence. The clock shows the family members, where they are and how they are, whether they are safe or not."

"In essence, yes, but I think a little more background would be useful. A Peverell clock is linked to its custodian family, and tracks the individuals whom that family cares about. Generally, but not necessarily or exclusively, the family members. The thaumaturgical energy in Peverell clocks is intuitive magic: the spell which powers it was not actively designed, but evolved of its own accord due to a person’s need for it. In this case Severia Peverell, a powerful witch, driven by a need to know if her sons were safe. So we don't know why or how it works.

"Intuitive magic is rare, but Peverell Clock magic has an even rarer feature. The intuitive
thaumaturgical element remains within it, dormant, but will awaken under certain circumstances. In the presence of a witch of sufficient power, the magic will change, re-evolve or adapt to fulfill her particular needs, though still within the original parameters. You can see, Rose, why so much mystique has grown up around Peverell clocks.

“Although the clock shows only three items of information about a person, those items, taken singly and in conjunction, can be very informative to those who can interpret them. Correct and full interpretation requires a knowledge of Peverell Clocks, the family it is attached to and the person concerned. Given this, a Peverell Clock reading can reflect the person’s feelings, conscious and subconscious; the person’s present state, both physical and emotional; and of course the person’s state of security, known or unknown to that person. Some believe they even reflect the future state of that person. I am sceptical of that. My opinion is that they reflect a blend of the current psychological and physical state, but with such perceptiveness that it appears prescient.

“A Peverell Clock will only function in the presence of a woman, and she must be a mother, either physically or in spirit. Hogwarts has two Peverell Clocks. Both clocks feature adapted magic, so differ from normal Family Peverell Clocks. One of our clocks shows all current students. The other … what I am about to tell you, Rose, is confidential and must go no further. The other clock is active only when the current Head is a female, and it shows past female students to whom the head-mistress had a strong emotional attachment. It shows, in short, those women she considered, and considers, to be her daughters in spirit.” McGonagall’s face had a red tinge to it. She didn’t normally discuss her emotions, Rose was sure. "Your mother, Rose, is on my clock, as is your Aunt Ginevra.”

Rose stared at her. She'd always liked McGonagall in spite of her strictness, but she was a teacher; more than that, the Head of Hogwarts: a high, remote being, watching over the school and students with dedication and care, but in an impersonal way. Now Rose saw her as a real person, a living, breathing, warm, feeling woman. A woman who loved Mum and Ginny as daughters. "Oh, Professor!"

McGonagall’s blush deepened, but her back straightened further. "I'm telling you this, Rose, because my clock states that your mother is well, safe and home. In other words, the clock magic says she is in a good physical condition and mental state of mind; is in a place where she feels safe and actually is safe; and is her home. She may or may not consider this place to be her home, but the clock does. As I have said, she is not in at your home in Brixton. I do not know where she is: the portkey destination is unplottable. However, I have analysed the portkey’s aura and signature, and found nothing to alarm me. The Potters were there the day before yesterday, and they believe it is safe for you to go.

"Your mother's condition is particularly relevant, Rose, because my clock showed her for some years to be unwell, and a few days ago, to be in mortal danger." She raised her hand and forestalled Rose's shocked question.

"I did not tell you, Rose, because there is nothing you could have done but worry. This state lasted less than five minutes, and during that period I contacted your grandfather and the Potters. I found, as expected, that they had already been alerted, and in fact, the Potters were already on their way back to England."

"But-"

"I understand your shock and concern, Rose. Take reassurance that your mother is now well, safe, and home, and that you will be seeing her in a few minutes. Do not tell her about my clock or its message, Rose. My purpose in telling you all this is that you should look around carefully,
particular at the people you meet. I want you to be aware that there is something special about
the place and the people there. That is all, Rose."

"Thank you, Professor, I will do that, and thank you for telling me what you did. I will not tell
anyone."

"I trust you, Rose, as I would trust your mother. Go now, your brother is waiting."

Scotland, Rose could see that at a glance: the heather covered hills, the great pines around the dark
waters of a loch. And there was her mother, standing next to a tall man. Behind them was a table
with a white tablecloth, laden with fruit: pyramids of apples, oranges, pears, grapes hanging in
clusters off bowls. Steam rose from a silver coffee pot. In the background was a huge, old stone
house.

“Hey,” said Hugo, “that’s Bansith Hall.”

She looked at him.

“There’s a drawing of it in The History of Magic. The Jacobites, the Battle of Culloden.”

She shook her head. Battles made no lasting impression on her mind. Too much violence and no
women.

Hugo sighed. "Girls! Bonnie Prince Charlie, okay?"

"Oh. Right.” Yes, a name like that aroused most girls’ interest. And there were songs about him,
fleeing his enemies, hiding in the heather, romantically sailing away to Skye. But it was all
hundreds of years ago. “Come on, Huey, Mum’s waiting.” She ran down the lawn, Hugo
alongside, saying, “Don't call me that, I told you. I’m not a kid any more."

Hermione ran to meet them. She was wearing a navy tartan tweed skirt with white blouse and
matching jacket. A wide purple leather belt matched a pair of calf length suede boots. All very
stylish and appropriate for the setting, but Rose’s eyes narrowed. No way could her father afford
an outfit like that. The boots alone looked as though they cost half a term’s fees at Hogwarts. Who
was dressing her mother?

"Rosie, Huey, oh, it's so lovely to see you.” Hermione hugged them both.

It was, but … she held her mother at arm’s length. “Mum, what’s happened? You look … so
youthful!” Her mother’s wellness should be a cause for joy, but this… this was much more than
wellness. Too much more.

Hermione laughed and hugged her again. “I’ll tell you over lunch. Come along and meet our host
first. I hope we didn't interrupt anything at Hogwarts.”

We? Rose looked at the man as they walked up to him. No, couldn't be. Her mother was young, but
he, he was ancient; she'd never seen anyone so old. Stooped, bald, and unbelievably ugly: his face
was creased and folded deeply, his cheeks sunken. He reminded her of a … a vulture! He stood
leaning on a stick, looking as though he might keel over any moment. Only his eyes looked young.
"Let me introduce you." Her mother looked at the old man. "Mr Malfoy, my daughter Rose and my son Hugo." She turned to Rose. "This is Mr Abraxas Malfoy. He is Scorpius’s great-grandfather."

A Malfoy! The Malfoys had tried to murder her mother, that evil Lestrange woman had crucioed her. They were dark wizards. They were arch enemies. How could her mother have forgotten! She must be spelled, and by this old man. More and more he was like a vulture: brooding, ominous, malevolent. He was holding out his hand for her to shake. No way! She stepped back, glaring at him.

"Mum, what is this? He’s a Malfoy, why’re you trusting him? After what they did ...”

"Rosie! Rose, that is so-"

His eyes fixed on Rose, the old man spoke. His voice was deep and strong, with none of the tremor old people often had. He spoke slowly, as if considering every word. "An understandable reaction, Miss Granger. I too would baulk at shaking hands with a man whose family had tried to kill, then tortured, my mother. Miss Rose and Master Hugo, I apologise, not for what was done to your mother, for those evils are too great for mere apology, but for the presumption I have just shown."

He bowed his head to her, then went on. "As you may know, your mother has been ill, and is convalescing. In due course she will be moving back to London. From that time onwards, your family need have no contact with me or any Malfoy. Now, you will have questions which are better asked and answered in my absence, so I will leave you. Should you need anything, Miss Granger, please ring the bell and Winky will attend you. I shall be in the small drawing room. Miss Granger, Miss Rose, Master Hugo, your servant." He bowed, then turned and limped away, leaning on his stick.
Hermione watched him go, then turned back. In a low voice, she said, "Rose, that was very, very rude. You must apologise."

"But she's right, Mum," said Hugo. "He's a Malfoy. Why are you trusting him? I think Malfoy, I mean at school, Scorpius, is okay, but Rosie doesn't trust him and gives him a rough time, just because. Why are you here, anyway? Rosie said what that old man said, that you've been ill."

"Don't call him 'that old man,' Hugo. His name is Mr Malfoy."

Well! First we, now she was defending him. "Mum, what's been going on? Professor McGonagall also said you'd been seriously ill. What with? Why aren't you in Brixton? Where's Dad? Why are you here, with this man?"

Her mother winced and said, "I'm not here with anyone. I'm a guest here, and so are you, Rosie. Now let's sit down and have some lunch, and I'll tell you. Mr Malfoy invited you, but now he's not here. I would have liked you to have got to know him a little, but this way I suppose I can talk more easily and freely. We can at least repay his courtesy by enjoying the lunch he provided."

"Why do you want us to get to know him, Mum?" This was getting more and more suspicious, especially with McGonagall’s words gonging alarms in her mind.

Her mother blushed a little. "He's a good man, and he's been very kind and supportive to me."

Oh yes? "That's all?"

"Yes, of course. What else?" But she didn’t meet Rose’s eyes.

Something else, definitely. She’d have to explore this. "It just all seems a bit funny, you here with a Malfoy rather than at home, you being ill, you looking so very young. What's been happening? Where's Dad?"

Hermione sighed. "I brought you here to tell you this: Dad and I are not together any more. Dad and I have split up. I'm ... I'm so sorry."

Rose squeezed her eyes shut. She’d seen this years again, as a little girl: a bubble of wrongness between her father and her mother. At first she’d pretended it wasn’t there, but ... she couldn’t, because it was. Then she’d hoped that if she was good, if she was deserving, it would go away. She’d tried, she’d tried hard, but it hadn’t. It had just grown and grown, careless of her hopes, her fears, her guilt; of her mother’s appeasing and troubled face. And now ... it had burst. "Oh, Mum!"

Her mother’s lower lip began to tremble.

Huey, though, was gaping at Hermione. "But why? Don't you love him any more?"

Rose glanced at him. What must it be like to have a masculine mind, to go through life untroubled
by a feminine depth of awareness? Though when he did catch on, her little brother had this naïve way of going straight for the jugular.

Hermione dropped her gaze. "I … it’s not as simple as that, Huey. Love is two-way and a growing thing that must be nurtured. Each person shows their love for the other actively, by doing things, like helping, supporting, caring for the other person. If they both do that, the love each one has for the other grows stronger. If one person stops, the other’s love withers and dies."

“So who’s stopped?”

Rose closed her eyes for a moment. *Way to go, Huey: don't knock gently, just smash the door down.*

Hermione just dropped her gaze again and said, “Oh, Huey!”

“You’re so stupid, Hugo,” said Rose. “Dad’s stopped, of course.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re a girl!”

“I am not! Who looks after us? Who is always there for us? Who helped us all the way through Junior school? If you need anything done now, who do you ask?”

“Mums always do that. Dad’s always away playing Quidditch. That’s more important than us.”

"Oh, Huey. I thought that too, when I was eleven. But then I started thinking: should anything be more important to a dad than his children? I’m not talking about Quidditch, I’m talking about how a dad should feel. How did you feel when you were in the spelling-bee final, and Dad didn’t come to watch? Mum and I were there, and uncle Harry and Ginny, and Gramps, and even George came. But no Dad.”

Hugo reddened and looked away. “He had a match on, he couldn’t come. But he gave me a new broom to make up.”

“Was it a match, Mum? I thought it was a practice.”

Hermione looked from Rose to Hugo, then said softly, “It was a practice, but I’m sure Dad felt it was a very important one.”

“Uncle Harry would’ve come, even if it had been a match, let alone a practice. Lily Luna told me he once told the Minister he couldn’t make a meeting because Albus was playing one of the shepherds at Christmas.”

“Yeah, well, uncle Harry’s uncle Harry,” said Hugo. “Anyway, all that is about Dad and you and me, not Dad and Mum.”

“No, Huey,” said Hermione. "Dad and you and Rosie, is Dad and me. Nothing is more important in my life than you and Rosie. Nothing. If Dad shows his love for you, he shows his love for me. If he hurts you, he hurts me. And something I want to tell you right now, and really, really don’t want you to forget, is that both Dad and I still love you. What happens between us makes no difference to our love for you. And it’s not as if Dad and I … Even though we are splitting up, we are still … still friends. If there is anything to do with you and Rosie, Dad and I will get together and discuss it, look for the best solution for you both."

"It's final then, Mum?" said Rose.
"I'm afraid so. I ... I kept it going as long as I could. But now ..." Two tears trickled down her face. "Sorry," she muttered, "I didn't mean to break down."

"What, Mum? What?" Was this something else? Something even worse?

"Dad has left home, and has someone else."

"What! Someone else? He's left us and gone off with someone else? Another woman?"

Her mother nodded and wiped the tears away. Her eyes were all crinkled up and her lips were trembling.

Rose hugged her. "Oh, Mum!"

But Hugo was gaping at her. "Dad? Dad's left us? How can Dad leave us? We're his family. He can't leave us. He can't!"

Hermione reached out to take his hand, but he pulled back. "I'm so sorry, Huey, but he has. But he still loves you, you mustn't think he doesn't. It's ... it's me he's left, not you."

Hugo glared at her, shaking his head. "We're a family. If he leaves you, he leaves all of us." He leapt up, grabbed his chair, lifted it over his head and smashed it to the ground, shouting, "I hate him, I hate him, I hate him!"

Hermione jumped up. "Huey, don't, that's not ours!"

"There's no ours any more," yelled Hugo. "We're broken. Dad has broken us. If he loved us he wouldn't have broken us. I hate him, I hate him, I hate him!" He lifted the broken chair again, and Hermione shouted, "No, Hugo, stop, stop, it's not ours."

"I told you," Hugo bellowed, "there's no ours any more."

"Huey, no," said Rose. "There's a new ours: you and me and Mum." She got up, took his hand and pulled him into an embrace with their mother. All of them were crying.

"I never want to see him again," said Hugo through his tears. "Mum, you must tell him. I never want to see him again."

Hermione sighed. "I've started divorce proceedings."

Rose looked at her, and Hugo said, "Good. I'm glad. I hope he suffers."

Hermione said, "Huey, please."

Rose pressed her arm. "Mum, leave it for now."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, you're right." They hugged again, Hugo wiping his eyes. "We'll always have each other, Huey."

Then she looked at the ruined chair. "Oh, dear."

"Oh Mum, that's nothing," said Rose. "What's a broken chair compared to Dad leaving us?"

Though she could see it was no ordinary chair.

"Well, nothing, of course, but it's irreplaceable. It's Jacobean. Hundreds of years old."
"That's what Hugo said, too, about the house. But you can *reparo* it, can't you? Or I can."

"No, we can't. I'm not supposed to have magic down around me. And that brings me to the other thing I wanted to see you about."

Now what? Not about the old man, she hoped. If something was going on there, she was going to stamp on it. No way would she let her mother get entangled with an ancient, evil, vulturous Malfoy, Peverell Clock or not. Especially in her emotionally vulnerable state.

"It’s probably easiest if I tell you what happened, because that will answer other questions. You know I have not been well."

Was this about her illness? "For quite a long time, Mum," said Rose. Huey just stared at her. He, being a boy, of course hadn’t noticed.

Hermione nodded. "Yes. I sometimes wonder if that was why Dad started … looking elsewhere. If I had been myself—"

"No. Mum, the vows say: for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. Dad’s done what he's done. He’s history. He's no longer even Dad, he's just my father. A biological accident."

Hermione winced. “Rosie, that’s very hard. He still loves you.”

"Less than Quidditch, Mum, as he has shown. Now go on, and don't even think about … Father."

"Rosie, really-"

"Mum, go on with what you were telling us, please. Forget about Father."

"Way to go, Rosie," muttered Hugo.

"All right," said Hermione, giving a wry smile. "I’ll do what my children tell me. The night Dad, er, Father … left, someone broke into the flat."

Rose looked her alarm, and Hermione said, "No, it's all right, I'm here, and fine. Mr Malfoy had a spell in place which transported me to safety."

Rose frowned: the connection between the break-in and the ‘transportation’ was blindingly obvious. If her mother couldn't see that ... An image appeared, of a vulture hovering high in the sky, wrinkled, skinny neck outstretched, gazing downwards, eyes fixed on her mother, waiting, waiting, waiting, for when she was weak and vulnerable.

But Hermione raised her hand. "Rosie, I know what you're thinking. That Mr Malfoy arranged the whole thing. He didn't. I don't know the details, but I’ve had Ginny and Harry look over what happened, then and afterwards, and it's all genuine. Really."

Well, if Ginny and uncle Harry said it was okay… anyone could fool her mother, she was so trusting, but Ginny the eagle-eyed lawyer? No way. And uncle Harry: his default ‘tude was scowling suspicion. It would take more than a Malfoy to get something past him, 'specially as they would be top of his black list. And he’d grind anyone to powder who tried to hurt her mother, with Ginny flaming anything that was left.

But: loose ends. "Mum, why don't you know the details? Who is not telling you?"

"Everybody – or rather, nobody is telling me anything. Not Mr Malfoy, not Ginny, not Harry."
What happened was, I went to bed in the flat that night, and at some stage I woke up with I thought was a nightmare. I thought something or someone was in the room. Next thing I knew, I was here."

She pointed to a whitewashed chocolate-box cottage in the trees. "I was terrified, as you can imagine. But Mr Malfoy had arranged for Winky, a house elf from my Hogwarts days, to attend me, and she assured me that I was safe."

"Winky?"

"You know her?"

"Of course I know her. She does our dorm. She took me into the kitchens in my second year to see the plaque to Dobby."

"I didn't know there was one, and we never saw the house-elves when I was at Hogwarts."

"These are modern times, Mum. Though not that modern: one of the first things Winky asked me if I was in favour of elf liberation. I was noncommittal, but she wasn't. She told me: 'Miss Hermione is a lovely, lovely person, but she has the oddest ideas.'"

Hermione laughed. "She still thinks that." She picked up the bell. "Shall I call her? I'm sure she'd love to see you."

"No, Mum, we want to hear your story first. That's more important."

"Yes, you're right. Well, I met Mr Malfoy at breakfast, and was quite abrupt and rude to him. I thought he'd abducted me. He told me that all he done was to have an apparation spell in place which had been triggered by my break-up with Dad."

"Father. We don't have a Dad any more," said Hugo.

"Hugo-"

"Your story, Mum, please," said Rose.

"All right. I wanted to know why he had this spell in place, by what right he took it upon himself to do such an outrageous thing. I was furious, as you can imagine. And I didn't think his reasons were very good." She paused.

"What were they? I mean, abducting someone?" The vulture swooping down, grabbing her mother’s limp body in its claws, carrying her off. "And I think your response needs to be a little stronger than being 'quite abrupt and rude' to him, Mum. Anyway, what did he say?"

"Well, as it turned out, the reasons he gave were irrelevant, because the trigger was not the break-up, but the intruder. When the intruder approached me, the spell was activated, and I was apparated here before he actually reached me."

"All right," said Rose slowly. "But that still doesn't explain why he had that spell there in the first place. I mean, you'd never met him, had you?" Please, no. She didn’t want a back-story here. Her mother had always been pure and innocent in thought, word and deed, and she wanted it to stay that way.

"I don't think I'd even ever heard of him, and if I had, I would have believed he was dead, because he disappeared in about 1970."

Good. But a pity he hadn’t stayed ‘disappeared.’ "So what did he say?"
"Oh, he went on about things like me being clever, and playing a part in bringing down Voldemort, and how I shouldn't have married Ron."

“What! He said that? What does it have to do with him who you marry!”

“Well, quite. And I made that point myself very forcibly. But when he explained what he meant, it didn't seem so bad.”

Her mother! "Oh? What did he say?"

"Oh, he said... well, um... Rosie, is this really relevant?"

"I think it is, Mum. A lot of this seems to be tied up with this ... with Mr Malfoy. We need to know what's going on, and why."

"All right. Because of my ... what he called my *virtues*, which he greatly exaggerated, he wanted to keep me safe from other families who might abduct me. So, really, it was for my own good."

Oh yes? "Why might other families abduct you because of your virtues? What does he mean by virtues, anyway?"

Her mother shifted in her seat. "He said: foresight, brilliance, fortitude; silly things like that."

Well! "That's what he said? Gold star for him. And why should other families be interested?"

"Rosie-" Her mother was looking at Hugo.

"Tell us, Mum, then we can move on."

"He said, well, basically, I suppose, that ... I would have clever children. Children with those virtues."
Rose stared at her mother. Suddenly the pieces clicked, or thudded, rather, into place. It made sense, even if it was a bit elemental and ruthless. Selective breeding, they called it on the farm. And she could imagine her mother’s shocked response to that. But: he’d told her? It must be the truth: it was so offensive, so outrageous that it couldn’t be anything but the truth. And if he’d told the truth about that, maybe he’d been telling the truth about everything else. That didn’t square with the vulture image. But then: what? She needed to know. After all, her mother as a broodmare?

Skip all the intermediate steps and wrap it in conventionality, so as not to shock Huey - or her mother. "So he wanted you to marry a Malfoy and have Malfoy kids?"

"Well, initially, yes, but of course there wasn't one available, besides which I would never have married Draco, and Abraxas accepted that. But, and this shows his true character, he kept the spell in the place, just in case someone else tried to abduct me."

"Abraxas?"

Her mother coloured. "Mr Malfoy."

He plans to use her as a broodmare and still she calls him by his first name?

She must stamp on this. "His true character? He was determined to save you for the Malfoys, no matter what? Nobody else was allowed to abduct you but him?"

"Rosie, you’re being deliberately negative. The people who were going to abduct me were the Goyles and the Lestranges. Need I say more?"

No. The Malfoy rep was dark, but theirs was a full order darker. If it was true. "How do you know?"

"Mr Malfoy told me."

Rose rolled her eyes.

"No, Rosie. They had attempted to put their abduction spells in place at the flat. He recognised their spell signatures. And yes, I do believe him. I know you think I'm naïve, Rosie, but he hasn’t lied to me yet. Though he has admitted to not telling me all of the truth."

"Not naïve, Mum, just a bit too trusting sometimes. Just a bit too ready to believe the best of people. He’s a Slytherin and, worse, a Malfoy, and that’s the ground point. That’s from where you have to start looking at his likely motivation. That’s what Ginny and uncle Harry would do."

"Well, Rosie, that's just what they did do. If you have finished interrogating me about Mr Malfoy, we can move on to that."

Selective breeding

Chapter Notes

Update 30.3.18
"Way to go, Mum," say Hugo, and Rose glared at him. "You can boss me around, Rosie, because I'm your kid brother. But now you're bossing Mum around."

"Only because she needs it, Hugo. You and I are all she has now. We must look after each other."

"Oh Rosie," and her mother reached out and pulled her and Hugo into a hug. "I love you both so much."

"And we love you, Mum, and that's why I'm interrogating you. Bad things have happened, and we don't want any more."

Her mother wiped away tears and said, "Then let me get on, tell you about my illness, get the bad news over. That evening, after dinner, Mr Malfoy told me I had been ill, that he had taken me to St Mungo's, and that I had undergone treatment there, was now convalescing and must stay until I was well. Healer's orders."

Oh yes? "What treatment? What was the illness? Is that why you look so young, Mum?"

"Yes, that's why, apparently. He wouldn't tell me what the treatment was or the illness, but I later found out it was cancer."

"Mum!"

"It's cured, Rosie. They were able to treat it at St Mungo's."

"It wasn't serious then?"

"Apparently it was. It was widespread, but they were able to treat it."

"Really? I thought they hadn't found a cure of cancer. And why was Mr Malfoy involved? He's not a healer, is he?"

"He gave something, not money, but something which made the healing possible. I don't know what it was: he won't tell me."

"Mum, that sounds very suspicious, especially considering how you look now. How do you know it wasn't dark magic?"

"It wasn't, Rosie. I would know, because dark magic leaves one feeling … oily, greasy, inside."

Rose shook her head. "I don't know, Mum. He's a Malfoy, he took you from our home, he's got you here, and he's telling you he's done wonderful things for you. And maybe he has, because suddenly you look like a schoolgirl, almost. But what? And why? What's in it for him? I can't believe all this is legit. I don't trust him. Vulture, no doubt."

"Rosie, he's not telling me. He wouldn't tell me anything. What I know, I know from Ginny letting things slip out, by mistake. And she apologized for it, to him. And before that, neither did I trust him. He told me, that first evening, that I had to stay here and convalesce for three weeks. I refused, point blank. I demanded to go home, right away. But he became quite stressed, actually very stressed, and I agreed to stay provided Ginny could come and examine my medical records."

"You changed your mind because he became stressed?" This was so like her mother.

Her mother sighed. "He's well over a hundred years old, Rosie. Stress at that age …" She shook her head. "And bear in mind that he had been exactly as you've seen him: gentlemanly, polite,
considerate in every way. Anyway, Rosie, I know you’d choose Ginny’s judgement over mine any day."

She was smiling. Rose smiled back. "Maybe I would, about people, Mum, but I’d choose you for my mum any day."

Hugo gave an exaggerated sigh. "Can we get on with the story? The old man persuaded you, over Rosie’s better judgement, and then uncle Harry and Ginny came next day."

"Not ‘the old man,’ Hugo: Mr Malfoy."

“But you just told us he’s over a hundred. He is an old man. More than old, he’s ancient. Older than a yew tree.”

“Yes, but calling him ‘the old man’ sounds disrespectful.”

“I bet uncle Harry wasn't respectful,” said Rose.

"You’re right there. He and I had … a set-to because he was so rude to Mr Malfoy. But after he and Ginny had seen my records, he was completely different, much more polite, almost deferential."

"Deferential? Uncle Harry? I've never seen him be deferential to anyone, not even the Minister. What do your records say, Mum?"

"Well, that's just it. I'm not allowed to see them."

"What! That old … Mr Malfoy won't let you see your own records? How can he stop you?"

"Legally, he can't. But it's not only him. Ginny and Harry don't want me to see them either. But Ginny let slip that I had cancer, and that it was serious. And he did something to fix it for me, something significant. I know that, because of the way Ginny reacted to Mr Malfoy when she came back from looking at them.” She shook her head.

"Well?"

"Well, first she had a go at me for not seeing a healer and for not telling her that I hadn’t, when I was so ill. I’d told her what I told you and Huey, Rosie, that I was seeing a healer, though I wasn’t. Then, when Mr Malfoy agreed with her, she turned on him. She started poking him in the chest with her finger, like … like you might do to Huey, Rosie. As if she had known him for years. Actually, it was rather funny. Mr Malfoy is so formal, so stately, almost, and here Ginny was prodding him, telling him off. He was so surprised. I don’t think anyone had ever dared do that to him before.

“She was accusing him of jeopardising my recovery by threatening to go away, as far as I could make out. And he apologised, and said he would not have done it, and that it would have hurt him more than me, but of course it all made no sense because I didn't know what they were talking about. And then, if you can believe it, Ginny put her arms around him and hugged him, then kissed him, all in front of Harry, who just stood by and watched." She gave a girlish giggle. Rose stared at her. She'd never heard her mother giggle like that. Never. She sounded … so young, so light-hearted. "And scowled, you know, like Harry does."

Rose giggled too. "Oh yes, uncle Harry scowls beautifully," then looked and added, "Like Huey is doing now," and they burst into laughter.

"You’re both being silly," said Hugo, scowling even more, and that set them off again.
"Sorry, Huey, sweetheart," said Hermione. "You're right. We'll try to be sensible."

It was wonderful to have her mother like this, so relaxed, so blithe, so free from care. Rose was so used to her being tired and restrained and worried. She'd never seen her like this; wouldn't have believed it possible. Could something so light and joyful come from dark magic? Surely not. And if not, how had it been achieved, and what was the old man's involvement?

"Mum," said Rose, "if there is something serious in your records, you should see them. And find out what Mr Malfoy did."

Hermione shook her head. "I can't. I promised Mr Malfoy that if he let Ginny see them, and she agreed with what he said, then I wouldn't insist on seeing them myself. And she did agree, and so did Harry."

"So Ginny and uncle Harry came here, saw you with the … saw you with Mr Malfoy and looked at your records. Then Ginny hugged and kissed Mr Malfoy, while uncle Harry watched. Sorry, Mum, but it sounds to me like you've all been spelled. Imperiused. I think, I really think you must come away with us when we go."

"Rosie, I can't. I promised Mr Malfoy I would stay for my convalescence. And both Ginny and Harry said I must stay. We haven't been spelled, Rosie, I'm sure. Ginny and Harry went back to St Mungo's, and checked my original medical records there, and spoke to the healers. If the two sets of records hadn't been the same, they would have been back here like a shot."

"They could still be under an Imperius. And so could you."

"Oh, Rosie. How can I convince you? Think about it. Harry Potter, under an Imperius curse? They couldn't even put him under one when he was at school. He fought it off, the only one in the class who could. He even threw off Voldemort's Imperius, later that same year. And now he is a mature man, a trained and experienced auror. Is it likely?"

"Well, maybe not. But there are so many unanswered questions."

"My suspicious daughter. I think we just have to trust a little. Harry, Ginny, Mr Malfoy. I wish you could get to know him a little: I'm sure you'd like him."

She was sure she wouldn't, particularly if he had designs on her mother. "Did uncle Harry and Ginny like him?"

"You wouldn't believe it, but even before Ginny saw my records, she seemed to have a rapport with Mr Malfoy."

Well, if that didn't show she was spelled … Ginny, who had nearly been killed, twice, by this man's son's actions. How could her mother be so naïve! She shook her head.

"No, Rosie, I know what you're thinking. If you had seen them when they first arrived … Believe me, you wouldn't have thought they'd been spelled. Harry grabbed my arm, and was all for dragging me away there and then. Ginny was supporting him. Both of them were bad-mouthing Mr Malfoy, Harry threatening lawsuits. They both believed I'd had dark magic done to me, and was being spelled into compliance. They wanted to get me away from him, to take me to St Mungo's, and get me examined there. I had to argue really forcibly to be allowed to stay. No, don't shake your head, Rosie. I was tempted to go with them, I really was, but Mr Malfoy and I had an agreement. Harry and Ginny were very, very reluctant to do what I wanted. But then Mr Malfoy said how impetuous Gryffindors were, and Ginny said that was true, and then she saw the glow
and after that, her attitude—” Hermione stopped abruptly.
Rose stared at her mother. "What glow?"

"It was ... nothing, Rosie. I didn't mean to mention it."

"Mum."

"Rosie, it's nothing to do with this. It's not relevant."

Oh yes? "Ginny saw something which changed her mind about Mr Malfoy, and it's not relevant?"

"No, it's not. Not to the trustworthiness of Mr Malfoy. It was my records that changed her mind, not... anything else."

"It's relevant to something else then, that affects you, and affects him. And you don't want to tell me about it. Why, Mum?"

"Oh, Rosie. Can't we leave it? Really, it's not important."

No way. This was the key, for sure. "It's so ‘not important’, Mum, that it changed Ginny's attitude towards a man from a Death-eater family. It’s so ‘not important’ that you are spending more time avoiding telling us than you would be in telling us. What affects you, affects us, Mum, as you told us earlier."

"Rosie, you'll just … you'll just jump to the wrong conclusion, like Ginny and Harry did."

"I certainly will now, if you don't tell me."

"All right then, I'll tell you. But just remember: it's nothing. A sort of light, a glow, occurs at the contact point when … when Mr Malfoy and I touch."

What! "When you touch?"

"Mum," said Hugo, "why are you going red?"

"Because your sister is grilling me, Hugo, over hot coals. Yes, Rosie. At certain, predetermined times, in a stylized way. Mr Malfoy is an Edwardian gentleman. When we go to dinner, he offers his arm, and I lay my hand on his arm. That is what Edwardian ladies and gentlemen did. That’s it, and that’s all of it. And Ginny saw that, and-"

Stylized? Oh, sure. But the glow: it couldn’t be … it must be something else. It had to be. Had to be! “A glow left by moving light beads?”

Her mother stared at her. “Yes. Two of them, trailing coloured threads.”

His and her oculi with trailing caudae. Escape hatch one closes.
“Do the threads make the glow?”

“Yes, they do. A fine mist of different colours.”

The pluvium. Escape hatch two closes. “Do the colours change?”

“Sometimes they get very bright, especially when I feel-”. Her mother stopped, reddening.

Rose hadn’t meant that, but her mother’s answer told her all she wanted to know: or rather, all she didn’t want to know, but had to find out. Brightness fluctuating in parallel with intensity of emotion was a hallmark. She closed her eyes. No, this couldn't be true, hallmark or not. Not with the vulture. Please, please!

“Rose, you’ve heard of this before. What is it? Is it bad?”

Bad? How could she be asking? But it was time to stop beating about the bush. “Mum, you’re not telling me that you and this man create an amaura together, are you? You are not, are you?” She couldn’t be, of course, otherwise she’d have said so.

"What's an amaura?"

What?! "Are you serious? Mum, everyone - well, every girl and woman, anyway, from age eleven upwards - knows what an amaura is. Every teenage girl dreams of finding a boy with who she will create an amaura."

Hugo groaned, and she turned on him and snapped, “Go throw pebbles at the water, Hugo. This is girl talk.”

“Yuck. Let me out of here!” He got up, said, "Yell when the ‘yuck’ is over,” and ran towards the loch.

“Mum, you must have heard of it. Didn’t the girls talk about the amaura at Hogwarts, when they hung out? They talk about it all the time now. Haven’t you read about it? The love-light?”

Her mother’s face reddened even further. "I hung out with Harry and your father, when I wasn't in the library. Nobody ever talked about it to me, and I never came across it in any of my books."

“Not schoolbooks, Mum, you won't find it there. But TeenWitch Weekly?Teena?”

"Rosie, I never read that sort … those magazines."

"All work and no play, Mum. Well, as you describe it, it sounds like the amaura."

"Rosie, what does it show, what does it mean? Though I'm not sure I want to know."

A bit late for that. If it was there, it was there, a part of you. You couldn’t walk away, just like you couldn’t walk away from who you were. No matter who it was with. You could reject it, she supposed, but it would be like … like cutting off a piece of your heart, like someone close to you dying. You’d think about it, mourn it, for the rest of your life.

"All sorts of things, Mum. It shows compatibility of personalities; it shows the potential for a fulfilling love partnership; it shows … well, in short, it shows you are soulmates. It's incredibly rare."

"Oh, I knew I didn't want to know! Rosie, he’s a hundred and nine. How can we be soulmates!" She put her face into her hands. "I didn't ask for this. My life is complicated enough as it is."
Couldn’t it be something else, Rosie?’”

Could it? It would be wonderful if it was. But Rose knew of nothing else even remotely like the amaura. It could not be faked, so they said, and that information came from a more reliable source than TeenWitch. Still, if a Malfoy was involved … “In the anti-clockwise cauda, the braided tail, what colours are thickest and brightest? And in the pluvium, the falling mist?”

“The brightest thread is usually yellow and the mist yellow-green.”

So he felt a warm respect for her, and offered her support. Exactly what her mother would be yearning for, after her life with Father. So it could be a spontaneous response generated by his perceptions of her needs. But equally, it wouldn’t take the discernment of McGonagall to realise what her mother’s needs were likely to be, and falsify colours to match. So this could go either way.

“Though it does vary, Rosie. Yesterday, after Narcissa’s visit, the yellow was exceptionally bright, but the mist was blue.”

“Narcissa Malfoy? The ice queen? You saw her? Alone?”

Hermione smiled. “She’s not Lucrezia Borgia, Rosie. We walked and talked for hours. She’s not at all as we think. She’s … a good woman, Rosie.”

Oh? A ‘good’ Malfoy? Her mother was overly trusting, but if they’d talked for hours … Hermione was not blind. Still, they weren’t discussing the ice queen. “You were giving him advice, Mum?”

“Yes. About Narcissa. He was very grateful.”

“He would be, Mum.”

Her mother looked at her. “You mean he was pretending?” She shook her head emphatically. “He wasn’t, Rosie.”

“Mum, I’m trying to see this ‘glow’ can be anything else.”

“I see that, Rosie, but you can rule out anything that requires Mr Malfoy dissembling or being underhand in any way. It would go against everything he believes in. He would never lie to me, Rosie.”

Right. High esteem, absolute trust: tick box for amaura. Defensive, using his personal name, standing by him, showing loyalty: tick box for amaura.

“The clockwise light bead colours, mum: were the blue and yellow threads thick and bright? Was the mist violet?”

Her mother looked at her, her head on one side. “Clockwise is me, is it? Well, Rosie, as a matter of fact, on one occasion both light beads had all those colours.”

Esteem and loyalty from him too? “What occasion was that, Mum?”

“Oh,” and her mother blushed. “I mentioned it to you, Rosie. When Ginny and Harry came, and I wanted to go with them. Mr Malfoy said we had an agreement that I would stay. I said I could come back. He said, Yes, I could, but he wouldn’t be here, because I would have betrayed his trust.”
“It sounds a tense scene, Mum.”

“He took my hands when I agreed to stay. Blue and yellow threads entwined, both thick and bright, as you said. And shedding violet mist.”

He’d be a cool schemer if he could fix that under stress and at a moment’s notice. “Anything else, Mum? Were the light beads moving fast?”

“They were racing around like meteors, Rosie. Oh, and a white light was shining between the threads and the violet mist had shiny white specks in it.” At Rose’s widening eyes, Hermione said, “Oh, is that bad, Rose? We had that on the first day, too.”

The vena cordis thread and pluvium? No, not bad at all, if you want cast iron proof that you are falling in love. And manifesting on the day you meet? This could be part of a TeenWitch romance: ‘Love at First Sight.’ Except for the male protagonist: that would be a twist too far and too dark for any schoolgirl magazine.

But the evidence was mounting up. “Mum-”

“Rosie, this could mean friendship, couldn’t it? Friendship has many of the relationship aspects of … love. An exceptional friendship, Rosie? Couldn’t it be that we are just … friends?” Her mother was all but pleading.

Friends. Half the girls at Hogwarts trying to convince themselves that they created an amaura with someone, and here was her mother, with the real thing, the real thing and with a first-day love vein, trying to convince herself the opposite.

“Friendship does not produce an amaura, Mum.”

“Are you sure? Never?”

“Uncle Harry is an exceptional friend, Mum. Have you ever felt this with him? When you touch, what you feel and how intensely?”

A pause, then her mother shook her head. “No.” A whisper.

“The feelings are the acid test, Mum. The amaura just reflects them. So: what did you feel when he touched your arm the first time, when you ... trusted him?”

Her mother just shook her head.

"Well?"

"Oh dear. I felt safe, Rosie. I felt protected and cared for. Like wrapped in a blanket with a storm raging outside. And I felt … respected and valued. I feel like that whenever I’m with him.”

"Then that’s your answer. Oh, Mum,” and she took her mother in her arms. It was her answer too, and she must rethink her image of the vulture: Soulmates meant compatible souls: pure and innocent and true could not be compatible with sullied, predatory and treacherous. Even if he was the Malfoy patriarch and a thousand years old.

Hermione rested her head on her shoulder. “Rosie, what am I going to do?”

Her mother needed her. She must put her own feelings to one side and focus on helping. How? Encourage her mother to explore her feelings a little? Start gently. “You never felt like this with
Father?"

Another pause, then another slow head shake. Then, "Well, of course, I did feel loved and looked after and valued at the beginning of our marriage, but there was never any glow. You and Hugo were created in love, Rosie, you must never think otherwise."

"Of course not, Mum, I wasn't thinking of that. So, do you feel - sorry, I can't avoid the L-word - do you feel love for Mr Malfoy." **However unpalatable the thought was.**

"No, Rosie, no! Of course not! How could I! He's a hundred and nine. How could I, it's just not possible."

She couldn’t agree more, but saying so wouldn’t help. "Mum, I don’t know if age comes into it. If you love him, you love him." Was that true? She didn’t know: the whole situation was too bizarre. What she did know was that an amaura was a stamp of assurance like an elephant’s foot coming down.

The answer was a wail. "Oh, Rosie, don't say that! You've got to support me. I can't fight myself and you."

Denial with a capital D. She tightened her hug. "Mum, you’ve always told us: start with the truth, not with what you want the truth to be. Then work from there. That's what you've got to do."

“Rosie, I can't love him, I can't. And he doesn't want it. When Ginny suggested something like that to him, he implied it was out of the question, just not possible. And both yesterday and today, especially …”

Oh? He was in denial too? Well, that said something for him: not just a predatory male then. Though of course the soulmates thing had already told her that. Still, they were left in the crazy situation where none of them, including her, wanted the relationship that inexorable fate was driving them into. Or rather, her mother and the patriarch said they didn’t want it. They were in denial, stuck in the mud, going nowhere. It was she, Rose, who had to drive this thing, to find a way forward to whatever solution made her mother happiest. As far as she was able, anyway: she couldn’t imagine that the Malfoy patriarch would pay much attention to what a sixteen-year-old Weasley girl had to say. Still, and she had a sinking feeling in her stomach as she realised, she’d have to speak to him.

But she had to, anyway: her mother was here, in his hands, and no way was Rose going to leave her here unless she felt her mother was safe. So she had explore that as well as the amaura. It wouldn’t be the most fun session she’d ever had. She’d speak to Winky first, though, dig a little as to the who and the why and the what.

First though, was her mother. She was floundering, and Rose must give her a firm place to stand. That meant facing the truth. Not full on, but by chipping away a little bit of the denial. "Mum, can you admit to yourself that you care for him? A little?"

The answer was a whisper. "Yes, I can do that. I do care for him. More than a little."

"Then let's start from there, and see what happens."

"All right." Then a half sob, half laugh. "This wasn’t meant to happen. I was going to be the strong mother, helping my children come to terms with the loss of their father. Instead I'm crying on my daughter’s shoulder."

"And your daughter is very happy to have her mother open her heart to her. I love you, Mum."
"Oh, Rosie. You and Huey mean the world to me. Oh dear, life is so complicated."

"Mum, your life is going somewhere now. Before, it wasn’t."

"But where? It’s like being swept off in a tornado, Rosie, being buffeted back and forth, and going goodness knows where."

This was probably part of the problem. Her mother planned everything, organised everything, was always in control. Here, she wasn't, and, with everything else that was happening, was frightened. Still, Rose had to agree with But where? One thing was clear though: this uncertain where looked a thousand times better than the where her mother had been in. “Just take it one step at a time, Mum. And you’ve got me now. If you need me, just send an owl and I’ll come.”

“I can’t do that. You’ve working for your Newts. And Professor McGonagall wouldn’t take kindly to me asking you to visit every second day.”

“Newts are next year, Mum. And you’d be surprised at what McGonagall would take kindly to, where you are concerned.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. You are special to McGonagall.”

“Really? She never showed it: she was always taking points off me.”

“That probably is her way of showing it. She expects you to meet her high standards. She's always taking points off me too.”

"Not for being in the Astronomy Tower at midnight with a boy, I hope."

Well! "Mum, when were you in the Astronomy Tower at midnight with a boy?"

"Getting rid of Hagrid’s Hungarian Horntail with Harry."

"Oh yes, I forgot. No, nothing so exciting or dramatic. You three had all the fun. No, McGonagall takes points off me for silly things like jinxes."

"But why do you think I am special to her?"

“I’m not allowed to say."

Her mother gave a wan smile. "Everybody seems to have don’t tell Hermione secrets. Now we better call Huey back, for I’ve got something else to tell you both.” Then, at Rose’s look of alarm, she said, "Oh, nothing like what we’ve been talking about, and nothing that we can't replace." She stood up, and waved and called to Hugo.
Hugo ran up and said, “Yuck all finished?” and Rose glared at him.

“Not ‘yuck,’ Huey,” said Hermione, “just personal talk that interests girls and women, and not boys. Now, I told you that there was an intruder in the flat, when Mr Malfoy’s spell brought me here. He was actually more than intruder, he was an arsonist. He set the flat on fire, and everything was destroyed."

"Oh, Mum, everything?” said Rose. “My DVDs, my laptop, all my clothes? My Cloud-Nine T-shirts, my Converse trainers?"

“What about my Nimbus 2000, Mum?”

"I'm so sorry. Yes, everything. Clothes, shoes, books, DVDs, your Nimbus, everything. Even my wand. But we can replace everything."

Rose looked at her mother. "Really? Can we afford it? And anyway, we haven't got a home to put anything in."

"Well, sweetheart, we do have a home to put anything and everything in. A big house, in London, in Richmond, up on the hill. George has given it to us. And also a lot of money, and he’s given me a job in his company, as a director."

Rose stared at her. "Really? All that? Why?"

Her mother blushed a little, and said, "We are his family, Rosie, and he loves us."

Us? Or her? First the old man, now George? George would have her vote, that was for sure. He’d always been sweet on her mother. But he wouldn’t have the amaura. The amaura was a stamp of approval that towered over everything else. If two people had the amaura, that was it. Hatches closed on all other options, no more debate.

"Does that mean I can have a new broomstick?” said Hugo. "A Firebolt Mark V?"

"Well, I don't know about a Firebolt, you'll have to ask Dad, er, sorry, Father, or uncle Harry about what to get, but I think a Firebolt might be a bit too powerful for an eleven-year-old."

"Rosie has one, and she's a girl."

Rose turned on him. "And just what difference does that make, Hugo Weasley?"

"None, I s’pose," he muttered.

She glared at him, then said, "Mum, it's lovely that George has given us this, but what I don't understand is: why now? We’ve been living in the Brixton flat for years, all my life. I'm very grateful and all that, but why not years ago?"

Hermione shifted in her seat. "Well, actually, he did offer, they all did, my parents, Dad’s family, years ago, even before we moved into the Brixton flat, to help us. But Dad said no. He was the father and he must provide for us, for his family."

"But he didn't. I mean, he did, because we always had enough to eat, and clothes and stuff. But we never had enough money to move out of the flat, into a proper home. I never brought friends home,
Mum, it was too embarrassing. Susie with her big house in Dulwich Village, me in the flat above the store? I did it once, and I saw how her mother looked around. Of course, she wasn't a witch, so she didn't know who you were."

Hermione looked down. "I remember that too. I'm really sorry, sweetheart. I know it was hard for you. We did our best. We never really intended to bring you up in a flat."

"Oh, Mum, I'm not blaming you. I know you did your best. But Father …" She shook her head.

“Susie?” said Hugo, “Was she Joe’s sister? The stuck-up one? The one who called me that bad word?”

“What bad word?” said Hermione.

“And her mum told Joe not to play with me. But then she changed her mind.”

Hermione looked from Hugo to Rose. “I never heard about this.”

“You didn’t need to, Mum,” said Rose.

“Why? If someone is snubbing my children, I want to know about it. I could have done something about it.”

“That’s why you didn't need to, Mum,” said Hugo. ”Rosie did.”

"Rosie did what?” Then Hermione's eyes widened. "Her car kept breaking down outside the school? And she was always being caught in the rain after visiting her hairdresser? Cecelia Braithwaite? Rosie, was that you?"

"Nobody snubs my brother."

"Oh, Rosie. She almost had a breakdown, the poor woman. She went from Bond Street-mummy to Mrs Mopp in a matter of weeks. All the other mothers began avoiding her."

“She pinched us so I pinched her.”

"Rosie, that’s … that’s appalling. You can't carry on like that, just interfering in people’s lives. I spend years trying to get Muggle protection laws into place, and my own daughter … You know, it got so bad that one morning she came with her cardigan all misbuttoned. I helped her and took her to coffee afterwards. She was pathetically grateful. She poured out her soul, about how life seemed to be conspiring against her, how she was worried about … so many things. And afterwards she told me that that morning with me had been a turning point, that after that her life looked up in every way.”

“I know.”

“You know what?” Hermione’s eyes widened. "Rosie, the buttons? It wasn't you, was it?”

"I knew you would try to help her, Mum. So I gave her a chance to redeem herself."

"Rosie, you used your own mother? You manipulated us both?” She shook her head, smiling ruefully.

"Well, it was to a good end, Mum. She wasn't a shallow snob after that."

Hermione looked at her. "You know, that's exactly what Mr Malfoy would have done: sort it out in
his own dubious way, scorning authority, using a tit-for-tat strategy, manipulating people to get the result he wanted. Very unethical, very unscrupulous … and very effective. Rosie, you must promise me you will never do that again."

"What, jinx people secretly?"

"Yes. Do you promise?"

"Certainly, Mum."

Hermione looked at her, narrow eyed. "Rosie!"

"Yes, Mum?"

"Rosie, you agreed too easily. That means you have a trick up your sleeve."

"'Cos she has, Mum," said Hugo. "You said secretly. She doesn't do it secretly, not any more."

"Flippy flappy tongue, Hugo," said Rose. "Next time you want Potions help, don't come to me."

"Fine, I'll go to Malfoy."

"You will not!"

"Shall I come to you then?" said Hugo, grinning.

Rose glared at him, then turned to her mother. "Mum, I promise I'll behave morally, if not ethically, and I'll do my best not to bring our name into disrepute."

Hermione sighed. "Oh, Rosie, I know you'd do that anyway, so that's no concession at all. But you're almost an adult now, so I'll have to trust you to behave responsibly. And as far as our name goes, you can’t do much worse that I am, now. Attitudes towards divorce are much more conservative in our world than in the muggle world. You may get some fallout at Hogwarts."

"Don't worry, Mum. We can handle it, Hugo and I."

"Will you let me know if you can't?"

"Of course, Mum. Don't worry so. You have enough on your plate as it is. If we need help, we'll yell. All right?"

“All right. So, when next you come home, it will be to Richmond Hill. We can go around from room to room, and decide how to furnish them. Harry tells me the decorators are in there now, but if you want to change anything, you can. We can sit down with catalogues, and visit showrooms."

"That’ll be fun, Mum. Can we invite Ginny? She's good at this sort of thing."

"Rosie, I wouldn't dream of doing it without Ginny."

"Mum," said Huey, "Can I paint my walls in Chudley Cannons… no, no, I don't support them any more, in Puddlemere United colours?"

"Huey, you can paint your walls any colour you like. Yellow with black stripes, like the Wimborne Wasps."

"Yuck. That’s a girls’ team. How can I support them!"

"Uncle Harry does."

"Uncle Harry's uncle Harry. I'm just a kid."

"Remember that, Hugo," said Rose. "Mum, it's really lovely that you have a place to go to when you leave here. And you mustn’t wait for us before you furnish it. You and Ginny must go ahead. Now, Mum, I’d like to see Winky. Alone, if I may."

"Oh. All right. You’re really taking charge, aren't you, sweetheart."

"I've been worried about you for some time, Mum, and I didn't do anything about it. I should have. I don't want to make that mistake again."

"Oh, Rosie, you couldn't have stopped anything happening. Not with Dad, anyway. The die was cast there years ago, even before you were born. I can see that now."

"No, I couldn’t have changed anything, but I could have been there for you, especially this last holiday. We could have sat down and talked. It would have helped, I’m sure. I was selfish, and self obsessed."

“Rosie, you're a teenager. Hogwarts is the centre of your life now, and you’re building relationships with your own generation which will be lifelong. Naturally your own affairs absorb you. Anyway,” and she smiled, “mothers are supposed to be there for their children, not the other way around.”

Rose shook her head. "It's two-way, like you said love was, Mum. Friends come and go, but family is forever. I took you for granted, and neglected you."

"Rosie," said Hugo, "if you saw this Dad thing coming, and Mum ill and all that, why didn't you tell me?"

"Huey, I knew Mum was ill, but I didn't realise how bad it was. I saw things were … not good between Mum and Father, but I hoped it would blow over, that things would improve. Anyway, what could you have done?"

"Dunno, but you should have told me."

"Huey, it would just have stressed you out, and done no good. I'm going to speak to Winky. Why don't you and Mum take a walk next to the lake."

"Yes," said Hermione, getting up. "I saw some good skimming pebbles. Scorpius can bounce a pebble seven times apparently. Let’s see how many you can do."

“Malfoy?” said Rose. “When did you see him, Mum?”

“Oh, the day before yesterday. He came to tea after his great-great-aunt’s funeral.”

“So that's why he wasn’t at Potions. But he was back yesterday morning. He was staring at me in Charms. I jinxed him to teach him a lesson.”

“Rosie, you can’t go round jinxing people for little things like that. Anyway, he was probably looking at you because he’d just seen me.”

“Then he deserved the jinx for not telling me. Anyway, it was just a little jinx, though I made sure
he knew it was mine."

"Are you on speaking terms with him, Rosie?"

"He would be if she’d let him," said Hugo. "Right now he's happy to be on jinxing terms. Not that he dares jinx her."

Rose took out her wand and pointed it at Hugo. "Flippy flappy tongue again, Hugo."

"No magic around Mum, remember, Rosie? Come on, Mum."

"In a moment, Huey, we'll just see Winky first." Hermione picked up the little bell and rang it.

Winky came hurrying up from the cottage, and Hermione said, "Winky, I believe you know my daughter Rose. This is my son Hugo."

Winky bowed her head. "Miss Rose, Master Hugo, Winky is happy to see you visiting Miss Hermione at Bansith Hall. What can I do for Miss Hermione?"

"Rose said she'd like to chat to you, Winky. Is that all right?"

"Of course, Miss Hermione. I am happy to chat to Miss Rose."

"Thank you, Winky. Hugo and I will go for a walk while you chat."

"Winky is sure that Miss Hermione has not forgotten that she has an appointment with Miss Healer Patil, and is expected in the small drawing room."

"Oh. Oh dear, yes, I had forgotten. Hugo …"

"The master has asked Jacobus to show Master Hugo how to cast for flyfishing. Jacobus is waiting at the lochside," and Winky gestured to where a small figure was standing holding two slender rods.

"Oh, that is thoughtful of Mr Malfoy. That's something you always wanted to try, Hugo. Off you go. Rosie, I'll come and find you both when I've finished. The checkup shouldn't take long. I feel so well."
A delicate cross-examination

Winky turned to Rose as Hermione hurried off. “Winky is working on an outfit for Miss Hermione to wear to dinner tonight with the master. Would Miss Rose like to come and sit with Winky in Bansith Cottage?”

“Yes, of course, Winky. I should like that very much. You won’t find it too distracting if we chat at the same time?”

“Not at all, Miss Rose, though from time to time Winky’s mouth may be full of dressmaking pins.”

Rose laughed. “I’m sure we can work around those, Winky.”

The cottage was as chocolate boxy inside as out. Though perhaps that term was a little frivolous to describe an ancient cottage where everything was for function and not effect. Hewn wooden beams supported the low ceiling, the great oak lintel over the fireplace was stained with smoke, the white limewashed walls were rough and uneven. The furnishings were not cottagey, though: delicate chairs, a lady’s writing bureau, a settee upholstered in a tan leather, a coffee table. They must have come from a higher social stratum, brought in from the Hall. But with wood dark with age, carvings worn and damaged with generations of use, they looked of the same era. What era? Jacobean, Mum had said. When was that? Early sixteen hundreds?

And … a cat, presumably not Jacobean. She appeared at an internal door and looked at Rose.

“This is Miss Sash, Miss Rose,” said Winky. She turned to the cat and said, “Miss Rose is Miss Hermione’s daughter, Miss Sash.”

Rose had never been formally introduced to a cat before. She held out a finger for Miss Sash to smell, then stroked her as she pushed her head into Rose’s hand. Her fur was very silky.

“Miss Sash is the Bansith cottage cat, and she is looking after Miss Hermione.”

“Oh.” Rose did not quite know how to take that, but she knew that elves were always literal. “That is nice of her.”

“It is her vocation, Miss Rose. If you stay here, she will look after you. But only women, and of course, children. She does not like men in her cottage. Please sit on the settee, Miss Rose, then we can chat.”

As soon as Rose was seated, Miss Sash sprang onto her lap and settled down. Rose began stroking her and was repaid by the soothing rumble of purring.

Winky laid a white cloth down over the coffee table. Then she sat down on the floor, spread a pair of trousers on the cloth and started stitching.

“Oh! That’s for Mum? What a lovely material.” It was a black velour, printed with black daisies.
Winky was stitching around the petals, embossing the pattern.

“Yes, Miss Rose. Miss Hermione likes wearing jeans,” and Winky wrinkled her nose. “Winky cannot bring herself to make jeans for Miss Hermione yet, so is starting with a trouser suit for evening wear. With evening trousers, Miss Rose, Winky can at least tailor them to fit Miss Hermione and to look feminine.”

“More than just feminine, Winky. You making them look very stylish.”

“Thank you, Miss Rose. Winky worked with Dubi, Miss Narcissa’s maid, for the first few outfits, because she was not Up-To-Date with fashions, styles, materials and methods. But now Winky is working on her own. Would Miss Rose like to see the jacket and blouse in which Winky will dress Miss Hermione for tonight’s dinner?”

Like a mannequin. Who was the boss here? That was the question which Rose wanted answered. Not between her mother and Winky, but between her mother and the Malfoys. “Yes please, Winky, I would.”

“They are in the wardrobe in the bedroom, Miss Rose. Would you like me to fetch them?”

“Not at all, Winky. I don’t want to disturb your work.”

Miss Sash leapt off her lap before she could move. Tail erect, she led her into the bedroom.

The wardrobe held four dresses. They were encased in cotton dust covers, but even from the little Rose could see they were elegant evening clothes, in burgundy, dark green, black and grey. Next to them, uncovered, hung a black velvet evening jacket with a high collar, covered buttons, turn-back cuffs, a high waist and slightly flared hips with a central back vent. The blouse was white cotton, simple in design, but with a high neck and mother-of-pearl buttons. Wow!

“I don’t think, Winky,” said Rose as she walked back into the sitting room, “that my mother has ever been so well dressed.”

The elf sighed. “Winky had a lot of trouble with Miss Hermione at the beginning. Miss Hermione refuses to accept that she is beautiful, and so does not want to dress appropriately. Winky does not mind what Miss Hermione thinks, but she does mind what Miss Hermione wears. Miss Hermione likes to dress building-site, not soiree.”

Rose grinned. “I believe you, Winky. My mother doesn’t think looks are important, and her tastes have never run to the exotic. But I see you managed to persuade her to your way of thinking.”

The elf raised her eyes from her work and looked at Rose. “Oh, Miss Rose, Winky would never try to persuade her mistress to Winky’s Way of Thinking. All she would do would be to put Other Points of View. But Winky had to put the Other Points of View again and again and again. Especially about heels.”

Rose laughed. “Mum and I argue about heels as well. You wore her down, Winky.”

“Miss Hermione is a lady, and so she must dress like a lady, Miss Rose. But Miss Narcissa wears trouser suits very elegantly, and Miss Hermione will as well.”

Miss Narcissa. That was what this was all about. Whether the Malfoys had spelled her mother. She felt she had sounded out Winky now, and was happy with what appeared to be a straightforward relationship between mistress and maid. Well, not that straightforward, by the sounds of it, with Winky pushing and pulling a reluctant Hermione to make the most of her looks, but at least
nothing underhand.

Would Winky know if her mother was spelled? Probably. Would she tell? This was the question. Free, she would. But was she free? Winky was a very traditional elf and considered freedom a matter of shame. She had taken dismissal from the Crouch family very badly, had felt herself disgraced, and become very demoralised. Hermione’s sympathy and support had helped, once she had approached it from Winky’s viewpoint. Winky’s pride in fighting in the Battle of Hogwarts had gone a long way to restoring her self-respect, but what had really done the trick was Hermione’s acceptance speech at the Order of Merlin Awards. She had arranged for the Hogwarts house-elves to be present, had publicly thanked them, and then had read out the names of the elves who had fought, all ninety-five of them. She had told them that their names would be recorded in the Role of Honour of the Battle of Hogwarts.

So the Hogwarts house elves loved her mother, and none more so than Winky. But if she was in service to the Malfoy family, she would be loyal to them. Only in the most extreme cases would she divulge their secrets - like Dobby had.

Rose’s first step was to find out where Winky’s loyalties lay. She would have to approach it in a roundabout way, for elves were very sensitive about their duties and their employers.

"I was surprised when my mother told me you were here, Winky. Have you been at Bansith Hall long?"

"Oh no, Miss Rose, only one day longer than Miss Hermione."

"Did Mr Malfoy bring you here, Winky? Is he your master?"

"Mr Abraxas is the master, Miss Rose."

"Oh. Then who is your mistress, Winky?"

"Miss Narcissa is the mistress, Miss Rose."

Aha! "Why Miss Narcissa? Why not my mother?"

"Oh, Miss Rose, Miss Hermione would not accept elf-service, everyone knows that. Miss Hermione thinks that elf-service is a Bad Thing. It hurts us, but we love her, so we don't hold it against her."

She hadn’t been expecting this. "But then why is Miss Narcissa your mistress?"

"How else could we arrange for Miss Hermione to have a lady's maid, Miss Rose? I take service with Miss Narcissa, she says: 'Winky, I want you to be lady's maid to Miss Hermione.' That is how we fixed it for Miss Hermione, Miss Rose. Fixing things is what Miss Hermione does. She fixed things for the Hogwarts’ elves. She fixed things for Mr Potter and for Mr Weasley. She fixes things for you, Miss Rose, and Master Hugo. She fixes things for the whole world, Miss Rose. She is so busy fixing things for everybody else, Miss Rose, that she fixes nothing for herself. And nobody else does, Miss Rose."

Rose looked down. Even the house elves knew she had neglected her mother.

"So that is why she needs a lady's maid. And she needed one badly, Miss Rose, really badly. Her clothes, Miss Rose," Winky shook her head. "Winky does not want to go on about it, but … not suitable for a lady, Miss Rose, not at all. Jeans are not the half of it. Tee shirts, off-the-shelf, untailored, clingy, Miss Rose," she looked wide-eyed at Rose. "All right for Street Corner Women,
but for a lady like Miss Hermione? A Bad Thing. And she wanted more, Miss Rose." Winky spread her hands. "Winky had to remind her that she is a lady. That is why she needs a lady's maid. For her it is a Good Thing."

*Street corner women?* Rose fought the impulse to pull at her skirt to make it longer. But … note to self: get rid of all slogan Tee shirts, especially the *Press Gang* tite-fit.

"So Miss Narcissa told you to look after Miss Hermione?"

Winky drew back. "Nobody needs to tell Winky to look after Miss Hermione, Miss Rose. Miss Narcissa knows better than that."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Winky, I didn't mean it like that. I meant that she didn't … give you any special instructions?" *Like compliance potions in the coffee.*

"I have been lady's maid to many fine lady witches, Miss Rose. I need no special instructions at all. Lady’s maid, Miss Rose, covers it for Winky. Winky knows her work. Winky knows her duty."

"Oh, I didn't mean that at all, Winky. I'm sure you do." When in a hole, Rose Weasley, stop digging. Maybe she should just try the direct approach before she affronted Winky further.

"What I was wondering, Winky, was whether Miss Hermione had been spelled." She held her breath: was that too blatant?

"Ah, Miss Rose, I sometimes wonder that too."

*What!* "What do you mean, Winky?"

"Why, Miss Rose, Miss Hermione is so clever, and so brave, and so true, and yet she has these strange ideas about Elf Rights."

Of course! "Oh, I don't think she’s spelled in that, Winky. She just wants you to be able to control what happens to you. She doesn't want elves exploited. She wants elves protected in wizarding law. That's why she is trying to make the Wizangemot pass laws on elf rights."

"We know that Miss Hermione’s intentions are pure, Miss Rose. But elves don't need contracts with their masters and mistresses. They are not a Good Thing."

"Winky, surely they are a good thing. What about Dobby? He was so badly treated by the Malfoys."

"Just by Mr Lucius, Miss Rose. Miss Narcissa used to protect him. And an Elf Contract would not have helped him."

"Winky, a elf contract makes exploitation of elf staff, and particularly abuse, illegal, so that Lucius Malfoy could have been fined or even imprisoned for doing it. That could have stopped him."

"Most masters and mistresses are good to their elves, Miss Rose. They don't need to sign contracts."

"I agree, Winky. The contract is for the bad masters and mistresses. It holds them to account. They will not be happy to sign contracts. But the good masters and mistresses will be happy to sign them, not because their own elves need them, but for other elves, to prevent them from being exploited or hurt." How had she been dragged into a defence of her mother's elf rights campaign?
"I see, Miss Rose. I had not thought of it like that. It is for the bad families, not the good families, but the bad won’t sign unless the good do. So everyone should sign it. I signed an Elf Contract with Miss Narcissa, Miss Rose. She insisted. She said it was a Good Thing. But it was not a Good Thing in one way, Miss Rose, because Miss Narcissa and Winky argued over the wages and the holidays and the hours."

“Oh? That’s not good.” And Narcissa Malfoy was supposed to be ‘a good woman,’ according to her mother.

“Quite, Miss Rose: arguing with the mistress is a very Bad Thing. But Miss Narcissa wanted to give Winky too much wages and too many holidays and too few hours."

Ah. Yes, an elf like Winky may well argue over that. "All right, but surely it's better to get it down in black and white, Winky."

"Not at all, Miss Rose. If it is not Down in Black and White, an elf can always work a few more hours when nobody is looking. If it is Down in Black and White, she can't. She is bound by the Black and White. That is why Winky is working on Miss Hermione’s trousers while talking to Miss Rose. If there had been no Black and White, she could have done it at five o’clock this morning, and given Miss Rose her full attention."

Rose almost laughed, but held it in, for Winky might misinterpret it. "I can see why my mother has to work so hard at this."

"Yes, Miss Rose. Miss Hermione has probably signed a Contract. She used to work elf hours, and now she can't, because of the Black and White. But the elves know that Miss Hermione is pure, so we don't fight it too much. And I will tell Waldi and the others about the Elf Contract, Miss Rose, so they understand that it is a Good Thing too. Do you think Miss Narcissa understands it, Miss Rose? Or should I explain it to her?"

“Er, no, Winky, I think Miss Narcissa understands it well enough.” She could just imagine the scene, the house-elf standing before a seated Narcissa Malfoy, earnestly telling her what a sixteen-year-old Weasley girl had said about elf rights. The ice queen would convey her opinion of Miss Weasley and her presumption with a single raised eyebrow.

But it did appear unlikely, from what she had heard, that Narcissa Malfoy had spelled her mother. Apart from what Winky said about her, the elf’s open manner of speaking held no hint of secrecy.

So that left the patriarch, and that interview would not be like the comfortable little chat she’d just had with Winky. But putting it off wouldn’t make it easier. “Winky, do you think I could see Mr Malfoy?"

“The master will always see family, Miss Rose.”

“Oh. Then he won’t see me?”

Winky looked at her. “Yes, Miss Rose, he will see you. He sees family. You are Miss Hermione’s daughter.”

What! The elves regarded her, or at least her mother, as family to the Malfoys? Hey, not so fast, if you please! But .. it tied in with what McGonagall had said about her Peverell Clock. This was getting as complex as a Gordian knot.

“We will speak to Waldi, Miss Rose, to find out where the master is. Just three more stitches, and I will be finished with this flower. The Elf Contract, Miss Rose,” and she shook her head.
Winky had just cut the thread when a large blond cat appeared on the veranda beyond the French doors.

Immediately Miss Sash stood up on Rose’s lap. The blond cat took a step into the room, and Miss Sash hissed and arched her back. Her dislike of intruding males must extend to her own species.

“No, Miss Sash. Mister Lumpy has come to meet Miss Rose.”

Miss Sash leapt onto the floor, walked stiff legged to the bedroom doorway, turned and stood there, back arched. It was as if she was guarding the bedroom from his intrusion.

The blond cat walked in and leapt up to the coffee table. Miss Sash hissed at him again and Winky whisked the trousers away. “No. Mister Lumpy, Winky does not want your muddy footprints on Miss Hermione’s new trousers. Miss Rose, this is Mister Lumpy, the Bansith tomcat. Mister Lumpy, this is Miss Rose. Miss Rose is Miss Hermione’s daughter. Master Hugo, Miss Hermione’s son, is with Jacobus by the lake, fishing.”

“That’s an unusual name for a cat,” said Rose. She stretched out her hand for him to smell, but did not stroke him, fearing to offend Miss Sash.

“He is an unusual cat, Miss Rose, like his sister. The name is an affection name, a love name. It came about because he get burrs in his fur which then have to be cut out. That is why he looks rather moth-eaten, Miss Rose. And if he imposes on his sister’s forbearance for much longer, he will be losing more fur. Let us go out.”

Hugo and Jacobus were still at the lakeside, but no longer practising casting. Jacobus was - oh dear - untangling a reel of fishing line, and Hugo, undoubtedly the tangler, was skimming pebbles across the water.

Rose counted the splashes: one, two, three … six, seven, eight. Good: Scorpius could do only seven.

“There is Master Hugo, Mister Lumpy,” said Winky.

The cat turned, looked, and hissed.

“Oh,” said Winky. “Miss Rose, your brother does not throw stones at cats, does he? That could be very dangerous. The Bansith cats do not like having things thrown at them.”

“Oh no,” said Rose. “My brother loves cats and would never harm any animal. So don’t worry about Mister Lumpy.”

“I am not worried about Mister Lumpy, Miss Rose. I was worried about Master Hugo. When Mr Lucius was a boy, one of his friends threw a stick at Mister Lumpy. Somehow the stick turned into a boomerang, and returned and took the boy’s eye out.”

“Mister Lumpy does magic?” Besides being at least half a century old.

“Miss Rose, everyone knows animals don’t do magic. But boomerangs are not common in Scotland, and the Bansith cats do not like having things thrown at them. Mister Lumpy, where are you going?”

The cat ignored her and strolled down to the waterside. Hugo saw him coming, ran forward and held out his hand for the cat to sniff, then dropped to his knees and began stroking him.
“Mister Lumpy likes him. And Miss Sash likes you, Miss Rose. The Bansith cats do not allow people they do not like to stroke them. Now let us find Waldi.”
Chapter Notes

Major update to this chapter

Padma and Abraxas were already waiting in the drawing room when Waldi announced Hermione. Padma waved aside her apology, saying, “I was early, Hermione. Mr Malfoy has been updating me. It’s good to see you looking so well.”

“It’s good of you to attend me here, Padma. I’m sure it must be inconvenient.”

“Not at all. I was happy to oblige.”

Oh - Abraxas must have asked her to come.

“Shall we get started?” said Padma. She glanced at Abraxas, and so did Hermione. She had half a mind to ask him to stay, just in case the news was bad.

But he rose and bowed. “Miss Granger, Miss Patil. Please ring should you need me. I shall be in the other drawing room.” He gestured to the little hand bell on the table, turned and walked out.

“There’s nothing to see,” said Padma, “and sometimes a partner is present, but most women prefer the consultation to be private.”

Partner? But Padma ignored her frown.

“It’s easier for me too,” Padma went on. “Having Mr Malfoy here is rather like doing potions with Snape.”

No fond memories there, but it didn’t sound very complimentary to Abraxas. “In what way?”

“You make mistakes just because he’s looking at you. Let’s get started. Ready quotes on; speech mode. ‘Padma Patil, Miss Hermione Granger. Notes on Miss Granger’s recovery, four days’ post op.’ Speech mode off.’” The quill rose, scribbled two lines on the parchment, then hung in the air, ready to continue. Nothing else moved.

“Fine. We’ll do this silently. Non-verbal dictation mode on. Now, if you will stand just here, hands by your sides, quite still, while I do the scan …” Using her wand, she traced the outline of an arched doorway in the air around Hermione, up one side and down the other, then the same from front to back. The quill wriggled across the parchment for five lines, then started a new paragraph. After half a line it stopped, hovering, then retraced its path, erasing the writing.

Was this normal? Hermione glanced at Padma. The healer’s face was blank. “Let’s check with the intuit non-verbal.” Check? Padma took Hermione’s hands in hers and closed her eyes. The quill did not move. After about a minute, Padma opened her eyes again, a slight frown on her face.

“Just a moment.” She turned to the laptop, pressed a few keys and looked at the screen. The frown deepened.
“Is anything the matter?” said Hermione.

“Oh, no, not at all.” The smile seemed forced: obviously something was the matter. “I just want to run the scan again. Just stand straight and quiet again, please.” This time she moved the wand more slowly. The quill hovered, quivering, an ominous exclamation mark. Something was wrong.

Hermione’s heart plummeted. The treatment had not worked. The cancer was still there. She wished she’d asked Abraxas to stay with her. Rose and Hugo: how would they cope without her? She’d have to speak to Abraxas, ask him to arrange the sale of the Richmond house and to set up a trust fund for them. Would he be prepared to be a trustee? This was such a shock. Her wellness – it must have been a false dawn. And where would Rose and Hugo live? Not with Ron and his bimbo! Here? No, how could they, what was she thinking? With Ginny and Harry, of course.

“Well, I’m amazed,” said Padma. “You know you’re clear, of course, but the tumour lesions seem to have healed as well.”

“I’m clear? Clear of the cancer?”

Padma frowned. “Didn’t Mr Malfoy tell you? The post-op … the scans straight after the treatment showed that.”

He knew? Why hadn’t he told her! Or had he? Quite apart from the whole Don’t tell Hermione thing, he’d been trying to play the illness down so as not to alarm her. But yes, he’d said, ‘Not quite just like that, but she certainly cured you.’ And she’d jumped down his throat for being present at all, so put a stop to anything further he’d been going to say.

“Maybe he did. But when you seemed uncertain, I thought …”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you.”

Sorry? Visions of orphaned children standing around a grave, and the woman just says sorry? She glared at the healer. “So I am clear, and healing well, then?” She wanted to be reassured now.

“You are clear, and healing at such a rate I’m revising my estimate of a recuperation period of six weeks to six days.”

“Oh.” Six days. She’d exploded when Abraxas had said three weeks. So the prospect of only six days should fill her with joy. It left her flat. In less than a week she’d be in her new house, looking down at the Thames across the meadows. Healed. Healthy. Financially secure. Free.

And alone. No chats over breakfast. No strolls arm in arm along the lochside. No sharing the thrill of seeing a kingfisher. No-

“Mr Malfoy will be pleased,” said Padma. “Shall we tell him?” and she picked up the little handbell.

Hermione frowned. Calling Abraxas back was her prerogative. Padma was just visiting. And he would be pleased about what? That his charge would be off his hands? She held out her hand, saying, “Yes, I’ll call him. May I have the bell, please?”

“Of course, Hermione,” and Padma passed it to her.
eyes widened, and she said, “Oh, nothing bad,” and Padma said, “Yes, the news is good, Mr Malfoy. Hermione may go on her way in a few days.”

Hermione glared at her. That was the good news? Did Padma have a personal agenda here?

“Indeed? Then Miss Granger’s recovery is going according to plan?”

“Better than according to plan, Mr Malfoy. Her recovery is almost complete.”

Abraxas hesitated a moment, then turned to her, bowed his head and said, “I am happy for you, Miss Granger. Happy that is you are recovered, that you are almost well, that you will soon be able to take up a life of fulfilling, beneficial influence in our world.”

While he remained here?

“She certainly will, Mr Malfoy” said Padma. “Considering the unusual treatment and that we were very much feeling our way with it, the results have surpassed expectations.”

What was this? Unusual treatment? Feeling their way? It all sounded a bit … experimental. Padma’s impersonal terminology didn’t help.

“You may recall my tentativeness at the time, Mr Malfoy,” Padma went on.

She didn’t know what she was doing either?

Not exactly confidence inspiring, all in all. *Who can we try this out on? Oh, here’s Hermione; she’ll do. Now, on which side shall I slice her open, this or that? Anyone have any ideas, or shall we just toss a coin?*

“Padma, does ‘feeling your way’ and ‘tentativeness’ mean the treatment you used on me is not fully developed?”

“Oh no, not at all. The treatment was in use for hundreds of years. It’s proven to work. It’s just that it’s not widely used.”

“And why is that?”

Padma looked at Abraxas, who said, “Miss Granger, may I suggest this comes under the heading of ‘Need to know’?”

She stepped back and turned to face him. “Mr Malfoy, this comes under the heading of Healer-Patient consultation. While I do not wish to breach our Ginny agreement, and while I have every confidence that Padma acted in my best interests, the fact remains that this treatment took place without my knowledge, let alone my consent, and I wish to be reassured on its precedents. This is between my healer and me, Mr Malfoy.”

“Miss Granger, I apologize. You are right. Miss Patil, I will leave you. All I would say is: please remember what we agreed upon. I rely on your discretion.” He rose, bowed to them both, and left the room.
When the door had closed behind him, Hermione said, “Padma, you used some expressions which made me think that the treatment you used on me is not proven, or that you yourself have not had much experience with it. That concerns me.”

“I can understand that, Hermione, but I’m sure I can allay those concerns. The treatment we used is proven, has been used extensively, and is very effective. This is confirmed by your remarkable recovery. But it has fallen out of use. As far as I know, no one has used this treatment in living memory. So neither I nor anyone else has any experience in using it. But the actual procedure is not complicated.”

“Well, all right, but how did you know what to do?”

“One of last practitioners of the treatment left a meticulous record of the procedure. Parvatti and I used her notes.”

“Wasn’t available herself?”

“Not in physical form.”

“Oh. She’s a ghost?”

“No, not a ghost.”

“Padma, you’re hedging. Who was she?”

“Hermione, is that really relevant to your treatment? She died a long, long time ago.”

“What difference does that make? All right, put that to one side for now; the treatment is more important. If it is so effective, why is it no longer used?”

“Because the … certain aspects of the requirements are difficult to fulfil.”

“I don’t understand. Aspects of requirements that were fulfillable so that the treatment was extensively used a long, long time ago suddenly became unfulfillable. How could that be?”

“I cannot help you any further, Hermione.”

Hermione stared at her. “Cannot? Or will not?”

Padma closed her eyes for a moment. “I’m sorry, Hermione, but … will not.”

The stare became a glare. “Is this because of Abraxas? You won’t tell me about the treatment you used on me because of what he said? Because he told you not to?”
Padma’s face crinkled up. “Hermione…” She took a deep breath. “All right. I won’t try to skip around the truth to you - not that you would let me. Yes, Mr Malfoy has impressed on Parvati and me that he does not wish you to know about particular elements of your treatment. But it so happens that I agree. I believe it would have a negative effect on you. If I didn’t, if I believed it would make a beneficial difference to you, I would tell you. I could not live with myself otherwise.”

Oh really? “It sounds as though you’re skipping around medical ethics a little, Padma.” Oh! “That’s it! Ethics have changed: standards are higher now than a long time ago. Practices which were acceptable then are considered unethical now. Is that right?”

Padma winced. “Yes.”

“My treatment was unethical?”

“No, certainly not! The requirements were all fulfilled. I would defend the ethics to any board, to any court in the country.”

Why was she so defensive about it? “So requirements which have been ethically unfulfillable for hundreds of years were ethically fulfillable in my case?”

A pause, then, “Yes.”

“And you won’t tell me what those were?”

Padma closed her eyes. “I will tell you if you demand it. You have the legal right to know. But if I do…” Her voice died away.

She was scared, scared of Abraxas, that was clear. Somehow he had a hold over her. But her attitude also showed that this was the knot holding the unknown. Undo this and the whole thing would spring open. And she, Hermione, had promised Abraxas that she would not do that. She had held to that promise, even though this unknown had been casting a growing shadow. Could she ‘squeeze’ the promise a little, without breaking the skin? And Padma had been pushing her, so she could push back.

“If the ethics are sound and I have the legal right to know...” Padma turned haunted eyes on her, and she relented. “Padma, are you standing in front of an open door through which you feel I should not pass?”

Padma gave a rueful smile. “That sounds like an Abraxas expression. Yes, I am. For several reasons, some of which benefit you, others which benefit others, including Parvatti and me, I admit.”

“All right. I won’t insist.”

Padma rose and hugged her. “Sorry. That was a little unprofessional. But really, for you alone, Hermione, I think, I really think, that is best. You will find out sooner or later – the deed is too vast, too powerful in its own right to remain under a bushel. Like the sun behind clouds. It is there, hidden but still giving… everything. And sooner or later the clouds will disperse, no matter what anyone says or does. But I believe the time is not right, nor the person. It should not be me who tells you.”

“Abraxas?”

“Do you really need me to answer that?” Padma raised her eyebrows at her, then went on.
“Hermione, may we return to the point I was making earlier? Your rate of recovery is unprecedented, even for this treatment. I prescribed the recommended conditions and recuperation period, but something is accelerating the recovery. I’ve seen a similar effect with lovers, but never so—”

*What!* “Mr Malfoy and I are not lovers, Padma. Please be very clear on that.”

“Sorry, bad choice of phrasing.” Padma spread her hands. “How about lovers in the romantic rather than the physical sense?”

What was wrong with the woman! “Padma, we are not *lovers* in any sense of the word. Any sense at all. Put that thought right out of your head.”

Padma’s eyebrows went up. “I see. You do know about the amaura that you and Mr Malfoy generate together, don’t you?”

Hermione glared at her. Was she being deliberately objectionable?

“I am here as your healer, Hermione, in a purely professional capacity. If I am to help you, I have to ask these questions and explore these issues.”

Healers were so full of themselves. But the woman had a point. “All right. I … we noticed the … glow two nights ago. I’d never seen it before.”

