Ring A Ring O' Roses

by Gallivant

Summary

Dark Magic, Dark Wizards and a mysterious and deadly Dark Flux, which, in the wrong hands, has the terrifying potential to mass-murder Muggles and Muggle-borns ...

It’s been fourteen years since the end of the Second Wizarding War and the Wizarding World is settled, stable and seemingly safe… Hermione Weasley has it all: a loving family, a successful career - and happiness… of sorts.

But a series of unexpected events is about to turn her life upside-down, threatening those she loves, fatally undermining the peace between worlds that has prevailed for centuries … changing life as she knows it, possibly forever.

If working with Draco Malfoy was the last thing Hermione Weasley ever wanted, falling for your enemy was the least expected. A quest to thwart a magical weapon of mass destruction has devastating consequences. A race to save the world, becomes a race to save themselves…
But Thinking Makes It So

ACT 1: ‘THE DEVIL HATH POWER TO TAKE A PLEASING SHAPE...’

Dark Magic, Dark Wizards and a mysterious and deadly Dark Flux, which, in the wrong hands, has the terrifying potential to mass-murder Muggles and Muggle-borns... all this and an unexpected visit from Draco Malfoy. Just when Hermione Weasley thought her bad day couldn't get much worse, she went home...

1. But Thinking Makes It So

'As we discussed, sir, what we now need is professional help in this matter. An insider with connections and access to official resources,' the young man said, 'and experience of investigating Dark Magic. Someone discreet.'

'Have you got the dossier?' his master asked, in clipped, businesslike tones.

The master was sitting behind an ornate, ebony antique desk positioned in front of a large set of French windows framed by thick green velvet curtains. Shafts of bright, white sunlight streamed through the windows. Beyond the window was a rolling lawn stretching towards a well-tended shrubbery.

'I have it here, sir. We have found some excellent candidates, even if I say so myself,' the young man said, placing a thin file containing twelve or so pieces of parchment on the desk in front of his master.

'Let's see,' said the older man, quickly thumbing through the file. Each document appeared to be a character profile, complete with professional CV and personal details.

'I'd like to draw your attention, sir, to a few of the more outstanding candidates. They have noteworthy experience in handling the Dark Arts and famously helped track down and destroy the Dark Lord's Horcruxes, which proved essential in ending the Second Wizarding War in Britain.'

A shadow passed across the older man's face. 'Yes. I remember it well,' he said stormily.

'Naturally, I know of Harry Potter. Who doesn't? But he's far beyond our reach. I can't see him working outside of the law. Who else do we have?'

The younger man shuffled the papers, sifting out the only document with a photo attached, which he then presented to his master.

'Ronald Bilius Weasley,' he announced. 'He was Potter's closest friend and assistant. He is also Potter's brother-in-law. As an Auror, he is very well-connected and he comes from a family with a good pedigree. His brother, Percy, is in a powerful position at the British Ministry of Magic. He has another brother, Bill, who works at Gringotts Bank and is widely considered to be the leading code-breaker of our age. And yet another brother, Charlie, who is an expert on dragons. And then there's George Weasley.'

'Ahh! Weasley's Wizard Wheezes? A bit of business acumen in the family, too, I see. They seem a talented bunch.'

'Ron's career has been less stellar than his brothers' or Potter's, but he is ambitious,' the younger man said smoothly. 'I think he could be worked upon.'
'He sounds like a fine candidate,' the master said, closing his file. 'A meeting should be arranged as soon as possible.'

'There is one potential sticking point, sir.'

'And what's that then?'

'His wife.'

The younger man reached over the desk and pulled the file from his master's grasp with a timid, apologetic smile. He tugged another profile from the file and presented it to his master.

'This is Hermione Weasley, also a former school-friend of Potter's. She's a very clever and diligent researcher. She's currently an esteemed prosecutor at the Department for Magical Law Enforcement in London. She's a well-known social activist and has vigorously campaigned to improve the welfare of house-elves.'

'House-elves?' the older man exclaimed, incredulous.

'Oh yes. House-elves,' the younger man said with a contemptuous sneer. 'And as a lawyer, she has been a very effective advocate for Muggle-born rights in the workplace.'

'Have you met her?'

'Once. Very briefly. We weren’t formally introduced so she’s unlikely to remember me.’

'Can she be neutralised?'

The younger man's face darkened. 'I don't think that would be the best way forward, sir. It would compromise her husband's emotional equilibrium at a time when we needed him most.'

'I don't mean fatally,' the older man said with a weary sigh. 'I meant can she be recruited to the cause?'

'As an active participant, I very much doubt it. She works by the book. Practically speaking too, I doubt she would have the time for anything extra-curricular, sir. She's a notorious workaholic.'

'We have the means to change that if it suits our requirements.'

'Of course, sir.'

'Best to keep her on board. A bit of social cultivation can go a long way with a woman.'

'Quite, sir. All very good, sir.’

'So, have you any ideas how we approach these Weasleys?’

The young man looked thoughtful. 'It's a tricky one, sir. And a little risky. But I have an idea.'

'Enlighten me.'

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Finding Draco Malfoy sitting in her lounge, casually drinking tea, really was the last straw for Hermione Weasley, rounding off what had been a truly terrible day.
Work-wise, it had been murder.

She’d endured five wasted hours trying to convince the Most Esteemed Wizarding Fraternity of Lincoln City's Medieval quarter not to enforce an ancient bylaw, which forbade anyone but pure-bloods and first generation half-bloods from owning businesses inside the old city walls. Hermione forcefully reminded them that the first time these archaic laws had been introduced, as far back as 1381, there’d been a violent riot and angry Muggle-borns had burned the city walls to the ground – but they didn’t give a damn.

Flushed with failure, Hermione had Apparated back to the Department for Magical Law Enforcement in Central London, only to find that her office was in complete disarray. Drawers flung open, furniture pushed out of position, files dashed to the floor, paperwork scattered everywhere ...

Hermione’s deputy, Padma Patil, was standing in the middle of the office, wand hanging limply in her hand, gazing helplessly at the mess around her.

‘What the hell happened here?’ Hermione gasped.

‘We’ve had a surprise inspection from Internal Affairs,’ Padma replied in ominous tones. ‘There’s been complaints.’

‘Complaints?’ Hermione shrilled, aghast. This was mystifying. Unthinkable! Her office was the most organized, the smoothest-running, the highest-achieving of all the offices in the Department for Magical Law Enforcement, if not the entire Ministry of Magic - as evidenced by the five gleaming Gold Star ‘Efficiency Awards’ ranged on the wall high above her desk. She glanced upwards and recoiled in horror. The wall had been stripped bare.

‘Who would do such a thing?’ she wailed.

‘A Mr Jinks,’ Padma replied, spitting out the words with disparaging scorn.

‘Never heard of him,’ Hermione muttered darkly. She had always made it her business to know EVERYBODY who worked at the Ministry. ‘Did he have an official seal?’

Padma nodded glumly. ‘Issued by the Minster for Magic himself.’

‘Really?’ Hermione tried to suppress the pang of alarm that throbbed through her. Clearly then this hadn’t been an administrative mix-up - it was far more orchestrated than that. ‘I see. Well. It’s a travesty.’ And one which Hermione had little personal power to resolve. She silently regretted avoiding the seemingly innumerable inauguration events and parties that had peppered the Ministry social calendar since Silas Witchell had become the new Minister for Magic earlier that year. Earning and keeping five Gold Star awards was no easy business! It took long hours, assiduous effort and relentless pressure to achieve the best results. Ingratiating herself with the new regime hadn’t been a priority.

‘This Mr Jinks. What’s he like?’ Hermione asked Padma.

Padma shrugged disdainfully. ‘Smarmy, officious … a wheedling little toad of a man.’ She whipped her wand, scooping sheaves of paper onto her desk in swift, fluid motions. ‘Said he was looking for “hard evidence” – whatever that might mean – and kept firing off all sorts of random accusations of incompetence and suspected corruption.’

‘Corruption? But that’s farcical!’
‘He claims he's received insider briefings; intelligence pointing to particularly serious breaches of departmental protocol.’

Hermione’s heart quickened. ‘From who?’

‘He wouldn’t say.’

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Hermione dispatched an owl with an apologetic note to her mother-in-law, Molly Weasley, asking her to pick up Rose and Hugo from their local primary school in Ottery St Catchpole. She was going to be late home from work – yet again. She could clearly picture Molly Weasley in her mind's eye, hands on hips, lips puckered in disapproval, sighing in dismay as the Ministry owl came pecking at her kitchen window at The Burrow. She reckoned she’d be in for yet another lecture from her mother-in-law, berating her over-zealous working habits.

Hermione fired off sharply-worded missives to just about every under-minister and their respective secretaries working at the Ministry of Magic, demanding an explanation as to why this Mr Jinks (who no one seemed to know much or anything about; he had been newly-recruited by Witchell himself) had been instructed to ransack her office. She waited for over an hour, rapping her finger-nails impatiently on her desk, hoping for some kind of response. But none came.

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‘Where are they?’ Hermione finally countered after Molly had delivered her usual diatribe in particularly scathing tones. She looked beyond Molly into The Burrow's dimly lit hallway, hoping to retrieve her children and escape as fast as she could.

Molly folded her arms tightly across her chest and smirked, a little too victoriously for Hermione's liking.

'They've asked to stay here tonight. With me. And Ron said yes.'

'You asked Ron? But he's on assignment.'

Molly shook her head. 'No, dearie. He's not. And once he realized you weren't coming home at a respectable hour, he decided to drop by for his tea.'

Hermione choked back her spluttered indignation - she was too dog-tired to argue – and heaved what she hoped looked like a grateful sigh. 'Well, at least I won't have to cook tonight,' she murmured, already retreating down the path. 'Thanks, Molly.'

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Thanks, Molly, she thought bitterly, repeating the phrase over and over in her head. Thanks for what? For forcing her to listen, for the umpteenth time, to the same old speech following the same well-worn groove; wouldn't it be easier if Rose and Hugo simply stayed at The Burrow during the day, while their mother was out gallivanting here, there and everywhere? But instead, almost every day, (which wasn’t even true, Hermione thought waspishly), Molly had to interrupt whatever she was doing to pick up poor little Rose and Hugo from their Muggle school … And why did Rose and Hugo have to go to a Muggle school anyway? Weasleys had always been home-taught. And it hadn't done her children any harm, had it? Why should Hermione’s children be any different? Hermione had explained, countless times, that there were some links with her Muggle heritage, certain ways of doing things, that she wanted her own children to experience. Why couldn’t Molly see that?
It didn’t help matters that Ginny was always saying how she would have happily left James, Albus and Lily in Molly's care… if it wasn't for Harry's job. How convenient, Hermione thought grudgingly, that Harry's job had taken his family all the way to Paris. Instead, it was Ron and herself, who had somehow wound up in Ottery St Catchpole.

Hermione rapidly jogged down the lane leading away from The Burrow, trying to ignore the gathering gloom cast by the tall elm trees which lined her route, to the village nearby. Chill dusk was closing in fast and the thick scents of Autumn clotted the air around her.

She shivered a little, hastening her pace.

Minutes later, Hermione's home, a neat redbrick cottage over-run with creeping wisteria, came into view. A faint trickle of light was seeping through closed crimson curtains.

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Hermione was wholly unprepared for the shock of seeing her husband calmly drinking tea in their neat, little sitting-room with its aged oak beams and whitewashed walls in the company of Draco Malfoy.