“Well, it’s rare, so not many people have actually seen it. But surely you guessed what it was when you did?”

“Padma, I’d never seen it or read about it or even heard of it, before.”

Padma’s eyes widened. “Really? You’d never heard of the amaura? Not even at Hogwarts? But we talked about it, the girls did. Endlessly.”

This was annoying. She was fine with astonishment from her own daughter, but not from an old class mate, especially when it came tinged with pity and condescension. Poor Hermione, so wrapped up in her studies she doesn’t even get time to be a proper girl. “Yes, Padma, really. I didn’t hear about it even at Hogwarts. No one ever spoke to me about it.”

Hermione? I’d as soon speak to a boy about the amaura as a blue-stocking like Hermione.

Padma gave a wry smile. “I think we were a little in awe of you, Hermione, with your drive and dedication. You had your head in your schoolbooks, not girly magazines. Luckily for the rest of us, as it turned out. And I suppose we didn’t ‘talk’ as much as ‘obsess’ about it.”

Hermione relented. "The girls still do, my daughter tells me. Neither of us, Mr Malfoy or I, knew what it was. Rose has just explained it to me. It came as a shock.”

“I can imagine, Hermione. Waking up in a strange place, confused, isolated and alone with Mr Malfoy, then this happens. Something you know nothing about, and in such a powerful emanation. You must have wondered if it was dark magic.”

“I … did. I didn’t trust it at all. But Mr Malfoy reassured me.” Oh-oh. *Trust* was an amaura characteristic, so of course Padma would draw the wrong conclusion. She hurried on. “I realised it didn’t have the foul, oily tang of dark magic. But I still don't know much about it.”

“Nor do we, in any depth. Much of our current knowledge was developed through guesswork, informed guesswork based on observation, but guesswork nonetheless. Only recently has science
and technology begun to play a part. But I can outline our current understanding of the amaura. Would you like me to? Are you sure you want to know?”
The Colours of the Amaura

Chapter Notes

To see the amaura, do a search of images of the veil nebula.

Did she want to know about the amaura? Rose would tell her she had no choice. “I suppose I must. It would be cowardly if I did not.”

Padma smiled. “What a Ravenclaw might describe as prudent, a Gryffindor would call cowardly.”

“I think I’m more Ravenclaw than Gryffindor, actually.”

“Oh, there’s no doubt about that.”

“Oh?”

“My dear Hermione, how far would Harry have got against him without your intelligence and knowledge to back him up?”

*Him?* Someone of Padma’s sense, erudition and status was still afraid to name him? Voldemort would have been pleased with that legacy.

Padma went on. “Ask anyone: you should have been a Ravenclaw.”

Hermione smiled. “You mean: ask any Ravenclaw. And you sound like Mr Malfoy.”

“He thinks you should have been a Ravenclaw?”

“Er … no. He doesn’t think a Ravenclaw could have coped with the mayhem at the Ministry, the zombie snake at Godric’s Hollow, or the smash-and-grab at Gringotts, among other things. No, he goes on about my ‘intelligence.’”

“He may have a point. I mean, he does have a point about your intelligence, obviously, and probably about the other things as well. Seeing the snake emerging from Bathilda Bagshot’s corpse at Godric’s Hollow would have had me in a foetal ball or running screaming down the road, certainly. I would never pretend otherwise. I’m no action-girl, and not particularly brave. But we digress.

“If you’ve only just heard of the amaura, let me give you a little of the background first. It is rare, and it occurs only when lovers touch -”

Hermione’s lips tightened, and she paused. “Hermione, I’m explaining this as I would when giving a lecture on this subject. The word *lovers* conveys the category of people about whom I am speaking to my students instantly and effectively. Even when consulting on a case, the term is acceptable. Most couples welcome the amaura, as it is the hallmark of an exceptional relationship. Fewer than one in a hundred couples have it in visible form. Very few of my clients have shown ambivalent feelings, as you do. Now I can skip around, trying to find terms which won’t cause you … disquiet, but obviously that will detract from what I am trying to tell you. What would you like me to do?”
Lovers meant people who love. She did not love Abraxas. Not … not in that way, that Padma meant. She liked him, felt esteem for him, felt gratitude for what he was doing for her, felt pleasure in his company. She trusted him and she felt caring towards him, she’d agreed that with Rose, and she could accept that meant she felt some affection for him. As he did for her. She would not speculate how much, neither her for him nor him for her. Some was as far as she cared to go. And that was all. She did not feel love, whatever Padma might convince herself. She could not, he was a hundred and nine. A hundred and nine. But, on the other hand, it was pointless and self-defeating if Padma had to ‘skip around’ for impersonal and neutral words. “Padma, please tell it as you see it.

Padma nodded. “I think that is best. I tell it as I see it, you substitute where you feel I misinterpret. I’ll go into the manifestation briefly, because it’s important you get a full picture. The visible part of the amaura is called the nebula, for the obvious reason that, in full flower, it looks like a nebula of stars. When the couple touch, the nebula begins forming, starting as two tiny comets, called cornea, moving in orbits around the touch point, the focus. Each corneum consists of a bead of light, the oculus, trailing a short tail of braided coloured threads, the cauda, which emits a fine, coloured mist, the pluvium. This falls, or rather gravitates, slowly to the touch point.

“The comets fly in opposite directions. When they meet, as they do twice each circuit, they fall into a tight spiral around each other, the knot, then continue on their way. They leave a trace of their passing on each circuit, a fine thread of white light called the filum. As each orbit is slightly offset from the last, these threads form a pattern of parallel lines. Together, in totality, they create a delicate, translucent net of light, the tela. For clasped hands, this takes the shape of a sphere.”

Yes, yes and yes: Padma was describing what Hermione had seen that first evening over dinner, and Rose had used some of the same technical terms. Ginny and Astoria had been gobsmacked when they saw it; Narcissa had tactfully avoided the subject. So everyone - every woman - knew all about it, except of course Miss ‘Nose-in-her-books’ Hermione Granger.

So, no wriggle-room on what it was. Except that …. “Ours was in the shape of a cocoon.” Ours? Watch your word choice, girl!

Padma gave her a brilliant smile. “The clasped arm manifestation is a veil nebula, the most beautiful form.”

Wonderful. Not only did they create an amaura that neither wanted, it was particularly beautiful.

“Let me tell you what the colours mean,” Padma said. “Each comet represents one of the partners, and the threads of each tail represent the benevolences he or she feels towards the other. Each colour represents a different benevolence, and the thickness of the thread the predominance of that benevolence. Similarly, the falling mist represents the benefactions that partner offers the other. The different colours represent different benefactions, and the predominance of one colour reflects the predominance of one benefaction. In a moment I’ll tell you what I mean by benevolences and benefactions. Did your cocoon have a belt?”

“Where the knots were, yes, a bronze colour.”

Padma nodded. “The knot represents reciprocation, how he responds to your love gifts, and you to his. In a fully developed nebula your belt would be pure gold, I’m sure.”

Hermione frowned. Was Padma getting carried away again?

“That’s how I see it, Hermione. Come, I think that gives you an overview of the visible part. Let’s define our terms and move on to interpretation, what it all means. The benevolences are the love sympathies that each feels for the other. They are based on how one partner sees the other, both
emotionally and intellectually, which in turn is founded in - selecting one gender for meaningfulness - her experience of him: how he has treated her, what he has done for her and so on, and the feelings that flow from that. The three primary benevolences are trust, esteem and desire.”

Was this getting too personal again? First love sympathies, then Padma selects the female gender for the one who had received the most - as she, Hermione, had, so very ‘meaningful’ - and then desire? She’d be rambling on about lovers again, next.

She leant forward to speak, and Padma said, “The term desire, Hermione, refers to a emotional response to a psychological need for physical contact. As such it is on a continuum, ranging from a touch to a cuddle to the act of physical love-making.”

All right. Hermione sat back and Padma went on. “Moving on, then: the benefactions are the love gifts which she offers to him other in response to those benevolence feelings. The primary benefactions are kindness, caring, empathy, support, commitment, constancy, tolerance, loyalty, and fidelity. The benevolences are also benefactions: her trust can be a feeling she has for him as well as a gift she bestows on him.”

The gender thing again. Was Padma trying to make a point?

“All right.” Trust with a bucket of cold water hanging over it, ready to douse candy-floss thinking.

“Thank you. Back to the colour wheel then. Desire, we find, is associated, appropriately, with the primary colour red. Esteem, which is respect permeated with warmth, is yellow, and trust is blue. These occur on the colour wheel at 12 o’clock, 4 o’clock, and 8 o’clock respectively.”

Rose, analysing her mother’s simple character with ease, had said one of her most common colours would be blue, representing trust. In his … She thought of the bright yellow glow when she had been counselling him about Narcissa, and her heart warmed to him. He esteemed and valued her. And desire? Had there been there? Yes, she had delighted in his touch and - stop this, girl. You don’t want to be thinking these thoughts. A hundred and nine, remember! Anyway she was taking it all too seriously: guesswork, she’d said, and Padma had agreed.

“The main benefactions lie between them, orange, at 2 o’clock, representing caring; green:
commitment, at 6 o’clock; violet: loyalty, at 10 o’clock. The other elements are also colour mixes, one level down: at 1 o’clock, kindness; at 3 o’clock, empathy; at 5 o’clock, support; at 7 o’clock, constancy; at 9 o’clock, tolerance; and at 11 o’clock, fidelity, that is, faithfulness in all its variants.”

Add woolly to guesswork. “Padma, words like support, constancy, tolerance, loyalty can have a multitude of meanings.”

Padma smiled at her. “Not only can, Hermione, but do. The meanings will vary from couple to couple, from male to female, from person to person. This is because every person has, simply by living and learning, come to associate specific words with specific meanings. So, just as your experiences are different from mine, so will your meanings be different from mine. This individual perception difference is straightforward in origin though complex in effect. When however, we introduce gender differences, and alloy them with the influencing factors of expectations and perceptions of interacting couples, the complexity becomes an order greater. What is more, the meaning will change with time and the development of a couple’s relationship as well.

“Take gender differences and the benefaction support. In general terms, support is providing for, maintaining, assisting, encouraging. To a woman a vital element of this would be physical safety - protection and defense - as well as an environment, physical, social and emotional, in which she feels secure. To a man physical protection would not normally be an expectation; he would hope for an emotional refuge. In most cases, this would be a home, in all senses of the word.

“The male/female element applies to expectations as well. Take constancy, to be steadfast in the relationship. He or she may understand different meanings by the term, but unless his behaviour conforms to her understanding, she will feel that reciprocation is lacking, and that will undermine her constancy towards him.”

This was all common sense. “Padma, aren’t these points rather obvious to anyone who sits down and thinks about them?” She was delivering them as if they were pearls of wisdom.

Padma smiled at her. That was a bad sign, Hermione was learning. It meant that Padma was about to say she was right, then, in the next breath, explain why she was wrong. “That’s the whole point, Hermione. In a relationship under stress, they are not.”

Too true. “All right, I accept that. But even putting aside the complexities in interpretation of your twelve elements, do they cover everything? Haven’t some important characteristics been left out? If fidelity and kindness are there, why not integrity, probity, justness? Aren’t they essential in a relationship?”

“Those are what we call the foundation characteristics, Hermione. Yes, they are vital - no couple produces an amaura without both partners being high-scoring in the foundation characteristics - but they are not on the colour wheel because they are not relationship characteristics. The same applies to two other categories, the innate abilities and the learned values. The abilities you were born with, like intelligence and the ability to reason logically; and the values life has taught you, like moderation and perseverance. Their influence is shown by brightness, purity and clarity of the colours.”

That made sense. If you couldn’t grasp what something meant, or rationalise your way through it you must be at a disadvantage. Similarly if your expectations were unrealistically great, or you gave up easily, the relationship would be fragile. And yes, these were personal … virtues, Abraxas would and did call them, whereas characteristics like commitment implied a relationship.

“That said, Hermione, your point is a valid one, and has been made by others. Where, they ask, are
vital relationship elements such as tenderness, consideration and affection? And the answer is, they are there, further down the pyramid. Just as the colours may be mixed into an infinite number of hues, so may the benefactions be split and joined infinitely. Consideration is a mix of, primarily, empathy, kindness, caring and support. Affection is an alloy of caring, empathy, support, and tolerance. Tenderness is a combination of affection and consideration.

“And this makes the point that we are dealing only with the main benevolences and main benefactions. Just as you may split your hours into halves and quarters, then into minutes; and your hues into constituent hues, so you may split your benevolences and benefactions into other, related elements.”

That was logical too: most emotional feelings could be related to others, some closely and some more distantly, just like colours and hues. So it made sense in theory, but was it workable in practice? The subtle differences between, say, affection and tenderness, were surely mirrored by subtle differences between their colours. Were they distinguishable?

Or … was she wrong? If you mixed colours, didn’t you get white light? A rainbow happened when light - ‘white light’ - was refracted by rain droplets into its constituent colours, red, orange, yellow, green and so on. Presumably you could recombine them to get white - or rather, colourless - light. Or could you? Her recollection of Rose and Hugo mixing coloured paints on the kitchen worktop was that the resulting colour was invariably mud. Or rather, to be fair, it was with Hugo. Rose was more careful, and sometimes ended up with the hue she wanted. But never white, and certainly never colourless. And she had white light.
“Padma, if you mix colours, don’t you get white light?”

Padma looked at her sharply. “No, not in an amaura, Hermione.” Or on the kitchen worktop.

But Padma’s tone was very definite. So did that mean that what she and Abraxas had was not really an amaura? That would suit everyone. So … why was her heart sinking?

“We did, Padma. I saw white light in the braided trail, and white mist in the pluvium, on the first day.”

Padma’s eyes widened. “Oh, Hermione! Your amaura had the vena cordis on the first day? That is really special. White does occur, but as a colour on its own, not as a combination of other colours. It represents pure love. The white core represents the feeling of pure love, and the white mist the gift.”

Hermione glared at the healer. One minute she and Abraxas may not be creating an amaura at all, the next they definitely are and, what’s more, it’s an extra special one.

But her reasoning had a defect. “Padma, this amaura business is all about what makes up love, what the component parts are. How can love be one of the parts?”

“Definitely Ravenclaw, Hermione. Any illogicality, and you’re onto it. Yes, if the amaura defines love, how can love be part of the definition? But it is. The white core does not break down into constituent colours as white light does. We’ve tried, with Newton prisms and everything, and it does not break down.

“But when you think about it, you realise that must be the case. Esteem, trust, physical attraction, loyalty, caring: if you add them up, you get a relationship between two people. But you don’t get love. The sum of the parts is just so much less than the whole that there must be something else. So we have the visual amaura bearing out what logic tells us. Isn’t that wonderful? And we call it pure love, for what else can it be?”

Now they were really entering the realms of fairytale romance. Hermione folded her arms. “No, Padma, I don’t think it’s wonderful. I think it’s a fudge. You don’t know what it means, so you give it an impressive name, and justify it with pseudo-logic? Pure love? The term is meaningless.”

More, actually: total twaddle. Like the rest of this amaura business.

“And that’s not all, Padma. Your thesis is that certain colours represent certain benevolences and benefactions. That may or may not be so; my argument is not that, but the underlying basis: being able to recognise and put a name to those colours. Every colour and hue must be uniquely identifiable, not just to one person, but to everyone, and all must agree on that identity. First level colours are tricky enough - what you see as red or green may not be exactly what I see as red or green, and who is clear about the difference between indigo and violet, purple and mauve - but when you move to the second level of mixed colours, and even worse the third level of mixing mixed colours? You have tricky squared and tricky cubed. Take tenderness, Padma, which you said is a mix of affection and consideration, which in turn are mixes of four different first level benefactions. Some are common, but still you get a mix of what, six colours. And not in equal proportions.

“Padma, if you asked ten different researchers to identify that, you’d get ten different answers.
Consistency of interpretation by individuals using the naked eye is just not possible. And I haven’t even considered differences in brightness, purity, and shading, let alone the prejudices and preconceptions of the individual assessors.”

Faugh, she sounded as though she was giving a lecture. Not just a bluestocking, but a pedantic bluestocking. Cut the rambling generalisations, girl, and get to what this is all about.

“All these technicalities are bogging me down. What I mean is that you might get one researcher examining an amaura, and saying, ‘I see that colour as being made up of bright pink, middling blue, dull green, and blinding orange in unequal proportions, and so means …’ she waved a hand, ‘that this individual has low integrity, middling rational ability and high expectations, that desire will be dominant, that loyalty will be low and intolerance high, commitment low and inconstancy high, and so on.’

“Then another might say, ‘No, I think the blue is actually indigo; the orange is light rather than bright, due to a high proportion of yellow; the dullness of the green is due to a high blue component. So I think this amaura means the opposite to what you’ve just said.’ You take my meaning, Padma? The whole thing is just too complex to be built on a foundation of an individual’s ability to identify colours.”

She shook her head. “I accept that in analysing human feelings, subjective assessment is unavoidable, but unless you have consensus of colour interpretation, unless you can agree about what you’re looking at, you are trying to build on foundations of quicksand. It’s guesswork. And so far, Padma, I have the impression it is guesswork steeped in romanticism. The exact opposite to the rigorous, dispassionate, scientific analysis I would expect from St Mungo’s.” And from Padma Patil, but she didn’t want to get too personal.

Padma gave another of her irritating, brilliant smiles. Now what? “In that case, Hermione, you will be delighted to hear that St Mungo’s has funding for a rigorous, dispassionate and scientific analysis of the amaura.”

Hermione glared at her. “That’s... that’s outrageous. Padma, I have to practically go on my knees to get a single knut from the Ministry to fund elvish welfare, and here they are giving you money to investigate this ... this sort of thing?”

“Oh, not the Minstry. It’s funded by a charitable foundation mental heath grant.”

Who would fund that sort of research? “Not a Weasley grant. Ginny handles the medical applications, but I’m pretty sure she’d never fund something like that.”

“She wouldn’t and we’d know better than to even ask her. She has little time for ‘well-being’ projects. Others are less ... sceptical.”

Now Padma had crossed one line too many. “How fortunate for you.”

The healer looked at her in surprise, then put a hand over her mouth. “Oops, I’d forgotten you are a Weasley Foundation trustee. Hermione, different charitable trusts will fund different spheres of magical medicine. Some trusts fund specific projects within those spheres, others will leave it to our discretion. Obviously we tailor our applications accordingly. What Ginny does fund, she funds generously, and we are grateful, Hermione, for that funding. Parvati and I would be out of work without foundations like Weasley and Loireag.”

“Loireag? You’re using a Loireag Foundation discretionary grant for mental health to fund research into the amaura?”
“Oh, I didn’t say that. I’m not sure that I can say …” She looked slightly nervous and glanced towards the door.

“Loireag are secretive about who they are, Padma, not what they support. Still, it’s nothing to do with me. You’re lucky. Both to have such a relaxed supporter and one that has such deep pockets. Much deeper than Weasley pockets.”

“That may be so, but even Loireag has no one like Arthur Weasley, and Ginny’s hands-on approach keeps us on our toes. So we are grateful to all our funders, and for all our funding. Hermione, if I may ask you to be discreet about this?”

What had her father-in-law to do with this? “Whom would I tell? Mr Malfoy is the only one I see and I can’t imagine the quirks of charitable trust funding would be of any interest to him. Though I’m sure he would be even more sceptical about funding amaura research than Ginny. Still, if you like.”

“Please. The last thing we want to do is upset our funders. And on this particular project I’m actually primary researcher, so I’m in the firing line, so to speak. I’d be really grateful if you didn’t mention it to anyone.”

“I won’t. But Padma, with respect, I really don’t see how you can justify spending charitable grants on investigating something that schoolgirls fantasize about. Besides, how can there be anything new to find out?”

“You astonish me, Hermione. This is about love relationships, and relationships are fundamental to our existence. They are so complex that there is always something new to discover. Society is all about relationships. Learning what drives them is vital.”

“All right, I accept that.” Reluctantly. “But amaura relationships are also personal, very personal.” She thought of Abraxas’s comment: all of magical Britain knew that the Granger-Weasley marriage was rocky. “Personal and private. It is intrusive, Padma.”

“Hermione, I couldn’t agree more. But we are medical researchers, scientists, professional, trained people, bound by confidentiality ethics. We are not prying Daily Prophet reporters seeking to titillate tabloid imaginations. Our sole purpose is to help. Hermione, I understand how you feel, but,” and Padma spread her hands, “on all levels I must disagree. To advance knowledge, to help individuals understand each other, to help couples when relationships go wrong.”

“It wouldn’t have helped me and Ron.”

“Hermione, did you, could you have tried it?” Padma raised her hands. “I’m not being judgemental, Hermione, just making the point that both parties must recognise there is a problem, and want to find a solution. Both recognising and both wanting are fundamental requirements for any form of help to have any chance of success.”

Hermione looked away.

“T am sorry, Hermione. I know it must be painful. I would never have mentioned it if you hadn’t. Yes, relationships are personal, so much so that it takes an independent person, distanced emotionally, to see and analyse a problem.”

Hermione nodded. She could see that. She and Ron had been too emotionally entangled. Entangled and trapped, her in placation, him in denial, so that they were going nowhere. Could someone like Padma have helped? She could see now that her placating merely entrenched Ron; convinced him
that he was right. It was not that he was … bad, just … weak. What Abraxas had said was true. Ron lacked the - she could face it and put a name to it now, at a distance - the integrity, the moral honesty. She put her hands on her cheeks: her face was burning. It’s over now, girl. Put it behind you.

But … what was happening with Abraxas was not over. Far from it: it was a flaming fire. So: was she too showing lack of moral honesty? At first she hadn’t known what the amaura was, but she’d suspected, and had turned away from finding out. Then Rose had opened the door, just a chink, but revealing the bright truth beyond. Padma had thrust it wide. Was she, Hermione, now shielding herself from the brightness by wrapping a blanket of fallacious obfuscation around her head? Hiding from the truth by telling herself that interpretation of the amaura was all guesswork?

Rose had made her take the first step. Must she, by herself, take the next? She knew what Rose would say: *Start with the truth, not with what you want the truth to be*. She’d reached the age when her children quoted her adages back at her. The truth. And get to the point.

“Padma, I am prepared to say that I care for Abraxas Malfoy. I’m even willing to grant that I care deeply. But you insist that the amaura we create means much more, that we are made for each other, and in love and so on. Given the guesswork, the interpretation problems, how can you be so confident that you are right?”

“Oh, Hermione, I hope I don’t insist anything. Being dogmatic would be against my beliefs, besides being very bad therapeutic practice. Love is a growing thing, different for every relationship, and can and will take many forms during the life of that relationship. What I’ve told you is that the amaura marks the potential for an exceptional love relationship between two people. The visible part of the amaura reflects elements specific to the characters of and the interaction between those two people. I don’t want to digress into philosophy or technicalities any further, so let me answer your question on evidence of veracity of interpretation.

“The term ‘guesswork’ reflects the analytical tools available in the past rather than the conclusions reached by some of the brilliant people who have worked on this. The twelve element colour wheel of benevolences and benefactions has been known for generations, and is time proven.

“What you mean by time proven, Padma?”

“That our interpretation is correct, as shown by empirical evidence. Specifically: we look at the analyses, we look at the outcomes, and we correlate the two. We have found that caring is shown by orange, commitment by green. We have found that couples who show strong constancy invariably have a bright green-blue hue in the amaura. We have also looked at what couples say about the relationship, and check the correlation. The former is far more reliable than the latter, even allowing for an element of judgement.”

“Which means what, precisely, Padma?” *Get to the point, woman.*

“It means, Hermione, that if you say you feel one thing, and the amaura says you feel another, the amaura is right.”

*Ouch. That was pointed; all too sharply.* “You are saying I am unable to interpret my own feelings. That’s pretty dogmatic, Padma. What is your justification? You say you have found this, and you use impressive sounding terms like empirical, analyses and correlation, but your ‘outcomes’ are still based on somebody being able to identify the colours. Sorry to hammer on about it, but isn’t that true?”

Padma was smiling, wearing that annoying *I’m about to upset your applecart* look again, much too
self-satisfied for someone about to admit that her careful construct was built on air. Hermione raised an eyebrow at her, and the healer said, “Until five years ago, I would have had to agree. I would have argued, certainly, that the term ‘guesswork’ devalues the combined experience of the many brilliant practitioners in this field and denigrates their professionalism, but that, essentially, your observation is correct. I would have also had to agree with your earlier comments that, after all these years, further research in this field would reveal little new, and smacks of intrusive, prying prurience, of indulging schoolgirl fantasies.

“But not now. It is now science-based. I’m also happy to state that in all but a few of the third level colours - which were always hedged about with caveats - the correctness of the guesswork-based analyses has been borne out.”

Was this real? Or more woolly-minded obfuscation. “Precisely in what way, Padma, is it science based? Are you measuring using scientific instrumentation?” Straight question, straight answer: yes or no, please.

“Yes,” and at Hermione’s surprised look, she laughed. “Yes, my dear Hermione. We are identifying amaura colours and measuring their physical characteristics using scientific instruments. Now every colour and hue, its dominance, brightness, purity, in fact every physical feature associated with the visible amaura, can be identified and measured. Interpretation of the amaura is now founded on rigorous scientific and mathematical procedures.

“We can now say with confidence that, for example, the yellow thread in the cauda is ten percent thicker and thirty-two percent brighter than the blue, that the pluvium consists of seventy-three percent green, nineteen percent violet, five percent indigo, and so on. We have also been taught the science of statistics, whereby you can wring information from your data that you didn’t even know was there. All thanks to Arthur Weasley. Let me show you.”
Padma led the way to a leather-topped table under a window. Spread across it was an array of scientific equipment, polished and bright.

What was this? Wizards didn’t ‘do’ science, not like muggles did. This must be muggle gear, and rather more sophisticated than ‘felletones.’ An eight sided crystal bar as long as her arm and as thick as her wrist lay next to a long, narrow mirror. Facing it was an instrument which looked like a cross between a camera and an astronomer’s telescope, flanked by tiny satellite dishes on each side. More of the little silvery curved discs stood in a cluster. A laptop lay on one side. Wires criss-crossed the table, linking some of the instruments to the laptop.

“It looks like a muggle research and development laboratory, Padma. What does it do?”

“It transforms amaura analysis from 18th century guesswork into 21st century science. R&D lab is an appropriate description, for it is still in the experimental phase. Optio, my tech-elf, came this morning, and set it all up. It’s one of Arthur Weasley’s projects. He’s a genius, our Arthur: no one can bridge magic and muggle like him. As you rightly said, Hermione, colour identification using the naked eye has limitations. With Arthur’s analytic instruments this vanishes. We can identify and distinguish colour and hues to the nth order, and consistently. We can look at a particular hue and say that it is made up of ten percent of this first level colour, fifteen percent of that, thirty percent of the other, and so on. We can say with confidence that it is identical within a three percent margin to that produced by Mr and Mrs Jones three weeks ago. Isolating the emotion tenderness by its colour passes from the realms of guesswork to certainty. Arthur has enabled us to see the secondary and tertiary threads of the cauda, together with the pluvia they emanate. He has split apart tint from transparency, brightness from vividity, purity from depth. Not only that, but he has quantified them for us, so we can compare one with the other and also one couple’s amaura with another.

“As variables increase exponentially from order to order, you will easily see that we will never need to go beyond the third order. We will, to put it simply, run out of emotions, benefactions, to which to allocate hues. This is an analytical tool of unrivalled power in our field. Nothing else even approaches it. Arthur, in his modesty, plays it down, saying it was obvious, and all it needed was for someone to see it and develop it.” Padma shrugged. “You could say the same thing about Newton and optics, or Galileo. In fact the best way I can convey its importance is to say that it will do, for amaura studies, what the development of the telescope did for astronomy.”

“Really? As significant as that?”

“Really. And, actually more significant, because the amaura is all about relationships, and relationships are fundamental to our well-being. Astronomy is not.”

True, but fundamental only after basic physical needs had been satisfied, like shelter, food and warmth. Still, that was another subject.

“You had this five years, Padma? So how many amaura have you analysed in that time?”

“It has been under development all the time, Hermione, with Arthur adding more facilities every few months. But most of our amaura couples are as excited about it as we are, and are happy to come in again and again as our analytic procedures develop and expand. We have done a hundred and eleven full analyses, Hermione.”
Was Padma making a point again? “You must be quite busy, with your hundred and eleven enthusiastic amaura couples. Are others working on it as well?”

“No!” Hermione looked her surprise at Padma’s vehemence, and the healer said, “Sorry, I didn’t mean it to come out like that. But this is primary research, and it needs to be developed before it is let loose on the world.”

“Wouldn’t development be quicker with more researchers? After all, if it is so important to well-being…”

“It is, and for that reason it shouldn’t be rushed. It has to be carefully guided by a sure and experienced hand.”

Was there more than the public good at issue here? “And that hand is Padma Patil’s? The same hand that will write the definitive paper for the Journal of Magical Medicine?”

Padma exhaled. “All right. I admit it. But is academic ambition such a bad thing? If it leads to a good end?”

“Of course not. It leads to more knowledge which benefits everyone. Other types frequently benefit only the individual and at the expense of everyone else. And if the world has got along without this since the dawn of magic, I doubt that a few more months will make a difference.”

“Thank you. We don’t want to lay ourselves open to criticisms from prominent figures in our society, Hermione, on rushed research and unsupported conclusions. Or even schoolgirl romanticism,” and she smiled at Hermione. “It is more important to get it out ‘right’ than to get it out ‘quick,’ and in the early stages, as we are, an experienced person is most suited to carry out the work.”

“Fortuitous, isn’t it, that that experienced person just happens to have gone to school with the techno-genius’s children, so that the contact and goodwill are already in place.”

Padma smiled at her. “I’ll not deny that, nor the fortuity that one partner in a couple producing, I strongly suspect, an uniquely powerful amaura, is an old class-mate with, I hope, that same goodwill. Hermione, I would like to analyse the amaura that you and Mr Malfoy create.”

What! But … of course. Why else would Arthur’s gear be here, spread out over the table?

No way! It was bad enough that she and Abraxas created an amaura at all, but if Padma were to analyse it, define it, slap categories and numbers all over it, that would cement it into reality, shattering what little wriggle-room there was.

“Padma-”

Padma raised her hand. “Hermione, I know you are reluctant. I know there are issues here. But really, with your astonishing rate of healing, I think it is strongly advisable, even essential.”

Oh, come on! Did Padma think she was naïve? Of course she did; Hermione’s own daughter thought she was naïve. But even she wasn’t naïve enough to swallow that argument. “Essential for me or essential for you? Do you think there might be a malign aspect?”

Padma looked pained. “You’re putting me through the wringer, Hermione. No, I don’t think there is anything malign. So, essential for me, though beneficial for you. And you want to further medical research, don’t you? Hard to imagine a Gryffindor refusing to help others, others in difficult relationships, because she finds something … I don’t know what: disturbing? Offensive?
Intrusive?”

“None of those.” Actually, all of those. As well as prying, nosy, interfering, gossipy, voyeuristic … she could go on. Though primarily disturbing: she did not particularly want to know more about the amaura. What she knew already was bad enough. And that was just the impersonal theory. Now Padma wanted to apply it to her and Abraxas, to find out what each felt about the other, what love gifts she offered him and he offered her. Did she want to know that? No! She was in more than enough turmoil already.

But … helping others in difficult relationships? She knew all about those, yes. Did she want to help other women, and their children, who had been in her situation? Lessen the distress, the feelings of despair she had had?

Still … “If you have already analysed a hundred and eleven amaura, Padma, and verified your conclusions, why do you need more data?”

“We are confident about our first and second level allocations. But yours is vitally important because I think that, due to the high-scoring foundation characteristics you both have, your amaura will exhibit uniquely clear and powerful qualities. I’m not trying to flatter you - that would have a negative effect - but just stating the situation as I see it. Those qualities will help us firm up on our third level colour allocations. And, of course, you will not be identified. We were collecting impersonal statistical data, anonymous numbers.”

She frowned at Padma. Was she supposed to be flattered by being assured that flattery would not work on her? Still: impersonal statistical data and anonymous numbers. Also she knew she could rely on Padma’s professional integrity. So at least they’d have privacy. Or … would they?

“Does … um … Arthur get involved in the analysis process also?” The thought that her father-in-law might learn of her relationship with Abraxas was mortifying. What would he think of her? Yes, they were soon to be ‘exes,’ but she loved and respected Arthur, and valued his good opinion of her.

Padma smiled. “Arthur? Hermione, you must be joking. Even if the confidentiality issue didn’t rule it out, he wouldn’t touch it. Arthur is an old school male, a man’s man. He does the technical side, the nuts and bolts. He doesn’t get involved in soft stuff like emotions, and would be embarrassed if we asked him. He’s lovely, is our Arthur.”

Hermione could agree with that sentiment. So privacy was as assured as it could be. That was something.

“All right, Padma. I’m not keen but I’ll do it. Though whether Mr Malfoy will agree is another matter. In fact, he may not even know what the amaura is. He didn’t when he first saw it.”

“I’m sure he does now, Hermione. If something affects him, he’ll find out about it.”

How did Padma know that? “Yes, he’s that sort of man. So you’ll have to persuade him. I’m the mole hill, he’s the mountain. Don’t try any manipulation on him, it won’t work.”

Padma smiled. “I wouldn’t dare. Are we ready to call him back?” She gestured towards the handbell.

At least she’d learned that lesson. Hermione picked it up, said, “And don’t go talking about lovers in front of him, please,” and rang the bell.

The door opened, and Waldi stepped in. “Miss Hermione?”
“Please ask Mr Malfoy to attend us again, Waldi.”
The master. What was Rose going to say to him? The amaura vouched for him, more or less, but
Hermione was her mother. Rose wanted to judge him for herself. Question him: have you spelled
my mother? Are your intentions regarding my mother honourable - an Edwardian question for an
Edwardian gentleman. How could she, a teenager, question a man a century old? But she had to,
for her mother's sake. Then listen to his answers: what he said and how he said it.

The front door was opened by a wrinkled elf footman. He led the way to a pair of double doors,
tapped then opened one leaf.

"Miss Rose Weasley, sir."

The old man was seated in a brown leather armchair before a fireplace, reading – Rose stared –
*The Times*. And he wasn’t reading it, he was glaring at it, almost setting it alight in it with his eyes.
And here Rose was about to make him, if anything, angrier.

But the scowl vanished as he pushed himself to his feet and bowed. Rose curtsied, feeling foolish,
but knowing it was the right response. Her face heated as she thought of her school skirt. All the
girls wore them that short, but in Edwardian times they wore them ankle-length. To show even an
ankle had been considered scandalous. At least she was wearing her black tights.

"Miss Rose, it is a pleasure to see you. Is your brother coming in?"

"Er, not just yet, sir. I wanted to see you alone." How would he take that, from the girl who had
refused to shake his hand?

"Indeed? Good. I am at your disposal, Miss Rose. May I order you tea, or hot chocolate?"

She should say yes, to be polite, but she was just too nervous. "Er, thank you, Mr Malfoy, but no."

"Very well. Mine is cold, so I was about to order a fresh pot anyway. Waldi, tea for three, please,
and a flask of hot chocolate, just in case. Incidentally, I have good news you on your mother’s
health, Miss Rose. The healer, Miss Patil, an old school friend of your mother’s, tells us that her
recovery is almost complete. You will be pleased to know, Miss Rose, that she will be ready to go
home in less than a week, a much shorter period than we originally thought. Now, Miss Rose, what
may I do for you?"

A few hours ago that would have had her cheering. Now it was a lot more complicated. Now it was
not just a matter of her emotionally and physically vulnerable mother in the clutches of a death
eater family at a remote and unplottable place. Now ties as unbreakable as iron chains linked her
mother to this man, and so herself to this man. And that made knowing him, what drove him, what
he had done and why, even more important. And more difficult, for now the breadth and depth of
what she wanted to know was wider and deeper.

She looked at him. The ravages of age and time had made him look ugly outside. Inside, here his
own domain, they made him look venerable and wise. The vulture had become an eagle owl. He
looked like an ancient sage. How could she, a mere girl, question him as to his motives? But she
had to.

"Thank you, Mr Malfoy, for that information.” Gah, she sounded like she was doing an oral exam.
No matter, go on, stilted, awkward, whatever. Take it from the beginning. “My mother has told
me, er, us, that she is staying here as your guest, that she was ill, has been treated, and must

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**Rose: the Miss and the Master**

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No matter, go on, stilted, awkward, whatever. Take it from the beginning. “My mother has told
me, er, us, that she is staying here as your guest, that she was ill, has been treated, and must
convalesce here." She paused.

He waited a moment, then said, "That is so, Miss Rose. She has been ill, she has undergone magical medical treatment at St Mungo's, and the healer specified that she convalesce here."

Now she must take the plunge. She must challenge him. "Mr Malfoy, I am worried about my mother being here. I am worried about what has happened to her. She is in an vulnerable state of mind. I am worried about what … what may happen to her." At your hands.

He inclined his head. "Thank you, Miss Rose. Your frankness means we may talk more freely than if we have to skip around each other. You are concerned that your mother is in the control of a House which not just has a reputation for malign actions, but which actually harmed her in the past. You are concerned about what has happened to her, what is happening to her, and what will happen to her in the future. You're concerned about what I already may have done, am doing and will do to her: have I taken advantage of her confused and susceptible state of mind? Have I spelled her? Her compliance and acceptance of the situation here would naturally raise this suspicion. Yes?"

What was this? Was he really being open, or was he just playing with her? She must show him that he couldn't intimidate her. "Yes, Mr Malfoy. Everything you have just said."

"Good. These concerns are valid and justified, and I am gratified that you have them. Your mother is in the habit of neglecting herself and her interests, and I am pleased that her daughter is looking out for her."

She glared at him. Was he highlighting what she was doing now in order to spotlight what she hadn't done previously? First Winky and now him? If he thought he would disconcert her by striking at her weak point, her feelings of guilt, he was in for a disappointment. She’d meet attack with attack. "I am particularly concerned, Mr Malfoy, as to why you doing all this."

His eyebrows went up. "Really? Surely, from your point of view, all that really matters what actually happened, is happening and will happen to your mother. My motives are irrelevant: what matters is how they affect your mother: the outcomes."

Was this delaying tactic? But he had a point, though not nearly as strong as he thought. With an amaura, motives were all important. "Sir, let’s look at the outcomes, then talk about motives."

"I think that is best. I wish to allay what fears of yours I can, and our time may be limited. We have three separate happenings, for want of a more descriptive term, Miss Rose. Your mother’s rescue; her treatment; and her convalescence so far. In these, has your mother been adversely affected in any way. Does that cover it?"

"For outcomes, yes."

"Very well. On the face of it, your mother was in danger, she was rescued. She was ill, she was treated. She is currently recuperating."

All this was supported by what McGonagall had told her. But she had to push him further. “That is just on the face of it. That is just what you have told her and are telling me, what happened. How do we know that is what really happened? I am sorry, but—"

He raised his hand. “Do not apologise: our purpose is to address your concerns. Your mother, naturally, raised the same points. This is why Mr and Mrs Potter visited Bansith Hall. Your mother will have told you of their visit, that they viewed her medical records, and on that basis, were prepared to leave her here with me. Perhaps she has told you of their initial reluctance?"
"She did, sir."

"You do not consider their acceptance to be sufficient, Miss Rose?"

She hesitated, then said, "I have enormous respect for my aunt's judgement of people, but... the point is, Mr Malfoy, that she is my mother. She and my brother are the most important people in the world to me. Somebody else's judgement, even someone whom I respect as much as Ginny, is not enough to persuade me. I feel that I need to see what she saw, what convinced her."

"You know the circumstances, the conditions, under which Mr and Mrs Potter viewed that document?"

"I do, sir."

"I am in a difficult position, Miss Rose. From my personal point of view, I would be happy for you to see your mother's records. I believe, in spite of your youth, that you are sufficiently mature. But you are so close to your mother: no one is closer. You are her second self. What she would feel, you would feel. Because of this, I am reluctant to show you the records for the same reason that I was reluctant for her to see them."

"And what is that reason, Mr Malfoy?"

"If I were to tell you that, Miss Rose, I might as well show you the records. But I will tell you what I told your mother: Viewing them would have an undesirable effect on you. Undesirable to you."

"I don't really see that could be, but anyway, Mr Malfoy, that's just your opinion."

"And the opinion of Miss Weasley and Mr Potter. After seeing her records, they agreed that she should not see them."

"But I am not my mother, Mr Malfoy. I am a separate person. I think I should see the records, and judge for myself."

He sighed. "Which brings us back to the first point. Miss Rose, for me, there is a very easy solution. I have simply to ask your mother, explaining that my reasons for not wishing to show you her medical records are the same as my reasons for not wishing to show her. What do you think her reply will be?"

Very clever. "She will support you."

"I am glad we can be frank with each other. I agree. But I would rather that you trusted me, and we did not stress her further by asking her to rule."

All right, point to him. Now she was going to be even more pushy, or 'frank' as he called it. But she had to do it. "Mr Malfoy, my mother is trusting you in spite of you bringing her here without her permission, having her examined and treated without her permission, making her stay here for reasons she doesn't understand, refusing to give her information which she has a right to. You have even told her that you have not told the whole truth. And yet she trusts you. And now you expect me to trust you in the same way." She took a deep breath, and said, "Why should I? The whole thing is very ... wobbly." Silly, childish word: would he understand what she meant?

"For that very reason, Miss Rose. Life is wobbly. We make decisions on incomplete information all the time, sometimes important ones. It is a matter of weighing things up and deciding what, on balance, to do. Sometimes the pros and cons are pretty well evenly matched. But here I believe you do have evidence of ... benignity. If I planned to do your mother harm, Miss Rose, would I not
already have done so? Would I have invited Harry Potter and Miss Weasley here to look at her? Would I have invited you and your brother? Do you think that Professor McGonagall would have allowed you to visit without being convinced that it is safe, without consulting Mr and Mrs Potter, as well as her own judgement? Yes, the edifice supporting your mother's safety here is wobbly. That makes it more credible. It is built up of little things, like Winky’s attentiveness and morning tea; the guardianship of a tabby cat and tranquil strolls around the lake; laughter and respect, consideration and politeness; and bigger things, like the Potter's judgement. A judgement, moreover, based on different approaches: Mr Potter with his broadsword and battering ram; and Miss Weasley - I beg your pardon: Mrs Potter - with her rapier wit and intuitive intelligence. An auror and a lawyer, trained and experienced in sifting evidence, in assessing deception. Some of these things interlock, but others are just piled haphazardly on top of each other. This makes for wobbliness. If the edifice were strong, with sharp, clear cut edges, that, for me, would raise suspicion, because life is not like that.”

She nodded slowly. It made sense, if a little convoluted. Except: the guardianship of a tabby cat?

“Another point, Miss Rose. The Malfoys have always endeavoured to keep Bansith Hall private. There are no access roads, it is unplottable. But in the past two days more than ten people have learnt that it still exists, including the most powerful wizarding couple in England and via them the most powerful clan, and one of most brilliant witches of the past three centuries. They all know your mother is here. If she were to disappear, or not return to her home when she should, or even be held against her will, do you not think there would be an outcry?”

"All right, Mr Malfoy. I understand what you say about wobbliness. And I accept that uncle Harry and Ginny think she is safe, and that many know she is here. But still, you may have spelled my mother, Mr Malfoy. She may be under an imperius curse. And you have said no magic is to be done around her, so no one can check."

"The prohibition is not mine; I am merely the messenger. But I agree, it could look suspicious, to one so inclined. And with Miss Hermione Granger in the hands of Abraxas Malfoy, the magical world would be greatly so inclined. But Mr Potter does not think she is under an imperius curse. And certainly Mr Potter is not. If Voldemort’s skill was insufficient to put Harry Potter under an imperius, you may rest assured that mine is also. But I could be controlling your mother in other ways. From the muggle world, Miss Rose, drugs inducing compliance; or brainwashing, by which method impressionable people are brought into destructive religious cults; or Stockholm syndrome, in which a hostage identifies with her captors.

“However, compliance drugs leave the victim passive and inert, I believe, and your mother is clearly neither. The psychological methods take time, and your mother has been here only three days. Still, I cannot disprove any of the possibilities. I may indeed have a tortuous, nefarious plan. All I can say is that I have not, and that I hope there is sufficient evidence to support this. My motives regarding your mother, Miss Rose, are benign.”

This seemed to be his method: agree with her, say she had even greater grounds for worry, then reaffirm his denial. It was beguiling, but for her mother’s sake, she must fight it. “You have a persuasive tongue, Mr Malfoy, but, eventually, really, I’m sorry, but it is all just words.”

A tap on the door, and Waldi entered. “Miss Hermione’s compliments, Master, and she asks if you would attend her and Miss Healer Patil in the large drawing room.”

Mr Malfoy expression hardened. At her? After all, she had just, effectively, accused him of deceit.

But as he pushed himself to his feet, his face cleared and he said, “Forgive me, Miss Rose. Your mother requires my presence. I will return as soon as I can, and we will continue. As to your point:
words are all we have here and now. If you can suggest anything else, I would be more than willing to oblige. Miss Rose, your servant.” He bowed, and left the room.
“I trust all is well.” Abraxas’s voice was flat, his bearing upright and stiff.

Hermione was already flustered by what Padma had just told her. His manner didn’t help. “Oh, yes, Mr Malfoy. Padma has just been telling me about the … the glow.” This was silly. Would giving it another name change what it was? “What it is, what it means, how to interpret it, how …” She trailed off, as the more she said, the darker his face grew.

“I see. And this was strictly in accordance with our agreement, Healer Patil? It was all directly relevant to Miss Granger’s health? None of it was unnecessary information?” Every word was clipped, harsh, fired like a bullet.

Padma shrank back and Hermione said, “I asked her, Mr Malfoy. She told me nothing that I did not ask her. As my healer, she has an ethical obligation to put my well-being before all else.”

He bowed. “Your well-being, Miss Granger, is what this is all about. Did these ethical obligations extend to disclosing details of your treatment?” His voice was glacial.

“Of course not, Mr Malfoy. We have an agreement. I have not breached it.”

“No. You would not have.” Twenty degrees warmer.

She was not so sure about that. Like the sun behind clouds, Padma had said, Hidden but still giving … everything. And with both light and heat growing. Would she resist now, if revelation presented itself?

She pushed the thought to one side and took a breath. “Mr Malfoy, Padma wishes to analyse the … the amaura. Is that all right?” There, she’d named it. What would his reaction be? Had he heard of it?

Apparently so, for he looked at her, then at Padma, then said, his brow contracting, “If Miss Granger is well, and her concerns allayed, why do we need further analysis?”

“Mr Malfoy, Hermione’s rate of recovery is unprecedented. We really need to investigate further and find out why.”

Oh, that was silly. If she, Hermione, had not been taken in by that argument, Abraxas would cut through it like a hot knife through butter.

“Miss Patil, is this directly relevant to Miss Granger’s current state of health, or is it for research?”

“Well, Mr Malfoy …” and she glanced at Hermione.

“Research, then,” he said. “In which case, Miss Patil, the answer is no.”

“Mr Malfoy, you astonish me,” said Hermione. “Padma’s research is to benefit others. If we can help others by letting Padma do a little more analysis, surely we should?”

He looked at her, then at Padma. “There are other factors to be considered here, as Miss Patil knows well. But … at Miss Granger’s request, then. I need not impress on you, Miss Patil, the all-important need for privacy in this.”

“I fully understand that, Mr Malfoy. The analysis will be used in data form only, impersonally and
anonymously, to add statistical weight to information we already have. Is that all right?”

“It is, Miss Patil. Please proceed.” Abraxas’s words were clipped.

Padma dropped her gaze. “All right. We are using a mixture of magic and muggle technology, Mr Malfoy, because that enables us to get a more detailed as well as a quantitative measure of what we are assessing. But the approach was developed by Arthur Weasley of Weasley Technologies for us, so it is perfectly safe.”

Really? Hermione thought of the flying Ford Anglia. Still, they’d come a long way since those days.

“I am acquainted with Weasley Technology products, Miss Patil, and with Mr Arthur Weasley by reputation.”

“Oh. Yes of course, you would be.”

Oh? Hermione knew, because she’d heard him tell Ginny, but why would Padma know such a detail?

Abraxas frowned - another why? - and Padma rushed on. “Yes, Arthur’s fame is spreading. He’s wonderful and we’re very fortunate to have him as a consultant. We put a techno-magical problem to him and his eyes light up. Then he disappears into his workshop, dead to the world.” She looked at Hermione. “I feel a bit guilty sometimes. With Molly gone and Ginny away so much, there’s no-one to make him eat and sleep, and often I’m sure he doesn’t. He emailed me a download and instructions this morning at 3 a.m., by the date-stamp.”

“Oh. Does he … does he know what it was for?” Who it was for, was what she really meant.

“Just in general terms,” said Padma, “I mentioned it in the context of your illness, which he already knew about. Unavoidable, I’m afraid. I needed his latest software version.” She spread her hands in apology. “I wonder if he has any special instructions.” She took a sheet of paper from her brief case and read it. “Hmm, yes. Layout as last time, except that ‘fuse box placed on insulation pad, minimum 300 mm from table edge, laptop and Newton bar.’ It sounds like he knows something I don’t. He hasn’t been here, has he?”

Hermione closed her eyes. *Heaven forbid.* “Ginny has.” She had, and of course she would have told Arthur that Hermione was safe, because he had seen the flat ablaze. And he would, understandably concerned, want to know where, and under what circumstances. She could trust Ginny to be discreet, but she would have been open with her father.

The heat rose in Hermione’s face: her father-in-law knew his daughter-in-law created an amaura with a man other than her husband. She had wondered what he would think of her if he found out. Now she knew: she was divorcing his son and, to all outward appearances, shacked up with a Malfoy. Arthur’s response was to work until three in the morning to give her what help he could. Her heart swelled.

“Oh, course, she was,” said Padma. “Daughter, agent and patent lawyer, all in one. I wonder what she told him?”

If she couldn’t work that out, Hermione was not going to tell her. Especially not in front of Abraxas. “No idea. They were here for a couple of hours.”

“And then interrogated Parvatti for an hour at St Mungo’s. And last week, when you were being treated, Harry almost broke the door down trying to get in to see you. If Ginny hadn’t been there …
Harry is a bit of a scrapper, you know – for which, I suppose, we should all be grateful.”

“Quite, Miss Patil,” said Abraxas.

Hermione glanced at him. Padma had sounded a little condescending, but Abraxas’s reprimand was too heavy, particularly coming from him. Padma was already carrying the weight of his disapproval, and her chatter was probably nerves. She’d better divert the conversation. Something technical? “So what’s the fuse box for? It sounds an unlikely medical accessory.” It looked nothing like a box, either: a black disc about the size of a galleon, with a shimmering ring hovering above it like a little halo.

“Oh, that’s just Arthur’s whimsy,” said Padma, “his fascination with all things muggle. It’s actually a … wtod. I never can pronounce it.”

And an unpronounceable wtod was supposed to mean more to her than a fuse box? She looked at Abraxas and said, “Have you come across one of these, Mr Malfoy?”

“Only by reputation, Miss Granger. It would indeed be an unlikely medical accessory if it had the standard use of preventing electrical current overload. It is in fact a fuse for magic. The acronym stands for Weasley thaumaturgic overload device, hence W-T-O-D, pronounced wuh-tod.”

“Yes,” said Padma. “Arthur’s prototype analysis setup burnt out my MacBook. I didn’t mind. I had cloud backup and it was a small price to pay for the cutting edge technology he is giving us. But, half joking, I told him I was glad it was my laptop that had burnt out and not me. So Arthur put his inventive mind to work and came up with the wtod, which protects people from magical overload.” She shook her head. “It’s pure genius, what he did. I wouldn’t know where to start.” She pointed to it. “He concentrates diffuse thau, magical energy, inside that ebony disc somehow, using a phoenix quill and a unicorn hair. He then uses the energy to trigger the fuse. I never quite got to grips with how it works.”

“The phoenix quill acts as a lodestone, a thau magnet, Miss Patil,” said Abraxas. “This attracts and concentrates some of the diffuse thau being generated by the thau person or people. Visualise magnetic lines of force entering at the Earth’s north and south poles. The unicorn hair is coiled in the shape of an inverted cone. This directs the collected thau into an acceleration vortex. Visualise water swirling down a plughole.”

“Oh. Yes, I can see that. And then a disruption in the thau field causes the water, or the energy rather, to divert and trigger the fuse.”

Abraxas bowed his head.

“Thank you, that’s clearer now. Anyway, we now have this safeguard which we never had before and,” she spread her hands, “to cap it all, George replaced my MacBook with the latest top-of-the-range Pro. I was a happy woman. So that’s what the fuse is about, Hermione.”

She looked back at the table. “One of those black boxes is an amplifier. The other,” and she looked at her notes, “a suppressor. And that’s the one he’s wired up. Strange. I’ve not needed to dampen this effect before. A suppressor as well as a wtod as well seems ultra cautious, but if Arthur thinks I need one, I’ll not argue. And my memory stick goes … Right side rear top USB socket. Usual place” She plugged it in. The LED came on, then the hard drive light. On the screen words appeared: *Amaura Analysis: Miss Hermione Granger, Mr Abraxas Malfoy*, and the date and time.

Hemione felt Abraxas stiffen. “Miss Patil, it appears you intended to carry out this assessment all along.”
“Oh, I … I thought it best to be prepared, Mr Malfoy. After all, considering the unusual treatment.”

“The treatment is irrelevant, Miss Patil. You have already established Miss Granger to be in sound health.”

“Yes, but…” and she threw a desperate glance at Hermione.

Hermione touched Abraxas’s arm. “Mr Malfoy, we agreed to let Padma do this.”

He took a deep breath. “Very well. Proceed, Miss Patil.”

The healer shot him a worried look, but said, “Thank you, Mr Malfoy. I think we are all checked and ready to go. It’s a little old fashioned these days, but I always make hard copy notes as I analyse: I find it focusses the mind. So as not to take too much of your time, I’ll dictate by my Ready Notes quill.” She laid the quill and a pile of parchment on the desktop next to the laptop.

Abraxas frowned. “I thought that we were to have no magic in Miss Granger’s vicinity during the period of her convalescence.”

“Oh, the field is very weak as well as localized. It won’t impinge on Hermione’s health field. Besides, her field is quite robust now. Is that all right, Mr Malfoy?”

“You are the healer, Miss Patil.”

“Yes. Yes, well, it’s very weak, as I say. And she is almost well.”

Padma’s nervousness was making her hesitant and unsure, and that would just drive Abraxas to more icy barbs. “We trust your judgement, Padma,” Hermione said. “Let’s go with that. Will this be a long session?”

“I’m afraid it will take a little while, yes. Is that-”

“That’s fine, Padma, yes, but may we sit?”

“Yes, of course. It’s best you can use chairs rather than a couch, as the instruments need manoeuvre space around you. Again, Mr Malfoy, the fields round the instruments are weak and will not affect Hermione’s healing. They are acting as receivers and transmitters of waveforms, both magical and physical, and not generators.” Abraxas gave a slight nod, and she went on.

“So, Hermione, if you could place yourself on Mr Malfoy’s left, and take his left hand in your right, with your hand leading his. Yes, that’s right, thank you. Now we just let the fuse set itself up.” She looked down at the laptop and said, “Activate w-tod.”

The words Weasley Technologies appeared on the screen, and below them a tumbling spanner with a weasel entwining itself about it. Then the logo shrank into the bottom right-hand corner and Weasley Thaumaturgical Overload Device appeared at the top of the screen, followed by a yellow triangle with a crimson lightning-strike diagonally across it. Below were the words Potentially lethal tool, Beta stage development, Authorized use only. Please sign in.

Padma held up her hand, palm facing the screen, fingers splayed. The words Healer Padma Patil appeared, followed by Proceed. At midscreen two buttons appeared, one reading Manual Calibration, the other Automatic Calibration. Padma clicked on Automatic, saying, “Sorry, but even Automatic takes ages. I’d hate to think how long Manual takes.”
Two of the little satellite dishes on the table began swivelling to and fro, and on the laptop screen the word Detecting … appeared, followed by a tumbling Phoenix feather, shades of red and green glinting from its surface. Then Three thau presences appeared, followed by two pink discs and a blue one. Below were Confirm, Identify further and Seek further buttons.

“Oh, Arthur!” said Padma.

“What’s the matter, Padma?” said Hermione.

“Arthur’s last set of symbols distinguishing gender looked like those identifying public lavatories, so I asked them to change them. Now he’s given me this. Talk about typecasting!”

“I would imagine Mr Weasley is more concerned about clarity than political correctness, Miss Patil,” said Abraxas. “Certainly his code is unambiguous.”

Hermione suppressed a giggle. “The pink is certainly very bright.”

“Fluorescent bright.” Padma pursed her lips as she selected Confirm.

Then Detecting active thau, followed by Spontaneous thau generation, Lodestone thau, instrument thau, atmospheric thau laid out in a column. Next to each were coloured bars, which looked to Hermione exactly like wi-fi strength bars. At the top were five full green bars, but all the others had one bar each, a pale yellow. Again the Confirm and Seek Further buttons appeared. Padma selected confirm again, and a column of buttons appeared next to the list of thau types, followed by Primary protection against which thau? Padma selected the top one, and immediately the words appeared Analysing spontaneous thau. A moment later two discs appeared, one blue, one pink, and next to them the word Amaura, followed by the Confirm and Seek Further buttons.

“Again,” Padma muttered, but selected Confirm.

Immediately a column appeared, of two pink discs and a blue, with the words Protect which thau presences? with buttons next to each disc and one for All.

Padma grimaced and clicked on All.

Then Primary protection: Third party thau, pain, pleasure, loss of control. Please confirm selection or reselect, and two buttons.

“Protection against pleasure, Padma?” said Hermione.

“If the person is susceptible to addiction, yes,” said Padma.

“One may be addicted to pain as well, Miss Patil,” said Abraxas.

“Indeed one may, Mr Malfoy,” she said, looking at him, “and in more ways than one. None of those, though, are applicable here.” And she clicked on Confirm.

Ready came up immediately but, on the next line, after a yellow triangle with an exclamation mark inside, was Caution: High levels of thau detected.

“Well,” said Padma, “we know that.”

As if in response, the words appeared on the screen: Please remember that this device activates only at specified levels of thau. Below those levels it is inactive. Thau presences may experience considerable discomfort before the disruption process activates.
“Fine. We know that too.”

Then Use of suppressor advised.

“We are.”

As if in response, further words appeared on the screen Please remember that any suppressor present helps protect your instruments. It does not and cannot help protect you and the other thau presences. Please sign in again to confirm you understand these points.

“Yes, Arthur.” She turned to Hermione. “He does go on a bit, doesn’t he,” and she raised her hand again.

Healer Padma Patil … Accepted appeared, then Activate instrumentation for amaura analysis?

Padma clicked on Yes and immediately the instruments on the table sprang to life.

The crystal bar rose into the air, slow rotating about the lengthwise axis, and swung to face them. It was lit up from within, and sent coloured patterns of light across the ceiling. Below it, the attendant mirror swivelled round on the table to lie parallel. A pinpoint of light glowed on the camera-cum-telescope, and it rotated to face them. Tiny wings unfolded on the sides of each satellite dish, and they flew up and arranged themselves, hovering in the air, around the joined hands.

The tumbling Phoenix feather dissolved into the words Proceed, Healer Padma Patil.

“At last. The next step is concordance. I must harmonize myself to your magical aura, and in so doing will act as a conduit for the analysis program and instrumentation to recognise your magical signatures and to attune themselves to your amaura characteristics. I will do this by taking your hands. Potentatum range and calibration will also take place during this stage. On completion of that step I will stand back and take no further active part, merely observing, assessing and recording. So, if you would extend your free hands so I can take them…”

She took Hermione’s hand and reached out for Abraxas’s, but as the fingers touched, a flash of light and a bang came from behind her, followed by a smell of burning. The quill tore though the parchment and dropped onto the table. The healer wrenched her hand free of Hermione’s clasp, stepped back and leant against the table. Eyes closed, she pressed both hands to her heart.

Hermione rushed forward. “Are you all right? I’m so sorry, did we hurt you? What happened?”

“Miss Patil proof-tested the wtod,” said Abraxas. “Dedication is a fine thing, Miss Patil, but don’t kill yourself in pursuit of it.”

Padma glared at him. “You’re a fine one to talk,” she muttered. Then her eyes widened, she raised her hand to her mouth and said, “Oops, sorry. The shock …”

She turned to Hermione and rushed on. “No, you didn’t hurt me. More surprise than anything. You reinforced a lesson I learnt years ago, but not well enough, it seems. Never prejudge. If the forces are undetermined, ease in. My fault entirely. I should have been more careful.” She glanced at Abraxas.

“As Mr Weasley was advising you, Miss Patil,” he said, though mildly. “Still, you now know that the wtod works perfectly.”

“The suppressor didn’t though. It didn’t work at all.”
“As I understood Mr Weasley’s statements, it wasn’t supposed to. Its purpose is to reduce your
within the capacity of the instruments. It doesn’t protect people. Though I would have expected
some form of response from it,” and he stood up and peered at it. Then he sat down again, saying,
“Try turning it on, Miss Patil.”

“Oh.” She looked and her face reddened slightly. “Yes,” and she leaned across, pressed a button
and a little green light came on.

In the top right-hand corner of her laptop screen, a large and a small dial gauge appeared. They
looked like, exactly like, the speedometer and the oil pressure gauge from the Ford Anglia.
Beneath one was the word Potentatum, beneath the other was Supression.

“Arthur’s little whimsies,” said Padma. Then she turned to Hermione and said, “Still,
unsuppressed, your unharmonised potentatum was powerful enough to blow the fuse, shred my
parchment and destroy my quill. Ginny must have warned Arthur about it.”

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment. Not only did her father-in-law know that his daughter-in-
law created a love-light with a man other that his son, but also that it was abnormally powerful.
And … who else would know once Padma had published her analysis in the Journal of Magical
Medicine? Every Tom, Dick and Harry? Hey, you guys, a window has just opened onto Hermione
Granger’s heart. Let’s everyone have a gawp. She would be dissected on the front page of The
Prophet the following day: Hermione Granger’s Love-light with Mysterious Stranger. What had
she done to deserve all this?

“And, er … sorry about your desktop, Mr Malfoy.” Padma gave a nervous laugh. “I’ll reparo that
before I leave.”

A thin spiral of smoke was coming from the end of the quill where it lay on the leather. Without
thinking, Hermione pointed at it and said, “Wingardium leviosa.” The quill lifted off the desk and
hung, hovering. Then she realised what she’d done. “Oops, sorry.”

“Confirmation of your state of magical health, Miss Granger,” said Abraxas. “You may leave the
mark, Miss Patil. It shall be a memento of Miss Granger’s visit to Bansith Hall.”

Visit. She was a passing guest, that was all. Soon she’d be ‘on her way.’

Padma looked from him to her, then said, “Fine, Mr Malfoy. Let’s try again, shall we, and this
time cautiously. New quill, ready.” A quill leapt from her briefcase and stood ready over a sheet of
parchment. “Hermione, could you take Mr Malfoy’s hand again, please, and then each extend a
finger with the other hand, please.”

They did so, and Padma gingerly touched Hermione’s, then, taking a deep breath, Abraxas’s. The
tumbling weasel entwined spanner appeared for a moment and the needles on the gauges swung
back and forth, then settled. The words Calibration complete appeared. Padma let go of their
fingers, and stepped back.

“Excellent. That’s the signature recognition, attuning and calibration done. Now we will proceed
with the analysis.” She hesitated, then said, “These will be, effectively, personal medical records,
so in the interests of patient confidentiality, I must turn the screen away so you cannot see it.”

Hermione felt Abraxas stiffen again, and quickly said, “Of course, Padma, that’s fine.”

“Thank you. We will do the immanent amaura first, then the ephemeral. The focus point for the
immanent analysis is the symbol of ai, a hand offering benefactions,” and she placed a wooden
carving of a cupped hand on the table, palm upwards.

Abraxas spoke. “If it is your intention, Miss Patil, to generate emotions for your analysis—”

Padma raised her hand to stop him. When he did, she said, “Not at all, Mr Malfoy. I want the opposite. The immanent analysis is intended to measure the amaura which resides in the background, all the time. Focusing on ai is intended to take your minds off the ‘here and now’ and induce a feeling of serenity. Only then can the immanent amaura surface.”

In Hermione’s experience, an amaura ‘surfaced’ whenever they touched, and sometimes in circumstances far from ‘serene.’ Also, from what she had seen this morning, serenity was not Abraxas’s state of mind when they touched, and Padma’s explanation was unlikely to make him more so. She’d better intervene. “It’s a beautiful carving, Padma. Where did you get it?”

“It is, isn’t it. I got it from a Tibetan woodcarver high in the Himalaya. I was trekking the Annapurna Circuit and came across him in a dell in the woods. He was sitting on a stool, whittling away. His carvings were laid out all around him. I wish I’d bought more, now, but I still had about sixty miles to go, so didn’t want to weigh down my backpack.” She held the hand up, turning it to catch the light. “It’s Juniper wood, very knotty, and it’s wonderful how he’s made the knots a feature of this work. Now, you would both just take each other’s hand again, looking at the carving.”
The window on the heart

As soon as she touched Abraxas’s hand, Hermione was aware of the familiar sense of safety and security, but stronger than ever, seeping into her. She felt herself turning towards him, heard Padma’s murmured, “Look at the compassionate hand, please,” and stopped, trying to concentrate on the carving.

But then Padma, frowning, half raised herself to peer over the laptop screen at their joined hands.

Something was wrong? Hermione glanced down.

The clockwise light bead - hers -was trailing the usual yellow and blue threads, with the blue slightly thicker and brighter than the yellow. The mist was orange, again as usual. Now she knew what they meant: She felt trust and esteem for him, and offered him caring.

The anticlockwise light bead threads were reversed, with yellow thicker and brighter than blue. The mist was a yellow-green hue. So he felt esteem first, then trust. Why were his the reverse of hers? Esteem? She reddened involuntarily. That was him going on and on about her uniqueness and virtues and all that stuff. And trust? He’d both felt and offered trust when she’d advised him about Narcissa, but otherwise trust, from his point of view, was not a necessity. For her, in his power so to speak, it was. And she felt it, for him. So what was his benefaction? What love gifts did he offer her? Yellow-green: what was that? Yellow was esteem, at 4 o’clock, and green was commitment at 6 o’clock. What was between them, at 5 o’clock? Constancy? No, support. Of course it was: when Harry had told her about the arsonist in the flat, when Lucius had told her Greyback was free, the mist had been a bright yellow-green. Abraxas had been supporting her, calming her, telling her she was safe.

And the white core? It was in the clockwise braided thread, but not in the anticlockwise one. It had been there that first night, she was sure. Now it wasn’t. Why? Didn’t he love her? Immediately she pushed the thought away. *Stop that, girl. You’re not supposed to be thinking those thoughts.* But, unable to help herself, she looked again. The anticlockwise braid had a core, but it was a dull metallic grey, like iron. What was that? Neither Rose nor Padma had ever mentioned that colour. It had no positive undertones either. White implied lightness, joy, purity, freedom, while iron grey was associated with heaviness, chains, control.

“The focus, Miss Granger.”

Abraxas’s voice was gentle, but Hermione jerked, guiltily. Yes, she was supposed to be looking at the compassionate hand, in a calm frame of mind. Not … not wondering about why … why anything.

“Oh. Yes, of course. I was just … is something wrong, Padma?”

“Oh, no, not at all.”

So the amaura was all right, it was something about it that caused surprise. Was it the iron grey core? And was this surprise to her as Padma, school friend of Hermione, or to Miss Patil, consultant healer? Padma the friend, by the looks of things.

“Your professional assessment, Miss Patil. Please proceed.” Abraxas must have sensed it too.

“Yes, Mr Malfoy, of course. It is just that your amaura has some unusual aspects.”
“That may be relevant to your analysis, Miss Patil, but not to Miss Granger and me. Please proceed.”

“Yes, of course.” She hesitated, then said, softly, “Clockwise cauda, benevolences, ranking.”

Clockwise was her, and the cauda the woven threads in the tail. By putting two and two together, from what Rose and Padma had told her, trust was highest, then esteem, then … desire.

“Benevolence trust, analysis by foundation, innate, learned characteristics.”

So Padma was analysing her trust of Abraxas using her foundation characteristics like integrity, innate characteristics like intelligence, learned characteristics like perseverance. Well! That sounded very intrusive and judgemental. She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could say anything, Padma said, “Potential benchmark.”

Oh. A benchmark was a standard against which other things are measured. So did that mean her characteristics were high?

“Benevolence esteem, same characteristics.”

Hermione waited. Intrusive and judgemental, yes, but if she was coming out of it well …

“Potential benchmark.”

All right, then. Though no doubt Abraxas would point out that the rightness or wrongness of an act was not dependent on its outcome. Which was true, but she’d not been awarded many gold stars recently. Except by him, but that was another story, ongoing and to nobody knew where.

Though Padma’s eyes were fixed on the screen, and speaking only for giving instructions, she was clearly thinking and analysing, for her quill was busy wriggling across a sheet of parchment.

“Benevolence … colour Red, same characteristics.”

Desire: even more personal and intrusive, but Padma was skipping around it. Some support, then, woman to woman, from the healer. She glanced at Abraxas: he was sitting there, straight backed, head up, eyes closed. As responsive as a buddha. Whatever he was thinking, he wasn’t letting on.

“Benefactions, ranking.” No gold star for desire then. Did she want one? Ummm.

A few moments passed, then Padma said, “Benefaction caring, same characteristics.”

Caring was Hermione’s highest benefaction, so clearly Padma was analysing these in order of prominence.

And what was she analysing? Given her, Hermione’s, ‘virtues,’ innate characteristics and formative experiences, she would be caring towards … whoever? That was more than intrusive, it was outrageous. How dare she question that! How dare she have the cheek, the prying, meddling insolence to even think about it! “Padma,” she said, her voice quivering.

“Yes, Hermione?”

Hermione paused. Was she going to tear strips off the healer? Was she going to tell her how offensive it was that her caring could even be questioned after her years of looking after Ron in spite of his neglect of her? All in front of Abraxas? And he had turned and was looking at her too, eyebrows raised.
“Nothing.”

He gave her hand a squeeze, and said, “Please continue with your analysis, Miss Patil.” Did he suspect what had been going through her mind? Very likely. She had fired up at him over his intrusiveness, as she saw it.

And she was being silly. Padma was conducting an assessment, not making moral judgements. No, she was not being silly. The analysis might be a matter of physical measurement and mathematical modelling, but the interpretation was, unavoidably, a moral judgement. How could it not be, when the elements been measured and assessed were virtues, benevolence and benefactions?

Padma the interested friend would learn what Padma the analysing scientist was learning. Of course, Padma the experienced healer would make a balanced assessment of what she’d learnt, and Padma’s healer ethics meant no one else would know. Anyway she had no reason to believe that Padma the friend was anything but concerned and sympathetic. Also she, Hermione, had no reason to be ashamed anything she had done. If she had erred at all, it was by being too caring towards Ron for too long. Even Abraxas said she had sacrificed herself for her family. So there, Padma Patil!

Besides, she’d agreed to let Padma do it, and had made a moral issue out of it to persuade Abraxas. She could hardly back out now.

“Yes, go on please, Padma.”

“Right, thank you.”

Particularly when …

“Potential benchmark.”

… Abraxas was seeing her getting a gold star for caring.

“Benefaction loyalty.”

This was getting more and more personal. And she’d forgotten for the moment that this was not just her feelings, but her feelings about him. Her trust of him; her esteem of him; the caring she offered him. And now the loyalty she offered him. Abraxas is more than capable of deducing that these were in order of how strongly she felt them. It was not that she did not trust him … oh! He knew that she trusted him, as that had been the first benevolence. How did she feel about all this? Not very comfortable. Showing him her heart when she wasn’t ready, didn’t know herself what she felt …

“Perhaps, Miss Patil,” he said, “it would be best if you referred to these elements by their colours, rather than by their names.” He felt it was too revealing as well? Was he saving her blushes? Or perhaps he didn’t want to know?

“Oh. Oh, yes, of course. Usually it makes no difference, as … But here, yes, certainly. I apologise, I should have thought of that.”

Abraxas nodded and Hermione agreed. Yes, she should have. “Please proceed with your analysis, Miss Patil. Miss Granger’s children are waiting.”

“Yes. Benefaction colour hue blue/green.”

Hermione had almost forgotten about Rose and Hugo. She’d said she wouldn’t be long, and here
she been gone for ages. But Padma was already flustered and hurrying, and a comment from Hermione would just make her more flustered.

Although Padma moved quickly from one colour to the next, her speed was matched by her rate of writing. Her quill raced across the page, line after line, each completed page fluttering away to land on a stack on a corner of the desk. By the time it had landed her quill was usually a quarter of the way down the next.

“Comparative analysis, benevolence primary, brightness.”

Her primary benevolence had been *trust*, she recalled. And so, no doubt, did Abraxas.

So now it was being analysed comparatively. Comparative to what? Other women who created an amaura and trusted their … the other person? Or some objective standard? She didn’t know, but she didn’t know what *brightness* represented anyway. Or did she? Padma had implied that brightness was a measure of the first influencing factor, the foundation virtues.

Padma seemed satisfied and unsurprised. The quill raced across the parchment page for a paragraph, then stopped, hovering. “Potential benchmark.”

That again. She’d either need to question Padma extensively when they were alone, or do a lot of library research. Or maybe, all things considered, neither.

“Purity.”

She felt Abraxas stiffen. Oh-oh, that was a frowned-upon word at Bansith. She squeezed his hand, whispered, “Orange juice,” and felt him relax. No doubt his lips were quirking.

“Potential benchmark. Clarity.”

Oh. She’d missed Purity, which was … innate abilities. Though if Padma called it a potential benchmark, perhaps it had been over there on the right, like brightness and … yes, clarity, the learned values, the forging, was in the same place.

“Benevolence secondary, brightness.”

They swept through the comparative analyses quickly, all the benevolences and all the benefactions. The pile of parchment on the corner of the table grew. And so, she suspected, did Abraxas’s knowledge about her, for if he knew about the amaura, he would know which colour meant which benefaction.
“Anticlockwise cauda, benevolences, ranking.”

Ah, Abraxas’s amaura analysis. Now she’d learn about him, how he felt about her. His benevolences, his benefactions, his foundation virtues, innate and learned characteristics. Would his be potential benchmarks too? This would be fascinating.

“Miss Patil, are audible commands necessary?”

“The analysis program requires audible, Mr Malfoy. If I use silent for both note dictation and program commands, the program could not distinguish between the two.”

“Then you could type them in, Miss Patil.”

“I … I suppose I could.”

“In the interests of patient confidentiality, Miss Patil.”

What was this? He’d heard all about her, and suddenly confidentiality becomes paramount? So she wouldn’t hear anything about him?

“And perhaps you could adjust the angle of the screen, Miss Patil. Currently it is reflected in the window behind you.”

Oh! She hadn’t even noticed, but he had. Slytherin! Had he been peeping? No, he was too honourable for that. So she trusted him not to peep, but he didn’t trust her? Well! That was insulting, that was mistrusting, that was … prudent: wouldn’t she be tempted?

“I’m sure Miss Granger would agree.”

“Of course,” she muttered. What else was she to say? Well, actually, Abraxas Malfoy, I don’t agree at all. I would really like to hear how you feel about me. Especially as you now know all about me. That would be fairer, don’t you think? Rather than the selective privacy you want?

But of course she couldn’t. Instead she’d just have to sit here, trying to burn holes through the back of Padma’s i-Thing with her eyes, imagining what was shown on the screen. Sitting here, awkwardly holding hands with Abraxas, for another half hour or so.

As it turned out, Abraxas’s analysis didn’t take long. Why? Because his feelings were less complex than hers? Or because Padma the person found it disquietingly intrusive to be analysing the feelings of a man like Abraxas. Or perhaps she was simply intimidated by his watching her throughout. Whatever the reason, his analysis took half the time hers had.

Then Padma sat back and looked at them. “If I may, I would just like to show you this. It will explain why I am so grateful that you are allowing me to do this.” She turned the screen so they could see it.

It showed a curve in the shape of a bell. “This is a frequency distribution of the potentatum of the amauras we have analysed, one hundred and eleven in all. As you must know by now, amauras are unusual. But yours is exceptional even among the unusual. There is yours, in the right-hand tail.” An X was blinking right at the end.

**Slytherin Hermione**
“Your separate analyses are the same,” and she touched a key on the keyboard. Two superimposed bell curves came up: a pink one slightly to the left of a blue one, with pink and blue X’s flashing at the right-hand ends.

“Sorry about the colours. But the same positions, as you see. These are weighted averages of the elements and characteristics we measured earlier, so, clearly, reflect the relative values of those characteristics. They are all higher than any we have had before.” She took a deep breath, and looking at Abraxas, said, “I would like, with your permission, to use them as benchmarks.”

“No.” The word was spoken quietly but emphatically. “Today, here and now, is the last time this occurs. So such a benchmark would be meaningless, besides which the privacy of Miss Granger and myself is paramount. So you may not use the data in any way that may provoke questions as to its source. That is final, Miss Patil.”

The last time? Without asking her what she might think or want?

Padma bowed her head. “Very well, Mr Malfoy. I shall use the data only in a general, non-specific and non-identifying way.

“That is a foundation condition. Is your analysis finished, Miss Patil?”

“The immanent analysis is. Normally we’d do ephemeral amaura analysis now, but given the potentatum levels generated under even tranquil conditions and the … particular relationship factors pertaining here, I’m not sure that would be wise.”

What did that mean? That a powerful amaura and so powerful feelings might be generated? She’d felt powerful feelings that morning, at the petroglyph. They’d been confusing, almost frightening, but also… exhilarating. Might that happen again? And if there were to be no more, ever, this would be her last possible chance.

“Padma, if it will help your analysis, I think we should do it.” She bit her lip. This was the most blatant deceit. Pretending to be the self-sacrificing Gryffindor promoting the public good, to get her own way? She’d jumped into it, impulsively and recklessly, knowing that if she’d left it a moment longer, Abraxas would have agreed with Padma, and the door would be slammed shut forever. And he always seemed to be getting his way.

“Miss Granger, your children are waiting.”

Immediately she felt better. Yes, no doubt Abraxas did feel a little concern for Rose and Hugo, but his real purpose was to bring this to an end. So if he could be devious, so could she.

“Oh, I’m sure it won’t take long. Not with a name like ephemeral.” Now she was using specious arguments. Who was the Slytherin here? “Will it, Padma?”

“It need not, no. It is a short-term effect caused by a particular event.”

“And event which you generate?” said Abraxas. He was suspicious, and that made Hermione all the more determined.

“Not at all, Mr Malfoy. I generate nothing, merely observe and record.”

“It sounds safe enough, Mr Malfoy,” said Hermione. “No different to what has happened before.” She appalled herself at how readily these lies sprang to her lips. Had she always been like this?

He turned and looked at her, eyebrows raised. Could he see through her reasons as easy as she
could through his? She blushed.

“Please proceed then, Miss Patil.”

“Well, if you are sure. Please take each other’s hand again … Thank you, and … look into each other’s eyes.”
The floodgates burst

Oh! They’d never looked into each other’s eyes before. A passing glance, a momentary exchange of looks, yes, but a long concentrated gaze into his eyes? Had she taken on more than she could manage?

She turned her head and looked into his eyes. Green: a deep sea green. The folds and crevices of the aged face faded into insignificance. Only the eyes and the soul of the man that they revealed mattered. She felt feelings surge up: trust … caring … more than caring … commitment … a deep, powerful commitment to … to…. Her body swung round to follow her eyes as if she had no control over it.

His face had shown no expression as their gazes met. A moment later his eyes widened, his gaze became more intense and she felt the feeling of being cared for expanding through her, enveloping her, almost as if he had taken her in his arms. And another feeling, a rising joy … yes, joy. Her heart went out and she took a step forwards.

Then his brows contracted and his eyes narrowed as if he was in pain. As she moved towards him, his free hand swept up, palm outwards, fingers outstretched. No!

It was as though he had struck her. She recoiled. He’d rejected her, he’d thrust her away. Hurt, hurt, hurt! Then - a bang and a flash, followed by a smell of burning.

The bond broken, she jerked back, their hands breaking loose. She stared at him. He looked equally stunned.

She spun away. She could not face him - she’d offered him her heart and he’d thrust her away.