Ron grinned. 'Oh good. There you are. We were wondering where you'd got to.'

'Ve. Had he said we? Like they were buddies … At least Draco had the decency, Hermione reflected later, to look a little sheepish.

'I thought you'd at least send an owl to tell us you'd be late,' Ron continued.

'I didn't even know you were coming home, Ron,' Hermione said pointedly. 'I thought you were at work.'

Ron shrugged. 'I am. This,' he nodded towards Draco, 'is my new assignment.'

A perplexed frown stole across Hermione's features.

Ron eagerly patted an empty space on their shabby, brown leather sofa. ‘You look pooped, love. Come in. Take a seat.' Then to Draco, 'you don't mind, do you, mate? You did say she could help out.'

Draco evaded eye contact, staring instead at his hands resting on his lap.

'Excuse me,' Hermione breathed. She really wasn’t in the mood for this. She stumbled backwards - almost tripping over a scattering of Hugo's toys splayed across the length of their hallway - and headed into the kitchen.

She needed a drink.

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Hermione poured herself a long glass of red wine and leaned heavily against the kitchen wall, closing her eyes tightly. Draco Malfoy in her house? it could only mean one thing... She downed her drink in one fell swoop, but her heart was still beating crazily.

'Hermione?'

Ron had followed her.
'What the bloody hell is he doing here?' Hermione demanded.

Ron swiftly closed the kitchen door. 'Like I said. It's work, Hermione.'

'Witness Protection?'

'No.' Ron placed a large, warm hand on her shoulder and drew her a little closer.

Hermione almost melted with relief. 'Thank God for that. For one truly terrible moment I thought this was going to be his safe-house.'

'Nothing like that at all,' Ron smiled tenderly. 'But something really interesting's come up. You’re going to want to hear this.'

'Hear what?' she asked hotly.

'Come and have a drink with us and I'll explain everything,' Ron urged.

'Tell me now.'

'It's best coming from Draco.'

Hermione scowled and fiercely wriggled out of her husband's grasp. Had Ron just called him Draco? What was wrong with sticking to Malfoy?

Ron sighed in exasperation. 'Believe me, Hermione. This is big.'

'You mean, Section A big?'

'Section A,' Ron said affirmatively. 'Most definitely Section A – the Elite Corps.'

There was an urgent, pleading look in Ron's eyes which Hermione couldn't quite ignore.

'This is exactly the kind of investigative case I’ve trained for, Hermione. The kind of job I’ve dreamed of. If this comes off, there’s absolutely no way they can shunt me back to Section D.'

'No more Witness Protection?'

'Never again.' Ron lightly caressed her cheek with his thumb. 'Please, Hermione, come and hear what he has to say. It only has to be for a few minutes.'

Hermione realized just how much this meant to him. She forced a polite smile. 'Sure. Just... just give me a minute, will you?'

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Alone again, Hermione poured herself a fresh glass of wine.

She was still fuming, but her protective instincts were kicking in. What kind of mess had Ron got himself involved in? She hoped that Ron had the wit to realize that, even now, almost fifteen years since the end of the Second Wizarding War, Draco Malfoy was still not a man to be trusted. Sure, he'd wangled his way back into a vague semblance of respectability in wizarding society – particularly since his father's prolonged illness meant he was pretty much Head of the Malfoy family. Even so, both Ron and Harry had openly discussed suspicions amongst the Auror teams that Malfoy remained a key figure in the flourishing trade in Dark Magic artefacts.
She took a deep gulp of her wine, but it did nothing to settle her jangling nerves.

It was more than a lack of trust, though. Much more. Maybe Ron was able to get over the rude, sneering taunts Draco Malfoy had levelled at them for so many years? After all, it was a long time ago. And nobody was the same person they’d been at school... But she’d never really got over it. She’d never forgiven Draco Malfoy for the constant degrading comments, mocking her Muggle-born heritage, calling her a ‘Filthy Mudblood’. She was bigger than that. She’d made sure of it, even drawing up the necessary legislation to outlaw pejorative terms of racial abuse. But it had never left her. It still hurt.

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Hermione kicked off her shoes and curled herself into the corner of the sofa. She studiously ignored the cool grey stare of Draco Malfoy, seated somewhere to her right on Ron's favourite well-worn armchair.

Ron was perched rather uncomfortably on a high wooden bar-stool he’d dragged in from the kitchen. He was momentarily distracted by the red wine swirling in Hermione's glass and regretfully eyed the empty teacup in his hand, but then seemed to collect his thoughts and raised his eyes to meet Hermione’s.

'No doubt you've heard of Dark Flux,' he declared by way of an opener.

'Of course I have,' she scoffed impatiently. 'I'm a Muggle-born, remember?' She shot Draco a quick, fierce glance. 'But as we don’t know if it actually exists, it’s not something I’ve ever really troubled myself to think about, Ron.' She sighed deeply, barely able to contain her disappointment. So much for Section A …

'Well, I’m sorry to have to inform you, Hermione, but it DOES exist.'

'No it doesn’t; there’s zero proof of such a thing,' Hermione retorted. 'Dark Flux is nothing more than a malicious myth peddled to scare people like ME. A stupid fabrication to make us feel as unwelcome as possible, to know our place.' She eyed Draco beadily over the rim of her wine glass. She shouldn’t be surprised that HE, of all people, should encourage her husband to spout such conspiratorial nonsense. ‘And even if it DID exist – for which, I repeat, there’s no concrete evidence – nobody has ever been able to describe exactly what it is… Case closed.’

Ron folded his arms and his lips tightened. 'You’re forgetting, Hermione, that my own sister was caught up in a Dark Flux attack just four years ago! A bunch of Muggles and two Muggle-born witches died that day.'

'The Paris incident?' It was the first thing Draco had said. His clipped, laconic tones seemed to echo around their living room.

Ron nodded vigorously. 'Yeah. It was bloody awful. Poor Ginny was about to give birth when it happened.'

'How many times have we gone over this? It was a leaky gas main,' groaned Hermione.

Ron narrowed his eyes suspiciously. 'In a single apartment block?'

'The authorities verified it at the time … surely you remember that, Ron?'

'I remember how terrified we were for Ginny and the kids – and then baby Lily … that’s what I remember!' Ron blustered. His cheeks were glowing.
Hermione gave him a twisted smile. ‘But you never actually believed that it was Dark Flux, Ron, because if you had, then you’d have also realized that they had nothing to fear... Dark Flux doesn’t kill pure-bloods or half-bloods.’

‘Just people like you,’ Draco said. His voice seemed closer and Hermione was startled to note that he had leant forward in his seat and his head was just a few inches from her own. At such close proximity she could see taut lines creased deeply across his forehead. He looked like a man with worries.

‘Have you ever heard of the Zametsky Effect?’ Draco asked.

Hermione was a bit stumped by this. It felt like a new line of attack.

‘It was first recorded about a hundred years ago; a small town somewhere in deepest, rural Russia,’ he continued. ‘Much of the Muggle population was decimated and the Wizarding Community was expelled. Up till then the two communities had co-habited peacefully alongside each other – for centuries, I believe. But this sudden, cataclysmic attack wasn’t the first of its kind, and the Muggles decided that enough was enough.’ Despite her better instincts, Hermione was suddenly alive with heated curiosity.

‘But I seriously doubt there’s any substantive evidence that these Muggle deaths were due to DARK FLUX,’ Hermione said snippily. ‘The historical record at that time and in that kind of place would have been very patchy.’

‘The Muggles didn’t agree.’

‘There could be any number of reasons why something like that could happen… Some kind of mysterious plague or virus. Or a toxic mineral affecting the water supply.’

Draco gave her a chilly smile. ‘And why would that just kill Muggles – and Muggle-borns?’

‘The truth is, Hermione,’ Ron said, ‘the Ministry is convinced that Dark Flux is a very real phenomenom and there has been considerable anxiety for some time that a dark wizard with an anti-Muggle agenda might get hold of some, and - you know - weaponize it.’ He shuffled uneasily on his stool as he spoke. ‘The problem is that the Ministry doesn't really know what Dark Flux is –’

‘Because it doesn’t exist,’ Hermione muttered between gritted teeth into her wine-glass.

But Ron chose to ignore this. ‘They don’t know if it’s a powder or a gas or some kind of airborne micro-organism - which makes it even more bloody scary. And – and things have suddenly got even scarier… Go on, Draco. Tell Hermione what you told me.’

Hermione instantly switched her gaze to Draco.

‘I've got firm evidence that this has already happened. Someone has found a way to detect and harness Dark Flux in its natural state.’

‘This is the stuff of nightmares, Hermione,’ Ron pushed vehemently. His eyes bulged a little as he spoke. ‘Draco’s sources say this guy then plans to release Dark Flux in a highly populated area.’

His eyes dropped enviously to Hermione's glass of wine, which she was clutching tightly in her right hand, whilst with her left hand, she fiddled with an unruly lock of hair which framed her face; something she often did when she was tense. The moment she realized what she was doing she immediately slapped her hand down, acutely aware of an unwelcome stab of self-consciousness.
'The plan, I hear, is to target the Muggle population of London,’ Draco said. 'Although we don’t know all the details yet - obviously,’ he added, instantly defensive.

Hermione suppressed a nervous snicker. She could hardly believe what she was hearing. This was a wind-up… It had to be.

'So tell me, Malfoy,’ she said, fixing Draco with a hard stare. He instinctively recoiled and a faint flush stained his pale cheeks. ‘Have your sources told you exactly how this individual can track Dark Flux, seeing as nobody even knows what it darned well is? Both of you seem to think I’m a complete ignoramus about what goes on at the Ministry. Any worries like this – something that amounts to terrorism, actually – would have passed over my desk by now. Not to mention the tiny but extremely relevant fact that Dark Flux is NOT recognized as a magical phenomenon by the Ministry and has actually been registered and classified by all peer-approved contemporary scientific research as a Verifiable Imponderable; meaning it defies rational explanation.’

'I'm surprised, Mrs Weasley, that you remain so pitifully uninformed. Dark Flux was officially removed from the Ministry's master-list of Verifiable Imponderables last year. In any case, Dark Flux research has continued, regardless of the Ministry's former attitude. You’ve heard of The Jeroboam Foundation, I take it?’ Draco asked, a crooked smile curling his upper lip into an all-too familiar sneer.

But of course she'd heard of The Jeroboam Foundation! Everybody had heard of it. The foundation was a major sponsor of all sorts of worthy research projects across a variety of fields; Medi-Magic in particular.

'Saul Jeroboam is highly respected and a very generous philanthropist,’ Hermione said primly.

'The bloke's loaded,’ Ron sniffed. 'He can afford to splash his money about.’

'Jeroboam's do-gooding image is a front. Believe me,’ Draco said assuredly.

'Believe you?’ Hermione snorted.

'But you’ve got to admit that just about everyone thinks Jeroboam’s a bit of an oddball…’ Ron interjected. ‘All we know is he’s this brilliant scientist, got pots of money, companies coming out of his ears, his brand name’s all over the place… but no-one’s ever actually met him! He’s a complete recluse.’

‘Social timidity is not a criminal offence, Ron,’ Hermione snapped.

‘Oh, come on, Hermione. He hides away in his mountain lair in Switzerland. Merlin knows what he’s plotting up there!’

Hermione couldn’t help but laugh at this. ‘You’ve been watching too much James Bond, Ron!’

‘James WHO?’

‘He’s a popular character in a British spy film franchise,’ Draco explained hastily, ‘but more importantly, there are also rumours that Jeroboam likes to avoid society because he’s a pure-blood supremacist, who hates mixing it up with Muggle-borns and Muggles.’

Ron took his cue. 'The sort of guy who’d love to purge the Wizarding world of witches and wizards like you, Hermione.'

'And he's developing the perfect weapon to do so,’ Draco concluded in cool tones. Hermione could
sense his wintry, grey eyes roaming her face, her hair. 'A weapon which can distinguish between blood.'

‘And – and how do you know this?’ she asked.

‘A few years ago, a private security firm managed to scout out one of Jeroboam’s storage depots in Switzerland. The place was clean – deserted, actually - but they did find blueprints suggesting that a whole load of mobile tracking scanners were being built, to be operated worldwide, checking out new Dark Flux manifestations where and when they occur.’

‘Is that meant to be often?’ Hermione asked, a slight quaver in her voice. She had always assumed that Dark Flux – if indeed it existed - was extremely rare.

Draco’s eyes glowed silver with meaning. ‘More often than you think, Mrs Weasley… Anyway, sources suggest those blueprints have become a reality and that Jeroboam has now developed a machine which traces – and can maybe even collect - Dark Flux matter.’

‘So, why are you telling me about this?’ Hermione exclaimed, caustically. 'Isn't this a matter for the Aurors? The Ministry? Come to think of it, it's probably even a matter for the Muggle Police as well. They've got stacks of anti-terrorism measures at their disposal.’

Ron sighed deeply.

‘You have told your superiors about this, Ron, haven't you?’ Hermione asked, a note of sharp concern creeping into her voice.

'The thing is, Hermione,' Ron reasoned, 'Draco has come to me, and me alone. Not the Auror division. Although, strictly speaking, I'm still acting in my professional capacity.'

A clattering at the window alerted the party to an incoming owl. Ron rose to open the window and accepted the message tethered to the owl’s leg.

‘Draco's run into a fair bit of trouble lately,’ Ron continued haltingly, quickly scanning the message with a small frown. Even from this distance, Hermione could recognise Molly Weasley's large, scrawly handwriting. 'If he goes directly to the Investigation Unit, they'll hang, draw and quarter him before listening to a single word he says - which isn't going to help anybody, is it?'

He gathered up his and Draco's empty teacups.

'I'm for something stronger,' he muttered, gesturing towards the kitchen. 'And Hugo wants his Captain Magic teddy bear.' He moved towards the door. 'Anyone else for a drink?'

Draco shook his head.

Ron swept out, leaving the door wide open. His sudden absence sent a chill through the room.

Hermione fidgeted uncomfortably, listening to the sounds of clanking glass and rushing water emanating from the kitchen, wishing Ron would return to break the weighty silence between her and Draco.

She hazarded a glance in his direction. He was watching her intently, his long, slim fingers casually toying with a silver rose pendant hanging from a silver chain, which hung loosely over the collars of his smartly-fitted, charcoal robe.

‘You shouldn't be here,' she hissed, turning on him, unable to suppress her irritation any longer. His
mere presence was maddening.

'I had nowhere else to go,' Draco remonstrated forcefully.

'Rubbish! If there was any truth in what you’re saying, the Ministry would have no choice but to give you a fair hearing.’

‘Unlikely. I'm the target of a concerted hate campaign. Pure prejudice. That’s what it is.’

‘I doubt that very much,' Hermione said in cutting tones.

'Well, it's true. Six months ago, those cretinous bastards in Section B fined me a wad of cash for handling what they described as unwarranted objects,' Draco griped.

'I hear Dark Magic artefacts are quite the rage at the moment,' Hermione replied, brandishing a sarcastic smile. 'You must be making a roaring trade.'

'I wasn’t trading.'

'Of course not.'

Draco grimaced peevishly. 'You've no idea what I have to put up with. You see, I have to travel a lot for my work-

'Draco is the global business manager for Herb Healing Limited,' Ron explained, returning with Captain Magic, who he swiftly reattached to the waiting owl before shunting it off the window-sill.

He was about to sit down again, but then seemed to have second thoughts, dashing back to the kitchen.

'But in my case, travel and work combined appears to be a highly suspicious activity … according to the Ministry at any rate,' Draco complained heatedly. 'Even though I am travelling for perfectly legitimate business reasons and have scores of witnesses to prove it. But those arseholes in Section B. They're still hounding me.'

'Did you say Herb Healing?' Hermione asked, screwing her face up in disbelief.

Draco nodded.

'You, *Draco Malfoy*? You work for Herb Healing?’

Draco nodded again.

'But doesn't that mean you work with Muggles?’

'Yes. Our main market is Muggles,' Draco agreed, keeping his eyes firmly trained on Hermione's face as he spoke. There was a faintly victorious gleam in Draco's eyes. 'It seems they just can't get enough of our products.’

'Well, Malfoy. I’m in shock. Consorting with low-born *Mudbloods*…? Who'd have thought it?’ she said snidely.

'I couldn’t care less what you think,’ he retorted in a quieter, more menacing tone.

Ron swung back into the room carrying a tumbler of Firewhisky.
'The thing is,' Draco continued breezily, 'in the course of my work I get to meet a lot of very interesting people and hear a lot of very interesting things. Jeroboam's quest for Dark Flux is currently a recurring theme. Over and over. Everywhere I go. This man means business. _Dark business._'

Hermione pursed her lips into a small, withering smile. 'Then you're just the man for the job, aren't you, Malfoy?'

Draco fixed an icy stare in her direction. 'You might not want to believe a word I say, _Mrs Weasley._…'

Hermione growled in frustration. 'How can I? If you were telling the truth you'd TELL THE MINISTRY!'

'Look, Hermione,' Ron cradled his tumbler of firewhisky in his hands, a sorrowful look on his face. ‘You know how the Ministry drags these things out.’

‘Yes, of course I do, but that doesn’t mean you can simply _bypass_ legitimate channels and investigate these claims about Jeroboam yourself! That’s not your plan, is it?’ she asked, her voice rising in alarm.

‘Yes. With your help.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ Hermione shrilled. ‘I know nothing about this – this Jeroboam.’

_You might not,_ Ron said, 'but Draco's told me that your colleague Padma and that chap she's going out with… you know… the nerdy one in Ravenclaw.'

'Tony Goldstein.'

‘Well, _they’ve_ got connections with The Jeroboam Foundation. Padma used to work for Arcana Limited – owned by Jeroboam – and Tony’s still there. Been there since Hogwarts. He’s some kind of lab boffin.’

‘Jeroboam’s top researcher, actually,’ Draco observed.

‘I know you don't approve of this, Hermione,’ Ron said in beseeching tones, ‘but could you talk to them? Kind of informally? Especially Tony. We need to get a sense of how The Jeroboam Foundation works - its’s such a secretive organization. They might know of former colleagues we can talk to.’

‘It’s all a bit cloak and dagger, Ron,’ Hermione grumbled. ‘Can’t you just take Jeroboam in for questioning? You are an _Auror_, after all.’

‘Yeah, sure, I could probably rustle up an international warrant for his arrest in no time,’ Ron said blithely. ‘But Jeroboam will have friends in high places. He's a very powerful wizard; which means any investigation would have to be super-stealthy.’

Hermione heaved a baleful sigh.

She recognised Ron's round-eyed excitement all too well. It was the look of an overgrown puppy with a new toy.

What choice did she have? If it made Ron happy and forestalled any future nagging, then of course she would talk to Padma and Tony – all told, it didn’t seem like the most onerous job in the world.
And then hopefully, that would put an end to it. And Ron could move on to his next obsession.

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Draco didn't hang around for any social niceties. Just minutes later, he unfurled his lean frame from Ron's favourite armchair, surprising Hermione at how tall he had become - certainly compared to the jumped-up little squirt she remembered from their school-days – and picked up a small black attaché case which had been parked against the armchair.

He moved purposefully towards the large Inglenook fireplace which dominated their sitting-room and asked to borrow some Floo Powder. Hermione informed him that they had, in fact, run out of Floo Powder, just yesterday morning.

'I hardly use the stuff when you're not around,' she explained to Ron.

Draco looked crestfallen, Hermione noted. Even a little agitated. He clicked open his attaché case and rummaged frantically through its contents.

'Blast it,' he cursed under his breath. 'I thought I'd packed a spare Portkey.'

He snapped the attaché case shut and headed instead for the front door.

Ron appeared to have recovered from his earlier comparative enthusiasm for Draco's company and was only too glad, it seemed, to usher him outside. He nodded tersely and in his best Auror's voice assured Draco that he would investigate the matter in hand thoroughly.

'Thanks for the tea,' Draco muttered, chiefly preoccupied with tightly buttoning-up his long, grey raincoat.

His eyes momentarily flicked to Hermione who was standing directly behind her husband.

She instantly prickled with anxiety.

There was something unfathomable in his forlorn, grey expression which disturbed her greatly.

The night had deteriorated since Hermione's return home. Steady drizzle fogged the air and a stiff breeze was furiously whipping the tops of the elm trees which bordered their property.

Draco stepped outside and with a brusque farewell he headed down the lane at some speed, turning left towards the village. His long, lean figure, crowned by his trademark silver hair, luminous in the darkness, was soon swallowed up into the shadows.

'Odd chap,' Ron murmured, staring after Draco's fading form with a bemused expression on his face. 'Why didn't he just Apparate?'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"EXTREME WAYS" by MOBY

&

"THE DARK SIDE" by MUSE
Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Chapter Summary

A trip to Malfoy Manor and some disturbing news. Hermione's suspicions of Draco Malfoy grow...

2. Elsinore

Hermione desperately tried to focus on her book - Eoin Grumigen's controversial biography of Albus Dumbledore, 'The Dithering Diplomat' – but her eyes kept skating off the page. Hot, prickling perspiration peppered her forehead and her stomach was churning. I’m being ridiculous, she thought. Completely irrational. Blood tests at St Mungo’s were nothing like ‘real’ injections, thanks to specially-honed, analgesic wands - there wasn’t a needle in sight.

She closed her eyes and took a deep, calming breath... And yet she still couldn’t stop remembering, with terrible clarity, the time her Mum had taken her to the local church hall to give blood as a teenager and the dark, jellied, queasy warmth that had overwhelmed her moments before passing out …

'You alright, love?' came a friendly voice close to her ear.

Hermione forced a smile for the benefit of the round-faced Mediwitch and put her book aside. There was no point in looking as scared as she felt…

The Mediwitch gently took hold of Hermione’s arm and prodded her veins with practiced fingers, seeking out the sweet spot where the blood flowed fastest.

No point in panicking. No point at all, Hermione thought. This would be simple and painless.

Her mind flitted back to her Mum… Where was she now? What was she doing? Probably soothing a scared child about to have their first filling or chatting to her receptionist, Kate, over a hot cup of tea and a Rich Tea biscuit in the cramped back office of her practice surgery. Hermione had a strangely wistful, almost painful pang of yearning to see her, to skip work for an hour or two, to jump on a bus to travel the long, meandering journey through the heavy London traffic to Parsons Green, where her parents still practiced dentistry and lived in a tall, red-brick, semi-detached house, with mock Tudor frontage and a Volvo Estate on the drive.