Moisture blurring her vision, she stared at the portraits on the walls. One of them, a tall woman dressed grandly in red and gold with an Elizabethan ruff, was looking at her. She had auburn hair, like Rose. Was she a Weasley ancestor? The woman moved, holding out an open hand. On her palm lay a single die and a Phoenix feather. What did that mean? Dice could mean a game, chance, luck, the roll of fortune, the uncertainty of life. A Phoenix represented life, purity and endurance. So was the woman saying: these things happen to us, some bad, some good. We endure it, and go on. Stay in there.

Padma’s voice penetrated her consciousness. Her mind could not process the words, but she looked towards her. The healer was half standing, gripping one edge of the laptop screen, staring at them, wide-eyed.

“Miss Patil.” Abraxas’s voice was trembling. In outrage or in shock? “Miss Patil, you spoke of an analysis, implying a dispassionate, mathematical process. You said nothing of a flaying, a lacerating, a tearing open of the souls. This is a breach of trust, Miss Patil. Worse, it is a violation, both of trust and privacy.”

Padma raised both hands. “I assure you, I absolutely assure you, Mr Malfoy, that I am not invoking this. It is not my doing, I promise you. It is entirely the interaction between yourself and Hermione.”

“Then explain what just happened, Miss Patil! Miss Granger and I have interacted perfectly calmly these past days. Now, during your visit, everything is escalating beyond control.”

No, that wasn’t true. Hermione knew her feelings had been growing, day by day, and, she was
sure, his too. They’d held them under control, barely in her case, but looking into each other’s eyes had breached the floodgates.

“Mr Malfoy, I can tell you what just happened, but …” She looked away.

“But what, Miss Patil!”

She turned back, looking him full in the face. “You won’t like the answer.”

He glared at her, and so did Hermione: what sort of reply was that? A moment’s reflection and she realised: a true one. For both of them.

“Mr Malfoy, we are in uncharted waters. The high thaumaturgic potentatum, the high levels of … integrity, of intellect, of life changing experiences, the degree of compatibility: it is all pushing the amaura into strata I have never seen before. Add to this the severity of Hermione’s illness, the … unusual treatment, and above all,” and she spread her hands, “certain restraints which you both exhibit. Given all of this, unexpected, extreme, even lacerating outcomes must be expected.”

He took a deep breath, sat back and folded his arms. His face was stony. “I allowed this analysis to be carried out against my better judgement. You now tell me that we are in uncharted waters. That to me conjures visions of other researchers eager to chart those waters. The anonymity of Miss Granger and myself vanishes. The window opens and the world peers in, prying, prurient, invasive. That cannot be allowed to happen, Miss Patil. Our privacy and our anonymity are paramount. So: no publishing in scientific or medical journals, not even anonymous case studies for your students. It remains in your notes only. No magnetic media records of the analysis. No cloud storage. This applies to both data and deductions.”

Padma looked crestfallen. “Mr Malfoy, this is groundbreaking. This is-”

He raised his hand and she stopped. “Miss Patil, it is only my belief in your professional and personal integrity, and gratitude what you did for Miss Granger, that prevents me from insisting that all records of this analysis are destroyed. As it is, I want your case notes to be stored in the Malfoy vault at Gringotts.”

“But the advance of medicine, Mr Malfoy, and the bearing on other cases!”

“Other cases, Miss Patil?” His eyebrows were raised.

She looked up at him. “Oh, not … identical treatments, of course, I don’t mean that. I mean similar situations, where the amaura can enhance and accelerate recovery.”

His face hardened again. “That … enamation is stillborn, Miss Patil. It has no future. It will not be occurring again. Any reference to it by you or anyone else will only cause pain to Miss Granger. I want your undertaking, Miss Patil, that this information, data and deductions, remains there,” and he pointed at her head, “and that no word of it so much as passes your lips without our … without my approval. That is final and irrevocable. I want your word on this, Miss Patil.”

This emanation is stillborn. He was declaring it dead. Her relationship with him, his with her, them together: dead. Padma glanced at her and she looked away.

“Very well, Mr Malfoy. The information will be treated as you wish. I give you my word.”

He inclined his head, but his expression remained grim. “Thank you. Your analysis being finished, Miss Patil, no doubt you will shortly be on your way. I will bid you farewell now, as I have a pressing engagement. Waldi has your portkey. Miss Granger, Miss Patil, your servant,” and he
hurried from the room.
The professional ethics of Healer Patil

The door closed behind him with a snap. A pressing engagement? Here? With who? No, he didn’t want her, and now couldn’t wait to get away from her. Like Ron.

She glanced at Padma, then away.

“You’ll be wanting to go on your way, then.” She wished she could put some life into her voice, but the effort was too much.

“Hermione-”

“It’s all right, Padma. I’m not the first woman to delude herself. Though I seem to make a habit of it.”

“You didn’t delude yourself, Hermione. The amaura is an emanation of feelings, and what his amaura showed, he felt.”

“Emanation: that’s what he called it. He wouldn’t even name it, other than to call it ‘stillborn.’ That sums it up, what he feels.” She glanced up at Padma. “Waldi will be waiting under the oak tree. Shall we go?”

“No. No, I’m not going to leave you like this. Hermione, he can say what he likes, he can deny to his heart’s content, but the truth is in the amaura. Now, I’ve only met him once before, but that time was enough to show me that he has a strongly developed sense of right and wrong, and that when he thinks he is right, nothing - nothing will turn him from his path. In the face of such rigidity, I feel justified in some flexibility in my professional behaviour. Hermione, bring your chair. I’m going to show you something.”

“Is there any point, Padma? It’s over and I feel drained.”

“Oh, Hermione! You create the most powerful amaura I’ve ever seen with this man, and you want to walk away from it?”

“He’s walked away from me.”

“He’s pig-headedly stubborn, that’s what he is!”

“He’s not. He’s just … doing what he thinks is best. I suppose.”

“Oh, Hermione,” and the healer hugged her. “You see? Not so ‘over’ or so ‘drained’ that you don’t immediately spring to his defence. As predicted by your amaura: Loyalty, colour violet, at 10 o’clock on the amaura colour wheel.”

Hermione gave a weak smile, and Padma said, “That’s better. Come on, let’s see what his amaura can tells us about him. I’m going to show you screenshots of the ephemeral amaura you created together, taken at intervals of a few seconds.”

Hermione drew up the chair, saying, “Wouldn’t your ethics committee have something to say about this?”

“Probably. Or rather, certainly. But I’m out on a limb there anyway.” She tapped the button on the keyboard. “This is the first one, taken when you touched. It is similar to the immanent amaura you
create, with your primaries being trust and caring, and his esteem and support. Now look at the cauda. In yours, chinks of light, representing … pure love,” and she glanced at Hermione.

“Don’t worry, Padma. I was grasping at straws, before. The ephemeral blew any remaining denial away.”

Padma nodded. “It had mostly gone anyway, as this shows. You at least were admitting the truth. His cauda, on the other hand, shows no light at all.”

“The first time we touched, at dinner on the first day, we both had white light shining through the cauda.”

Padma nodded. “Yes. The vena cordis on the first day, and that was the unsullied truth. Only when he learned what the amaura was, did it change to denial. Now in the ephemeral, he was taken by surprise at the strength of both his and your feelings. So this next screenshot probably reflects that first-day state of innocence. This was taken about a second after you looked into each other’s eyes.”

In both his and her caudae, a white light was bright between the threads. In both caudae too, a thick red thread was visible. In the pluvia a bright green was now prominent. She’d not had that before. Green represented …

“Commitment,” said Padma softly. “Commitment to a long term relationship. And see how fast the nebula is being created? The light beads whizzing round. Look at the belt of knots. Gold, representing powerful reciprocation, each to the other. And vena cordis, pure love, is prominent in the caudae: the software tones down the glare, otherwise we wouldn’t be able to see anything else, but it’s bright, Hermione. None of this, not one element, is compatible with denial. Hermione, this is what you are both feeling at that time, spontaneously and uninhibited. This is the truth, your truth, and a truth you can get back to.”

She turned back to the screen and tapped a key. “The next one is three seconds later.”

Her white light dominated the cauda. The green dominated the pluvium, bright and strong as before. But in his the whole cauda had darkened, the white light turning grey. The pluvium was still green, but the colour had darkened. She turned to Padma. “What’s happening?”

“He’s trying to control his emotions. He is fighting his own corneum. Let’s look at the last one, which is a replay of the final three seconds. Then I will tell you what I can.”

Her white light was still there, but the brightness dimming. Her green had dulled, with a scarlet lightning strike across it, shimmering. But his: between the threads of the cauda was a dull steady metallic grey. Across the pluvium lay four lightning strikes, the colours pulsating between crimson and scarlet.”

Hermione looked to Padma. The healer said, softly, “You are hurt, but still offering love and commitment. He has wrested control, but at a huge cost in pain.”

“We are both in pain? I know I was.”

“Pain in an amaura is not that uncommon: couples are human, after all, and all relationships go through ups and downs. Normally, however, the elements which enabled the amaura to form in the first place - integrity, perseverance, moderation, reciprocation, respect, these enable the partners to handle it. Scarlet strikes indicate a high level of hurt.”

Hermione closed her eyes. “Yes, I felt it.”
“It wasn’t deliberate, Hermione. He wouldn’t hurt you. He’d die before hurting you, believe me, Hermione.”

Oh! “Then why …”

“Hermione, I don’t know. I’d have to know why he was fighting his own corneum, and, as I’m sure you will appreciate, he’s not about to tell me or anyone else that. All I can tell you is what is happening, not why. He wants … something, perhaps what the amaura is offering him, but he’s denying it to himself for some reason. And that is the source of the pain.”

“Is it … bad?”

“I have never seen that level of pain in an amaura. I have never seen one lightning strike, let alone four, in an amaura. I have seen lightning strikes like that, pulsating between crimson and scarlet once, years ago, when I was counselling victims of torture. His torture.”

“Voldemort’s?”

Padma winced. “Yes. Those strikes reveal intense psychological pain.”

“And you don’t know why?”

Padma was silent a moment, then said, “I don’t know why, but if I was to speculate - off the record - I would say that this is pain which he inflicts on himself to avoid hurting you in some way.”

“Oh.”

“I’m basing that on what I know of him. He’s inflicting great pain on himself, and a little on you, now, to avoid inflicting more pain on you later. But that is speculation. Hermione, the point I really want to make is that beneath that grey sheath is the vena cordis. That is not speculation. It is there, he feels it, he is fighting it and that fight is causing him intense pain. He is denying something, and what it is and why, is for you to find out. But whatever it is, it is not indifference. Hermione, you create an uniquely powerful amaura with Abraxas Malfoy. What you have is incredibly rare, and worth fighting for. Don’t let it slip away.”

She stood up. “Now, I’ve already breached goodness knows how many ethical rulings on patient confidentiality, so I’d better be going before I breach more. I’ll send Optio to pick up the gear.” She tapped her notes into a neat pile, slid them into her briefcase, and shut the laptop.

“Thank you, Padma, both for showing me that and for your insights. Though I don’t know what Mr Malfoy would say, especially after his flattering comments on your professionalism and integrity.”

“As I’m sure you have already found out, Hermione, Abraxas Malfoy’s ideas on integrity are unconventional. Though I’m sure that while he guides his behaviour by his personal interpretation, he expects everyone else to conform to the standard meaning. So, yes, I wouldn’t care to explain my actions to him. Though … I’m doing this for him too.”

“I’m surprised. He hasn’t given you an easy time today. And you seem … quite wary of him.”

“Oh, I am. But that’s another matter entirely. This is about you and him. If I can help you, either of you, professionally or personally, I will. You because of who you are and what you have done. Him… well, I suppose for the same reasons. What he did and what he is. I don’t think I have ever met a man so driven by principle. Or one so determined and stubborn.”
“Oh, I’m not sure he’s really that stubborn.”

Padma smiled. “Benefaction loyalty again. You can’t help it. No, to you he’s almost ‘sit up and beg.’”

Hermione gave a giggle at the image, and Padma said, “Target achieved: Hermione’s mood lightened. I’d better leave now before he comes and finds I’m still here, and wants to know why.”

She gave Hermione a peck on both cheeks, then she stepped back and said, “You really are a groundbreaker, Hermione Granger. From the moment you entered Hogwarts, you’ve changed the way the wizarding world looks at things. Muggle-born, but top in year, top in school, the brains of the Golden Trio. Women’s rights, muggle rights, elf rights, now this, and even your divorce.”

“You know about my divorce?”

“The notice was in the noon edition of the _Prophet_. The Ministry does it to discourage, to shame, but this time it has done the exact opposite. You are a role model for women, and women are saying, not, as the Ministry wants, “She’s divorcing him? Oh, how shocking,” but, “She’s divorcing him? Good for her!” and looking at their own situations. I had a quick glance at the afternoon edition before I came: there were five divorce notices. Five! Women who were waiting for a trail blazer. They read your notice and immediately owled their lawyers. I think, really, it’s wonderful. You’re dragging us into the 21st century.”

Hermione sighed. “Not intentionally. Padma, thank you, both for coming and for all you have done for me.”

Padma shook her head. "Believe me, Hermione, I am not the one who deserves your thanks. Now, I think we only need one more consultation on your healing, and I'll set that up with the Malfoys.”

A tapping at the door, a pause, and Waldi stepped in. “Ceannard wishes to know if Miss Patil and your children will be staying to dinner, Miss Hermione.”

“Rose and Hugo! Oh dear, I’d forgotten all about them. No, Waldi, they won’t be staying. Padma?”

Eyes wide, Padma shook her head emphatically and Hermione said, “No, Waldi, she won’t. In fact she is just leaving. Do you have-”

Waldi held up a feather. “I have Miss Healer Patil’s portkey here, Miss Hermione.”
A light double tap on the door, it opened, and the old man strode in. His face was white, his expression hard and set. He was angry, no, furious, at something. At her, at the presumption she had shown earlier in questioning him?

He bowed to her and said, “A moment, if you please, Miss Rose.” He sat down at his desk, leaned forward and rested his forehead on the palms of his hands. A few moments later he lifted his head. The anger lines had eased away.

“My apologies, Miss Rose, for being away so long. However the matter is now dealt with, once and for all. Your mother is dispatching the healer on her way, and will then go to find your brother.”

What could Padma Patil have done to make him so angry?

“This gives us a little more time, Miss Rose. You were expressing disquiet that all I have offer you by way of allaying your fears about your mother is just words, and has little in the way of robust supporting evidence. But words are all we have, here and now. Is there anything else I can offer you.”

Yes, there was. He’d given her time. Time to gather her thoughts and her courage. Now she was ready for her move. She had a rapier, a powerful one, but which would give her only one strike. One that would, she hoped, strip away the words to reveal the feelings.

“Mr Malfoy, let us look at your motives. You said that why you have done what you have done is irrelevant. To the world that may be so. But to me, with my mother here, under your roof, the why is everything. Everything, Mr Malfoy, for I know that you and my mother, together, generate the amaura.” She held her breath.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, then opened them again. "She has told you of that.”

"It slipped out. She tried to draw it back, and was very reluctant to give details. But I know that when you and my mother touch, Mr Malfoy, the amaura is created. And that it is powerful.”

He gazed at her so intently that she took a step back. He had been treating her, it seemed, as an equal, but had she now presumed too much? Or had her strike pierced him?

“Miss Rose, two days ago I had never heard of the amaura. What I have learned since has made me wish I could have remained in that state of ignorance. What I discovered from my own research was disquieting enough, but today Miss Patil, in her … probing into this phenomenon has, unfortunately, revealed much that should have remained hidden.”

Was this why he’d been angry? She thought of healer Parvati drawing out the poison of her childhood nightmares, considerately, gently, persuasively. She’d been both competent and professional. Rose couldn’t imagine that her twin sister was any different. “I don’t understand, sir. Surely healer Patil was only revealing what was there? Wasn’t she merely acting as an explainer, showing and interpreting what you and my mother created?”

“It was unnecessary, Miss Rose. Neither I nor your mother needed that knowledge.”

She couldn’t let this pass. “Speaking for my mother, sir, I cannot agree. She would want to know about it, especially something that affects her so deeply. She always taught us that knowledge is
better than ignorance. On my mother’s behalf, sir, I would not want her to remain uninformed of something so vital.”

He looked at her, then stood up and bowed. “Miss Rose, you are absolutely right. My statement reeked of autocratic highhandedness and outrageous chauvinism, not to speak of moral dishonesty. Who am I to decide what your mother should or should not know. And you are right also about Miss Patil. As your mother’s healer, she has an ethical and professional duty to impart information if she judges it to be relevant and beneficial to your mother’s physical and mental health. She was doing her duty. Your mother told me this, I agreed, and then blithely ignored it. I am, immorally and unjustly, attempting to transfer my guilt to Miss Patil’s shoulders.”

“I was angry with Miss Patil, Miss Rose, for it was under her ministrations that your mother experienced pain, powerful and disturbing pain. But it was I, not Miss Patil, who allowed this amaura to develop, knowing full well that it had no future. In so doing, it was I, not Miss Patil, who has inflicted pain on your mother. By my rules as well as yours, that is unforgivable.”

He leant forward. “Miss Rose, whatever the amaura might mean normally, it can mean nothing to us, to your mother and me. Indeed, there is no us. I am some eighty five years older than your mother. There can be no us. In a few days we will part. She will return to her life, and I will stay here, to live out what is left of mine. That is, as it were, cast in stone.”

"You feel nothing, sir?"

He leant back and shut his eyes. "Rose, I feel everything. Any man would value so delightful a companion; gentle and considerate, intelligent and informed, beautiful and feminine. When your mother places her hand on my arm, and the amaura binds us, it is like the doors of a prison springing open and sunlight flooding in, warming my face, my arms, my whole body, after a lifetime of cold. Walking with her on my arm is like floating through a meadow in springtime.

“Today, looking into her eyes, that wonderful, trusting, loving woman, I saw a vision of a future, a paradise, together. I wanted to take her in my arms, to hold her to me, forever. I wanted -” He rose suddenly, lifting a hand to his eyes as he turned his back.

“That paradise can never be, Rose. Those doors must close again, be bolted shut: top, bottom, sides. I must go back, she must go forward. In her world she will find fulfilment. Her light, her passion, her morality, her brilliance will find expression in just, in elevated causes. I am not only not needed in that world but not wanted, indeed actively, furiously rejected, as a Malfoy. That, to me, is nothing, for I care not a jot for the world's opinion. But eighty five years? She has sacrificed too much already, Rose. She deserves someone young and whole and strong. I would be a millstone around her neck. That is it and that is all of it. She will stay here until she is well, and then she will go." The words rang like a judgement.

He turned suddenly and faced her. His eyes were glistening – and so were hers: she could hear the pain and sense of loss in his voice, harsh though it was. "You need not fear for your mother, Rose. She means too much to me for me to do other than nurture her while she is here and free her when she is ready to go.”

It sounded so romantic: the lovers doomed to part, love denied forever - or it would if her mother wasn’t one of them. But she was, and if Rose wanted a fairy tale ending, she’d have to fight for it. His passion, his denial of himself had blown away all her doubts. He loved her mother. The irony that she, Rose, had switched sides was not lost on her. But what was, was, and her denial of it would not help her mother - or him. She opened her mouth to argue, but he was speaking again, shaking his head. "I do not understand how the women of your family manage to drag these things out of me, Rose. Your mother, your aunt, and now you. A Climbing Rose indeed."
A shadow passed one of the windows, and he said, "Here is your mother, we must compose ourselves." He reached into a pocket and pulled out a folded handkerchief, strode across and gave it to her. "Clean and unused, Rose," took out another and wiped his eyes.
Confusion

Hermione stepped back from the cottage window. Hugo was having a wonderful time playing tag with Mister Lumpy, and she didn’t want to stop them. Hugo had always wanted a cat, but had had to make do with hamsters: having a cat where they were, in a flat on a busy road, was just not practical. Now he was playing tag, and Mister Lumpy, to Hugo’s great delight, was stalking and pouncing. So the Bansith tom could be playful as well as dignified and serious.

What about the master of Bansith? Could he be playful? He’d been the opposite - almost ferocious - when dealing with poor Padma. Yet with her, Hermione, he was completely different. Gentle, considerate, and, yes, playful. With her he would occasionally let his guard down, like when he’d said the impetuous Aughterlee Maelfee would probably have been in Gryffindor. Still, she’d never seen him smile: a twitch at the corner of his mouth was the closest he ever came to it. But somewhere, under that cast-iron reserve, she was sure lay a great capacity for joy, happiness, playfulness. Not that he appeared unhappy: generally he seemed at peace with himself, content with whatever life gave him. Though he also seemed to have the desire to change what he didn’t feel was right. And when he did, he moved like a juggernaut. *Determined and stubborn*, as Padma had said. Though he could be stopped: she’d stopped him more than once.

But now? She’d hurried to the cottage after seeing Padma off. She’d not wanted to risk meeting Abraxas. Though, to judge from his hasty departure, he was no more eager to meet her.

That amaura analysis had spoiled everything. Why, oh why had she agreed to it? They had been sailing along nicely, taking gentle pleasure in each other’s company, sharing little joys like seeing the kingfisher. She’d been uncertain about her feelings, and probably he about his, but nobody was pushing for clarity and certainty. Then Padma had come with her analysis and had brought everything to a head. What before had been vague and open to interpretation was now so clear and sharp edged that it had cut them. And while it had removed some uncertainty, it had brought another uncertainty into focus: what would happen to their relationship. Though no uncertainty from him: *stillborn*, he’d said.

Uncertainty from her: her feelings, her course of action. Padma had given her guidance, saying that Hermione should fight for what they had. She’d said that the amaura reflected the truth about how they felt, and that while Abraxas was clearly in denial about something, there was no doubt about how he felt about her. It was up to her to find out what he was in denial about, and to deal with that. How? If her own feelings were anything to go by, he probably wouldn’t know himself.

All right. Even if he didn’t know, what might it be? He cared for her, he valued her, she knew that even without the amaura. He saw her as *a precious jewel*, he’d said. But a jewel was something to be valued in the monetary sense, not something to be loved. That would account for the grey vena cordis, wouldn’t it?

But the vena cordis had been white, and then turned grey. You couldn’t have love, and then not love, could you? You couldn’t plug a wtod into an emotion to shut it down when things go wrong. She couldn’t; could he? Hadn’t he done just that? No, he hadn’t. He hadn’t shut it down, he’d wrested control, he’d suppressed it, he’d denied it at the cost of great pain to himself. *A flaying, a lacerating, a tearing open of the souls*, he’d said. What had he denied? His feelings for her? What feelings? Love? How was she to tell?

Oh, it could be anything. Only the fact of his denial was clear and bitterly sharp.

And her? What did she deny? Not her feelings for him. She couldn’t, not after what she’d felt in
the ephemeral amaura. But even with that, she couldn’t commit to love - shiny bright vena cordis or not - and she was not sure why. Where did that leave her? Confused, in a maze, going round and round, but finding nothing and getting nowhere. She was too involved herself to work it out.

One thing was clear: Abraxas’s denial was centred around her. He was denying her, rejecting her.

How did she feel about that? Unhappy, of course. So was she just going to accept his decision? Sometimes … sometimes she hated having an analytical mind. Sometimes it made things clear that she didn’t want made clear; made her face things she didn’t want to face.

The truth was that Abraxas had nailed the coffin lid down and that was that. And what was in the coffin? She tried to push the thought away, but it wouldn’t go. Their hearts? No, no, she must stop this train of thought, she must get away from it, it was too … disquieting.

*Disquiet.* That was a term Abraxas used. Padma had used it too, as well as *skip around*. And she’d other expressions of his: *Garden of Eden*, and *You’re putting me through the wringer*. Unless Padma’s hobby was studying washing machines of the early twentieth century, she’d certainly never seen a wringer. Harry’s comment came to mind again. *You seem to seduce all the women you meet.* The high flying Patil twins too?

But there was no doubt that Abraxas had that something: that mix of strength and vulnerability, of solidity and fragility, of wisdom and wit, of stubbornness and sensitivity, that attracted women. He also had a way of making a woman feel special.

It was no good: she’d try to go off at a tangent, to stop thinking about what she felt for him, but the tangent quickly became a curve, leading her back to thinking about him again.

It was getting late. She must collect the children, then go and see Abraxas to say goodbye. Would he … would he see her? The way he’d run off, with that absurd excuse … it was so unlike him. He must have been really desperate to get away from her. If he felt like that, did she want to see him?

She put her face in her hands. Oh, what a mess! This morning she’d wanted him to … to kiss her. Now, a few hours later, they were avoiding each other. All because of Padma and the amaura. Was that true? No, it wasn’t. Yes, he had been annoyed at Padma, but it was her, Hermione, who had persuaded him to let the amaura analysis take place. Worse, it was her, her alone, using deceit and guile, who had persuaded both him and a reluctant Padma to go ahead with the ephemeral analysis. And it was the ephemeral which had blown the lid off everything. That would teach Miss Hermione Slytherin Machiavelli a lesson.

Stop wallowing, girl. You’re a mother, you have responsibilities: getting the children back to school. And … where was Rose? Not in the grounds, not in the cottage. Had something happened to her? While her mother had been wallowing in forbidden feelings?

“Winky? Winky?” Then, as Winky came hurrying through into the sitting room, “Winky, where is Rose, where’s my daughter?”

Winky looked at her, wide-eyed. “She is here, Miss Hermione, she is safe. She is with the master.”

Hermione stared at her. *What!*

“Miss Rose has been with the master in the Great House, for some hours, Miss Hermione. She is quite safe.”

Him: *I will bid you farewell now, as I have a pressing engagement.* And her? *His absurd excuse.* Where was her trust, her loyalty, her belief in him?
But … Rose with Abraxas? Sparks would be flying if the last meeting was anything to go by.

She hurried to the cottage door. “Good evening, Mister Lumpy,” and she inclined her head. “Huey, I’m afraid we must be going. It’s getting rather late.”
Bonnie Prince Charlie

A tap at the door sounded, it opened, and Waldi said, "Miss Hermione Granger and Master Hugo Weasley, sir."

"Thank you, Waldi. Come in, Miss Granger, Master Hugo, please. I was just explaining to your daughter, Miss Granger, that in this very room the Jacobites plotted the downfall of George II."

Her mother, looking surprised, gazed at him, then at Rose.

"Yes," said Rose. "Did you know Bansith Hall is mentioned … er, pictured in The History of Magic, Mum?"

He turned and stared at her: Ha, he'd never expected she'd swing into tandem, and so adroitly. She'd been able to put one over on the Malfoy patriarch. His mouth gave a twitch at one corner and … he winked! No one had ever winked at her before – other than Hugo when he was three, and then it was with both eyes at once.

And of course Hugo was glaring at her now: she'd stolen his thunder. "Hugo told me. He knows all about it, Mr Malfoy: Bansith Hall, Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Battle of Culloden."

"Really? Are you interested in history, Master Hugo?"

Hugo looked trapped. "Uh, sir … I must tell you, I'm very sorry but I broke one of your chairs."

"That all right. It can be repaired or another one made."

"Oh, but," said Hermione, "we're terribly sorry, Mr Malfoy, but it's one of the Jacobean chairs. I'm afraid it's an original. I'm happy to pay for a replacement but I don't know if one can get a replacement. And I'm afraid it will never match the others."

"Miss Granger, please do not distress yourself. Jacobus can repair it, and if he can't, he can make another one. And it will match perfectly."

"But, Mr Malfoy, a replica Jacobean chair is worth nothing compared to an original. You must let me-"

He raised his hand to stop her. "Jacobus, Miss Granger, is the master joiner who made the original chairs. He helped build Bansith Hall, during the reign of James VI of Scotland. He made the window frames, the bookshelves, he built the staircases, he put in the oak panelling throughout the house. We have seasoned Jacobean oak in the cellars. A chair built by Jacobus is an original, not a replica. So, Master Hugo, I'm happy to tell you that the broken chair is not a problem."

Hugo was still staring at the carpet. "Thank you, sir. I really am sorry. And Mum says you must not call me Master Hugo but just Hugo."

"And what do you say?"

Hugo glanced at Hermione, then Rose. She gave a tiny nod. "I guess it's okay, sir."

"Thank you, Hugo. I already have taken the liberty of addressing your sister as Rose, without, I must admit, requesting permission. Perhaps, as she is a young lady, I should revert to the more polite address to avoid the offence of over-familiarity."
He’d winked at her: could she be daring? “Mr Malfoy, you would then be guilty of the offence of over-formality,” and she winked back at him. She saw her mother’s eyes widen.

His eyebrows lifted and his lips twitched. Then he gave a stately nod of his head. "Thank you, Rose. I can bestow no higher compliment than to say that you are your aunt’s niece as well as your mother’s daughter.” He turned to Hugo and said, "The Jacobite army under Charles Edward Stuart stayed here for two weeks in 1745, Hugo. They commandeered it from the Malfoys. They met here in this very room, thrashing out their future moves against King George and his government. And in this very room, we spied on them. See the portrait up there, the one over the fireplace?"

It was of a tall, red haired woman wearing an Elizabethan ruff. She looked stern and forbidding.

“The one who is looking at me?” said Hugo.

“Yes, and wherever you go in the room, she will be looking at you. That is Lady Fionnguala Morag Malfoy, 1506 to 1625, second cousin to Mary, Queen of Scots. She corresponded with William Shakespeare. Behind that portrait is a secret room, the size of a broom cupboard. You go in there, slide a panel across and look through her eyes.”

“Can I see it?”

“Certainly. Unless …” He looked at Hermione.

“I think it is a little late, Hugo,” said Hermione. "You have already missed most of your classes.”

“Another time then, Hugo. I will show you how to operate the secret panel too.”

"'Another time’ never happens,” muttered Hugo.

“Let us walk to the portkey point. Hugo, I will mention this to Scorpius. He has a portkey to Bansith Hall. Arrange something between you. Scorpius can let me know easily, as a portrait of Lady Fionnguala also hangs in Hogwarts. He knows all the nooks and crannies, all the secret rooms in Bansith Hall. You can spend a weekend exploring. And of course, Rose is welcome too.”

"Thank you, sir," said Rose. Trust Malfoy? An hour ago she have politely agreed, privately rejecting the proposal out of hand. Her and Hugo, spend a weekend in the company of her arch enemy? Not likely. But now everything was turned on its head. Scorpius was no longer just the son of the man who had tormented her mother at Hogwarts. He was the great-grandson of the man with whom her mother created the amaura. Their families were now linked, like it or not. The implications for her and Hugo were wide, deep and serious, and she’d have to think them through.

"Thank you, Mr Malfoy, that’s very kind of you," said Hermione. "So your ancestors opposed Bonnie Prince Charlie?"

"We did, Miss Granger. Bonnie Prince Charlie was a romantic Victorian invention. The real Charles Edward Stuart was a reactionary fop, a dilettante, a self-obsessed Continental Italian adventurer careless of the lives of those who supported him. He was a light-weight, Miss Granger, in intellect, character and morals. I see Hugo looking askance at me. The History of Magic says otherwise, does it not, Hugo?"

“Um, yes, sir.”

"Bathilda Bagshot, being Victorian herself, bought into the romantic myth, and of course, everybody is happy to give the Malfoys a bad press. In some cases we deserve it, but not in this. It was not for material gain that we opposed the Stuart Young Pretender. It was that we could see that..."
the chances of success were small and the benefits would be slight, and of failure were great and
the consequences disastrous. And so it proved, though even worse than we anticipated. No doubt
Hugo knows the details of the Battle of Culloden."

"The Scots lost," said Hugo.

"Yes, though Scots fought on both sides. An incompetently led, half starved, ill-equipment, ragtag
Highland army faced a well fed, well equipped and properly trained English army on ill-chosen
ground. The result was a foregone conclusion, but even we underestimated the vindictiveness of
the Southerners. I will not go into detail, but to give you a flavour of what followed, I’ll tell you
that the English commander, the Duke of Cumberland, was known, by his own men, as the
Butcher. As always in life, Miss Granger, when the big people blunder, it is the little people who
suffer. The Young Pretender brought nothing but decades of persecution, misery and in many
cases, death, to the Highlands. It would have been better for Scotland, Miss Granger, if Bonnie
Prince Charlie had been strangled in his cradle when a bonnie wee babe. If you doubt my
assessment of him, read modern muggle historians on the subject. They are less emotive, less
blineker and more dispassionate than Miss Bagshot was."

“I remember Scorpius saying something like that in class," said Rose. She had also, she was
ashamed to recall, told him that he was only saying that because he was a Malfoy. She hadn't even
considered that he might be right. She had, in fact, behaved exactly like Huey had when he'd said
she supported Mum only because she was a girl.

“Thank you, Rose. I'm glad to hear that my great-grandson had the courage to stand up for the
truth."

She blushed. She’d apologise to Scorpius the first chance she got – well, the first suitable chance,
anyway. She had a reputation to uphold as well as Gryffindor honour, and admitting prejudice to an
arch enemy and a Slytherin … She’d have to think it through.

"Well, here we are. Rose, Hugo, I am happy to have met you both and I bid you au revoir rather
than goodbye. I will leave you to say your farewells, Miss Granger."

His hands behind his back, he bowed, and was walking off when Rose said, "Please, Mr Malfoy?"

He turned and she walked up to him holding out her hand, a little way from her mother. He bowed
his head and said, "I am honoured, Rose," but when he held out his, she took it in both of hers. “Mr
Malfoy, I just wanted to say: I do trust you. I do believe that you saved my mother from abduction
or worse. I do believe that you did something to help her heal, something big. I do believe you are
doing your best for her now. So I want to thank you for that.” Oh dear, his eyes were glistening
again. And she was about to make it worse.

She leant forward, stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek, adding in a whisper, “And I don't
accept what you say about you and Mum and the amaura. There must be some way …”

He took her other hand, so that he was holding both, and whispered back: “Sweet Climbing Rose, I
am truly flattered and touched by your concern. I wish there was a way. But there is not.” He
turned to Hugo, and held out his hand.

Hugo glanced at Rose. She gave the tiniest nod of her head, and he reached out and took the
wrinkled hand. "Thanks for lunch, Mr Malfoy, and sorry about the chair. And thanks for looking
after Mum. If Rosie thinks she's okay here, I guess she is."

"Thank you, Hugo. I, too, would trust your sister's judgement.” He bowed his head again, said,
“Miss Granger,” then turned and walked away, taking a handkerchief out of his pocket as he went.
How could I not?

When Abraxas was out of earshot, Hermione said, “Rosie, were you really talking about the Jacobites with Mr Malfoy?”

"Hugo," said Rose, “go and wait over there by the tree. This is more girl stuff."

"Give me the portkey, then. Bye, Mum. Don’t forget my Firebolt, okay? Rosie, five minutes, okay?"

Hermione hugged him and, as he walked off, looked at Rose and said, “Well?”

Rose said, "Of course we weren’t, Mum. We talking about you."

"Oh, Rosie. Did you have to?"

"You know I did, Mum. I had to sound him out, try and get a handle on him as a person. I wasn’t going to leave you here otherwise. I wanted to hear what he had to say about all this."

"And what did he say?"

"He just told me what you told me. The same stuff, about uncle Harry and Ginny, and that."

"Are you convinced now? You seemed to get on so well with him. I could hardly believe my eyes."

"Now, yes, but not by that. And less by what he said than how he said it. He has a convincing way about him. But then I asked him about the amaura."

"Oh, Rosie, you didn't! How could you!"

"Mum, how could I not? Something so important?"

Her mother sighed. "And?"

Rose shook her head. "I can't tell you."

Hermione stared at her. "Why is it that every time Mr Malfoy meets a woman of my family, they discuss secrets which they won't tell me? Ginny was the same. Rosie, there must be something you can tell me? About how he feels? About the amaura?"

"Oh, Mum, I don't know what I can say. I've got to think about it. But …"

“Yes?” Eagerly.

"Mum, you're carrying on like a teenager!"

Hermione took her hands. "Sorry, Rosie. I must say I’ve felt like a teenager, these last few days. Up and down, up and down. It’s been, actually,” She gave a little giggle, “rather wonderful, in a way. But what were you going to say?"

"Oh, Mum. He was all calm and measured and … mathematical when we were discussing Ginny’s being here, and the Weasleys and Professor McGonagall knowing about Bansith Hall, and all that. All rational and reasoning. But when I mentioned the amaura, it was like I had melted the ice round his heart. Like his fire had been lit. He has feelings, all right, powerful ones. But he denies
"But it's there. He's seen it. I've seen how it affects him. How can he deny it?" Her mother was almost pleading.

"He told me how it affects him too, even accused me of dragging it out of him, like you and Ginny did. He doesn't deny that it's there, or that it affects him. He denies that it has any meaning for him and you. He says he is eighty five years older than you, and that your life is back in the world, and not with him."

Her mother shut her eyes, and took a deep breath. "Oh. I see. And … and that’s all?"

"Mum, please!"

"Rosie, tell me! I may be your mother, but I'm still a woman."

"He … he … " No, she couldn't say this. She couldn't tell her mother that he loved her. That was for him to say, if and when. But what she must say was the opposite: she must destroy hope rather than build it. "Oh, Mum, I'm sorry. There can be no us, he said. That is set in stone, he said."

"Oh."

Oh, this was heartbreaking. She must give something, some crumb of comfort. "He said … Oh, Mum, he said, I needn't worry about you, because you mean too much to him for him to do anything except nurture you while you’re here, and free you when you're ready to go."

"Oh." A pause. "He actually used the words ‘mean too much’? And ‘nurture?’"

"Yes."

"The first time we created the amaura, he said I was like a little bird cupped in his two hands, and soon he would have to let me fly away, back to my world." Her voice was soft, almost dreamy.

"Oh, Mum. He’s implacable, isn't he. Like granite."

"That's one reason I … feel safe and sheltered and warm, with him. He is so … solid, so rock-like."

"I can see the attraction. After Father."

A yell from Huey. "Rosie, are you coming or not." She waved him to wait.

Hermione shook her head, then, looking away, said, "It's what I expected. It's what I want. It's what I said myself. I care for him, yes. That's enough. And he cares for me. And that's enough. It has to be, because there can be no more," and she put her face into her hands.

Rose put her arms around her. "Oh, Mum. Here, take this, it's his." She pulled out the handkerchief and put it into her mother's hands. An ‘AGM’ was embroidered into one corner. "It's clean, Mum, just a few of my tears on it."

"Your tears?"

"Yes. He and all this, it has that effect on me too. Look, just take it one step at a time, okay? That's what we decided. A week, Mum. A lot can happen in seven days. Even to granite."

Hermione smiled. "Yes. Human granite, anyway. Thank you, love, for being there. When I wake at two in the morning with all the doubts and insecurities crowding around me, I'll hug you and your
advice to me, and go back to sleep. I'll take it one step at a time."

"You can hug his handkerchief to you as well."

Hermione reddened a little. "Yes." A pause. "He made an impression on you, didn't he."

"I think he'd make an impression on any woman he opened his heart to."

Hermione shook her head. "Harry said something."

"About what, Mum?" Uncle Harry was not noted for perceptive observations on the gentler emotions.

"Oh, just about Mr Malfoy and women. Figuratively." Then she shook her head again and went on. "Mr Malfoy winked at you, didn't he, and later you winked back. I was so surprised, especially after how you responded to him earlier. But that told me something was going on, and you hadn't just been talking about Bonnie Prince Charlie. He winked at Ginny too, and he’s never winked at me. And, well, you kissed him goodbye, so do you … do you like him?"

"Oh, Mum. What kind of a question is that? Yes, of course I do. I like him as a person, and … and for you. But it's very complicated and messy."

Another yell from Hugo. "Come on, Rosie!"

"Mum, I've got to go. Keep it touch, all right? Send me an owl when you're leaving here, I can speak to McGonagall, perhaps spend an afternoon to settle you in at the new house in Richmond."

"We'll see. I'll let you know anyway."

When they arrived back in the common room, Hugo said, "Is Mum okay with that old man, Rosie?"

"Mr Malfoy, Hugo. Yes, I think she is."

"Good. Then can I speak to Malfoy to fix up a visit to look at the spy hole?"

"Oh … not just yet, Hugo. Give it a week or so, and we’ll talk about it again. I … I want this Mum thing to settle down a bit." What she really wanted was to sort out how deal with Scorpius.

She had built up an image of the Malfoy family as being evil beyond redemption. And now they were linked to her family with an unbreakable bond. But even without that, meeting Abraxas had shattered the image. She could not treat the great-grandson of such a man as a pariah without good reason. Really good reason. And from what she had already seen of Scorpius, all the reasons pointed the opposite way.

The boy from beyond the pale was now to be assessed on his own merits, rather than through the shroud of his family’s past. Of course, she’d known from the start that this was unfair, but fairness weighed little on the scale when balanced against his family’s treatment her mother. She had taken every opportunity to visit the sins of the father on the son. Contradicting him in class, sneers, hexes, whatever she could throw at him, she had. She was mortified to think of it. She’d even
badmouthed him in his absence during her first year, but then had realised it was undignified, reflecting badly on her and her family.

And, truth be told, he came out of the reassessment rather well. He had responded to her campaign calmly, collectedly, and without any attempt at getting back at her. He had been dignified and unfailingly polite, and she’d found it really annoying. He had never hexed her, had never sneered or, as far as she knew (and she had enquired), badmouthed her. What she did learn was that he called her Princess Rose. That had made her furious, for she was sensitive about her status as the daughter of two members of the Golden Trio, and she had blown him up about it. Especially as Harry was called, behind his back, King Harry IX. And not only had Scorpius stopped doing it himself, to her amazement, but he had stopped the other Slytherins from doing it.

It had been so exasperating. How was she to keep up her belief in the evil Malfoys if he kept on responding like a gentleman? Dishonest and sneaky, she’d called it, hiding his true character. She’d considered getting back at him by calling him Prince Scorpius, but the problem was that, with his height, looks, bearing and manners, the name fitted him too well. So she’d kept quiet, and fumed. And that, no doubt, had given him much satisfaction.

He reminded her of Abraxas; they seemed to share many characteristics: the raised eyebrows; the slow, considered replies; the politeness, and, yes, she had to admit it, the gentlemanliness. The boy kept a low profile, was studious, did well academically, and, she knew, was quietly competitive with her. When she got top marks in an Arithmancy test, he would be second, and more than once he had looked at her, and his lips twitched in that way that now reminded her of Abraxas. Her response had invariably been a narrowing of the eyes.

So everything was rather topsy-turvy, and she would rather not get involved with Malfoy until she got her mind around how she felt about him.

But what she must do, was report back. “I must go and see McGonagall.”
His and her Truths

Hermione hadn’t felt able to face Abraxas after Rose’s revelations, and had gone to the cottage, sending Winky to make her excuses.

Fearful of a concerned visit, she’d retreated to the bedroom and sat down on the bed. But he’d left her alone. Perhaps he too was reluctant to see her until he had to, at dinner? No, she wasn’t going to make that mistake again. If he left her alone, it was because he respected her privacy. It was for her benefit, not his.

Had she ever had a day like this? First the surge of emotions at the petroglyph. Then Rose telling her that her unidentified ‘Touch’ was actually a rare but well known phenomenon which meant she and Abraxas were soulmates. Then Padma explaining and analysing the amaura - their amaura - followed by the experience of the ephemeral amaura. She’d been stripped of her feeble denial like a tree of leaves in an autumn gale. Then Rose giving her a censored version - censored, to her own mother - of what Abraxas felt about it and about her. All of which just increased her uncertainty about what she felt for him. It was so confusing: what she should want, what she could want, what she did want, what she oughtn’t to want. How was she to find her way through that thicket? And him? What did he feel for her? Really feel? Putting aside his granite resolve and iron will?

She was wakened by Winky’s voice saying softly, “Miss, dinner is in an hour. Your bath is ready.”

How would he react to the day’s events at dinner? Would he still be angry about Padma and the amaura? Ron would nurse a grudge for a month or more. Or would he be warm and engaging, as he had been with Rose and Hugo? 

It turned out to be neither. He was quiet, reserved, almost melancholy, as he had been when they had rowed back from the petroglyph. She wore the tailored slim-fit trouser suit Winky had made her, which they both, or rather all three, agreed, fitted her ‘neatly’. Remembering his reaction to her on their first dinner, indeed all their dinners, she had hoped for something similar, but although he had complimented her, he was subdued.

His mood must surely be linked the amaura. It was such a mammoth thing, looming so large in their lives, in their relationship, and so new to them both that it could not but dominate their thoughts, hers and his. And it was his that she wanted to learn about: what he felt, how deeply he felt it, why he had acted as he did.

Stillborn was what he’d said, but why? The age gap, he’d told Rosie. Well, yes, but what about everything else? That was a physical thing but what about all the emotional things, how they felt about each other? The amaura meant they were soulmates, for heaven’s sake: surely that was worth exploring? 

But also his feelings were what she was most scared of learning about, for surely it meant more pain, both for her and for him. She didn’t want that, but how could she crystallise her own feelings until she knew more? Only then could she decide what to do and move forward. If indeed ‘forward’ was an option. Stillborn was pretty much a stop-it-in-its-tracks statement.
So she must, but she couldn’t do it directly. It was too delicate, too painful. First she must try to lift his mood.

What could they talk of, to draw him out? She wanted to hear more about his time in Nurmengard, but that seemed too dark a subject for someone already gloomy. Something lighter, but that would interest him. History? She’d started speaking of the petroglyph, then went on to Robert the Bruce, then the history of Bansith Hall and the Jacobites. He had responded politely, but without his usual enthusiasm and interest. The ease and companionship of previous dinners was just not there.

She must, she must bring him out of this. She needed something he felt more strongly about. Grindelwald, but avoiding his hardships in Nurmengard? “I found your comments on Grindelwald very interesting, Mr Malfoy. I have often wondered how he felt about Voldemort, a wizard who appeared to be succeeding where he had failed.” Oh, that sounded so stilted. This was the man with whom she was supposed to be soulmates! But she was desperate.

He looked up, his eyes meeting hers. So young, so intensely green.

“So succeeding? Grindelwald did not consider it as such, not at all. Grindelwald despised Voldemort, considered him a poseur and a parvenu. ‘Lord Voldemort?’ he said. ‘What sort of a half baked upstart takes a title like that to himself? The man is a second-rate snake-oil merchant. Why doesn’t Dumbledore just squash him like a mosquito?’ And he knew that Voldemort would come to Nurmengard, eventually. ‘Insecure, he is. A dachshund pretending to be a rottweiler. A feeble shadow of the magus he pretends to be. He needs the Elder Wand to bolster his image of himself. What a pathetic fool. Let him come, let him see how a real magus treats him. Let him see how Gellert Grindelwald can die, scorneing the hollow man.’ He was proud, proud of his accomplishments, proud of his intellect, proud of his heritage. He considered Voldemort beneath his notice.”

"But why? I can understand that he considered Voldemort to be an intellectual inferior, that his assuming a title was silly and childish, but surely, they had the same aim: muggle domination by wizards?"

“Not at all, Miss Granger. That may have been Grindelwald’s aim in his youth, but by middle age he had realised that wizards were just as stupid as muggles. He planned to lead both the wizarding and muggle worlds.”

“Isn’t that even worse?”

"Only by degree. Though it was that degree that rallied opposition to him. Tell me you’re going to enslave my neighbour, and I will be shocked. Tell me you’re going to enslave me, and I will reach for my broadsword. And, yes, Voldemort also planned domination of both worlds."

“Then was there really much difference between them?”

“A chasm as deep and wide as the Olduvai Gorge, Miss Granger. As fundamental as motive and method. Grindelwald’s ultimate motive was the greater good. Voldemort’s was Voldemort’s ‘good’. He sought to rule for his own purposes, and they had nothing to do with benefiting the ruled.

"And the method, how they would achieve their goal: Grindelwald wanted and expected his followers to support him because they believed in what he was doing, believed in his ideal of the greater good. Voldemort didn’t care why his jackals followed him. He wanted numbers, he wanted gun-fodder. He was happy to entice those gullible enough to believe that a half-blood cared about pureblood rights; those seeking power for themselves; perverts, thugs and werewolves; nonhumans
with a grudge against humans; anyone and everyone. Provided they could be used, provided they could be gulled, intimidated or terrorized into fighting for him, he was not concerned about their motivation. If they disobeyed or ceased to useful, he killed them. And those fundamental differences are why I said his jailers’ decision was misguided and unforgivable. Putting aside Dumbledore and his manipulative and labyrinthine methods, Grindelwald’s knowledge and skills would have brought down Voldemort far sooner.”

Hermione did not comment: Abraxas held these views with a passion. But using one dark wizard to hunt down another would have been like riding a tiger. And you couldn't put aside Dumbledore and his methods: if he had defeated Grindelwald, he surely could have defeated Voldemort. One could speculate why he chose not to: his distrust of himself, that wizarding society needed to be severely shaken to make it purge itself of rabid values, that they needed a new figurehead. For her, her conviction that he loved Harry and was benign was sufficient. Though she had to agree that his methods were manipulative and labyrinthine.

“Honesty and integrity were important to Grindelwald, but had no value for Voldemort. I have sometimes thought that the difference between them could be summed up in their ways of dealing out death: Grindelwald’s preferred method would be the guillotine, quick and clean; Voldemort’s the torture chamber, foul and slow.”

Oh dear. She’d succeeded in rousing him, but as she had feared, the subject was too dark. And getting darker: she didn’t like the way this was going, what it was telling her about him. But now she must follow it to the end. ”You almost sound as though you … admired him.”

"Miss Granger, this is what I meant when I said that people are quick to judge matters about which they have no grasp or experience."

She looked up at him. He was looking at her with raised eyebrows. "I'm sorry. I think I meant it more in a questioning than a condemning way." But she had to know. “Did … did you admire him?”

He inclined his head. “Grindelwald would have approved your courage there, Miss Granger. Yes, overall. You cannot live cheek by jowl with a person for twenty eight years without coming to some sort of appreciation of their qualities. He was dictatorial, arrogant, abrasive, dismissive of opposition, and unwilling to admit that he could possibly be wrong. But he was also brave, loyal and honest. He had integrity.”

All right, she could accept that. “And … his beliefs? Did you agree with those?” She held her breath. Please, please, don’t say yes.

“Yes. Yes, to his underlying belief; no, to what he believed logically followed.”

She shut her eyes. Had she inadvertently opened a window onto darkness? The last thing she wanted was to be shown that his fundamental values were opposite to hers. But she couldn’t turn back now. She sat back in her chair and folded her arms. "Explain, please."

“He believed, in essence, people are foolish, and so must be driven for their own good. I agreed with the former but not the latter. People are foolish: they are deluded, short-sighted, bigoted, pigheaded, gullible and all the rest, but you cannot drive them. You cannot even lead them. They must find their own way, make their own mistakes. Further, even if a leader starts with impeccable ideals and good intentions, in the long run it always goes wrong. And Grindelwald’s ideals were far from impeccable to start with. We had endless arguments over that pureblood rubbish.”

She stood up, walked around the table, put her hand on his and kissed his cheek. "Thank you. I can
live with that.” His hand turned under hers and seized it, entwining her fingers with his. The amaura hazed around the joined hands, brightening to a vivid blue. The grip tightened, becoming almost painful, then, abruptly, he loosened her hand, rose from his chair, turned his back and walked a few steps away.

Why had she done that? It had been spontaneous, showing how she felt, but … but … she shouldn’t have. But he’d been so brave and … well, noble, about the whole Nurmengard affair … and also about the whole Hermione Granger affair … her … She dabbed her eyes.

She’d done it because she couldn’t help it.

He was patting at his eyes with a handkerchief. “Miss Granger, thank you for saying that. But you won’t have to live with it, for we will be going our separate ways in the very near future. Waldi, the coffee, please.”

Oh! That would teach her to let her feelings take control when he had his all chained up. But now, now was the time: she must muster her courage, and take the great step.

“Mr Malfoy, why? Why will we be going in our separate ways in the very near future?”

“Because there is no other path open to me, to us.”

“Is this because of the amaura?”

“No, Miss Granger, it is not. It is the path we were going to follow right from the start, from the very beginning. Nothing has changed.”

We. There was no we in this: she hadn’t been asked. But that was a side issue. “That is not so, Mr Malfoy. Everything has changed. The amaura, as Padma has shown us, changes the whole situation.”

“Miss Granger, I wish, how I wish I could agree. Unfortunately I cannot. The foundation conditions remain, and it is they which determine our actions. Miss Patil and her amaura simply exacerbate the surface situation.”

“Mr Malfoy, it is not her amaura. It is our amaura. She is not to blame for it.”

“As always, Miss Granger, you are correct. I felt Miss Patil was making a bad situation worse. A serious error of judgement I had made was being compounded by hers, and you were the sufferer. But in hindsight I realize I was being both foolish and arrogant. You are an adult woman, have the right to know, and she is the best one to tell you.

“I am ashamed to say that I blamed Miss Patil for exposing us to the amaura, but it is I, not she, who did that. All Miss Patil exposed was my folly. The error and the culpability is mine, entirely and exclusively. I am grateful to Miss Patil for revealing and quantifying the damage I have done.”

What was this now? “Mr Malfoy, nobody is to blame for the amaura.”

“No, not for its creation. But for allowing it to develop, I am. I have been weak and indulgent, Miss Granger. I promised you I would apply discipline to my feelings and actions. I have done neither. I thought we could let this amaura run a little without harm. I was gravely, disastrously, mistaken. In me the run has become an avalanche, and I have long lost what little control I ever had over it. That very first night, Miss Granger, when it occurred: I should have stopped it here and then. I should have stepped away, never have touched you again, seen you at dinner only.”
“But that would have been ...” Horrible. Not to have seen him, no walks arm in arm, no sharing of feelings; comfort, warmth, laughter?

“Sensible and prudent, Miss Granger. But, weakly, delighting in the feelings it generated, feelings I had no moral right to and certainly no right to involve you in, I had wilfully blinded myself to what it meant. Miss Patil's analysis showed me, dispassionately, what was happening, what was developing, what you were suffering. Then, under your daughter’s searching questions, I realised the fault was mine, and Miss Patil was merely the agent of exposing it. The results of my self-indulgent folly became clear to me. I have let it run, selfishly and wantonly, causing you great suffering. I, too, but justly so.”

Was he saying what he seemed to be saying? She’d like to be sure before she committed herself. But she couldn’t let him blame himself like this. "You speak as if it had a life of its own, as if it were an entity which we could ignore and it would leave us alone. It is not, Mr Malfoy. It is a part of us, a manifestation of a group of feelings, feelings which we feel, you and I. If there is blame, I must share it. I too delighted in my feelings. I too turned my head away from what they might mean. Avalanche is an apt description: I … I too have been swept away. And it was Rose, too, who drew back the veil, who told me I must face the truth, then work from there."

"And I have no doubt that both you and your daughter have the courage to do just that. But truth, Miss Granger: truth can have many faces. What is truth to one may not be truth to another."

"Mr Malfoy, I will not be sidetracked into a philosophical discussion. Rose, after she had met with you, told me that you admitted the amaura, but denied it had any meaning for us, for you and I." Oh, she really was going out on a limb now. She had to.

"I did. And I do. Miss Granger, there is no us. There can be no us. You must return to your world, I must stay here. That is my truth. I knew this before, but turned my eyes from it. Your daughter forced me to face my feelings, and hence the implications. Your words and actions yesterday were such that I could no longer delude myself. You must leave Bansith.”

Just like that? What she done to provoke this? "I don't understand."

He reached across the table, as if to take her hand, but stopped. "No. This is exactly what I have been doing. Indulging myself, at your expense. Miss Granger, let me walk you back to the cottage. I will explain as we go. Waldi?"

The elf stepped out and drew her chair back as she rose.

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Abraxas walked with his hands clasped behind his back. She felt oddly awkward, her arm dangling, ready to place on his should he offer, or even for him to take her hand. But of course he did neither, not after what he had just said. Nor did he speak, until she said, “Mr Malfoy, I am awaiting the promised explanation.”

He sighed. “Very well. Miss Granger, the insularity of Bansith allowed me to create a little fantasy world, a bubble world, denying the existence of the real world beyond. Yesterday that fantasy world began to disintegrate. Today it imploded and my folly was exposed. My folly, my self-indulgent, wilful blindness, the injury I have done to you, the one person above all others that I
should not have hurt. I wish to place you in a place where it is beyond my power to hurt you further, and a place where the Miss Granger I saw yesterday may flourish.”

“I don’t understand. Yesterday? All I did yesterday was to meet with Narcissa, and speak to you about her. There was nothing more than that.”

“No, nothing more than observing, assessing, and analysing her state of mind, identifying the causes of her trauma, then detailing the steps necessary to alleviate it in simple, solid, practical terms, so that all I have to do is follow them. That was all you did, Miss Granger. In five or six hours, what I was unable to even begin, in seventeen years. A mere nothing. But even to my dull, masculine mind, it was enough to show me that your world is back there, and it is waiting for you. And it is waiting now. You are effectively recovered, Miss Granger. The healing is all but complete. You do not need my presence any more.”

“And you?”

“I stay here. That is my truth, Miss Granger.”

She glared at him. “And me?”

He looked at her. “You go back to your world, Miss Granger, as I have said. Have I missed something.”

“You have, Abraxas Malfoy, in your fit of self-flaggelation and I-know-what’s-best. You have disposed of Hermione the functional person, the organiser, the analyst of people’s psychological problems, very rationally. She is needed back in the wider world, where she will lead a fulfilling life fixing people, organisations, society, so off she goes. But Hermione the fixer is not the whole Hermione. There is another part that you seem to have missed, in searching for your truth. Hermione the woman. The woman whom you rescued, whom you healed, whom you have helped and guided. The woman who has found more pleasure in your company than she has ever experienced with anyone, and who flattered herself that you enjoyed her company in the same way. The woman with whom you create an amaura. It is that woman who is wondering why she is being cast off, being cut away from you with such cold, callous cruelty.” She was trembling by the time she had finished.

He passed a hand over his eyes. “If I am being callous and cruel, Miss Granger, I am to myself as much or more than to you. And as to why: you know that very well. I am too old, Miss Granger. Too … old.”

“And what if I don’t care?”

He turned suddenly and pulled her against his chest, wrapping his arms around her and crushing her to him. “I care. Callous? You think I feel no pain at what I must do? It rips at the core of my being. Cruel? Yes, I am cruel, because life is cruel. Cruel to me, cruel to you: you were born half a century too late. I do care. I care as I have never cared before: I want to spend every waking moment with you: walking with you, talking with you, holding your hand, listening to your voice, hearing your thoughts. I want to spend every sleeping moment with you: you lying in my arms, your head on my shoulder, your breath on my cheek. But in ten or fifteen years I may be dead or, much worse, bedridden, and you, having gifted me with your vibrancy and youth, would be chained to a dying old man. What sort of a monster would I be if, you having freed yourself, with immense pain and trauma, of the shackles of seventeen years, I was then to shackle you again? I care, and I will not crush you with that burden. My years draw to a close; my time is spent. Yours lies before you. That is the truth, both yours and mine. Good night, Miss Granger,” and he released her, turned and strode away.
Had she slept? She must have, though all she could recall was a night spent in emotional turmoil. He’d all but told her that he loved her. He loved her, but was turning her away.

And her? Must she go? What choice did she have?

She’d awoken to a note from him, brought in on a silver tray by a worried-looking Winky.

_Dear Miss Granger,_

_I apologize for the short notice, but will be away all day today. I expect to return tonight, probably late, so shall dine out. The staff are off from midday, but Winky is happy to attend you should you so wish._

_I remain, Miss Granger, your devoted friend,_

_Abraxas Malfoy._

Was he avoiding her? Giving her time to think? Or, everything having come to a head last night, arranging things for the future? Her future, as a ‘devoted friend’ might do.

She’d assured Winky she needed no attendance and no breakfast, and had gone for a long run, right around the loch. Miss Sash had sat in the cottage doorway, a small dark figure framed in white, and watched her go. She’d stopped at the petroglyph, stood in the spot where he had held her and turned her to see the stag, had put his head next to hers and whispered into her ear. Then, her eyes moist, she’d made herself run on, crossed the burn by the little stone bridge, and turned towards the lodge again. By then she was walking, too tired to run, thinking she’d have to increase her fitness levels before inviting Narcissa to join her. But no, she’d be leaving in a few days, and from what Abraxas had said, she wouldn't be coming back. Well, he couldn't stop her seeing Narcissa, and they could run in Richmond Park or on the Thames Path, or in Kensington Gardens, if that was more convenient for Narcissa. Or even in the Bois de Bologna or along the Seine. Narcissa could tell her how he was getting on.

She'd always found running to be a great soul-settler, but this time it didn't really help. His words the previous night had shown the strength of his feelings for her. What were hers for him? Caring, yes, greatly. More than caring? Yes. Much more? Yes. How much more? She didn't know. She didn’t know or she couldn’t bring herself to admit it? She didn’t know that either. All she knew was that he was casting her off.

She'd showered, had a light lunch in the cottage, then sent a subdued Winky away.

Restless and lonely, she’d gone up to the Hall. The great oak front door had swung open easily on oiled hinges, and she stepped inside, closing it behind her. It was the first time she’d had to do it for herself: how quickly and easily she had slipped into this world of household staff. It had taught her that the house elves actually loved being in service. What would Winky do when she left? The little elf had put her heart and soul into caring for her. ‘A mistress she’d die for.’ Even if it was a bit dramatic – though elves did not do ‘dramatic’: if they said something they meant it, and literally – it showed how she felt. She’d never dreamt, when she spoke to Abraxas at the petroglyph, that
she’d be leaving in a few days. Winky would be devastated if she were sent back to Hogwarts: rejected, disgraced and a failure in her own eyes. And Narcissa already had at least two maids, so could keep her on only out of sympathy. She’d have to take Winky with her. It would shatter her image as an elf rights champion. But what was more important, her image or Winky’s happiness? She’d take Winky and handle any raised eyebrows as Abraxas had suggested.

What should she do? She was tempted to visit the library - the glimpse she’d had that first night was enticing. Abraxas had never taken her there, but he’d never said she couldn’t go there either. Still, without express permission she hesitated, walking up the hall instead.

It was lined with portraits: would there be one of Abraxas? It showed the Malfoy family through the ages. Torquil Donald Maelfee with sword and target, Dougal Finlay Maelfee standing with one foot on a stag, then - she stepped back and stared. The man, dressed in kilt, plaid and bonnet, and holding a staff, was turned as if looking at the distant mountains, but his face was covered in a Hannibal Lector type leather mask. What had he - Lachan Angus was the name on the little brass plate - done to deserve that? The Wars of the Roses lay within his time span. Had he been guilty of some war crime? It must have been bad, for atrocities were the norm, then.

Next was Caitlin Claire in a full-length white gown with lace trimmed bonnet and checked shawl. Then the baronetcy - had they backed the right side? - under the Tudors: Sir Edward Murdo, Bart, wearing a lace ruff, declaiming over a scroll; Sir Dragonmir Henry on a horse. Then the Stuarts: Lady Portia Elizabeth on an ornate bench, Sir Tiberius Jacobus in slashed purple doublet, lace collar, broad brimmed hat, standing behind with one hand possessively on her shoulder. Sir Septimus Oliver in plain black with broad linen collar and tall Puritan hat. Sir Quintus James in a cream embroidered waistcoat with pink roses, billowy white sleeves and frilled cuffs: the Malfoy austerity of the Commonwealth had not withstood the Restoration.

A trio of 18th century Malfoy daughters with white gowns splayed around them as they sat on the greensward, stroking a cat. A tabby cat, rather like Miss Sash, with shaggy fur, white bib and lynx-like ears. As she looked, the cat’s head moved to look back at her and the tip of the tail twitched. Very, very like Miss Sash. Behind the girls stood a Malfoy son in a royal blue pantaloon suit, a hunting horn slung around his neck, feeding a fawn. On one side was the portrait of Lady Drusilla looking haughty, on the other an empty portrait with a backdrop of trees, hills, a herd of deer and … a lion? Not exactly indigenous fauna, in Scotland, but perhaps it was meant to reflect the normal occupant’s character, who was … Hermione bent to study the name. Lady Fionnguala Morag Elspeth Malfoy. A very Scots name, rather than Roman, but of course she hadn’t been born a Malfoy. Oh: she was the Elizabethan lady over the fireplace in the main drawing room, the one who had shown her the Phoenix feather and had corresponded with Shakespeare.

She straightened and a movement caught her eye. The lion was walking into the foreground. A lion? The colour was right, tawny, but the proportions weren’t. The head was too small, the mane a ruff, the body too furry. A cat. The gait caught her attention, a relaxed, swinging stroll, and as the cat reached the foreground, she said, “Mister Lumpy?” The tail went up, and he sat down and stared at her. He had the white bib on his chest and even that moth eaten look. First Miss Sash, then Mister Lumpy? Well, of course, it couldn’t be them. This painting was Elizabethan, even older than the other, but surely, their direct ancestors. Abraxas had said Bansith had always had cats. The cat’s eyes followed her as she walked on.

The baronetcy seemed to drop away around the turn of the 19th century. His Honour Justice Tiberius George Malfoy QC, in powdered wig and gown. A small portrait of Valeria Victoria, a young woman in a Crimean War nurse’s uniform: had she died there? A mustachioed Augustus Edward Malfoy Esq in top hat and wing collar, and Mrs Antonia Lucinda Malfoy with wasp-like waist and lips slightly pursed – was that her character? Or the pressure of her whale-bone corset?
Gaius Bellus in his early twenties, khaki uniform, shiny leather riding boots, swagger stick against his thigh, the Malfoy sneer on his face – almost certainly his character, but she put the thought away: he’d probably died in the trenches at the Somme. Next was Titus Piers Malfoy, striped blazer, boater tilted over one eye, poling a punt on a placid river; his befrocked sister Aemilia Millicent recumbent, trailing her fingers in the water. Really, one could almost trace the course of British history just by looking at them.

But the next made her pause: The background was Bansith Lodge. In the foreground two little girls, were leading a third across the lawn, each holding one hand, both looking into her face with … distress on theirs. Hermione looked too, and jerked back: the child was Bellatrix, Bellatrix Black, but it was not that that shocked her. It was the child’s expression: bewildered and frightened, despairing. The girls leading her: one had light brown hair, and similar looks to Bellatrix, the other – immediately Hermione recognised the delicate features that had blossomed into the beauty of Narcissa Malfoy. But she was drawn again to Bellatrix, gazing at her. Poor child: what had happened to her?

“She is soul-lost.”

Hermione turned. Nurse Valeria Victoria was standing in the painting behind her.

“What does that mean?”

“All of us, all of us shadows that you see here,” and she waved her hand at the other paintings, “are in the land of the sancti or the land of the living, where you are. She is in neither. She is soul-lost.”

“She looks so … bereft, with no one to turn to. Can’t someone help her?”

“Not where she is. Only those whose sancti are broken go there.”

The sanctus was the spirit world equivalent of a person, made up of a spirit body and a soul, the person’s consciousness of self. Could that break, split into soul and spirit body? Apparently so. And then the soul became lost. Why? Because the body had the senses: sight, hearing, touch and so on? So the soul became blind and deaf - and lost?

Narcissa had said Bellatrix was soul-lost too. But Bellatrix hadn’t lost her soul. Not in the strict sense of the phrase. Or maybe she had. Who knew what dark spells had passed between her and her master? Perhaps when she had killed Sirius, she’d lost part of her soul to a horcrux? Certainly Narcissa believed something had happened to transform her sister into the psychotic monster she had become. Perhaps this place held those with maimed souls as well? “So she has to stay there forever?” What a terrible fate!

“Yes,” another voice, “so that will please you, won’t it. She is being punished for what she did to you. Good work, girl.”

Hermione turned. The young Edwardian woman in the punt was glaring at her. Aemilia Millicent.

“Who did what to whom?” a haughty voice enquired. Lady Drusilla had risen and was advancing in full sail to the side of her frame. “The lost Bellatrix child? Whom did she harm? This…” She waved her hand towards Hermione without looking at her. “This person? Who is she?”

A sharp crack made Hermione start. “It doesn’t matter who she is.” Gaius Bellus slapped his swagger stick against his thigh again. “Knowing she had the effrontery to oppose a great family is enough. She is just some common tart.”

“Really, Cousin Gaius, your arrogance overrides your intelligence so often I sometimes wonder if
you have any.” The young man in the straw hat was leaning on his punting pole, shaking his head at the soldier. “If she opposed a great family and, clearly, bested them, and she is just some common tart, what does that say about the great family?” He turned Hermione. “Piers. Law, Cambridge. My sister Em. Fine Arts, ditto.” He bowed, the boat rocked and Aemilia Millicent shrieked, “Idiot. You’ll have us over.”

“First wash for a century,” he said, winking at Hermione. Hermione opened her mouth to introduce herself, but Aemilia Millicent shook her head, scowling at her. “We know who you are, Miss Muggle.”

Lady Drusilla moved her imperious gaze to Aemilia Millicent. “We do not, child.” Then she raised a lorgnette to her eyes and looked Hermione up and down. Her lip curling, she said, “Well. Your attire confirms the honourable captain’s opinion. So it does not matter who you are, just what you are doing here. I take it you are not the new scullery maid.”

She was being deliberately insulting. “I beg your pardon!” said Hermione.

“Maybe she’s a mucking-out girl, from the stables,” said Mrs Antonia Lucinda.

“That’s what she should be, scullery or mucking out,” said Aemilia Millicent. “Except that the family would never employ one such as she, even as a slops girl for the chamberpots. This female, Lady Drusilla, is the muggleborn upstart who put Malfoys and many other purebloods into Azkaban.”

Exclamations broke out among the portraits: “Her?”; “Is she the one?”; “What is the hussy doing here, then!”; “Harlot!”; “Damnable female!”; “God’s blood, a traitress,”; “Delilah,”; “FraochŮn an Diabahl.”

But Piers, raising his voice, said, “As Lady Finna has observed, the less said about that period of Malfoy history the better. If that is all you have to offer, Em…”

“Oh, I don’t, I don’t. She then had the effrontery to marry into a pureblood family. Bloodtraitors, yes, but still pureblood.” A few mutterings followed this but she went on. “The worst is yet to come. Her ambitions have grown: she is looking to move up the social ladder. She has her eyes on this family now. This is Hermione Granger. This coquette is the pater familias’ new ‘companion.’ They walk about arm in arm.”

The paintings around her filled with figures as Malfoy ancestors crowded in to see her. “Her?”; “But she’s a no-one!”; “She’s the muggle-born upstart?”; “She’s to be his mistress?”

“But didn’t the Granger girl marry that ghastly Weasley boy? How can she be here?”

“Of course she did,” said Aemilia Millicent, “but she’s divorcing the lay-about, the blood-traitor flâneur, in order to clear the field. The Weasleys are not enough for her.”

Now the comments took more censorious tone. “What! Divorcing?”; “That’s scandalous!”; “But he won’t marry her: he can’t. Not a divorced woman!”; “Oh, the shame it would bring on the family!”

“But doesn’t she have two children by him?”

“Oh, she’ll throw them out, along with him,” said Aemilia Millicent. “Nothing will stand in the way of her ambition.”

Hermione stepped up to her. “Why? Why are you peddling these lies about me? What have I ever done to you?”
“You put my great-nephew Lucius into Azkaban, you little slut,” the woman hissed.

“I did not,” said Hermione. “He attacked us in the Ministry. All we did was defend ourselves. I wasn’t even a witness at his trial.”

“Verified,” said Piers. “Lucius brought that on himself. Can’t you get it into your head, Em, that the family feels that the less said on that whole affair, the better?”

“And can’t you get it into your smart head, white feather boy,” said the soldier, “that what we have here is a social climbing tart, using sexual wiles to worm her way into an ancient family. This female is an enemy and a mudblood.”

A shocked silence fell.

Piers said, “It’s the cellars for you, Gaius, face to the wall. And when you come back, you address me as Wing-commander. Or Sir. Get that, Captain? And Em, if you want to use the B-word, together with pure, traitors or the like, please leave the painting first. I have no intention of spending a year in damp and darkness just because you can’t button your bigotry.”

“It’s not bigotry, you idiot,” said Aemilia Millicent. “Just look at her. She’s so transparent. She acts all dewy eyed and innocent. A pretty face and a simper, and he’s all over her. It’s so obvious. She’s so obvious but he can’t see though her. It’s all foolishness and naïvity.”

“Gullible. No fool like an old fool,” said Mrs Antonia Lucinda.

“He is not,” said Hermione. “He is not gullible or a fool. If you call him that, you know nothing about him.”

“And you do?” said Mrs Antonia Lucinda. “How long have you been here, girl? Three, four days? And all of them spent in enticement. We know your sort, girl. Come from the gutter, gull an older man with your coquettish ways, marry him and a month later taking your pleasure with the footman, the stable-boy, the under-gardener.”

Hermione closed her eyes. What had she done to deserve this vitriolic attack?

“Centuries of witches,” said Lady Drusilla, “with impeccable ancestry marrying into the family, and now you? A bourgeois femme fatale with no forebears, no breeding, nothing. And the pater familias is supposed to be one of the wisest wizards of his time. And you want to marry him? With nothing to recommend you? Your presumption is breath-taking.”

“I never said I wanted to marry him!”

“Then why are you here?” said Mrs Antonia Lucinda. “You have come, you have stolen his-”

“Enough!” The voice was female, but deep, and seemed to carry enough authority to stop the others. “We forget ourselves. This young woman is a guest of the Malfoy pater familias, and we here are bounden to respect that. And bound also to keep silent on his words and deeds.” Lady Fionnguala Morag Elspeth had returned. She was in a full length green riding habit and wearing a hat with a flying feather, though not from a Phoenix. Leaning on a strung bow, she gazed at Hermione.

Piers whispered, “Better curtsey, lass, she’s top dog round here. Lady of the Bedchamber to Mary, Queen of Scots; Queen’s Privy Council; Lady Justice, the lot.”

Feeling rather foolish, Hermione took hold of her hems and dropped a curtsey.
A wave of giggles came from the three Georgian daughters.

“But look at her,” said Mrs Antonia Lucinda. “Trying to curtsey in trousers. What next? And how can we respect a girl dressed like a man?”

“And not even a gentleman, but a navvy. And now pretending to be a lady,” said Lady Drusilla. “Which are you, girl? Real or pretend?”

“I have no pretensions to be a ‘lady’ if that is what you mean,” said Hermione.

“You couldn’t if you tried, girl. You are a poseur. But I am referring to the … other.”

“What other? I’m a woman.”

A guffaw from Augustus Edward. “Certainly are, girl, no doubt about that.” Mrs Antonia Lucinda glared at him again.

Aemilia Millicent leaned over the side of the boat and said, “She means, Miss Muggle: do you … shop around the corner?”

“I don’t understand.”

Aemilia Millicent rolled her eyes and said, "Heavens, girl, are you from a hole in the ground? That island in the Aegean, where females of a certain inclination go."

"Oh … am I a lesbian?” A gasp from several of the portraits, and Lady Fionnguala raised her eyebrows. “No, I'm not. Many women wear trousers now.”

"Wore 'em in the past, too," muttered Augustus Edward, earning another glare from Mrs Antonia Lucinda.

Lady Drusilla drew her breath. "Well, I can see that more than clothing fashions have changed. Girls saying that word. And in my day, such a outrageous suggestion would have meant brothers with pistols at dawn."

"Fiddlefaddle, Dru," said Lady Fionnguala. “It all went on, but people were discreet about it."

"You would know," called out Sir Dragomir.

“Oh, oh. Duck!” yelled Piers. The Georgian girls squealed and lay flat, the boy threw himself on the fawn and pushed her to the ground, Lady Drusilla drew back into the corner of her portrait, and Lady Fionnguala drew and let fly with an arrow. It flew from portrait to portrait, and as it passed the girls, the Miss Sash look-alike leapt into the air and batted at it with a paw. It flew on, to bounce off Sir Dragomir’s shield.

"Really, Finna, do you have to do that every time?” said Lady Drusilla.

"She’s just being playful. She likes to play," said Sir Edward Murdo.

"Indeed I do, Eddy. But not always. Was it you who tried to come calling on the girls last night?" She held up a brass belt buckle with a shred of brown velvet attached to it. "One of you men, anyway. I got a trophy with my skinning knife. Next time I'll cut lower and deeper. You'll be thinking Lachan got off lightly." She nocked another arrow to her bowstring, turned and pointed it straight at Hermione. "So. Miss Hermione Jane Granger. Muggle-born witch, top of the class. Brilliant at her books, brilliant at logistics, brilliant in a crisis. But not so brilliant at running her
own life. And now in hostile territory, accused of spying, theft, immoral behaviour and inappropriate marital ambitions."

This was better than being slashed by claws. This was cool and calm. “If you know that much about me, your ladyship, you’ll know I have not stolen anything and have no marital ambitions.” Could she really shoot that arrow at her? Or was it more of a message to let her know she was on trial?

“Well, what about the pater familias,” said Lady Drusilla. “You took, or accepted something that you should not have accepted.”

“With respect, your ladyship,” said Valeria Victoria. “This young woman was in one of my private rooms at St Mungo’s and she was not conscious.”

“Indeed,” said Lady Finna. "That is my understanding also. Moreover this is a matter on which the pater familias has made his wishes very plain, so we will have no further discussion on it. But while on the subject of accepting things, I was in the dining room during tea three days ago, and heard her refuse gifts from the pater familias.

“She did?” said Lady Drusilla.

“Including Bansith Hall.”

“What! He tried to give her Bansith Hall?”

“And she refused it, Dru, saying she had no right to it.”

“Well, she’s right there, but he must be besotted to offer it at all. And that’s her doing. So she refused it, but what about her future intentions? She might be gambling a sprat to catch a whale.”

“Look at the whole picture, Dru. We’ve seen the amaura.”

“Could be faked,” said Aemilia Millicent.

Several portraits turned to look at her. “Really?” said Lady Finna. "How?"

The reply was a mutter. "She’s supposed to be so clever, so smart at magic."

"The amaura cannot be faked," said Valeria Victoria. “A glow, yes, but everything else? Not possible.”

“We can resolve all of this, right now," said Lady Finna. "All the suspicion, all the ill feeling. You all know that. Shall we?"

Valeria Victoria nodded emphatically, and Piers said, “I think we must, your ladyship. Things out of order have been said about the pater familias. Aspersions have been cast. He has acted, as is his right. Some believe he is misguided and mistaken. Not to speak of gross insults to this young lady. We should resolve this.”

Lady Finna looked around. “Very well. Miss Granger, be so kind as to go to the end of the hall and lift the cloth over the object there.”

What was this? Against the end wall, above a chair and high off the floor, something was covered in a cloth. And she was supposed to lift it? Without knowing what was behind it? No way. It could be the entrance to a basilisk’s lair.
She hesitated, and Lady Finna said, "It is not the abyss of Abbadon, the benneag of the bodach, or the cave of the cockatrice, Miss Granger. It is quite safe." Was it? She could imagine Aemilia Millicent having few scruples about trapping her, perhaps even Lady Drusilla, but Lady Finna seemed above the petty antagonism of the others. She’d seemed to be on Hermione’s side. Still, a woman who had survived the turbulent Tudor times, holding high office and serving both Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots in a personal capacity, would be skilled in dissembling. Versed in statecraft, she might choose this way of disposing of a problem without trace. Then Valeria Victoria, Miss Sash next to her, appeared next to Lady Finna. She smiled and nodded, saying, "It's quite safe." Miss Sash’s tail flicked.

Right. Hermione curtsied to Lady Finna, nodded to Miss Sash and smiled back at the nurse. Then she walked to the end wall, slipped off her shoes and climbed onto the chair. She took a deep breath and lifted the cloth. It was a Peverell Clock. Such a build-up, and just a Peverell Clock? She stepped down and turned to look up the gallery. All the portrait people seemed to be crowded into the closest paintings, and were staring at the clock.

"Well," said Lady Finna. "There it is: you can't argue with a Peverell Clock."

What? Hermione turned to look. As expected, there were hands for Abraxas, Narcissa, Lucius, Astoria and Scorpius, but also for her, for Rose and Hugo. Her children’s clock hands said they were well, safe and at school. Hers that she was well, safe and … at home!

She stared at it and said, “But … but …” The implications … “What does it mean?”

“Clever Miss Muggle,” said Aemilia Millicent. “What part of well, safe and home don’t you understand, girl?”

“That’s enough, Aemilia. It means, Miss Granger," said Lady Finna, “that your well-being is of significant importance to two or more senior members of this family. It also means that,” and she looked around at the other portrait figures, “whatever the personal feelings of us shadows, we are bounden to consider and do what we can to protect you and your interests. Replace the cloth, if you would."

Hermione did so, then sat down on the chair. “I really don’t understand what is going on. Just that it is all to do with Abraxas. I’m out of my depth here.”

“Really. What you know about the pater familias, factually?”

“Just that he is a hundred and nine, that he was captured by Voldemort and spent twenty eight years in Nurmengard, and fought against Grindelwald when he was little more than a child.”