It was another life. Another world. One that sometimes seemed to be fading into the distance, to the point that she had to remind herself that once upon a time she’d lived as a Muggle in a world of Muggles, and never known anything else.

‘Nearly there, love,’ clucked the Mediwitch.

Did her parents feel the same way? Hermione wondered. She often worried that there had been a subtle disruption to their connection since the Second Wizarding War, when she’d been forced to erase her very existence from their minds and move them to Australia for safekeeping. Despite assiduously restoring their memories, Hermione had an uneasy sense that since then they’d been performing their relationship, rather than simply being.
But maybe the damage had already been done? And maybe this was the same for all Muggle-born witches and wizards? Perhaps the inevitable loosening of those family bonds was the price you had to pay for the gift of being Magical? But it seemed an incredibly high price when you thought about it, made even worse for those vulnerable children in an alien community who were then subjected to further exclusion and nastiness. Other children, prideful in their superior sense of self-entitlement - kids like Draco Malfoy, Hermione thought bitterly – were often the worst offenders.

It was a tough road for Muggle-borns growing up in the wizarding world and Hermione wasn’t sure if it made them more determined to succeed or fatally undermined their confidence.

Hermione was so lost in her thoughts that she didn’t immediately notice that the round-faced Mediwitch had finished drawing blood from her arm and was already decanting the blood into small, silver vials.

‘All done,’ she said chirpily. ‘Mediwizard Alcock will examine these later. I take it you’ll be wanting to know what he finds out?’

‘I’m a Muggle-born,’ Hermione said flatly. ‘I already know the answer.’

The Mediwitch shrugged. ‘Maybe you’re different? Not ALL Muggle-borns are Gamma blood-types.’

‘99.9% are.’

‘Well, maybe you’re the one that’s different…’ the Mediwitch said with a reassuring smile.

‘The 0.1…’ Hermione muttered irritably, roughly pulling down her sleeve. Her arm ached a little. ‘And I don’t need to be different. I’m fine as I am.’

This had been a stupid idea, Hermione thought crossly. How had she ever let Ginny talk her into it? Ginny had assured her that the point of this testing programme – the widest Pan-European trial of its type to ever be conducted - was to prove that different blood-types didn’t confer special powers; that blood was irrelevant. However, Hermione wasn’t so sure about this, ever since Mediwizard Alcock had let slip that Hermione had been selected as a test subject because of her ‘exalted magical achievements’. He made particular reference to her ability to deploy powerful wandless magic; a skill usually reserved for the rarest blood type in the magical world – Epsilons – who were universally pure-bloods or half-bloods.

Still, it gave her something to talk about with Tony Goldstein, who she was due to meet for lunch. His academic field was Magical Haematology, Padma had proudly told her, and his chief area of expertise was the Epsilon allele and how it differed from Alpha and Beta alleles – the most common blood types found amongst the non-Muggle-born wizarding population.

‘Can I get you anything?’ the Mediwitch asked. ‘A cup of tea?’

Hermione brusquely shook her head.

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Padma was waiting in the foyer at St Mungo’s, armed with a sheaf of papers and a quill.

‘These need signing immediately,’ she said breathlessly, thrusting the papers into Hermione's arms. ‘Mr Jinks has been in the office all morning. He says there have been complaints that we aren't passing on case files to the appropriate departments quickly enough and holding up crucial Ministry business.’
'I can't sign these here,' Hermione said, suddenly flustered. 'We'll be back in the office later; two hours at most. Can they wait?'

Padma shook her head vehemently. 'Mr Jinks insisted.'

'Insisted? Who the hell does he think he is?' This had become a particularly pertinent question in recent days...his investigation into her department had morphed into a position of permanent oversight. He’d effectively taken control.

Hermione flipped open her briefcase and with a deft tap of her wand expanded its interior to accommodate the thick wad of reports, contracts and copious unapproved minutes of departmental meetings that Padma had brought with her.

'Anyway, I thought you were taking me to lunch today with Tony?' she added in brighter tones. 'I've been looking forward to it all morning.'

'He had to cancel,' Padma said apologetically. 'Work's gone crazy.'

'How very inconvenient,' Hermione sighed grumpily, ignoring the sharp look her colleague was giving her. She’d promised Ron she’d take care of this Goldstein business, hoping to prove that his latest silly obsession that Jeroboam was a new ‘Dark Lord’ was utter nonsense.

'Well, it suited me just fine,' Padma said in brittle tones, defensive of her boyfriend. 'I was about to cancel too.'

'Whatever for?'

'I'm surprised you have to ask!' Padma huffed. 'Mr Jinks, of course.'

XXX

'Can't you just owl Tony yourself and invite him out for a spot of lunch or supper?' Ron asked that evening, as they both brushed their teeth in readiness for bed. Ron spat a glob of toothpaste into the washbasin; it landed close to the rim of the white china bowl. A trail of saliva trickled slowly and inexorably down the side of the bowl towards the plughole. He then wiped his mouth with a hand-towel. 'Padma's not really needed anyway and the fewer folks who know what we're doing the better.'

'I can't invite him without Padma,' Hermione explained. ‘That’d be wrong.’ She attempted to brush a thickly knotted tangle from her hair before giving up and straightening her curled tresses with a quick swish of her wand instead.

'Rubbish,' Ron scoffed. 'You know him from school. You're old friends.'

Ron eased himself into their king-size bed, hugging their goose-down duvet so tightly that Hermione's half of the bed was left completely uncovered.

Hermione sidled onto the bed next to him and tugged defiantly at the duvet until it had shifted a few inches towards her.

'I don't know Tony that well. Certainly not well enough to arrange to see him without Padma, at any rate. And I can't think up a work-related excuse to visit Arcana.'

The truth was, of course, other than the failed lunch with Padma, Hermione hadn't put much effort into this at all... Work was frenetic and her home life had been even more hectic than usual, in the
light of Hugo's near-expulsion from school for 'accidentally' setting ablaze a teacher's umbrella.

Ron looked perplexed. 'Seriously, Hermione, I don’t get it. You're a married woman. You're Padma's boss, for Merlin's sake. She's hardly going to think you're trying to get into her boyfriend's pants now, is she?'

'Of course not! It's a question of *etiquette*.'

'Etiquette? It'd just be lunch with an old friend while asking him a couple of questions about the bloke who funds his research. It's not exactly difficult now, is it?'

'Then why don't you do it?' Hermione snapped. 'You probably know him better than I do.'

'Bollocks. I hardly know him at all. A bit of a boring bastard, if you ask me. Always had his nose stuck in a book. *Crap* at Quidditch.'

'Now that's plain nasty.'

'See. It's obvious you're better for the job. You're much more tolerant than I am.'

Too tolerant by far, Hermione thought wearily. She really should have knocked this harebrained scheme on the head the moment Draco Malfoy tried to recruit Ron.

'I'll see what I can do,' Hermione said, if only to shut him up.

'You'd better,' Ron said sternly, pulling the duvet over his head. 'We've been invited to Malfoy Manor for tea tomorrow. He'll be expecting some news.'

XXX

Hermione was still seething with her husband when they stepped out of the grand Inglenook fireplace into the palatial entrance hall at Malfoy Manor.

'I can't believe you agreed to this,' she hissed in low tones. 'Have you forgotten what this place means to me?'

It was over fourteen years since they, along with Harry, had been snatched and brought to Malfoy Manor to be interrogated, but even so, how could Ron have forgotten what had happened here? Draco's aunt, Bellatrix Lestrange, had tortured her in the drawing room – just a few feet away from where they were now standing - while Ron, incarcerated in the cellar below, had been forced to listen.

Ron didn't have time to respond. There was a sudden flurry of activity as a small troupe of house-elves, decked out in ill-fitting royal blue livery and weighed down with huge gold epaulettes, Apparated before them.

One of their number - the most curmudgeonly and authoritarian-looking of the bunch, Hermione thought – stepped forward. He extended a long, gnarled finger and pointed in a threatening manner at Ron's chest.

'Who are you? What are you doing here?' the house-elf demanded in a high-pitched, querulous tone.

Ron stepped backwards, colliding with the vast iron overhang of the Inglenook fireplace behind them, his cheeks ablaze with scarlet embarrassment and outrage.
'Your master, Mr Malfoy, invited us,' Ron cried, rubbing the back of his head where he had struck the fireplace.

'How else could we have passed safely through the wards?' Hermione reasoned, feeling genuine alarm at this odd turn of events.

She should have known it. This was a trap of some kind. Draco had set them up; the devious, little snake.

One glance at the angry, contorted expression on Ron's face told her he was thinking precisely the same thing.

'Yeah,' he blustered, swerving to avoid a second gnarly prod from the leading elf. 'If he hadn't invited us, we'd be chopped liver by now, wouldn't we?'

This made the elf pause for thought, and certainly the rigid, aggressive stance of his companions visibly wavered.

Ron fished frantically in a deep inside pocket of his gown, pulling out a silvery piece of parchment that was prominently crowned with the Malfoy crest, and shoved it towards the elf.

The elf momentarily closed his eyes, as if sensing the origins of the paper and its writer vibrate through his brown, leathery skin, before magicking the paper into thin air with a brisk flick of his bony wrist.

A sly, papery smile slowly spread across his face, and his formerly harsh glare softened into deference. Even his voice had lost its hard edge, assuming instead a cloying meekness.

'Kind Sir. Madam,' he said, with a respectful bow which his fellow elves immediately copied. 'Master will be along shortly.'

Hermione wasn't fooled for one moment by this little charade.

Draco may have invited them, but he'd forgotten to show up himself.

'Let me escort you to the drawing room where you can await the Master in greater comfort,' the elf said in obsequious tones.

Hermione's throat constricted involuntarily at the thought and even Ron looked a little green. He did remember. Of course he did. How could she have been so selfish?

To her surprise, however, the elves hurried them away from the entrance hall at breakneck speed, past the drawing room's heavy, oak door. It appeared to have been magically sealed, judging by the gossamer-thin stream of white light which encircled the door frame.

They followed the head elf along a wide, wood-paneled corridor, lined with austere mahogany or ebony framed portraits, all featuring the sharp-faced, aquiline features of former Malfoys.

The elf ushered them into a large, square room, dominated by a vast fire blazing furiously in a white marble fireplace.

Hermione wasn't sure if it was an effect of the heat generated by the flames or the consequence of a strangely pungent odour which suddenly assaulted her senses, but there was a distinctly shimmering, translucent quality to the scene - akin to a mirage on an empty road on a scorching summer's day. An array of tall, slender white candles hovered majestically above them, presiding...
over three white sofas – deep and welcoming – facing the fireplace, and framing a low glass, rectangular table which supported a splendidly ornate silver samovar. A line of crystal tumblers, nestled inside silver filigree holders, sprang into view at the bidding of the head elf, who summoned their tea with a curt snap of his fingers.

He turned to Hermione and Ron, bowed deeply, then Disapparated.

'Bastard,' Ron grumbled.

'I didn't like him, either,' Hermione said stoutly.

'I meant fucking Draco Malfoy,' Ron sneered, flinging himself onto one of the plush white sofas.

'Finally!' Hermione said triumphantly. 'Finally, you see sense. So, can we just go home now? I've got a stack of paperwork to get through by tomorrow for this blasted audit, and this really is a waste of time. Surely you can see that?'

Ron cast her a sidelong glance.

Hermione's high spirits quickly faltered. She knew that look.