“Has youth befuddled your brain, Miss Muggle?” said Aemilia Millicent. “I thought you were so good at logic. Use an abacus, girl. Look in the library. Third alcove, on the hall wall.”

“Enough, Aemilia,” said Lady Finna.

“Well, she needs to know. She stands there pretending to be all dewy-eyed and innocent, and we need to prick that bubble.”

“Impressive reasoning, Em,” said Piers. “If she needs to know, what exactly is she pretending about? May I suggest a course in Logic next term? Still, Miss Granger, it’s good advice. You’ll learn a lot. Third alcove, on the hall wall. Alphabetic, you know, but not in ‘abacus.’ Then double it.”

What? But Piers just smiled and nodded in the direction of the library. Aemilia Millicent turned
and glared at him, but Valeria Victoria, looking at Hermione, nodded her head emphatically.

“Enough. We exceed our authority.” said Lady Finna. “Miss Granger, you have more than sufficient information. Apply your intelligence.”
Virtus vitalus oblatio

She pushed open the double doors, stepped in and stopped.

A library, yes, but what a library. The glimpse she’d had had not done it justice. The room ran half
the depth of the lodge and was the height of a double decker bus. Light poured in from tall
windows, and every square inch of available wall was clad in honey coloured wooden shelving.
The shelves climbed the wall from floor to ceiling and were lined with row upon row of books
bound in brown and green leather. At one end, in front of a bay window, stood a great leather
topped desk with a captain’s chair behind it, at the other an oak table, three armchairs and a couch,
all in brown leather. A faint smell of beeswax was in the air. The whole atmosphere was one of
erudition and wisdom.

But … should she be in here, looking? Lady Finna’s words made it clear that the portrait people
had already said more than they should. All right, she hadn’t asked them to, but now she was acting
on what they had told her. Was that a breach of the Ginny agreement? Not necessarily, because she
didn’t know what she would find: it might be just something to do with her being on the Peverell
clock. Anyway, hadn’t said she couldn’t go into the library, and whatever was there, she might
have stumbled across it anyway, by chance. This was just a bit more … directed, that was all.

She stopped, appalled with herself. Since when did she use that sort of tortuous justification? She
knew very well she should not be investigating something which might lead to a breach of the
Ginny agreement. To pretend anything else was … skipping around the truth.

Yes, it was, but he admitted to doing that himself: skipping around the truth and more: withholding
information. If he could, why couldn’t she? But he’d told her he was doing it. Well, she’d tell him
she’d done it, when he returned. What would he say, how would he react? His freezing behaviour
to Padma came to mind and she quailed. No, he would never be like that to her, she was sure.

Though wasn’t throwing her out worse, much worse than being freezing? And didn’t something as
drastic as that mean the rules were torn up? Didn’t it mean she now had the right to know what
was going on and why? If the portraits were blaming her for something, didn’t she have a right to
know what it was? Lady Finna seemed to think so.

Yes. She had rights, she was going to assert them, and she was prepared to face the consequences.

The hall wall, third alcove held biographies and autobiographies, not abacuses. Had Piers being
misleading her? He’d seemed to be on her side. And Valeria Victoria had confirmed the advice. So
there must be something here. Why might she need an abacus anyway? What might she need to
calculate? Or did she need to calculate anything? Alphabetic, but not in ‘abacus’. A, B and C were
in ‘abacus’. D was not. She looked along the books to the D’s: Conducting Charles, by Amelia
Darwin; Leading Leonardo, by Isabella da Vinci; Healing, Ethics and the transmission of wisdom:
The Life of Dilys Derwent by Thora Derwent. Double D? Even as she looked, words formed on the
leather binding below the title. “Pensieve edition: handle with care.” She pulled out the book: it
was thick and heavy, so she carried it across to the oak desk and laid it down gently.

It opened of its own accord at the back page. A slim wooden frame the size of the cover protected
a double row of leather pockets, each pocket containing a phial with letters and numerals engraved
into the glass. Pensieve books were rare, for even with spell protection, the phials tended to get
broken. There had only been two at Hogwarts, in the Restricted Section, and so bound with spells
the student couldn’t even touch them. Madam Pince used them just to demonstrate what Pensieve
books were. Also, of course, one needed a pensieve to experience the memories, and they were
beyond the means of most wizarding families. Not the Malfoys though: besides the small one in
the cottage, a full size pensieve stood next to the desk.

She closed the back cover and opened the book at the front. The worn leather binding, thick coarse
paper, rough-cut pages and uneven archaic print conjured up images of the 18th century: horse
drawn carriages rattling along cobbled streets, men in breeches and mud splattered white stockings,
powdered hair and rouged faces, ragged street urchins yelling, mud and the pervasive smell of
sewage.

She began to page through it. Thora Derwent was Dilys Derwent’s daughter, and she started by
telling of her mother’s early life. Hermione had always been proud that her adopted world had been
enlightened enough to educate girls alongside boys for the past thousand years, but it was clear
from the narrative that that enlightenment had limitations: girls were only allowed to take certain
subjects, generally those related to domestic matters, and could not proceed beyond their OWLs.
Once they had completed their education, they were expected to marry and raise a family. The
professions were barred to them. Dilys Derwent had been fortunate in having a wealthy and
indulgent father who had been prepared to employ tutors to further his brilliant daughter’s
education after Hogwarts. She had become a talented healer, and had run a maternity clinic so
successfully that St Mungo’s had tried to close her down, citing lack of formal qualifications and
danger to the public.

This had been a major tactical error. Healer Derwent’s father was a barrister, and relished the
challenge. The resulting court case had brought to light that the survival rate at her clinic was three
times that of St Mungo’s. The public outcry had forced the hospital not only to drop the case, but to
adopt her methods and herself as a consultant.

Hermione sat back. This was wonderful. She hadn’t known that Dilys Derwent had fought for
women’s rights. She felt akin to her. But it was daunting to realize that, more than two centuries
later, women were still fighting for their rights.

She read on. The misogynists, defeated in public, now tried to destroy her in private. At St
Mungo’s they treated her with disdain, isolated her, suborned her staff, and did their best to
undermine her professionally. She’d had a breakdown – not recognised as such in those days, but
that was clearly what it had been. If her opponents hoped that that was the end of her, they were
disappointed. During her recovery, she started looking into medical ethics. At that time legal
constraints on medical practices were few, and in practice either ignored or paid mere lip service.
Healer Derwent chose the practice of Virtus vitalius oblatio as her flagship target.

Hermione had never heard of this, but clearly the term was such common knowledge in the 1780s
that Thora didn’t even bother to translate it. She checked in the glossary: it meant life energy
gifting, and the reader was referred to Memory Phial VVO1.

Could she use the pensieve? She was already uneasy about what she was doing. But - might as well
be hung for a sheep as a lamb. She took the phial from its leather pocket, uncorked it, poured it into
the pensieve and looked in.

She was in the market square of a village. Around her were thatched wattle and daub cottages, little
more than huts. A little way away stood the stocks, with a whipping post next to them. Beneath her
feet were slimy cobbles. Around her stood men and women, dressed in earthy coloured homespun
clothing. They were silent, eerily so.

The clatter of iron shod hooves on the cobbles raised a low murmur among the villagers, and a
carriage came into the square, stopping next to the stocks. Behind it came a squad of men-at-arms on foot and two men on horseback: a wizard in satin robes, the other in the black gown of a priest.

A footman leapt from the carriage, unstrapped a wooden armchair and placed it on the cobbles, then opened the carriage door and helped another man descend. He was much older, wizened and dressed in furred robes. The lord of the manor.

He sat in the chair, the wizard and priest next to him, and the men-at-arms, following orders from the wizard, arranged the villagers so that they approached the lord one at a time. Each one, man, woman, boy or girl, knelt on the cobbles and placed a hand on the lord’s hand, resting on a chair arm. After a few seconds the lord would shake his head, and the villager would rise and step quickly away.

Over half the villagers had passed when a girl in her late teens came up. She knelt, placed her hand on his and waited. The lord sat for a few moments, then placed his other hand on top of hers, held it there for a while, then nodded.

A scream came from one of the remaining villagers, and a woman rushed out, crying, “No, no, no.” Two soldiers started forward, but before they could reach her she had been stopped by the other villagers. They bustled her back into the crowd and closed ranks against the armed men.

The girl stood with her head bowed as the lord was helped back into the carriage, then the wizard, leading the girl by the hand, passed her up into the carriage also, then climbed in himself.

The scene faded, replaced by one inside a rich tapestried chamber. The girl, now dressed in fine clothes, sat on a stool next to a four poster bed. Her face was white and drawn, her head bowed. Next to her stood the priest, whispering to her. At one window, staring out, stood the wizard. Sunlight streamed in from another. The door opened and the lord came in, leaning on a stick. As he hobbled to the bed, his shadow fell across the girl and she shuddered.

He lay down on the bed and stretched out his hand. The wizard started across the room, then stopped as the girl began shaking her head, tiny shakes, almost like shivering. The priest bent and whispered in her ear. She stopped shaking her head, and just sat there, her hair over her face. Then slowly she stretched out her hands to clasp the lord’s wasted forearm, shuddering when they made contact.

The wizard stepped forward and said, “Do you, Anna Jemima of Oxenholme, donate this Virtus Vitalus to Lord Alfred Jacobus le Strange, of your own free will and without coercion?”

The girl was silent, the priest whispered to her and she nodded her head, once.

“I must have words, maid.”

“God’s blood,” said the lord, “do we have to have this rigmarole? I have sifted through a thousand of this rabble to get to this point. Just say the spell, you fool, and let’s get it over.”

“Regretfully, lord, we need her consent. That is the law.”

“Damn the law. Say ‘yes’, girl, or I’ll foreclose on your father’s loans tomorrow.”

The priest clapped his hands over his ears. “Lord, you cannot say that. Consent must be without coercion.”

“Hogswill, man. We all know what this is about. I want life, she wants a free family, end of story.”
“Yes.” The voice was soft but distinct.

The priest drew back, the wizard placed his hand on the two joined hands, and muttered an incantation.

The scene misted, then became clear again. The sunlight was now shining in through the opposite window. The figures were in the same position, one on a chair, one in a bed, hands clasped. But the girl was no longer a girl, but an aged woman, her hair white, her face lined and wrinkled. The old man was young, his hair a shining black, his face smooth and unblemished. Only his eyes looked the same, ancient, and, to Hermione, grasping, calculating, evil.

As she watched, the man withdrew his arm, young and fresh, from below the old woman’s clawed hands, threw back the covers of the bed, and stood up.

“Magus,” he called. The door opened and the wizard entered.

“Get rid of her, will you.”

“Lord, she must remain within your aura for a half dozen of weeks, to consolidate the transfer.”

“Then keep her out of my sight, the abomination.” He walked out, leaving the door open.

Hermione drew back: so this was *Virtus Vitalus Oblatio*. How could anyone be so grasping, so inhuman, so evil as to take another person’s life force; to live out his own life, then steal another’s to have another lifespan? No wonder she’d never heard of it: surely an act so monstrous must be banned.

But another scene was solidifying front of her.

No rich tapestried chamber this one, but a cowshed, with a woman lying in the straw, pale, eyes closed, hands lying by her side. A midwife knelt next to her, pads of blood soaked cloth in her hands, looking up at an older woman – the grandmother? - holding a newborn baby.

“She’s lost too much, and I can’t stop it.”

The grandmother looked at her daughter, then held up the child to the midwife. Drawing up a stool, she sat down next to the bleeding woman, grasped her forearm in her two hands and said, “*Aperi lorem vitae varius ... virtus vitalus oblatio ... ad vitam.*” The accent was strong, but this time the words were clear.

The scene misted again, and then cleared.

Now it was the grandmother lying in the straw, her hand on her stomach, drawing shallow breaths. Next to her stood the mother, holding the hand of a little girl of about four. The old woman gasped and winced, drawing in a shuddering breath, and her daughter seemed to come to a decision. She turned and spoke to a man, saying, “Hold the child.” Then she knelt next to her mother, grasped her forearm and said the incantation.

Immediately she began to age, her hair greying, then whitening, her skin wrinkling. The child screamed, and the man ran out with her.

The scene misted to another showing the mother lying in a bed, arms folded across her chest, her lined face stiff and still, eyes closed. Next to her knelt the grandmother, screaming and tearing at her hair.
The last scene was out of doors, at a church lychgate, the little girl dressed in black, nestled in her father’s arms. Behind them were a group of villagers carrying two doors on which bodies wrapped in biercloths rested. But in front of the lychgate stood the village priest, arms aloft, one hand holding a wooden cross, barring entry.

“You may not enter” he cried. “We do not bury those of the damned in consecrated ground. These women sold their souls to the devil: one took her own life. Let them be buried in the woods, and their children cursed by their deeds, yea, even unto the third generation. Begone!”

The child turned away, hiding her face against her father’s chest, her body shaking.

Hermione drew back. This was too traumatic. She didn’t want to see any more. What kind of a life would that orphaned child lead in a small village, among ignorant and superstitious people, with the Church’s curse hanging over her?

But the message was plain: Virtus vitalus oblatio was too dangerous for use. Even in the most humane circumstances, it could set in motion a chain of actions which could lead to tragedy. Better to let nature take its course. So what had Dilys Derwent done about it? She turned back to the book.

Virtus vitalus oblatio, while not widespread, was at the apex of a pyramid of healer practices which had very little effective ethical regulation. Dilys Derwent believed that if she could bring ethics to bear on Virtus vitalus oblatio, it would spread downwards through the pyramid, changing the nature of healing. Many low and middle ranking healers felt as she did. But only the top could order change. The top, where the healers were conservative and comfortable with the status quo, as well as being subject to the pressures of the rich and powerful, those who had brought the status quo, and had a great stake in it. The top, which had already expressed its antipathy to her as a mere female, subject to ‘vapours and emotions’. But, fighting through the High Court and again supported by her father, she forced the wizengamot to accept ethical constraints based on her proposals.

‘The practice would be allowable only where there was no transfer of any form of recompense, and where donor had a strong and undeniable moral debt, equivalent to a life, to the receiver, as accepted by a tribunal of eminent men or women. No money was to be paid, in cash or in kind. No obligation was to be nullified. Family transfers were banned totally: there would always be a mother prepared to sacrifice her life for her child. Breaching was to be considered murder and subject to the full force of law on the receiver. A collaborating healer would be considered an accessory to the deed.’

That sounded reasonable: an ethical barrier which was almost insurmountable.

She stopped and drew back as cold realisation crept over her: what had Padma said? A treatment with ethical barriers so high it had fallen out of use; the last practitioners had died hundreds of years ago; a decision that she might have to defend to an ethics committee or a court of law.
Revelations

Chapter Notes

No, it couldn’t be! But everything was dropping into place: the healing of her cancer, her health and younger looks, the comments of the Malfoy family at tea, of Winky, of the Malfoy portraits. And the age discrepancy: how could she have missed that. If he was a hundred and nine, he’d have been born around 1908. But he’d been a runner-boy in 1945: he must have been around thirteen or fourteen then, so born around 1931. So he was actually about eighty six. That gave her a twenty three year discrepancy. Where had those years gone? To her? It tied up: but … how could a man give a woman he’d never even met a fifth of his life span?

No, no one could be that idealistic. She wouldn’t do it. For Rose or Hugo, yes, but anyone else? No, it must be something else entirely.

And yes, it must be. Apart from anything else: the ethical constraints. How could Abraxas owe her a life? He didn’t, he couldn’t. Though Abraxas followed his own code of ethics, he’d shown that plainly. And with wealth and power, he could have overcome the ethical restraints. And in this case, it wasn’t the rich taking from the poor, but the other way around.

All right, what about compatibility. The cowshed scene had shown that blood-family members were compatible, which was not unlikely. But in the feudal scene: the lord of the manor had said he had ‘sifted through a thousand of these rabble’ to find a compatible donor. So the chances of her and Abraxas being compatible were remote. Also, there was no glow when the girl touched the lord’s hand. Definitely, for now that she had experienced it, she always looked. But the glow was the amaura. And it had been the lord who decided, not the wizard, so did that mean it was something felt rather than seen? A vibration? A tingling? She didn’t know, but did know she felt nothing of that sort with Abraxas. All she felt was the warmth, and that was part of the amaura. Wasn’t it? It must be: it led to, well, comforting feelings and all that. But she’d like to be sure.

She turned to the book. An index too much to hope for, in a book of this age, so she scanned through the chapter on *Virtus vitalus oblatio*. Yes, there it was, compatibility was shown by … *an emanation of heat at the point of contact.* Another tick hovering over its box: it was possible that, for her and Abraxas, the warmth of the amaura was obscuring the warmth of life energy transfer compatibility.

Anything else? The next paragraph caught her eye: *In the case of non-family donors, the donor must remain in the vicinity of the recipient for a period related to the amount of life energy transferred, to prevent rejection of the life energy.* And she was to have remained at Bansith, or rather, with Abraxas, for six weeks, initially, just like the poor girl in the memory phial. Another box ticked. But then Padma had decided it was not necessary. Why? Something to do with the amaura, Padma had believed.

She sat back. Nothing was conclusive. She needed proof. But if it was so … what an obligation. She must know, she must have proof one way or the other. She had given her word, but… this was too much. She had to know. And the proof was in her medical records, in the safe.

She wasn’t supposed to do magic; she had no wand; she’d promised Abraxas that she wouldn’t; but still she went into the drawing room, raised both hands, concentrated and said, “*Appareo chiloma.*” A silver box appeared in front of her, the same one that had been hovering there when she had gone in with Ginny. This time it just flickered for a few moments, then vanished. She tried again,
with the same result. Obviously her magic was working again, though, without a bonded wand, weakly. But … she wasn’t a Malfoy. She shouldn’t be able to Appear the safe at all, even in this insubstantial form. That she could, probably meant she had … Malfoy life force in her? She groaned. Everything was conspiring against her.

Suddenly the safe appeared before her, solid. A moment later the door swung open. She frowned. Surely that shouldn’t happen? Not very secure, but, well, gift horse and all that: inside were two scrolls and a memory phial. She reached in, took them out and closed the safe door. She felt guilty enough to say, “Disappareo chiloma.” Immediately it disappeared again.

She turned to the pensieve, but then stopped, looking out of a window. It was already dark and a gibbous moon was visible through the top panes. Abraxas might return at any time. She would tell him what she had done, of course, but first she wanted to know what he had done, and he might try to stop her. She would use the pensieve in the cottage.

The first scroll had the words: ‘Deed of conveyance from Abraxas Gaius Malfoy to Hermione Jane Granger’ written across it, the second ‘Health records of HJG relating to events of 2\textsuperscript{nd} week September 2017.’ But both were sealed with red tape and wax. The seals said ‘Potter’, which made no sense until she realised that Harry and Ginny must have looked at them, then re-sealed them. She was reluctant to break the seals: irrationally, she knew. The documents contained information she had a right to know, and it wasn’t as if she intended to pretend she hadn’t done what she was doing. But Abraxas … anyway, surely the memory phial would tell her what she wanted to know.

The writing desk was in the sitting room now, placed to get light from the afternoon sun. She sat down on the padded seat, opened it and lifted the pensieve lid. Then she poured in the phial contents and bent forward.

This was bizarre. She was looking down on herself, but a pale, wasted self. With a shock, she realised that this was her just eight days ago – she’d forgotten how ill she’d been, how she’d looked. Whatever Abraxas had done for her, it had caused a dramatic change.

The recumbant Hermione’s legs were uncovered to midthigh, and she was aware of Abraxas there, standing across from her. Not right for Miss Hermione, Miss, not at all, not here, Miss! Winky had been right. She wanted to lean forward and cover herself, but of course, she was looking at a memory. Then, someone next to her knelt and did it for her, pulling a sheet over her to her waist. Winky? No, Narcissa. She’d been there? Was this her memory?

Miss Sash appeared next to the memory Hermione, sniffed at her nose then stepped back, arching her spine and hissing. Then the cat turned, looked up and mewed. Narcissa looked into the unconscious Hermione’s face, then held the back of her hand against her cheek. Miss Sash mewed again, and patted at Narcissa’s hand.

“Yes,” said Narcissa. She looked up at Abraxas. “She is ill, Grandfather, I think gravely. She is too pale, too thin, too hot. Miss Sash can smell something in her, some disease, some illness, something seriously bad. We must take her to St Mungo’s immediately.”

Abraxas said, “Yes,” and Hermione looked at him. Her heart sank: she need watch no further. This Abraxas was old, but at least twenty years younger than her Abraxas. Those years could only have been given to her. But how? How had it happened? How had he fixed it? And, more important to her, why? She watched on.
The image blurred then formed again to show Hermione lying on a bed in a consultation room, a young female healer attending her. The woman put her hands on Hermione’s shoulders, then slowly circumscribed her with her wand. Then, frowning, she stepped across to look at a computer screen. Looking grave, she turned to Narcissa and said, “Madam, please sit down, I’m afraid I have some bad news. Your daughter is very ill, madam.”

Daughter? That was flattering. When was she ever beautiful enough to be considered Narcissa Malfoy’s daughter?

“I’m afraid your daughter has cancer. It is far advanced and pervasive. Life force is at critical level.”

“Cancer?” It was Abraxas, speaking for the first time. His face was white. “Are you sure?”

The healer turned the screen to face them. She pointed to solid blobs around the chest and lower. At the bottom of the scanner were the words: Weasley Medical Technology. Funded by the Loireag Foundation.

“Treatment?” said Abraxas. Hermione looked at him: the curtness was unlike him, even given the circumstances.

The healer spread her hands. “I am sorry, sir, and of course we shall get a second opinion, but it looks to me as though the cancer is too advanced, too pervasive. We can apply palliative measures to limit the pain but, I’m sorry, I don’t think healing is possible.”

“That is what I was told last time.” Abraxas’s face was taut and angry now, his words clipped. “Can you call Padma Patil for your second opinion, please.”

The young healer looked startled, probably by both his request and the manner of delivery.

“This is not Healer Padma’s field, sir. She is in research. Healer Parvati Patil comes on duty in an hour, but she is available only for referrals, not cases like this.”

“Be so good, Healer Smith, as to summon her, now.” It was not a request.

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The healer turned to Narcissa and spread her hands. “Madam, you must understand, we cannot disrupt the running of the hospital for one patient. You must understand, an hour will make no difference to your daughter, madam.”

“She is not my daughter, Healer Smith,” said Narcissa. “This young woman is Hermione Granger. Without her, you would have no hospital to run. Please ask Healer Patil to attend us. She won’t mind, I promise you. And then please arrange Miss Granger’s transfer to one of the Valeria Victoria Malfoy private rooms. Here is your authorisation.” She opened her handbag, took out a business card and handed it to the healer. The young woman looked at it and her eyes widened. “Yes, madam. I will see to it.”

The scene blurred again, then slowed to show Hermione in a bed in a white walled room, a portrait of a young woman in a Crimean War uniform on one wall. Valeria Victoria?

Standing over the ill Hermione was Parvati Patil, staring at her. “God, how did this happen! Hermione Granger, dying of cancer. How did this ever come about? To her, of all people. Oh, Hermione, why didn’t you come and see us? Why, why?” She turned to Abraxas. “Mr Malfoy, this is appalling, but as a healer, all I can do is confirm Healer Ann’s diagnosis. It is cancer, and it is terminal. I’m sorry. Only palliative treatment is possible. She must have known something was wrong, because she must been suppressing the pain with spells. I don’t understand why she didn’t
“Miss Patil, that is all water under the bridge now. I would be grateful if you ask your sister to attend us.”

“My sister, Mr Malfoy, with respect, is a researcher in ancient magical medicine. My field is modern medicine. If I cannot help you, she certainly cannot.”

“Miss Patil, I know her field. I fund her research, as I fund yours. My family runs the Loireag Foundation. Be so good as to ask your sister to join us.”

What! The Loireag Foundation? Was this what Malfoy wealth supported? Was this Draco’s ‘our own small charity?’ Small as in the Cullinan diamond. No wonder Padma had been reluctant to cross Abraxas.

The scene blurred again, then reformed to show Padma facing Abraxas. “Mr Malfoy, I grieve for my friend Hermione, but I really don’t see why you think I can do anything if my sister cannot.”

“There is one treatment from the distant past which will work, Miss Patil, and which you can administer. *Virtus vitalus oblatio.*”

Padma jerked back. “We can’t use that. It’s illegal.”

“It is not, Miss Patil. It merely has a high ethics barrier.”

“Insurmountably high, Mr Malfoy. So high that it has not been used for over two hundred years.”

“Not legally, Miss Patil.” They were glaring at each other.

“I see your reluctance, Miss Patil,” said Narcissa. “I’d be grateful if you could explain the difficulty to me. What is this treatment?”

“It is more than reluctance, Mrs Malfoy. I simply cannot do it. As to what it is: *Virtus vitalus oblatio* restores a patient’s health and literally rejuvenates him or her by utilising life energy from a donor. In essence, it takes life from one person and gives it to another. Controls are minimal and the donor’s death sometimes results. The treatment was widely used between 1300 and 1746, during which period it was all but unregulated and used in exploitative and other totally inappropriate ways. In 1746 strict ethical requirements were brought in, effectively rendering the method unusable.”

“What are the ethical requirements?”

“A moral obligation equivalent to a life: the donor must be someone who would otherwise be dead without the receiver’s action.”

“Mr Malfoy,” said Parvati, “How do you even know of it? I have never heard of it.”

“My wife died of cancer in 1960, Miss Patil: St Mungo’s told me no treatment was possible. I believed you, finding out about *Virtus vitalus oblatio* too late.” His voice was bitter.

“We could not have used it, Mr Malfoy,” said Padma. “*Virtus vitalus oblatio* between family members is totally banned.”

“Do you think that would have stopped me? I would have had it done backstreet.”

“Mr Malfoy-”
“I can see how it might be misused,” said Narcissa, “but if it were regulated and controlled …”

“It is difficult to control, even by a healer, Mrs Malfoy. It is an *Errantes Sanctus* spell, one in which the donor’s sanctus leaves the physical body. That in itself is bad enough, but in addition its use is fraught with danger in both application and aftermath. So much can go wrong, and the results catastrophic for all concerned. And psychologically, even when used in the most benign circumstances, it sets up a chain of obligation and counter-obligation which frequently leads to tragedy. Believe me, if you were to examine Dily’s Derwent’s memoirs, you would agree. In this country we set a very high ethics barrier, but in most magical societies today it is considered worse than vampirism, and banned outright.”

“I see. From the donation point of view, is it easy? Anyone who fulfils the ethical requirements and is prepared to take the risk can be a donor?”

“Not at all, Mrs Malfoy. Compatibility is required. Family members are usually compatible with each other, but outside the family, only one in a thousand is compatible.”

“Well,” Narcissa turned to Abraxas. “Even setting aside the ethical barrier spell complexity and dangers, I don’t quite see why we are discussing this, grandfather. Tragic though the situation is, we don’t know if Miss Granger could be saved, and even if we did, we have no donor. Unless, somehow, you know of a compatible donor.”

“I believe I do, daughter. Me.”


“I can and I must. Miss Patil, be so kind as to check for compatibility.” He held out his hand to her.

“Sir-”

“Miss Patil, if there is no compatibility, then the whole business is settled. So let us resolve this point, at least.”

Padma looked at him, her eyes slightly narrowed, but then said, “All right. We’ll check. Congruus for *Virtus vitalus oblatio* is shown by warmth.”

“Grandfather-” said Narcissa, but he shook his head and she fell silent.

Padma took his hand and placed it on one of Hermione’s, placing one of hers on top. She held it there for a full minute, then said, “Yes. You are compatible. You knew, Mr Malfoy. May I ask how?”

“After Desdemona’s death, I studied the subject. I read the historic records of *Virtus vitalus oblatio*, analysed them, and drew conclusions. I know what factors make compatibility more likely: genetic divergence, gender difference, age difference, survival enhancement factors like intelligence, health and beauty, and other factors, mostly genetic. These increased the probability from one in thousand to about one in hundred. But the main factor which told me, was something which happened at Hogwarts: Miss Granger struck Draco in their third year, you may recall, daughter.”

“I certainly do,” said Narcissa, and Parvati nodded.

“I read the letter in which he described this. He mentioned an unusual warmth at the point of contact. While this could have been induced both by the physical action and the emotional reaction, I suspected that it was in fact the life energy transfer compatibility indicator. When I picked up
Miss Granger to carry her here, I felt this warmth too. It could have been something else: my knowledge of magical medicine is very limited, but I suspected that it was *Virtus vitalus oblatio* compatibility.”

“Mr Malfoy,” said Padma. “This is all very well, but we still cannot do it, because the ethics requirement is unfulfillable.”

“Miss Patil without Hermione Granger, you and I would not be standing here talking. You and all of magical Britain would, to put it bluntly, be living in Hell.”

“Sir, I agree, but national obligation is not enough. The nation cannot be a donor. Only a person can, and while we all owe her much, who owes her a life?”

“I do. I was imprisoned in Nurmengard by Voldemort. The imprisoning spell died with its caster. Without Miss Granger, Voldemort would not have died. I would have, in the prison. So I owe her my life.”

“Grandfather, no!” said Narcissa. “Your family need you.”

Abraxas took her hand. “I am not sacrificing my life, daughter, only donating life force.”

“But how much? Miss Patil says the spell is very dangerous, that she cannot control it. It is too great a risk, it is too great a sacrifice. Why do you want to do it?”

“The Malfoy family has moral debts to our society. These must be paid. What better way than to save the saviour? Particularly as she is one we have wronged.”

“Then it should be me. You did not wrong her. I did. I should be the one to pay.”

“You did not wrong her, daughter. You never raised a hand against her.”

“My sister did. I never raised a hand to help her. I should be the one to pay. Besides, I am not … needed.”

“Of course you are needed, daughter. You are a keystone of our family. And you will be needed even more if …”

“Mrs Malfoy,” said Padma, “did she save your life? Directly, unambiguously, irrevocably?”

“In a figurative sense, yes. Please, check for compatibility.”

“With respect, Mrs Malfoy, there is no point. You must see yourself that the ethical standards would in no way be met.”

“Humour us, Miss Patil,” said Abraxas. “Consider it an academic exercise for a hypothetical situation.”

Padma pursed her lips, but took Narcissa’s hand, placed it on Hermione’s, then rested her hand on top. A few seconds later she lifted hers. “No warmth, so the ethics question is irrelevant.” She turned to Abraxas. “Mr Malfoy, while on the subject of hypothetical situations, are you aware of what such a gift would cost you?”

“I am aware that life force transfer does not occur on a year for year basis, that old years are worth far less than young years, that the relative ages of donor and receiver as well as their states of health play a part.”
“Yes. For a fifteen year old girl donating to an eighty year old man, one year of her life force rejuvenates him by six years. An eighty year old man donating to a thirty five year old woman would need to donate about four years to give her one year. So the relationship is not horizontal, but it is not even diagonal. It is not linear at all. It is an S curve. In addition, other factors, relating to the character of the individuals and, as you said, their physical and mental health and attributes, play a part, moving parts of the curve up or down. We have no figures on this: the practice was banned before the age of scientific analysis and investigation. Disease eradication takes more, again how much we don’t know. And they cannot be separated, rejuvenation and disease eradication. So what I am saying, Mr Malfoy, that that an eighty year old man might need to give thirty years or more to eradicate terminal cancer in a thirty five year old woman. Even given the greater life spans of our people, a man of such an age might not survive the process.”

“Thank you. I am in fact aware of this, having studied the subject extensively. Miss Patil, I am as tenacious of life as any other man: I exercise regularly, eat healthily and keep mentally active. I am emotionally stable: I see my family regularly and am on good terms with them as far as possible. I enjoy my life: it is both fulfilling and rewarding. But this situation transcends that: Miss Granger is, or was, a jewel: a woman of high personal integrity, of intellectual brilliance, of great courage and fortitude. These virtues, which saved our society, allowed her to drift into an unequal relationship. Those virtues kept her there, draining her. We, society, stood by. This is the result. Our debt to this woman, Miss Patil, is monumental. We cannot, not pay it. To put it plainly for the record, Miss Patil, I accept that I might die, and am prepared to take that risk.”

Padma seemed to wilt. “Sir, the ethics requirement must be fulfilled and approved. I will not, I cannot act without this.”

“Miss Patil, I would not expect you to. The law requires the assessment and approval of a tribunal of eminent, independent, responsible persons. My daughter-in-law is a trustee of the Loireag Foundation. Is that eminent enough for you? With yourself and your sister, that makes three.”

“Sir, the independence of all three could well be questioned. St Mungo’s have an Ethics Committee. It is a decision for them.”

“Miss Patil, we have not the time to jump through the bureaucratic hoops. Miss Granger is dying. We cannot dot all the ‘i’s and cross all the ‘t’s. Time is of the essence. If St Mungo’s will not do it, I will go elsewhere.”

“Sir, I cannot allow that. Backstreet practitioners are unlicensed for a reason: they are unqualified, incompetent, cavalier with risk. Please, please believe me.”

“Miss Patil, I repeat: Miss Granger is dying. I will have this treatment done. I would rather have it overseen by you. I need a decision. I need it now. Will you do it?”

Padma dropped her eyes from his gaze, then looked at her sister. Parvati looked back at her. The faces of both sisters were creased with anguish.

Padma took a deep breath, shaking her head slowly. “Mr Malfoy, we are on treacherous ground. Dily Derwent forced these doors shut in the face of virulent opposition over two hundred years ago, bringing to an end centuries of vile exploitative practices. Now you would open them again.”

“Miss Patil, the conditions all this situation are unique: three people only defeated Voldemort, one person only freed from twenty eight years of prison. The ethical requirements, though high, will be met.”

Padma shook her head again. “We could be struck off the medical register for this.”
Abraxas shook his head. “The Loireag Foundation funds over a third of St Mungo’s research. You will not be struck off.”

Padma dropped her head. “I don’t even know the protocol: this never been done before.”

“I will set it out. Set your recorder, Miss Patil.”

She shook her head, but lifted her briefcase, took out an Ipad - a small silver sticker on the back read: Funded by the Loireag Foundation - set it up, then nodded silently to Abraxas.

“This tribunal is convened to consider whether the ethical requirements of the proposed donation by Abraxas Gaius Malfoy of life energy to Hermione Jane Granger are fulfilled. Present as members of the tribunal are Padma and Parvati Patil, consultant healers at St Mungo’s hospital, and Narcissa Malfoy-Black, trustee of the Loireag Foundation. The ethical requirements are set out in detail elsewhere, but in essence they amount to the obligation by the donor to the receiver of the donor’s life. The submission of Abraxas Malfoy is that he had been imprisoned in Nurmengard by Voldemort, had already spent twenty eight years there and would undoubtedly have been left to die there. He was released on the death of the spell caster. While he accepts that the primary actor and immediate agent causing the spell caster’s death was Harry James Potter, it is universally accepted that without logistic, intellectual and emotional support by Hermione Granger, Voldemort would not have been defeated. Abraxas Malfoy thus submits that he has a life debt to Hermione Granger, and on that basis that he petitions the tribunal to be allowed to be a life energy donor. He also submits that, considering the imminently terminal state of Miss Granger’s medical condition, time is of the essence, and the transfer be commenced immediately. Does the tribunal accept, admit and grant his petition?”

Chapter End Notes

Reviews or comments would be appreciated
Why?

She’d seen enough. Any uncertainty she had about what he might have done was burnt away like the morning mist on the loch in the autumn sunshine. What remained was a hill of uncertainty as to what it meant for her and for him, individually and together. She closed the pensieve, and sat down on the settee. Immediately Miss Sash sprang onto her lap. She started stroking her, and the rumbling vibrations calmed her.

Abraaxas Malfoy had transferred twenty three years of his life force to save her life. He’d said: *the healing has rejuvenated you, figuratively speaking*. He’d all but told her the truth.

“Why, why, why, Miss Sash? Why did he offer? Why did they agree? Why didn't they wake me up to ask me?”

Miss Sash turned her head and gave her a look. *Silly question?* Because he knew she’d refuse the donation? Must be.

All right, why had the Patil sisters agreed to the transfer at all? On strictly rational grounds, his case sounded weak. The link was there, certainly, but not direct, not standing shining and clear cut. Certainly she would not have liked to have to defend it to an ethics committee. But … with the Loireag Foundation towering behind the Patils, funding a third of St Mungo’s medical research? The committee would rubber stamp it, no questions asked.

And that was why, apart from the pressure of Abraxas’s personality, the Patils had agreed: Loireag Foundation funding. No funding, no research. Not that she believed that someone with Abraxas’ moral code would withdraw funding for that reason, or that the Patils would have agreed had there been no ethical justification. But, given the funding and the clear and determined wishes of the funder, areas of grey turned black. Skip around the ethics just a little, and your major donor is happy, in fact obligated to you. No wonder Padma was prepared to be persuaded. And of course it was a Robin Hood situation: the rich and powerful giving to the poor and needy. Public opinion could be invoked, if necessary, to pour opprobrium on anyone questioning the ethics.

But this was all about what had happened, the justification, the ethics, how it affected the outside world. What mattered to her was *why* he had done it? He had put forward reasons - unconvincing, to her mind - but this was merely to convince the others, an intellectual rationale. Why had he wanted to? It was emotion which drove him, not intellect. Intellect merely provided the justification, the surface reasons for others to see. Without the *wanting*, all the rationalizing in the world would be worthless. All right, some men - and women - were motivated by ideals. And he was an idealist, no question. So she could accept that some of his motivation came a sense of obligation, as he had claimed. She could even accept that some of his motivation came from what he had told her that first morning, that he wished to save her because of her – and she squirmed a little – intrinsic worth.

But was that all? Had he - she didn't want to consider this but, rationally, she must - had he fallen in love with a sort of idealised version of her before he met her? He'd spent twenty eight years in prison: had he dreamt up an ideal woman, and she came closest to matching the image?

“Am I the warm body, the living woman behind the *Mona Lisa, Miss Sash*?”

Miss Sash did not venture an opinion this time. She just kept purring.

Maybe so: he’d gone on and on about her ‘virtues’. He did seem the type. If so, she hoped that
meeting her in the flesh, so to speak, hadn't disillusioned him too much. Certainly she had been quite rude and aggressive towards him those first two days. None of which seemed to dent his regard. She was still up on the pedestal.

Yes, she was still on the pedestal, and that also defied reason. Surely any sane, normal man, having ‘paid’ the astronomical price of twenty three years of his life for a woman, would expect that woman to be his, body and soul. He didn’t. Honour? Honour and obligation went hand in hand: his sense of obligation (so he said) - but together with more personal, intimate feelings, she was sure - made him save her life at an unthinkable cost to himself. Did his sense of honour stop him from profiting by it? Or respect? For her? He did respect her: her values, her opinions, her advice. He had shown that in spadefuls when she had spoken about Narcissa. And the respect was real: he'd paid her the compliment of demanding she explain when he didn't understand, of arguing when he disagreed, then conceding the point. He’d treated her as an equal. He was kind, gentle, considerate and obliging. How could a man give so great a gift: a fifth of his lifespan, and yet still be so … gentlemanly about it?

“I just don’t understand him,” she murmured, and Miss Sash turned and gave her a look again. What did that mean? He is a male and they are all simple creatures? Or he is a male, beyond the comprehension of anyone?

Then Miss Sash rubbed her head against Hermione’s hand. Oh, she understood that. We are two females together, and my part is to offer sympathy and support, not advice.

In four days she had learnt a lot about Abraxas: his expressions, his mannerisms, his body language, how to interpret the lip twitches, the eyebrow lifts, the head tilts, shakes and nods, but she still hadn’t really penetrated the shield he had built around himself in Nurmengard. Then, last night, a corner lifted, and she had seen and felt the passion. And now she had seen a further side of him: less the velvet glove and more the iron fist. He wanted something and was prepared to do whatever was necessary to get it.

And the something, again, was for her. What did that tell her? Adding together all he had done and all her experiences of him, of the way he reacted to her, she could not doubt it. And the amaura confirmed it.

“I think, I think he must love me, Miss Sash.”

Miss Sash’s tail went up, bottle brush straight, and her purr deepened. She had a definite opinion about that.

But this was all about how he felt about her. How did she feel about him? She felt, well … start from the beginning, girl. You know everything now, everything he hid from you. Everything he did for you. So reassess, using that.

She enjoyed his company, enjoyed walking with him, found his conversation stimulating and engrossing, his interests interesting - unlike Ron’s. He could be serious when she wanted to be serious, witty and fun when she needed lightening up. She enjoyed linking arms with him. No, that was wrong. Enjoyment was far to feeble a word for what she felt there. Yesterday she had felt weak-kneed when he was holding her. What did that say about her and her feelings? And she didn’t just enjoy his company and walking with him, she delighted in it. She listened to him, respected and valued his opinion, relied on his advice. She felt comfortable, safe and protected when he was with her. When he was not with her, she thought about him incessantly. Last night the veil had torn part way, today it had been blown away.

It was simple, really. It has been complicated only because she had made it so, by turning away
from what was obvious. She loved him. She couldn’t, wouldn’t deny it any longer. Not because of what he had done for her, but because of what he was. She loved him. All her discovery had done was to sweep aside the silly doubts, the confusion that hid the truth in her heart.

“I love him.”

Miss Sash leapt off her lap, did a pirouette, batting at imaginary butterflies, then sprang back and settled down on Hermione’s lap again. No doubt of her opinion there.

Still, she was still left with this massive obligation towards him, one she hadn’t asked for and would certainly have been refused had she been asked, but now there, a burden looming like a mountain over her. Or was it? A mountain, yes, but a burden? If she hadn’t loved him, if she hadn’t known that he loved her, it would be. Now, it didn’t actually make any difference. Or rather, it bound them together more closely. She knew that she would have done the same thing for him.

Now she saw clearly. Now she saw that when she had said to Harry, And I don’t care how old he is, it was her heart speaking, and she had meant exactly what she had said, even then, even on only the second morning. If he had put his arm around her as they watched Ginny and Harry leave, it would have seemed natural and right. If, after Narcissa had gone, he had taken her in his arms and kissed her, it would have seemed natural and right. At the petroglyph, a romantic response had seemed so right she had expected it. If, last night, after her words had lit the fire and she been warmed by the blaze, he had taken her hand, led her to the bedroom, and made love to her, it would have seemed, no, more than seemed, it would have been natural and right. She would have gone with him trustingly, unquestioningly, and her only words would have been, “I love you.”

But he hadn’t. And he wouldn’t. He had stamped on the flames of his passion, extinguishing them. I am too old. That summed up his feelings. No, not his feelings, not his feelings at all. His rationale. The harsh, cold, logic which he made dominate his feelings. And he hadn’t extinguished his passion, he had merely forced it into submission. At a huge cost to himself in pain: those pulsating lightning strikes. The blaze was there, damped by his determination to rule his feelings, but inextinguishable.

He’d refused her. He’d said they had no future together. Set in stone, he’d told Rose. And she’d accepted it, accepted his decision. But that was when she’d been confused, uncertain of her own feelings as well as his. Now she wasn’t. Not about hers, not about his. His feelings, as distinct from what he said. And what he said, that they must part, was for her good, or rather his interpretation of her good. That added fuel to the fire – or pyre, rather, for what he was burning was their future together. Him telling her what they were going to do, and telling her it was for her own good. And was she going to just accept it? Like an obedient little woman, just because he was a man?

“I did that for Ron, Miss Sash, and where did it get me? I’m not doing it again. This time I’m taking control.”

Miss Sash’s tail flicked, then she stood up and licked Hermione’s face. She approved. Well, she would: she didn’t allow adult males - human or feline - in her cottage. So she had strong feminist views.

Abraxas was a bit of a chauvinist – all men were, though he had more excuse than most, having born when feminism was in its infancy - but he would just have to accept it. It was their future, his and hers, and she had as much a say in it as he did. More, because … because… because she was going to demand more. They were going to do what she wanted.

I am too old. Yes, by conventional standards, he was. But what did she care for convention! She been through a marriage and a break-up. She’d learnt that what mattered was what two people felt
for each other. Society might raise an eyebrow, might even snigger and sneer. So what? Let them. She didn’t care. Anyway, was he? He’d said he was eighty five years older than her, based on his \textit{virtus} increased age of 109 and her \textit{virtus} reduced age of say twenty five. She’d said seventy, using her chronological age of thirty seven. But eighty six minus thirty seven was only forty nine. In the forties, properly looked at. That wasn’t such a huge gap. June - December, maybe even July - December. Not such a huge gap.

And if he couldn’t perform in bed, well, she’d accept it. Oh, lovemaking with him would be wonderful, but if he couldn’t, he couldn’t. Was she going to turn away from everything else because of that? She already had two children. It would be lovely to have his child, but if they couldn’t, they couldn’t. They could be companions. Ten or fifteen years, he had said. But that was pessimistic. Araminta had lived to a hundred and thirty, and Abraxas was from the same stock. They’d have over twenty years. That was worth having, wasn’t it? Many muggle marriages lasted less that half that time. Her own lasted less than that, and certainly had been happy for less, far less, than half that. Even ten years were worth having. And it wouldn’t be that: he was … old - she was growing to really dislike that word - yes, he was, but healthy and strong.

She would tell him that. She would argue him down. His age didn’t matter: all that mattered was how they felt about each other. Ginny had known that. Ginny knew the difference in their ages, but when she saw the amaura, she’d felt, immediately and without hesitation, that that over-ruled everything. So did Rose. And she respected the opinions of her daughter and sister-in-law more than any other women. He too respected Rose and Ginny. Respected them enough to wink at them. Though not at her … oh, stop rambling, girl.

She would make him see it wasn’t gratitude, that she felt gratitude, of course she did, for he had given her life, but that was not what made her want to link her life to his. Nor was it a sense of obligation. It was simple, plain, unadorned, pure love. How could he argue against that? And he loved her. She hugged the cat to her.

“I’m going to tell him tomorrow. I’ll \textit{make} him see reason. And if he won’t, I’ll … I’ll just sit on his doorstep until he does. He might be granite, Miss Sash, but I’ll be water. I’ll wear him down. Water always wins in the end, ask any mountain. I’ll tell him tomorrow.”

Miss Sash sprang off her lap and, tail erect, pranced towards the front door. She looked back at Hermione.

“You think we should go now? Go and wait for him? Tell him now? Good idea.”

She rose, but before she could take a step, Miss Sash sprang back from the doors and turned to the window facing the lodge. Her back arched, her hackles rose and she began hissing.
The nightmare becomes real

Was someone coming? Abraxas? No, Miss Sash would never react to Abraxas like this. And her head was moving, her senses tracking something coming past the wall. Hermione backed towards the bedroom door. If Miss Sash did not like whatever it was, she was sure she would not either. The front door crashed open, and a tall, broad figure stood there, filling the doorframe.

“Girl.” The voice was hoarse, deep and male.

She shrank back. Her nightmare had come. Panic rose like retch in her throat.

He stepped into the room so the light fell on his face. Long matted grey hair and a coarse beard framed a ravaged face.

Miss Sash hissed and spat, backing away.

“Devil cat! I kill you.” He drew a long, thin bladed knife and crouched, preparing to spring.

“No,” cried Hermione, but Miss Sash had already leapt to the windowsill and out, vanishing into the night.

The intruder turned to her. “Girl. I have come for you.”

Get a grip on yourself, or die. She backed to the settee and said, “If you harm me, Mr Greyback, you will spend the rest of your life in Azkaban.”

He snarled. “You are my right, Girl! You are mine, mine to harm or not, as I choose. You were given to me by witchwoman. Eighteen years ago you were given to me.”

Were females chattels in the world of werewolves? Or had the years in Azkaban deranged him? Or both? He seemed more demented than before. Whatever, she’d better play along. “The witchwoman had no right to give me. I was not hers to give.”

“Bah. Females must be owned. This is not forest-world, where young unmated she-wolves can run free for anyone. Girls cannot run free just for anyone.”

“This is true, Mr Greyback-”

“Do not call me Mister! Mister is for weak humans. I am moon-wolf, alpha-wolf, killer-wolf. I am pack-master Greyback. I need no feeble title. Greyback, you call me. Respect!”

Deranged, yes. A half crazed, half wolf, half human creature. “Greyback. I have always been owned, Greyback. I was owned then. I am owned now.”

He snarled again. Brows locked together over the sunken eyes. “Who owns you?”

“A powerful wizard, Greyback. He will track you down, Greyback, as you track down the she-wolves. He will hunt you and destroy you.”

“Witchman? Who!”

“Like you he spent long years in prison, hoarding up his power. But his prison was Nurmengard, a evil place steeped in dark magic. Your time was but seventeen years, his was ten more than that, ten years gathering strength, gathering magic, gathering wisdom. He is strong, Greyback, strong,
strong, strong. If you leave me, he will leave you. If you take me, he will seek you, he will hunt you as the wolf tracks the doe.”

“Who, Girl!”

“He is a Malfoy, and the Malfoys are strong, dark wizards, as you well know.”

“You lie, Girl. Greyhair Malfoy witchman told me you were here, and opened the witch-gates to this place for me. You lie and you stink of fear. Your fear tells you I am master. I will take you and go.” He strode forward and grabbed her arm, a stench of sweat and smoke preceding him. Then steps thudded on the boardwalk, and he froze, looking at the front door. As the door opened he pulled her in front of him, raising a dagger to her throat.

Abraxas, holding his wand, took one step inside and stopped.

Greyback pressed the blade into her skin.

“Drop wand, Witchman, or I kill her.”

She could feel a trickle of blood starting down her neck.

Abraxas dropped his wand. “If you harm her, Wolf, I will nail your pelt to my barn door.

Greyback snarled at him, and his fetid breath washed over her. Then his grip on her neck tightened as he used the other hand to take out a slim vinewood wand.

“My wand!” she said.

“Mine now,” growled Greyback, pointing it at Abraxas. “Accio wand.” He caught Abraxas’s wand in his wand hand, threw it to the floor and stamped on it. The wood splintered. Then he said, into her ear, “This your owner?”

“Yes. And even if his son sent you and opened the witch-gates for you, he will hunt you if you harm his father. And he has grandsons and great-grandsons.”

“Bah. Twisted dark-lair Greyhair Malfoy witchman fears me. He will not come. And Malfoys sire one heir only. But this witchman, he stinks of power. He will hunt with a sharp arrow.”

“And a honed skinning knife,” said Abraxas. “Free her, Wolf.”

“Never! For eighteen years I dream of Girl. Eighteen years. Girl is mine. But you, Witchman: I smell no miasma of twisted soul with you. You tell truth. You will hunt me, without rest, to Hell. So, we settle this right now, Witchman. We fight for Girl. No magic. No weapons. Tooth and claw only. Or I kill her. Neither has her. Here, now. Which? Choose!”

Oh no! His madness did not preclude cunning.

Abraxas stared at him. Hermione shook her head frantically, but he said, “Fight, Wolf. I will fight you for her.”

“No!” she cried out, “No, Abraxas, he’ll kill you.”

Greyback shook her. “Quiet, Girl. Nothing to do with you. Witchman, when Girl is won, winner takes her, loser turns away, seeks another. No hunting, no vengeance. Or I kill her now. Swear on your grandsire’s grave.” He pushed to the blade deeper into Hermione’s neck and she winced.
“I swear on my grandsire's grave that if you win, I will not hunt you. I will not seek vengeance. Put down the knife, Wolf.”

“Greyback, listen to me,” said Hermione. “I will come only if you agree not to kill him.”

Greyback laughed, a harsh, barking sound. “No choice, Girl. I win, you mine, I take you and go.”

“Wait, Greyback. Are you going to … sire your … cubs off me?”

“What else? I need alpha-bitch. My two-wolf, fire burn him, stole my pack when witchmen put me in hellhole. Moon full tomorrow, Girl, I make you lubin, then we mate. You bear my young. You produce good whelps. We make alpha pack, strong like me, clever like you.”

She’d kill herself first. But – Abraxas: “Then, if you kill this man, I will kill your whelps at birth.”

Greyback snarled. His breath washed over her - putrifying meat, she shuddered to think from where - and his teeth fastened on her ear. Was he going to rip it off?

Abraxas started forward. Greyback released her ear and snarled, “Stop or I kill her. Girl,” he cuffed her across the head, back and forth. “You my bitch. You kill my whelps, I kill you.”

“I will be dead inside anyway.”

Greyback spun her round and stared into her eyes. His irises were yellow, the pupils black vertical slits – he must be part transformed! How could that be? The three-quarters moon, the adrenaline, the madness?

He opened his mouth to speak: the canines are already abnormally long. “So. I not kill him. You not kill my whelps. You, Witchman: No weapons, no stick. Give stick to Girl.”

Abraxas nodded, knelt and slid the cane across the floor to Hermione. “Look after my Excalibur.”

Greyback pushed her to one side, and sprang forward to meet Abraxas. She bent to pick up the cane. Excalibur: she ran her hand down the bamboo shaft, and at a joint, felt a knob. She pressed it and the joint opened. Her eyes on the males, she felt inside. Narrow, edged, metal-cold. A sword stick. Would she get a chance to use it? Only if she could catch him unawares.

Man and werewolf circled each other: the man upright, stiffly; the werewolf half crouched, teeth bared, hands clawed, ready to grab. Even she could see that there could be no doubt of the outcome.

The werewolf sprang, knocking aside the man’s hands, ripping with his teeth, then leapt back. Blood began running from a tear across Abraxas’ cheek and neck.

“Old man, useless old man. Too weak to fight wolf, too useless to mate with Girl, too feeble to sire cubs.”

Abraxas lurched towards him, but Greyback leapt to meet him, slashing with his teeth, grasping, then shoving with his hands. Abraxas fell heavily, and the werewolf leapt forward, kicking at his chest, then dropped onto him. A cracking sound, and Hermione winced. His ribs?

“No,” she cried, “leave him, you have won, leave him.”

The werewolf swung round to face her, kneeling at the prone, gasping man. “Witchman dead is safest. My whelps will be your whelps, lubin whelps. You will not kill them.” His eyes watching
Hermione, he bent to Abraxas’ throat, baring his teeth.

From behind him came a voice, and he started, turning his head and torso. “Wolf, Mad Wolf, look.” Lady Finna was standing in the painting foreground, holding up a grey pelt in one hand, a long spear in the other. Beside her in the painting stood Miss Sash. “Your great, great, great, grandfather, Mad Wolf. I killed him, Mad Wolf. I killed him at full moon with this silver spear. Then I slit his throat, Mad Wolf, and skinned him. I opened his chest and drove a silver dagger through his heart.”

He snarled up at her, still bending over Abraxas. Hermione cautiously moved forwards.

“He was a coward, Dark Wolf. His victims were children.”

“You lie, Bitch” he snarled. “My grandsires were strong, brave and strong.”

Lady Finna threw back her head and laughed, loud and vigorous. “Brave and strong? Like you? You prey on children also, women and children, and old men. Weak sire, weak whelp, weak, mad wolf.”

Abraxas’ eyes were open and on Hermione as she crept closer, drawing the sword from the cane as she came.

“I use his pelt for a doormat, Mad Wolf. It is worth nothing better, like you.”

With a howl the werewolf leapt over Abraxas and slashed at the painting with his claws, shredding it.

Hermione took three quick steps forward: she was almost with striking distance. Slowly she raised the sword.
The werewolf raised his head and sniffed the air. Then his ears twitched and he sprang around, dropping into a crouch, ready to spring. Suddenly he was the hunter, and hunting her, huge, menacing, terrifying. She jumped back, holding the sword in front of her, point towards him.

“Girl. Look at me.” Fixing his eyes on hers, he took a step towards her.

Her big advantage had been surprise, and she’d lost it. But still, she had a sword and he did not. She must fight him. She must jump at him, thrust at him, now. Gathering her courage, she looked into his eyes, yellow eyes, slitted black. Huge, glaring eyes, menacing, implacable, all-powerful eyes. She … took a step back.

He took another slow step forward. “Put it down, Girl. You cannot use it.”

She could, she could use it. But she took another step back. Did she stand a chance against him, even with a sword? She’d never even held one before, never held any weapon, let alone tried to defend herself with one.

His eyes pinioning hers, he came after her, soft footed, crouched, stalking. “Put it down, Girl. You cannot use it.” His lips drew back and he gave a low snarl.

She could try, couldn’t she? But the sword was trembling in her grasp, and he would be so quick. If she tried, he would just sweep the sword to one side as he sprang at her. Still, she must try, she must try, she must … But he was huge, strong, swift, a hunter born. And she was just … Girl. What could she do?

“Put it down, Girl. You cannot fight me. I am master.”

Retreating as he advanced, she edged behind the settee, felt the wall against her back, moved along it. *Put it down.* She must. *You cannot fight me.* She could not. *I am master.* He was, he was master. She couldn’t resist, she couldn’t even free her eyes from his. He would kill Abraxas and carry her off to some forest lair. It was as inevitable as nightfall. Why fight it?

She took one more step and felt the wall corner against her back. It was over: she was trapped, nowhere to go, nothing she could do. He stepped within range, holding her with his eyes, and she let the point swing down. He reached for her. “You are mine, Girl.”

Then, from the settee top beside her, something large and tawny launched itself at him, hissing and snarling. The werewolf jerked his gaze free of hers, but too late as Mister Lumpy fastened himself onto his face, clawing and ripping.

*Fight!* Hermione swung the sword back up – *the heart, she had to get the heart* – and plunged it into him, just below the breast bone, upwards, using both hands and all her strength.

Yelling, the werewolf tore the cat off his face and flung him away. Mister Lumpy twisted in midair, hit the wall feet first, twisted again and landed on his feet on the floor.

The sword, she pulled at it, jerked at it, but it wouldn’t come. Caught in the rib cage. Then the werewolf grabbed the sword with his hands, and she let go. His head bowed in front of her, he heaved at it and his hands slid along the blade, leaving trails of blood. Then he lifted his head and looked at her. She tried to step back, but she was already against the wall.
His face was in ribbons of flesh, dripping red, one eye a mass of blood. He howled, the sound filling the small room, pounding on her ears, and she shrank back from his fury, into the corner, cowering below him.

His lips curled back, revealing long yellow canines and he reached out for her with a long, low snarl, his mouth opening, teeth bared. *If I can’t have you, nobody will.* She shut her eyes, turning her head away. She felt his hot breath, his hands clutch her face, force her head back to expose her neck. Then a hissing yowl sounded next to her, and she opened her eyes to see Miss Sash on Greyback’s face, tearing at the flesh. For a moment she glimpsed yellowish bone as the flesh was torn away, then blood washed over it. Greyback screamed and ripped the cat from his face. Still she tore at his hands until he flung her away. He had stepped back a pace, and Hermione threw herself over the settee back, across the seat, onto the floor. She felt the werewolf grab her ankle, kicked out, heard a cat yowl again, and she was free, crawling away. Reaching Abraxas, she scrambled up, turned, looking for a chair, anything, to use as a barricade.

But it was not necessary. The werewolf was slumped half across the settee back, and as she watched, slid back out of sight. Silence, except for gasping breathing. Hers. His, as well? Was he dead – or laying in wait?

Taking a chair and holding it in front of her, she tiptoed around the walls to get to the furthest point from which she could see behind the settee. Yes, there he was lying, the sword still projecting from his chest. Dead? She took one cautious step, then shrank back as the head lifted. The single yellow eye stared at her, held her, she felt the imperative: ‘Come’, she took a step forward, but then … the head fell back, eye contact was broken. Shaking, she backed against the wall and shut her eyes. Even dying, the creature was controlling her. In her mind, she heard his rasping whisper: ‘You are mine. You cannot escape me.’ Then - nothing. Was it dead?

She opened her eyes a slit. It was lying there, unmoving. Was it really dead? She dare not go closer to check. It had too much power over her.

But Miss Sash sprang up onto the settee back, looked down, gave a hiss, sat back and – Hermione couldn’t believe it, and gave a slightly hysterical giggle – began to wash herself.

Had she got the heart? She must have – werewolves were virtually unkillable otherwise. But could he be pretending? As if in answer, Mister Lumpy walked up to the body, sniffed at it, then turned and walked towards her, tail held high. Miss Sash leaped from the settee to the floor, walking next to him, also tail erect.

If that was not a sign of victory, she had never seen one. She knelt and held out her arms. “Oh, oh, Mister Lumpy, Miss Sash, what can I say? Without you, Abraxas would be dead and I would be ...” She couldn’t bring herself to say it. Cowering on a bed of bracken in an isolated lair in a remote forest, offering her throat to the wolf monster crouching over her. “Thank you.”

She held out her hand to stroke them, but Mr Lumpy veered around her, sniffed at Abraxas, then - she stared - sprang into the painting, shrinking in size, then disappearing. Oh! She’d never seen or even heard of any living creature being able to do that. Miss Sash walked past her: was she going too? “Oh, please,” Hermione cried out, “Please, stay with me? I don’t want to be alone, not with that there, and Abraxas…”

Miss Sash glanced at her and mewed, but walked to Abraxas, sat down and began licking his face. Abraxas’ eyes opened: he was, he was still alive!

Hermione ran to him, fell onto her knees beside him and took his head into her lap. Above her, a voice said, “Miss Granger.”
Lady Finna was standing in the intact corner of the painting, looking at her.

“Oh, can you get help? Quickly, quickly.”

Finna raised the spear and said, “Lady Wolfsbane, I dub you. Yes.” She stepped back and disappeared.

Her, Lady Wolfbane? Miss Petrified Rabbit, more like it. The two cats had done it. She’d had the sword, but was lowering it, defeated, without even attempting to defend herself, when Mister Lumpy had attacked. Yes, no doubt the werewolf would have just knocked the sword aside if she had tried, but she couldn’t even bring herself to try. Why? And then when he was going to kill her, rip her throat out, again she hadn’t even struggled until Miss Sash had attacked him again. Only then had she been able to escape. And even while he was dying she was responding to his will.

What had been happening? Somehow he had dominated her, crushed her spirit and her will, forced her into submission, and all without even touching her. Was it psychological? The abuser and the abused? Was it sexual, male domination and female submission? That was a repellent thought. Was it force of character, his powerful, primitive drive, over her more complex but gentler resistance? Was it the awareness of his physical strength over her weakness? Or was it just that ancient thing, the predator and the prey? Certainly he had trapped her with his eyes. She had been held, almost physically. He had known what he was doing, instinctively. A creature who had hunted all his life, who always just taken what he wanted, by force. And her, exactly the opposite. But it didn’t matter, he was dead. All that mattered was Abraxas.
The healing

“Abraxas,” she whispered, and bent to press her lips to his forehead. Blood dripped from the cut on her neck onto his cheek. “Abraxas.”

Abraxas opened his eyes and whispered, “Well done, my love. I can call you that now.”

“And I you. I love you, Abraxas Malfoy, and we are going to be together from now on. I’m going to marry you. First we’ll heal you.”

A slight shake of the head. To the healing or the marriage? But both were going to happen. Before she could remonstrate, a gasping whisper.

“The blade contains silver, so he should stay dead.” A pause. “But someone should drive a stake through his heart, just in case.” Another pause. “I want you to be safe when I’m gone.” He coughed, and a bubble of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth.

“No, you’re not … you’re not going to die. I’ve sent for help.”

The head shake again. “No time. Wards … ” Laboured breathing. “Wards triple armed now. Only Lucius and Draco … can disarm.” More laboured breathing. “Lucius your enemy, Draco away.” Blood was now trickling down the side of his jaw. From his lungs, his punctured lungs.

“Then I’ll do it. Accio wand.”

“Too much damage. Too old. But glad, what I did, for you.” His eyes closed and he seemed to slip from consciousness.

‘What he did, for her.’ What he did for her, she must do for him. Virtus vitalus oblatio. But: all Padma’s warnings, little control, no limiting especially on a return transfer, and she’d seen the grandmother die when she’d returned her daughter’s life energy. Yes. Still, she must. But - her own daughter, her own children? If the worst happened, they would have Ginny and Fleur. And Narcissa. She must risk it, she must.

But she must leave a message for them. She composed her thoughts, conjured a phial and transferred them into it. She inscribed Rose’s name on the glass and sent it to lie on the writing bureau.

Then she bent, kissed Abraxas’ brow and prepared herself to enter.

A thudding on the boardwalk made her pause. Triple wards: Lucius or Draco? Miss Sash’s eyes scanned along the wall, as before, but without the unease. Still … Hermione pointed her wand at the door as it was flung open.

Lucius burst in, wand drawn.

Miss Sash sprang onto the window sill and hissed at him, but that was all. Did she trust him?

His eyes widened at the blood splattered around. “You bitch, what have you done? You’ve killed him.”

Using her wand, she pointed towards the werewolf’s body. “No, Mr Malfoy. You have killed him. You opened the gates, you let in a deranged animal, you incited the animal to abduct me. And
when your father tried to protect me, the animal attacked him. This is your doing, and your father is
dying of it.”

Lucius’ eyes flicked to the werewolf and back, looking down at Abraxas. Then they widened.
Hermione looked down. Abraxas’ eyes were open, looking at him. “Lucius. My son. Betrayer,” he
whispered. Then they turned back to her, and closed.

“I … you…” said Lucius. He put his hand over his eyes. “He is still alive. What can I do?”

“You are asking me, a mudblood?” She spat the word at him.

“Your blood and his blood: I see them running together, mingling. Mudblood burns away when it
touches pureblood, he said.”

“Voldemort lied, in that as in everything else. But you believed him, you believed everything, and
this is the result.”

“What can I do? What can I do to help him?”

She glared at him. “Nothing. There is nothing you can do, but go away and leave me alone to try
what I can do.”

He put his face in his hands, then held his hands out to her. “Miss Granger. My father is dying.
Dying because of me. No healer is here. I may have … certain prejudices, but I do not live under a
stone. I know you are regarded as the most accomplished witch of your generation. I accept that
my skills, my knowledge are inferior to yours. Guide me. How can I save him?”

Hermione took a deep breath. “There is only one way that I know of: to give him life energy, as he
gave to me.”

“He to you?”

“Yes. You were right, Mr Malfoy, though I did not know it when last we met. I was dying of
cancer, as your mother did. Your father gave me twenty-three years of his life energy, and so saved
my life. Now I'm going to return it, if I can. But the spell is errantes sanctus magic. My soul and
spirit must leave my physical body. Can I trust you not to try to harm me?”

“Miss Granger, if you can save my father, I will owe you a life debt. I will not hinder or harm you.
I will help in any way I can. What are you going to do?”

“I am going to try to send my sanctus into his body, and use my navitas, my life energy force, to
heal the damage, if I can.”

“Will it work? Have you done this before? I have never heard of this.”

“I don’t know if it will work and I’ve never done it before. Other than your father, no one has given
life energy for over two hundred years. And returning it: the last time that I know of, the donor was
drained of life energy, and died.”

“You are risking your life for him?”

“As he did for me. Mr Malfoy, I can't talk any longer, I must go in, your father is dying.”

“Can I go in also, and help?”

“You have compatibility, as his son. I may need help. But if you do, it might kill you.”
“If he dies, I will have killed him. I cannot live with that. What do I do?”

Can I trust him? She looked at Miss Sash. She looked back, raised her tail and flicked the end.

Hermione turned to Lucius. “Take his arm, and say these words.” She pressed her lips to Abraxas’ brow again, then taking his shoulders in her hands, said, “Aperi lorem vitae varius ... virtus vitalus oblatio ... ad vitam.”

The world blurs away to insignificance as she feels herself slowly contracting to a bright blue glow. Gradually she becomes aware of her surroundings. Just behind her a greyish glow comes into being, not as bright. A navitas, waiting, she senses, for her lead. Around her is a purple mist. She begins to flow through it, the grey glow following. Here and there are patches of deeper purple: damage, weakness, deterioration? She can feel the labouring heart, the torn flesh tissues leaking blood, the congested lungs struggling to absorb enough oxygen. She senses the life energy at critical level, the purple slowly deepening. Has she left it too late? What first, what first? A blackness in the chest seems to demand attention first: She flows towards it: in the centre a dull red glow pulsates. The heart: if that fails, everything fails. What to do? Help? How? Help it beat? She imagines hands cupping the heart, squeezing and relaxing, squeezing and relaxing, in time to the beat: immediately she feels strength leave her and the beat become stronger. The pulsating red glow brightens a little. So does the purple: does the colour indicate level of health? If so, does she just need to seek out dark areas in the purple? But then she can’t stay here, helping the heart. Can the grey navitas take over? He was just there behind her, unsure, waiting for her to tell him what to do. She imagines her hands coming away and another, larger, pair of hands around the heart. She feels the drain on her ease. The beat falters, then picks up again as the grey navitas flows past her. It had worked!

She senses the deepness of the purple slowly lightening. So: the darker the atmosphere, the closer to … death? Abraxas’s death? No, she must push aside emotions: that would waste energy, energy which could be used for healing. She had a job to do and must do it dispassionately, efficiently, effectively. And analytically. So, why had the heart been labouring? Lack of oxygen? She flows to the lungs, into the cavity, and jerks back: a strong sense of wrongness, of malfunction. Senses the slow red pulsating over most of the surface. Caused by what? She senses a metallic, cloying smell: blood? Of course, blood from the wounds, the tissues torn by the breaking ribs, seeping into the lungs, coating the surfaces, preventing oxygen from being absorbed? How can she get it off? Use the Tergeo spell? No: she’s already inside a spell. Using one spell inside another was one of the Ten Prohibitions of spellcasting. The two spells might clash: few had done it and lived to tell the tale.

So she must follow this spell’s laws. But what were they? Must she visualise what she wants, like she had done for the heart? She imagines a viscous red fluid coating coming off – what? What do clean lungs look like? She’d seen pictures of grey and black lungs – no, those were smokers’ lungs. The last thing she wants! Should they be sort of pinkish? Dear God, she hopes this healing force knows what to do, because she certainly doesn’t. She’s like a child blundering through a fireworks factory holding a lighted candle.

Yes, it seems to, she can sense the cleansing, the breathing becoming easier. The red pulsing fades then vanishes. It worked, again! Still some dark patches down there, but not critical, not pulsating. The breathing eases further. The purple lightens further, but with jagged flashes of grey, like lightning. Pain? Shock? The ribs, girl, the broken ribs! This is going to be tricky. She’ll need help. Can the heart keep going on its own now? Oxygen flow is good, so yes, probably. Almost immediately she senses the grey navitas beside her, waiting for instructions. The heart beat carries
on, weaker than before but stronger than when she had first sensed it.

The broken ribs: this was not just a matter of visualising healing: they’d have to physically move the broken bones, join them so they could knit. Was this even possible? But surely it was not too different from keeping a heart pumping? Both involved movement.

She’s nervous about this, but delaying would make things worse. Help me, she thought at the grey navitas, and she felt his strength supporting hers. The first rib is broken but not snapped: a slender piece of bone still joins the two sections, and the chest wall has not been breached. She sends out the image of the bone straightening back into position. A grey flash, two, three – yes, they must indicate pain and the coupled shock. Then the fractured sections join together, the flashes stop and she visualises the break healing, the bone becoming one again. The lines at the join fade. Well, that worked all right.

Now the other one. This is of an order more serious and complex. A floating rib had broken into two pieces, the chest wall penetrated and one piece is loose and in the lungs. How can she take this on? This is major surgery! But if she doesn’t, who will? Trembling with apprehension, she imagines the broken rib moving back through the hole in the chest wall, pushing aside the torn flesh. Slowly, slowly, gently, gently.

The grey flashes become more frequent, streaking jaggedly across her awareness, so powerfully she can almost feel the pain herself. The heart begins labouring again, and the purple aura deepens. Just a little further, rib, just a little more - her senses in tumult, feeling the hammering of the pain, the blinding of the flashes - almost there, almost – a vivid grey flash blots out the purple, fades, leaving … black. Black silence. No heartbeat. Dear God, she’s killed him. She flees to the heart, takes it in her hands and begins squeezing, relaxing, squeezing, relaxing, squeezing – then: a red glow blossoms around one of the veins? Arteries? A blood vessel, anyway, that leads to the heart. Oh, no, now what? She seeks it out. A weakness, a ballooning in the wall. A few more pumps and it would burst. Desperately she visualises the wall thickening, strengthening. The ballooning shrinks, the tube wall becomes sound, the red glow dwindles, vanishes. Quickly she scans around: anything else about to snap, burst, explode? No? She begins the squeezing again, her heart in her mouth, waiting for the next crisis. This is so frightening. Like fighting a raging bushfire: no sooner have you put one blaze than another one springs up behind you. But here it is Abraxas’s life you’re playing with.

A few more pulses and the heart begins to work again, the black receding as a purple tide washes in, dark at first but quickly lightening. Relief floods through her. He’d come back. But she still has the rib to deal with. She hopes Grey has held the rib in place: if they have to start again … Could Abraxas stand another shock like that? Even she is still shaking from that … that experience - she doesn’t want to think what nearly happened.

Carefully she withdraws from the heart, but it seems much stronger now. The rib? Yes, Grey has held it in place. Another, infinitesimally slow nudge, and the two pieces join. She visualises them locking together, being bathed in healing. Another jagged grey flash, a pause in the heart beat - and in hers - and the beat picks up again. The jagged lines showing the join fade as the rib becomes whole again.

Suddenly she’s aware of a fourth presence, a very faint yellow. She could sense it in Abraxas as well as feeling it in herself. What? Who? It seemed neutral, not a helper: a watcher, an overseer? A healer? Padma? In herself she sensed communication: Withdraw, it said, withdraw. Come back.

No. She has a job to do and she is going to do it. What sort of a housekeeper left her house cleaning half done? Though for her that was a poor analogy. She was a terrible housekeeper. Cleaning in the
flat wasn’t left half done, it wasn’t even started sometimes. But this, this is important. This is Abraxas. Here she’ll withdraw only once she’s finished cleaning, once she’s healed everything she can.

She’s taken care of the critical. What about the not-so-critical? Those dark areas in the lungs: were they really black or was it just a sort of diagnostic colour, something that she sensed as black because it was not healthy? She seeks them out - and finds she had been wrong. There is pulsating, but it’s so slow, it’s easy to miss. She reaches out … and recoils, revolted. Disease, perhaps dormant, but definitely malign. She steels herself and reaches out again. Old, deep damage, crevassed, covered in … scar tissue? Tuberculosis, from the dark, damp cells of Nurmengard? Something oozy and yuk, anyway. She visualises bathing the area in balm, bombarding it with cleansing, sterilizing, health-giving sunlight. Slowly the black breaks down revealing pink below. The breathing eases further, the heart as well.

The heart: slowly she flows around it, looking for red or even orange, areas of weakness, pouring healing into anything she finds. And then the lower organs, the stomach, the liver, the bladder - what’s that? A cancer: prostate? Small, possibly dormant, but while she’s there … she bombards it with what looks like sunlight, but what she now thinks of as essence of health.

Again the communication comes, this time with an emotional tinge to it: it seems worried. Well, she has this in hand now, so Grey can go. she visualises him withdrawing, back to his body. She senses though that his colour is much darker than it was. As, in fact is hers. What is that? Tiredness? She certainly is that. Tiredness giving way to exhaustion. But its meaning doesn’t really matter right now. She loves this man, and will stay until he is healed, fully.

Abraxas had pain when he moved: arthritis? Rheumatism? She doesn’t know the difference, just that they both cause stiffness and pain. And they are just labels, anyway. Whatever he has, the diagnostic glow would show it up, she hopes. She flows to the left knee: yes, an orange glow: which seems to mean something faulty but not life threatening. The area is swollen with fluid. Some protective measure, she supposes. Yes, the membrane is swollen, the cartilages worn, even torn at one corner, with bone spur growth and rough, eroding contact surfaces. Ouch, the thought alone of walking on it makes her wince. She visualises the cartilage regrowing, spreading the joint again, the spurs shrinking, the bone damage healing … done. She moves to the ankles, the feet, both hips and the other leg, healing as she goes. He’ll go up Ben Nevis like a gazelle, now. Then up and down the spine, the neck, shoulders, arms and hands. The hands that had held hers, with swollen knuckles. Tenderly she bathes them in health. The swelling comes down. Anything else? The head? She’s nervous of going there: Besides being of another order of complexity compared to the rest of the body, the brain is his inner sanctum. She would not, could not, dare not invade his thoughts. But she could just stay on the surface, just checking everything available was all right. Up she goes, and almost immediately she spots a glow on each side of his head, rather like … earmuffs? Yes! Earmuffs are exactly what they are: something stopping him hearing: his deafness. If she could fix that! Both inner ears show a glow, one orange, one orange-red. She baths them in health, and gradually the colours turn to yellow. She flows around the outer surface, looking for the tell-tale red glow of something not quite right: it all seemed satisfactory: no break in the yellow aura.

At last it seemed to be finished. Again the call came to withdraw, and with an even stronger urgency, a concern bordering on fear. All right, she’s ready now … or is she? Shouldn’t she give him one more check over? She doesn’t want to, she’s so tired. But he would have done it for her. Almost sleepwalking from exhaustion, she starts again, at the feet and works her way up. All fine, all fine, she’d picked up everything first time round.
At the head, she pauses. Need she go there again? Everything else had been fine, why should the head be any different? And the way she feels, she might do more damage than good. But no, she must be consistent. Once all round, and once all round checking. She surely won’t need to do anything. She flows around the brain surface. Again, she daren’t go in... but... what’s that? Just below the surface, a red glow around a blood vessel. How had she missed that! And dare she go in? She must: she can't leave it. Not something in the brain. If she leaves it, she’ll spend the rest of her life worrying about it. She eases in: it’s a weakness in the vessel wall. If that bursts ... the implications are too horrible to think about. She visualises thickening, and the red glow fades. Now, having found one potential killer, she has to search the whole brain, length, breadth and depth, in case there’s another.

She should have done it earlier, but she'd been too scared. Now she’s paying the penalty for her timidity - or rather Abraxas is. She’d been fresh, or at least fresher. Now she’s tired, and can’t do as good a job. Well, she can, but it’ll take longer because she’ll have to be more careful. She’ll have to apply discipline - as Abraxas would say - to be careful. Will the diagnostics even work, if she’s so tired? She doesn’t know, but the worst option is to do nothing.

And, stupid, stupid girl, she’ll not be invading his thoughts, of course not: she’s examining his brain, not his mind. Something physical, tangible, not … ephemeral. Ephemeral: the word had a feeling attached, a warm, loving feeling. She felt calmer, drew energy from it. Was it the right word here? It sounded right, but … probably not. Hadn’t he said about some word or other: ‘I neither know nor care, Miss Granger,’ and nor did she. And she loved the way he said ‘Miss Granger,’ it was so - for heaven’s sake stop rambling, girl, and get on with the job.

Gently, she flows through the brain, scanning, checking for anything that doesn’t have the yellow aura. Slowly, slowly, carefully, carefully, looking in every nook and cranny. But there are so many of them. More than once she stops, unsure whether she had properly checked the last section, forcing herself to go back and do it again.

At last, she’s finished. She’d found nothing but she’d checked, top to bottom, back to front, inside to out. At last she could – wait, what is that, there, at the spot where the spine joins the skull: the glow was not red but black, and pulsating slowly, like the TB had been. And there’s a nasty blood red tinge to the black. How, how had she missed that! What is it? Some sort of a growth, compressing the nerve bundle. And that sounds bad news: Progressive damage? Loss of feeling? Loss of use? Paralysis? She reaches out. A growth on the bone, covering something. She probes deeper: a fragment of bone, a chip, gouged out of the spine. How can a gouge be natural? It must be from … violence? A wound from his battle with Voldemort? From one of the enchanted swords? A fraction of an inch either way, and Abraxas would not have been here today. And so, neither would she. Him dead and gone decades ago, her dying. And yes, this is an old, old wound. It’ll not be just a matter of shoving it back into place and healing it as she had done with the ribs. Time would have changed both the gouge and the chip. What is to be done? Dear God, how could she know? All she’d done so far was to bumble around and hope for the best. And she’s so deathly tired. All she wants to do was curl up and asleep. Fight it, girl, this is the last hill.

No, she hadn’t just bumbled around, she tried to get the defect back to the original, healthy, condition. She’d stripped the blood off the lungs, she’d stripped the scabs off the TB infected lungs, so could she do the same thing here? Sort of turn back the clock to get wound into its original condition, then slip the chip back into the gouge and heal it into place? She had to undo what time had done.

She visualises the protuberance reducing, the layers of protective growth coming off. For a long time, it seems, nothing happens, and she begins to flag. Then, gradually, the growth begins to shrink. It has almost gone when the yellow aura darkens swiftly to red then purple, and grey
flashes appear again. The heart began to labour. What was happening? This is nothing compared to the trauma of the rib repair, so why in heaven’s name should he be going into shock … unless … could he be reliving the attack by Voldemort? Then she senses the gushing of blood from torn, tortured flesh. What? Is the attack actually, physically, happening? The dark tide is flowing, receding, flowing again, under a sky of grey pain. Dear God, is she going to lose him at the penultimate moment? Wait, wait: the chip must be … yes, is free, the gouge waiting. Do it, girl! With more haste than care, she brings the two together and visualises them becoming integral, the blood washing back, the damaged flesh drawing together. Is she in time, or has she just completed Voldemort’s work for him? She feels the black tide roar in – then swiftly recede, driven back by a light yellow aura. The heart beat settles, rhythmic, steady, confident: thump … thump … thump.

He’s alive, strong and healthy, and … she’s finished. Alive and finished. She feels like a wrung dishcloth, but it doesn’t matter any more, she’s finished, she’s done all she can. Was this how that mother in Dilys Derwent’s recording had felt? Physically exhausted, but emotionally deeply satisfied? And the other voice, full on panic, is screaming at her now: withdraw, withdraw, withdraw!

Yes. Slowly, quietly, exhaustedly, she pulls back, leaving his sleeping awareness, and … his aura is blue, bright blue, like hers! But she’s too tired to think what that might mean. And hers is not blue now, but purple, a deep purple, which she hopes, she hopes is just tiredness. Is there something else? She feels there should be, something to close the channels, to put everything back into place. She can’t think, and really, she’s too exhausted to care. She feels as though she could sleep for … forever.
Rose had closed her Arithmancy notes and was thinking about bed when McGonagall’s Cheshire cat avatar appeared, hanging in midair. “Rose and Hugo Weasley, please come to my office immediately.”

“Oh-oh. Shouldn’t have done that last hex on Malfoy, Rosie,” laughed Lucy Scamander.

Rose grinned. She’d been avoiding Malfoy rather than hexing him, but so far no one had noticed. Anyway, if McGonagall wanted Hugo as well, it must be something else. She hoped it was nothing to do with her mother. She’d rather be in trouble herself than that. “Come on, Hugo.”

McGonagall’s face was serious. “Rose, Hugo, your mother is in danger of some sort. I don’t know what, except that it is not physical danger. It was, but is no longer. I believe she is at Bansith Lodge, as before, as the Peverell Clock says she is at home. I’m awaiting word that it is safe for us to go there, as well as a mode of transportation. Phineas Nigellus and Dilys Derwent are both active in portrait message chains,” and she nodded to two empty portraits on the wall, “and Phineas has asked us to stand by. The Potters, Weasleys and Malfoys are all aware and either active or standing by. So, you now know as much as I do, and all we can do is wait.”

A few moments later a Jabberwocky avatar appeared, and a voice said, “Sorry to trouble you, Minerva, but Scorpius Malfoy is on his way and begs entrance. He says it’s frightfully urgent, to do with Miss Granger, and that you should alert her children.”

“Thank you, Ludwig. I am already aware, her children are with me, and Mr Malfoy should come straight up.”

A few moments later there was a tap at the door, McGonagall called, “Enter,” and Scorpius Malfoy rushed in.

“Professor, I am to take you all to Bansith Lodge, my grandmother says, immediately. I have an unactivated portkey,” and he held up a small wooden carving of a fish.

“Thank you, Mr Malfoy,” said McGonagall. “I am awaiting confirmation that it is safe, then we will go.”

“But Professor, my grandmother-” McGonagall held up her hand and he stopped.

“Mr Malfoy, I trust your grandmother, but messages can become distorted in message chains. I expect independent verification shortly. We will wait.”

She had scarcely finished speaking when a witch in ringlets came into a portrait and said, “You may go, headmistress. I have had confirmation from Valeria Victoria Malfoy that it is safe. She says Lady Finna has given the field-clear.”

“Thank you, Dilys. Mr Malfoy, let us go.”

They arrived in darkness, under a tree. Awaiting them was a tall woman holding a hurricane lantern. “Professor, Miss Rose, Master Hugo, welcome to Bansith. I wish the occasion was less
fraught. Scorpius, thank you for bringing them.” The voice was low and melodious, the accent refined. “Please follow me.” She was walking as she talked. “I apologise for the arrival point. Normally it is in the drawing room, but the pater familias moved it temporarily out here to ensure no magical aura occurred in Miss Granger’s vicinity.” She led them across the grass, past the lodge with its lit windows and along a wooden boardwalk to the cottage. “I must warn you that the cottage is like a battle scene, but that your mother, Rose and Hugo, is physically unharmed, as far as we can tell.”

Physically? As far as they could tell? They couldn’t ask her? She was mentally harmed?

At the cottage she stopped, saying, “My daughter Astoria will take you from here. I must await the healers.”

Another tall woman was waiting at the open door, and Rose recognised Scorpius’ mother. “Professor, thank God you have come. Please, please go in first, see for yourself, I really don’t think it is a scene for Rose and Hugo.”

What! No way was she not going in! She began to push forward, but McGonagall said, “They must, Astoria. She is their mother. Rose, in a moment, please,” and went in, wand held ready.

Rose heard a sharply indrawn breath, then McGonagall stepped aside for Rose to pass her. She had to suppress a scream.

The first thing she saw was a body, of a large man, lying on the floor behind the settee, his face a shredded mess of raw flesh. Blood was everywhere in the tiny sitting-room, splashed on the walls and ceiling, pooling on the floor around the body. The tan leather settee was drenched in it, all of it except one end, on which sat Miss Sash. Her tail came erect when she saw Rose. On the wall a painting hung askew and in tatters, one corner only intact. Below it sat her mother, cross-legged on the floor, and now Rose did scream, for Hermione’s face was streaked with blood.

“It’s not hers, it’s not hers, Rose, it’s not hers.” Astoria was crying out to her, then a male voice said, “It’s his, the werewolf’s. It’s his blood on her.” Scorpius’s father was standing there, pointing to the body behind the settee.

But the blood was only part of it, for her mother sat as still as a Buddha, oblivious to the world, her eyes closed, her hands on the shoulders of … Mr Malfoy, Abraxas, lying on the floor, his head in her lap, his face also covered in blood. His own, for she could see the torn flesh. Around them was faint orange-green haze.

Kneeling to one side of Abraxas was a man Rose had never seen before, but immediately deduced to be Scorpius’ grandfather, the sinister Lucius. He was gripping one of Abraxas’s arms with both hands. That filled her with dread. That malignant man? He was attached to Abraxas, not her mother, but still. And all three of them were unmoving, eyes closed, as if frozen into place.

Grasping Hugo’s hand, Rose turned to Draco. “What is it, sir? Are they spelled?”

He spread his hands. “I don’t know. I assume so. I have never seen anything like it. Scorpius, we must wait.”

Rose glanced at Scorpius. His face was white, his eyes fixed on his great-grandfather.

“Professor,” said Draco, “I’m really glad to see you. Do you recognise this? What should we do?”

“It looks,” said McGonagall softly, “it looks like an errantes sanctus spell.”
Rose’s heart sank and she tightened her hold on Hugo’s hand. *Errantes sanctus* magic was an advanced seventh year course, so dangerous that McGonagall allowed only three or four selected students to take it, and even then only in strictly controlled conditions.

She remembered McGonagall’s words clearly: “*Errantes sanctus* - absent sanctus - spells are among the most dangerous of all spells to cast, for in them your sanctus leaves your body. To refresh your memories: our beings are composed of three parts. The physical body; the eidolon, which is the spirit world equivalent of the physical body; and the soul, the consciousness of self and of the world around us. All three are needed for a being to function as a living, aware person. The soul and eidolon are tied together in an almost unbreakable unit as the sanctus. The sanctus is tied by powerful bonds to the body, but with certain spells, these bonds can be stretched, so that the sanctus leaves the body but is still tied to it. An analogy would be a rubber band, though of course the bond is not physical.

“The dangers of *errantes sanctus* spells are three fold. The first is that as your sanctus and hence consciousness is absent from your body, your body is totally undefended against invasion: physical, mental, magical. The next is that if something goes wrong, for example the conditions of the spell are breached, the bond tieing the sanctus to your body may be broken. Thus your sanctus may be marooned or lost, away from your body. If this state persists beyond a certain period of time, your body, denied the life spark of its sanctus, withers and dies.

“You might think this is the worst that can happen, but you would be wrong. Normally when you die, a path opens along which your sanctus travels to the Lands of the Sancti. If the sanctus is not present in the body when it dies, it cannot find this path. It wanders, lost, and ends up in another spirit world. There the bonds holding the sanctus together weaken, and it splits into soul and eidolon. This has a terrible effect. A soul without an eidolon has no senses, no way of interacting with an outside world, be that our world or a spirit world. An analogy would be the loss of all our physical senses - sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste. The soul knows it has lost its eidolon, but without senses, cannot find it. The eidolon has senses, but without its soul, has no awareness, so does not seek its soul. You can imagine the devastating impact of this on the individual soul. That is not all: the soul cannot leave this world of its own accord. Unless rescued, it stays there. Forever. I hope I have impressed on you the dangers of this type of magic. *Errantes sanctus* spells can not only kill you but prevent you from entering the afterlife. They are not to be trifled with.”
Diagnosis

“I’ve never seen it enacted before,” said McGonagall, looking at the still figures, “but it can only be Virtus vitalus oblatio.”

Rose had never heard of this, but McGonagall’s way of speaking alone told her it was something bad. She said the words as if the spell was a curse. Hugo must have picked this up too, for he shivered.

“It is.” The voice came from the tattered painting, from the intact corner. Two women stood there, one the forbidding Elizabethan lady, the other small and slight, in a very old-fashioned nurse’s uniform. “It is Virtus vitalus oblatio, Professor,” said the nurse. “I have alerted Healer Padma Patil. She is on her way.”

“In that case,” said McGonagall, “we touch nothing, disturb nobody, and wait.”

A movement sent Rose’s heart racing again, but it was just Miss Sash. She jumped down from a window sill, walked across the room, sprang up onto a small writing desk and sat staring at her.

“What is it, old girl?” said Draco, but the cat ignored him. Draco walked towards the writing desk, “There’s a memory phial here.” He reached out, but the cat hissed at him.

“Must be for you, Rose, the way Miss Sash is carrying on,” said Scorpius.

Rose went across and picked the phial up. ‘Rose and Hugo Weasley’ was engraved on the side.

“If you open the lid of the desk, Miss Weasley, there is a pensieve inside,” said Draco. Miss Sash leapt down, crossed the room and sprang back up onto the windowsill.

Rose didn’t want to take her attention from her mother, but if this was a message from her … She opened the lid, poured the contents of the phial into the stone basin and lowered her head.

She lifted it again to find everyone looking at her. She shook her head and looked from Hermione to Abraxas. No wonder her mother was gifting her life energy. What a tangle: donations, reparations, obligations, emotions. And the amaura, dominating everything.

Should she let Hugo see it? No, better to just tell him the outline. She’d take him into the bedroom and explain. She turned to him and beckoned – but then the thudding on the boardwalk told of another hurrying arrival. Astoria opened the door and in came an dark skinned woman wearing a white lab coat. Healer Parvati Patil? Rose had met her once, when her mother had taken her in for a consultation when she’d been having bad dreams. No, this must be healer Padma, for behind her came her twin.

Their eyes widened at the sight of the blood covered corpse, but the tableau stopped them dead. Padma lifted a hand to her throat and said, “Oh my God. Oh my God.” Immediately Rose pulled Hugo into her arms and held him tightly. Then the healer shook her head. “I knew this would happen. Parvati, check Lucius.” She herself hurried around to Hermione, knelt, took Hermione’s head in her hands, and closed her eyes. The twin did the same thing with the kneeling Lucius.

They were in the same position where footsteps outside announced more arrivals.
McGonagall hurried to the door behind Scorpius’ mother, raising a finger to her lips to silence the newcomers. It was Ginny and uncle Harry, George, and Bill and Fleur.

Harry came in first, wand out, looked around and muttered, “Bloody hell.” Apt description, uncle Harry. He glanced at Hermione, but then, Bill with him, went to the werewolf, pointed his wand at it and said, “Vitae revelabit.” Satisfied with the result, he went and stood silent against the wall next to the door, flanked by George and Bill, eyes on the healers.

Ginny looked around the room wide-eyed, then she hurried across to Rose and Hugo and whispered, “Padma can sort this out if anyone can. She’s the best in Britain on this.” She put her arms around them as they stood watching Hermione and the healer. Behind them, quietly following, was the tall stately lady who had met them. Scorpius’ grandmother? Must be. Hermione had spoken of her in the phial, warmly. A thawed ice queen. She went into the bedroom and returned carrying a sheet. She draped it over the body, then went to stand next to Astoria.

“Rose and Hugo,” said McGonagall quietly. “Your family are here now. Would you like me to leave?”

“No, Professor, please,” said Rose. McGonagall was the rock she was clinging to, along with uncle Harry, Ginny and Hugo. Besides, her mother was on McGonagall’s clock. “Please stay.” Hugo looked at Rose, and nodded.

McGonagall looked at Ginny, who said, “Please, Professor, stay if you would. We may need your … wisdom and everything.”

At last the two healers sat back, then stood up. Everyone stood, watching them, waiting. Even the scrap of painting was crowded with figures.

“Sanctus non inest?” said Parvati to her sister, and Padma nodded. “Animus deseritur. Sermo qui sanat. Periculosissimum.”

Rose bowed her head at having McGonagall’s judgment confirmed. The healers were carefully avoiding the words errantes sanctus, but Rose knew enough spell language to know that animus deseritur meant much the same thing. If confirmation was needed, she had heard periculosissimum often enough at Hogwarts to know it meant ‘very dangerous’.

Hugo tensed in her arms. He was looking at Hermione. She … Rose stared: she was changing: creases were forming around her eyes, her brow was wrinkling, lines appearing on her neck.

Hugo started trembling, then, yelling “No,” tore loose from Rose’s grasp. He leapt towards Hermione, and Padma shouted, “No!” and Harry grabbed Hugo as he ran past, swinging him away, into his arms.

“Let me go,” screamed Hugo, “let me go, he’s killing my mother, he’s sucking her blood, let me go. Get her away from him,” but Harry held him tight.

“Hugo, no,” said Padma. “You mustn’t touch them. Her … her sanctus is inside him. If you pull her away, it may not be able to get back. She … she might die.”

Hugo was sobbing, gasping, “Bloodsucker, bloodsucker, I’ll kill him.”

Harry said, “Hugo, we’re doing everything we can.”
“You are not, you’re not, you’re all just standing there while he steals Mum’s life away. I hate him, I hate him. I’ll kill him.”

Rose smelt a faint scent of orange blossom as Narcissa stepped past her and knelt in front of Hugo. “Hugo, I would feel the same if she were my mother. We will set it right, I promise you. We will do everything we can to set it right.”

Padma cleared her throat. “Medically speaking, we have a very delicate situation here. I think we need this room cleared. Parvati and I need to monitor this situation.”

Without knowing anything? No way. Obviously uncle Harry thought the same. “Not before you tell us what’s going on, Padma. I’m not asking you to breach patient confidentiality, but everyone here is a relative, more or less, of these three people. We are all concerned and involved. Tell us what’s going on.”

Padma looked at Parvati, who shrugged and said, “Most know half the story already.”

“All right. Parvati, in the meantime, can you continue to monitor Hermione.” Parvati sat down cross-legged behind Hermione, and placed her hands on either side of her head.

“What we have here,” said Padma, “is a return life energy donation. Life energy donation or virtus vitalus oblatio, to give it its magical name, is where one individual gives some of his or her life energy to another.”

“Never heard of it,” said George.

“Nor has anyone else, Mr Weasley, because it has fallen out of use. It is all but illegal, and has been for centuries, except in the most exceptional circumstances.”

“Do I have this right?” said Bill, frowning. “Is Hermione transferring her life energy to the old man on the floor? What the hell-”

“No, Bill, no,” said Ginny. “Or rather, yes, but you don’t know the circumstances.” She looked at Harry. “We promised not to tell, but …”

Harry shook his head. “We’re beyond that now. The whole damn thing is exploding. But this is just between us here, all right? This is family business, Weasley, Malfoy, Granger, Potter. It goes no further.” He looked around and they all nodded, even McGonagall. “Ginny, you tell it.”

But before Ginny could start speaking, the boardwalk outside sounded to another arrival, and Ron walked in.
Ron looked around, his eyes widening at the sight of all the blood, then even more at Hermione, Abraxas and Lucius on the floor. “What the bloody hell is going on here?”

“Arrived at last, have you?” said Harry, glaring at him. “Listen and you’ll find out. Gin?”

Ginny ignored Ron. “Thursday last week, in Albania, our Peverell Clock went off: Hermione was in mortal danger. We apparated back through the staging points as quickly as we could, and arrived at the Brixton flat to find it aflame.”

“What!” said Ron. “Burning?”

“That’s what aflame means, Ron. Burning. On fire. Obviously you haven’t bothered to get in contact with anyone since you walked out on Hermione.”

“But nobody-”

“Arson, an intruder, and Hermione alone. You off with your fancy woman-”


Ginny glared at Ron. “An intruder, an arsonist and a would-be abductor, who, I suspect, had another go at Hermione, and now lies there.” And she pointed to the sheet covered body. “We got there an hour after it had all happened. Dad was already there. No Ron, of course. But we all would have been too late to save Hermione anyway. The flat, the whole building, was blazing. Fortunately for her, and us, Abraxas Malfoy,” and she gestured to the man on the floor, “had a rescue spell in place, which got Hermione out before the abductor could touch her.”

“What! Why?” said Ron. “Why did a Malfoy have a spell on my flat, and on my wife?”


“Later,” said Harry. “Whys, wherefores and recriminations later. Ginny, go on. Otherwise I’ll tell it, and mess it up.”

“Right. Right.” She gave Ron another glare, then went on. “We knew Hermione was safe, because the Peverell Clocks said so. They also said she was home, which we didn’t understand at the time, but now do. Mr Malfoy brought her here, discovered she had …,” she tightened her arms around Rose and Hugo, “discovered she had cancer, and took her to St Mungo’s.”


“Oh, quite. Quite, Ron. You never knew. Your wife has terminal cancer and-”

“Ginny,” said Harry, and George said, “Terminal cancer?”

Ginny took a deep breath, then went on. “Yes, terminal cancer. Caused by or at least hugely worsened by stress,” and she glared at Ron again. “Incurable. The only possible way to heal her was to use an archaic spell which has been banned for centuries. Virtus vitalus oblatio, life energy donation. So that was what Abraxas Malfoy did. He gave some of his life energy, equivalent to about twenty five years of his life span to heal her, to eradicate the cancer.”

Ron’s eyes narrowed. “How do you know all this? Were you there?”
“We saw her afterwards. We saw both of them, Abraxas and Hermione. One old, one young, much younger and much healthier looking than she has been for years.” She glared at Ron. “We looked at Hermione’s medical records.”

Ron grunted, and Bill said, “She doesn’t look young now: she looks about fifty. And she’s giving life energy to him, and getting older. He looks about the same age, but getting younger. So what’s happened?”

“Don’t know,” said Harry. “But—”

“If course she’s giving to him,” said Ron. “It’s all just a great con trick. Whoever heard of a Malfoy giving a brass farthing to anyone. Ginny’s gullible, she’ll fall for any cock and bull sob story, but you, Harry, you astonish me. Donations of life energy from a family renowned for its deviousness and selfishness? Look at her, aging before our eyes. And him getting younger. Anyone can see it’s a setup. I’ve had enough of this. I’m not conned or spelled, even if you are.” Shoving Padma out of the way he strode across to Hermione and seized her shoulders. Parvati gasped, then reached forward to place her hands over Hermione’s, holding them in place.

“No!” It was a chorus of female voices, the healers, Ginny, Astoria, Narcissa, McGonagall, even Fleur. Rose shut her eyes.

“Ron,” Harry’s voice was hoarse. “Ron, lift your hands. Lift your hands off her shoulders.” He had his wand out and was pointing it at Ron.

Ron looked at him and his eyes narrowed. “Are you threatening me?”

Harry’s wand shot out a few sparks. “Damn right I am. Take your hands off Hermione’s shoulders and step away. Now!”

Glaring at Harry, Ron did, and Rose rushed forward, putting herself between her father and mother.

Padma stood next to her, saying, “Mr Weasley, Hermione is in the midst of an errantes sanctus spell. Her sanctus is out of her body. If you pull her hands off Mr Malfoy, it may not be able to return.”

Ron looked around. “I don’t believe it: you’re all swallowing this, hook, line and sinker. These are the Malfoys we’re talking about.”

“You have good reason to mistrust us, Mr Weasley,” said Narcissa, “but surely you accept the word of a St Mungo’s healer.”

“Oh, come on. Give her a backhander of a few hundred galleons, and she’s in your pocket.”

“Oh yes, Ron?” said Ginny. “Like Quidditch?”

Ron shrugged. “It goes on, of course it does, everyone knows that. Why should she be any different?”

“Maybe because healers have higher ethical standards than Quidditch players?”

“Just the sort of naïve comment I’d expect from you, Ginny. Everyone’s on the make, don’t you get it?”

“Ron, can you just button up for a bit?” said Bill. “This is more important than match fixing. Healer Padma, can’t you do something? For whatever reason it’s happening, the bottom line is that
Hermione’s life energy is draining away. Can’t you stop it?”

“No, Mr Weasley, we can’t. Before this case, this spell lay unused for over two hundred years. We have little documented information on it. The main reason this practice was banned was ethical, but even without that, it is deep, complex, and dangerous magic. The healer can have some control if granted by the donor, but even that is limited, and can be withdrawn by the donor at any time, even in the middle of the spell. And here we have a reverse transfer, about which we have even less information. Only Hermione can control this. And …” she looked at Rose, and stopped speaking.

“Padma!” said Parvati, “Periculum!”

Abraxas’s breathing had become heavy, his chest rising and falling. Then, after a short, sharp intake of air, Abraxas’s movement stopped and he lay still. Hermione’s breathing became rapid.

A sharp indrawn breath from Narcissa, and a whisper, “No!”

Padma rushed across and kneeling, placed her hands on either side of Abraxas’s head. The seconds passed. Ten, twenty, thirty. Then Abraxas’s chest began to rise and fall again. Hermione’s breathing slowed and became deeper. But in those few moments, her hair had begun to turn grey.

Rose glared at Narcissa. Her family. Narcissa’s hands were crossed across her chest, and her eyes closed momentarily. Then they opened again, and Narcissa looked straight at her. Her face creased as if she was about to cry, and she mouthed the word, ‘Sorry.’ Then she put her hands together in the attitude of prayer and mouthed, ‘Thank you,’ to Rose. She must be taking her, Rose, as standing proxy for Hermione.

Ron began to pace around the room, but Ginny whispered, “Keep still, can’t you.”

“Why should I?”

Rose glared at him, and Harry said, “Because you’re disturbing the damn healers,” and George said, “Keep still or get out.”

Ron snorted, but stopped walking.

Everybody stood watching the group of five on the floor. No more crises occurred, but gradually the lines and creases faded from Abraxas’s skin, and reappeared on Hermione’s. Given what was happening in front of her, Rose could almost believe what her father said was true, that it was all a Malfoy setup. But she had met Abraxas, had spoken with him, had seen the amaura. And he had been attacked, that was obvious, presumably by whoever or whatever it was under the sheet. A werewolf. But even without that, possible duplicity on one pan of the scale was counterbalanced by what was happening to Scorpius’ grandfather. He knelt there, holding Abraxas’s arm, aging, if anything, faster than Hermione. In the hour or so they had been there, he had gone from old to, well, ancient. His skin hung in folds from his face, his hands were gnarled, his finger joints swollen. He looked older than Abraxas had when they’d met him, and Abraxas had been over a hundred years old then. How could it be a set up if one Malfoy was in there sacrificing himself for another?

A movement in the tableau: Padma lifted her hands from Abraxas’s head, slid back and stood up.

“Well?” said Ginny, sharply, when Padma leant against the back of the settee and rubbed her hands down her face without saying anything.
“Remarkable,” said Padma. “More than remarkable, astounding. What she is doing in there,” she shook her head. “Targeted healing. Very efficient, very effective, much more so than our normal ... scattershot method. It was an revelation.” She looked around. “The ... temporary cessation of heartbeat, that was shock caused by Hermione’s manipulation of a broken floating rib back into place. On cessation, she made Lucius hold the rib in place, while she went to the heart, found and healed an aortic aneurysm, then restarted the heart. I couldn’t have done it better myself. Then she went back and completed her work on the rib. Now she’s seeking through the body: looking for ... defects. She’s found dormant tuberculosis. She’s found prostate cancer. She’s found arthritis. She’s going everywhere, healing everything she finds. And she’s not even a healer, never had any training.”

“Well, that sounds just great for Abraxas Malfoy,” said Harry. “But what about the cost to her, damn it. Look at her, Padma. She looks about sixty. Couldn’t you stop her?”

“I tried, Harry, believe me, I tried. I told her: ‘Withdraw, withdraw, withdraw!’ and she heard me, I’m sure, for I had the sense of a response, but it was just: ‘When I’ve finished, and not before.’” She spread her hands.

“Padma. Abstractio fit,” said Parvati.

Lucius lifted his hands from Abraxas, sat back and opened his eyes. Then he looked round at them, frowning as if he couldn’t quite see them. Then he rose, slowly, creakily. But Hermione remained; still, silent, attached.

“Great,” muttered Harry. “Now Hermione carries the burden alone.”

“Of course,” said Ron. “What’d you expect?”

“Shut up, Ron,” said Ginny. “Mr Malfoy, can you tell us what’s happened, how all this came to be?”

“Draco, a chair,” said Narcissa, but Scorpius sprang to get one from the cluster in a corner of the room, and his grandfather sank into it.

“Well, Father?” said Draco.

Lucius rubbed his hand down his face. Then in a low, expressionless voice, looking at the floor, he said, “It’s my fault. Everything. I betrayed him, I betrayed her. I let in the werewolf. It attacked him. They killed it, somehow. Now she’s saved him. Saved my father. She even let me help.”

“But you left her in there,” said Ron.

Lucius peered at Ron, as if struggling to recognise him. “She dismissed me. She said she had no further use for me, that I should go. So I went.”

“A likely story,” said Ron. “Lucius Malfoy taking orders from a mudblood.”

Glaring at Ron, Lucius struggled to his feet, Scorpius leaping forward to help him. Leaning on his grandson for support, Lucius said, “How dare you use that term here! And about Miss Granger! I will not tolerate it. Draco, see this young man off the property, and do not invite him here again.”

“Yes, Father,” said Draco. “I’ll do that, but perhaps first we should get you to bed. Scorpius?” Each taking an elbow, they helped the old man out of the cottage. As they left, Narcissa said, “Astoria, dear, perhaps you would go with them to ensure everything is properly arranged. And please ask Draco to recall the staff. We need them.”
“A pretty charade,” said Ron, “but it fools no one.”

Bill shook his head, and Harry said, “You reckon? Fools me.”

“I find it pretty convincing too,” said George. “A pity you don’t turn your critical microscope on yourself, brother.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Ron.

“It means you’re judging everyone by your standards, Ron” said Ginny. “Everyone’s on the make, everyone’s happy to take backhanders, nobody has any principles.”

Ron snorted. “That’s priceless, coming from you, the woman who did everything she could to marry the most famous man in the world. You chased him-”

Rose winced. Was this her father? Cynical, sneering, nasty, believing only the worst of everyone? Had he always been like this, or was it the situation bringing it out in him?

“Please,” Narcissa’s refined voice interrupted, speaking softly, and they turned to her. “Gentlemen, please. However you might feel about the Malfoys, please have consideration for Miss Granger. This constant … suspicious aggression poisons the atmosphere, and must affect Miss Granger’s state of mind. It cannot help her.”

Ginny’s face reddened and she whispered, “Yes, you’re right. We’re being really thoughtless. Sorry. No more talking.”

“We can do more, Madame Malfoy,” said Fleur. “Ron, they do not need us. Shall we go out?”

Ron folded his arms. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m not leaving Hermione here alone with them.”

Ginny glared daggers at him, but didn’t say anything. Fleur pursed her lips. The men just glared at him, Bill shaking his head.

Then Parvati spoke again. “Padma! Periculum.”

They turned. A wound had opened on Mr Malfoy’s neck, the flesh slashed, gouged white bone exposed, blood streaming everywhere. Narcissa ran forward, her wand out, but Padma said, “No!”

Narcissa stopped, and Padma said, “It’s all part of what Hermione is doing, part of the spell, her errantes sanctus spell. We mustn’t interfere, or we’ll disrupt it, and then God alone knows what will happen.”

What did happen was very quick: the gouge filled and closed, the torn flesh came together, all trace of a wound disappeared, and the blood became translucent and vanished.

Then Hermione lifted her hands from Abraxas’s shoulders and slumped back in Parvati’s arms, still comatose. She looked older than McGonagall now, her hair white, her face criss-crossed with tiny lines and wrinkles. Hugo, sobbing, pulled loose from Rose’s arms and started forward, but Padma said, “Wait. We must assess this carefully. To act impetuously could endanger Hermione.”
The unsought gift

Abraxas stirred, opened his eyes, sat up. Everyone stared at him. His hair was now fully brown, his brow only slightly wrinkled: he looked barely older than Ron and Harry. He got to his feet, frowning at them, then turned and saw Hermione lying comatose. Before he could react, Hugo had launched himself at him, pummelling Abraxas’s chest with his fists and yelling, “Vampire, vampire, you’ve stolen Mum’s life, give it back, give it back, give it back.”

Ron grabbed him and pulled him away, and Hugo turned on him, shouting, “Let me go, let me go.”

“Huey, calm down,” he said, but Hugo began to hammer on his chest, yelling, “It’s all your fault, it’s all your fault, let me go. I hate you, I hate you.”

Ron stepped back, staring at him. “My fault? Huey, how can-”

“I’m not Huey to you. You’re not my dad any more. You left us, you threw us away, you threw Mum away, it’s all your fault, Mum sick, Mum dying, everything, it’s all your fault. You did it, you’ve been doing it for years, for always. You never cared for us, Quidditch was more important than us, and now Mum’s dying, and it’s all your fault. I hate you. Get away from me!”

Ron looked at Rose, his brow creased, his eyes wide. She looked back at him for a moment, then turned her face away. The look in her father’s face tore at her heart: bewilderment, shock, hurt. But he must be told, must be made to understand, what he had done to Mum, to all of them, and how she and Hugo felt about it.

Ron looked at the adults. Ginny just shook her head and looked away. None of the others met his eyes except Fleur, who stared angrily back at him.

“Hugo.” She could still recognise Mr Malfoy’s voice, though now it was deeper, more robust than before. “Hugo, whatever I have taken from your mother, I will return. That I swear to you, you and Rose. I would never willingly have taken anything, let alone what she has given.” He looked at Rose, then at Padma. “Miss Patil, this is not your doing.”

“Of course not, Mr Malfoy. Ethically, professionally, I would never have done this, could never condone it.”

“Good. In that case you will be quite prepared to reverse it.”

Padma’s eyebrows went up. “Mr Malfoy, it is not as simple as that. While I would never have done it, we are now in the situation where it is done, and I can’t simply step in and reverse it.”

“Why?” It was just one word, but Rose could sense the determination, the force, the power behind it. This was not a man that one crossed lightly.

Padma raised her hands and stepped back. “Mr Malfoy, please. Because all the factors against the return transfer, from her to you, apply with equal force against you returning her life energy. Apart from the ethics: the uncontrollability, the unpredictability, the dangers of such a transfer. These are totally uncharted waters.”

“Miss Patil, this is going to happen. I accept your point about uncharted waters. That is why I want the best hand available at the helm. Yours.”

Padma passed her hand across her brow. “Mr Malfoy, I cannot control it, I told you. I could not
make Hermione withdraw from your healing. In your analogy, there is no connection between the helm and the rudder. I can … I can see the stormy seas, but cannot steer the ship. All I could do is monitor and advise.”

“Then that will be all I would require, Miss Patil. To maximise Miss Granger’s chances. Then when she is safe, healthy, and … thirty-five, as she was, you will tell me, and I will withdraw.”

“And you, Mr Malfoy?”

“I will be what I will be, Miss Patil. Without Miss Granger, I would be dead, this time as last. So, if you like, that settles the ethics. Shall we begin?”

A choking sound came from Narcissa, but Abraxas raised a hand without looking at her.

“Mr Malfoy, please,” said Padma. “I haven’t agreed to anything. Besides, Hermione needs rest before we do anything. She is exhausted.”

“How long?”

“One or two hours, at least.”

“You will watch over her?”

“Parvati or I will monitor her the whole time.”

“Thank you. I will move her to her bed.” He bent to pick her up and Ron shouted, “Don’t you touch her.”

Abraxas straightened and stood back, and Ron said, “Get away from her, Malfoy. I’ll carry her.”

“No, you won’t,” said Ginny. “Harry?”

“What!” said Ron. “She’s my wife!”

“Was, mate,” said Harry. “You walked out on her. I’ll do it,” and he strode forward, picked Hermione up and carried her into the bedroom. Narcissa hurried in before him, and Rose heard her say, “Just lay her there, Mr Potter, thank you, and perhaps you could ask your wife and niece to step in so we can make Miss Granger comfortable.”

Hermione showed no sign of awakening as they changed her day clothes for the silk nightgown they found in the chest of drawers. Rose’s heart clenched as she looked at the lined face, the limp muscles, the sagging and wrinkled skin. She could feel the tears running down her face. Hold it together, girl. Falling apart won’t help Mum.

She felt something rub against her leg. Miss Sash was there, looking up at her and mewing softly.

“She’s beautiful,” said Narcissa softly, and when Rose and Ginny looked at her, she added, “I mean, this shows how she will look when she does eventually, really, get to this age. Look at her: she is so serene.”

“You’re Miss Narcissa, aren’t you, Miss,” said Rose.

She flinched away, like a dog expecting a kick, and said hesitantly: “Yes …”

“Mum said I can trust you like I can trust my gran.”
Narcissa flushed red. "Thank you. Thank you, Rose. I would trust your mum with … my life."

“You think we will be able to … to rejuvenate her, Mrs Malfoy?” said Ginny.

“If it is humanly possible, yes, Mrs Potter. When Grandfather has his heart set on something, it happens.”

Parvati came in, followed by her sister, and smiled at her. “Hello, Rose. It’s good to see you again, though I wish it was under happier circumstances. The nightmares are not troubling you anymore?”

“Hardly ever, now, thank you. Healer Patil, may I stay and help with the monitoring?”

Parvati looked at Padma, who shook her head. “Thank you, Rose, and I would like to say yes, but after all the disturbance out there, I want absolute peace and quiet for her. And I don’t want to sedate her. Perhaps later, when … things are a little more settled.”

“Is she … Healer Patil, is my mother in danger? Please, I want the truth.”

Padma passed hand across her brow. “The truth, Rose, is yes, but how much I don’t know. I have never, in living memory nobody has ever, dealt with this situation before. Your mother has over-expended her strength, that I know.” She took Rose’s hand. “All I can do is to assure you is that Parvati and I will do our very best.”

They left Parvati sitting next to the bed, her hand resting on Hermione’s, Miss Sash on the other side.

As soon as they closed the bedroom door, Padma said, “Mr Malfoy, I must insist on peace and quiet here, now. Hermione needs it. I really would like everyone to leave this cottage. And I would like to know what has happened to put us in this position, Mr Malfoy.”

“Miss Patil, we shall leave immediately,” said Abraxas. “And if you will join us in the lodge drawing room, I will tell you everything I know.”

“You’d better,” said Ron. “I want to know what the hell you’re doing in my wife’s life, Malfoy, and turning my children against me.”

“I shall deal with all that shortly, Mr Weasley. Mr Potter, perhaps you and the two younger Mr Weasleys would escort the ladies to the drawing room in the lodge. I have a task to carry out first, and would value the eldest Mr Weasley’s help and advice.” He turned to Bill. “Miss Granger dispatched that creature,” he pointed to the body under the sheet, “by impaling its heart with my sword. The blade contains silver and mercury, both powerful inhibitors against werewolves resuscitating themselves. However, I wish him to remain dead for eternity. In the past we would have skinned the creature. I am happy to do the butcher work, Mr Weasley, but would welcome both your assistance in carrying the body outside, and your advice as to any other steps we should undertake.”

“With the greatest of pleasure, Mr Malfoy,” said Bill. “Reincarnation of werewolves is rare, but not unknown. I carry a silver stiletto with me. I recommend we impale the heart again, just to be sure, then remove it from the body and burn it. We can then decapitate the carcass. Skinning is not really necessary, but we can do so if you wish,” and Fleur said, “I will come too, and shine the torch.”

“Miss Delacour, this will be no sight for a lady.”

“Monsieur Malfoy, I am a French rosae spinosis and no fragile English orchid. This creature attacked and marred my ‘usband. But for your presence, Monsieur, I would bayonet and cut out the
‘eart myself. But, to your English sensibilities, I will leave that pleasure to you and merely light the work. But you cannot deny me this. In France also, we wrap the heart in mistletoe and place it in an ash casket for the burning.”

Abraxas bowed his head. “Mademoiselle Rosae Spinosis, your presence and your advice are both welcome.”
The interested parties

Three tall glass carafes of coffee stood on silver trays on the table, surrounded by plain white cups and saucers. Ginny, Harry and George stood quietly talking each other. McGonagall stood next to a painting, deep in conversation with the witch in ringlets Rose had seen in her office. Ron paced back and forth, not looking at Rose or Hugo. Two elves dressed as footmen moved quietly amongst them, offering biscuits.

The drawingroom door opened, and Padma, Fleur, Narcissa and Astoria came in, followed by Bill, Abraxas and Draco. Scorpius came last, closing the door behind them.

“About time,” said Ron. “Right, Malfoy, what’s all this about? What are you doing with my wife?”

“Ron,” said Ginny, “I’ve already told you what happened, about the fire, and Mr Malfoy’s rescue, and Hermione’s cancer, and Mr Malfoy’s donation of life energy to cure it. I’m sorry, Mr Malfoy, I know we promised not to tell anyone, but-”

“Dammit, Ginny, will you stop kowtowing to him! Hermione is, I don’t know, maybe dying or something, and you’re treating him as though he’s given you a thousand galleons. Yes, Malfoy, I’ve heard my gullible sister’s version, and one would have to be simple to believe half of it. But even given that it contains a semblance of truth, what I want to know is what the hell you were doing putting spells on my flat and my wife.”

“Mr Weasley, let me make two observations. The first that my motives for whatever I have done are irrelevant to anyone but Miss Granger, her children and me: all that affects the outside world is what I have done, not why I have done it. The second is that you seem to believe I owe you an explanation. I accept that I owe an explanation to those with a right to be concerned about Miss Granger’s well-being: her children, Mr and Mrs Potter, your brothers, your father, even the good professor. You, however, no longer fall into that category. You rejected her: in so doing you lost your right to be concerned in her affairs.”

“The hell I did. You-”

“You are attacking me, Mr Weasley, in a fit of affronted male pride. You are outraged that I have touched, figuratively speaking, your woman, your property. It is all about you, not about Miss Granger. I do not choose to pander to such attitudes.”

“You bloody well-”

“Mr Weasley, I tolerate your presence here out of respect for your children, your family and your friend. That tolerance has limits.” He turned away and, looking at the others, said, “Mrs Potter has told you, in outline, all she knows. That disclosure, Mrs Potter, was justified by the changed circumstances in which we now find ourselves. These same circumstances demand that I now explain how we come to be in the present lamentable situation.”

“I left here this morning - actually yesterday morning, now - to deal with urgent business related to Miss Granger, her circumstances, her advice, all prompted by her imminent departure. I set up triple wards, wards that could be disabled only by my family. This was … an error, a misjudgement for which Miss Granger has paid. My son Lucius, always a little unstable, perceived Miss Granger to be a threat. He disabled the wards, and let the werewolf Greyback in.” He stopped and looked at Hugo, then at Ginny. “Mrs Potter, you stand as proxy for Miss Granger. What I have to relate now, you may feel to be unsuitable for her children to hear. I believe Rose is sufficiently mature, but the
decision is not mine.”

What! Not hear what happened to her mother? No way!

“Damn you, Malfoy,” said Ron. “They’re my children, not Ginny’s. Who the hell are you to say whose responsibility they are! I decide what happens to them.”

Abraxas ignored him, looking at Ginny.

“Without knowing what happened, Mr Malfoy,” said Ginny, “it is difficult for me to judge. But Hermione would not want her children frightened. Also I think Rose and Hugo should stay together.”

“What the hell, Gin,” said Ron, “this is nothing to do with you! They are my children. If there is … violence, I don’t want them to hear it. And that’s final.”

“If it’s to do with Mum, I want to hear it,” said Rose. “I have a right to hear it. She’s my mother.”

“No,” said Ron. “I’m your father and I say no.”

Rose glared at him, but Ginny said, “Rosie, I’ll … tell you later. I think it’s best if you look after Huey.” Unspoken were her words I don’t want Huey to hear it.

Abraxas looked at her, eyebrows raised. He was asking her, not ordering her as her father was doing. She gave a curt nod. “All right. Shall we wait in the hall?”

“Scorpius,” said Abraxas, “would you escort Rose to the gallery, please. Show her the Jacobean tapestry. And Hugo.”

A tapestry? Who cared about a tapestry at a time like this!

Scorpius led them out, closing the door behind them, Then he turned to Rose. “Do you want to listen?”

She glared at him. “Not at the keyhole, if that’s what you mean.”

“I don’t. Come on.” He led the way up the stairs and then back along a gallery hung with huge tapestries. At one end of a hunting scene he stopped and pulled the tapestry aside to reveal wood panelling. Then he turned and said, “Hugo, see the knot in the floor next to that baluster? Give it a hard jab, with your thumb, will you?” Hugo did, and a piece of the wall panelling slid aside to reveal a narrow recess. Scorpius gestured to Rose to step in, saying softly, “See the slider? Just push it across gently. I’ll let the tapestry back down, but leave the panel open. Just slide it back when you’re finished.”

Rose frowned at him. What was all this about? But she stepped in and he let the cloth fall back. She froze: dark, confined spaces terrified her. They had ever since a Weasley boy cousin had flung a blanket over her and yelled Lethifold inferi, lethifold inferi. Hilarious, he’d thought it. Her mother hadn’t: Rose had had nightmares for months afterwards. That was when she’d met healer Parvati.

Get a grip, Weasley, you’re not five now. She took a deep breath, and, feeling with her hand, found the slider and shoved it across. It went clack against the stop, and from the gallery she heard Scorpius say, “Shush!”

Well, if he’d left her some light … But now light was coming in from two holes in front of her. She moved her face up and peered though them, jerked back in surprise, then moved forward again.
She was looking down into the drawing room, and by some trick of the acoustics, could hear what was being said. She must be in the Jacobean spy hole. Below her Abraxas was standing at the table, arms folded. The women were seated in chairs in front with the men standing in various attitudes behind them. Ron had fists clenched on his hips, Harry and George had folded arms, Bill was leaning against a bookcase next to Fleur, an elbow on a shelf.

Everyone was looking at Abraxas. Addressing everyone, he said, “I take full responsibility for my son’s action. For my part, for what he did to me, he has more than repaid. But for Miss Granger’s condition, he is culpable. Time will determine the consequences and redress.

“Returning to Greyback: Unfortunately the portkey point is outside so it was only when Greyback reached the cottage that his presence could be detected. Fortunately Miss Sash, the cottage cat, was there with Miss Granger, and she immediately came to the house and alerted Lady Finna. She sent a message to me. I arrived to find Greyback on the point of making off with Miss Granger. By that time he had been there a full ten minutes, but somehow she had been able to delay his actions. He claimed, I gather, that she was his property, given to him by my sister-in-law Bellatrix. It was his intention to take her to his lair, to make her a lubin, a female werewolf, then to sire his cubs off her. He had a blade to her throat when I arrived, indeed had already cut her.”

*Sire his cubs off her.* One of those arm’s-length phrases like *collateral damage.* What it meant to the victim was repeated rape.

“Couldn’t you have *imperiused* him?” said Ron “You had your wand, didn’t you?” Bill shook his head.

“Werewolves have animal reaction speeds, Mr Weasley,” said Abraxas. “Far faster than human reaction speeds, as you will know if you have ever played tag with a cat. By the time I had uttered the word *Imperius,* Miss Granger’s throat would have been slashed.”

“Beyond doubt,” said Bill.

“So when he demanded my wand, I gave it to him. I was playing for time, hoping that Draco would arrive. Unfortunately he and Astoria were dining out, and by the time Narcissa had found them, it was all over. Anyway, Greyback feared the Malfoy clan, and offered to duel me for, so to speak, Miss Granger’s hand. Whoever won would take the lady, and the other would not pursue. I accepted.”

“That’s outrageous” said Ron. “Not only do you fight over another man’s wife, you agree to let him take her freely if he wins?”

“Mr Weasley, are you keeping up? I was dealing with a deranged creature. I would have promised anything and everything to delay him. And are you suggesting that had Miss Granger not been another man’s wife, the arrangement would have been acceptable?”

“I didn’t say that, damn it.”

“Let me go on: Time may be pressing, later. Miss Granger objected to the arrangement, not because she was the victim – she too was just playing for time – but out of concern for me. She could see that a frail old man stood little chance against a werewolf in his prime. But in this game our hands were weak, literally as well as figuratively, for physical strength was all that mattered, and he had it all. However, she led him to say why he was abducting her, and she responded by saying that if he killed me, she would kill his whelps as they were born. This threat, of course, enraged him, and he struck her, but then agreed not to kill me. I passed her my walking cane, and managed to let her know, without alerting him, that it was a sword stick. He then attacked, fists,
feet, teeth and nails, and downed and disabled me immediately. He then decided to kill me after all, but Finna Morag, who had killed one of his ancestors, distracted him by relating the tale and taunting him. Miss Granger attempted to creep up on him, but he heard her and, using predator-prey domination tactics, was about to disarm her when he was attacked by the Bansith cats.”

“Cats? Against a werewolf?” said Harry, frowning.

“Surprise, speed and ferocity will compensate for size, Mr Potter, in the very short term, at least. I have seen a black bear displaying extreme reluctance to engage with a domestic cat. And our cats are far from domestic in the usual sense.”

“Didn’t you see Greyback’s face, Harry?” said Bill. “Ripped to shreds, bone, muscle, tendons exposed, one eye … gone.”

“It was a hell of a mess, yeah. Argument with a tiger, looked like.”

“Indeed,” said Abraxas. “To continue, the male cat’s attack released Miss Granger from the werewolf’s control and distracted him, and she was able to wound him mortally with the sword. But she was trapped behind the settee, and he had grabbed her to kill her, to tear her throat out, when the female attacked him. This time Miss Granger was able to get herself out of his reach.”

“They deserve cream for ten years,” murmured Fleur. “If either has kittens, Mr Malfoy, I would like one.”

Abraxas bowed his head. “I shall bear that in mind, Miss Delacour. Then, the creature dead, she came to me. She told me she was going to heal me, which I believed impossible, given my age and physical damage. Virtus vitalus oblatio was the only spell that could save me, and I was sure she had no knowledge of it. I underestimated her. Shortly after Lucius arrived, I lost consciousness.”

“So she saved your life by killing the werewolf,” said Ron, “and then you claim you were unconscious when she started to give you her life energy.”

“Yes.”

“And you expect us to believe that.”

“Mr Weasley, it is a matter of complete indifference to me whether you personally believe me or not.”
Abraxas turned to Ginny. “As soon as Miss Patil tells me Miss Granger has recovered sufficiently, I intend to return what she gave me.”

Padma’s back was to Rose, but she turned her head away, then stood and, facing him, said, “Recovery before we discuss anything further, Mr Malfoy.”

“Miss Patil, I repeat, I will have this done.”

“Oh you will, will you,” said Ron. “After what I’ve heard, I wouldn’t trust you anywhere near her.”

“It’s not your decision, Ron,” said Ginny. “She’s moved on.”

He turned on her. “Shut up. I’ve heard enough from you.”

“Cool it, Ron” said Harry. “Ginny is right. Hermione has moved on.”

Ron glared at Harry, then at his brothers. “I simply don’t believe you’re all standing here, swallowing this. Look at him,” he flung out a hand towards Abraxas. “He was an old man, and now he’s a young man. Hermione was young, and now she’s old. And her,” he pointed at Padma, “she orchestrated this. And now you’re prepared to trust Hermione to this crew again. You, woman,” he looked at Padma, “how much did he pay you?”

She stared at him, then looked at Harry. “You should be aware of any possible conflict of interest. I must tell you that the Malfoy family, as the Loireagh Foundation, funds my research, and funds Parvati’s research.”

“There you are,” said Ron. “If that’s not bribery, I never saw it.”

“I think maybe you’ve seen too much of it,” said George. “She’s declared a conflict of interest. That’s called ethics, bro. Maybe you haven’t come across it in Quidditch.” He turned to Abraxas. “So you’re the Loireagh Foundation. Hermione and I have wondered for years who they were.”

“We keep a low profile,” said Draco, “for obvious reasons.”

“Mr Malfoy,” said Bill, “We accept you are an interested party, but we are too. Hermione is family to us. Bottom line, people, because it’s coming up soon, is how we feel about this. Hermione has given, what, forty years of her life energy to Mr Malfoy. He says he’s prepared give it back. Healer Patil has not yet agreed, but in any event, says it is very risky and she can’t control it.”

“Just a minute,” said Ron, “before you all bloody shut me out.” He turned to Padma. “Hermione’s life is already in danger, from what I gather. How much of a threat is there? Both now and later, if he gives back when he’s stolen?”

“You are a piece of work, Ron,” said Ginny. “First you insult her personally and professionally, then you call on her expertise?”

“There is danger, serious danger,” said Padma. “She is in danger now and would be even more so should such a transfer take place. I cannot quantify the extent of that danger.”

“Why can’t you! It’s your damn job.”
“Ron, get away from her,” said Ginny. “Leave her alone. She’s doing her best, can’t you see that?”

Abraxas looked at Ron, opened his mouth, then closed it again.

“Yes, Mr Malfoy?” Uncle Harry, of all people.

“However much you might doubt Malfoy integrity, Mr Weasley – let me rephrase that: even if you think that I am a liar and a thief, there is no good reason to doubt the integrity of the Misses Patil. Healer Padma has declared a conflict of interest. The parties concerned must decide whether that is relevant, and if so, whether that outweighs her expertise. And regarding expertise: healers are not all powerful, Mr Weasley. Healers are just people; clever people, trained people, but just people. They don’t know everything, but with their intelligence, training and experience, can chart the course most likely to lead to an optimum outcome. I have been following Healer Padma’s career for ten years, and there is no one else to whom I would rather entrust Miss Granger’s life.”

“You would entrust? You? I’ve been listening to you, Malfoy, talking as though you care about her, as though nobody else does, as though she bloody belongs to you. And I know that it was your lawyers rushing through the divorce. Well, you’ve got that, and you’ve stolen her youth, what more do you want, her soul? You’re more than a thief and a liar, you’re a bloodsucker. So stop pretending you care about her and back off. She’s not your problem.”

“Ron, you are unbelievable,” said Ginny, her hands on her hips. “Hasn’t anything that anyone has said made any impact on you? Hasn’t it sunk in that it’s no longer your business who’s ‘problem’ she is. You lost your right to be her protector when you walked out on her. She’s moved on.”

“So you say, and boy, it didn’t take her long.”

“What! What! It didn’t take her long? It took her seventeen years, Ronald Weasley. Seventeen years of being married to you.”

“What do you mean? This thing happened a week ago.”

“A week? Is that what you think? She gave you seventeen years of the best years of her life, seventeen years for you to come right, to be worthy of her, and still you couldn’t do it. She hid her brilliance under a bushel for you, because of your insecurities. She turned down an aurorship, she turned down a healership, she turned down research posts, she even turned down a directorship in George’s business. She became a housewife. Hermione Granger became a housewife for you.”

Rose had never seen Ginny so furious, and that was saying a lot. Mum said she had inherited Ginny’s temper, but she’d never blown her top like this.

"She never told me about those,” said Ron. “Just the aurorship. And she told me that all she wanted was to be a housewife.”

“And you just accepted that? You didn’t question why the most brilliant, the most driven witch of her generation was, all of a sudden, happy to be a housewife? It didn’t strike you as a bit out of character? It didn’t cross your mind that she might, just possibly, be doing it because you had made your feelings of inferiority so blindingly obvious? It didn’t occur to you that she was trying desperately hard not to outshine you, that she was giving you a chance to prove yourself? God, you are shallow. And what did you do during those seventeen years? Did you think: here is this wonderful woman suppressing her talents for my sake: let me show her that I am worthy of her. No, you just thought: here is this wonderful woman, the brains of the golden trio, who loves me, who is prepared to pander to me: what a great guy I must be! You thought: Hermione Granger’s a mere housewife; at last I’m superior to her. Did you ever love her, Ron? Or was she just a trophy to you? ‘Wow, if Hermione Granger married Ron Weasley, he must be really something special.’”
Ron flushed. "I did love her. I was prepared to die for her. In their dungeon." He glared at Abraxas.

"Yes, Ron, you were prepared to die for her. What you weren’t prepared to do was to live for her. Dying for someone is easy; any hothead can do that. Living for someone: that's hard. Putting them first, seeing things from their point of view, trying to understand them, trying to help them, supporting them, day after day, month after month, year after year. That’s what she did for you."

“I did support her, I supported my family financially, year after year.”

“I’m not talking about financial support. But while on that subject, Ron Weasley, the support you gave scarcely provided the bare necessities. Hermione could have commanded a salary of four or five times what you made, at the snap of her fingers. She was offered job after job in the course of her charity and Ministry work, because they could see her abilities. She turned them all down. She turned them down for you. She saw your feeling of inferiority, and she squashed herself down, she doused her brilliance, so as not to outshine you. And what did you do? You went out and played Quidditch. What was it, Ron? Trying to recapture the celebrity status you had as the third member of the golden trio? You liked the spotlight, the adulation?"

Ron winced.

"You always were one for the easy option, Ron. Always lazy. You have the brain, but you could never be bothered to use it. You have the intelligence, the potential, and Hermione saw that. What she didn't see, because of her trusting nature, was that you would never develop that potential, never use that intelligence for anything worthwhile. She didn’t see that you lacked the gumption to ever amount to anything."

“Gin, that’s enough,” said Harry.

“No, Harry, it’s not enough. What is enough is our pandering to Ron’s feelings, our making excuses for him, our giving him chances to prove himself. What has he done with his opportunities? Nothing. Everything squandered. He just saunters along in his bubble of petulant selfishness. And the result is a dying wife.”

“Ginny, he’s your brother,” said Bill.

“And she’s my sister, Bill, in all but blood. Yes, he is my brother, and I love him, we all do, though God knows he’s done little enough to deserve it. And I love his children next to my own. But Hermione’s given him the best years of her life, and look what he’s done with that gift.”

“Damn you, Ginny, I'm good at Quidditch.”

"Exactly. Exactly. George runs a business empire, Bill sits on the Board of Gringotts, Charlie is an international dragon consultant. Percy, even pinstripe Percy, is Under-secretary to the Minister. And Ron? He’s good at Quidditch. Plays Third, or is it Fourth Division?" She shook her head. “You’ve always envied their success, Ron, but you’ve never been prepared to do what they did to get where they are. Hard, solid graft.”

“They had the breaks,” Ron’s voice was a mutter.

“What?” said Bill. “What breaks?”

"You’re on the Board of Gringotts because you represent an ethnic minority, because you are part …”

Fleur sprang up. “J’en ai ras-le-boi! Zees ees calomnie insultant. He ees on le Board de Gringotts
because he ees curse breaker élite. Nuzzing to do wiz … wolf, you ‘ear me? And you know why he ees élite? Because he ‘as risked his life in so many dark and dangerous places. All know he broke ze Grande Malédiction de la Pyramid de Kufu. But he says nothing of the other places, les Catacombes de San Gennario et Odessa, les villes souterraines de Derinkuyu et Tatlarin—

“Fleur, love—” said Bill.

“Non, I will tell them, I will not be silent, I would tell the world, but you say non, but I will tell your family, oui, they should know, especially him,” and she glared at Ron. “The others, oui, le Chambre de Sarawak, les grottes néolithique de Eddakal et Lascaux, les grottes paléolithique de El Castillo, Sterkfontein, Makapansgat et Kromdraai. Places you ‘ave never heard of, magic that ees deep and dark, that ees tens of zousunds, hundreds of zousands of years old. You think they give up their secrets easily, these places and their ghosts? You think this ees safe, like riding a broomstick, chasing a quaffle? You think it ees a game? In this game you die!

“Every time he goes away I wonder: will I see my ‘usband again? Because I know, oui, I know, one mistake, just one, and poof, it ees over. No Bill, no ‘usband for me, no father for Victoire, Dominique, and Louis, anozzer son gone for Papa. Every night I lie awake, oui, waiting, worrying, terrified the black owl will come, tap, tap, tap at the window. And when he ees not risking his life in these dark places, he ees studying about them. Study, study, work, work, at the cottage, that ees all he does. But I am happy, oui, because he ees there and safe, because I can see him and touch him and hold him, and because I know that the more he knows, the less chance of poof. And you say breaks? Pah! If my ‘usband was not ‘ere, I would say worse to you, oui! But for now I just say ‘ermione ees diamante dans la bou, oui, in the mud. In this I stand behind my sister.”

And she did, hugging and kissing Bill, then stalking across to stand behind Ginny, hands on her hips, glaring at Ron.

Well! Rose had always thought of Fleur as being a little shallow, like some of the good-looking girls at Hogwarts. Butterflies, she called them, pretty to look at and fluttery around the boys to make them protective, but a bit brainless, with no depth. She’d never seen this side of her, the passionate and devoted wife, watching over her family, worried to death about her husband.

Ron had been staring at the floor during Fleur’s tirade. He looked up and said to Ginny, "George, then. You can’t tell me George never took a few shortcuts.”

“He never did. And you know how I know? I got Hermione to check his books the first few years. I knew my brother had the potential and the drive to achieve success, but I also knew he was traumatised by the loss of Fred. I thought he might cut a few corners, and I didn't want his reputation tarnished. Hermione checked his books and I got Dad to check his products. No shortcuts.”

“Proper little busybody, aren’t you. Spying on everyone.”

“Mon Dieu!” said Fleur, throwing up her hands. “Only the mud at your feet do you see, never the montagnes magnifiques behind. My sister watches over the family, every one of us, like matriarch, like Maman used to.” Less and less like a butterfly.

“Actually, Gin,” said George, “that first year, I did. Cooked the books a little. Seems Hermione kept mum about it. But she got hold of me, and set me straight with six words, no, seven. ‘George,’ she said, ‘winning by cheating is not winning.’ I never did it again.”

“You see?” said Ron.

“What I see, Ronald Weasley, is that George held Hermione in such high regard that a mere six or
seven words from her turned him in his path. What I see is a woman so loved and so valued by the family she married into that she has that effect on them. And now obviously by other families, but not by her husband.”

“I did love her. I did value her.”

“Your love was so great that you didn’t even notice that your wife was ill. You valued her so much that you didn’t even see that she was dying before your very eyes.”

Ron shrugged. “I thought it was just, you know, a woman ageing.” Rose shut her eyes. The casual way he just threw it off. “She said she was fine,” he went on. “You’re so bloody clever, didn't you notice? Or were you too busy being the hotshot lawyer?”

“Yes, Ron, I noticed. Five, no, seven years ago, I noticed. I suggested she see a healer. The first time we spoke of it, she said it was too expensive, so I offered her the money there and then. That was foolish of me, really stupid, because of course she refused, just as she refused help from every one of us. She refused because she was a loyal wife to her husband, and her husband was determined to make his own way in the world. Which would have been fine if he had actually done so.

“But all that happened was she got the worst of both worlds: a waste-of-space husband as well as poverty. What I should have done was to make the appointment myself, and taken her myself, and sat there with her, and I’ll never forgive myself for that. But she told me she'd do it. And when she didn’t, I nagged her. I nagged her so much that she lied to me. Hermione Granger, to whom integrity means everything, so unlike her husband, lied, not for her own sake, but to save her worthless husband’s face. She told me she’d seen a healer, that she’d been cleared, was fine, just tired. And when she seemed to get worse, I asked again, and again she lied. And I believed her, because I couldn’t believe she would lie to me. But she hadn't, because she couldn't afford it out of the miserly housekeeping budget, and she didn't want to ask you for more. And what did you spend the money on? Flights to Florida, for Quidditch trials. Your wife is dying, and you fly off to Florida.”

“I didn't know, dammit. I didn't know anyone could be so stupid as to sacrifice themselves like that.”

“Stupid? Yes. Hermione Granger was prepared to sacrifice herself to save the world from Voldemort. That was a worth-while sacrifice. But for you? I have to agree with you there. She’d have to be blindly, stupidly devoted to sacrifice herself for a person like you. You were a ball and chain to her, Ron Weasley. For seventeen years she stifled herself for you. And you … threw her away,” she made a casual gesture with her arm. “And now you have the arrogance to say she has no right to something better? To a man who will value her as she deserves? A man who would do for her what she did for you? Ron, I would never have married a loser like you, but if I had, I would have walked out within six months.” She burst into tears, and turned and buried her face in Harry’s chest.

“Damn you, Gin, it’s not as simple as that.”

She turned back. “Of course it’s not. It never is. But those are the fundamentals: she crept about, staying in your shadow, smothering herself for you, giving herself stress-related cancer, waiting, hoping, trusting you to justify her faith in you by fulfilling your potential, to make something of your life, or at least that you would become sufficient of a man not to feel threatened by his wife’s brilliance. And what did you do? Did you follow your brothers into an adult’s world, doing a job in which you could achieve recognition and worth? No, you screwed around – probably literally as well as figuratively – with Quidditch. You never grew up.
“In all those seventeen years, you gave her just two things of value: her children. And you did one other thing for her. You walked out on her. She’d have stuck by you for ever, because even while dying, she had the guts to stick to her principles, misguided though they were. But you, with the principles of a tapeworm, walked out on her. For once, thank God, your shallowness worked to her advantage.”

“I didn’t know she was sick. I didn’t-”

“Yeah, we heard you, bro,” said George. “But she was. And she still is.”

“Yes,” said Bill. “And we need decisions, family decisions.”

“I think-” said Ron, but Bill interrupted.

“We’ve heard what you think, Ron. The consensus is that what happens to Hermione is no longer your affair.”

“Listen-”

“Ron,” said Harry. “This is about Hermione, not you. Sorry, mate, but you shut up or you get out.”

Ron glared at Harry, but didn’t argue.

So the family blamed Ron. There was no doubt in Rose’s mind, but it was heartening to have the family on her side. And Ginny: Ginny saw all that? Ginny had been thinking those things for years? If only she’d known. If she’d spoken to Ginny five, six years ago, when she’d begun to see her father for what he was, if they’d worked together, they could have saved her mother years of anguish. But … she hadn’t known. And at the beginning, she’d fought that awareness, squashed it down, denied what she couldn’t excuse. She’d loved her father. She’d wanted to keep loving him, desperately. But it became harder and harder as she saw, more and more, her mother’s burden and the price she was paying, and her father’s lack of concern.

She saw Ginny look at Abraxas, mouth the word, “Sorry.”

Abraxas shrugged, then to Rose’s shock, stared straight at her – or the portrait, rather – and nodded his head towards the drawing room door. He knew she was there?

Then he turned to Ginny and said, “Mrs Potter, if family decisions are to be made, Miss Granger’s children should be here.”
Revelations and negotiations

Rose quietly moved the slider across, turned and pushed the tapestry to one side. She lifted one leg and put it through the opening. This was really awkward, and of course Scorpius would see every un-ladylike move.

“Like a hand?”

*Not from you.* She opened her mouth to make a cutting remark, then stopped. This was not Hogwarts, where everything and everyone – especially Slytherins – were treated with suspicion. This was Abraxas’s world, an old fashioned, genteel world where women were treated with politeness and consideration. It was also a world where this boy’s great-grandfather had risked his life for her mother, and was prepared to do so again. And Scorpius was acting in the same mould: it would be uncouth to refuse. He was behaving like a gentleman. She must respond as a lady, and graciously accept. To do anything else would be juvenile and let both her mother and Abraxas down.

“Thank you.” She placed her hand in his and stepped through. Then she jerked her hand back and, off balance, almost fell over. He leapt forward to catch her, but then stopped and raised his hands, saying, “Sorry.”

She regained her balance – without the added indignity of a fall – and stared at him. She could still feel the heat on her hand where they had touched. And there had been a glow, and a feeling of comfort and helpfulness that had flowed from him to her during the few seconds of contact. It wasn’t … it couldn’t be, not with him, not with Scorpius Malfoy!

Hugo was staring at her. “What’s the matter?”

She shook her head. “They want us downstairs,” and led the way.

“Why, what’s happened?”

“Mr Malfoy was just telling them about the werewolf, about how it wanted to take Mum, then he came, and it attacked him, and almost killed him, and then how it was going to take Mum again, and the two cats attacked it, and Mum killed it with a sword.” Even the sanitised version was dramatic.

“Mum did? The sword of Gryffindor?” asked Hugo, his eyes wide.

“Oh … no. No, just a sword Mr Malfoy had in his walking stick.” That was mind-boggling enough.

“Wow. My mum killed a werewolf with a sword, Scorp!”

Scorp? She narrowed her eyes at Scorpius. Had he been making friends with her brother behind her back? First the … whatever it was - she refused to put a name to it - and now this?

“Fantastic, Hue. Not many people could do that.”

Hue? *Now just a minute.* She turned and gave him a look, and he said, “Well, it’s true. How many people do you know who’ve killed a werewolf? At all, let alone with a sword?”

Deliberately misinterpreting her, no question. But to say anything would be an admission of …
something she was not ready to admit or even think about. Let it go, girl.

An elf met them at the foot of the stairs. “Miss Rose, master Hugo, master Scorpius, the master has requested you return to the drawing room.”

In the hall they passed Padma, going to the cottage to see how Hermione was progressing.

As they entered the drawing room, Narcissa rose and said, “Rose, Hugo, Scorpius, hot chocolate and hot milk are available. Just tell Waldi what you would like, then help yourself to biscuits and pastries from the little table.”

“Thank you,” said Rose. “I’ll just have a glass of hot milk. You wanted us?” She looked at Ginny.

“We need to make a family decision,” said Ginny. “Mr Malfoy, Mr Abraxas Malfoy has offered to return the life energy to your mother. We have to decide how we feel about that, how you feel: whether - sorry, Mr Malfoy, but I think we must mention all the possibilities - whether we trust him to do it; if we do trust him, whether it is worth the additional risk to your mum. Your father does not trust him. Harry and I do trust him, Fleur, Bill and George trust our judgement of him. We feel it is worth the risk, provided it is monitored by the healers, and their instructions obeyed. Hugo, how do you feel?”

“He must give back what he has taken.” Hugo spoke without hesitation.

Abraxas nodded, and looked at Rose.

“I trust him. But I don’t want him to give life energy to Mum. Mr Malfoy, if you give life energy, and you … die, then all Mum’s sacrifice has been in vain.”

Abraxas frowned at her. “Rose, I must do this. I’m not going to die.”

“Healer Padma seems to think that you might, sir. And even putting that and the effect on your family to one side, it would make everything my mother has done pointless. All her sacrifice, all her ageing.” She took a deep breath, and said, “You’d be doing it for yourself, not for her, out of guilt.” Had she gone too far: she, little more than a child, telling a mature man that his motives were selfish? But he’d treated her as he would an adult, as an equal, before. Would he again?

Yes. “Sit down there, Rose,” he pointed to one end of the settee, and sat down himself at the other. “Now let us discuss this, you and I.” Ginny sat down on the settee arm behind her. “Now, Rose, the consensus among your family is to let me go ahead. But you and Hugo are the linchpins, for you are closest to her. Hugo is for, you are against.”

“I’ll talk to Hugo.”

He smiled and shook his head. “Thank you, Rose, but I’d rather you didn’t. He thinks too highly of you and you are too persuasive. Rose, I would not be doing it out of guilt. I am doing it out of regard for her, out of love. I will marry her if she will have me.”

“What!” said Ron.

“Ron,” said Harry, “back off.”

“But-”

“Sorry, mate, but you back off or you get out. If you stay, not another bloody word, understand? This is between Rosie and Abraxas.”
“Mr Malfoy,” said Rose, “she won’t marry you. She’ll refuse. She’ll be too old.”

Abraxas spread his hands. “Then let me make her young, Rose.”

“Then you will be doing it for yourself, and if you fail, her sacrifice is for nothing.”

He threw his hands in the air. “This is heads you win, tails I lose. Rose-”

“Mr Malfoy,” said George, moving to stand behind her. “You are coming across too heavy. You’re not negotiating with a seasoned wheeler dealer. She’s sixteen, a schoolgirl. Remember that. Don’t use challenge tactics. Don’t use business tactics. Don’t use any tactics.”

Abraxas passed a hand over his brow. “This is more important than any deal I’ve ever made. And I wasn’t using tactics. But too heavy, you’re right. Sorry, Rose.” Speaking softly, he said, “Your fear is that something will go wrong, I will die, and your mother’s sacrifice will be for nothing. What if I limit my life energy donation to say … say thirty years?”

“That’s too risky, Mr Malfoy.”

“Twenty years?”

She shook her head

He folded his arms and sat back. “I’m not prepared to go below twenty years, Rose.”

“Mr Malfoy.” George again. “No bottom-line, no ultimatum tactics. By your choice, she holds the cards.”

Abraxas glared at George over her shoulder. “Fifteen years, Rose. How can there be any danger in that? I would be fifty, fifty-five. That’s young, no risk to me. I must give her something. Will you accept fifteen years?”

“No more than ten, Mr Malfoy.”

His voice rose. “Ten? What good is ten? She will be over sixty: she’ll still turn me down.”

“You see? You are doing it for yourself.”

He threw up his hands and looked at George. “She can use tactics on me, but I can’t on her? Rose, do you really believe that?”

“No, you know I don’t. But I need every point I can get against you.”

“Rose, you use logic like a rapier, and are as quick as a feral cat: it’s clear whose daughter and niece you are. I’ll accept ten, grudgingly. But I’ll be standing by afterwards: if there’s a problem, I’m going in. All deals are off. All right, Rose?” He stood up and held out his hand for her to shake, but Rose walked up to him and gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“All right, Mr Malfoy. Thank you.”

But Hugo was scowling. “Rosie, we had a young mum. Now we are going to have an old mum. Why can’t he give more? He took more.”

“He didn’t take anything, Hugo. He was unconscious. Mum gave it to him. Anyway, I have another plan.”
That got everyone’s attention. She took a breath. This was going to bring them down on her like a lorry load of bricks. “If there is any life energy to be given, I will give it. I’m young, and from I learnt from Mum’s memory phial, a year of my life will give four years to Mum. I will age to twenty-four, Mum to what she was, thirty-seven, more or less. Perfect solution.”

They stared at her, but before anyone could respond, Hugo said, “Great. I’ll give too.”

Ginny got in first. “No, no. Rosie, Huey, you can’t.”

“Well for once my sister and I agree,” said Ron. “Rosie, Huey, no. I am still your father, you are under-age, I forbid you. It’s out of the question. Too risky.”

Rose spoke softly. “You forbid me to save my mother, Father?

Ron’s eyes closed for a moment, then he said, “You too, Rosie? I’m no longer Dad?”

This was painful, but it had to be said. “I’m sorry, but not since you walked out on Mum. And you were losing my love even before that. The truth is that you have been neglecting Mum for years and years, just taking her for granted. Ginny is right. She sacrificed herself for you, and you did nothing to earn that sacrifice. I’m sorry, but what we have here is your doing more than anyone else’s.”

Ron’ eyes narrowed. “Your mother’s poisoned your mind against me.

Stay calm, stay calm. “For your information, Father, she did exactly the opposite. When she told us, she went on and on about how you still loved us, that it was her you had left, not us, that you would still be there if we needed you. And when we argued, she still fought for you. In saying what you’ve just said, all you are doing is proving that you never valued her, were never worthy of her.”

Ron put his hand over eyes. “Rosie, I don’t want you hurt.”

“You didn’t think of that before you hurt Mum?”

Silence for a moment, then Ron said, “How can I make it up?”

This was hard, but she must give him the truth. “How can you make up for seventeen years neglect of the woman who loved you, who sacrificed herself for you? How can you make up for sixteen years of putting yourself, your Quidditch before your children? I don’t think you can, Father. I’m sorry.”

He turned away, his hand over his eyes. This was heartbreaking, but she had no choice. He had to understand what he had done to them. He had to understand that his neglect had cost him not only his wife, but his children. Mum came first: she had earned it.

“Rosie,” said Ginny, “Your mother would not want this. You cannot decide just to do it, Rosie. You are not of age.”

“Look,” said Bill, “None of us want Rosie or Huey involved in this. But why don’t we all donate, Weasleys and Potters. Five years each, she’d be thirty-five.”

“Perfect,” said Fleur.

Ginny shook her head. “We thought of that, Harry and I, but you need compatibility, Bill. Not just anyone can donate. Blood relations can, married partners can, usually, but outside that circle compatibility is rare. That the Malfoys have it with Hermione is a one in a thousand chance.”
“We do?” said Draco. “We can donate?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “Abraxas did, and that means his immediate blood relatives are compatible.”

“Then I can,” said Scorpius. “If Rose, Hugo and I each give two, two and a half years, that’ll fix it, won’t it?”

*What!* Rose looked at him. “You? Why should you give?”

“I’ve met your mum, Rose. She’s … special. And she’s important to … us. She’s on our clock.”

“What!” said Harry. “Your Peverell clock?”

“Yes, sir. With Rose and Hugo. So they are as good as family to us. I’m happy to donate, sir.”

Well! This was a turn she’d never have expected.

Astoria began to speak, but Abraxas raised his hand and she fell silent.

“Scorpius, thank you. But you, Rose and Hugo as donors are right out of the question. There is a reason why life energy at your age is so dense and rich, so valuable. And that is because you are in your formative years, the years in which your body, mind, and character is forming. Take away those, and you would be emotionally crippled for the rest your life.”

“I still think—” Rose began, but Abraxas raised his hand, and she stopped.

“Rose, you want to help, I know that. And you are still prepared to make the sacrifice. But think how your mother would feel. She, to whom her children are the cornerstones of her life, would see you every day, damaged, knowing that it was done for her. I don’t think she could bear it. I really don’t. Your argument against me, Rose, cuts both ways. It applies against you, but with tenfold force.”

Somebody started speaking, and Abraxas’s hand shot up to stop them, his eyes remaining fixed on her face. "Rose, do you accept my argument, as I accepted yours?"

Rose glared at him. "All right, I do, for Mum’s sake. But there is an emergency, as you said, the deal is off."

Again someone started speaking, and again Abraxas’s hand snapped up.

"Only, Rose, only in life-threatening circumstances, and, and this is vital, Rose, if no one else is available."

She glared at him and shook her head. "No, Mr Malfoy. I must judge for myself."

"Yes, Rose, you must judge. You are your mother's daughter. But we must set the criteria on which you judge, now. It must be clear, for there will be no time to clarify it in an emergency. And the main criterion is that all other avenues must have been explored. Otherwise, Rose, you will put a burden on your mother just as great as the one she has just shed. Greater, for she would never be able to shed it. Formative years are irreplaceable. Think how you would feel, if Hugo was to do that for you.”

“All right! All right! You've made your point. I won't do anything except as a last resort, all right?"

"Almost. That last resort, Rose, will be after I have given life energy. Your argument against me applies in a non-emergency situation. In an emergency, I will give before you. The cost to me will
be just a few years. I would not be crippled, as you and Hugo and Scorpius would. She would just see me as a few years older. In fact she wouldn’t, because she has never seen me young. All she would see is a much younger man than when she last saw me. Do you agree, Rose? Me first?”

She glared at him. “You are taking from me. She is my mother! I love her. I want to give to her.”

"Rose, you will. And what you will give her has much greater value than mere life energy, than anything I can give her, ever. You can be there for her, as a daughter, as a friend and confidant, for the rest of her life. As a man, I can never do that for her. I love her too. If you and Hugo agree, I will marry her. Me first, Rose?"

"All right. You first. And you'd better ask her, not me and Hugo, if you want to marry her." And she hugged him and kissed his cheek again.
A tap on the drawing room door, it opened, and Padma came in. Everyone stared at her, but she addressed Abraxas. “Sir, we are still trying to bring Hermione round. Physically she is stable. Weak, but stable. However, we have a more serious problem: her sanctus is not in her body.”

“Her sanctus is absent? You did not tell us of this before, Miss Patil.”

“We did not wish to cause alarm, and we could sense its presence. We still can, so it has not departed. She may have omitted the sanctus return part of the *Virtus vitalus oblatio* spell, either because of exhaustion or because she did not know of it. In controlled application of *Errantes sanctus* spells such as your situation, Mr Malfoy, full or auxiliary control is given to a healer, and he or she instructs the return. But even in cases like this, where the spell was used in a benign way and the healer is known to the donor, the donor sanctus can usually be persuaded to return by the healer. Here neither Parvati nor I can do this. It is as though something is standing in the way, or rather, pulling in the opposite direction to us. We were wondering if it was a counterspell, perhaps a curse left by the werewolf,” and she looked at McGonagall.

“Surely,” said Abraxas, “all curses die with their caster?”

McGonagall shook her head. “Death curses don’t. Death curses expire only when the caster leaves the Lands of the Sancti and goes to Talamb dar Críoch, the Land of Ending. But death curses are very complex spells and it would astonish me if Greyback had the knowledge, the skill or the power to cast one. If however one considers the circumstances: Hermione’s psyche battered and vulnerable from Greyback’s predator-prey tactics; her exhausted and agéd state from the *Virtus vitalus oblatio* gifting, and the werewolf’s psychotic focus on her, some form of malediction may be influencing her sanctus.

“Be it a spell or a curse or a malediction, Professor, might it kill Miss Granger?”

Rose tightened her arms around Hugo.

“Not directly. Let me explain, Mr Malfoy. A malediction, a common malediction – not a Grande Malédiction, which is another matter entirely,” and she glanced at Fleur, “is something with magical properties but at so low a level that it barely counts as a formal spell. It is more passive than active, acting as an inhibitor. In this case it could be preventing Hermione’s sanctus returning to her body. Normally a witch of her power would brush this off, but given her current state, she is unable to. The danger is that if her sanctus remains away from her body for too long, she will die.”

“So the outcome is the same. Surely then we should improve her current exhausted and agéd state? Then she will be able to brush it off.”

“I would be cautious about that. Hermione is currently in an unfinished spell and possibly being influenced by another. Introducing a spell inside another while it is being influenced by a malediction is dangerous. Though I would say of the two concurrent spells that one is all but complete and the other is weak. But Hermione too is weak. So I would consider such an action only as a last resort. That is the theoretical position as I see it. Of more weight is the practical point of view, based on experience and training of the healers. Padma, what you think we should do?”

“I agree with all your points, Professor. I believe we should wait. The situation may rectify itself.”

“In your experience, Miss Patil,” said Abraxas, “does this situation usually rectify itself?”
Padma pursed her lips. “Errantes sanctus cases are rare, uncontrolled application is even rarer, and I have never experienced a refusal to return, Mr Malfoy.”

“Your prognosis, Miss Patil.” He spoke in a monotone

She looked away from him, then back. “I have to say: not good, Mr Malfoy.”

“Then Professor McGonagall’s last resort may apply. A return Virtus vitalus oblatio would at least give her strength and youth again. Is that not so?”

She drew in a sharp breath and said, “Mr Malfoy-”

“Miss Patil, I know your opinion on the ethics of using this spell. My enquiry relates solely to the operation of the spell, the mechanics.”

Padma pursed her lips. “I cannot say, I don’t think anyone can say, whether Hermione’s sanctus would return if she was strengthened, or even rejuvenated. Even if we were sure of the cause of the current blocking, we lack the empirical evidence that strengthening her would enable her to overcome the blocking spell. Logic tells us it would have an effect, but would this be outweighed by the other influencing factors? We cannot say. Even if we did have empirical evidence, we could not say with any certainty that it would work in this case. The fields of knowledge around these arcane, complex spells are virtually unexplored. We simply don’t know, Mr Malfoy.”

“Then we will have to substitute probability for certainty, commonsense for knowledge. Doing nothing because of what may happen is the worst option.” Abraxas looked around. “We must prepare ourselves for Virtus vitalus oblatio should Miss Granger’s condition worsen.”

“Mr Malfoy-” began Padma, but Abraxas raised his hand and she stopped.

“Miss Patil, we know your professional advice, and I hope we do not have to go against it. However, if we do, we must be prepared.” He looked around. “I will donate, but Rose has restricted me to ten years. Mr Weasley?” He looked at Ron.