She should never have gloated. Ron was very sensitive to her 'always having to be right,' as he put it.

Ron opened his mouth to speak, but then shut it again as the distinct sound of whispered conversation, and the soft, shushing noise of rapidly approaching, slippered feet on tiled flooring, alerted them to fresh arrivals.

Hermione could make out the calm contralto of Narcissa Malfoy, Draco's mother, and a similarly toned female voice, with a faint American accent, that she didn't recognise.

Much as a panicked 'Sssh' in the wings of a theatre has the power to be heard with undue force in a hushed auditorium, these whispered voices also seemed to be magnified by their own sense of unexpected melodrama.

'Did he say anything to you before he left?' the unknown voice asked sharply.

'Not a dickie bird,' Narcissa Malfoy replied. 'It's most peculiar. And to think, the Weasleys, of all people.'

Moments later, Narcissa Malfoy, flanked by a handsome woman of Amazonian proportions with an impressive mane of pale gold hair, was shaking their hands with polite enthusiasm, greeting them rather as long-lost friends than the intruders they were clearly considered to be.

Hermione cast a swift appraising eye over Narcissa Malfoy. It had been many years since she had met her. Since Lucius's complete retirement from public life some years ago – it was claimed he was 'indisposed,' although his disappearance had sparked innumerable conspiracy theories, none of which had ever been confirmed or denied by the Malfoy family – sightings of Narcissa had become rare, exciting uncommon degrees of gossip-fuelled interest.

Years of semi-seclusion hadn't harmed her, Hermione thought. She was positively radiant, her silvery hair wound into an intricately coiffed chignon, and her lean, elegant figure was clad in a simple white, silk toga. The overall effect was calm, serene, classical. The fingertips she extended in welcome were soft and cool to the touch.
Hermione sensed that Narcissa was similarly regarding her with that polite, slightly competitive gaze shared between women who haven't seen each other for a long time and are wondering if the other has piled on the pounds or developed an unattractive facial hair problem. Luckily, Hermione was still relatively young-looking for her thirty-three years. A little curvier perhaps, compared to her youth, but that was to be expected after giving birth to two children.

To her surprise, Hermione sensed an even more penetrating stare from Narcissa's fair-haired companion.

'This is Sylvestra,' Narcissa said, stepping aside to allow Sylvestra to come forward.

Hermione noticed that Ron's eyes instantly lit up. Always a sucker for blondes, Hermione thought ruefully. Although she had to admit, this Sylvestra was a particularly magnificent specimen.

But she was pretty darned sure that Sylvestra wasn't the name of Draco's wife. Or rather, his second wife. Wife number one, Astoria Greengrass – a snooty little number, she recalled from their schooldays at Hogwarts – had famously run off with a Quidditch player from Brazil, even though her baby son was not yet out of nappies.

However, Hermione was the first to admit that she hadn't taken much interest, if any, in the personal affairs of Draco Malfoy since the Second Wizarding War ended. He was someone she didn't care to think of.

For all she knew his wife might well be Sylvestra. She decided to be polite, whoever she was.

'Do sit down,' Narcissa said, gesturing towards the voluminous white sofas.

Hermione chose to sit as far away from the roaring fire as possible. She was already unbearably hot. Unfortunately, poor Ron wasn't so lucky, as he had already positioned himself on the sofa closest to the blaze. Moments later, he was throwing off his robe and loosening his collar.

Narcissa sat directly opposite them, while Sylvestra seated herself in the middle of the sofa facing the fireplace and the long glass table, on which the samovar was quietly steaming.

'Tea?' Narcissa asked, in a clear, bell-like voice.

Ron nodded, surreptitiously wiping a film of gleaming sweat from his face with the back of his sleeve.

'Draco should be here shortly,' Sylvestra said.

'He sent a message to say he was late,' Narcissa lied. 'I-I forget the precise nature of your business. It's been an extraordinarily busy day. Hasn't it, Sylvestra? But… if there's any way we can be of assistance?'

'It's a work matter,' Hermione explained breezily.

'Oh. I see.'

Narcissa passed them a steaming glass of golden-brown tea and retreated from the rather tense, birdlike poise she had been holding, perched on the edge of the sofa, into the sofa's capacious white cushions.

She stared pensively into the fire for a few short moments, as if thoroughly digesting this particular piece of information, and then turned abruptly to Hermione, smiling sweetly. 'How about some
music while we wait?' she chirruped.

Hermione nodded amiably.

‘Wonderful!’ Narcissa cried and she clapped her hands with almost childlike glee. The room was instantly alive with loud strains of thumping, throbbing classical music - emanating, it seemed, from every direction. Ron looked around the room in some confusion…

'Isn't that simply marvelous?’ Narcissa sighed. 'Brahms 4th.’ She fixed Hermione with a bright-eyed stare. ‘But I guess you already know that, don't you?’

Fortunately, Hermione did know. It was one of her mother's favourite symphonies. Even so, it struck her as odd that Narcissa automatically presumed she would be familiar with the piece. Was it because she was Muggle-born? And Brahms, of course, was a Muggle composer.

Her suspicions were all but confirmed by Narcissa's next statement.

'To give credit where it's due, music is the one area of civilization where the Muggle population has truly excelled, don't you think?’

She cocked her head jauntily to one side and surveyed Hermione beadily.

Hermione flushed. She wasn't sure if Narcissa was being deliberately rude or this was a rather wooden attempt to be nice.

'I'm not so sure about that, Narcissa,' Sylvestra intoned. 'Don't forget, the Muggles have critical mass on their side.' She flashed a dazzling smile at their guests. 'There's a lot more Muggles than wizards, aren't there?’

'Perhaps it's also about training,' Narcissa mused. 'I don't recall any musical instruction at Hogwarts. Do you?’

'No, Mrs Malfoy. None at all,' Ron spluttered.

'Do you play, Mrs Weasley?’ Narcissa asked. She demurely sipped her tea, awaiting Hermione's reply.

'I-I used to,' Hermione said. 'I played the piano.'

'Ah! The pianoforte. How very lovely,' Narcissa breathed. 'Sylvestra plays too, don't you, dear?’

Sylvestra beamed in agreement.

'And Draco played awfully well when he was a child,' Narcissa continued. 'But he never had time to practice. He was always so very, very busy.’

'Actually, Narcissa, he does still play from time to time,’ Sylvestra said, a little too smugly for Narcissa's liking, Hermione thought with some amusement.

But Narcissa was having none of it. 'I think you'll find, Sylvestra, that Draco has all but given up. He told me so himself, just last year.’

'But I've heard him play since.’

'I very much doubt it.’ Narcissa firmly pursed her lips and poured herself another glass of tea.
'He does play. Believe me,' Sylvestra said emphatically.

Narcissa rolled her eyes in exasperation. 'Dearest Sylvestra. I haven't seen him play for a very long time. And I rather think I would know if he did. After all, this is my house.'

By now, Sylvestra was bristling with indignation. 'For your information, Narcissa,' she said pointedly, 'he plays the piano in her room.'

Narcissa's eyes flicked nervously to Sylvestra, and then to Hermione and Ron.

'Why don't we just ask him?' Ron said, looking over Narcissa's shoulder towards the open doorway behind her.

Draco was leaning nonchalantly against the doorpost, arms folded tightly against his chest. He looked thunderous.

'I don't play. I don't like to play. And I certainly won't be playing anymore,' he drawled, leveling a particularly furious look in Sylvestra's direction.

Sylvestra didn't seem to notice. Or if she did, she certainly didn't seem to care.

'Just as I thought! Come and have some tea, darling,' said Narcissa, pouring her son a glass of tea into which she spooned three teaspoons of a curious green powdery mixture, extracted from a Meissen China sugar-bowl.

'We have been entertaining your guests,' Narcissa said. 'Charming people,' she added with a sickly smile.

Draco cast Ron a withering look. 'Weasley. You're two days early,' he growled. 'I said Thursday, not Tuesday.'

Ron blushed bright scarlet. He rummaged desperately – and unsuccessfully - for Draco's note, before remembering that the head elf had vanished it.

'It's as well, really, isn't it, Ron?' Hermione said. 'We have to be somewhere else anyway.'

She carefully placed her glass of tea on the table and was about to stand up when Draco sauntered into the room, collapsed onto the sofa next to his mother, and gestured to Hermione to stay put.

'Now that you're here, we might as well talk,' he said. He turned to his mother. 'And if you care to turn down that blasted music, we might be able to hear ourselves think as well.'

Narcissa's face darkened, although, with a brisk click of her fingers, Brahms's soaring violins, dancing round and round, higher and higher, were instantly stilled.

'The problem with my son, Mrs Weasley,' she said with an air of exaggerated confidentiality, 'is that he hasn't got a soul.'

Hermione stifled a giggle, amused at Draco's stricken expression.

'If you’ve quite finished entertaining our guests at my expense, Mummy dearest, we have some important matters to discuss,' he said sardonically.

'I was doing no such thing!' Narcissa retorted with an injured sniff. 'Come on, Sylvestra. Let's leave these people to their ever so important business.'
Both ladies rose to their feet and glided elegantly out of the drawing room, leaving two out of three of the room's occupants in slightly stunned silence.

The silence continued for some time, as all ears strained to hear the last of Narcissa and her companion, ensuring they had quit the vicinity.

Draco leaned closer.

'There's been another attack,' he said bluntly.

'An attack?' Ron exclaimed. 'Of Dark Flux? Are you sure?'

Draco nodded.

'That’s ludicrous! How come we know nothing about it?' Hermione demanded. 'I've got high-level clearance at the Ministry and Ron's an Auror. Section A. He'd be the first to know if something like that happened.'

Draco hadn't actually looked directly at her to properly acknowledge her presence since his arrival, and even now, to Hermione's profound irritation, he allowed his gaze to switch from Ron to herself for the briefest of moments only.

'I have sources,' he said, with a dismissive, almost Gallic shrug.

Hermione didn't want to let him off that lightly.

'What sources?' she asked incredulously. 'The slightest inkling of Dark Flux and it would be all over the *Daily Prophet*.'

Draco flipped open the Meissen China sugar bowl and dipped the little finger of his left hand into the mound of green granulated powder skulking inside.

'Not to mention the Muggle newspapers and TV reports. A number of unexplained deaths in a single community is bound to make the headlines,' Hermione continued. 'It'd be big news.'

'But it was on the news,' Draco said silkily.

To Hermione's disgust, he licked the end of his finger, before plunging it back into the sugar bowl. 'You just didn't notice,' he said wearily. 'The outbreak was reported in South America. A village in Paraguay,' Draco continued in clipped, efficient tones. 'I'm planning to go out there; take a look at what's been going on.'

'What happened?' Ron asked.

'Seven Muggles dead. Usual symptoms. Bluish lips, ghostly pallor, rolled-back eyes. Eyewitness accounts described a strange rash on the bodies.'

'What was the official *Muggle* explanation?' Ron asked, a little too disdainfully for Hermione’s liking.

'Contaminated water. The village shared a single well.'

'How can you be so sure that it wasn't whatever was IN the well that killed them?' Hermione asked tetchily.

'Like I said, Mrs Weasley, I have my sources,' Draco said, this time fixing the full force of his
bleached, grey gaze in her direction.

Hermione gritted her teeth, refusing to flinch from the unguarded threat she had momentarily sensed in his stare.

There was more to this business. Much, much more. And she didn't trust Draco Malfoy one jot.