Rose looked at him too: He seemed to have shrunk over the past few hours. What had happened to his wife, and the fact that she and Hugo, and his own wider family, held him responsible, had hit him hard. And here Abraxas was offering him a way back out of the cold.

“Why don’t we all donate?” Narcissa? The Ice Queen? Yes, and she went on. “As I understand it, parents are compatible with their children, husbands with their wives and vice versa, and by a quirk of fate, Malfoys with Miss Granger. Thus I have compatibility with Draco, and Draco has compatibility with Miss Granger. So he can attach to her, and I to him. Mr Potter is compatible with Mrs Potter, Mrs Potter is compatible with her brother, who is compatible with Miss Granger as the father of her children. Thus we here may all donate life energy to Miss Granger. Except, of course, the young people and Professor McGonagall.”

“Mrs Malfoy!” said Padma. “We have no knowledge or experience that such a process can work, quite apart from the total illegality of family transfers. You are suggesting life energy donations in series and in parallel, all at the same time. It is fraught with danger. We don’t know the effect of donors in parallel, let alone in series.”

“Series donation, Rose, Scorpius and Hugo,” said McGonagall, “is where the donors line up behind one another, the one in front doing the transfer to the recipient. Parallel donation is where the donors stand side by side, each transferring direct to the recipient. Series magic is used when an increased amplitude is required, parallel when an increased amplitude would be dangerous but a
large volume of magical power is required. Series is thus short and sharp, parallel slow and steady.”

Rose looked at her: even in a situation like this, she would not miss an opportunity to further her students’ education.

“Yes,” said Bill. “Hermione, Harry and Ron were to blast their way out of Gringott’s because they were hanging onto each other, and so in series, and so enhancing the power of each defolio casting.”

“Well, quite.” said Padma. “We may overload Hermione.”

“Virtus vitalus oblatio transfer is self-regulating, Padma, I believe,” said McGonagall.

Padma glared at her. “It may have been in past cases, but we don’t know the conditions of those transfers. This is an highly complex field: we can’t just blunder in and hope for the best. We have just seen what happened to Hermione. We have no records of a triple sequential transfer. Doubles sometimes resulted in death to the secondary donor, from primary or secondary causes.”

“We have one person here who has the experience of donating life energy in parallel with another, with no apparent ill effects, and also of withdrawing,” said Narcissa. “Draco, please fetch your father.”

Draco nodded, and hurried out of the drawing room.

Padma looked around and spread her hands. “Please, we can’t just … experiment like this: these are people’s lives we are talking about. We have no experience, no records or even evidence of this being done in the past. There are too many unknowns, too many uncertainties, and the little evidence we do have point to the great danger of irresponsible use, of playing around with this sort of spell. Quite apart from if the spell itself goes wrong, immense obligations are set up, and these in themselves can cause problems. We have before us the example of Hermione in danger because she returned the donation which Mr Malfoy gave to her. This spell has so many implications, direct and indirect. It’s like an avalanche: one small slip and soon the whole mountainside is moving.”

“Miss Patil,” said Abraxas, “we take your point. However, you require a level of certainty and control which is just not available in this situation. We are trying to address one, or rather two, of your concerns: for the others, we will just have to do the best we can. Here is Lucius.” He turned as the old man shuffled in, wearing a green silk dressing gown. “Draco has probably explained, Lucius, but we wish to know whether you received Miss Patil’s request that you withdraw.”

“He has explained.” He seemed more composed than before. He looked at Padma. “I did receive your message to disengage, Miss Patil. I did not, because Miss Granger did not dismiss me. However, when she did, I was able to disengage without difficulty.”

“If you are concerned about overload, Miss Patil,” said Narcissa, “we can engage slowly, one by one, with you monitoring. We can then disengage at your request if there is a problem. I am prepared to risk it. You may try on us first. Draco, are you prepared to do this?”

“Certainly,” he said, but Lucius interrupted him. “I will do it.”

Everyone looked at him. Ginny pursed her lips and gave a slight shake of her head.

“Why, Lucius?” Narcissa spoke softly.

“She saved my father, so I have a life debt to her. Also I have wronged her, grievously. She is the
one that is pure, not me. In that world where we were, there is only the essence of being. My father’s colour was deep purple tending to black: surely the colours of approaching death. Miss Granger’s was a brilliant blue, mine was grey. But in hers the colour was unsullied. In mine there were splotches of red and black. My essence was corrupted, hers was not. Hers was pure, mine was … muddied. Muddied. Mine reflected my … befouled past. And her superiority to me was … blindingly clear. Not just skill and knowledge, but in generosity of spirit and leadership. I do not know how she felt about me, but in there she showed no animosity, not even dislike or distaste at my presence. In the healing she acted with decision, promptitude and skill, directing me, showing me what to do, trusting me to do it.” He looked at them, defiant and angry, “I will donate also. I too have much to repay.”

“No, Father,” said Draco. “You have already donated, more would … you shouldn’t donate any more.”

“Draco is right, Lucius,” said Narcissa. “I understand how you feel, but considering the dangers and … possible ramifications, I really think you can help Miss Granger more by abstaining. Miss Rose, on behalf of your mother, what is your feeling?”

Lucius. He had harmed her mother more than any other Malfoy, and it was hard to believe he had really, fundamentally, changed. But he had made that astonishing response to Ron when he had called her mother a mudblood. And now this even more astonishing acknowledgement of her mother’s superiority and his own evil past. So perhaps he had changed. But even accepting that his offer was genuine, would her mother want a donation from him? Also his donation to Abraxas had aged him hugely. Could he give any more and not have it kill him? And how would her mother feel if he died giving life energy to her? To make it worse he was Abraxas’ son. How would she feel if the son of the man she loved – Rose could face that now, without reservation – died for her? No, it was not on.

How would her mother handle this? “Mr Malfoy,” she said, “thank you for your offer, but on behalf of my mother, I must refuse. You have already helped her. Without your help, she could not have saved Mr Abraxas. With your help the cost to her was much less. So, thank you, really, but no.”

“Your family will assume your moral burden, Lucius,” said Narcissa. “I will attach with Draco. That will give you a series of two.”

“And I, making three,” said Astoria.

“We can’t have Malfoys risking what Weasleys don’t,” said Harry. “Ron, you’ll link? Then we can link through you.”

Ron, looking at the floor, said softly, “Christ, what a mess I’ve made of things.”

“Got to agree with you there, mate. You did, to hell and gone. But a chance here to pay a bit back. You game?”

“Of course, but …” Ron looked at Rose, then to Hugo. “May I?”

She ran up to him and hugged and kissed him. “Yes, Dad, you may.”

Hugo was not so forgiving. “Yeah, like uncle Harry says.”

Bill looked at George, and his brother nodded. “We are all game.”

“Mr Weasley … Bill,” said Abraxas softly, “do you recall what night it is?”
Bill closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Yes.” He looked at Rose. “Sorry, Rose, love. It’s full moon. Worse, it is the autumn equinox as well. So my life force, besides being subject to strong surges, may well be tainted.”

“Never!” Fleur burst out, glaring at him. She looked around fiercely. “My ‘usband ees never ... that evil word. Mais oui, surges. So it ees good that I am here, for a mother’s life force ees twice as good as any man’s.”

“Fleur, love-” said Bill.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Am I not a Weasley?”

He spread his hands and looked at Rose.

“Fleur,” she said, “Your children-”

But Fleur immediately raised both hands to her. “Not anozzer word, Rose. Your mother ees my sister also, in all but blood. I will stand with my sister Ginny in this.”

How could Rose have ever thought she was a butterfly!

She looked at the Malfoys. Just two days ago the name alone had placed them beyond the pale. Now they were offering life force to her mother. So were all the others. It was too much. “Miss Narcissa, Mrs Malfoy-”

Astoria smiled and said, “I am a Malfoy, Rose. My husband’s debts of honour are my debts. Besides, we all owe your mother more than we can ever repay.”

Narcissa nodded. “A hundred times over.”

A voice from the portrait over the fireplace drew their attention. It was the huntress. “Miss Patil. Miss Patil, we have a situation. Your sister requests your attendance immediately.”

Hugo beat them all to the door, but Rose was second, just in front of Abraxas.
The scene was as it had been, Hermione, white haired and wrinkled, lying still in the bed, Miss Sash on one side, Parvati on a chair on the other, holding her hand. Parvati’s face was grey and drawn. She looked at her sister and said, “Sanctus dilaberetur. Defecto corpore.”

Abraxas did not wait for translation. He strode to one side of the bed, pointed to the other and said, “Mr Weasley,” then turned to Padma. “Miss Patil, we are ready.”

Padma took a deep breath, closed her eyes for a moment, then said. “Mr Malfoy, I cannot do this. It goes against everything I stand for. Healer ethics, safe healing, minimising risk. We … we lose Hermione, yes, which is a tragedy, but if we do it your way we risk losing everyone. I’m sorry. And this is my decision, mine alone. I have not consulted my sister. So if there is retribution, let me suffer it alone.”

Abraxas nodded, as if he had expected her reply. “I do not visit retribution on honour, Miss Patil. You are following your ethical code. Likewise we must follow our individual moral codes. Mr Weasley,” he looked at Ron. “The *Virtus vitalus oblatio* spell has five parts: the moving of the donor’s sanctus to the recipient, the opening of the life energy channel, the activation of the life energy flow, the closing of the channel, and the moving of the donor’s sanctus back to the donor’s body.”

“Mr Malfoy!” Padma’s tone was shock and outrage.

He nodded to her, then went on, looking at Ron. “By necessity, as your sanctus is absent from your body, the spells are non-verbal, other than the first *Errantes sanctus*. This is said with the destination, Miss Granger, in mind. Once there, the opening spell is *Aperi lorem vitae varius*, the flow activation spell is *Venetatis eu*. The closing spell and sanctus homing spell, which we hope in this case will cause Miss Granger’s sanctus to return, is *Finem vitae lorem varius, Redit.*” He looked around. “These spells are used by all those who choose to donate. And of course, the wanting must be there, in mind, body and soul. I will now attach, open and activate, and you follow, Mr Weasley. Sweet, brave Rose, Hugo, for your mother’s sake, please do not. If she can be saved, we will save her. If we cannot, you cannot.”

“Mr Malfoy, you can’t-” said Padma.

Abraxas raised his hand and she stopped. “And Miss Patil will, I hope, even in the face of this unilateral and illegal action, monitor and advise as we discussed. Otherwise, we will just have to guess.” He raised one eyebrow at Padma, grasped Hermione’s arm, closed his eyes, and said, “*Errantes sanctus …*”

“Mr Weasley, Ron-” said Padma, but he just shook his head, knelt on the other side of Hermione’s bed, and looked at Rose and Hugo.

Hugo said, “Go, Dad, go!” and Rose smiled, nodded, and said, “Yes, Dad.”

Ron’s eyes losing some of the pain, he took hold of Hermione’s arm, and whispered the *Errantes sanctus*.

“Harry, Ginny, Draco, you can’t do this, the risks-” said Padma, but Harry raised his hand (did he learn that from Abraxas?) and said, “Padma, we can’t not do it. Ginny, you first.” He gestured to Ron.
Padma threw up her hands, went to the head of the bed, took Hermione’s shoulders in her hands, muttered a spell and closed her eyes.

One by one the others attached. Ginny grasped one of Ron’s shoulders with both hands, saying the spell, then Harry and Fleur taking Ginny’s shoulders and repeating the words. George took Ron’s other shoulder. On the other side, attaching to Abraxas: Draco with Narcissa on one shoulder, Astoria on the other. Padma stood there, eyes closed, a frown of concentration on her brow, but not stopping them. Bill stood there, arms folded, his eyes moving from person to person. Watching, checking, monitoring – Rose was glad he was there.

Hugo began moving towards Ron, but Rose stepped behind him, pulled him against her and wrapped her arms around him. “No, Huey. Mr Malfoy is right. We must just watch.”

Hugo was breathing in great grasping breaths, his heart racing, and she felt her heartbeat rise in response. She must, must stay calm. If she panicked, Hugo would.

She sensed someone next to her, and Scorpius said, “May I help?” His hand was hovering above her shoulder. She glanced at him, about to refuse. His eyebrows were raised, in an expression which reminded her of Abraxas. She hesitated. The boy was trying to help her. He’d offered life energy to her mother. Last time they had touched she’d felt calmed and supported, and she would convey that to Hugo. She nodded, and one hand descended onto one shoulder, then the other.

*I didn’t say both!* But already the comforting, soothing feeling was flowing through her. Well, if it helped Hugo… And it was: she could feel his heart slowing, his breathing returning to … not normal, but well below panic. But if Scorpius thought this was going to make a difference to her attitude towards him at Hogwarts … Out of the corner of her eye she caught the glow. She squeezed her eyes shut. Why did life have to be so complicated!

A voice said quietly, “Necessity drives knowledge. You are watching medical history in the making.” She opened her eyes again. McGonagall was standing next to them, her eyes on Hermione.

Rose looked too. Her mother’s hair had already changed from white to silver, and as Rose watched, from silver to grey, grey to light brown. It was happening so quickly! The wrinkles became lines, the lines faded to smooth, young skin. The tears ran down Rose’s cheeks and choking rose in her throat as she saw the mother she remembered returning. Hugo was crying too, and she felt Scorpius squeeze her shoulders. *Sympathy and gladness.* Maybe she wouldn’t, maybe she didn’t want to rubbish him at Hogwarts any more, quite apart from Abraxas and all that.

She glanced at the others: None of them seemed to be showing any sign of aging: Because her mother had been so old, and they were so many?

But now they were disengaging, presumably at Padma’s instructions. She twitched her shoulders and Scorpius stepped away. No need to advertise the … glow.

Fleur and Harry lifted their hands and stepped back, Fleur into Bill’s arms. George and Ginny, Narcissa and Astoria, and Draco, all followed. Only Abraxas and Ron were left. Why weren’t they? Hermione looked about thirty five now. Any more would be too much, more than she would want. Then Abraxas disengaged. But he was supposed to be last. What was going on? Oh, no: Ron was trying to prove he still cared, that he was sorry. No way would he disengage before Abraxas, no matter what it cost him. And it was costing him: his hair was greying, lines appearing on his face. Mum looked about thirty, now.

Rose looked at Parvati, waved a hand to attract her attention, and mouthed, “That’s enough. He
must stop. Tell him.” Parvati nodded, stepped behind him, put her hands on his shoulders and closed her eyes. A moment later she stepped back, and Ron lifted his hands from her mother’s arm.

They’d done it! They’d rejuvenated her mother, and none of them seemed any the worse. Ron looked about forty five, Abraxas about forty, and Narcissa’s silver hair had a slightly lighter sheen. The others looked unchanged.

Narcissa. Rose owed her now: she’d actively driven the multiple life energy donation idea, and it had worked. She owed them all.

Just Padma now. She was still monitoring Hermione, her face contorted in concentration. In a moment she would disengage, Hermione would wake and they would all be together again. Within a few weeks, Rose was sure, she’d have a stepfather. She already felt tremendous respect for him, as well as a tenderness, and she did not doubt she would grow to love him as a daughter should. She’d come here for her holidays, she and Hugo, and they -

From the depths of the house she heard a clock chime, then saw a grey blur as Miss Sash leapt to the window sill and out into the night. A moment later Padma jerked back, lifting her hands from Hermione, and opened her eyes. One glance at her ashen face and all Rose’s castles in the air collapsed.

“She’s gone.”
The Land of Lost Souls

Abraxas sprang to the side of the bed and held the palm of a hand to Hermione’s mouth. Looking at Rose, he said, “She’s still breathing.” He took her wrist and held it for a few moments. “Her pulse is still strong.” He looked at Padma.

“But her sanctus is gone, her sanctus is gone.” Tears were running down Padma’s face.

“Healer Patil, what does that mean?"

“It’s as if she’s been kissed by a dementor.”

“And what does that mean?”

Oh! Rose wanted to scream at him. It meant her mother’s whole self, her character, her love and giving, everything that made her Hermione, was gone! Just the empty shell was left. Didn’t he understand that?

Padma covered her eyes. “It means she is all but dead,” she whispered.

“Healer Patil.” His voice was clipped and he waited until Padma was looking at him before he went on. “Healer Patil, your patient needs you. She needs you to put your feelings away. She needs your professional detachment. All but dead is not dead, Healer Patil.”

Padma blinked, then took a deep breath. “Yes.”

He nodded. “What has happened, Miss Patil?” He spoke softly but with no expression.

“Hermione’s sanctus was weak, diffuse, but as the life energy flowed in, rejuvenating her, it began to coalesce, to brighten and gather. It was slow, for she was still desperately tired from overextending herself. But something else was there also, resisting the coming together. It was as if the glow was trying to collect itself through a thick grey mist. I was calling to her and she was responding, trying to reach me, to return to her body, then suddenly the mist thickened and turned black, and she was gone.”

“I felt it,” said Bill. “Not Hermione’s sanctus being torn away, but the sudden surge in power of the malediction. It happened at the moment of solar midnight on the autumn equinox.”

Abraxas nodded, not taking his eyes from Padma’s face. “Miss Patil, to where has her sanctus gone? Can you send me there to bring her home?”

Rose stared at him. So did everyone else. Did he realize he was talking of leaving the living world, of going to a place where the sancti of those Kissed by dementors went to, to find her mother? Of course he did: he was Abraxas Malfoy, with all that that meant. Did this man’s resolve have no limits?

“Mr Malfoy,” said Padma, “she is in a spirit world. I cannot send you there; no-one, no human agency can, let alone bring you back again. Professor, is that right?”

McGonagall looked at her, then turned her gaze onto Abraxas. “Mr Malfoy, there is a way to that place and others have attempted what you propose. Few, very few have returned.”

“Tell me of it, please, Professor.”
McGonagall looked at Rose. Was she going to ask her and Hugo to leave? “Professor, she is our mother. We want to know, we have a right to know what has happened to her.”

McGonagall nodded and turned to Abraxas. “Hermione’s sanctus is in a world which lies between the land of the living and the worlds of the afterlife. We call it Talamb na Anamacha Cailtse, the Land of Lost Souls. More: her sanctus is no longer whole. It has ... fractured, been torn apart into soul and eidolon.”

Rose squeezed her eyes shut. No wonder McGonagall had hesitated. This was terrifying. And worse was to come, she was sure. She moved up behind Hugo and put her arms around him.

“Professor, sorry, but Hogwarts was a long time ago,” said Harry. “Can you remind me about this soul and eidolon stuff, please?” Draco nodded his head.

“Briefly, then,” said McGonagall. “Our beings are composed of three parts. The physical body; the eidolon, which is the spirit world equivalent of the physical body; and the soul, the consciousness of self and of the world around us. All three are needed for a being to function as a living, aware person. The soul and eidolon are tied together in an almost unbreakable unit as the sanctus.

“When a person dies with the sanctus resident in the physical body, a bridge opens between our world, Talamb na Análaith, the Land of Breathing, and one of the worlds of the afterlife, usually the Land of the Sancti, Talamb ar an Bhoitáithe. The sanctus then travels safely from one to the other.

“However, when the sanctus leaves its host body and for some reason cannot return, it goes to the Land of Lost Souls. It is to this land, when _errantes sanctus_ spells go wrong, that the spell casters go. It is here that those who have been Kissed by dementors go. We know little about this world and much of that little is based on half forgotten memories. So most of what I am about to tell you is speculation and not to be relied upon. What we surmise is as follows: on arrival the sanctus splits into soul and eidolon. This is a violent rupture, and both components are hurt. Immediately the soul begins to seek its eidolon so the sanctus can reform. However, the soul, having self-awareness but without senses such as sight and hearing, cannot find the eidolon; and the eidolon, though it has senses, lacks the awareness to look for its soul.

“This is the straightforward interpretation, but there is some evidence that the eidolon retains a very low level of emotional awareness, a non-rational and instinctive, almost primeval awareness. So it can feel very basic emotions like fear and loss. Having just experienced the trauma of losing its soul, it dreads a repeat of that pain and so shuts the soul out. Consequently, not only does it not seek its soul, it would flee if the soul accidentally finds it.

“So the two wander through this spirit world: the soul bereft and seeking, the eidolon drifting and all but mindless. After a period or an event - we don’t know which - the eidolon leaves that world, so that the reforming of the sanctus, in any event highly improbable, becomes impossible. The soul comes to realize it has been abandoned and is overwhelmed by despair.”

“It sounds like a place from Dante’s Purgatory,” said Abraxas.

“Sounds like Hell,” said Harry. “So what happens to the lost souls? How do they get home?”

McGonagall looked at Rose, and she tightened her arms around Hugo. Something bad was coming. “If by home, Mr Potter, you mean here, they don’t. The lost soul can only go on to the land of the sancti, where it will reunite with its eidolon.

“So the person dies?” said Harry.
“Worse than that, Mr Potter. The physical body in our world dies when the eidolon leaves Talamb na Anamacha Caillte. The lost soul is not so fortunate. It must remain, blind and deaf, in that world until the Ferryman comes. Only he can take the lost souls across the water, the void, which divides that land from the Land of the Sancti. And the Ferryman will come only when summoned a person with a whole sanctus.”

“And the sanctus splits on entering Talamb na Anamacha Caillte, so there are none,” said Abraxas.

“Catch-22,” muttered Harry, then, “Sorry, muggle culture; Hermione would get it. Go on, please, Professor. So what happens?”

“The souls wait, Mr Potter. They wait and wander until someone with a whole sanctus chooses to go there, leads them to the place of departure and calls the Ferryman.”

“How long, Professor? How often do people go there?”

“How often do living people choose to leave our world, enter a spirit world where the chances of survival are minimal, and succeed in crossing that world and leading the lost souls to the ferryman? Not very often, Mr Potter.”

“Yeah, but how long, Professor? Years? Decades?”

“No set period, Mr Potter. It depends on the qualities of the person and, I’m sure, on what they encounter in that land. It could be decades, it could be a century, it could be more.”

A century or more! Her mother might have to spend more than a lifetime in this place, wandering and waiting and despairing!

“We have little in the way of records, Mr Potter, and no confirmed recent successes. I will speak to Dilys Derwent, as she knows more than I do of this.”

“Right. And that’s where Hermione is, in this Talam place.”

“Her sanctus is, and though it is split, the eidolon has not yet departed. We know that because her body here is still alive. So there is hope.” She looked at Abraxas. “This is crux of the matter. If, before the eidolon departs, a living person willing sends his or her sanctus to Talamb na Anamacha Caillte, that sanctus does not split on arrival. For a time it remains whole. If, during that time, that sanctus manages to locate the eidolon and unite it with the wandering soul, the two whole sancti can return here, to the land of the living. Exactly what the whole sanctus must do to achieve that end, we do not know. What we do know is that it is very, very difficult, We know this because so few of those who go, return. And-”

“Oh, no, what now?”

Rose spun around. Parvati had taken her sister’s place in monitoring Hermione, and was looking up at Padma. “Her respiration rate is increasing.”

It was: she was breathing as though she’d been for a brisk run.

Abraxas moved back as Padma stepped up to the bed. She placed a hand on each side of Hermione’s head, closed her eyes for a few moments, then said, “Fear. Something is frightening her.”

She began to mutter a spell, but McGonagall lifted a hand. “No. Her body here is responding to something that is happening there, to her eidolon or soul. A spell here cannot help her there, and
may attenuate or otherwise damage the link between the two. If that tie breaks ...”

Rose squeezed her eyes shut. Her mother’s life was hanging by an invisible thread and nobody seemed to know what they were doing.

But … McGonagall, Abraxas, Harry, Bill, the Patils: all powerful witches and wizards, all fighting for her mother. So was everyone else there. If Hermione could be saved, they would do it. And though they seemed to be staggering from crisis to crisis, her mother was still alive. But for how long?

“Heart rate rising,” said Parvati. “She’s entering hyperventilation.” Now Hermione was taking great gasping breaths.

“Professor,” said Abraxas, “can’t you do something?”

McGonagall shook her head. “I cannot, but ...” and she looked round.
The children of Bastet

Two blurs, one light, one dark, entered Rose’s side vision. The cats, leaping from the painting of the cottage to the floor, then bounding onto the bed, Miss Sash on one side, Mister Lumpy on the other. They sat down facing away from Hermione and … froze. Then, even as Rose watched, Hermione’s breathing began to slow. What was going on?

“They’re ... guarding her,” said Narcissa.

“Not in this world,” said Abraxas softly.

McGonagall glanced at him sharply, then transformed into her animagus shape. Springing onto the bed, the animagus cat approached Miss Sash cautiously. Her head went forward, she sniffed at Miss Sash, then her whole body flattened on the bed. Miss Sash remained still, showing no awareness of anything around her.

The animagus cat backed away, jumped off the bed and transformed into human form. “Did you know your cats are mau?” she asked Narcissa.

Narcissa’s eyes widened. “We knew they were unusual and very long-lived. I thought mau cats were just myths.”

McGonagall shook her head. “Unusual indeed. Miss Sash has an aura of mystery and age around her like that of the Great Sphinx of Giza. And long-lived: they are the children of Bastet, the cat goddess, from a time predating the Old Kingdom of Ancient Egypt. I knew they had existed, but to stumble across them after five thousand years…” She shook her head, then looked around. “Their powers we know little of, but they were said to take certain roles to help humans. Here we see two of them: Bes, guardian and protector; and Khensu, traveller in the sky or, as here, between worlds.”

“Professor,” said Abraxas, “what are they protecting Miss Granger from?”

“I don’t know, Mr Malfoy. We believe that only lost souls are in Talamb na Anamacha Caillte, but we don’t know this beyond doubt. However, it is an empty, silent, barren place of everlasting twilight, devoid of life, so that in itself would be terrifying.”

“Probably just the place then,” said Harry.

“Whatever it is, the mau seemed to have it contained,” said Abraxas. “But as we apparently know as little of the powers of the mau as we do of the place they are in, we dare not rely on this. Professor, I wish to go to Talamb na Anamacha Caillte. How do we set this up?”

McGonagall looked at him and shook her head. “Mr Malfoy, I know already that you are not a man to make unconsidered decisions and that you have powers of survival, of physical and mental endurance that few others have. I must tell you though that those will make little difference in Talamb na Anamacha Caillte, and that your chances of returning with Hermione are small. Others may have a better chance, so let us explore this now and reach what conclusions we may. Winky, are you there?”

“Winky is here, headmistress. Miss Sash summoned Winky, and she is ready,” and she stepped forward.

McGonagall looked around. “Padma said, correctly, that no human or human agency can send a person to Talamb na Anamacha Caillte. However, under certain circumstances, elves can. Winke
Loireagnighean, please direct us.”

Winky bowed her head again. “Yes, Ma’am.”

Rose blinked. That was said with … respect bordering on reverence, the way one, or she, anyway, would address the Queen.

Winky put a finger to Hermione’s temple and closed her eyes. A moment later she opened them. Looking at Narcissa, she said, “Mistress, the boireannach glic speaks the truth. Miss Hermione is in the Land of Betwixt. She is wandering there, self lost and shape worn to sleep. To help her, Mistress, Winky must break vows, Winky must do Bad Things.”

“Winky, you have my permission to do whatever you can to save Miss Hermione. If they help her they will not be bad things.”

Winky shook her head violently. “They are Bad, Bad Things for an elf, Mistress. Breaking of elf vows to elves, breaking of elf vows to her mistress, risking Miss Hermione’s Second Self. But without this Miss Hermione cannot leave that world.”

“What second -” began Harry, but McGonagall waved him to silence, and said, “Winky, what must we do?”

“First Bad Thing is Winky may do this only for her mistress, or one who stands in her place.”

What did that mean? Narcissa looked puzzled too, but McGonagall said, “Winky must transfer her allegiance to Hermione before she can help her. Winky, we do not have time for the full procedure, but we have goodwill on all sides. May I administer the oath, and we can sort out the details later?”

“Winky can accept that, Ma’am.”

“Professor,” said Harry, “surely we don’t need-”

“We do, Mr Potter,” said McGonagall. “Elves have strict protocols and rigid behavioural boundaries. Winky is already stretching and bending them for us. Doing other than as she asks will only delay us. Winky, thank you. Narcissa, do you agree?”

“Of course, Professor. The arrangement was only to smooth things out for Miss Granger.”

“Thank you. Please take Winky’s hand.” She took out her wand and held it over the joined hands. A green ring appeared, encircling their hands. “By amicable mutual consent the binding magical contact between Narcissa Malfloy-Black and Winke Loireagnighean as mistress and house-elf is hereby dissolved.” The ring vanished. “Rose, you must stand proxy for your mother. Please take Winky’s hand.” Rose did so. “I, Minerva McGonagall, stand here as binder and adjudicator of a magical Contract between Hermione Jane Granger, as the mistress, and Winke Loireagnighean, as the house-elf.” Winky shook her head and McGonagall said, “As the lady’s maid.” Winky nodded, and McGonagall went on. “Details of the Contract, subject to the adjudicator’s approval, will be agreed at a later date. Do you, Rose Ann Granger-Weasley, daughter of Hermione Jane Granger, accept the service of Winke Loireagnighean as lady’s maid on your mother’s behalf?”

“I do.”

“Winke Loireagnighean, do you accept Hermione Jane Granger as your mistress?”

“I do, Ma’am.”
“Then I declare you mistress and maid.”

The green ring reappeared, encircling their hands, and McGonagall said, “Winky, over to you.”
Winky bowed to McGonagall, then to Rose, then, wringing her hands, said, “Now Winky must do a much worse Bad Thing. Winky must send Miss Hermione’s Second Self to the Land of Betwixt, and Winky cannot say that her Second Self will return.”

“What is this Betwixt?” said Harry, looking at McGonagall. “I thought Hermione was in that tongue twisting Talam place. And who or what is this second self. For that matter, what is a self?”

“What we call Talamb na Anamacha Caillte, the Land of Lost Souls, the elves call Betwixt, for it lies between our world and the worlds of the afterlife. The self is what the elves call the soul, as it is the self-awareness, the consciousness of the person. What we call the eidolon, the elves call the shape, for it has the form of a living being without the vital spark of awareness. What we call the sanctus, the soul and eidolon together, the elves call the shadow, for though it has both the shape and the awareness, it cannot exist in our world without our physical bodies, and so is like our shadows. As frequently happens, the elf terms capture the essence of a thing simply and aptly, often better than ours do.”

“You can say that again,” muttered Harry. “I can remember a name like Betwixt, and pronounce it.”

“Quite so, Mr Potter. Hence your grade of ‘Abysmal’ for Celtic Mythology in Fifth Year, and why I would not let you take Spirit Realms in Seventh Year. One mispronounced destination and you’d have ended up with Miss Sash in pre-Dynastic Egypt or among the Kargan. Still, you brought down Voldemort, which I suppose must count for something,” and she raised her eyebrows at him. “To continue. The second self. Yes, a person has only one self, one soul. The second self is another person, but one who is very close to the person in question. Winky, please go on.”

“Miss Hermione is in Betwixt, Master Harry. Her shadow is broken, her self and her shape apart and lost. Her shape does not remember she is Miss Hermione, that Miss Rose and Master Hugo await her with love and longing and tears. Her self wanders blindly seeking, bereft and weeping. Alone shape and self will not come together and, as two parts, may not Return here. If she is to Return, her Second Self must enter this land as Seeker and bring her back.”

“Is this Betwixt a real world?” said Harry. Winky looked at McGonagall.

“What defines real, Mr Potter?” said McGonagall. “It is a spirit realm but has the feel and touch of a physical world those that enter it. Though time there is not as time here.”

“So real if you’re in it. That’s real enough for me. And Hermione’s there, so someone can rescue her. This second self, someone close to Hermione. And Winky can send him there, right?”

“This task is not to be undertaken lightly, Mr Potter,” said McGonagall. “Once sent, the Seeker is committed: he or she cannot change their mind. The only way back to our world is by Returning with the Awakened sanctus. The failure rate is very high. Overall, only one Seeker in many hundreds succeeds. The others don’t come back. Neither does the lost one.”

Harry shrugged. “Bad odds, I agree. But how many of them were aurors? I’ve had twenty-five years of fighting dark magic. I reckon the odds on me would be a lot better.”

“They’d be even better on me,” said Bill. “Spell breaking is my field, Harry.”

“Gentlemen,” said Abraxas, “this sounds like neither dark magic nor spell breaking. It sounds like...
searching through a dark, desolate land looking for someone. I spent twenty-eight years in a dark and desolate place. I am the obvious candidate for this.”

“Me,” said Ron. “It’s got to be me.”

McGonagall shook her head, but merely said, “Winky?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Winky looked at Rose. “For her new mistress’s sake, Miss Rose, may Winky speak above her place?”

“Winky,” said Rose, “all that matters is bringing my mother back. Please say everything you want to.”

Winky inclined her head to her, then turned to Harry, Bill and Abraxas, bowing from the waist to each in turn. “Winky will speak plainly, even to mages. If Miss Hermione is to come home to the Land of Warmth, someone must Seek her. Seeking her means doing three tasks. First the Seeker must Find her, her shape. Then she must be Awakened, her self and her shape brought into one again. And lastly the Seeker must Return with her: together they must journey to the Place of Departure and come home. No witch or wizard in our world knows what must be done to carry out any of these tasks, or how they may be done. Neither do they know why some Seekers succeed and others don’t, nor who might be a successful Seeker. Elves too do not know the What or the How, but elves know a little, just a little, of the Why and the Who. Lore handed down from ages past tells us of the Why, in *The Lay of the Seeker,*” and Winky started to chant softly.

*A heart with no armour, a heart that will weep*

*For self and for others, yet still faith will keep*

*A heart to keep striving, through hope and despair*

*A heart to keep loving, though love be flayed bare*

*A wall to be cloven, a passage to make*

*Through shape and through shadow, that sanctus may Wake*

*The tools in the darkness, these tasks to enspan*

*Are tears and to offer all that one can*

*To seek without knowing, this journey to dare*

*For knowing is damning, ill will the wise fare*

*Though going in anguish, the way still discern*

*That Seeker and lost one alone may Return*

Silence followed, until Harry said, “Hell, that could mean anything. A wall and a passage through shadow and shape?” He looked at McGonagall. “Any ideas, Professor?”
“Several, Mr Potter, but overriding them is the prohibition that to know the meaning is to be damned to fail. The Seeker must enter this land innocent of the knowledge and skills to succeed, but with the characteristics of courage and fortitude, and an open and loving heart.” She paused, looked around, her gaze resting briefly on Rose. “Still, one message is very clear: for the Seeker who Returns, the journey will be emotionally harrowing.” Rose nodded. Love be flayed bare and Going in anguish. She didn’t envy whoever was chosen to go.

“The anumcara is correct,” said Winky, bowing to McGonagall. “Elves too do not know the meaning, but elves know it to be true. Let Winky now tell of the Who.” She turned to Harry. “Master Harry Potter is a great warrior, none greater, Winky knows. Master Harry has been to the anteroom of that place, and Returned. For combat, Master Harry would be best. For the twists and turns of ancient spells, Master William would be best. For walking longest with the world on his back, Master Abraxas would be best. Mr Ronald,” she paused, looking at him, “the guilt is not enough.”

She looked back at Harry. “Perhaps the master warrior, the spell master, or he who can keep striving when all seems lost, can find Miss Hermione and take her to the Place of Returning, so great is their strength and wisdom. Though Betwixt is not as Here is: that land will endure no magic. Still, Winky knows, yes, Winky knows it is more than magical lore that makes these wizards mages.

“For the Awakening, to be brave and strong, learned and cunning, steadfast and everlasting as a rock, is not enough. The keystone to the Awakening is love. Miss Hermione loves Master Harry and Master William, but as brothers, and it is not enough. The love bond between Master Abraxas and Miss Hermione is as strong as any Winky has ever seen, but Master Abraxas cannot Awaken Miss Hermione.

“For the Awakening, to be mage is both not enough and too much. The wise in lore and life cannot reach Miss Hermione. In Betwixt, strength is weakness and weakness is strength. Only one love and only one person can reach Miss Hermione to Awaken her. The love between parent and child, and Miss Rose. Miss Rose is her mother’s Second Self.”
Of course: not a second self or even the second self, but her mother’s second self. It was not a matter of choosing; it was predetermined. But her? It had never crossed her mind that she might be the one. Not with all these powerful witches and wizards around. Though if the love between parent and child determined it, then: yes. What could be stronger than the bond between her and her mother? Still, even given that, could she do it? She squeezed her eyes shut. She must, for no one else could. Her love must carry her through.

But would she be allowed to try, for, “No way,” said Harry and Ron at the same time, and Bill nodded.

“Just a moment,” said Abraxas. “I agree, Rose going there is the last thing we want. But if it is the only way, and I go with her, then that is what we must do.”

Winky shook her head. “Only one may Seek, Master. Betwixt may be entered and crossed alone only.”

Now Abraxas too was shaking his head.

“Rose-” He stopped and gestured to Ginny.

“Rose cannot go. Hermione would absolutely forbid it,” said Ginny.

Rose was going to have to fight for this. Everyone was against her.

Then McGonagall spoke. “I agree, Ginevra, that her mother would forbid it. However, I would point out that Hermione did things that her own mother - and I - would have forbidden had we know about them, not once, but many times, year after year.”

“Exactly,” said Rose. “You all did. You never asked anyone, you just did it. So why shouldn’t I?”

“Look,” said Harry, “before we start chasing our tails here, what success rates are we talking about? For daughters seeking mothers? Fifty-fifty? Sixty-forty? Winky?”

Winky bowed her head. “Master Harry, Winky does not know numbers but Winky knows, yes, Winky knows that few return.”

“Few? Winky, do you have first hand knowledge of this?”

“Master Harry, only one, one in Winky’s families down the years, and that one, that one, that Winky sent, she …” Winky’s head sank lower and lower as she spoke.

“That one … didn’t come back?”

Winky shook her head. A tear dripped down her face.
“And yet you are willing to send Rose?”

Winky seemed to shrink and McGonagall said, “Harry Potter! Think what you are saying, whom you are attacking. If it wasn’t for Winky we wouldn’t even have this opportunity.”

Harry passed a hand over his brow. “Yeah, right. Sorry, Winky. I know you would do anything to help Hermione. But to send Rose…”

“We have no good options, Mr Potter,” said McGonagall. “Only bad, very bad and hopeless. But you want numbers, so let’s quantify those as best we can. Not much data is available as legal errantes sanctus spells are usually performed under strictly controlled and monitored conditions, so seldom go wrong. The ones that do go wrong are those performed illegally, such as Virtus vitalus oblatio, and, as they are illegal, tend to be underreported. So the data we have is from Dilys Derwent’s time, the mid-1700s, and earlier, when the law was both lax and laxly applied. Yes, mothers and daughters do have the greatest chance of success, but even then: Of fifty-one daughters Seeking their mothers in the three hundred and fifty years prior to about 1700, seven came back.”

“Hell,” said Harry. “That’s odds of less than seven to one against. You’d be better off trying to kill yourself playing Russian roulette. Sorry, Rose, it’s out.”

“And Mum?” Rose was almost in tears.

“I’ll go,” said Abraxas.

“Yeah?” said Harry. He looked at McGonagall. “What are the odds there, Professor? Men seeking loved women.”

McGonagall raised her eyebrows. “Relationship details are not available, Mr Potter. However, of five hundred and fifty who sought lost ones of the opposite gender in the same age bracket, twelve returned.”

“About one in fifty, Mr Malfoy,” said Harry. “Even more suicidal than daughter-mother odds.”

“For you, Mr Malfoy,” said McGonagall, “they are worse. Of those twelve, ten of the seekers were under twenty years of age. This suggests that something about youth is vital, that maturity and experience not only do not help, but may even worsen the odds. Thus the words in the Lay, ill will the wise fare, and Winky’s words that the wise in lore and life cannot reach Hermione.”

“Professor, I accept that the elvish Lay, Winky’s comments and your statistics weight against me. I would dispute, though, that they rule me out. Remember that Miss Granger and I share an unusual and powerful link. Surely the amaura must affect the odds?”

“It does, Mr Malfoy. But – I’m sorry – it is already factored in. Both successful over-twentys created amauras with their lost soul.” McGonagall spoke softly. “Worse: one was a woman, Still worse, we know of others who had it, men and women, and did not Return. Your odds, Mr Malfoy, may be anything from one in five hundred - at best - to one in thousands.”

“Odds like those,” said Harry, and he shook his head, “All your ducks in a row is not enough. You need luck, Mr Malfoy. A hell of a lot of luck.”

“I don’t believe in luck, Mr Potter.”

Harry exhaled. “Neither do I. Except bad luck, which is what we have here with Hermione. No, it’s just my way of saying that you don’t stand a snowball’s.” He walked across to put a hand on
Abraxas’s shoulder. “Mate, if rock-solid perseverance and pure guts could bring Hermione back, my galleons would be on you. But they can’t. Strength is weakness and weakness is strength, Winky says, and the professor has put numbers to it. Bottom line: you need some quality that a young girl looking for her mother has, and, not being one, you don’t have it. Don’t know where that leaves us, because Rose can’t go.”

“Precisely. So if Hermione is going to die there anyway, it’s worth me giving it a try, Harry.”

“Look, mate, I know how you feel,” and he glanced at Ginny. “But Hermione wouldn’t thank you for just throwing your life away.”

“Master,” said Winky, “Winky has looked down that path and seen only darkness.”

“Have you seen light down Rose’s path, Winky?” said Abraxas.

Winky shook her head. “No paths in Betwixt show light, Master. Winky cannot see the future, only what may be. But Miss Rose’s path is lighter than the master’s, lighter than anyone’s.”

“If it is all down to what may be, it may be that I will succeed.”

“You won’t, Mr Malfoy,” said Rose. “Winky has just said so. Over and over again. You’ll just waste my mother’s sacrifice.” Her voice was trembling but she couldn’t stop it.

“Rose, she’ll never know.”

“I’ll know, Hugo will know, that … that she gave her life for you and you … you threw the gift away.”

“Oh, Rose. What would you have me do? Live an empty life without her?”

“No. Live a full life with her. Let me go.” Now she was struggling to keep her voice from breaking.

“Rose, Rose. Against those odds?”

“Rose.” Bill’s voice. She swung round. His face was sombre. “Rose, love, I wouldn’t go with those odds. Fifty:fifty, no hesitation. Two to one against, yes, because I have years of dealing with difficult situations in dark places. For Hermione, I’d risk four to one against. But seven to one against? Those odds are all but suicide.”

“But no one else can do it! Either I go or Mum dies.” Didn’t they understand that?

“Rose, sweetheart,” said Ginny gently, “Your mum would rather die than have you risk your life.”

“You think I don’t know that? You think I don’t know she’d sacrifice her life for me and for Hugo? Is that any reason I shouldn’t do the same?” She could feel the tears running down her face.

“Do we have the right,” McGonagall was looking round as she spoke, “to decide what Rose may or may not do? I do not believe we have. I believe this decision is for Rose to make. Her age is relevant only before the law. Before us, here, it is her maturity that matters. From my knowledge and experience of Rose, I believe she is sufficiently mature.”

“She’s not going,” said Ron. “I forbid it.”

McGonagall glanced at Rose and raised her hand, forestalling her outburst. Then, looking at Ron, she said, “You do not have the moral right to forbid it, Mr Weasley. Your daughter denies you that. You may have the legal right, but if you invoke that, you will destroy whatever can still be
salvaged of your relationship with your children.”

Ron stared at her. It was true, thought Rose, and her father was realizing that.

But Ginny said, “Professor, no! How can you put her life in danger like this! Rose is only sixteen. That is not mature and she would be going against her mother’s wishes.”

“And you never went against your mother’s wishes, Ginevra? Or mine?”

“That was completely different, Professor.”

“Was it, Ginevra? And I am not putting her life in danger. I am saying it is her decision.”

“Oh,” said Ron, “ducking responsibility? I notice you’re not offering to risk your life.”

McGonagall just gazed at him. “Mr Weasley, I have a Peverell clock at Hogwarts. On it are the icons of six women, women who were my students through the years, whom I loved as I would have my own children. Your sister is one. Hermione is another. If I live that long, I expect your daughter to join them. If I could enter Talamb na Anamacha Caillte instead of Rose, and save Hermione, I would.”

Her? On McGonagall’s clock? It would be attention-drawing and embarrassing, but she had to do it. Rose went to her and stood on tip-toe to kiss the withered cheek. “Thank you, Professor. I’m glad you can’t. We need you too much.”

McGonagall hugged her. Her eyes were glistening. Rose felt the moisture collecting in hers. McGonagall, showing emotion openly? The sky would fall next.

“Padma,” Parvati’s voice was sharp and tense, and everyone turned towards her. “Professor … Winky. Hermione’s pulse rate is dropping. Respiration … all life signs are waning.”
A desperate remedy for a desperate time

Winky sprang to Hermione’s side, and again put a finger to her temple. A moment later she turned to Abraxas and waved him forwards. “Master, forgive me, but we have no time. Miss Hermione is drifting away. She must not, she must not drift away in Betwixt. Master must support her, give her strength to stay there.”

“What must I do, Winky?” As always, in moments of crisis, Abraxas spoke quietly but deliberately.

“Master, you must call to her, must give her strength, must keep her there. You must take Miss Hermione in your arms. You must hold her tight. Master, forgive me, but what do you call Miss Hermione, your love name for her?” Winky’s huge eyes were fixed on Abraxas.

Abraxas reddened as everyone looked at him. Ginny’s lips were twitching. “Except once, I have never called her anything but Miss Granger.”

“Then that is the name she will hear, in her heart, Master, said in your way. You must call out to her in your mind, you must call to her with your heart. You must tell her, Master, you must remind her that you love her, for then she will open her heart to receive your strength. And then you must talk to her, so she stays aware, of Bansith, of the curlew calling in the morning, the wind sighing in the heather, the water splashing from the oars, cold on her skin, the sand rough under her feet running through the shallows, the scent of the wild rose. And you must tell her to wait, for her Second Self to come.”

His eyes flicked to Rose, then squeezed shut for a moment. Then he lifted Hermione to a sitting position. Miss Sash, still in her trance, moved, one limb at a time, down onto Hermione’s legs. Abraxas slid onto the bed behind Hermione, put an arm around her, then looked at Winky. “This is awkward. Shall I-”

“Lift her, Master. Lift her into your lap. Master mustn’t be shy or backward. Hug her, hold her tight and call to her, Master.”

Rose watched as Abraxas drew Hermione up against himself, her back against his chest, one arm around her waist, the other cradling her head. But … where was the glow? Was her mother’s life in that world already so withered that even the amaura could not reach her?

“Have you found her, Master?”

“I feel a connection. Yes, she is tired. More, exhausted. I am calling her … telling her that I … asking her to let me help her.” He frowned. “I feel another presence. Something else is with her, calming her, strengthening her, protecting her.”

“Miss Sash is with her,” said Winky. “The mau are protecting her.”

“I sense that she wants to flee the danger, to fly away.” He looked at Winky. “Can she fly in that place?”

“She must not, Master.” Winky’s voice was panicky. “Tell her she must not fly. Tell her to trust in Miss Sash and her brother. Remind her that they saved her before. Tell her to be still and to wait. Tell her you will help her, will look after her, Master. Tell her someone is coming for her. She cannot understand words but she can grasp feelings: calmness and safety; and she trusts you, Master, trusts in your strength and goodness and caring. Hold her tight and send her strength and reassurance.”
Abraxas nodded and closed his eyes. Then: “I sense … confusion … she senses me but does not understand … still, she is responding.”

“Life signs returning,” said Parvati, “now recovering … steadying … stabilising. Whatever you are doing, Mr Malfoy, keep doing it.”

Rose closed her eyes. She had almost, almost lost her mother. But now a glow, a faint blue, surrounded her mother and Abraxas. The amaura was working again. Her mother’s trust. How could she have ever thought her mother was too trusting! Here her trust of Abraxas had saved her. Rose blinked back the tears. Now at least they had a chance.

“It is the depths of her heart responding, Master,” said Winky. “Not her understanding, for her self is not with her. Master must keep holding Miss Hermione, keep telling her he loves her. This is the Master’s task, not to Seek and fail, but to Keep Miss Hermione’s shape in Betwixt.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “You’re out of the frame, mate. You have to stay here, to give Hermione the strength she needs. Now it’s just whether Rose goes or not.”

What was wrong with them! Her mother had almost died when they had been arguing with her just a minute ago! How much longer was she going to have to fight for this? She took a breath to start insisting again, but then …

“Sir.” Scorpius was on his feet, looking at Harry. Rose glared at him. This was family business. Nothing to do with him.

“Look, I’m sorry to break in, and you’re going to think I’ve a hell of a cheek, but, with respect, Sir, aren’t we going over the same ground we’ve just been over? Rose wants to go; she is determined to go.” He glanced at Rose, then looked back at Harry. “Rose will rip me to shreds for this, but I’ve known Rose at school for six years and I know that when she’s as determined as this, she is going to do whatever it is she’s determined about. So Rose is going to go, like it or not. She either goes now, with your blessing, or later, behind your backs. Either way it is going to happen - unless you lock her up for ever.”

Oh, he knew her, did he? And she was going to rip him to shreds, was she? Well, he knew her well enough to get that right. What a cheek! Still … he was right: she was going to go, no matter what, and they’d better realize that.

“And we don’t know how critical time is, so if she’s forced to go later, that might worsen her chances, endangering both Miss Granger and Rose. Going sooner must be better than going later.”

As they’d just seen, but nobody had grasped that except him.

“Sir, no one wants Rose to go. But she stands a much better chance than anyone else, Winky says. Yes, the odds are bad, but Rose is good. I mean: really, really good. She’s near top of the year in most everything.”

That was an exaggeration if ever she heard one. In Divination she’d been near the bottom, in Charms no more than average. She was not actually top in anything at all. She opened her mouth to put him right, then closed it: he was pushing for her.

“And she’s a fighter, and not just a fighter, but a canny fighter. If you don’t already know, her patronus is a lynx, and that says a lot.”

Well, thank you very much, kind sir. That’s just what any girl would want said about her. She held her tongue, but: Just you wait, Scorpius Malfoy.
“Scorpius,” said Draco, “This is not really our-”

“No, he’s right. He’s cut through the muddled thinking. Thanks, lad,” said Harry. He looked around at the family. “She’s determined to go and we can’t stop her. And in her shoes, Ginny, you’d have gone, I’d have gone, Ron’d have gone.”

“Harry, those were desperate times.”

“So are these, in a different way. Maybe not the world, but our world is threatened, Rose’s world is threatened. No Hermione? But that’s not why. Bottom line: it’s Rose’s choice, as Professor McGonagall says. We not only can’t, we don’t have the right to stop her. She mature, she’s as skilled as we were, maybe even more, at her age.”

“Winky has something to say,” said Narcissa.

“Yes, Miss, Winky has.” She turned to Harry. “Master Harry has not forgotten, Winky is sure, that the mau are protecting Miss Hermione from something in Betwixt. Who knows for how long they can do that? And who knows for how long Master Abraxas will have to support Miss Hermione?”

“Yeah, right, as Scorpius said too. And that settles it,” said Harry. “Our faffing around threatens both Hermione and Rose. Winky, how does she get there?”

Ginny grabbed his arm. “Harry, no! We’ll lose them both.” Bill nodded agreement.

Ron had been sitting with his face in his hands, but now looked up, shook his head and said, “You must choose, Rose. And whatever you choose, you have my blessing, for what it’s worth.”

“It is worth a lot to me, Dad, and I’m going,” said Rose. “Winky, can you send me?”

“Er,” said Scorpius. “I hadn’t actually finished.” He looked at Rose and said, “Sorry, Rose, but this is too important.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. What now? Why was he blushing?

He looked at the adults, settling his eyes on Ginny. “What I wanted to say was this. My great-grandfather and Miss Granger create the amaura together, and he is supporting her in that place. Well, Rose and I also create the amaura together.”

Rose shut her eyes. She could feel the tide of red rising up her face. So much for keeping it quiet. Ginny, Fleur, Astoria, Narcissa, as well as all the men. Why not write it in foot high letters and hang the sign in Hogwarts’ Great Hall. The lynx was bad enough, but this! She’d give him such a telling off, first chance she got. Hanged, drawn and quartered!

“So I can support Rose when she goes. She’ll be alone, yes, but not entirely. All right, I don’t know how much it helps, but if Winky thinks it does, I mean helps Miss Granger, then surely-”

Rose nudged him in the ribs. “You’re rambling. And I don’t need support, not from … anyone.” She stopped. It sounded very ungracious, but who’d asked him to get involved?

But Harry was shaking his head. “Point taken, Scorpius, son. Rosie, this is no time to get-” Rose glared at him. He might be King Harry and all that, but if he thought that gave him the right ...

“Whatever you are getting about him,” Harry went on. “He’s right. You might not like it, but if he can help, you must accept, for your mum’s sake if not for your own. This place sounds much worse than anywhere I ever went. Alone there, you are going to need all the help you can get.”
She looked at Ginny and Ginny nodded. “If it will help your mum, Rosie.” McGonagall was nodding too. So was Narcissa. None of them was smiling about it, for which she was grateful.

She scowled at Scorpius. “All right. Winky, what do we do?” Oh, that ‘we’ stung.

“You must sit at the bottom of the bed, Miss Rose, with Master Scorpius behind you, arms wrapped around like Mr Abraxas and Miss Hermione. Then I will take your hand and say the Sending spell.”

Rose closed her eyes. She was about to go to the most frightening place she had ever heard of, alone. To make it worse, she was going to sit in Scorpius Malfoy’s lap - not quite but just about. His arms were going to be around her. Her, Rose Weasley. After all she’d said about him and to him at Hogwarts. She’d never live it down if word got out. But if it helped Mum …

She turned to Scorpius. One smile, just one twitch of the lips and she’d hex him into oblivion. She pointed to the bed end. “Sit.”

Totally straight-faced, he obeyed, and she climbed on to bed and sat down in front of him. Her face was aflame, she knew. But nobody was enjoying her discomfiture, not even George, who, good-hearted though he was, would normally have been laughing at her. Uncle Harry was frowning. Of course, embarrassment meant nothing to him; all that mattered was getting the job done. The women - she dreaded looking at them, but made herself do it. Ginny had a slight smile but in an approving way. She nodded to Rose. Narcissa and Astoria did the same, but without the smile. Fleur was less reserved: nodding vigorously, giving her the thumbs up with both hands.

McGonagall, though, stepped up, took her hands and looked into her face. “Rose. The place you are going to is terrifying, and what you are going to do will be the hardest thing you have ever done. You will be alone. No one can reach you, no one can help you. All the spells you have learnt will be useless. What we, what I know and have told you of Betwixt is certainly incomplete, and some of it may even be wrong. This task will test you, your character, your courage, your fortitude to the utmost.

“The amaura is deep and powerful magic: you have seen how the bond between Mr Malfoy and your mother enabled him to bring her back when she was sinking. Accept your bond to this young man and open your heart to his help. It will strengthen you, and so help your mother.”

Rose reddened, but nodded. For her mother she would do it.

“Those odds, Rose, seven to one against: there will be a reason for them. There will be a reason that, of the fifty-one daughters who set out with love and courage in their hearts, only seven returned. That seven returned proves it is possible. That forty-four did not shows it is only just possible, that it is extremely difficult, that it takes something special. Your love for your mother is what drives you, but that love on its own is not enough. The Lay of the Seeker tells us of two key tasks you must carry out to Awaken your mother: A wall to be cloven, a passage to make; Through shape and through shadow, that sanctus may Wake. That is enigmatic, and meant to be and to remain so. It is possible that you won’t even know when you have achieved them. Likewise how: The tools in the darkness, these tasks to enspan; Are tears and to offer all that one can. What we can draw from that and, indeed, the rest of the Lay, is that the journey through Betwixt will be emotionally traumatic.

“But we can also draw from the Lay the character traits that are necessary if you are to succeed: courage and fortitude; empathy and compassion; and being able to keep faith with what you believe is right and the belief others have in you. One characteristic is tucked away: the way still discern. I believe that refers to the ability to analyse logically; the capacity, even when you are distressed or
despairing, of being able to assess the situation you are in and choose the best - or least bad - way forward. I believe it will prove as vital as the others.

“Rose, you have all those characteristics and abilities, and you are strong in all of them. Your struggle, Rose, will be to keep going. You will reach a stage when any and every action seems pointless, when everything seems against you, when the tasks ahead seem impossibly great. At times you will doubt everything: your mother’s love, your courage, your fortitude, your conclusions and decisions.

“You will be under pressure, Rose. Pressure of time, pressure of events, but above all, pressure of emotion. This is what the Lay tells us. You will feel anguish, despair, self-doubt, even fear; debilitating, draining, immobilizing emotions. Fight them by believing in yourself, your love, your mother’s love. Hugo believes in you, Winky believes in you, Scorpius believes in you, I believe in you. Everyone here believes in you, that you can Find, Awaken and Return with your mother. But you will have to dig deep within yourself to do this. And … Rose?”

“Yes, Professor?” McGonagall had an almost pleading look on her face.

“May I … may I give you a mother’s blessing? Something I was never able to give Hermione.”

“Oh, yes, Professor, please.”

McGonagall bent and put her lips to Rose’s brow.

“Thank you, Professor. I will share it with Mum when I find her.”

“Rose.” Abraxas was looking at her. “Rose, following on from what the professor told you: a time will come when you will feel you cannot go on, that it is too difficult, too demanding, too draining for anyone to endure it. When that happens, just think: what is the next step, the smallest thing I must do to move on. Then force yourself to go through the mechanical process of doing it. Small steps, tiny steps, one at a time. Gradually it will become easier. Make yourself remember, Rose: there is always a choice. Even at the nadir, there is a choice: give up or go on.”

“You sound as though you’ve been there, Malfoy,” said Ron. “How do you know she can survive?”

“I have not been there, but I have been in dark places, Mr Weasley. I was imprisoned in Nurmengard by Voldemort and spent many years there. Self-doubt, draining morale, despair: what Rose will experience, I have experienced. How do I know she can survive? I don’t, of course, but three factors make me think she can. The first is that some do go and return, so it is possible. The second is that Winky would not suggest sending her if there was no chance of her surviving. The third reason I believe that Rose has a reasonable chance of succeeding is because, as my great-grandson has said, and Professor McGonagall has summed up so admirably, Rose is exceptional: she is her mother’s daughter and she has Weasley blood. But Rose, it will take everything you’ve got. Come,” he looked at Winky. “We gain nothing and risk much by delaying. The sending spell, if you please, Winky.”
This was weird. One moment she was sitting on the bed, looking at her mother’s blank face in the lamplight, the next, here, in all but darkness. It was like a winter’s evening, after sunset. Rather, the light was: just enough to see the length of a Quidditch pitch or so. Beyond that, just silhouettes of great boulders against a dark sky.

But the land was like no winter scene she had ever seen. Winter had life; dormant, but life. Trees, bushes, grass. This place had not only no sign of life but no sign of death, no tree stumps or roots, nothing to show that something - anything - had once lived here. She looked behind her: the same nothingness. It was like a desert, a flat desert of stones and rocks and sand. A plain, but as empty of life as the moon. Empty, empty, empty.

Not even colour: just shades of grey. Grey sand, grey boulders, grey sky.

And the silence. Not a quiet, retiring silence, not just an absence of sound, but a brooding silence, a dark, ancient silence, and if you broke it, something might waken and come looking for you. She found herself taking shallow breaths, as if deep breaths might make too much noise.

She shivered. Like all girls, she avoided lonely places, places in which danger might lurk. But this place was the loneliest ever. She was alone, alone as never before. She felt exposed and vulnerable. What was she doing here, a sixteen year old without even her wand for protection? Anything, anyone could be lurking out there, hiding behind one of those great boulders, waiting to grab her as she walked past. What chance would she stand? None. Who could help her, who would even hear her if she screamed? She wrapped her arms around herself.

And her mother was here? She turned right around, peering into the gloom. Nothing, just stillness and the silence. So where was she to look? Why hadn’t Winky told her what to do, instead of just abandoning her here? Yes, the Seeker cannot know, according to the Betwixt Lay, but this – she looked around again – this was hopeless. Her mother could be anywhere. She could have walked off in any direction. Maybe she hadn’t even started from the same point. Even though her mother had set out from the same point as her, the bedroom at Bansith Cottage, who was to say they had arrived at the same point in this place?

No, this was impossible. How could she ever think she’d be capable of finding her mother in this … this nether-world? Back there it had been easy to say she could do it, and she’d have been outraged if anyone had suggested she couldn’t handle it. But now, here, this was the real thing. Brave words were just words: here she had to do it, and … she couldn’t. She wasn’t uncle Harry, determined, battle scarred and tough; she wasn’t Ginny, bold, daring and quick; she wasn’t her mother, brave and clever and analytical. She was, really, just a schoolgirl, and she wanted to sit down and cry. She was, really, just another butterfly. She just wanted to go home. She’d admit she wasn’t brave enough. And they would comfort her, and tell her she was right, and that it was too much for her; would be too much for anyone.

And Ginny would take Hugo away, for Rose would have betrayed him, and his eyes if not his words would tell her so. And Scorpius wouldn’t say anything, but just quietly leave. And Abraxas would also quietly leave, but he would come here, and he would not lose courage, he would search until he found Hermione or died in the attempt. But he wouldn’t bring her back: he could not reunite her soul with her eidolon. Only the most powerful of love bonds, where blood bound parent and child, was strong enough to reforge her mother’s sanctus, Winky had said. Only she could save her mother, and she just wanted to sit down and cry.
But she couldn’t, because … her mother would die. And so would she. She was here now. She must go on, and do what she could. If she failed, she failed. But … others had been here and got back.

Had all the girls seeking their mothers felt like this? The forty-four who had failed: had some of them arrived and just … fallen apart? But the seven who had succeeded, the ‘seven wise maidens’, they had mastered themselves, and gone on. She clung to that thought. If she panicked or despaired, that just drained her. McGonagall had said she’d reach a stage when she’d feel despair, that she’d feel that everything was against her, that the tasks ahead were impossibly great. Yes, but for that to happen the moment she arrived? And if her predicament was this hopeless now, what would it be like later? More hopeless than hopeless?

Get yourself together, Weasley. Otherwise there won’t be a later. What had McGonagall said about dealing with it? Rose had scarcely listened to her, so eager had she been to leave. If she had only known! Believe in yourself. Philosophy, just what Rose needed right now. Thanks, Professor, but how about something a little more practical?

Abraxas had been practical: Take the smallest step. Work out what to do and take the smallest step to do it. He spoke from experience. How much hopelessness must he have felt during all those years in Nurmengard? Find the smallest step, then make yourself do it. Like a machine, without feelings. Take the step. Then another. Then another.

What was the first small step? To find her mother. How, how? She felt the despair welling up again, and pushed it down. No, that was the purpose. What was the smallest step to achieve the purpose? The small step was … think, girl, work it out. Use rational analysis, that ability her mother had and McGonagall told her she had.

Assume her mother started from here, because if she didn’t have that, she had nothing. Then finding her mother meant … following her. Following her meant … looking for her trail. She looked down, and noticed she was dressed in her old Levis, the pink converse trainers and the blue cable jumper her mother had hand-knitted for her. Her heart warmed a little - that was love. Though no joyful colours here: the pink and blue were just shades of grey. But the clothes were exactly what she would have chosen for this, and she hadn’t been wearing them at Bansith. No, she’d been pulling at her skirt to try to make it a little longer. More … she could feel the wand holster against her leg. She reached down, pulled out the wand and said, “Lumos.” Nothing happened. ‘The land will bear no magic,’ Winky had said, so she couldn’t expect her wand to work. Still, given her outfit, something was at work, and that was comforting.

She squatted down and stared at the ground around her. Was that a trail? Or just a pattern in the stones? She followed it a short way, and it petered out. Not a trail; just a natural pattern then. She turned back: where had she started from? She couldn’t see the pattern: had been her imagination? Or was the land acting against her? If it was, she had no chance of succeeding.

She felt panic rising and forced it down. She hadn’t taken more than ten steps. She took ten back again and looked around: Yes, this looked right: there was the pattern again. She’d build a little cairn, so at least she’d not lose her one fixed point.

She stooped and picked up a few stones: they were all rounded, like pebbles. This must have been a river or a sea, once. That was good, that thought. She was making connections, putting things into context, not being a butterfly. She placed the pebbles in a pyramid, but as she turned to gather more, she heard a sliding sound. The heap had collapsed. She picked up two of the pebbles again and looked at them: they were not just rounded, they were perfectly round. She tried to make a pyramid again and again it collapsed. Why? One could make a pyramid of glass marbles, so why
not these?

Because you weren’t allowed to leave beacons in this place? Must be. Her heart sank, but then rose again: if there were rules here, physical laws, however odd, there must be order here, and order meant that if you followed the laws you could expect certain things to behave in certain ways. It meant that logic and reason worked here. If the laws said you couldn’t make a beacon, there was no point in wasting time and energy trying to make a beacon. It also meant, or at least implied, that the land was indifferent: it wouldn’t help her, but it wouldn’t act against her either. Good, but first she needed to test her theory.

If she couldn’t leave a beacon, could she leave a trail? She walked a few steps, dragging a shoe, than stopped and looked back. The sand and stones she had pushed aside were sliding back into place, covering her drag mark. Right, no trail either. Or not using anything from this world. What about a marker from her world? She took out a tissue and dropped it. Litter, her mind told her; bad. The tissue lay there for a moment, then seemed to just dissolve into the ground, vanishing. So even if she’d had a bag of rice, like Hansel and Gretel, it wouldn’t have helped her. As uncle Harry would say: bottom line: no marker, no trail.

If she couldn’t, the seven wise maidens also wouldn’t have been able to leave a marker or a trail. So that meant either that she was not supposed to move, which seemed very unlikely, or that her arrival point was not important, that one could Return from somewhere else. And that was a relief, because it meant she needn’t worry about how she would get back here.

So her mother could have not left a trail. But there must be something, otherwise the seven wise maidens would not have been able to find their mothers. Or had they just started earlier, as soon as their mothers had gone, and seen them nearby? And she hadn’t because Uncle Harry and Ginny and everyone had been arguing about whether they’d let her go or not. Using up vital time, and in that time her mother had walked off. Only when Scorpius had spoken up had they let her go. And Scorpius was supporting her here, through their amaura. Their amaura. Hers and his. Her life had abruptly switched direction; she was now irrevocably linked to someone else. How would it work out? She gave herself a shake: if she didn’t Return there would be nothing to work out. So get on with the job. Still, she felt better. She was alone, but not entirely.

Whatever the situation had been for the seven wise maidens, she was in this one. No mother and no trace, no physical trace of her. What else could there be? A psychical trace? Was there such a word? Something she could sense with her mind rather than see, anyway. The laws of nature were different here, she’d found that out. What worked in her world did not work here. Maybe some things worked here that didn’t work there. A sixth sense? Could she sense her mother’s presence? She could try. How? She imagined her mother dressed, not that old-lady nightie Rose had last seen her in - that would be cringeworthy - but in the tweed outfit she’d worn yesterday - she’d looked good in that - and turned slowly, her eyes shut, seeking . Once, twice, three times. The third time she had a faint sense of pulling, stopped and looked. Between those two boulders, just on the edge of sight? Or was it hopeful imagination?

Give it a go, girl, you’ve got nothing else. She walked towards the two boulders, scanning the ground, just to be sure. No trail. So it was ‘psychical sensing’ or nothing. And nothing didn’t bear thinking about.

She passed - warily - between the two boulders and stopped. Where next? Slightly left, to the right of that large rock she could just see. And so she went, stopping at each landmark, trying to sense where to go next, but never really knowing whether the ‘pull’, the sense that her mother had passed here, was real or just her hopeful imagination. Soon she was climbing a steepening slope, her waypoints stones rather than boulders and rocks. And was the ‘pull’ becoming weaker? Perhaps it
faded with time. Walking faster, she reached the top of the rise and began to descend again. Another plain. She was striding out now, afraid that the sense of passing might just dissipate. But she had to be careful, she had to be sure of the direction, because if it was fading, she’d never find it again if she lost it. But surely her mother was close: she had set out about an hour after her mother’s sanctus had finally vanished. If it was this faint after an hour, it would vanish after two. And if it hadn’t been for Scorpius, she might still be back there arguing.

That took courage, what he’d done. To her, Harry Potter was just uncle Harry, whom she’d known all her life. But she knew from Hogwarts that to others he was a towering and a daunting figure. Add that aura to his forthright manner, and she could readily understand that others might be wary, even scared of approaching him. Scorpius had not only approached him but challenged him, telling him he was wrong, that he was endangering Rose and her mother by delaying her. And he’d done it for her. That gave her a warm feeling.

She reached a clear patch of sand, and slowed, reaching out with her mind for the ‘pull.’ Was it that way, slightly to the left, or straight ahead? Left felt slightly stronger, so she hurried on, but when she reached the edge of sight, she couldn’t sense anything. She stopped, turning this way and that, trying to imagine her mother standing, walking, sitting. Nothing. She turned full circle, reaching out, then again, and again. Nothing. No sense of her mother’s presence, of her passing at all. She’d either lost the trail or it had dissipated.

Now what? What could she do? She’d lost the trail. How could she ever find her mother in this vast, empty land without the trail? She couldn’t even see more than a hundred paces or so. How could she ever have believed that she could come into this place and find her mother? She was just a teenager, how could she – stop it, stop it; get a grip, Weasley. Yes, it was true, but falling apart wouldn’t help. Fight the despair, girl. But how? Work out what to do, break it down into small steps, then do it. But she’d lost the trail, she’d lost the trail. Even the smallest step meant walking, following the trail, and there was no trail. Just do your best, girl, that’s all you can do.

All right, accept there is no trail. Should she walk on, in the hope of picking it up again, or turn back to the last point at which she could sense it? One or the other. Walking on would never work: the trail so far had twisted and turned all over the place. She turned and tried to pick out where she’d come from. Was it there, that patch of whitish sand? She walked to it, stopped, then scanned around. Nothing. Right, go back to the next point, that group of pebbles. She walked to it, stopped, and scanned around again. Nothing. Right, go back to the next point, that boulder. Was this right? Or were her recollections all mixed up? Was she just getting more and more lost? The sense of despair grew.

‘She’s good, I mean, really, really good,’ Scorpius had said. Well maybe he thought so, which could be flattering, but she wasn’t. Not like her mother, top in everything. And anyway, what schooling had she ever had for finding someone in a nowhere land? She’s a fighter, Scorpius had said. Well, this was one fight she was losing.

She reached the boulder and scanned around again. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. What was the point in going on? She’d lost the trail, and so, her mother. She was going to join the forty-four girls who had failed, the forty-four who had never brought their mothers back, who had never returned themselves. The foolish maidens. She’d been foolish to come here, to think she had the guts to cope with this terrible place, let alone the smarts find her mother in it. So now there would be forty-five. She would be just another number, a warning to the big-heads. Hugo would grow up without mother or sister. Scorpius would forget the amaura, and tie up with someone else. Rose is exceptional, they’d said. Hah, if only. Exceptional at panicking, at giving up, yes.

Oh, stop wallowing, Weasley. Get a grip, will you! At every setback you just fall apart. It’s not
helping. McGonagall had warned her about negative emotion, despair and all that, and here she was wallowing in it. Courage, fortitude and rational analysis. So far she’d shown as much of those as a day old kitten. Even a lynx kitten. So start earning everybody’s good opinion.

And, by the way, she wasn’t looking to tie up with Scorpius Malfoy anyway.
The lost child

So, rational analysis: if there’s no trail to follow, what else could she do? Make for the highest point, to look around? What, Weasley, in this light? A rubbish idea: you’d see no more from the top of a hill than from the bottom. But … if it is so gloomy, you might see a fire in the distance, a fire lit as a beacon. Another rubbish idea: even if someone wanted to light a fire, there is nothing to burn here.

Images of her mother and the Devil’s Snare below the Cerberus trapdoor in her first year: *But there’s no wood.* And her father’s caustic response: *Are you a witch or not?* No help here, clever clogs: no magic in Betwixt. Anyway, from what she’d gathered back in Bansith Cottage, her mother was in no state to help herself, let alone someone else, even to rescue her.

That was the problem with analysing: you saw all the flaws in your ideas. *That is the point, Rose,* McGonagall would say, eyebrows raised. *You analyse the situation, devise possible solutions, and analyse again to choose the best one.* But … what happened if there was no best one, not even a good one? What happened if all options were rubbish?. What did you do then? Sit down and cry? Which was what she felt like doing. But that, beyond doubt, would be the most rubbish option. What would be the least rubbish?

To keep going back the way she’d come, as well as she could remember it, then climb that hill. Rubbish, yes, but not as hopeless as sitting down and crying. *Slide into that pit, girl, and you might not be able to climb out again.*

So, back along the way she’d come. Was it that way, or … was that movement there, just on the edge of sight? She peered into the gloom. Maybe … maybe not, but if it was. She started hurrying towards it. Yes, something definitely, disappearing into the gloom.

Could it be her mother? Her heart leapt. But … why would her mother be running away from her? And if it wasn’t her mother, what was it? As she understood it, Betwixt had no living creatures, no living anything, just the lost souls, and they were invisible. The only visible beings here should be her and her mother.

Could it be something trying to trap her? Snare her in a web like Aragog’s spiders? She’d have to risk that: she was desperate. The shape disappeared behind a boulder, and she broke into a run. If she lost it, she lost her only hope.

She rounded the boulder, and there it was, a small, dark figure, smaller than her, hurrying away. “Hello, please wait,” she called, and ran after it.

It turned, bent down, picked up a stone and raised it to throw. “Get away from me. You are a Thing. I stone Things.” It was a girl’s voice, young and frightened.

“I’m not a thing,” said Rose, stopping near her. “I just want to talk to you.”

“How do I know you’re not a Thing? Just because you’re warm and bright …”

What did warm and bright have to do with it? “I’m a girl, like you.” Was she a girl? She looked it, a little girl of about five, dressed in her mother’s robes, far too large, half of them dragging on the ground behind her like a bridal train, the hood fallen over her face, the sleeves rolled right back.

“Then why are you chasing me? I was coming to you, looking for a friend, and then you turned and started chasing me.”
“I wasn’t chasing you. I’m looking for someone, and I saw you. So I followed you, just to talk to you.”

“The Thing is always following me, so I throw stones at it, and it cries and goes away. But then it starts following me again. I hate it. You are a girl?”

“Yes. I just want to talk to you.”

“A real girl?” And she moved closer, slowly, holding the stone ready to throw.

“Please, put the stone down. Girls don’t like having stones thrown at them.”

The small figure dropped the stone. “If you are really a girl, will you be my friend?” She pushed back the hood.

Oh! The shoulder-length hair was white and the face an adult’s, marked with a lifetime’s trauma, lined and furrowed. More than that, much more, was whose face it was. She’d seen pictures: the burning, black-ringed eyes set in the ghastly pale face; the glaring, fanatical expression. Repulsive but also fascinating: a study in the macabre. And here was the original. “You!”

The small figure took a step closer and held out her hands in supplication. “Why are you sending cold? Are you angry? What have I done? I won’t throw any stones, I promise. Please be my friend.”

Who did she think she was fooling? An adult’s face would surely mean an adult’s mind. That adult’s mind, steeped in evil. “I know who you are, don’t think I don’t.”

The ghoulish face brightened. “You do? Tell me, tell me. I haven’t had a name for so long, and I do so want one. And tell me your name. You will be my friend, won’t you?”

Friends with the woman who had tortured her mother? She must be the most brazen hypocrite. “You are Bellatrix Lestrange.”

“Bellatrix.” She clapped her hands together, laughing. “I have a name now. Bellatrix. Thank you so much. I like that name. I don’t like the other one, that you said. It has bad air around it. I will throw it away.” She cupped her hands as if holding a bird, then threw it away from herself. “There, it’s gone. And what is your name, so we can be friends?”

“Do you really not know who you are, what you’ve done?”

The furrowed brow creased. “You’ve just told me who I am. And I didn’t throw a stone at you, did I. So I’ve done nothing. And I do so want a friend.”

Her words, her gestures, her body language had the innocence of a child. If she was acting it out, she was amazingly convincing. “What are you doing here?”

“Walking and walking and walking and walking. I’ve been walking here forever, looking for someone to be my friend. The wailers are no good, worse than no friend at all. That woman came, but she’s just another no-self, they always walk like that. And now you have come; a whole-self girl, and you don’t want to be my friend.” She looked ready to burst into tears. More and more she was coming across as genuine. But … ‘that woman’?

“A woman came?”

“Yes, she came just after that Beast, to the same place.” Bellatrix held up her hand, moving it from
side to side. “Cold, then warm. Maybe it called her. Maybe she belongs to it. But then two bright-selves came, very fierce and fighting with the Beast, so I ran away. Then I felt you, a warm whole-self like me, walking and talking, so I came to find you, to see if you could be my friend. Only three warm whole-selves have ever come before, a man and two girls. One girl said she’d be my friend but then she went into that bad place and never came back. The others weren’t nice at all, so I left them alone. I don’t like nasty people, Rose. They went wandering somewhere with their no-selves, didn’t find anywhere and faded. Everyone fades and so will you, and I’ll never have a friend.”

Surely only a child would speak like this. She used terms like whole-selves and no-selves which only she understood. She dropped hints of more, like finding anywhere and fading. And all without any attempt to explain what she meant. She had a child’s innocent self-centredness. So perhaps the face was only skin-deep. Anyway, Rose had to trust her. She had to find her mother, and she had no other guide. “Bellatrix, the woman. Where is she?”

The child waved her hand vaguely. “Over there somewhere. If you won’t be my friend, I’m not going to tell you.”

What would being a friend to this person mean? Though, again, Rose was in no position to argue. She had already tried the fruitless ‘wandering somewhere.’ “All right, I’ll be your friend.”

“You will? Hooray, I have a friend.” She clapped her hands together. “What is your name?”

“My name is Rose. Will you tell me where the woman is now?”

“If I am your friend, Rose, we can do things together, and you don’t need the woman. Anyway, she can’t be your friend. She’s a no-self, I told you.”

A no-self was someone without self? Self was what Winky called the soul: self-awareness, consciousness of oneself as an individual. So a no-self must be what Winky called a shape and McGonagall the eidolon, the physically active but awareness-deficient part of the sanctus.

McGonagall had said she believed the sanctus broke apart in Betwixt, and Bellatrix was telling her that Hermione’s had. Rose had expected it but still, dismay and fear for her mother rose up within her. “She’s my mother, Bellatrix. I must find her. That’s why I’m here.”

Bellatrix scowled. “Why must you find her? What is a mother?”

What a question! Surely there could be no duplicity here. Somehow Bellatrix Lestrange had regressed to a stage of innocence in mind as well as body. She was now Bellatrix Black, aged five or six. Just the face remained, as the mark of Cain. What did a mother mean to a five year old? “A mother, Bellatrix, is someone who loves you more than anyone else in the whole world.”

The child’s eyes widened. “Really? Oh, I would like a mother.” Then the brow creased again. “I think … I think I had one once. But she didn’t love me. She only loved herself. I don’t have anyone who loves me. No one at all.” Her head drooped.

Indifference and selfishness from the most important person in a child’s world? How hurtful that must be! Rose thought of how, when she was a toddler, her mother’s face would light up when she saw her, how she would kneel and hold out her arms so Rose could run into them for a hug and a kiss. And Bellatrix had been denied that. No wonder she tried to purge the memory of such a person, even to blot out the very concept of a mother. “Bellatrix, don’t be sad. You have sisters who love you, who cry for you.”

Her head came up. “I do? They cry for me because they love me?”
“Yes, they do. I have met one of them. Her name is Narcissa, and she loves you, and is sad about you. And if you will help me find my mother, I will help you try to get to a better place, a place where there will be people to love you.”

“My sister Narcissa, who loves me?”

“Narcissa is not there yet, but your other sister, Andromeda, she is there.”

“I would like that. But you won’t be there, and you are my friend. Do you love me?”

This was tricky. The adult Bellatrix had tortured her mother. To blame the child for the adult’s deeds was wrong, but, in Rose’s mind, the name had been synonymous with evil for so long … The child Bellatrix could not be expected to understand that, though. She would just see rejection, and she had already had so much rejection. “To really love someone, Bellatrix, you have to know them. I … love your sister Narcissa, so if you are like your sister, I would love you too.” This was the most blatant skipping around the truth. “I won’t be going to that place with you, but I will be coming later. “ Much, much later, she hoped. “First I must find my mother. Will you help me?”

Bellatrix looked at her, then shook her head slowly. Her eyes were wide. “Scary creatures are fighting over her. The Thing will be there too now. If you find her, Rose, the dark-selves will find you.”

She didn’t want to be found by creatures with terrifying names, but if that was where her mother was, she had no choice.

How could Bellatrix be persuaded? What would mean most to her? What she was starved of? Love, a mother’s love. Rose was carrying a symbol of love, a gift to her and her mother. Would it be a betrayal of love or trust if she gave it away? Not of love, because the giving away was an act of love, towards both Bellatrix and Hermione. Trust? No, not here. McGonagall would understand. “Bellatrix, I am carrying something very precious. If you take me to my mother, I will give it to you.”

“What is it? Can I see it?”

“No, you can’t see it because it is in my heart. But it is a most precious thing, Bellatrix. It is a mother’s blessing of love. It was given to me by a great lady, to share with my mother. But I will give it to you if you promise to take me to my mother.”

“If it is in your heart, how can you give it to me?”

“I will give it to you as it was given to me by Mother Minerva, with a kiss.”

“Mother Minerva: that’s a lovely name, a name to hug me and keep me safe. And Mother Minerva’s love blessing: I could wrap that around me, Rose, couldn’t I. Like a warm blanket. It would be wonderful to have, Rose.”

“Promise to take me to my mother, and I will give it to you, Bellatrix.”

Bellatrix held out a hand towards her. “I can feel it … Will you really, Rose? Really give it to me?”

“Yes, Bellatrix, I will. I said I will.”

“But people don’t always, Rose. They say they will, then they don’t. They cheat.”

“Not in my family.”
“In mine they do.” Her head drooped again.

“How do you remember your family, Bellatrix?”

“Just bits and pieces. Cheats and tricks and lies. Hurt. And then more hurt. I don’t want to remember.”

Oh! Not just indifference, not just lack of love, but betrayal, exploitation, even malevolence. What kind of a childhood had this girl had? Rose’s heart went out to her. Was it so surprising that she had followed - but what mattered here and now was here and now. And here and now to this child she must show faith.

Apprehensively Rose took the ghoulish head in both hands, then almost let go. Icy, Bellatrix’s body was freezing cold. Did she really believe she was warm? No matter. Steeling herself, Rose leaned forward and kissed the furrowed brow. “There. You have Mother Minerva’s love blessing.”

Bellatrix put a finger to her forehead, then spread the hand on her chest. “It’s true. It’s true, Rose, I can feel it. Oh, it is warm, so warm. You did give it to me, really and truly.” She smiled at Rose and for a moment the lines of trauma and pain smoothed away, the black-ringed eyes lightened and the clear, unsullied features of innocence shone forth. Oh! Was the blessing of a mother’s love so powerful? Of course it was: hadn’t a mother’s love turned Voldemort’s death curse when Harry was a baby? And here, Rose was sure, it had revealed the true nature of the child before her. The evil had been burned out.

“Bellatrix, will you take me to my mother now?”

“Yes, Rose, I will take you now.” Bellatrix turned in a circle, her head high, as if smelling the air. Then she pointed. "This way.”

As they walked, Rose said, “How do you know?”

“Oh, lots of ways. The bright-selves are burning hot. I can feel them from miles away.”

Like the sun’s heat? But Rose couldn’t feel any warmth, or even see any sign of light.

“And the woman is light and warm, and I can feel her too.”

Her mother had a warm heart, but that was not the same as being physically warm. Maybe here it was.

“And I can always feel the horrible Thing,” Bellatrix held out a hand, palm down, fingers splayed. “Because it is so cold.”

Colder than her? And she was icy cold; colder than a … well, a corpse, really.

“Can’t you feel them, Rose?”

“I can’t feel anything. Nothing at all. Tell me about them, Bellatrix. What are bright-selves and dark-selves?”
The denizens of Despair

Chapter Notes

Chapter 73 revised

“I don’t know what the bright-selves are,” said Bellatrix. “I have never seen even one bright-self here before, and there are two. They were growling and snarling at the Beast, and drove it away from the woman. They were scary, but I think they are good, because they are very bright and very warm.”

Two bright-selves, growling and snarling? Could they be Miss Sash and Mister Lumpy, defending her mother again? Must be, she’d seen them at it in the Bansith cottage bedroom. That would be wonderful. They would help her, Rose was sure. How much less fraught would her first few hours have been if Miss Sash had been there, walking by her side. How much easier the journey to come.

“Light and warm things are always good.” said Bellatrix. “That’s how I know you are good, and the woman is good. And you are my friend, Rose.”

“Yes, Bellatrix, I am. Did the bright-selves have shapes?”

“I didn’t stay to look, Rose, because of the fierce fighting with the Beast. I ran away. I always run and hide when the dark-self things come, because they are cold and bad.”

Would a dark-self be the soul of a dark wizard, Kissed by a dementor? McGonagall had said they came here. Yes, they deserved a place like this, unlike her mother and those like her. They’d done nothing wrong; hadn’t hurt anyone.

But … Betwixt was supposed to be a dead world with only invisible, intangible souls, and here Bellatrix was visible and tangible. From what Bellatrix said, these other creatures were too. “Bellatrix, is the Beast … walking and talking, here like you?”

“Oh, yes. I heard its growling. That’s why I hid, Rose.”

So there was a large, animal-like, recently arrived dark wizard here. Could it be Greyback? Surely not. He hadn’t been Kissed by a Dementor or been in a Errantes Sanctus spell. But Bellatrix hadn’t either, and she was here. Greyback was more beast than human, and he’d been killed not long before her mother’s errantes sanctus spell had gone wrong. A malediction - his malediction - had been blocking the return of her mother’s sanctus to her body. Yes, it was all beginning to come together, into a huge, dark, terrifying shape. Rose’s heart began racing: no way could she stand up against Greyback. His size, his strength, his bestiality. Even her mother couldn’t. Not until the cats had attacked him. But they were protecting her mother here, so they would protect her too, she was sure. Still, this land was much more dangerous than McGonagall or Winky believed.

“The Beast is big and scary, Rose, but the Darkness will swallow it up. It swallows up all the dark-selves. They never come back.”

Images arose in her mind of a huge black cloud sweeping across a plain, men and women fleeing before it, screaming in panic, but being engulfed as it overtook them. Gone, for good, who knew
where. Not a pleasant fate, but then … dark wizards were not pleasant people.

“And the Thing?”

“The Darkness has never swallowed the Thing,” Bellatrix said. “Maybe it would choke on the Thing, it is so nasty and horrible. It makes my flesh crawl. It is scaly and vile.”

“What does it do? Does it walk and talk, like you?”

“Eww, no! It doesn’t walk, it scuttles. It doesn’t talk, it whimpers and cries and thinks at you. It watches you, all the time. It tries to steal your warmth. It is the creepiest of creepies.”

What could it be? How could something think at you? How could something steal your warmth? So many questions, and Bellatrix’s answers were like random pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

So what could she deduce, starting with Bellatrix? Her self was there, but not as it had been in life. Her spirit body, her eidolon, too was different. So while she had an intact sanctus, it was not whole and undamaged. Why? In life she’d been a fiendish psychopath: she’d killed Sirius, and tortured Professor Longbottom’s parents. She’d been trying to kill Hermione and Ginny when Granny had Avadaed her. Such a person must surely be damaged - more, maimed - in mind and soul. So maybe maimed sancti came here too. And Betwixt showed the maiming by a changed body and mind: Bellatrix was a child with a child’s mind. And the Thing? A wizard so evil he had been transformed into a creature which scuttled and couldn’t talk? Could it be … no, she didn’t want to think that, it was too terrifying. She shuddered.

Grip it, girl: knowing is safer than not knowing. “Bellatrix, what does the Thing look like?”

“Horrible. Like a starving baby, with stick arms and legs.”

Rose’s heartrate rocketed. A creature like a starved baby, that whimpered and cried? Could even mau cats defend her against that? “What … what does it do?”

“It comes after me, it follows me, and when I throw stones at it, it squeals and wails, and goes away, but then it follows me again. It is scaly and vile.”

No dark magic then? No, even he would be bound by the laws of a spirit world. “Does it … try to touch you?”

“Eww! I never let it near me, Rose. It makes my skin crawl.”

Rose’s heartrate slowed. Whatever it was, Bellatrix seemed able to cope with it. And if a child could, Rose could … she hoped. So, bad, yes, but not nearly as bad as it could be.

“What does it want?”

“How should I know? I am not a Thing to know a Thing’s mind. But everything in Despair wants warmth.”

She’d said something about despair before. “What are they in despair about?”

Bellatrix looked at her. “They are in Despair. We are all in Despair.”

“In despair about what, Bellatrix?”

“In despair about being in Despair,” and she giggled. “That is the name of this place, Rose. Despair. Didn’t you know?”
“I thought it was called Betwixt.”

“Someone who has never been here might call it that. A name that is neither here nor there. A name that is neither good nor bad. But this is here, and what is here, really and deeply and truly, is Despair.”

Oh! This was an adult’s way of speaking and adult concepts. The child shell had cracks in it, and the adult was leaking through. Though in a philosophical way, not in a malign Bellatrix Lestrange way.

But what she had said, as a comment on what it was really like for those who lived here, was frightening. Though, from what Rose had seen so far, all too true.

Back to the Thing. “So everything … here wants warmth, Bellatrix?” She didn’t want to name the creature or the place: feeling what she felt was bad enough.

“Except the dark-selves. They hate everything, but hate light worst.”

“It … the Thing likes warmth but doesn’t hate light?”

“I never said ‘likes,’ Rose. I said ‘wants,’ wants like the frozen soul craves the cottage fireside. What does that mean, Rose?”

Rose blinked. Child-woman cracks again: a figure of speech from the adult’s past, the child asking what it meant. “Oh, I suppose that someone who is very lonely wants human friendship more than anything.”

“Oh. Yes, then the Thing craves, craves, craves warmth, Rose. It doesn’t like light, only the wailers and me like light, but it craves warmth more than it fears light.”

Was this yet another type of creature which lived here, the wailers, which nobody knew about? But one thing - Thing - at a time.

“How long has the Thing been here?”

“Forever. Almost as long as me.”

Forever. Eighteen years would seem like forever to an adult, let alone a child. And in this place, alone: it would be enough to unhinge anyone. But the identity of the Thing was, terrifyingly, taking form … Maybe it couldn’t do magic, but a creature so malevolent would find other ways to evil if it wanted to.

“Bellatrix-”

“My turn now, Rose. Does your mother love you? Like you said, more than anything else? I want to know, Rose.”

“Yes, Bellatrix. Me and my brother Hugo.”

“Would she love me like that if she was my mother?”

A tricky question. Best to leave some wriggle-room. “Yes, she would. If you hadn’t done anything to destroy her love.” Where was this leading?

“Oh, I would never do that. Would she love me, even though I’m not her daughter?”
This was getting complicated: she didn’t want to hurt the child’s feelings, but she also didn’t want to lie. “To love someone you have to know them, Bellatrix.” Bellatrix’s face began to crease. “But my mother knows your sister Narcissa, and she likes her very much, so if you are like your sister, she would come to love you.” That was true but … was it honest?

“Am I like my sister Narcissa, Rose?”

The trouble with dealing with children was that their openness and honesty demanded your openness and honesty. And sometimes you couldn’t be open and honest. “Deep down, I’m sure you are, Bellatrix.” Very deep down.

“Oh, good. Then you and the mother will love me, and I will love you and the mother. That will be wonderful. I hope the mother has not become a wailer.”

This sounded a bit insulting. “What do you mean? What is a wailer?”

“You can’t see them, Rose, or hear them?”

“No, I can’t. Tell me about them.”

“They are coming, Rose, because of your bright light and your bright warmth.”

Without thinking, Rose looked around her. “I don’t have a light.”

Bellatrix covered her mouth with her hand and giggled. “Silly: you are a light. That’s how I found you. It is how we are finding the mother.”

She gave off light and warmth? Was this the figurative becoming literal again? If so, her mother would, yes. People did look up to her, so she was a role model, a beacon, in that sense, and of course she was caring. So, yes, her mother had light and warmth. But her, Rose? No, big-head, you’re just a schoolgirl: who would look up to you?

It must be because she had a whole sanctus.

And her mother, even with a broken sanctus, also did. But whatever caused them, Bellatrix could sense them. This must be one of the oddities of Betwixt. Abstract qualities took form and shape, and Bellatrix had developed senses to discern them. Would she?

“The wailers can see you and feel you from all over, Rose, so they come. They have lights, but very dim, and their wailing is very faint. Wailing, wailing, wailing. They wail all the time, because they’re cold and lost, and nobody loves them.”

That sounded pretty grim. “Why might Mum become a wailer?”

“Oh, they all do. Not me, I have never slept, Rose, never, ever. But everyone else, the no-selves, even the whole-selves like you, they get tired and can’t stay awake. They fall asleep and fade into nothingness. And then there is another wailer.”

What! “Come on then, we must find her. Can’t we go faster?”

“Not here, it’s too steep. Don’t pull my arm, Rose, my friend wouldn’t do that. We are finding her, we are going there, as fast as we can.”

“But how far away is she? Bellatrix, if she falls asleep …” The wailers could be only the lost souls McGonagall had spoken about. The pieces of the jigsaw were crashing into place: McGonagall saying if the eidolon left Betwixt, reforming of the sanctus was impossible; Winky saying her mother must not drift away. Rose thought Winky had meant a physical drifting away, like an autumn leaf in the wind. Perhaps she had meant that, for elves had never been here to see it
happen. But it was a drifting away of consciousness; it was falling asleep. To sleep was to fade, and to fade away entirely was to die, or worse than die: to unwittingly condemn your soul to an everlasting bereft wandering, blind and deaf.

Her mother had almost done it once, but between them, Abraxas and Winky and Parvati, they had saved her and brought her back to life. And now Abraxas was giving Hermione the strength, the energy to stay awake. But he was in another world, and Winky had been worried about how long he could keep doing that, for Hermione was exhausted.

“We are close now, Rose. I can feel them nearby.”

They reached the brow of the hill, and ahead Rose could see two glows in the dusk. Light, the first light she had seen in this gloomy place. Her heart lifted. The bright-selves, the cats were still there, so her mother must still be there. Beyond them was a small white boulder and beyond that again was a shadow, dark against the dusk. The Beast?

But in a few moments they’d be together; her, her mother, Miss Sash and Mister Lumpy, and together they’d travel to the Place of Returning. That the Beast was there was frightening, but if he was capable of attacking, why hadn’t he already done so? He must fear the cats too much.
The missing soul

Chapter Summary

A heart to keep striving, through hope and despair
A heart to keep loving, though love be flayed bare

She began hurrying towards the two lights, but as she approached they began dimming. What was happening? “Miss Sash,” she called, but the lights became fainter and fainter until they disappeared entirely. The cats had gone! The Beast would attack now … but the shadow had gone too. Just the white boulder was left. No, where the lights had been, a figure, a person-sized figure, was lying on the ground.

Rose broke into a run. “Mum?”

A woman, a young woman with long, light brown hair. Yes, it was her mother, dressed as she had been the previous day: tweed skirt and jacket, curled into a foetal position. Rose knelt and took her hand. “Mum, are you all right?”

Hermione uncurled and sat up, and Rose took her in her arms. “Mum,” she said, and her mother’s head turned towards her. Her face was expressionless, her eyes empty.

What was this? “Mum, it’s me, Rose. Mum?”

The blank eyes looked into hers. Why wasn’t she responding? “Mum?” and she gave her shoulders a little shake.

“Her self is not there, Rose,” said Bellatrix, softly.

Oh, of course. In the joy of finding her mother, Rose had forgotten. This was her mother’s eidolon. Her soul was absent.

But … the soul was supposed to come. The love bond between mother and daughter was supposed to call it to the eidolon. They would join, forming a whole sanctus, and her mother would Awaken. But it was not happening. Why? Winky had said it would. Why wasn’t it working? Why couldn’t she Awaken her mother? What was wrong?

Then, beyond Hermione, the white boulder moved, rose up on spindly limbs, and came towards her. Like a baby, yes, but bloated, all body and head, with grey-white skin, raw and scaly. For a moment Rose stared, frozen by terror. No longer could she doubt what it was.

Then she seized her mother’s hands and tried to pull her up. “Mum! Get up, get up and come away, now, up, up.” The Thing hissed at her and clutched at Hermione’s clothing.

“No! Get away from her, get away, you horrible thing.”

The Thing wailed, a thin, high-pitched wail, scuttled forward and grabbed Rose’s leg. Its hand was skeletal, its touch was like ice, colder than ice, so cold that the grip was burning her leg, right through the denim. Huge slitted eyes stared up at her.
Bellatrix screamed and Rose, almost choked with fear, tried to pull free, crying out, “Mum, Mum, help!”

Hermione looked at her again, then turned away. Oh! Not only no Awakening, her mother didn’t even care. But then Hermione’s gaze moved to the Thing. It looked up at her, and let go of Rose’s leg. Then it squealed and scuttled back. Bellatrix had flung a stone at it.

“Get away, Thing, “she shrieked. “Get away from my friend.”

Hermione looked around. As her gaze paused at Bellatrix, the child stepped back, raising her hands against Hermione’s look. Then, head bowed and shoulders sagging, she turned and started to walk away.

“Bellatrix?” What was going on?

“She hates me. The mother hates me.” She was sobbing.

“What do you mean? She hasn’t even spoken to you.”

“She is sending cold. She likes the Thing better than me. How could she do that, Rose?” She spread her hands. “Am I bad?”

Her mother was relating in some way to Bellatrix, even to the Thing, but not to her own daughter? Still, the child was hurting. “No, Bellatrix, you’re not bad. I’m sure she doesn’t like the Thing better than you, but Mum doesn’t like violence. She doesn’t like people throwing stones.”

“But the Thing is bad, bad, bad!”

I couldn’t agree more. “I think she knows that, Bellatrix.” Or did she? Did she know what the Thing was? Maybe not, not if she couldn’t recognise her own daughter. But she was recognising something on some level, for she was responding. “Bellatrix, how does she ‘send cold’?”

“Don’t you know? Don’t you feel it?”

“No, I don’t feel anything.”

“You don’t? Your own mother and you can’t feel anything? I can, and she is not even my mother.”

That hurt. “You can feel her sending you cold, can’t you, Bellatrix.”

Bellatrix’s head fell. “Yes,” she whispered.

Oh, that was nasty. Was she being spiteful to a vulnerable, insecure five-year-old who had been starved of love? “Bellatrix, I’m sure she likes you more than the Thing.”

Bellatrix’s head came up. “Really? Do you really think so, Rose?”

“Yes, I do, I really do, Bellatrix.” That was true, even if it didn’t quite mean what Bellatrix would think it meant. “But tell me how she sends ... cold or warmth to you.”

“Will she send me warmth, Rose? Really? You sent me warmth when you said you would be my friend, and when I was leading you to your mother. But I have never, ever had as much warmth as when you gave me Mother Minerva’s love blessing, Rose. That warmed my whole body. I can still feel it, here in my heart. It is wonderful.”

So Bellatrix felt friendship, caring, love, as warmth. And cold was the opposite: dislike, rejection,
indifference. Oh yes, she could see how a child would respond to that. And the Thing? Would it also respond to those projected feelings? Was that why it was following her mother, why it had attacked Rose, seeing her as a threat to receiving warmth? Did it follow Bellatrix, who threw stones at it, who was almost as cold as it was, because it was so desperate for warmth? That was ironic, from a creature who had scorned love, scoffed at it as weakness, in its own life.

But her mother wasn’t sending her any warmth. She was cold and indifferent to her own daughter. Why? She could sense the desperate desire for love from the Thing, but not care about the hurt of her own child? No, Rose couldn’t believe that of her mother. It must be something to do with the eidolon.

Her mother’s soul, her consciousness of self, was not there, but something of her character, of a loving, caring woman was there, even in the eidolon, perhaps on a very elemental level. Hadn’t McGonagall said something like that? And it was on that elemental level that her mother was sensing the need of Bellatrix and the Thing, and responding to them. The Thing and Bellatrix, their senses sharpened by years of cold, desperate for warmth, seeking on all levels, could feel it. Rose, seeking only on a conscious, higher level, could not sense anything. She would only be able to sense emotions on the conscious level from an Awakened Hermione. Was that it? She hoped so, for the only other explanation must be that her mother didn’t care about her enough to respond to her.

But … that was the only explanation, for she had not been able to Awaken her mother. What other explanation could there be? Somehow her mother’s love for her was not enough. Why? Why should her mother not love her? If someone had challenged her with that, she would have been furious. She might have doubted her own courage, her fortitude, her cleverness; but her mother’s love for her? Never. But here, put to the test, the truth came out, naked, ugly, devastating. Her mother no longer loved her.

“Rose? Why are you crying, Rose? Are you sad because your mother is not sending you warmth?”

Why deny it? “Yes, Bellatrix. I am sad because I have lost my mother’s love.”

“I’m sorry, Rose. I lost my mother’s love too.”

“I don’t know why, I don’t know how. I don’t know what I did.”

“Did you do something, Rose? I never did. My mother never had any love to give. She was always cold. But your mother is not like that, Rose. She is warm. I can feel it.”

“I’m glad for you, Bellatrix, but she’s not warm for me.”

“Oh but she is, Rose. She is warm for everyone. Just like you, Rose.”

“Am I warm, Bellatrix?” Was she seeking comfort from the damaged sanctus of a madwoman? No, from a five year old, who would tell her the plain truth.

“You are even warmer than your mother, Rose. Warm, warm, warm. And bright, bright, bright. That’s how I found you, I told you, have you forgotten, Rose? But now you are not as warm and not as bright.”

Her light and warmth lessened when she was downhearted? “No?”

“Yes, Rose: no. And that makes me sad. It makes everyone sad.”

“Well, thank you, Bellatrix. But who is everyone?”
Bellatrix gestured around. “The wailers. They are here, Rose, gathering because of your light and your warmth.”

“Do they understand what has happened, Bellatrix?”

“No, they don’t understand anything, but they see that your light is fading and that your warmth is less, Rose. They’ve seen it before and they know what it means. I’ve seen it before too, Rose.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, I told you, don’t you remember? The whole-selves who came, the ones who were nasty to me. They were warm and bright, though never as much as you, and they wandered and wandered, and got sadder and sadder, and faded and faded. Their no-selves faded, then they did, faded right away, and then there were more wailers.”

They must have been seekers, seekers who had failed. Like her. And they had faded and … died. Like she would. She’d wander together with the mother she couldn’t Awaken. She’d wander and the feeling of despair and failure would grow. She’d lose heart, lose the will to live. Her sanctus would split, her eidolon would leave Betwixt and her consciousness, her soul, would become … a wailer. Already that ground was shifting under her feet.

“The wailers are sad for you, Rose, but much sadder for themselves.”

“Why should they be sad for themselves?”

“They were hoping for something, I don’t know what, Rose, and they are sad that the something is not going to happen.”

What could they have been hoping for? Deliverance from the Land of Despair? Yes, obviously. Though perhaps not as clear as that, just a desperate hope that the bright light would change things for the better. To do that, she would have to lead them to the Place of Departing and summon the Ferryman. And that was not going to happen now.

Only a person with a whole sanctus could summon the ferryman, and if she couldn’t Awaken her mother, she wouldn’t be travelling anywhere or summoning anyone. She’d be staying here, her mother with her, for there was no point in going on.

No point for her, but what about these bereft lost souls? She could help them, couldn’t she? Why? Why would she? It wouldn’t make her mother realize that her daughter really did love her, loved her deeply. It wouldn’t make her mother love her more, because her soul was not there to understand that. It was too late for that. Too late, a wall between them, Rose shut out.

But the lost souls were the ones whose errantes sanctus spells had wrong, through no fault of their own. Among them must be mothers and daughters, daughters who had come with love and courage in their hearts, but found one or the other was … not enough. Like her. Daughters who had come in hope and found only hopelessness, like her. Daughters who had risked their lives to help their mothers, only to find their mothers beyond help, beyond their help. Daughters who had learned that the foundation belief of their existence was just … mist. Daughters like her. A tear dripped down her cheek.

If she couldn’t help her mother, could she at least help the daughters like her? Could she help all the lost souls to escape Despair?

How could she? A girl who was so pathetic that she couldn’t even keep her own mother’s love? So feeble she didn’t even know she had lost it, or how? A girl like that, so pathetic and feeble, how
could she help anyone, lead anyone anywhere? Why would the ferryman bestir himself for such a contemptible creature?

No … no, she couldn’t. She’d come with love, she’d fought hopelessness and despair, she’d found her mother, and look what happened. Now she had no more fight left in her. She was giving up. She’d sit down, have a cry, and … just fall asleep. No more soul-searching, no more anguish, no more … torture. It was going to happen anyway; she might as well get it over.
The mission

Chapter Summary

*A heart with no armour, a heart that will weep
For self and for others, yet still faith will keep*

“Rose?” said Bellatrix. “Rose, your mother does not like what you are thinking. She is shrivelling. You are thinking bad thoughts and you must stop, Rose.”

*If only it were so simple!* But, yes, creases and lines had appeared on Hermione’s face. Was that the first stage of fading? Must be. And Rose’s negative thoughts were causing it? So … not only had she let her mother down, she was hastening her death?

Come on, pull yourself together, girl. Yes, maybe your mother is going to die anyway because of your failure, but are you going to bring it about here and now because you’re just giving up, being a total wimp?

Would her mother have given up? No, never, she’d have fought on. She’d never given up, no matter how hopeless the cause. How tiny must her chances again him have seemed. She’d not given up even when she was being tortured by … no, this child-woman was not the Bellatrix her mother had known. This was a hurt child, and one she would have wanted to help. Just as she would have wanted to help all these lost souls. She would have, even if she’d known she couldn’t help herself.

And her mother would want her to. Yes, Rose might be pathetic and feeble and contemptible, but she could give it a go, couldn’t she? She still was her mother’s daughter, even if she had somehow lost her mother’s love. Her mother would never have wimped out. And her mother was what this was all about.

“Bellatrix?”

“Yes, Rose? Your light is brighter and the mother is unshrivelling, Rose. Are you thinking happy thoughts now?”

*Happy thoughts in Despair?* “Not really. Bellatrix, is there somewhere here called the Place of Departing?”

“No place here has names, Rose, and nothing like that.”

The Thing hissed at her, and Rose looked at it. It had just been squatting there, grotesque and malevolent, on the other side of Hermione. But was it malevolent? So far it hadn’t done anything. Even now it was close to her mother but not touching her, and quiet. Was it just waiting for a good time to strike against her, Rose? Why would it wait: she was at her weakest and most vulnerable now, yet it did nothing. Was the evil there but overwhelmed by the Thing’s need for warmth? Or had it been burnt out, as it had in Bellatrix? The great slitted eyes glanced at her, and she looked away. Hard to believe there was no malevolence in such a repulsive creature. Whatever, right now it was quiet, so best to leave it. She had enough trouble without digging for more.
“Well, is there a river here, Bellatrix?”

“What is a river, Rose? There is only this.” She waved a hand around.

“A lake, any water at all? Have you been everywhere in this land, Bellatrix?”

“What’s water? I remember water. Paddling in the shallows, mayflies hovering all around. No, no water, Rose. I have been everywhere. I have been here forever, walking, walking, walking. I have been everywhere, and no water, no mayflies anywhere.”

The Thing hissed at her again, and she said, “Don’t you dare say I am lying, Thing.” She looked at Rose. “The Thing says there is a place with a name and I have not been there.”

“The Thing understands us?”

“It is a horrible place and a horrible name, that’s why I have never been there, and I will never go. I don’t want to it to be.”

Rose shut her eyes. This was all she needed: her only guide in Betwixt denying that a place existed because she didn’t like it.

“Has the Thing has been there, Bellatrix? Does the Thing know where it is, and what it’s called?”

Bellatrix pouted. “I know where it is and I know what it’s called. I am your friend, not the Thing. The Thing has never been into the Cave of Screaming either.”

Ah, right. Not a name with a warm, cuddly teddybear feel about it. Maybe Bellatrix had a point.

“The Thing knows it is a bad, bad place. So I am not lying, Thing.” Bellatrix bent down to pick up a stone and the Thing backed away. Hermione looked at her and she dropped it. “Please don’t be cold at me, Rose’s mother.”

Rose’s heart went down another notch. What wouldn’t she give for even a scolding from her mother, something, anything which showed she cared. But no, not for her.

“Bellatrix, I want to look at this Cave of Screaming. Will you take us there, please?”

Bellatrix scowled at the Thing. “See what you have done? Bad Thing. Now we must go to that bad, bad place. And there won’t be a mayfly there, not one.”

What about the Beast? The cats must have done something to it, otherwise it would have come back to attack them. Best to check though. “Bellatrix, can you feel the Beast around here?”

“No, Rose, I can’t. Perhaps the Darkness has swallowed it up.”

The cats or the Darkness, Rose would happily settle for either, as long as it was gone. Though maybe it came to the same thing. In protecting Hermione, the cats hadn’t killed the Beast. Perhaps they couldn’t, because they were here in spirit form, or because, as the beings here were already dead, they couldn’t be killed again. So perhaps the cats had just invoked this swallowing up, and sent it into the Darkness - whatever that meant.

The Thing hissed again, and Bellatrix said, “Rose, the mother is trying to sleep.”

Oh! Yes, Hermione’s head was drooping, her eyes closed. Was the Thing actually helping her? Rose took her mother’s arm, shaking it gently. “Mum, wake up. You mustn’t sleep. It’s dangerous. Wake up, we’re going now.” Hermione’s head came up, and she looked at Rose. Rose turned her
head away. Her mother’s empty expression was too painful.

What about the wailers? “Come on,” she said, then thought, no, the lost souls can’t hear. Still, if they had gathered because her and her mother’s lights, they would follow because of those lights. For what good it would do them. Or her.

She’d thought she’d be travelling across Betwixt with an Awakened mother, with Miss Sash and Mister Lumpy by her side, safe and secure, the burdens lifted from her. Instead here she was, alone and heavy hearted, her mother blind to her, vulnerable, threatened by malevolent creatures around her, the responsibility of dozens of lost souls on her.

Dreary. A dreary journey taking dreary hours through a dreary world. They’d crossed wide plains, low hills, shallow valleys, but all empty, silent, colourless, barren and in the same gloomy dusk light.

She’d asked Bellatrix how she could find the way, and the child had raised a hand, fingers spread, and said, “I can feel it. It’s colder than anywhere else, Rose.”

Yes, it would be. In a miserable world, it would be the most miserable place.

They were crossing a boulder-strewn valley when a tall, conical hill took shape in the gloom ahead of them.

“There, Rose,” said Bellatrix, pointing at it. “On the side is a hollow that you must go into. It’s dark in there, Rose. But not as black as the cave. That’s deeper in. It’s really scary, really icy, really dark. You won’t like it, I promise you.”

Rose did not answer. She had no doubt that she wouldn’t like the dark, scary, Cave of Screaming. But her apprehension was underlain by a dull resignation. She’d undertaken to help the wailers, so she must, come what may.

They reached the hill, and in front of them lay a small, gloomy dell.

“There, Rose. Go in and look. You’ll see what a horrible place it is. Then we can go back.”

Hope flared. “Back where, Bellatrix? Is there another place, a better place?”

“Anywhere is better than there, Rose. No, there is no better place. There is only horrible-there, and not-so-horrible-not-there.”

Rose glared at her, then led Hermione down into the dell. Her mother was all but sleepwalking now, her body slack, her feet dragging, stumbling every third step. She would sit down and sleep at the first opportunity.

The sides of the dell grew steeper, soon becoming rock walls. They reached a cliff face riven by a cleft, narrow, dark and forbidding: the Cave of Screaming.

“You see?” said Bellatrix. “Can you feel the cold? Horrible. You can’t go in there. My friend, the last girl who came, she went in there and never came back.”

Bellatrix had mentioned her, Rose remembered now, the other girl who’d been her friend. Had she
been a Seeker too? A Seeker who’d Awakened her mother, gone in to the cave and found the ferryman? A Seeker who had Returned? “Was she with her mother, Bellatrix?”

Bellatrix shook her head slowly. “She was alone, Rose. A no-self woman had come before she did, but she’d faded. I told my friend that no-one ever came back, but she said she didn’t care.”

No! Oh, what must that poor girl have been feeling? Rose had at least been able to Find her mother. How much worse would she be feeling if Hermione had already vanished? Also suicidal?

She gave her mother a hug. She wouldn’t respond, Rose knew, but at least she was there. Rose’s hopes might be all but none, but while her mother’s eidolon was there, they did exist.

And now this cave, into which that poor girl had gone, and never returned. Rose did not want to go in. More than anything, she didn’t want to. But what choice did she have? Where else was there?

Still holding Hermione’s hand, she walked up and peered into it. Absolute darkness, total silence and … something else.

“I think I must, Bellatrix.”

“You mustn’t, Rose. If you do, I won’t have a friend anymore. Can’t you hear the screaming?”

“No, I can’t hear anything.”

“No one ever comes back, Rose. No one who goes in, ever comes out again. The Cave of Screaming has the Darkness in it. The dark-selves and the Beast are in there.”

What was this now? “But you said the dark-selves and the Beast had been swallowed up by …”

“The Darkness. Yes. In the Cave of Screaming, Rose.”

Rose glared at her. *Now she tells me.*

“Why are you sending me cold, Rose? I told you before.”

Maybe she had, but in typical cryptic higgledy-piggledy Bellatrix fashion. Only now, on the doorstep, did it become clear that the terrifying creatures Rose had thought were gone, were instead waiting for her in a place with a terrifying name.

“The light-selves are scared of the Darkness, Rose. They won’t go in, and those that do never come out. Never, ever come out.”

“Yes, yes, I get the message, Bellatrix!”

She turned and looked into the cleft. She couldn’t hear screaming, but she could feel that something or things were in there. Could they harm her? The dark wizards perhaps not, if they were only in soul form. Though those souls would be undiluted malevolence: who could tell what they might have dreamt up. But the Beast could, for it was in whole sanctus form, like her and Bellatrix. That was frightening. But … it made no difference. She had to risk it, she must go in because … there was nowhere else. Nowhere else. The cave held the only possible hope.

She felt Hermione drawing away from her and turned.

Bellatrix was pulling her back. “Not the mother, Rose. If you must go, you can’t take the mother with you.”
The Thing, squatting just behind her, hissed agreement.

She didn’t want to, not until she knew what was in there herself, but, “I must, Bellatrix. I can’t leave her here. She’ll fall asleep if I do. Then she will fade and vanish.”

“No, I will stay with her, Rose. I will keep the mother awake.”

“Will you, Bellatrix? She’s warm to you, she cares about you. Do you love her enough to do that for her?”

“Of course I do, Rose. She is my mother too, now.”

Rose looked at the Thing. What drove this creature now, in this place? Only the desperate need for warmth? She hoped so, must believe so. “If she sleeps, Thing, she … she dies. If she dies, I die. You will be alone again, no one to care about you, no one to give you warmth.” The Thing just gazed back at her out of its great slitted eyes, and gave a gentle hiss as she turned away.

She didn’t trust either of them. Bellatrix was no more than a flighty child, the Thing the decayed remnant of a monster. But taking her mother into a hostile place about which she knew nothing - except that a creature which had attacked her and tried twice to abduct her was in there - was even more risky.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” she said, and squeezed through the crack.
Within a few paces the feeble light of outside had faded and she was in absolute darkness. The sense of touch was all she had. She moved by sidling along, feeling the ground ahead with her feet, the rock wall with one hand, the other waving back and forth in front of her. She did not want to split her head open on a jagged rock jutting from the roof.

The silence too was absolute. All she could hear were her feet sliding along the cave floor and her breathing. The feeling she’d had when she arrived in Betwixt, of an atmosphere of brooding watchfulness, was strong. With every step it grew stronger, changing from an undirected sense of malice to a seeking, to a finding. A finding of her. Something knew she was there, was watching her, wishing her harm.

Her childhood nightmare rose before her, but she pushed it down even before the image could form. No, no lethifold was here, it was in her mind, not real.

The sound was so faint at first she wondered if she was imagining it, but as she moved deeper into the cave it changed in intensity and nature. From an indifferent murmur it became a disapproving muttering, then a resentful calling out, then a virulent yelling. What was it? It was personal and focused on her: she could feel the malignance. The dark-selves, it must be, for only they would show such hostility when she had done nothing to harm them. They would loathe her for what she was, not just for what she was doing. Could they do more than just yell at her? She hoped not. Even so, without being able to see anyone or anything, the noise was frightening.

Though … somehow, she could see more now. How could that be? Surely the deeper she went into the cave, the darker it must get? Were her eyes adjusting to the darkness, or was some other sense awakening in her? Or was something else creating the light, to draw her in deeper and deeper?

Was it … could it be the Beast? She felt the panic rising. If it grabbed her, she was finished. She would die here in the cave, torn apart with her throat ripped out. Get a grip, girl. If it’s here, why hasn’t it already attacked you? Why would it want to draw you in? You are as powerless against something big and strong at the entrance as in the depths of the cave.

She took a deep breath. Whatever it was, dangerous or safe, she must go on.

The passage was widening a little: she was aware of alcoves, little hollows in the rough wall. She could see the jutting rocks from the sides and the roof, and boulders in the passageway more and more clearly. And even as she stepped around them, the light, if light it was, seemed to be lighting up the way ahead.

Something was doing it, and the only whole-self besides her was the Beast. So it must be him … or must it? Could a dark creature create light in Betwixt? Surely not: that would jar with the ethos of this shadow world. And the light was growing stronger, definitely. Was there some beneficent spirit helping her? She could hope. And if it was, surely there was a purpose, to show her something that would help her. Even, perhaps, just possibly, help her with her mother? Perhaps
even one of the cats: they’d helped before, why not again? Yes, it must be.

She stepped around a boulder and, in an eye-blink, terror swept away her hope. A grey blanket, lines of eyes staring, rose up before her. *Lethifold inferi, lethifold inferi, lethifold inferi.* The Beast was a lethifold! The light vanished and in the darkness she spun round to flee.

Within three steps, she’d tripped, staggered and fallen to her knees. Instantly the screaming intensified to shrieking: *bite her, tear her, rip her, kill her, kill, kill, kill.* The waves of hatred washed over her. She put her hands over her ears, but it made no difference: the shrieks were in her brain. She collapsed onto her side, hugged her legs to her chest and buried her head in her knees. *Help, help, help.* But her little scream was lost, swept away in the screams of malice smothering her, draining her.

She squeezed her eyes shut and immediately she saw a light, a bright light, but just a segment, as if someone was drawing covers over a light bulb. As she watched a little more became hidden, jerkily, as though many hands were at work. She tried to think, to think what it was, but couldn’t, there was too much tumult in her mind, too much beating down, too much hatred.

She squeezed herself tighter together. Even as she did so, she saw another swathe of the light covered: not much more than a glimmer left now, just like her hopes.

Just like? It was, it was exactly like. It was her light that she could see, her light that the dark-selves were covering even as they beat her down with screams and hate and fear. There was no lethifold, no Beast, no smothering nightmare creature, just them, the dark-selves, trying to destroy her. The same dark-selves that had tried, as dark wizards, to destroy her mother. Her mother had defeated them. Was she going to be defeated by them, be defeated by noise and malignancy and a childhood fright? Let them extinguish her hope, her hope and herself, and with them, her mother’s life?

*No, no, no!* She uncurled and flung her arms wide: *Get, get, get away.* Her light, blindingly bright, blazed out. The covers vanished and the screaming stopped as if it had been slashed through with razor-edged knife.

She pushed herself to her feet. Silence. Not brooding, not malevolent, not even watchful. Just simple silence. What did that mean? She couldn’t kill dark-selves, surely. Still, she’d stunned them with that surge of light. And she could see again. She looked around. No sign of a lethifold. Or a Beast. No sign of any living thing at all, just the cave, rocky walls, floor and roof.

She’d beaten off the dark-selves. They’d attacked her, done their worst, and she’d defeated them. She felt elated, and her light blazed out. Maybe there’d be other dangers, other dark creatures waiting deeper in, ready to attack her, but she’d beaten the terrors of the cave once. Maybe she could again. She’d go on.

She took five paces, then stopped. *Fright ... fear ... terror.* Not hers, her mother’s. Something was threatening, maybe attacking her mother!

She spun on her heel and started running. Immediately the yelling began again, this time with overtones of derision. The dark-selves thought she was running away.

Let them. She was needed, desperately. She didn’t know how she knew, but she knew with an urgent certainty. And not only could she now see again, everything was much clearer. Not brighter: the place was still gloomy, but she could pick out more. The boulders, the projecting rocks: she avoided them with ease. She could see too, that the little alcoves had tiny sparks of light in them, off-white, light grey, clusters of two and three and four. Were these the dark-selves? Bellatrix
could see them, and now so could she.

That lethifold thing: had it just been them, rows and rows of them, one above the other, forming a sheet? A sheet of grey light, of nothingness? No, not nothingness: terror. And they’d almost overcome her. If she had already lost her mother, like that poor girl who’d gone before, they would have, no question. She wouldn’t have had the spirit to fight them off, the devils.

But why could she see them now? It must be the cave - or rather, her, changed by what was happening to her in the cave. Though ‘see’ was probably the wrong word. She was perceiving it as seeing, but she was sure it was some other sense. Just as she could sense the emotions coming from the dark-selves: malevolence, anger and … apprehension, even fear. Of her?

She ran on: she had no time for them. What was happening out there? She’d left her mother in the care of two enemies. What were they doing to her?

Light ahead - real light, not this sensed light, and a few moments later she burst from the cave into the little dell. Empty: no Hermione, no Bellatrix, no Thing. Lights, though, tiny sparks again, but yellow this time, and many of them, scattered around. She did not pause: the sense of danger was even stronger. She ran through the dell, two or three of the sparks flying before her.
Senses awakening

She came out into the flat valley, and again, nothing. Just the empty, watching wasteland. The sparks flew on, angling away from the dell, leading her on, but … she knew already. That way, towards that group of boulders to the left.

The sense of danger grew stronger as she ran, until, when she was nearly at the boulders, she heard Bellatrix scream. No! she thought, and a shaft of brightness shot out, lighting the great rocks and sending their shadows dancing.

She ran through a gap and there was Bellatrix holding Hermione’s arm, staring wide-eyed into the darkness. Just beyond them the Thing was moving, back and forth, looking in the same direction.

“Rose, Rose, was that you?” cried Bellatrix.

“Yes, Bellatrix, it’s me. What’s been happening? Mum was in danger, wasn’t she?”

“Yes, didn’t you see? The Beast was here, huge and hairy and horrible. It wanted to take her, then you drove it away.”

“I? I wasn’t even here.”

“With your light, Rose. You shot your bright light at it and it ran away, the nasty, scaredy-cat Beast. I didn’t know you could shoot light, Rose.”

“Neither did I, Bellatrix. I don’t know how it happened.”

She had another new ability she hadn’t known about, too: ‘seeing’ warmth. Her mother’s was a faded orange. Bellatrix emanated a metallic blue of coldness. The Thing’s coldness was a turquoise white and she had the sense of arctic ice so deeply buried it had never seen the sun. Around them were the little yellow sparks in their dozens again.

“Bellatrix, tell me what happened here?”

“The Beast came and attacked us. It wanted the mother, Rose. I was screaming at it.”

“I heard you, Bellatrix. That was very brave of you, when you are so scared of them. What happened?”

“I … it ran away when you came.”

“But … I was deep inside the cave when I felt the danger to Mum. It must have attacked then. It took me ages to get here. Was it frightened of you?”

Bellatrix glanced at the Thing, then said, “Yes.”

The Thing hissed at her, she said, “I am!” and looked defiantly at Rose.

Conflict? Why? “Bellatrix, is that all that happened? The beast was so frightened of you that it didn’t attack Mum?”

The Thing hissed at Bellatrix again, and she said, “All right!” Glaring at it, she said, “The Beast was frightened of the Thing because it’s so nasty. The Thing was hissing like a … nasty, nasty thing which hisses very nastily, at the Beast.” Then she looked at Rose. “But the Beast was coming
closer, even though the Thing was huffing itself up. Only when you came, Rose, did it run away.”

A huge, hairy beast being held off by the grotesque Thing sounded rather more likely than it being scared of a five-year-old child. But … the Thing protecting her mother? Must be, for Bellatrix wouldn’t give the hated Thing the credit otherwise.

Rose looked at the Thing. It looked back, gestured to Hermione, then made an awkward bow to her. The message was clear: ‘I defended your mother.’

Rose, gathering her courage, bent and kissed the Thing on the forehead. “Thank you, Thing.” A flash of orange passed through the arctic white, and the Thing closed its eyes, wrapped its arms around itself, and rocked for a moment.

“I suppose the Thing is your friend now, rather than me.” Bellatrix was facing away, but Rose could hear the tears in her voice.

“I think the Thing is beyond friends, Bellatrix. You are still my friend. But why are you here? You were supposed to wait at the cave for me to come back.”

“Oh, I was, Rose, but you were gone for ages, and I thought you were never coming back. I wasn’t stealing her, Rose, honestly I wasn’t.”

That hadn’t crossed Rose’s mind, but… yes. “No?”

“No one ever comes back, Rose, and the dark-selves in there were screaming and the mother was upset and shrivelling. I thought the Beast might come out for her, so I bought her away.”

“But the Beast was out here, Bellatrix. I thought you said you couldn’t sense it out here.”

“I couldn’t, Rose, and that’s why I thought it was in the cave, because that’s where they usually go, into the Darkness. But this one didn’t. Maybe it wanted the mother too much.”

That sounded likely. Hadn’t McGonagall called it a psychotic fixation? What a world this was: Bellatrix and the Thing being able to keep their sancti whole by refusing to fall asleep; the Beast by a psychotic focus on the eidolon of her mother; and herself being able to drive off the Beast, much larger and stronger than she, by light.

“Rose? Rose, you mustn’t go away again. It’s bad for the mother, she was shrivelling from the moment you left.”

Rose looked at Hermione. She was sitting on the sand, gazing out into the gloom. She looked no different.

“Do you mean fading, Bellatrix? I don’t see any shrivelling.”

“She was shrivelled, Rose, like this,” and she puckered up her face, making it even more lined and wrinkled. “When you came back she unshrivelled. She was fading too, Rose, in fits and starts when the horrible Beast was here, but from the time you left she began to shrivel. The no-selves always shrivel before they fade, but the mother only shrivels when you are not here. So you mustn’t go away again.”

Did this mean that … her mother needed her? Hope flared. “What must I do, Bellatrix, to stop her shrivelling?”

“Not go away again, Rose, I just told you.”
“I just have to be here?”

Bellatrix looked at her. “Yes, Rose, you just have to be here. If you are here, she does not shrivel. If you are not here, she does shrivel. So you must be here. And now we must walk, walk to keep the mother awake, so she doesn’t fade, Rose.”

Spell it out for the simple Gryffindor. “Yes, I understand that, Bellatrix, it’s just that…” Her heart was swelling. Her mother needed her for something, not just the physical act of walking, but for her to be there. Her mere presence was evoking a response in her mother. What that mean? But she dare not hope, not now, not yet.

“Let’s get walking then. Come on, Mum.” Her arm around her mother, she began walking back through the boulders.

“Where are we going now, Rose?”

Where? She hadn’t even thought that far ahead yet. But she knew there could only be one ‘where.’ The horrible-there offered little hope, but the not-so-horrible not-there offered none. And time was running out. Her mother was exhausted and would soon fall asleep no matter what Rose did. So she had to risk the Cave of Screaming again, this time with her mother in tow, no matter what the dangers. This time there could be no turning back. It was make or break. If the cave held no clue to the whereabouts of this elusive ferryman, they were finished. There was nowhere else, and even if there had been, Hermione would never reach there awake.

“We must go … into the Cave of Screaming.”

“No! You can’t. You can’t take the mother in there, Rose. The Darkness is in there, with dark-selves and beast-things. They will get her if you take her in there. Didn’t you see them?”

“I saw the dark-selves. I didn’t see any beast-things. I think the Darkness is just darkness, no light.” Though that was bad enough. “The dark-selves screamed at me. They attacked me.”

“They did?” Bellatrix’s eyes were wide. “How did you fight them, Rose? With your light?”

“I … think so. It must have been with my light. I almost lost.”

Bellatrix looked at her doubtfully. “But you came out again. No one who goes into the cave ever comes out. Even the Thing has never been into the cave.”

“Bellatrix, I have been into the cave and came out.”

“How do I know you are Rose? I can see your light is different, sharper. You can see the light-selves now, I can tell. Can you hear the screaming?” They had reached the cave, and she gestured towards it.

“No, they’re not screaming now.”

“You see?” said Bellatrix. “That proves it. You can hear them not screaming. You must have turned into a beast-thing that looks like Rose, in the cave.”

What sort of logic was this? “Bellatrix, I am not a beast-thing.”

“But you would say that, Rose, wouldn’t you, if you were. If you don’t know how you beat back the dark-selves, Rose, maybe you didn’t. Maybe the dark-selves fed you to a beast-thing. You might have gobbled up Rose, and so are a Thing that looks like her. And that’s why you want to go
back into the cave.”

This was getting beyond silly. “Bellatrix, I am not a beast-thing and I don’t want to go back into the cave. I really don’t, but where else is there?”

“If you go, I won’t have a friend anymore.” She said this softly, almost to herself. “I’ll be alone again.”

“Bellatrix, you can’t stay behind. You must come with us, with me.”

Bellatrix’s eyes widened. “Me? Never, Rose. The cave is too scary. I’ll never go in there.”

“Bellatrix, we must go in. If you want to leave this place, we must all go in. If you want to find Andromeda, you must come.”

Bellatrix stared at her. “My sister Andromeda, who loves me? She is in there? You saw her?”

“No, but I think the ferryman is somewhere in there, with his boat, to take you there, where she is.”

“A boat? That goes on water? In a cave? That’s silly.”

This from a girl who believed that Rose had been eaten by a Beast, which then morphed to look like her? Still, it did sound unlikely. But this was a place where there was no day or night, where nothing grew, where you didn’t eat or drink, where you shrivelled and faded to nothingness if you fell asleep. Who could say what was likely or unlikely? Even morphing.

“Bellatrix, you told me you had been everywhere in this land and not found water. Everywhere but the Cave of Screaming. So the Cave of Screaming is the only place in this land where we might find the ferryman.”

“But the cave is full of dark-selves, and no one who goes in ever comes out. The dark-selves gobble them up.”

Rose shut her eyes. They were going round in circles. Weren’t the burdens she was carrying enough? A mother on the brink of vanishing into nothingness, a mother who didn’t love her, a mother who didn’t even recognise her, a mother she despaired of saving? The burden of the light-selves following her, dozens and dozens of them, wailing softly at her, hoping, expecting her to lead them out of this deathless wasteland? The burden of the most malevolent dark wizard of the past millennium following her, quiet now, but perhaps plotting who knew what? Did she have to put up with a whining, petulant child who was determined not to accept reason and logic as well?

Yes, she did. Bellatrix had led her to her mother; she had helped, or tried to help. She carried McGonagall’s kiss. She was Narcissa’s sister, and Rose owed Narcissa. Besides, she, Rose, had promised to help her.

“Bellatrix, I have been into the cave and came out again, and the dark-selves did not gobble me up. And I am not a beast-thing.”

“How can I know that? You even kissed the Thing.”

Rose stepped forward and put her lips to Bellatrix’s brow. “And now I’ve kissed you. Twice.”

Again Bellatrix put her finger to her forehead, then her hand on her chest. Again the face of the innocent child appeared for a few moments, and she smiled. “Yes, warm. And you are warm, Rose. The dark-things are never warm. And you are light and you shot light. So you can’t be a dark-
thing. I must come with you into the cave, Rose?"

At last. “Yes, Bellatrix, you must. We must all go.”

The Thing hissed, and immediately Rose had the feeling of danger to her mother again. She turned. Hermione was sitting again, her head on her knees. While she was trying to persuade Bellatrix, her mother was falling asleep. She knelt, put her arm around her mother and lifted her. “Come on, Mum. Bellatrix, the cave is very narrow, so you take Mum’s hand, and give your other hand to the Thing.”

“What! No, never. I’ll never touch the Thing.”

Rose’s patience snapped. She was standing balanced on a knife edge of guilt, self doubt and anxiety. She was coping, only just, and here was Bellatrix, Bellatrix who had tortured her mother, who had just tried to steal her, arguing about everything! “Then stay here! You lead the Thing or you stay here.”

Bellatrix pouted, but then took Hermione’s hand and held out her other hand to the Thing, scowling at it. “Horrible Thing!”

“Don’t let go, all right? Keep holding hands and follow me. No matter what you hear or feel or think, don’t let go.”

What about the light-selves? So far they had followed of their own accord, but they had not followed her into the cave. They feared the cave more than they trusted her. ‘You must follow me,’ she thought at them. ‘If you want to escape this land of despair, you must follow me now.’ To her amazement she got a feeling of acquiescence back.

Holding her mother’s hand, she squeezed through the crack and into the darkness, pulling her mother behind her.
The pied piper

Before she had found her way by touch, now she could see: that sense had not left her. Nor had the others. If anything, her awareness was sharpening: her mother’s light and warmth; the fears, hopes and coldness of Bellatrix and the Thing; the faint glows of the light-selves, even that tiny single orange glow, the friendly little light-self who had joined her in the cave earlier. Now it was flying before her.

She was more acutely aware also, of the dark-selves; their grey lights and their malice. The murmuring began again, quickly building up, but now she could ignore it. They had done their worst, and she had beaten them.

But the screaming grew, becoming more intense. Not just anger becoming fury, ill-wishing becoming malevolence, but apprehension becoming fear. Not hers, someone else’s. Many, many of them. The light-selves? Was it just being in the cave that was frightening them, or was it the dark-selves?

She could see the clusters of dark-lights in the recesses: could the dark-selves do more than scream and send out negative feelings? Could a soul kill another soul in this place? Maybe not, but the virulent hatred was enough to strike fear into anyone’s heart; no one knew that better than she. So were the dark-selves terrorising the light-selves?

The devils! She wasn’t having that: the light-selves were her people, her responsibility. She glared at a group of dark-selves in an alcove, and thought, ‘Stop that!’ A flash of light shot out, the alcove shone white, jagged silhouettes flared into relief, all just for a moment. Then … no grey lights. Had she killed them? She felt a surge of guilt: she didn’t want that; she just wanted them to leave her and her party alone. No, there were four or five grey lights close to the floor. And the hate had gone.

No, it hadn’t gone, because she could see dark-selves all around, and she couldn’t send light everywhere at once. Still, it was less. Perhaps she’d shocked them by fighting back. Certainly she could sense that the light-selves were elated.

Bellatrix was too. Rose heard her whispered voice: “That’ll teach you, you nasty dark-lights. My friend is strong and has a lot of light, bright light. You’d better stay away.” Rose hoped it was true.

Was that the spot where she had fallen and lain, curled up, overcome by the malevolence of the dark-selves and terror of the unknown? What would have happened if they had been able to cover her light entirely? Her light must surely represent the strength of her sanctus, so covering it would have meant obliterating it, destroying it, breaking it into separate soul and eidolon. So she would have been in the same condition as her mother- or worse - and certainly incapable of helping her or anyone. Her eidolon would have faded and vanished, and her soul would be here, in this cave, tormented and … screaming. Her mother, her eidolon, would surely have faded by this time. Rose had been within a hairsbreadth of irrevocable failure.

And now she knew how to drive back the dark-selves with light. She had learned something. If only she could learn how to Awaken her mother. But no, deep within her she knew that was something one could not learn. You either had it or you hadn’t and if you hadn’t, there was nothing you could do to get it. She had never doubted her mother’s love for her, just as she had never doubted hers for her mother. But somehow, somewhere, some vital part was missing. Really, with
such a weight dragging her down, it was not surprising that the dark-selves had all but destroyed her.

And… was this something else now? She could hear a faint groaning. Was it the dark-selves? They might hate her and the light-selves as enemies, but it was hard to believe that they were happy in this place. Surely they too must feel despair at their lot. The sound seemed to rise and fall, like a creature in pain.

The passage widened and just ahead she could see two black patches. The passage split. So now she had a choice of route. Both looked the same, but from the left-hand opening came the whining sound. Bellatrix, still holding Hermione’s hand, came up to her.

“Rose, the light-selves say we are in a … What you call a dark place with lots of passages?”

A maze? No, a dark place. “A labyrinth? Are we entering a labyrinth, Bellatrix?”

“Yes, and can you hear the noise? They say that is the Chamber of Howling, with a howling Beast, and you must not go there.”

Wasn’t there a Greek legend about a labyrinth? It had had a beast in the middle, a huge bull-headed man, the Minotaur. She remembered it particularly because the muscle-bound youth who had killed it had gone on to two-time the girl who had helped him.

She had no muscle-bound youths at her disposal, two-timing or otherwise, so she’d better avoid any Beasts, howling or not howling. She started down the right-hand passage, and soon came to a junction, this time with three passages leading off it. Another choice. She stopped to think about it.

“Rose, the mother is falling asleep again.”

Did she have to do everything? She turned: her mother’s head was drooping. “Wake up, Mum, we’re going on.”

Going on where? How was she to choose? She couldn’t do it randomly: she would never find the way back, and she might need to. Keep taking the rightmost passage? For want of anything else, yes.

But … in a hundred paces or so she came to another junction, this time with four options. She started down the right-hand passage again, but then stopped. She must think this out. Taking a bird’s eye view: if there were more and more options every time and she kept going right, it was quite probable that she would be going in a circle. Should she go right then left, then right then left? It all seemed very hit and miss. Also, the more junctions there were, the more chances of choosing the wrong way. What were the chances of her being right? Vector had covered this in Arithmancy. Factorials, that was what it was called. The chances were one in four multiplied by three multiplied by two. So, one in twenty four.

Worse than the odds of being able to Awaken her mother, and she knew how that one was turning out. Stop that, girl, this is no place for wallowing in misery. You need to decide. Well, first off is that random guessing will never work. Particularly as she didn’t even know what she looking for.

“Rose, the mother is falling asleep again.”

Again. “Can’t you try to keep her awake, Bellatrix?”

“You keep stopping, Rose, and that’s when the mother falls asleep. You mustn’t stop, Rose.”
So helpful, Bellatrix. She kept stopping because she didn’t know where to go. She didn’t know because she couldn’t know, because there was nothing to guide her. The only thing which gave any guidance was the voice of the Beast, and that was a don’t go there sort of guidance. It left many options. Too many options.

But … “Bellatrix, how do the light-selves know about the labyrinth and the Chamber of Howling if they have never been into the Cave of Screaming?”

“These are the inside light-selves, Rose. The outside light-selves don’t but the inside ones do.”

What was this now? “You’ve never mentioned them before.”

“I didn’t know about them, Rose, because I’ve never been in the Cave of Screaming.”

“Are they the ones who came into the cave and never came out again? The ones you said had been gobbled up?”

A pause, then, “That’s what I thought, Rose, but I couldn’t know, could I, because I’ve never been here before.”

Ah, right. Yes, it was Rose’s fault for having unreasonable expectations, not Bellatrix’s for stating guesses as fact. Wonderful. How much else was guesswork?

“We are picking them up as we go along, Rose, and some of them know about the labyrinth and the Chamber of Howling.”

“Bellatrix, have any of the light-selves ever seen the howling Beast?”

“They don’t need to see him, Rose, because we can hear him. He sounds horrible and scary.”

“Bellatrix, can you ask them, please.” So we can separate fact from guesswork, this time.

A sulky “If I must,” there was silence for a moment, then Bellatrix said, “They are saying sort of ‘No’, Rose.”

“‘Sort of?’ What you mean, Bellatrix?”

“I don’t ask them in words, Rose.” More offended now. “I think of a howling Beast in a picture, and ask them if they have seen it. And then they send me warm or cold feelings, and then I have to think whether cold means ‘No, I haven’t seen it,’ or ‘Yes, I have seen it and it’s very scary.’ That is the only way I can talk to them, Rose. Some of them are too shut down to talk to, and some of them are really nasty and won’t talk to me at all.”

Were those the ones who recognised her as Bellatrix Lestrange? No time for that now: with a mother falling asleep, Rose had to act, and quickly. She’d take their answer as a ‘No.’ “We’re going back then, and we are not going to stop again.”

“Back where, Rose?”

“You’ll see.” She didn’t want an argument.

Before they were ten paces along the new route, she had one.

“Rose, you have made a mistake,” said Bellatrix. “This is the passage to the howling Beast, Rose,
can’t you hear roaring? We can’t go here.”

“I know this is the passage to the Beast, Bellatrix. We must go this way, because there are too many other ways, and we will get lost in the labyrinth, and never find our way out. Maybe there is no Beast.”

“There are two Beasts, Rose. One we can hear, and one who wants to steal the mother.”

“Then we will have to try and avoid them, Bellatrix, skip around them.” Rose could feel the panic rising, and fought it down. She had to go this way, she had no choice.

“Rose-”

“Bellatrix, you’ll just have to be brave, and trust me. Now no more talking, Bellatrix, because I want to concentrate on finding the way.” Trust her? She didn’t even trust herself. But she couldn’t cope with Bellatrix’s fear as well as her own.

“But Rose-”

“Shush, I’m listening.” Was this what parents did? Pretend something just to stifle argument?

After the first two junctions following the sound became easier, for it was getting louder. And louder and louder. What could it be? It couldn’t be the dark-selves, for she was hearing it with her ears, not her mind. Whatever it was, it must be big to make a noise that loud. Was she being foolhardy, risking her mother’s life in approaching this unknown thing? Maybe, but she’d already been through all that. She had no choice, her mother was practically sleepwalking as it was. She must go on, no matter how foolhardy it seemed.

Louder and louder, rising and falling, and she was getting more and more scared. Until she thought: this is too loud, No living creature could make a noise that loud. Unless there really was a Minotaur. But meeting something from a Greek myth in a spirit world seemed unlikely. No, it must be something else, something natural. It sounded like… breakers, waves falling on a beach, the sound of the sea.

It must, it must be the sea, and the sea surely meant the ferryman. And perhaps, perhaps he knew something that could waken her mother. Bellatrix had helped her find her mother, and had led her to the Cave of Screaming. Perhaps another inhabitant of this world was needed to help her Awaken her mother. And was that light ahead? Her spirits soared.

“Come on, Mum, we’re almost there.” She pulled Hermione’s hand.

Another ten paces and she came out… into a large round cavern. The walls went up and up, tapering inwards like a great chimney in an oasthouse. And up and up went the wind, she could feel it on her skin, she could hear it in her ears, gusting, moaning, blowing away the tower of her hopes. No sea, no ferryman, no escape. The light she had seen was just a cluster of light-selves, now drifting off to one side.

From behind her came a querulous voice. “Did you have to go so fast, Rose? I almost had to let go of the mother’s hand. Thing, let go, let go. Rose has stopped now, can’t you see? Let go of my hand.”

The Thing whimpered.
“No, you can’t. I must hold the mother’s hand, not you. Rose said so. I know you are cold. I can feel them sending cold at you. They hate you even more than me, even more than Rose, you know that? And you needn’t think I’m going to send you warmth, because I am not. I’m not going to hold your hand any more either. Rose, I’m not going to hold the Thing’s hand any more. I like holding the mother’s hand because she is sending me warmth all the time, even though she is scared like me. My mother would never do that, Rose. When she was scared she would get cold. Not icy cold like the Thing, but cold like: ‘I only care about me.’ So I love the mother but I don’t love the Thing, not the teeniest bit. So I am not going to hold its hand any more. It is too cold.”

Rose closed her eyes. She had dozens of light-selves on her hands, an unresponsive mother, she had just had her hopes blighted again, and here was Bellatrix refusing to do the one little task she had been asked to. She spun round to face her, hands on her hips. “Bellatrix, you -”

But Bellatrix was already backing away, her hands raised. “Sorry, sorry, sorry, Rose. I’m sorry, I won’t be bad again, please don’t hit me, please don’t-”

What! Was this what happened to this child when she was ‘bad?’ “Bellatrix, stop it. Of course I won’t hit you. I-”
The Slough of Despond

It happened so suddenly. One moment she was talking to Bellatrix, downhearted, oppressed by the load but bearing up, the next it all became too much.

“Won’t you, Rose? But you are angry, and angry people do hit, I know that. My mother…”

Oh! Did this girl think she was the only one who had been hurt by her mother? Did she think that being hit was the worst that could happen? Did she know what it was like to love and have her mother turn away, uncaring, indifferent? Did she know what it was like to have her love rejected as not worth having? Did she? Did she? Rose did! All too well.

And how was this her fault? Had she been such a terrible daughter? Hadn’t she laughed with her mother, cried with her mother, hugged her mother, kissed her mother, told her she loved her? Had she deserved such a rejection?

“Rose, Rose, be careful, the mother …” Bellatrix’s voice.

Oh, be quiet, you foolish child. When your mother rejects you by showing nothing, nothing at all, then you can expect some sympathy from me. Your mother gets angry? That’s at least something. Mine doesn’t even get that.

Rose took her mother by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. Empty: no joy, no sorrow; no happiness, no sadness; no love, no indifference. Nothing, nothing! Even anger would be better than this. “You are my mother, my mother. I am your own child, your own daughter. I love you! Why won’t you love me back? Why?”

The eyes closed. Around them were lines, wrinkles spreading over the face. Was this another Betwixt thing? Was this the shrivelling before one faded and died? Because that the way everything was pointing.

She shook her. “You’re going to die, you know that? Because you won’t love me, you’re going to die.”

What, what was she doing! Shaking her mother, the mother who had brought her up with such patience, understanding, kindness, with such … love? Yes, love. Even if, for some reason, her mother no longer felt that love. What kind of a daughter did that!

“Oh, Mum!” And she put her arms around her and hugged her, burying her face in her mother’s shoulder. “Mum,” she whispered, “I love you but you’re going to die. Even if you can’t love me, think about Hugo. You love Hugo, don’t you?”

She looked at her mother’s face and her heart gave a leap: tears from the closed eyes were trickling down the cheeks. The wrinkles were going, too. Could it be … was her mother Awakening? Had Rose’s desperate fervence … but no, her mother would be talking to her, hugging her, full of love and tears.

This was that primordial response again. Her mother could sense the pain and hurt, and was responding to that. So she was aware on some level that Rose was there, hurt, distraught and pleading with her. Her mother was aware of her daughter and still the mother-daughter love was not enough to cause her sanctus to become whole.

It was not enough, and she was blaming her mother for it, as if, like Bellatrix’s mother, she was
selfish, neglectful and uncaring. And she wasn’t. No one could be further from that.

Turn it around: could her mother blame her? Yes. Yes, she could. Her daughter had been selfish, neglectful and uncaring; her mother had been dying of cancer and Rose had not noticed. Her own mother, dying, and she had not noticed. Yes, she’d been at Hogwarts, but not all the time. She’d been at home some of the time and, yes, she’d looked, but she’d not looked enough. She’d asked, but she’d not asked enough. She’d listened, but she’d not listened enough. She’d ... loved, but she had not loved enough.

Everyone had blamed her father, but what about her, the daughter? Had not her neglect been just as bad? Or worse, for she was female and supposedly more sensitive to feelings, and in particular, responsive to love. She was to blame, and more than her father. It should have been her that Ginny had been accusing of neglect and indifference, of being self-centred, of not caring. Callous, that’s what she was. A self-centred, uncaring, callous bitch.

So really, it was not surprising, given such a unloving daughter, that her mother did not love her. Not surprising at all, the logical consequence, as McGonagall would assure her, of her own actions. Her mother had not withdrawn her love: Rose had driven it away by her indifference to her mother’s suffering. What mother could love a daughter like that? Her fault, hers, hers, hers.

Oh, what was the point of all this, anyway? She’d never Awaken her mother, because she was too worthless to deserve her love. Worthless, worthless, worthless.

And the ferryman, help her? Why would he help someone so worthless? And even if he would, she knew very well that he couldn’t. The love between her and her mother was between her mother and her, and no one could help.

All these wailers, depending on her: how could she think that she could possibly lead them to the ferryman? How could they think she could protect them from the dark-selves? She hadn’t even been able to protect herself: the dark-selves had beaten her down, had her curled up on the floor in terror. She had failed her mother; she would fail them. Why were they following her; couldn’t they see that she was useless? Useless, useless, useless.

Worthless and useless.

And even if she could, why should the cave have anything to do with the ferryman? It was just a dark place for dark-selves to hide from the light. If the ferryman could be found there, the cave would be empty, for the dark-selves would have gone with him. The cave just led here, and nowhere else. Her light was so dim now she could hardly see the far wall. But she knew very well that nothing was there, no opening. Why should it be? Everything was against her, so why should there be any way to go on? They’d have to go back and what was the point? Back was failure, and she had already failed. They might as well stay here.

She might just as well sit down here, put her arms around her mother, her head on her shoulder and cry herself to sleep. And look, her mother was already slumping down. Her eyes were closed and her face was as lined and wrinkled as it had been when she given life energy to Abraxas. Soon, soon she’d fall asleep. Both of them would. It was the easiest as well as the most sensible thing to do. What was the point of fighting it?

Rose sat down beside her mother and put an arm around her. She could feel the tears running down her cheeks. This was the end.

“Rose? Are you going to sleep, Rose?”
A soft voice, Narcissa’s voice. No, her sister’s voice. Bellatrix, Narcissa. All of them, back at Bansith Lodge, waiting hopefully. Ginny, uncle Harry, the Weasleys, McGonagall. Mother Minerva, who loved her mother as a daughter. Abraxas. ‘There is always a choice, Rose. Even at the nadir, there is a choice: give up or go on.’ How many times must Abraxas have felt despair in those twenty eight years in Nurmengard? He’d weathered them, every one. He wouldn’t have survived otherwise. He wouldn’t give up. He’d never give up. If he couldn’t walk, he would crawl. If he couldn’t crawl, he would drag himself along on his stomach. Abraxas, whom her mother loved. She was betraying them all, but him especially.

But most of all, Hugo. Baby Hugo, who she, aged five, had held in her arms. Toddler Hugo, taking his first steps, holding out his arms to her, full of trust. Boy Hugo, who would turn to her almost as soon as to their mother when he needed help. Hugo, who loved her, who looked up to her, who depended on her.

The Thing squatted down beside her, looking at her. It hissed at her and plucked at her sleeve, then took her hand and pulled at it.

“Please don’t go to sleep, Rose.” The beseeching voice of a child. “Please don’t. I love you, Rose, I’m sorry I said that about the Thing. I will take the Thing’s hand, I will really, Rose.” Imploring her. Her, Rose. And she could sense the light-selves clustered all around. They needed her. All these creatures needed her. Even the Thing. She was their only hope.

Images came before her closed eyes. An otter swimming in a river with two half grown cubs. Her mother, with her and Hugo? The otter climbed onto a little sandy, sunny cove. Then a shadow passed over them, and the viewpoint drew back to show an eagle owl perching on a branch above them. ‘Look out,’ Rose thought at her, but the otter merely opened her eyes, looked up at the bird, then snuggled down with her two younglings again. Except that there were now four cubs, the two older ones and two babies. What was this: a vision of the future? Or … a possible future?

Her mother’s breathing was getting fainter now, her body in Rose’s arms less substantial. Her mother’s eidolon was fading. In the living world, clasped in Abraxas’s arms, her mother was dying. In the living world, her mother’s future was dying with her. Was this her daughter’s choice? To let her mother die? The mother she loved and who, deep down, surely loved her?

Her mother. Hugo. Abraxas, Ginny, uncle Harry and all the others back there in the living world. All these lost souls in Betwixt. They all depended on her and she was letting them down? She was giving up?

She leant forward to put her lips to her mother’s ear, and oh, that tiny movement, the first step in fighting back, was so hard. “Mum.” Just one word, so much effort.

Her mother’s head rose a little.

“Mum, wake up.”

The head came upright. Rose pushed herself to her knees, took her mother by the shoulders. Hermione’s eyes opened, and looked at her. Empty. If only Rose could transfer some of her own soul into her mother, just to get a flicker, just a flicker of awareness. But no, it did not work like that. They must get up and walk, walk to stay alive, that was how it worked. The hard way, because that was how life worked. The easy way never led anywhere worthwhile.

She pulled her mother close and hugged her. Then she got to her feet. “Come on, Mum, up, up. We’re going. You’re not going to die because I’m not going to let you. Come, we’re going on.”
Yes, it was hopeless, useless and pointless but she had to do it, no matter how hopeless, useless and worthless she felt.

And then, as suddenly as it had gone, her courage came back. It was not that the task was any less hopeless, just that now she could face it again. What had happened? Was it … Scorpius? She’d scarcely given him a thought. Had he been helping her all the time, then suddenly stopped, for a while? Was it that? Though, if it was, by the time he’d came back, it would have been too late. She had weathered that alone, but … she had been so close, so close to giving up. How would she have coped if she’d been alone from the moment of her arrival here? Would she have got even this far?

“Rose? Are you better now, Rose?” Bellatrix’s voice, soft and tentative.

Better? What did that mean? Well in body, mind and spirit? She was far from that. “Yes, Bellatrix, I’m better now.”

“Was it the dark-selves, Rose? Your light almost went out. That’s what they do, the nasty things. Was it them?”

“I … I don’t think so. I think it was just me and … all this.” This was true, but … why hadn’t the dark-selves attacked her? She’d been so close to the edge that a surge or two of screamed hatred would surely have pushed her over. She looked up. The light-selves were all around her, enclosing her in a bulging cone, like a beehive. Had they been protecting her from the dark-selves? Defending her as she had defended them?

‘Thank you,’ she thought at them, and received a warm feeling in return. Communicating again.

“Everyone is glad you are better now, Rose,” said Bellatrix. “Even the Thing. And the wailers, Rose, I have never heard them not wailing, but now they are not. They are happy. No, not happy, no one can be happy here, not even the dark-selves, but they are pleased something is happening after being here forever. They are pleased that you are teaching the nasty dark-selves a lesson. They were scared, back there. They are still scared, but not so much. Some of them are even screaming back at the dark-selves. But Rose, did you see the light-selves that were here?”

She had. Were they souls that had reached this point, and got no further? A mother eidolon and a daughter Seeker, arriving here, expecting the ferryman, and falling into despair like she did? “Yes, I saw them, Bellatrix. Have you spoken to them?”

Bellatrix pulled a face. “They have spoken to me, Rose, even though they don’t like me. I don’t like them either. Still, they say there is no roaring Beast, but a beast was here, and he went on. They say the labyrinth gets worse, and nobody knows the way through, or even if there is a ‘through.’ They say the dark-selves are nastier here. They say some of the caves have soul eaters. The other light-selves, Rose, the ones who came with us, and those who have joined us on the journey, they are worried. They say the mother is weak and getting weaker.”

Rose’s heart sank. Soul-eaters and the Beast ahead in this dark maze? Hadn’t what she’d been through been bad enough? And she knew very well that her mother was getting weaker. She was tired, but her mother’s exhaustion must be on another level altogether: apart from the many hours she had been awake, she’d fought off a werewolf, then gone into a broken, diseased, dying body and mended, healed, rejuvenated it, giving almost all her own life energy in the process. Not to speak of the emotional trauma her own daughter was putting her through in this place.

It could only be Abraxas’s support that was keeping her awake, giving her strength through the amaura. Rose knew of no-one, not even Uncle Harry, whom she would have trusted to do more, but there was a limit to what any human could do, and he must surely be approaching it. The drain on
him must be unbelievable. He loved her mother and here he was showing it. If only her mother knew: it would help her, encourage her to keep going.

“Abraxas, Mum. Abraxas loves you. You love him, Mum, do you remember? He’s trying to help you. Do you remember him? You’re wearing the clothes he gave you.” No response, just as she’d expected. Well, she tried: there was nothing else she could do. Or was there? She, Rose, had arrived in Betwixt in clothes she would have chosen, and her wand came along for comfort. Had her mother done the same? Chosen an outfit Abraxas had given her and brought what for comfort? His monogrammed handkerchief, perhaps? She put her hand into the jacket pocket.

Yes ... no. Something but not a handkerchief. She took it out. Hugo’s Year 4 embroidered colour strip. Hadn’t that gone up in the fire? She put in her hand again and took out the memory cord she had made for her mother in Year 3. Her sight blurred with tears. Such a little thing and her mother had kept it all those years.

“Those are love tokens, Rose,” said Bellatrix softly.

Yes, they were. Even for her. Somewhere in there, buried deep. She put in her hand again. Yes: the handkerchief. She’d tie that and Hugo’s embroidery strip around her mother’s wrists. Their touch on her skin might somehow, somewhere in her mind, remind her that people who loved her and whom she loved were waiting, hoping, fighting for her.

As Rose pulled the last knot tight, Bellatrix said, “She’s looking at you, Rose, do you see?” Rose looked up and into her mother’s eyes. They were still blank, but Rose could feel something, some awareness that wasn’t there before. And her hand was warmer, the clasp stronger than before, she was sure. Something had happened ... but whatever it was, it was not an Awakening. And she had a task to do, while her own strength and energy lasted.

“Come, we must go on now.”

“But the soul-eaters, Rose!”

“Bellatrix ...” She mustn’t reason with the child, she’d just keep arguing, and Rose had neither time nor energy for that. “Bellatrix, do you trust me?”

“Oh, of course, Rose. You are my friend.”

“Then we must go on, Bellatrix.”

“All right, Rose. That way?” And the child pointed across the cavern.

A dark, jagged crack was in the opposite wall. Why hadn’t she spotted that? Too convinced she had failed to believe there could be a way forward? Or perhaps her light had been too faint. In this place, that probably meant the same thing. “Yes, that way.”
They set out, single file and holding hands as before, the light-selves around and close behind them. This cave seemed colder, but perhaps that was the wind. It seemed darker than before, or perhaps her light was weaker. Also … the light-selves were right: the dark-selves here were ‘nastier’. Their screams were more piercing, and their hatred more virulent. Bellatrix felt it: she was whimpering now, and there was a low wail from the Thing. Perhaps the dark-selves this far in were those from her mother’s time, killed in the Battle of Hogwarts, or even condemned to be Kissed. They would certainly have reason to hate the Thing and, very likely, Bellatrix too.

Rose was sending light at them, but either her light was weaker or the dark-selves stronger, because though it would drive them away, they were soon back and attacking again. Probably both: after who knew how many hours here, and drained by conflict and self-doubt, she was tiring. She was bent over, her shoulders slumped, her footsteps dragging. Every now and then she would realize, and straighten, but soon she would be slumped over again.

But the light-selves too were more active than before, forming defensive clusters against the dark-selves. They feared the dark-selves but they were fighting back. So in this world the souls, though without their spirit bodies, still had some vestigial senses: they ‘saw’ the light of her sanctus, they ‘felt’ her warmth of character. They retained their characters: the dark wizards became malign dark-selves; the light-selves responded to her help with grateful feelings. They could make decisions and act on them: the dark-selves attacked her, the light-selves defended her.

This place was far more complex - and more terrible - than McGonagall or Winky knew. The wonder, it seemed to Rose, was not that only seven of the fifty one had Returned, but that any had at all. She had little hope that she would join that number. Still, she had a job to do and she must do it, pointless though it seemed. This was just a slog, an interminable, terrifying slog to an end which offered … nothing.

They reached another cavern. Not a big one like the Chamber of Howling; this was only as big as her dorm. But at the far end, it split into two passages. Which should she choose? Left or right?

Decisions, decisions, decisions. She was getting so tired of making them. She was getting so tired, full stop. But she’d been through this before: escalating choices. She knew that selection at random was not an option. Especially now that some caves were supposed to hold soul eaters. She must have a criterion, a criterion dictated by the land. Before, she’d followed the sound getting louder. A pity she couldn’t follow the sound getting fainter, but that would happen in every passage.

What else was there? Nothing but this cold wind, the wind which caused the howling in the cavern. Even if she could - how would one follow a wind - why would she? A wind was something which
started somewhere random and ended somewhere random. It wouldn’t actually lead anyone anywhere.

Or would it? A wind indoors was called a draught; something annoying because it shouldn’t be there. You’d close a door or a window to stop it. Stop it coming in from … outside.

So if she followed the draught, it might lead her outside, out of the cave, maybe even to the ferryman. But how could she follow it? She couldn’t see it, all she could do was feel it. Could she feel which passage it was coming down? She raised her hand. Yes, it seemed to be coming down the left hand passage. To make sure, she stepped a few paces down the right hand passage: nothing, no wind.

Good, the left fork had to be right then. She stepped back into the cavern and … Bellatrix screamed. Both passages had shapes forming, grey skulls with deep black eyes and white, grinning teeth. They filled the openings, blocking the way.

Rose staggered back, terror rising. The Dark Mark, the sign of the Dark Lord!

No! No, all that is dead and gone, just memories in the real world, shadows in this netherworld. Feeble shadows like the dark-lights themselves. They could raise terror by creating images… but that was all. They’d tricked her once, with the leithifold, and no way would she fall for that again. She shot light at the skulls, first one then the other, and they vanished.