'This 

Draco shrugged. 'Pink, mottled, blue, green? I've no idea.'

'But isn't it important, Malfoy? I've been doing a little reading around the subject and historic claims of Dark Flux have NEVER been associated with a rash. Looks like your sources might be sending you on a wild goose chase.'

Draco ran his long, pale fingers through his surprisingly unkempt, silvery hair, and smiled - a crooked, smug little smile, which Hermione itched to smack from his face.

'Well, it won't just be me, will it? Ron's coming too. Aren't you, Ron?'

Ron looked a little startled at this information. 'I am?'

'Next week. I've got a few business matters to attend to first in that part of the world. But once that's out of the way...'

'You can't expect Ron to just hang around while you conduct your – your shady deals!' Hermione scoffed.

'I'd hardly call Herb Healing business, shady,' Draco countered.

'And he's needed at home.'

'He's an Auror, Mrs Weasley. Dangerous missions are what they do.'

Dangerous? Did he say dangerous?

But before either Hermione or Ron had a chance to question Draco further, the silver-haired wizard had already unfurled his lean frame from the plush cushions of the sofa and was moving towards the doorway – a clear indicator that their meeting was over.

'In any case, Mrs Weasley,' Draco said, with a supercilious smile, 'I've no doubt you'll be far too busy rooting out insider information on Mr Jeroboam to even notice that Ron has gone.'

'That's enough, Malfoy!' Ron barked, levering himself clumsily off the sofa. 'You've no right to speak to my wife in that tone.'

'He's just a prat, Ron,' Hermione sighed. 'Ignore him.'

She rapidly made for the exit, but Draco was blocking her path, hands on hips.

'Look, Mrs Weasley, Ron,' he said in a far more diplomatic tone than his cocky stance implied. 'Okay, so we have history. We … we don't particularly like each other.'

'Too right,' Ron mumbled.

'Which means this isn't going to be easy for any of us,' Draco continued. 'But wouldn't it be better if
we just put old antipathies aside? Just this once?"

'Well. We can try,' Ron conceded. 'I just don’t want you giving my wife any lip. Is that clear?'

Hermione rolled her eyes in exasperation. She was perfectly capable of looking after herself.

'Have you spoken to Tony Goldstein?’ Draco asked Hermione, ignoring Ron’s intervention.

'Actually, no,’ Hermione said truthfully. 'He cancelled our lunch meeting.’

'Why didn't you say so?’ Draco said. 'That can only mean one thing…'

'Yes. He had too much work to do,’ Hermione said snidely, securing the fasteners at the collar of her gown in readiness, she hoped, for a speedy departure. 'It happens to the best of us, you know.’

'Hold on. When was this latest Dark Flux case?’ Ron asked, narrowing his eyes in suspicion.

'Oh, come on, Ron!’ Hermione sighed. 'Tony had nothing to do with it.’

'While Jeroboam's his paymaster, nothing can be ruled out,’ Draco said darkly.

Ron agreed. 'Exactly. I bet Jeroboam needs all the help he can get when there’s a Dark Flux outbreak. Don’t forget, his aim is to get hold of the stuff and weaponise it.’

'I haven't forgotten, Ron,’ Hermione said blithely, pushing past Draco and into the refreshing cool air of the gloomy corridor. 'I'll get onto it, I'll talk to Tony,’ she added, already trotting away from the drawing room, back to the entrance hall. Appeasement and escape was her preferred tactic at this juncture.

Ron and Draco followed soon after, making, what felt to Hermione, like slow, funereal progress. They were talking together in quiet, low tones.

Hermione waited impatiently by the Inglenook fireplace, desperate to leave as soon as she could. She curiously eyed a large wooden barrel, filled to the brim with Floo powder. Some of the powder had been decanted into a circle of small, portable silver vessels, arranged in a floral pattern on a side-table, next to the fireplace.

Her eyes drifted upwards, trailing the curved length of a vast staircase, its wooden balustrades freshly polished and gleaming in the light afforded by an ornate, round window, poised high above the atrium.

The staircase led to a spacious landing with vivid red walls, adorned with gilt-framed paintings depicting gently bucolic, pastoral scenes and the occasional colourful portrait. One half of the landing was plushly carpeted and brightly lit, leading East towards what looked like the family apartments. A left turn, however, moved away from the wide, welcoming landing, narrowing into a gloomier passage and snaking westwards.

Hermione couldn't help but wonder if the West Wing was where the *true* master of Malfoy Manor resided, victim to some mystery illness; or, as some rumours would have it, kept under lock and key for his own well-being and those around him. It was insinuated that he had finally run mad with sorrowful regret for his former dark deeds and the shame he had inflicted on the Malfoy family.

Hermione’s ruminations were disturbed by the rapidly advancing pitter-patter of footsteps scurrying towards her. It was Narcissa Malfoy, arms outstretched, with Sylvestra close behind. 'Mrs
Weasley! Thank Merlin you're still here!' Narcissa gushed. 'I've had a fabulous idea!'

Hermione had a very bad feeling about this.

'It's so very rare I meet anyone else who shares my appreciation of truly wonderful music. I have tickets for the Berlin Philharmonic this Friday. Sylvestra's otherwise engaged and Draco's away on business, so would you accompany me instead?'

The slight quaver of insecurity in Narcissa's voice shocked Hermione into nodding her assent.

'Of course, Mrs Malfoy. That sounds lovely.'

But even as she spoke, a vague sense of dread crept over her – largely based on the briefest of glances exchanged between Narcissa and her son, who had finally arrived at the fireplace with Ron and was now standing directly behind her. In that tiniest of moments, something had been communicated, promptly vanquished by Narcissa's effusive expressions of joy and gratitude.

They arranged to meet in Berlin, seeing as Hermione had a departmental meeting to chair until at least six o'clock. Narcissa informed her that a special Portkey station was being set up at Widford Hill in Oxfordshire, as the concert was bound to be a tremendously popular event. She knew at least half of the Southern Counties branch of the Slytherin Women's Institute had already purchased tickets, so it was set to be a perfectly adorable evening's entertainment.

'Shall we meet at half past six?' Narcissa asked.

'Sure,' Hermione agreed, already feeling a little queasy at the prospect.

Throughout this exchange, Draco stood in silence, an inscrutable, even slightly bored look on his face.

'Come on, Ron,' Hermione said, tugging at her husband's sleeve.

'I'll be in touch,' Draco said crisply, before turning his back on the party and walking quickly away.

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Ron just didn't get it, even though Hermione explained her misgivings about working on this investigation with Draco – and indeed any association with the Malfoys - over and over again the next morning. They were walking back from St Botolph's Primary School in Ottery St Catchpole where they had just dropped off Rose and Hugo.

As far as Ron was concerned, nothing major seemed amiss. Sure, Draco was an irritating little shit, but Narcissa had been surprisingly pleasant - a little kooky perhaps? But what else would you expect of someone who had lived with Lucius and Draco all these years?

'But, Ron, don't you think it's a tad strange that she's invited me to this concert on Friday, claiming loneliness, when it sounds like half of Slytherin house is already going? I feel I've been roped into this under false pretences!' Hermione complained.

'Blimey, Hermione! You really are a conspiracy theorist, aren't you?' Ron cackled.

'No, Ron. There's something wrong. Something… off,' Hermione said, thrusting her gloved hands into the deep pockets of her duffle coat in an effort to keep warm on what was a particularly cold, autumn morning.
'She never said she was lonely,' Ron muttered, lagging behind as he kicked mounds of dry, brown leaves. 'Just that Sylvestra couldn't make it.'

'And that's strange too, don't you think?'

'What's strange?'

'Sylvestra,' Hermione said, waiting impatiently for Ron to catch up. 'Who is she?'

'Dunno,' Ron shrugged. Then, after a moment's thought; 'She's not Draco's wife, that's for sure.'

'You've met her?' Hermione was burning with curiosity.

'A couple of times.'

'When? Where? What was she like?'

'Nice enough, I think. Too nice for him. But I don't really remember,' Ron said in a casual tone, which never failed to infuriate his wife.

'And you're sure she's not Sylvestra?'

Ron threw her a puzzled look. 'Quite sure, Hermione. I'm not blind, you know!'

'So, who is she?' Hermione repeated.

'Who? The wife or Sylvestra?'

'Sylvestra! And the wife. Both of them.'

Ron shook his head in exasperation. 'You've lost me now.'

'What a surprise,' Hermione mumbled under her breath.

They had reached their cottage on the outskirts of the village. Ron pretended to rummage for his key, for the sake of random passers-by, and then subtly flicked his wand, which was poking out from his coat-sleeve, whispering a brusque Alohomora. He nudged the door open and stepped inside.

Hermione followed, hanging up her duffle coat, hat, scarf and gloves by the door.

She was running late. She'd have to Apparate to work.

'Maybe they're lovers?' Ron said suddenly, raising his eyebrows saucily.

'Sylvestra and Draco?' Hermione shrilled.

'No, no! Sylvestra and Narcissa.' Ron's eyes glinted wickedly at the thought – a little too wickedly, Hermione thought.

'Really, Ronald. You have a mind like a drain,' she tutted.

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CHAPTER TRACKS:

"SYMPHONY NO.4 IN E MINOR: OP.98" by JOHANNES BRAHMS
Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Her Last Stand

Chapter Summary

A surprising turn of events turns Hermione's life upside down...

Hermione had all but given up on trying to convince Ron that throwing his lot in with the likes of Draco Malfoy posed a very high risk to his career and reputation. Ron didn't seem to care. He'd made up his mind, and that was that.

It worried her deeply. What was driving Ron to such desperate measures? Had his life really become so stale and tired? At just thirty-two, he was far too young to be having a mid-life crisis. Did he need saving from himself?

This question had often loomed over Hermione during the last week. She had even wondered if it was worthwhile staging an intervention of some kind; enlisting his family and friends to talk some sense into him. She was sure Molly could stage a sufficiently convincing heart attack if all else failed. But she doubted Ron would ever forgive her the humiliation.

Or should she simply support him?

Up till now, this had been her favoured approach to a very thorny problem. But their visit to Malfoy Manor had only served to boost her very real misgivings about the entire venture; most particularly, this harebrained notion that Ron and Draco should travel to Paraguay of all places.

Later that afternoon, Hermione spotted Draco at the Ministry of Magic. He was in the public atrium, speaking with Auror Tom Bennet. Their conversation seemed quite amicable. More like two old friends… And yet Draco had claimed that the Aurors were 'hounding' him, baying for his blood.

It had all been an outright lie.

She decided then to change her tactics. She simply couldn't allow that conniving little creep to take her husband down. She had been right all along to suspect his true motives in approaching Ron – one of his oldest enemies - with his dark accusations about Jeroboam.

What other lies had he told?

Discrediting Malfoy's claims and character with some hard evidence shouldn't be too difficult, she reasoned. And Ron couldn't ignore the facts, surely?

And if she could achieve this by Friday, just a couple of days away, then she could hopefully wriggle out of her 'date' with Narcissa Malfoy as well.

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As soon as Hermione arrived at her desk, she paid a quick visit to the Auror's Record Office, which was on the same floor as her own, to confirm that Auror Bennet worked in Section B - Fraud and Finance.
Bennet was described as Draco's main 'handler' – which seemed a little informal for an official Ministry record, Hermione felt.