“Oh! You blew them away. That was clever, Rose, the nasty things.” The light-selves were elated too, Rose could feel them. But behind, rising like a wave, came the most intense feeling of fury and hatred and malevolence.

Let them: they’d done their worst, and it hadn’t stopped her. Holding her mother’s hand, she started walking down the windy passage.

But though she could ignore the rage and ill-will of the dark-selves, her little troop could not. Soon Bellatrix began whimpering again and the Thing’s wail was louder. Rose could sense the fear of the light-selves. Her mother’s hand tightened on hers: even in her eidolon state, the terror was getting through to her. How could she distract them? She thought of Hugo, standing in his cot, refusing to lie down and go to sleep.

“Once upon a time,” she sang out, “there were three goats, Little Billygoat Gruff, Big Billygoat Gruff, and Great Big Billygoat Gruff. They lived in a field with a river and a little stone bridge over it. Under the bridge…”

Bellatrix’s screams stopped abruptly and the Thing’s wails grew softer. Even the pounding on her mind grew less. Were the dark-selves being distracted too? This was bizarre: here she was, a schoolgirl in a cave in a spirit world, leading a train of lost souls and two beings with maimed sancti, beings that had terrorised the world just twenty years earlier, calming them with a muggle children’s story about three goats and a troll who lived under a humpbacked bridge.

“And Little Billygoat Gruff said to the troll, ‘Oh, you don’t want to eat me …’”

She came to another widening in the passage, and again a forking of the route: one, two, three openings. They all had the skulls in them. Almost casually, she shot light at each one and dissipated it. Then the fourth one seemed to have a draught in it. Or was it the fifth? She’d lost count, but it didn’t matter: she’d not be coming this way again, and anyway all she had to do was follow the draught. Though the wind, though gusting all the time, seemed to be gradually weakening. If it stopped altogether, she’d be in trouble, so she blew the skull away and started
down the passage, hurrying.

“So the troll said, in his deep voice …”

Another hundred paces or so, and another widening, with more forks. No skulls this time. Had the dark-selves given up? Not with their hatred, that was still there, frightening her people. What frightened her more was the labyrinth and this failing wind. Without something to guide her, getting lost was a certainty, and her mother hadn’t the energy to survive getting lost. Had she? She didn’t know, but her light was weaker, far weaker than before.

Was the wind coming down the second fork, or the third? She held up the back of her hand. She couldn’t be sure. Would she have to wait until the wind rose again? Could she? Bellatrix’s whimpering was already starting again, and how long would her mother last, standing still like this? Rose felt the panic rising. The wind was there, she was sure, it was just that she couldn’t detect it well enough.

Didn’t water cool when wind passed over it? They’d learnt that in potions: evaporative cooling, Professor Dodgson had called it. So, if she wet her finger … She put a finger into her mouth then held it up. Yes! That way, the second opening.

“And Big Billygoat Gruff said to the troll, ‘Oh, you don’t want to eat me …’”

Another series of openings, she held up a wet finger and … the fourth one this time. Any more and she’d have to start a new story.

“And the troll climbed back onto the bridge, and said …” Was that a glow up ahead? Another cluster of dark-selves? No, it was daylight, and grew lighter as she approached it. She hurried on and came out into another dell … no, a small cove, with black shingle sloping down to glistening water, and a small wooden jetty. She’d found it, the Place of Departing! No ferryman, but surely he would come.

Rose turned, taking her mother’s hand in both of hers, drawing her out of the cave. Then Bellatrix stepped out, one hand gripping Hermione’s, the other … covering her face. Behind her, dozens and dozens of light-selves, dozens of dark-selves … but no Thing.

Chapter End Notes

Double update coming on Christmas Day
Duty and compassion

Chapter Notes

Happy Christmas everyone!

“Where is the Thing? Bellatrix, where is the Thing!”

“I … I … he let go. It let go, Rose, I was holding and it let go, honestly it did. It wasn’t me, I promise.”

Rose stared at the fissure, willing the Thing to appear. Where was it? Somewhere back in the cave, where Bellatrix had dropped its hand? And now? Her heart sank. Who would fetch it? She hadn’t dropped its hand. She done everything she could to help it, in spite of her misgivings and knowing what it really was. It was not her fault it was stuck somewhere. But who else could fetch it?

She glared at Bellatrix. She should have left her behind; she’d been nothing but a hindrance. And she couldn’t leave her mother again: she’d fall asleep under Bellatrix’s flighty care. She couldn’t, out of the question. But … what else could she do?

“Bellatrix, this is your fault! You dropped the Thing’s hand, and now I have to go and find it. If you let my mother fall asleep while I am gone, I’ll take you back into the cave and leave you there, and you’ll never, ever see Andromeda or Narcissa. Never, ever, ever! Do you understand!” Stupid, stupid girl.

Bellatrix’s eyes filled with tears and her head drooped. “Yes, Rose, I’m sorry, really and truly sorry. I promise, I really promise.”

Misgivings in her heart, Rose passed through the dark opening and started hurrying back. The light was dimmer now: had the light of the light-selves been adding to hers? Or was it her sanctus weakening? And … yes, the wind current was weakening too. No matter, she could use the howl to guide her, as she was going towards it now. Then - that’s silly: if there was no wind, there’d be no howl. So she’d better hurry … except that … how would she find the way back, if the wind had died down? That prospect was frightening.

She didn’t even know how far back the Thing was. Where had that foolish girl dropped its hand? Not far, she hoped. When had she last heard its wail? Back near the howling chamber? That was about five junctions back. But she had been telling the story to calm it, so it was surely not that far back. She couldn’t go back five junctions, never. She should be able to hear its wail if it wasn’t too far away. Unless it was too cold, too weak to make a noise?

She stopped. Oh, this was hopeless, it could be anywhere. What was the point, anyway? If anything deserved to be left in this place, the Thing did. But … the Thing had protected her mother, had kept the Beast at bay; it had tried to help when it could. So whatever it owed the world, she owed it something. And she’d seen its misery, its desperate need. Could she leave it here? No, not without at least trying to rescue it.

But how would she get back, with no wind to guide her? She couldn’t, no question. No, wait, of course she could. She could leave a trail by dragging her shoes as she walked. Move, girl, move,
who knows what is happening with Bellatrix and Mum.

She reached the first junction cave: she’d passed three openings before she’d taken the draughty one, so she passed three openings and took the fourth. Just to be sure, she listened for the howling. Yes, there it was: very faint, but of course she was quite a long way from it, with many winding passages between. She went on, carefully dragging her shoes as she hurried along.

No sign of the Thing. In fact, no sign of anything, not even dark-selves. Had they all followed her out to the cove? What a cheek: they hated her, had attacked her, tried to kill her, yet trusted her to lead them to the ferryman. Hypocrites

The second junction cave: had it been the second or the third she’d taken. Third? No, couldn’t be, there were only two going this way. If her memory was that bad, leaving a track was essential.

Third cave: how far away was the Thing? She listened: was that a faint wail? But … what about the wind howl? She listened again, and held up a finger. Nothing. The wind had died away. But the Thing’s wail was coming from the fourth opening.

She hurried along the passage. Now she could feel something - malevolence - ahead. Some dark-selves: why had they stayed behind?

She soon saw: in the next junction cave the Thing, greyish-white in the gloom, was lying on the cave floor, a group of dark-selves around it. The Thing was curled up, a gasping coming from it.

“Shoo, shoo, go away,” and she sent a blast of light at the dark-selves. They scattered and she ran to the Thing.

“Come on, Thing,” and she took its hand. Oh! She’d forgotten how cold it was. She tried to pull it onto its feet, but her hand just pulled loose. The Thing wailed. Again she took its hand and pulled, but again it did not move.

“What’s the matter? Can’t you walk? Are you hurt?” Or … was it cold to the point of being frozen? Perhaps it had no, absolutely no heat of its own, and that was why it clung to any creature which had warmth, even Bellatrix. That would explain its desperate clinging to her mother. Now, having been left behind and having the dark-selves sending cold at it, it was too frozen to move.

She wasn’t about to carry it, that was dead sure. But … what then? If it couldn’t walk, she’d have to leave it here, leave it to be tormented by the dark-selves. She owed it; she couldn’t do that. But carry it how? On her back? No way, never! Carry that creature on her back, its arms around her neck? She’d be totally at its mercy. But … her mother was waiting, in Bellatrix’s flighty care. It was carry the Thing on her back or leave it. She’d have to risk it.

She sat down with her back to the Thing and said, “I’m going to carry you, Thing. Climb onto my back.” She heard the gasping breath, felt the bony arms on her shoulders, the body against her back. Her body clenched, not just at the thought of what she was carrying but also at the icy touch. It felt as though the warmth was being drained from her. “Hold on,” she said, and fought down the panic as the arms tightened around her neck. Still, they weren’t squeezing, just tight. But there was more: she had a sense of urgency: something was happening in the cove. Her mother was in danger.

She struggled to her feet and began walking. Left fork, yes, she was sure of this one. She started down it, glancing at the ground just to be sure… Nothing, no trail. Was she wrong? Had it been right fork? She turned back to check. No tracks down the right fork either. Then she remembered: one of her very first discoveries in Betwixt, the sand moving back across the drag marks she had
made. No trails allowed. Her heart sank. No trail and no draught? How was she to find the way back? And the ever increasing urgency of the call: her mother in danger.

She hurried down the left-hand fork to the first junction cave. Third or fourth opening? Third, was it? She felt the panic rising. Decide, girl, your mother needs you.

She started felt it, but immediately a sense of wrongness came from the Thing. How could it know, it hadn’t even been with them at this stage. But … it had found her mother before, it could sense her warmth, so perhaps that was what it was sensing now. But … could it be trusted? She’d done it no wrong, had helped it, she had even come back to rescue it, but in life it had showed no gratitude or loyalty to those who had fought for it.

The sense of danger to her mother again, sharp and strong. She must choose quickly, and go. Trust it or not? Trust: they were on the same side, here and now, the side that wanted to save her mother.

She turned back and started down the fourth opening. Yes, it felt right. The next junction: she’d taken the second passage last time, she was sure. She moved towards it: no sense of dissent from the Thing. They agreed. The next - was this the last junction cave? Which one has she taken here? Fourth or fifth? She walked past the fourth and immediately had a sense of wrongness from the Thing. She turned back and took the fourth junction.

A few hundred paces and… yes, there was light. Light and an ever more urgent summoning. As she neared the exit she could hear Bellatrix’s voice, screaming.

She burst from the cave to see a huge hairy form, half again as tall as her. It was standing there, back to her, with Bellatrix pummelling on its leg with her fists. Over its shoulder, like a sack of coal, lay her mother, her hands clasped over her head.

“No,” yelled Rose. She pulled the Thing’s arms from around her neck, it slipped from her shoulders and she ran forward. “No, put her down, put her down!”

The creature swiped at Bellatrix, sending her sprawling across the shingle. Then it turned to face her. A long snout, bared teeth, pointed ears. Greyback. The Beast was Greyback in werewolf form. He must have followed them through the labyrinth and hidden in an alcove when she’d gone back for the Thing.

Light, he feared her light! She sent a bolt of light at him, as she had at the dark-selves, so many times. Nothing happened. Her light wasn’t working any more!

He lifted his head, muzzle to the sky and gave a long howl. Triumph, Rose could feel it. He finally had the prey he had been after.

No! She ran at him, shrieking, hands raised for she did not know quite what. But it would not have made any difference, for the werewolf, holding her mother in place with one hand, reached out and grabbed her wrists, first one then the other, and held them in a crushing grip. She tried to kick at him, but he just lifted her off her feet, her body dangling from her wrists.

Then Bellatrix was back, shrieking at him, hitting him with her fists, but she could have been a buzzing fly for all the effect she had. Only the Thing was left.

“Help me,” she screamed, but what could the Thing do? It couldn’t even walk anymore.

But as the werewolf turned towards the cave, the Thing dragged itself across to the entrance, and squatted there. The werewolf ran at it, growling. The Thing hissed back, a deep, menacing hiss and the werewolf stopped.
Now what? The Thing had held Greyback off before, but this time the werewolf had his prey in his hands, and the Thing was much weaker than before. The werewolf could just kick the Thing to one side and make his escape, and he would soon realize that. What could she do; how could she help? She twisted her head around and her heart jumped in surprise.

A young woman was standing off to one side, watching her. She was dressed in an old-fashioned riding habit, with a cinched waist, large buttoned bodice and feathered hat as if she had been performing in an English Civil War costume drama. An arm was around an older woman, also in period dress, but with the same sort of nowhere gaze as Hermione.

“Help me, please, please!” Rose cried, but the girl’s gaze fell and she turned away. Oh!

The werewolf half crouched and began stalking towards the cave, snarling. He’d realised the Thing was powerless. He’d knock it aside and make off into the cave with her mother. And her.

Near her were a cluster of light-selves. ‘Please, help,’ Rose thought at them. How they could, she did not know, but they had helped her before. And they did again, flowing towards her, gathering as they came, more and more. They began clustering around the werewolf’s head, like a helmet. He growled, but with both hands full, could do nothing else.

They needed to confuse him, to frighten him, so Rose formed the image in her mind of the light-selves circling the werewolf’s head. They started moving, round and round, faster and faster, swirling around his head.

Now to frighten him, and she imagined them zooming in at him. Immediately one darted in, straight at the werewolf’s eyes, others following it in a cone, like a swarm of bees. The werewolf gave a howl, ducked, and let go of Rose’s wrists. She fell to the ground, then threw herself forward to try and catch her mother as she slid from the creature’s shoulders. The werewolf was flailing at the light-selves, but his hands seemed to pass right through them.

How long before he realised that the light-selves were all snarl and no teeth, like the Thing? Then he would ignore them, and take her mother again. She must keep up the pressure, keep him confused, drive him back, into the water, perhaps … drown him? It was a forlorn hope but she had nothing else.

“Take Mum away,” Rose whispered to Bellatrix, then stepped around in front of the werewolf. She had driven him back with her light before, so he might still have a vestige of fear of her, even if Betwixt magic didn’t work here.

The light-selves were just circling again. “Attack!” she screamed, stepping forward, and they did. The werewolf howled and stepped back. She stepped forward and … “Attack!” And again and again, the creature howling and snarling, striking with his hands, but … retreating, one step at a time. It was terrifying, knowing what he was, that he was twice her size and many times her strength.

Then, just before the water, he gave a high pitched howl and fell to the shingle. He writhed for a moment and - she gaped - just dissolved into the ground. A small grey light hovered over the spot for a moment, then drifted away. What had happened? Had the sanctus split into soul and eidolon? It must have. But why now?

Then behind her she heard murmuring. She turned. All the light-selves were drifting across the shingle to the landing stage. Against it lay a rowing boat and in the boat was a robed, cowled figure. He was standing, legs braced apart, arm outstretched, pointing at her. No, not her, the werewolf, where it had been.
Greater love hath no man ...

Chapter Notes

*The tools in the darkness, these tasks to enspan*
*Are tears and to offer all that one can*

The ferryman turned and held out his hand to ... her mother, standing there, on the landing stage. He was going to help her onto the boat.

“No,” Rose screamed, “No, Mum, no! Stop.”

Hermione turned and looked at her as she ran across the shingle and onto the boarding. She grabbed her mother’s arm and pulled her away, back, off the landing stage and onto the shore.

Then she turned to the ferryman. Within the cowl was just a glimmer of white in darkness. “No!” she said. “She is not dead. She is not going with you.”

The cowl seemed to stare at her. Then a sleeve rose slowly. Projecting from it was a white skeletal hand, a finger pointing at her. Her heart jumped. But then it swung across, pointing past her to the cave exit. The Thing was still there, crouching. Leading her mother, Rose went back up the shingle. The Thing was whimpering and cowering down. As she reached it, it half turned, as if to scuttle back into the cave.

“No, Thing. No one will be left here now, there’ll be nothing but cold. You'll freeze here forever. You must go on now. Whatever is on the other side, it cannot be worse than here.” She picked it up and carried it in her arms onto the landing stage. It gave a soft wail as the cowled figure took it and set it down in the boat.

The ferryman pointed to her, gesturing that she must go and stand next to her mother, out of the way. Then he held out an arm as if guiding people on to boat.

She’d never really paid the light-selves much attention. Even when she had been able to see them, too much else had been going on. Now she saw that they were there in their hundreds. How long had it been since the ferryman had last come? McGonagall hadn’t said, but unless there had been a recent epidemic of *errantes sanctus* spells going wrong, it must be a very long time.

A tall feather, moving among the light-selves, caught her eye and her lips tightened. The costume drama girl, her arm still around her mother, her eyes fixed on the planking, avoiding Rose’s gaze.

“Yes, you might well feel ashamed,’ thought Rose. ‘You couldn’t stir yourself to help me, but you’re happy to be rescued when I call the ferryman, after being here ... how long?’ Costume dramas were, what, late 20th Century? Though why costume drama actors should be involved in an *errantes sanctus* spell ...

Or were they? Could they be ... the real thing: mother and daughter witches from the time of the English Civil War? Oh no! Surely, surely that poor girl could not have been here since about 1650? Three and a half centuries, here in this cove, waiting? That would be enough to drive anyone insane. And Rose could see that while the eidolon mother’s clothing was still pristine, the
daughter’s was ripped and torn. She thought of her own emotional experiences here, the despair, the hurt, the guilt: had this girl lived through that? She must have, for what else could she be but a failed seeker? And then three and a half centuries of waiting, three and a half centuries to think about what she had done wrong, how she had lost her mother’s love, why she was an unworthy daughter. The torn clothes were the visible signs of the trauma: self-harm, self-punishment, self-mutilation. Beneath the clothes, Rose was sure, would be more. Her heart went out to the girl; who was she to judge and condemn a person after an experience like that? Especially as she herself had failed. And … was that what was facing her? Her heart quailed.

The mother and daughter boarded and were lost to view among the light-selves. Bellatrix too was hidden, somewhere on the boat. The light-selves were no longer wailing, in fact had not been since they entered the cove. The sound Rose could hear now was a murmur of … not joy exactly, but optimism, hope. The aura of despair was gone. They flowed onto the landing stage, poured across the gangplank and crowded into the prow of the little boat.

Every now and then the light-selves would stop and draw back, and a group of dark-selves would board. The light-selves already on the boat would cluster more densely, avoiding the dark-selves, but the ferryman was directing the new-comers to a corner of the stern, away from the light-selves. The boat settled deeper and deeper into the water as the souls boarded. Who would have thought that a soul had weight?

The water seemed almost lapping over the sides when the last few dark-selves drifted across the gangplank and onto the boat. Then the ferryman turned and beckoned to her. Now, now was their turn. Now, now was her chance. Her very last hope, forlorn though it was.

Rose had sought her mother, had found her, had brought her to the ferryman. She had done everything she could do. Could he, would he …?

Gripping her mother’s arm tightly, Rose walked them down the jetty, stopping at the gangplank. Her heart in her mouth, she said, “Can you help me? Can you help me Awaken my mother?”

The darkness beneath the cowl stared at her for a moment, then the head swung slowly from side to side. Left to right to centre, then still.

The tears began to roll down Rose’s cheeks. “But we are not dead. We want to go back to the land of the living.”

Again the head swung slowly from side to side.

“But then what do we do?”

The hand rose, pointed to Hermione and gestured to the boat.

They could only go on, to the Land of the Sancti? Never! But … if the alternative was to stay here? Even going on to the world of the sancti was better than that. They would die, yes, both of them, but at least her mother would have a whole sanctus again.

She walked forward, stepping onto the gangplank first to help balance her mother, but the ferryman held up a hand to stop her. Again he pointed to Hermione, and his head nodded. Then he pointed to Rose and his head moved slowly from side to side.

Her mother could go on, but she couldn’t? Her mother’s sanctus was broken, so she could take the ferry to the land of the sancti. Rose’s was not, so she could not. Her sanctus was whole.

But he had let the Civil War girl on, with her whole sanctus, so why not Rose? Because, like
Bellatrix, she was maimed? Would a soul be maimed by three centuries of despair, desolation, guilt? Oh, need she wonder?

So she must stay here, in the land of the lost souls. In the land of the living, her body would wither and die. Here, in Betwixt, in this cove, she would stand and wait, like the Civil War girl. After a time she too would become maimed, and could wander, whole but damaged, though Bewixt. The Cave of Screaming would be silent now, except for the wind, silent and empty, for all the dark-selves would have gone. But whatever she did, she would be waiting.

Waiting until someone, someone Seeking like her, but better, braver, more loving and more loved, came to rescue her own mother and succeeded where Rose had failed. How long would she wait? Years, decades, centuries, millennia, no one could say. She knew, no one better, how slim the chances were of success, how traumatic and draining the journey had been, how great a part luck had played for her to have reached this far. And still she had failed.

And she would be alone. She would be alone, more alone than she had ever been, as alone as anyone could ever be, the only being in this world. She would learn, yes, she would learn why the wailers wailed.

Unless her mother stayed with her. They could stay together, here in the cove, like the Civil War girl and her mother. They would at least be together. It would be better, surely, than being apart.

For her, yes. But for her mother, with a broken sanctus, her eidolon unaware, her soul drifting, seeking fruitlessly, grieving endlessly? Could she condemn her mother to that?

The choice was hers.

“A mother, Bellatrix, is someone who loves you more than anyone else in the whole world.” She’d said that. Was it true? Yes, though it seemed … not for her. But turn it round: was her mother the one she loved more than anyone else in the world? More than … herself?

Tears streaming down her cheeks, she took her mother in her arms and kissed her. “Goodbye, Mum. I love you.” She could hardly choke out the words.

She lifted her mother’s arm, and the ferryman took it, guiding her onto the gangplank.

Then Hermione’s head came up. She stopped and half turned to look at her. “Rose? Rosie, is that you?”

“What? ‘Mum’?”

“Rose, what … where are we?” Her mother’s light was growing, from nothing to an almost blinding brilliance, her warmth from that pale orange to a deep red.

“Mum, Mum, you’re awake, you’re Awake!”

The ferryman turned Hermione around, and gently pushed her off the gangplank onto the jetty.

“Have I been asleep, Rosie? Rose, Rose, what’s the matter?”

For Rose had flung her arms around her mother, was hugging and kissing her, heaving great sobs and crying out, “Mum, Mum, Mum!”

The sound of splashing and the creaking of timber took a while to reach through her joy. She looked up to see the boat was already well away from the jetty.
“What about us?” she called, but the ferryman, cowl down, just kept rowing.

Now what? Back through the cave into the empty land, looking for the Place of Returning, fighting to keep herself and her mother awake? A place so hidden that Bellatrix, here and wandering for seventeen years, had never come across it. Her heart sank again.

“Please, can’t you help us? Where should we go?” she called. The ferry was almost at the edge of sight, fading into the gloom before the ferryman’s cowled head lifted and looked towards them. He stopped rowing, shipped one oar and raised an arm. The skeletal hand seemed to flick upwards: a gesture of dismissal.
Consciousness came slowly, and with it a feeling of being held, of being safe and cared for. What? Where? Rose opened her eyes ... home?

Yes! Bansith cottage bedroom - home, home, home!

And not alone any more: sleeping people scattered untidily around the room: Ginny sitting on a rug on the floor, her head on crossed arms on the stool. Draco, his long legs at an awkward angle, was sitting on the dressing table, back against the mirror. Astoria next to him, her head on his lap. Bill was the only one upright, leaning against a doorpost. His watch? Waiting for her to wake? The cats already knew: Mister Lumpy was sitting, porcelain pose, on the windowsill, and Miss Sash, at the other end of the bed, was stretching, one leg at a time. Both were looking at her and even from here she could hear Miss Sash’s purr.

Miss Sash on the bed? Where was Mum? Rose jerked upright. Her wrist pulled free from someone’s grasp and her head hit something solid.

“Ow.” Scorpius’s voice. His arms around her. She wriggled free and slid off the bed, turning to glare at him. He was rubbing his chin. “All you had to do was ask, you know, Rosie,” he said. But he was grinning.

Rosie? Cheek. “Where’s my mother?”

“She’s fine, Rose,” Parvati was sitting in a chair next to the bed. It had been her holding her wrist. “She’s in the drawing room, sleeping, waiting for you.”

“Everyone is,” said Bill. “A heroine’s welcome awaits you, Rose.” He bowed to her.

Ginny got up and took Rose in her arms, kissed her and hugged her. “You did it, you wonderful, wonderful girl. You brought her back, but what a time you must have had! We’ve been so worried. Scorpius has been through ... purgatory just holding you, so heavens knows what it must have been like for you.”

“But is Mum all right? Is her sanctus …”

“It’s there, Rose,” said Parvati. “It was there when you Returned, whole, sound, strong, solid.”

“It’s just that ... she kept wanting to sleep, in that place. And I knew she would fade and die if she did, but it was so difficult to keep her awake. So when you tell me she’s asleep now, I get scared.”

Parvati squeezed her hand. “She’s fine, Rose, really. You Returned four hours ago, both of you, and both in deep sleep. Padma and I checked you both, immediately. You were physically fine, both of you, with sanctus present, whole, healthy and strong. Your mother woke two hours ago, and took half the party to the drawing room to avoid disturbing you. As it is three in the morning, I’m sure they are asleep there. But Padma is monitoring her, as I am you.”
“Padma and Parvati have been monitoring you both for the past twenty three hours, Rose,” said Ginny. “I don’t know how they kept going. I don’t know how any of us kept going, but I do know that none of us want to experience anything like this ever again. Knowing that your mother was hovering on the boundary between life and … something else, and you, in there, fighting for her, against something, nobody knew what, just that it was draining you, driving you to that boundary yourself. Knowing there was nothing, nothing we could do to help you.” She shook her head. “All the time we were trying to gauge how it was going, by watching Abraxas and Scorpius. Abraxas just sat there like a stone statue, eyes closed, but his breathing: sometimes slow and steady, sometimes quick, a few times gasping like he was running a race. That was frightening. But watching Scorpius was even worse. He seemed to be reflecting what you were experiencing. It was terrifying, like being on an out-of-control roller-coaster.

“Then Narcissa said we should watch Miss Sash and Mister Lumpy. They’d returned to their bodies about two hours after you left. They knew what was happening, or something of it, but smoothed out the highs and lows. When things were going badly, Mister Lumpy would begin pacing, like an expectant father, and Miss Sash would sit down next to you and begin licking your face. We had a terrifying moment just before the end where both cats were spitting and snarling, not at each other but at some imaginary creature in the air. Some crisis: you were all under huge stress. And a few moments before Padma and Parvati realized you were Returning, Mister Lumpy began purring and Miss Sash leapt into the air. Dancing, Narcissa called it. They knew.”

“Oh.” Rose put out a hand and Miss Sash pushed her head into her palm. “I wasn’t thinking about anyone but Mum and me. Though I think I knew Scorpius was helping me.” She glanced at him. “The monitoring showed that, Rose,” said Parvati. “Between the four of you, you’ve revealed a dimension we didn’t know existed. Amaura couples are bonded to a much deeper level than we realised.” Amaura couples: no hedging of terms from the healer. Rose hoped she wasn’t blushing too much, but she … wasn’t averse to hearing. “Scorpius’s life energy stress level has been fluctuating in parallel to yours, at about ninety, ninety-five percent of your level, indicating supportive draining. An analogy would be the two of you on a tandem, both pedalling. When you were on a hill, both levels rose, but yours more than his: sometimes it went soaring up, frighteningly so. Abraxas’s levels have equalled yours, but the demands on him were in contrast to Hermione’s levels: They peaked every time hers plunged: she was very weak. Only he was pedalling on the tandem. And at one point he seemed to be on an incredibly steep hill, going slower and slower. Her pulse was weakening as well as the rate falling. I really thought … we were going to lose her. And possibly him as well for he was putting all he had into it. That was when Scorpius had left you for a few moments, unavoidably but still much to Mister Lumpy’s fury. Your stress had plateaued at a level higher than I have ever seen before. But then you came out of it, and very quickly Hermione recovered, and to a stronger state than before. You must have done something to strengthen her. Then Scorpius came back, and the amaura power became effective again.”

Was that when … something … she couldn’t quite remember, just that it was unbelievably hard. And she had done something … wrong, bad? There was a vestige of guilt there. She’d no recollection of doing anything to help her mother: quite the opposite. “Yes, she kept wanting to … to … to sleep. I couldn’t Awaken her.” Why was she having such trouble remembering? But the despair, the despondency she could remember very well.

“You did Awaken her eventually, Rosie,” said Ginny. “You must have done, or you wouldn’t be here.”

Ginny had a deep red glow about her. Rose could see it. More, she knew what it was: Ginny’s warmth, her humanity, her caring. She looked around. The others had colours too. Bill, a deep,
deep blue, Scorpius the same shade, but lighter. What was this? Some sense, some awareness she’d
brought back from Betwixt with her? Bill was a mage, Scorpius a schoolboy: was that the
difference? She’d better keep quiet about this until she knew what was going on.

“We’re so pleased to see you awake and well, Rose dear,” said Astoria. “I’m sure you want to
reassure yourself about your mother. Shall we go across to the drawing room now?”

Miss Sash sprang off the bed and, tail erect, walked to the door. Mister Lumpy joined her, leaving a
space between them for Rose. Together they would escort her to the Great House.
The drawing room lights were turned low. On a couch her mother was half sitting, half lying in Abraxas’ arms, her head in the hollow of his shoulder, her arm around his waist. His head was resting on hers, his eyes closed. A faint white glow was around them, ringed by a rainbow of colours. No denial there anymore. Padma was sitting on a chair next to the couch, her hand on Hermione’s wrist, her head propped on an elbow, her eyes closed. Fleur, Harry and George lay sprawled in armchairs. They all looked very uncomfortable. Right at the far end, lit by a small table lamp, two people were still awake, heads together, talking softly: Narcissa and - Rose stared - Graddad Weasley. He must have arrived during the night. And with Narcissa; was there something there? That would be so good for both of them. They were both lonely and alone.

“Action stations, fanfare,” called Bill, turning the lights to full. Everyone began stirring.

“Rosie!” Hermione sprang up and ran to her, taking her in her arms and hugging her. Rose’s fears vanished at once. This was her mum, whole, healthy and strong. She too had the red glow, even deeper than Ginny’s. “You rescued me from a dark, dark place, sweetheart. How are you?”

Abraxas took Rose in his arms, hugged her and kissed her forehead. “Rose. What can I say?” and she kissed his cheek and said, “You needn’t say anything, Mr Malfoy. We understand each other.” He had the same blue glow as Bill, but even deeper. He was smiling, fit to bust. She’d never seen him smile like that before, actually never seen him smile at all. He’d looked as though he couldn’t smile, that the ancient patrician face was built for sternness, self-control, austerity, anything but happiness.

And he looked so young. Now, now, now the amaura he and her mother shared was a thing of joy, to be welcomed and celebrated without reserve. Two people with an unclouded future before them. She could see their colours melding, but each retaining its characteristics. She pulled them both into a hug. “I’m so happy for you.” Tears all round, and she reached into Abraxas’s pocket and took out a handkerchief. The AGM monogram: what did that remind her of?

Abraxas stepped back so others could reach her, drawing her mother back with him, putting one arm around her shoulders, another around her waist with the air of one determined never to let her go. And her mother looked radiantly happy.

The others came up: Fleur kissed her on both cheeks and pronounced her ‘une fille pétillante,’ George swung her round, Harry kissed her and said, “I knew you could do it.” Granddad Weasley hugged her and kissed her on the forehead, saying, “My little rosebud has blossomed in so many ways now. I’m proud of you, Rosebud.”

Narcissa said, “You are truly your mother’s daughter, Rose,” and Draco nodded.

Her father? Where was he? Had he gone, without knowing she was all right? No, there he was at the door. He’d probably been outside in the darkness, unable to stand the sight of her mother with Abraxas. She felt a pang for him: he was yesterday’s man, but now at least was showing the maturity of not denying it.

As the others stepped back, he came forward. “Rose, my wonderful, brave, beautiful daughter. Like your mother, doing what no one else could have done.”

She kissed him and hugged him, but then he loosened her arms and stepped back. “I … must go, now I’ve seen Rose back, safe. I must go.”
“Ron …” said Hermione.

“Mione, I must go. I must go. You have another life now. Try to remember me as I was once, not what I’d become. Though I never was … worthy of you. But I’ll stay out of your life, do nothing to make it difficult. All I ask, and I know I don’t deserve it, is that I be allowed to see Rose and Hugo from time to time, if they will see me.”

“Oh, Ron, Ron,” and she held out her arms.

He raised his hands. “No, Mione, no. You’ve moved on, and rightly. He’s … he’s the better man, a better match for you. He, and this,” he waved a hand around, “you can … grow, as I would never let you, grow to what you should be. I’m … so grateful that you have your health and youth back. I can never give back what I took from you, but at least now …”

“Oh Ron, I know you must have given back … given to me. Abraxas aged hugely when he gave me life energy, so I must have aged when I helped him. I must have, because I’ve seen Lucius, and was shocked at his ageing. Yet I look the same as I did, so I know someone must have given me life energy, to rejuvenate me the second time. I can’t tell with him, with Abraxas, because I never saw him young, but with you I can. You’re older, much older. You gave me life energy, Ron, you can’t deny it.” And she reached out to him again.

Again he raised his hands and stepped back. “No, Mione, don’t. Yes, I gave you life energy, but we all did. They don’t want you to know, but it wasn’t me alone. All the Weasleys, all the Malfoys, Harry, all of us. Mrs Malfoy worked out how we could all help, Mr Malfoy told us what to do; the spells, and attached first, Padma and Parvati monitored. I was just one of many, and I had to most to repay, the most to gain by giving.

“Ginny, you were right, Fleur too. I was given, unearned and undeserved, the love of a wonderful woman and two wonderful children. I squandered the lot. Callously, irresponsibly, petulantly. I can’t believe how selfish, how deluded, how blind I’ve been. Giving you a tiny bit back, Mione, has enabled me to regain a little of that love from Rose.” He looked at Rose. “I know I don’t deserve it. What I threw away and the little I gave back. It’s only your big heartedness, Rose, which you didn’t get from me, that gives it to me.”

“Oh, Dad!” Rose hugged him. His pain made her heart bleed.

He hugged her back, hesitantly, then said, “Now I must go.”

“Ron, what will you do?” said Hermione. “Please, please don’t do anything … impetuous.”

“I will stay out of your life, Mione. I owe you that at the least. And I won’t do anything impulsive or foolish, for that would be more petulant self-indulgence, more exploiting of you and Rose and Hugo. As long as I have that bit of love from Rose, I can carry on. But for the rest, I’m finished with Quidditch. George has offered me a job in R & D: I start with Dad in his workshop on Monday. I must go now.”

“I’ll come with you, mate, to see you off,” said Harry, and putting his arm around Ron’s shoulders, they left the room together. Granddad Weasley followed them.

Hermione stared after him, tears still running down her face. Rose, wiping away her own tears, went up to her. “It’s for the best, Mum. A clean break. Dad can start his life afresh, make something of it. He’ll be good at inventing things, developing them, making them work. I’ll … watch over him, as much as I can, with Ginny.” Ginny nodded.
“Oh, Rose.” Her mother took her in her arms. “Thank you. And thank you for taking him back, as Dad. That means everything to him. You and Hugo are all he has now, all that stands between him and … He won’t accept anything from me now.”

“No, he won’t, Mum. You must accept that, and move on.”

“Yes. Yes, I must. I have other responsibilities now.” She glanced at Abraxas.

“You do, Mum. Dad is our responsibility, Hugo’s and mine, and the Weasleys. I’ll speak to Hugo and – where is he? I haven’t seen him.”

“Upstairs, asleep in bed, my love,” said Hermione, “but I’ve seen him, and he’s seen you, and he knows we are both back and safe.”

“All right, good. And Winky? I haven’t seen her either.”

A squeaky elf voice answered her. “Winky is here, Miss Rose. Winky knows her new mistress is busy, so Winky has been making tea for her guests on her behalf. Here is hot milk, hot chocolate, Abyssinian coffee and Earl Grey tea.” Then Winky put her hand into Rose’s, looked up at her and said, “Winky is so, so glad that Miss Rose was able to Find, Awake and Return with Miss Hermione. Winky could not have borne it if Miss Rose had not. But Miss Rose did.” Winky was looking intently up into her face. “Winky knew that Miss Rose has the same virtues as her mistress, her new mistress, that she is brave and clever and-”

“Winky …” said Rose.

“Winky just doesn’t want Miss Rose or Miss Hermione, her new mistress, to think Winky would send Miss Rose to that terrible place without Due Consideration. Lots and lots of Due Consideration.”

She cocked her head to one side, still looking at Rose, a worried frown on her face. “Winky hopes that Miss Rose has not forgotten to tell Miss Hermione that Winky is her lady’s maid, that Miss Hermione is Winky’s new mistress?”

“Oh, er …” said Rose, and Hermione said, “Miss Narcissa has told me, Winky, and I am very happy to welcome you as my maid, my lady’s maid. I know you will look after me very well. And give me good advice.”

Winky relaxed, then went red and muttered, “Winky does not give her mistress Advice, Miss. Winky knows her place. The most Winky will do is show Another Point of View, Miss.”

“If Winky’s Other Points of View are as good as her dress-making, they will be worth paying close attention to,” said Ginny. “And did you say there is tea, Winky? Would you pour me a cup, please, and also for Master Harry, and while you are doing that, perhaps Rose could tell us what happened. If you feel up to it, Rose.”

“Yes, of course. It was like being … like being …” Images were sliding together in her mind, one superimposing on another, then blurring and sinking, sinking … “Like being nowhere, in almost darkness, and nothing growing, just a barren place with hills, no colour, just greys, light, dark.” She was gasping out the words as fast as she could, for the images were fading in her memory.

“And Mum on a hill, and the cave, the cave of … And the ferryman, and the boat sinking deeper into the water, and …” She covered her face with her hands. “I’ve forgotten! I can’t remember! But it happened to me, it was terrifying, and I can’t remember. What’s wrong with me; have I lost my mind?”
“No, Rose, no. It’s normal,” McGonagall’s voice. “Those who have been there can never remember. That’s what the records say. They all have memory fade immediately. That’s why we know so little.”

A hand rested on her shoulder and she clutched at it. Scorpius, she knew, but still she clutched at it. Comforting feelings seeped through her.

“It was terrifying, I can tell you that,” he said. “I experienced only the emotions, but they were bad enough.”

“You felt them?” She was so grateful to him for taking the attention off her. She must look an utter fool standing there saying she couldn’t remember those terrifying experiences.

“I felt what you felt, I think. At the beginning: shock, then fear and growing … hopelessness.”

“It sounds a terrible place,” said Narcissa softly.

Rose looked at her. Narcissa would have known hopelessness, despair, all those feelings.

“After a few hours I felt a surge of your joy, Rose,” said Scorpius, “and I guessed you’d found your mum. I hoped it might get better after that. But instead your spirits plummeted, like falling off a cliff. It was worse than before, much worse. Hurt, confusion, despondency, despair.” He shook his head. “Grandmother was wiping my eyes all the time, and I was experiencing it only at second hand. Harrowing pain, yet you kept on going, Rose.

“I’d expected, if I’d expected anything, terror, and there was terror, three, four times. That was scary, yes, but when your spirits sank, deeper and deeper and deeper, the feelings of despondency, of hopelessness, were far worse. Your heart was at rock bottom, Rose, but somehow you just kept slogging on. And then, just before you came back, an upsurge of hope and … joy, joy like I’ve never felt, like… like a shooting star, going up and up. And then you both came back, and were asleep as if nothing had happened. It was unbelievable.”

She squeezed his hand, then turned to McGonagall. “But why can’t I remember? It was so real-”

“It was real, Rose, but -” said McGonagall.

“I do beg your pardon, Professor, but I have an urgent request for Mrs Malfoy senior to go into the gallery.” Lady Finna was speaking from the portrait over the fireplace.

“Oh? Now? All right. Please excuse me,” and Narcissa hurried off.

“Rose, there is nothing wrong with your memory or your mind or your sanctus,” said McGonagall. “We know so little about Talambh na Anamacha Caillte because the few who do return experience immediate memory fade. I think it is to do with not having a physical body, a flesh and blood brain, for the memories to be imprinted onto, Rose.”

“I suppose that makes sense. My sanctus was there, not my physical body. If I had gone on, I would have remembered, but I came back here, to my physical body.”

“And you have given us one solid fact we never had before, Rose: this cave. That is a significant -”

Narcissa came running back into the room and went up to Rose “You wonderful, wonderful young woman, you never told me. Oh, Rose, thank you, thank you,” and she kissed her and hugged her. Rose politely hugged her back, but said, “Never told you what, Mrs Malfoy?”
“My sister. Bellatrix. Come and see.”

“Bellatrix?” Harry frowned and stood up. “We’ll all come.”

Narcissa looked at him, eyes wide, and said, “Oh, but …” and Ginny pulled at his arm. “No, we won’t. Harry, sit down. We’ll wait here, Mrs Malfoy.”

“Thank you, Mrs Potter. Perhaps later, if …” She tailed off.

Ginny shook her head. “Your family business is your family business, Mrs Malfoy. The past is past.” She frowned at Harry, then looked back at Narcissa. “This is nothing to do with us.”

“Thank you, Mrs Potter. Miss Granger, Rose, Grandfather, please, come. Professor, you are most welcome, should you wish to come.”

“May I bring Scorpius, Mrs Malfoy?” said Rose. “He was … concerned as well.”

Narcissa looked pleased. “Thank you, Rose. Of course you may.”
The mist lifts

Chapter Notes

Our tale draws to a close

This was embarrassing. All the paintings were crowded with figures, staring at Rose as they walked past, whispering to each other. “Only sixteen;” “Her daughter, you know;” and “How long did you say?” Near the end of the gallery, Narcissa stopped. Three girls of about five or six years old were standing at the edge of a painting, looking at them. So were the two cats, one on each side.

“There she is!” The little girl in the middle, in an old fashioned party frock, lace bibbed and calf length. The voice was familiar, but the face: the caricature of the madwoman had gone and the face was innocence and joy at seeing her friend again. “Andi, this is my friend Rose.”

“Oh!” said Hermione. “She’s come to life. Oh, I am glad!”

“Hello, Rose’s mother. Have you had a sleep now?” She turned to the girl on her left. “Cissy, Rose’s mother just wouldn’t stay awake. Rose tried, and I tried and even the nasty Thing tried, and all the time she just wanted to sleep.”

“Bellatrix?” said Rose. Cloudy memories were taking shape.

“Yes, Rose? I did try and keep the mother awake, Rose, really I did, but she would try and sleep. And it wasn’t my fault the Thing got left behind in the Cave of Screaming, Rose. I suppose I let go of the Thing’s hand, but the Thing let go of my hand too. Still, you found it. How could you carry the Thing, Rose, that creepy, slithering, horrible Thing? How could you carry it like a baby in your arms?”

The Thing! A horrible, creeping thought was occurring to her. “Bellatrix, the ferryman took you to Andromeda, didn’t he.”

“Andi,” and Bellatrix turned to kiss the cheek of the child on her right. “That’s what she likes to be called. Yes, just like you promised, Rose. But you told me I wouldn’t meet my other sister, Cissy, for a long time, yet here she is. Rose’s mother, Rose told me that you love Cissy like Andi loves me.”

Hermione took Narcissa’s hand. “Yes, Bellatrix, I do love Cissy like a sister.”

Bellatrix gazed at her intently. “You were warm to me in that nowhere place, Rose’s mother. And you helped me through the Cave of Screaming, holding my hand tight and sending me warmth. So I know you have a caring self. Will you care for me like you care for Rose? And Andi too? We never had a mother, Andi and Cissy and I, not a proper one, not like you and Rose.”

Both Hermione and Narcissa were in tears now. “Yes, Bellatrix, I will care for you like a mother. And Andi and Cissy too, if they want that.”

This was all very sweet and touching, but Rose had worries, serious worries, not at all sweet. If Bellatrix could appear in paintings from wherever she was, what about the Thing? Panic would
spread like wildfire. “Bellatrix, what happened to the Thing? When you … left the ferry, did the Thing go with you?”

“Oh no. That boat, Rose, you shouldn’t have allowed all of those others on. It was hardly floating. The water was almost coming over the side.”

Flaky as ever. “Bellatrix, the Thing. What happened to it?”

“When we reached the other side, Rose, all the light-selves got off, except that girl, the ragged one with the torn face. She wouldn’t stop crying, Rose. I thought she was crying because her mother was a no-self, so I tried to tell her that your mother would be her mother too, if she liked, that you were happy to share, but she just cried all the harder. She spoke funny English, but she was saying she was bad, bad, bad. When her mother got off, with all the light-selves, she didn’t want to. She was crying and crying and crying. And then the man touched her forehead, and she stopped crying and got off. With all the light-selves gone, the boat got higher in the water, so it was not almost sinking, and only me and the Thing and the dark-selves in the corner were left. The Wolf-thing was there too, I saw him. Why did you let him on, Rose? He tried to steal your mother; we were all fighting him, the nasty dark-self, even the light-selves. You should have left him there, where the man killed him.”

Greyback: she’d forgotten about him. Her mother reached out and clutched her shoulder, her eyes wide and questioning. Rose patted her hand. One monster at a time.

“Bellatrix, what happened to the Thing?” She spoke sternly, and Narcissa looked at her in surprise. If you only knew the history, Mrs Malfoy …

“I’m coming to that, Rose.” On her dignity now. “The man started rowing away, so I told him that my sister Andi was waiting and could I go to her please, and he said ‘No.’ Well, he didn’t say ‘No,’ he just thought ‘No’ at me. Like the nasty Thing. And he kept rowing. So I told him that you were my friend, and that if he’d sent you to where you wanted to go, he should let me go where I wanted to go. But he just thought ‘No’ at me again, and kept rowing. He wasn’t at all polite. So I told him he was very rude, both in what he said and how he said it, by thinking at me. But he just thought ‘Yes’ at me, and kept rowing. What kind of an answer is that, Rose? No ‘I beg your pardon,’ nothing.

“So I told him that he had no manners, and that his mother couldn’t have loved him, otherwise she would have taught him manners, and that my mother had taught me manners even though she hadn’t loved me. And I told him that you loved me, and that your mother cared about me, so now I had manners and love and caring, and he had neither three. And that wasn’t very nice or polite or friendly, but I was cross because he was so rude.

“And then he stopped rowing and looked at me. Scary, no face, all blackness. So I felt a bit sorry for him, because with a face like that, maybe his mother couldn’t love him, and maybe he didn’t talk because he had no mouth. So to make up I told him about Mother Minerva’s love blessing, and showed it to him,” and she touched her forehead. Rose could sense McGonagall’s raised eyebrows. “And I told him I was saving him from getting into trouble, because you would be really cross with him if he didn’t take me to Andi, and he wouldn’t like that. Not at all.” Now Rose could sense everyone’s raised eyebrows, and she blushed. “So then he rowed back and let me off, and Andi was there, just like you said.”

“And the Thing?”

“No, he would not let the Thing off. When the Thing and the dark-selves tried to follow me, he just said, ‘No.’ He didn’t think it, he said it, out loud. His voice was big and deep, Rose, huge, like he
was speaking from the back of the Chamber of Howling. So maybe he thought he was being polite by thinking at you rather than talking at you, because he had such a scary voice.”

“Did he take it back?” She didn’t want it to appear in a painting somewhere, but the idea of it being taken back to that deathlike existence was almost worse.

“Why do you care about the nasty Thing so much, Rose? You fought the dark-selves, you fought the Wolf-beast, but you care about the Thing, and the Thing is worse. Sometimes I think you care more about the Thing than about me. I saw you kiss it, Rose, don’t think I didn’t. Why did you do that? I hope you didn’t give it Mother Minerva’s love blessing.”

“I kissed it to say thank you for keeping the Beast away from my mother, Bellatrix.” After you tried to steal her. “And of course I didn’t give it Mother Minerva’s love blessing. There was only one and I gave it to you for taking me to my mother. It’s yours.”

“For ever?”

“For ever, Bellatrix,” said McGonagall. “I am Mother Minerva, and I am pleased that my soul daughter gave my blessing to you. It is yours for ever and ever.”

“Oh. Mine, for ever and ever.” A joyous smile spread over the child’s face and she touched her forehead again. “Thank you, Mother Minerva. I love you.” She turned to Rose. “I forgive you then, Rose. Why don’t you call me Belle, like Andi does. Anyway, the ferryman didn’t go back, he went on.”

“On where, Belle?” This was like drawing teeth.

“A further place, Rose,” said Andi. “Not where we are, Belle and I. A place far, far away, called the Land of Ending.”

“Talambh dar Críoch,” said McGonagall. “No return from there, in any form, Rose.”

“And now I don’t want to talk about the Thing ever, ever, ever again,” said Bellatrix. She cupped her hands and blew the thought away. Then she looked at Rose. “But I’ll tell you about the light-selves, that almost sank the boat, because you are my friend.”

“These were the lost souls in Talambh na Anamacha Caillte?” said Abraxas.

Bellatrix drew back slightly and frowned at him. “Tala what? Where’s that?”

“The place where you were.”

Bellatrix raised her eyebrows. Now she was Bellatrix Black, high-born young lady, dealing with an impertinent questioner who hadn’t even been introduced. “It’s not called that silly Tala Banana name, it’s called Despair. And of course the light-selves were there. How could they have got on the boat if they hadn’t been there? They followed Rose through the Cave of Screaming. And they were screaming too, because the dark-selves were trying to hurt them. Then Rose shot light at the dark-selves and they ran away. After that the light-selves stayed really close, specially in the labyrinth. But that’s why I dropped the Thing’s hand, Rose, because the dark-selves were so nasty after those horrid skulls. But you never finished the story, Rose. What happened to Great Big Billygoat Gruff when he tried to cross the bridge?”

“Great Big …” Rose reddened. Finish that ridiculous story? In front of Abraxas and Professor McGonagall? And Scorpius? He’d tease her about it forever. But once Bellatrix got hold of something she wouldn’t let it go. Better to get it over with. “He butted the troll off the bridge into
the river.”

“Wasn’t it into the cooking pot?” said Abraxas, lips twitching.

“No, it was straight into the fire,” said Scorpius, his face perfectly straight.

She narrowed her eyes at them. “Into … the … river. Definitely.” She could play this game too.

“You are being silly,” said Bellatrix, frowning, looking from Abraxas to Scorpius. “Boys are always silly. Cooked troll? Eww!” She turned to Rose. “It’s a silly story, Rose.”

“It was, but it stopped you screaming and got you through the cave, Belle.”

“I wasn’t screaming, Rose! The others were, but not me.”

“Tell us about the light-selves, Belle,” said Narcissa. “How many were there?”

“Oh, many, many, Cissy. As many as bees in a hive. That’s why they made the boat almost sink, because Rose let them all on. They were so happy to get on the boat, but even more happy to get off it.”

“Yes, we were.” A tall stately woman behind the three girls, arm in arm with a younger woman, bowed to Rose. The younger woman curtsied. “Deidre Malfoy, and my niece Melissa. I thank you, Miss Rose, for delivering us from that Land of Despair. For years seemingly beyond count we have waited for the one who could. ‘Thanks’ is but a poor word for the gratitude we feel towards you.”

“Could you tell us how it happened, Madam?” said Hermione.

“With the greatest of pleasure, Madame. Your own warmth, unusual in an eidolon, attracted us first. Then your esteemed daughter came. The light of her courage and the warmth of her compassion summoned the lost souls from all over, giving us hope such as we had never had before. But warring with our hope was our fear. Fear of the Cave of Screaming and the dark-souls that dwell therein. We had seen strong sancti enter their realms before and not return. We would not hazard that place of terror without some assurance of being defended from them.” She bowed to Rose. “We need not have worried. Your daughter entered that place alone, fought the dark-souls and vanquished them. When she returned, Madame, her soul bearing the scars of combat and enhanced in skill and sight and wisdom, we knew that at last our deliverance was at hand. So when she called us to follow her into the darkness, we did. Like wolves the dark-souls attacked us, but she defended us: she summoned her light and drove them back, again and again.

“Her courage gave us courage, so that when she herself was assailed by those treacherous imps we all harbour in our hearts, Despair, Guilt and Dejection, we protected her from the dark-souls as she had defended us. It was a grim time, Madame. We could not help her through her own slough of despond, and your own light, Madame, was weak and fading. Behind you, carrying you, was another light,” and her eyes shifted for a moment to Abraxas, “but that too was fading. We were despairing, but we misjudged your daughter’s fortitude.” She bowed to Rose again. “Her strength and courage rising again, she subdued those false assailants. Her light returned and she brought you back.

“Then, undismayed by tales of the inextricable labyrinth ahead, your daughter drew on her native wit to lead us on, threading her way through that maze of dark passages, annihilating with her pure light the evil vestiges which barred our way. She led us truly and surely to the place of deliverance. Theseus could have done no better. But even then her travails were not over: a dark one had been
left behind and such was her honour and courage that, though weakened by toil and sorrow, she re-entered the labyrinth to rescue it. On returning once more, she found, not the Minotaur, but a werewolf, about to abduct your honoured self, Madame. It seized her but, undismayed, she mustered her forces, and together we drove it to the shore, where the Stygian ferryman, newly arrived, dispatched it. It was an epic journey, Madame, worthy of a praise-singer’s saga. If ever a mother could take pride in her child, Madame, you may take pride in her.”

Even before she was quarter way through, Hermione’s arms were wrapped around Rose, and Rose’s gaze was fixed on the floor.

“You may rest assured, Madam, that I do.”

“The ferryman took you to Talambh na Anamacha?” said McGonagall.

The lady bowed to her. “Us and many others, Lady Minerva. Up and down the land, you will find them in paintings everywhere. Travers, Black, Yaxley, Abbott, Bones, Longbottom, Perks, Potter, yes,” and she looked at Rose, “even a Weasley, your own kin, from 1738.”

“Dinner engagements for the rest of your life, Rose,” murmured Abraxas, and she narrowed her eyes at him.

“You haven’t had a rescue since then?” said McGonagall.

“A Dagworth mother and daughter of 1697 was the earliest, I believe, your ladyship, the daughter so traumatized the ferryman gave her to drink of the Waters of Lethe.”

Had there been someone … a girl with torn clothing, the one Belle had seen weeping? Rose had a hazy recollection; feelings of sympathy and empathy.

“And your own situation, Madame?” said Narcissa.

“An *errantes sanctus* spell gone awry in 1775, Madame. My brother’s daughter, a de la Coeur with courage and love in her heart, sought me. She did not succeed, but no shame to her: we saw how, with all Miss Rose’s strength and fortitude, intelligence and skills, how narrow was the margin between success and failure.”

Rose nodded. “A hair’s breadth. And luck played a part. So you are a de la Coeur, Madam.” Fleur would be all over her. Not that she minded, now. Fleur’s life energy was in her mother. And Narcissa’s and the other Malfoys, the Weasleys and Harry. Suddenly her family was five fold bigger.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, and turned.

“Rose,” said McGonagall, taking both her hands. She had tears in her eyes. “Rose, if I had known this, that no one, that not one Seeker had returned in the past three hundred years, I would never have let you go. You trusted me, Rose, as did your mother in spirit, and everyone, and I let you down. I’d heard reports of three or four Returnees, from Cockaigne and among the Maenads, one within the last thirty years. It seems they were all false. No Returnees for three hundred years means the odds were much, much worse than one in seven. I should have checked my facts, I should have—”

“Professor, I would have gone anyway, no matter what the odds were.”

“Bear in mind also, Professor, the situation,” said Abraxas. “The time imperative, with Hermione barely clinging to life, Rose needing to set out as soon as possible. You gave us the most accurate
information you could, based on what you believed then. Checking facts was just not feasible given the constraints we were under. No, I think our decisions were correct, given our circumstances. You trusted Rose’s abilities, her character, and your judgement was sound: Rose was able to do what she set out to do.”

“You are very kind, Rose and Mr Malfoy. I’m sure her mother would not agree,” and she looked at Hermione.

“Professor,” said Hermione. “I would not have agreed to Rose going under any circumstances, so the difference in odds between one in seven and one in seven hundred and seventy seven is immaterial. I certainly don’t blame you. Not that anyone asked me, or considered a mother’s point of view,” and she glanced at Abraxas.

“Quite so, my love,” he said. “No more than you asked me if I wanted you to risk your life for me, which is what placed us in the situation in the first place,” and he wagged his head at her, smiling.

“Nobody asked anybody,” said Narcissa. “Or rather, they asked and then did what they were determined to do anyway. Though let me say, in justice to those not present, that your extended family, Hermione, and particularly Mrs Potter, took your point and opposed Rose’s going most vehemently. Only when it was decided that it was her decision and no one else’s, did it happen. Perhaps,” and she looked at Abraxas, “we should return to our guests?” She turned to the portraits. “Excuse us, if you please. Rose and Miss Granger will come again soon, I’m sure.”

The ladies murmured acquiescence and stepped back, and Bellatrix said, “You’ll come and see me again, Rose, won’t you?”

“Yes, Belle, I will. But we have friends and family here now so must go back to them.”

“Indeed,” said Abraxas, “But first, if you please … in the gunroom.”
Abraxas led the way a little further down the passage and ushered them into a small windowless room, one handed because he was holding Hermione’s hand. He hadn’t let go of it since they’d left the drawing room. And Rose had seen her mother interlace her fingers with his. Scorpius had been hovering but she’d made sure that her own hands were never free. She needed time to think about everything.

Abraxas closed the door and then, looking at Rose, said, “The Thing? And the Wolf-beast?”

“The Wolf-beast was Greyback. He was in physical form, like Bellatrix.”

Abraxas shook his head. “If we had known he was there, nothing would have persuaded us to let you go, Rose. What happened?”

“It was before Mum was Awake, in the cove before the ferryman came. Greyback had hold of Mum and me, but the Thing was blocking his escape. Then the light-selves attacked him and he dropped us. Together, the light-selves and me, we were trying to drive him into the water when he sort of toppled over. His body just … evaporated, and his dark-light appeared. The ferryman did it.”

“We thought we’d killed him as dead as could be.”

“He and his maledictions are dead and gone for ever now, Mr Malfoy,” said McGonagall.

“Good. And this other creature, the Thing. Rose? Would I be right …?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Then not a word about it beyond this room. Nobody, ever.”

“Oh, but surely,” said Hermione, “when people realize what he’s been through-”

He shook his head. “That would make no difference. It would bring condemnation and worse down on Rose. She would be shunned, suspected of dark magic sympathies or even practices. It would be held against her all her life and she would never be allowed to forget it. It would be held against her brother, her mother, her children. Sins of the father.” He bent and kissed her forehead. “Believe me, my love. People are shallow and impulsive, quick to condemn and slow to forgive. Remember my villain, who reaps a fiftieth of the opprobrium of the other. And you would feel it fifty times more intensely than I. Let it lie a skeleton in the cupboard. You will have to get used to those, if you become a Malfoy.”

Hermione raised a quizzical eyebrow at him.
Hadn’t he even asked her yet?

“Are we agreed? Professor?”

“Yes,” said McGonagall. “But not for ever. Posterity deserves the truth. I shall leave a paragraph in my memoir which will become visible only on the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of my death. By that time it will be of interest only to historians. Is that all right, Rose? Hermione?”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “Posterity deserves the truth, I agree. Rose?”

“Of course, but … you won’t let anyone trick it out of you, will you, Mum? I trust everyone else,” and she looked around. Yes, Abraxas, Narcissa, even Scorpius: the Malfoys kept secrets as a matter of habit. Nobody could trick McGonagall, no question there. Nobody would dare even try. Only her mother …

“Well, thank you, Rosie,” but her mother was smiling.

“Oh, Mum, it’s only because you’re so trusting. You’re too good, too honest.”

“Well, thank you, Rosie,” said Abraxas, “for that implication.” He was smiling too. “No, Rose, we know exactly what you mean. We Malfoys grow a carapace of caution and cynicism while young. We always look for the question behind the question.” He turned to Hermione. “But you can see now, my love, the consequences for your children.”

“I promise I won’t tell anyone, Rosie, all right? I’ll be careful not to be drawn in.”

“All right,” said Rose. “You see, it works both ways: I know a promise from you will hold you, whereas from someone else …”

“Like me, Rose?” Abraxas was still smiling.

He looked rather … handsome when he smiled. And when he did not. Like his great-grandson.

“Oh, I know a promise would hold you, Mr Malfoy, but also that you would interpret it to suit yourself. Mum would interpret it to suit the person she gave it to. When you hedged me in about not giving life energy to Mum, but then said you would give first in an emergency, I knew you would go your own sweet way no matter what I made you promise. Your promise to me was a one liner and even then elastic. Your ten years would have swelled to the thirty you wanted at the first hiccup. Mine to you, by the time you’d finished, Mr Malfoy, was five pages and full of small print. But I knew you would do your best for Mum and me and Hugo, and that was what I trusted.”

He raised a hand. “Please, Rose. If you go on, your mother will see me for what I really am.”

“Oh, I already do, Abraxas,” said Hermione, “have no doubt of that. A man who was prepared to give his life for me, over and over. A man who-”

He stooped and kissed her brow again, and she stopped. “Shall we return to our guests? Scorpius, would you go ahead and order more tea?”

Hermione took Rose’s hand as they walked up the gallery. “Sweetheart, I’m learning more and more just what you did for me. Entering that terrifying place, Seeking and Finding me, fighting off the dark souls, fighting off the werewolf, finding your way through the cave and the labyrinth to reach the ferryman, Awakening me, bringing us back: you showed enormous courage and ability.
And bringing all those lost souls back as well.”

“And all by your personal qualities, Rose,” said McGonagall, “for, as Winky told us, Talambh na Anamacha Caillte will allow no magic.”

“Yes,” said Hermione, nodding.

“No magic from outside, professor,” said Abraxas, “But it seems to have magic of its own. Rose left in her school uniform and returned as we see her. Likewise Hermione returned in different attire.”

“Not only that,” said Hermione. “I found Hugo’s binca bookmark and your rainbow memory cord, Rosie. They were destroyed in the fire. If I could have saved any mementos of your and Hugo’s childhood, sweetheart, they are what I would have chosen. So it was a wonderful surprise to find them tied to my wrists when I woke.” She held up her hands to show them.”

Rose stared. “But …”

“Yes, my love? You must have done it.”

“Yes, but I tied Hugo’s bookmark to one wrist and Mr Malfoy’s handkerchief to the other.”

Hermione stared at her. “Abraxas’s handkerchief was in my pocket, sweetheart. And why …” she turned to Abraxas. “I thought the reason Rose went was because only the love between mother and child was powerful enough for the Awakening.”

“That is what Winky told us,” said Abraxas, slowly, looking at Rose. “From what I saw, third hand by watching Scorpius, I do not doubt that it is true. If Rose, with such a deeply rooted and powerful daughter-mother love bond, went through the emotional trauma she did to Awaken you, I cannot see how any other person could possibly have succeeded.” Then he raised his eyebrows and said, “If Rose tied my token instead of hers to her mother’s wrist, she had a strong reason, but that reason is personal to Rose and her mother.”

“Yes,” said Rose, “but as we are all family here …” She turned to her mother. “I couldn’t Awaken you, Mum. I thought I would Awaken you as soon as I found you, but I couldn’t. You didn’t - your eidolon didn’t respond to me. The self, the soul, didn’t come. Only right at the end it happened. So almost all of the time there, Mum, I believed that I couldn’t Awaken you because you … because I had … wounded your love for me. That was why I used Mr Malfoy’s token instead of mine, to help you.”

“Rosie, Rosie, how could you ever think that! Wounded my love for you? Never, never! Why, why should you ever think that?”

“You weren’t there when Ginny was sounding off against Dad, but all those things which she said about Dad neglecting you, they could equally apply to me, and more so because I’m your daughter. I saw you, Mum, I spoke to you, I knew something was wrong, that you weren’t well, but I never did anything.”

“Oh, Rosie, you are making a big, a fundamental error. Do you really think that I, as your mother, was going to tell you or even admit that I was ill or depressed or whatever, that I was going to burden you with my troubles when you were a maturing teenage girl, developing your own life, concentrating on your education? You did ask me, Rosie, many times and in many ways, and every time I told you I was fine. I told you, just as I told Ginny, that I had visited healers for check-ups when I hadn’t. Whenever I saw you, I pretended to be much better than I was. Sweetheart, you
didn’t find out because I wouldn’t let you find out. You did everything any daughter could be expected to do. Now I don’t know what happened in Betwixt, but I do know that you brought me back against odds which few people would be prepared to tackle, and far fewer could succeed against. And that tells me both that I have a wonderful daughter and that the love between you and me is as strong and robust as it could possibly be."

“Oh, Mum.” They were both crying and hugging each other.

“And the proof is that you did Awaken me in the end.”

“Even now I don’t know how or why it happened.”

“The Seeker must not know, Rose,” said McGonagall, “but it did happen.”

“Yes,” said Abraxas. “So you need have no doubts as to the strength of your mother-daughter bond.”

“I … suppose so. It’s just that … I was so convinced that …”

“You want further proof, Rose? I can give it to you. I can show you a tangible proof that a whole spirit world has placed its stamp of approval on the power and strength of your mother’s love for you and yours for your mother.”

She stared at him. “Tangible? Something I can touch? From Betwixt? How can you possibly do that, Mr Malfoy?”

He smiled at her. “Ah, Rose, you’d be surprised at what I can do.” He took Hermione’s right wrist and held it out. “Betwixt replaced my token with yours. I cannot imagine a more meaningful contradiction of a misconception than that.”

“Oh … Yes, right. I see what you mean. Betwixt saying I was wrong.”

“Beyond any doubt, my love,” said Hermione. “And even with that dragging you down, you still brought all those lost souls out of that place, Rosie.”

“Yes,” said Abraxas. “We seem to have three vital elements here. Courage and fortitude, compassion, and love. All elements of a big heart. It takes a person with courage and fortitude, one who can bear up and persevere in the most hopeless situation, to reach the ferry point at all. It takes a person with compassion to take the wandering souls with her. Once there, the ferryman comes, summoned by the beacon of the Seeking sanctus. Love is a necessary component in these stages, but something more is needed, perhaps an act of love, for the Awakening. Quite probably it is not the act itself but the blossoming of awareness in the Seeker that precipitates the Awakening. Like the sun coming out from behind the clouds which causes a flower to open. Only then will the ferryman send you back. Only those with big hearts can Return.”

“I didn’t feel bighearted, Mr Malfoy. Much of the time my heart felt as tiny as a grain of sand. Lady Deidre said I was ‘undismayed’, but I was dismayed almost all the time.”

“I believe you, Rose. Whole-heartedly I believe you. The monsters of this place are bad enough, but the real terror is within oneself. The land reaches deep into your psyche, seizes a foundation stone, something fundamental to your emotional well-being, something you have never questioned, and makes you question it. It uses your state of mind, your vulnerability, against you. It eviscerates you emotionally. Betwixt is far worse than Nurmengard. But still you overcame, Rose, and brought my love back to me.”
That reminded her of something. “Mr Malfoy, is your patronus an eagle owl?”

He stared at her. “How could you possibly know that? I haven’t invoked my patronus for fifty years.”

She smiled at him. “Ah, Mr Malfoy, you’d be surprised at what I know,” and she squeezed her mother’s hand.

Hermione looked at her questioningly, but she shook her head. Rose could never tell of the baby otters, for the future might not go that way. Except, perhaps, after it had happened. By which time, of course, the revelation would have lost all of its value.

Abraxas laughed and shook his head, but McGonagall said, “I think we all would.” She looked around, “I will discuss this in more detail with Rose and Hermione, but we here should be aware that Rose has come away from this place with enhanced powers, both magical and personal. The evocative names we have heard: the Land of Despair, of living death, the Cave of Screaming, the realms of the dark-selves, the Chamber of Howling, the labyrinth: they bespeak a world through which one cannot pass unchanged. And indeed, the witches who returned all became magi whose names are still with us: Elfrida Cragg, head of the Wizards’ Council in the 17th Century and early conservationist was a returnee from Talambah na Anamacha Cailte. So was Bridget Wenlock, arithmancer, the first to establish the magical properties of the number seven in the thirteenth century. Cliodne, Irish druidess in medieval times, who discovered the properties of moon dew. Most famous of all, Rowena Ravenclaw was a returnee from Talambah na Anamacha Cailte.”

“An august company,” said Abraxas, smiling. “In that case, there is something I must do before I become too awestruck to attempt it.” Right there, in the gallery, all the portraits watching and whispering, he knelt down in front of Rose. “Rose, will you be my daughter? Then I can ask your mother to be my wife. But, after all that has happened, I dare not ask one without the other.”

Eyebrows raised, a smile hovering at the corner of her mouth, Hermione put her hands on her hips, and Rose said, “That may be so, Mr Malfoy, but I think you’d better revise the order of your … proposals if you don’t want to be in trouble later.”

“Whatever you say, Rose.” Abraxas swivelled around on his knees. “Miss Granger, will you marry me? I have your daughter’s permission to ask.” Narcissa burst out in a giggle and McGonagall was smiling.

Hermione bent down and kissed his forehead. “Get up, you silly man. Of course I’ll marry you. But only once you have told me exactly what you have done for me.”

“Conditional acceptance, with an overwhelmingly strong hand. Your daughter has been coaching you.” He swung round on his knees again. “Rose?”

“You may marry my mother, Mr Malfoy. But I must warn you that she is no good at darning. So you’d better get up before you wear your knees out.”

He did, and took them both into his arms. “My dear, dear women.”

“And Narcissa,” said Hermione, and reached out an arm to include her in the embrace.

“And Mother Minerva,” said Rose, and drew her in between her mother and herself.

“Rose, Rose,” said McGonagall, “that warm, impulsive heart will get you into trouble one day.”

“Maybe even today,” said Rose. “You’ve told everyone else, Mother Minerva, so I am telling
Mum. Mum, you are on Mother Minerva’s special Peverell clock as her daughter, her soul daughter, along with Ginny. Mother Minerva, tomorrow you can be my professor again, but for tonight you’re our mother.”

McGonagall didn’t speak, probably couldn’t, but just hugged Rose and Hermione to her. All of them were crying.

“Ah,” said Abraxas, after a minute or so. “Does this mean I should go down on my knees again? Or just that I make the cottage keys over to, er, Mother Minerva, if I may be so bold, together with a portkey?”

“Oh, just the cottage, I think, Abraxas,” said Hermione. “I’m really hopeless at darning.”

“Hermione, Mr Malfoy,” said McGonagall, “that is really very kind, but-”

“Surely, Professor,” said Narcissa, “there must be times when you need to get away from Hogwarts? Even just for an afternoon?”

“Well …”

“I’m sure Professor Dumbledore had a bolthole, Mother Minerva,” said Hermione.

“Rose,” said McGonagall. “What have you started? First my … name, now this?”

Rose reached up and kissed her cheek. “No less than you deserve, Mother Minerva. Would I, would Mum be here without you? It was you who taught us, by deed rather than word, that there is more to magic than magic.”

“Well.” McGonagall looked at Abraxas. “Mr Malfoy, if you really mean it: two weeks in summer would be beyond delightful.”

“Four, Professor, and at half term, and between Christmas and New Year. Any time. In solitude or company, as you choose. Just sent word so Winky can light the fires and air the linen. And now we’d better return to our guests. We really have been neglecting them.”

“We have, but … aren’t you forgetting something, Abraxas?” said Narcissa.

“Am I?” He put his arm around Hermione’s shoulders. “I have my betrothéd. What else is there?”

“Perhaps your betrothéd deserves something in recognition of her acceptance of your proposal, Mr Malfoy,” said McGonagall.

“Half my estate? All of it?”

“Nothing so mercenary, Abraxas,” said Hermione, smiling.

“More romantic? The Star of Africa in an engagement ring?”

“As well, but that’s later,” said Rose.

“After you have served time in the Tower for stealing it from the Crown Jewels,” said McGonagall.

“There is a feminine conspiracy against me. Is anyone going to help me?”

“My,” said Hermione, her hands on her hips. “Do I have to do everything around here?” She
reached up and kissed him.

“That’s it?”

She smiled and nodded.

“That’s all?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Considering how forgetful you are, that’s more than you deserve.”

“I’ve forgotten something else?”

“You have, Abraxas, but I forgive you as you were in great pain at the time. I asked you to marry me in the cottage, after ... that animal died.”

“And if I had remembered that, I would deserve more?”

She raised her eyebrows at him but just said, “Possibly. What more did you have in mind?”

Oh, Mum! Thank goodness Scorpius wasn’t here.

“That’s for me to know and you to find out,” he said, and she blushed. “I don’t recall anyone asking me to marry them,” he went on, and her brow creased, “but I do recall someone telling me she was going to marry me, willing or no.”

The frown turned into a slightly embarrassed smile, and she said, “Well, I was right, wasn’t I.”

“Yes, as usual, my love. And I get my bride either way.”

“And you both get a future denied to you in the past,” said Narcissa. “I’m so happy for you both.”

“We all are,” said McGonagall. “From star-crossed to star-blessed lovers.”

Hogwarts

“I still don’t see why we couldn’t have stayed at Bansith Hall until the wedding,” said Hugo. “Everyone doing exciting things and we have to come back to boring old Hogwarts.”

“Mum would never have agreed to a week off school, Hugo. You know that.”

“Mr Malfoy would’ve.”

“Maybe, but Mum calls the tune.” Rose stifled a yawn. “I think I could sleep for a week. Hugo, the password is ‘Barn Owl’, McGonagall told me. Remember, the story for the common room is that we went to see Mum because she was ill, but she’s better now. And yes, the flat was burnt, so we’re in the Richmond house now. If anyone want to know more, tell them to ask me.”

“Great Big Nannygoat Gruff. That’ll shut them up,” said Scorpius, and she narrowed her eyes at him. How many times would he remind her of that?

“Mum’s marriage to Mr Malfoy will be announced in a few days. Until then, it’s a secret. And not a word about anything else, all right?”

“Including you and Scorp and that glow thing?”
She shut her eyes. It was too much to hope that he’d forgotten that. “Let that slip out, Hugo Weasley, and you are toast.”

“Okay, okay. But,” he looked at Scorpius, “she won’t do anything, you know. She’ll threaten, but that’s all.”

“Maybe not, Hue, but she’ll be hurt and upset. And when women are hurt and upset …” he shook his head. “You’ll feel really bad. Believe me, it’s not worth it.”

“Okay, okay, I wasn’t going to anyway.”

“Off you go, Hugo,” said Rose. “I want a word with this professor of human feelings.”

“G’night then.” He walked off up the passage, said the password and climbed through the portrait hole.

As soon as the painting swung shut, she turned to Scorpius and said, “Not a word, all right?”

“It’s all right, Rose, I understand. We’re … Montague and Capulet. I’m a dark Malfoy, you’re a shining Weasley. More, you’re Rose, the warrior princess, but only Hue and I know that.”

She put her hands on her hips. “You’re not acting like a Malfoy. You’re acting like a Goyle. My mother is about to marry your great-grandfather, or second-cousin-twice-removed from the Isle of Rum, or whatever they decided to call him, so I think we’re rather beyond the Montague and Capulet stage. Our families are linked now, and so are we, and I’m not trying to deny it. And you can cut out the princess stuff.

“I just want to think things through, Scorpius.” There, she taken the first step, saying his name. Though maybe the first step had been spending a night in his arms. She blushed and went on. “You and me, what it all means. I just want to take it slowly, but I’m not hiding from anything. To prove it, on Tuesday you can be my partner in Potions. If you want to.” The next step.

“Really? Thanks, Rose, I’d like that. It’ll raise eyebrows though.”

“It’ll do more than that.” A lot more. Fortunately House antagonism was a thing of the past at Hogwarts, but still, there would be fallout. “Everyone will be watching us. So remember: no touching. We don’t want to reveal the … the amaura until we have to.” There, she’d named it. Did he realize what a giant step that was? And half the girls in Hogwarts would happily offer her up for dragon bait when that became known.

“Whatsoever you say, Rose.”

“Remember that too.”

“I won’t forget. If you scare the Ferryman, think what you must do to me.”

She stuck out the tip of her tongue at him. Another step. Had she meant to do that? “Now off you go before someone comes.”

“All right. Goodnight, my … Rose.” He turned and began walking down the corridor, and she said, “Scorpius, aren’t you forgetting something?"

He turned back and she proffered her cheek.

“May I?” Eyebrows raised. Like Abraxas.
“It’s a special occasion.” Where had that come from? These steps were taking on a life of their own.

“In that case, a special kiss.” He took her face in his hands, turned her and kissed her on the lips. Then he put his arms around her and hugged her to him. She could sense the glow around them. She hoped, hoped with all her heart, that Peeves wasn’t watching them.

“I don’t know if I’ve earned it,” he whispered into her hair. “Did I help at all, Rose?”

She looked up at him. “Scorpius Malfoy, I will admit this once, and deny it ever after. If you hadn’t been there, I would not have made it. I’m not trying to make you feel good. I’m absolutely serious. I wouldn’t be here and neither would Mum. The despondency would have been worse, I would have been weaker fighting the dark-selves, decisions would have been more difficult to make. Also McGonagall told me that in the few Tala Banana cases they have any records of, the Seeker took double the time I did. I really don’t think I could have survived that, and Mum definitely could not have.”

He tightened the hug. “Good. Sorry that I left you once. I had to go to the lavatory. I was dying—”

“Uh—” she said, and he stopped. “Too much information.”

“Was that a bad time, when I wasn’t there, Rose? The reason I ask is that Mister Lumpy was furious, hissing and growling at me all the time I was away. And Miss Sash was licking your face for all she was worth.”

“It wasn’t a good time. But then, no time was good.” She wasn’t going to tell him how close to the brink she had been. Parvati had touched on that already, and making him feel guilty wouldn’t achieve anything. “And, of course, you shoving your oar in, persuaded them to let me go. So, overall, Scorpius Malfoy, you did more good than harm,” and she nudged him in the ribs.

“And Rose Weasley is still Rose Weasley,” he murmured.

“Not quite,” and she pulled his head down for another kiss.

“I think I like the ‘not quite’ Rose Weasley.”

“Not the old one, then?”

“I like that one too. It was glorious having you in my arms for those twenty-three hours, Rose. Mind you, it was really embarrassing when your mum woke up. There I was, some random boy, with his arms wrapped around her sleeping daughter. I mean, what was the obvious conclusion?”

Rose giggled. “A compromising position.”

“You can say that again, and with about twenty witnesses.” He put on a deep voice. “Overwhelming circumstantial evidence, m’lud. Attested to by men and women of impeccable character and the highest standing in the land.”

Rose burst into laughter.

“But of course your mum worked it out in a split-second, so when I opened my mouth to explain, she just put a finger across my lips, and gave me a kiss on the brow. She’s a wonderful person, Rose.”

“Don’t fall in love with her now.”
“I don’t think I’d dare. Being in love with her daughter is bad enough.”

She looked up at him, he was grinning. “Bad? Bad?” She elbowed him in the ribs and he oofed. “Are you in love with me, Scorpius Malfoy?”

His face became serious. “Have been since third year, Rose. As much as I was allowed.”

Allowed by her? “And me? Was I in denial?”

He shook his head. “No. My family hurt your mother. You were being loyal, Rose.”

“A bit more than that. I gave you no credit for anything. Being a gentleman, never retaliating against my … childish jinxes, telling the truth about Bonnie Prince Charlie.”

He spread his hands. “You were being Rose, that’s all.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “And what does that mean?”

He smiled at her. “You don’t do anything by halves, Rose. When you … hate, you do it with your whole heart. But equally, when you love, you do that with your whole heart too. So I’m not complaining.”

She looked away. Love. Did she love him? Wasn’t that what the amaura was all about?

He kissed her hair and said softly. “No rush, Rose. Let it happen, let it grow in its own time. No rush.”

She glanced at him. He’d known what she was thinking. And he could make her laugh. And he could handle her. It had already seeded, and would grow. Let it happen in its own time. No rush. As he said. Which reminded her.

She wriggled free, stepped back and put a finger on his chest. “It’s getting late, but before you go, I want to make one thing quite clear. I think – hope – it didn’t cross your mind when you mentioned Capulet and Montague, but understand, Scorpius Malfoy, that though we are past the feuding families stage, we are a long, long way from the Romeo and Juliet stage. Now off you go.”

He smiled and nodded. “Night-night, Rosie, my love.”

She watched him go. He turned and waved at the end of the passage. She waved back, then walked to the portrait hole. So much for ‘taking it slowly’. They’d gone through about six months worth in five minutes. Slow down, girl. Still: Rosie, my love. She’d hug that to herself in bed.

The end

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed it. Any comments, questions, likes, dislikes ...?
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!