Despite her rising reputation and status as one of the leading luminaries in the Legal Prosecution Service of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, she wasn't allowed to access any further information about Bennet's ongoing cases – which seemed a tad unusual. Still, she was pretty certain that Ron could.

And she might even try to engineer a friendly chat with Auror Bennet… It would be interesting to find out Draco's purported crimes, she mused. Although, too many crimes would potentially support Draco's argument that no Auror would ever take him seriously if he accused a well-respected wizard like Jeroboam of plotting a major terrorist catastrophe.

What else? Hermione whipped out a quill and a piece of scrap parchment. On the left-hand side, she jotted down a list of questions she had concerning Draco's credibility, while on the right-hand side, she listed her options in finding answers to these questions. This she would then present to Ron as a 'dossier of truth.'

Getting people to express their undying hatred for the man would be almost too easy, Hermione thought gleefully.

That dealt with Draco.

But more importantly perhaps, what about Draco's accusations? What about his claim that Jeroboam was seeking to find and weaponise Dark Flux? If true, of course, this was terrifying and needed immediate attention from Section A. But how could she prove it?

Indeed. How could she disprove it?

She had to learn more about Jeroboam himself, to see if he was fishy. She tried to ignore the voice in her head that reminded her that this was precisely what Draco Malfoy had wanted her to do in the first place. Obtaining a background check probably wouldn't be difficult. She could even send an owl to Harry at the Aurors' Office in Paris for any information they might have.

Thinking of Harry, more Ginny really, Hermione realized she had to hand, an invaluable eyewitness account of exactly what happened when an outbreak of what many believed to be Dark Flux struck a neighbourhood. Ginny had been more exposed than Harry to this particular incident in 2008, which had killed two Muggle-born witches and three Muggles on the street in Paris where the Potters were living. Harry had been away on an assignment leaving Ginny alone - terrified and distraught by the events unfolding around her. This was hardly surprising as she had been so close to term with Lily. The whole experience had prompted plans for an early return to Britain for the family.

Strange how things worked out, though. The Paris office, which was the centre for European Auror Co-operative Ventures – more commonly known as Auror HQ - had been so mortified by the great Harry Potter's plans for a hasty departure, they had offered him an even better job with more perks, a very nice apartment, and a very fat pay cheque to boot. And now Ginny couldn't be happier, or richer, as Ron so frequently liked to point out.

Thinking back to the Dark Flux outbreaks… Draco had said there were many more incidents than she thought. Exactly how did he know this? Was it worth cross-referencing Muggle news coverage with Daily Prophet reports over a period of time; possibly the last five years? It might be time-consuming, even for her fabled research skills. Still, it was worth a shot. Particularly if Ron could then cross-check Draco's claims with suspected cases. That might be a sure-fire way to catch Draco
She chewed the end of her quill thoughtfully, half-watching Padma battle a thick wad of case reports back into their relevant folder.

Dark Flux. Dark Flux. What else could she prove wrong?

Draco had claimed Dark Flux wasn't listed anymore as a Verifiable Imponderable. Now that she found very hard to believe. If it was off the list, that made it fair game for funded research from any quarter. Even if it could be rationalised and understood as a phenomenon, which was unlikely, surely Dark Flux would be far too dangerous a substance to actually work with? No Ministry official in their right mind would endorse such a move. She could check that one out pretty much straight away.

Another nail in Draco's coffin…

She was back to Draco himself. Considering his lesser importance in the scheme of things, her questions regarding him were much more extensive, which didn't feel right somehow. In fact, some of them just felt plain nosy.

For example, was it really relevant that Lucius Malfoy hadn't stepped out of Malfoy Manor for six years? It was intriguing, but it hardly reflected on Draco's character – unless of course he'd murdered him and squirreled his body under the floorboards – but one thing Hermione felt sure about when it came to Draco was that he was no killer. And even if he had killed his father, (which she knew he hadn't, he idolised the prig), that would hardly wreck his credibility in Ron's eyes. Ron possibly hated Lucius even more than he hated Draco.

Then there was the wife. Or wives. Both of whom appeared to have done a flit. Astoria’s running off with a Brazilian quidditch player, Feliu, had been a cause for hilarity some years ago. So much so, Hermione remembered Harry actually getting defensive of Draco… which had been a bizarre turn of events.

Hermione knew absolutely nothing about Draco's second wife, except for the fact that she was very absent, and according to Ron, had been so for a very long time. And of course, that glamorous Sylvestra creature was currently installed in Draco's house, which might explain a few things, but this was the sort of stuff Witch Weekly was made of. And she never read Witch Weekly or garbage like it. And really, when she thought about it, it had no bearing whatsoever on the case against Draco Malfoy that she was planning to compile for Ron.

On the contrary. Multiple wives and a live-in lover? Salacious scandal and bonhomie with his investigating officer? Not to mention he was part owner of a Quidditch team.

Ron would be on his way to Paraguay in no time. Still. She had to start somewhere.

Hermione looked over to Padma who did read Witch Weekly – under her desk when she thought nobody was looking – and wondered if she had time for a coffee.

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Trying to talk to Padma about anything beyond the pernicious Mr Jinks was proving something of an ordeal, Hermione realized.

The girl was obsessed. Or maybe possessed, judging by her hysterical tone and frantic arm waving whenever she recounted yet another outrageous demand on her time and patience. Hermione was at least thankful, for Padma's sake, that they were the only customers, huddled at a corner table in a
little Muggle coffee shop located close to the Ministry of Magic – far from any eavesdroppers.

She aimlessly stirred her tepid black coffee. Frankly, she was unable to dredge up the sort of blind hatred Padma clearly felt for Jinks. Yes, yes, she had the same memos piled high on her in-tray. And yes, this whole investigatory audit business was hugely irritating and more than a little perplexing. But really, Jinks was a toothless tiger. A busybody accountant. A bureaucratic rubber stamp.

This audit, Hermione now assumed, was all part of the Ministry's much-hailed 'New Brooms' campaign - effectively a shake-up and restructuring of each and every department - which had come into effect when Witchell had been instated as the new Minister for Magic in February that year. Despite her initial fears of a dastardly set-up, nothing truly terrifying or portentous had come of Mr Jinks’s rummage through her office for supposed ‘evidence’ of incompetence or nefarious dealings. And Hermione very much doubted it ever would. She knew she had nothing to hide.

They simply had to suffer Mr Jinks’s unwanted attentions and complaints just a little longer, Hermione felt, and then he'd move on.

She had much more pressing concerns to deal with now.

'Padma,' she interrupted sharply, 'I'm looking for some background information.'

Padma halted her tirade, blinking rapidly as though pulled unexpectedly from a deep trance.

'About Draco Malfoy,' Hermione said, keeping her voice as cool and steady as possible. She wanted this to sound professional.

Padma screwed up her nose in disgust, looking like she'd just discovered a dead fly floating in her coffee. 'That prick,' she snorted. 'What could you possibly want to know?'

Hermione cradled her coffee pensively. How should she approach this? She was used to being pretty blunt these days. But she didn't want anybody learning about Ron's nutty dealings with the guy, which made this awkward.

'I've – I've got a friend who's interested in working with him. For Herb Healing.'

Padma looked relieved. 'Phew. I thought you were going to say you had a friend who wanted to date him.'

'That would be a tad difficult, wouldn't it? He's married.'

'So, he says. Have you met his wife?'

'No… but Ron says he has.'

'When? Where?'

'He couldn't remember.'

'See?' Padma said smugly. 'Nobody ever does. A bit odd that, don't you think?'

'A little,' Hermione agreed. She signaled to the passing waitress for a top-up of her coffee. 'Maybe she's not particularly memorable?'

Padma snorted with loud laughter, surprising the young waitress who nearly dropped the hot, steaming coffee pot she was carrying to their table.
'You remember Astoria? Not exactly a shrinking violet.'

'Maybe his tastes have changed?'

'Hardly. There was a string of witches after Astoria. All identi-kit. Same blond hair. Same enhancements. Same loud, raucous personality. I used to work with one actually. At Arcana.'

Arcana. Now this was good, thought Hermione. A neat little segue from Malfoy's chequered love life to Padma's old boss. The mysterious Jeroboam.

'She used to talk non-stop about everyone and everything. Believe me, I knew more about Draco Malfoy than I ever wanted to know!' Padma continued. 'She hates him now of course.'

Hermione knew she should move the conversation directly to Jeroboam while she had the chance, but burning, or human curiosity as she liked to think of it, was getting the better of her.

'Why's that then?'

Padma looked puzzled. 'Why does she hate him? I can hardly believe you just asked me that.' She pondered a moment. 'There was another girl. A blond and beautiful American. Seemed good chums with the family. I met her at a work do.'

Sylvestra. It had to be. There had been a slight American twang to her voice. At a guess, though, she'd been schooled in Europe.

'This was still when you worked at Arcana?'

'Oh yes. About the time the Malfoys were finally declared bankrupt.'

'Bankrupt? Are you sure?' Hermione asked, incredulous. How had she missed that golden nugget of news?

Padma nodded. 'Absolutely. I hate to admit it, but Draco's done well to turn things around, so if your friend's thinking about a job at Herb Healing, they could do a lot worse in my opinion. Anyway, this girl's father became a big investor in the company, so I figured it was more a relationship of convenience than anything else... Or so I told poor Agatha. She was pretty cut up over it all.'

That sounded typically like Malfoy, Hermione thought. Thinking he was onto bigger, better things and not caring who he hurt to get there.

'Anyway, Agatha's moved on,' Padma grinned. 'She's now the gossip columnist at the Daily Prophet.'

'You mean, Agatha Thrussington?'

'The one and only. Bit of a faux pas that, from Draco, don't you think?'

Hermione laughed, all the while thinking: Arcana, Jeroboam, Arcana. She had to switch topics. Padma had already checked her watch twice since they sat down.

Luckily, Padma was a chatter-box.

'Mind you, I kind of miss all her silly tittle-tattle sometimes. Our office is so deadly serious, don't you think?'
'Do you miss working at Arcana then?' Hermione asked, a little miffed.

Padma grimaced. 'Not really. It had its moments and some decent people worked there. I was stuck doing admin for the lab's legal department, which wasn't too thrilling. All pretty standard stuff really: Contracts, patents, waivers. Tony *loves* it there. Says he has the best lab facilities in Europe. He's very proud of the work they do.'

'And what is that exactly? I forget-'

'Medi-Magic. Healing the sick and old. Saving the wizarding world… That sort of thing. It's all a bit too evangelical for my liking. Everyone's in awe of *Saint* Saul – that's Mr Jeroboam, who owns the company - even though we never got to meet the man! Personally, I'd rather have worked at Medi-World.'

'Why's that then?'

'Better pay, shorter working hours, less groveling. Jeroboam might be the great white hope of the wizarding world, but he pays his staff peanuts.'

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Not exactly a glowing endorsement of Jeroboam, Hermione thought as they walked back to the Ministry a little later than she had first anticipated. But by the same token, she didn't feel the man could be considered the next Dark Lord just because he was a bit stingy.

As for Draco? Sounded like a shifty little shit in the romance department, but that was hardly surprising. But to learn that the Malfoys had been bankrupt! No wonder Draco had been dirty dealing in Dark Magic artefacts. The family had been broke.

There were three messages waiting on Hermione's desk. The first was a big blow to her plan to undermine Draco's credibility.

In answer to her question concerning Dark Flux's status as a Verifiable Imponderable, the archivist at the Department of Mysteries had confirmed that, yes, it had been removed from the list. Exactly as Draco Malfoy had said.

There was no record of which official had permitted such a travesty and no sign either of a Wizengamot hearing to discuss the matter, which was most peculiar.

The second message came in the form of a 'Case Report' and was similarly troubling. Hermione had requested any *historical* data relating to Draco Malfoy - basically, case histories prior to any ongoing investigations. The resulting single parchment page listed a number of offences over many years, mainly minor infractions relating to missed court hearings and a persistent refusal to pay fines.

However, there were some offences that had been left blank. Completely blank. The date when Draco was charged was listed, but nothing more. Nothing incriminating. And the charge sheets themselves were missing, including Draco's latest so-called infringement six months ago, that he complained had incurred a hefty fine.

This must be the work of Draco's friends in high places.

However, it was the third message that proved most shocking of all for Hermione. It came from her immediate boss within the department, informing her in the tersest of tones, that she had been
summoned to a Ministry Tribunal, investigating her work practices, scheduled for Thursday next week.

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'I can't believe it! I just can't bloody believe it!' Hermione was screeching, slamming dinner plates on to the kitchen table with such force that they nearly jumped straight off again.

'That Jinks is a miserable, lying bastard! “Irregularities. Anomalies. Causes for Concern.” What the hell is he going on about?'

Ron shook his head. 'Doesn't make sense.'

'I could be sacked!'

'No, Hermione, that's not going to happen.'

'Or… or they might try to move me out of the Department. Out of Level Two. Maybe to Level Ten. Closer to the law courts in the bloody dungeons. Now wouldn't that be fitting?' she said a little hysterically. 'I think I'd shrivel up and die of embarrassment!'

'Come on, dear,' Ron said, wrapping his arms around her. 'You know you've done nothing wrong. It's probably just routine.'

Hermione pushed him away, a little more roughly than she had intended.

'Who the hell do they think I am? Some half-cocked twit who doesn't know what they're doing? I'm Hermione Granger, for fuck's sake!'

'Weasley, dear. You're Hermione Weasley,' Ron said, a strange look in his eye.

'I've worked so hard for that department! I've put my life and soul into that job. I've done more for Muggle-born rights in the last few years than anybody at the Ministry – and this is my reward! It's not fair!'

'Children,' Ron hissed, indicating Hugo, who was standing pale-faced and rather forlorn at the open kitchen door.

'Hugo asked timidly, his eyes round as saucers.

'Hermione tried to clear her mind. To take a deep breath and think.

'Nope. Can't picture it,' she sighed. 'Did you leave it at Granny's?'

Hugo shook his head mournfully,

'Can it wait? Mummy and Daddy are talking.'

Hugo bit his lip nervously, then shrugged resignedly before shuffling away to hunt for Elephant alone.

XXX

'I spotted Malfoy today at the Ministry,' Hermione said, pouring herself a glass of dry white wine. Finally, she was calm. Dinner had been eaten, Rose and Hugo were tucked up in bed and Ron was
reading the *Daily Prophet* at the kitchen table.

He didn't look up.

'He was talking to Tom Bennet. Works in Section B?' Hermione added.

Ron nodded. 'Yeah. Good guy.'

'Don't you think that's a bit odd though?'

'Tom's his chief investigating officer. They have *history*,' Ron explained.

'Well, here's a thing. That *history*'s been erased,' Hermione said in dramatic tones.

Ron continued reading.

Exasperated by his silence, Hermione tugged his newspaper out of reach, forcing him to look at her. 'I really think you should check out his case files, Ron. *Before* you go chasing off to Paraguay.'

'Bolivia, actually. Turns out it's a border town.'

'Well… wherever it is.'

'Look, Hermione,' Ron said, sighing heavily. 'I know all about Draco's record. More than you could imagine. I was his chief protection officer during the Angelotti trial in 2007. He was one of our key witnesses.'

'I didn't know that.'

'And why should you? That's my job. It's what I do… did.'

'And since then? Has his record been *blameless*?' Hermione asked with a sceptical sneer.

'Far from it. Like I've told you before, the prat can't keep out of trouble. His name's always attached, one way or another, to just about every Dark Magic deal that comes our way. Naturally, he denies most of it, but he's probably guilty as hell…'

'And this is the caliber of man you want to be working with? Come on, Ron, he's up to no good and trying to drag you down with him. Why can't you see it?'

Ron shook his head vehemently, tapping his nose in a knowing manner. 'I've got an instinct on this one, Hermione.'

'But why you, of all people? Why not Auror Bennet?'

'Tom's a different department. Dark wizards planning mass murder isn't his bag.'

'Nor is it yours.'

'YES IT IS!' Ron shouted, jumping up from the dinner table. 'You might not want to believe it, Hermione, but I am now a *Section A Auror*, like Harry.'

'Who I strongly suspect would be reporting Malfoy to his superiors.'

'No, he wouldn't. He'd be sticking close to the bastard to see exactly what he was up to.'

This gave Hermione momentary pause for thought. Did Ron know something she didn't?
'Look, Ron, it's simple. After all the things that were said and done at school–'

'School? Are you kidding me?' Ron exploded. 'That was bloody years ago. I can hardly remember school! A fair few things have happened since then, if you hadn't bloody noticed. Now leave this alone, Hermione. I know what I'm doing!'

Then, to Hermione's surprise, Ron marched out of the room, leaving her with that rare queasy feeling that she had just lost an argument with her husband.

This had been her last stand. She couldn't stop Ron, she knew that, and now she had no choice but to let it all happen.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"ERASE/REWIND" by THE CARDIGANS

&

“THE SYSTEM ONLY DREAMS IN TOTAL DARKNESS” by THE NATIONAL

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Le Bonheur

Chapter Summary

Life is unraveling fast for Hermione. A night out at 'Le Bonheur', the classiest restaurant in town, goes very wrong...

4. Le Bonheur

'Please, Mummy. Please wear the shiny gown. Please! Aunty Fleur bought it for you specially!' Rose begged, fingering the hem of a red silk gown hanging in Hermione's wardrobe.

Hermione struggled to control the scowl that threatened to cloud her features. She had already chosen her outfit for the evening: a decidedly more conservative, high-waisted sky-blue satin, which didn't cling to every curve in such a wildly suggestive manner. After all, even though the next few hours were supposed to be 'fun,' this was still, to all intents and purposes, a work do. The annual St Mungo's Charitable Association Dinner and Dance was an event where Ministry bigwigs and business professionals exchanged information, cut deals, and even greased palms, if the persistent rumours were to be believed. Most Ministry department heads and a number of highly influential wizards were set to attend.

As a major up-and-coming star – at least until that memo had landed on her desk yesterday afternoon - she was expected to attend. Expected to circulate, exchange pleasantries, maybe get a teensy bit tipsy, just enough to look like a well-balanced individual and not a crazy-eyed workaholic.

'Please, Mummy,' Rose persisted, continuing to caress the red silk gown.

'I don't think it's my style,' Hermione countered.

'But it was a present for Beltane.'

'I know, Rose, but this is not the right occasion.'

'Yes, it is,' Rose said petulantly, her bottom lip jutting out peevishly. 'You never look nice, not really nice. Aunty Fleur says so. Aunty Fleur says you don't make the best of yourself.'

'Does she, now?' Hermione fumed.

She had always considered Fleur's little interventions rather rude. Fleur was always goading Hermione to 'liven up,' to 'be more herself' and occasionally act on instinct rather than endless procrastination.

Her meddling sister-in-law was all too keen to spruce up Hermione's admittedly drab, workaday dress sense, too, and in this instance, she had insisted that vivid red automatically heightened a woman's sexual attractiveness. But, frankly, at this moment in time, Hermione felt so horribly burdened with worries that 'heightening' her sex appeal really was her last priority.

Dressed only in her underwear, she gazed irritably at her reflection in the long, ivory-framed mirror that graced the wall of her bedroom. 'Not bad,' remarked the mirror - a little cheekily, Hermione
thought.

But yes. It was true. 'Not bad for an old bird,' she repeated to herself in soft undertones. She studied her narrow, waspish waist, her flaring hips, and her strong, slim legs with mild approval.

She eyed the sleek scarlet robes dangling temptingly in the wardrobe. She even imagined a slight flutter of wind had rippled invitingly across the surface of its glossy fabric.

Maybe she could, just this once. Ron was coming with her, so it wouldn't look like she was on the pull or anything idiotic like that.

She smiled at her daughter, whose watchful honey-coloured eyes met her own.

Hermione donned the red robes then seated herself on a low stool at her dressing table, instantly aware that the hem raised a little too high, just grazing her thigh as she sat down.

Rose caressed a small velveteen latch on her mother's jewellery box. The lid sprang open. Rose squealed in delight, looping a string of pearls over her small, neat fingers, which she then passed to Hermione. She fastened the pearls around her neck, then coiled her hair into a chignon, fixing the knot in place with a delicate silver butterfly hairpin which her daughter had selected. She then wrapped a black lace stole over her exposed shoulders.

Hermione smiled inwardly. This was nice. One of those precious moments between mother and daughter that she hoped to remember and cherish.

Rose was so unlike Hugo. Whereas Hugo, with his tufty earth-brown hair and perpetually scuffed shoes, was graced with a bouncy, unruly temperament and a cheeky grin, Rose's wild, red hair belied a self-contained and secretive nature. She was soft-spoken, bookish and shy, and altogether a little too in awe of her mother. She was much more at ease with her father.

Rose watched her mother apply her mascara and then plucked a rich ruby-red lipstick from Hermione’s makeup bag. 'Like your dress!' she trilled.

Hermione regarded the lipstick regretfully. She’d bought it a few months ago on a whim, while shopping in Muggle London with her cousin, Gwen. It was much more vivid than her usual colour palette – not that she wore makeup very often and never at work. But she didn’t want to disappoint her daughter.

‘Thank you, Rose. It’s a perfect match.’

XXX

The St Mungo's Charitable Association Dinner and Dance was being held at Le Bonheur, a glamorous (and expensive) wizarding restaurant in London's West End.

The main salon was decorated in an ornate Belle Époque style, replete with exquisitely carved marble statues, lush velvet drapes and a vast, glittering chandelier hoisted high above a circular atrium. A plethora of round dining tables encircled the atrium, which opened onto a deep, recessed bay window and in front of this window was a long dais where the Ministry's chief dignitaries and St Mungo's senior executives and main benefactors were seated.

Hermione and Ron had been placed on a table that had been resplendently laid for dinner and positioned at some distance from the dais – a little too near to the Chamber Orchestra for Ron's liking.
'All that scratching and scraping,' he groaned, indicating the violins, 'they're going to give me a headache.' He'd been in a foul mood all evening.

'Just have a drink,' Hermione said, grabbing a flute of fizzing blue champagne from an enchanted, free-floating drinks tray which was passing by. Ron eagerly complied, draining the drink in a few short seconds.

As she'd hoped, the champagne was Exultante, meaning it had been pepped up with a hugely popular 'happiness' draught. Exultante was widely used at most public social occasions since the Second War against the Dark Lord. Ron was now beaming with delight, any vestiges of tired grumpiness instantly vanquished.

Hermione's relief was short-lived. A rotund, balding man joined their dinner table. Sporting a smarmy smile, he sidled next to Ron and Hermione, and with a tone of unctuous familiarity introduced himself to Ron as Mr Jinks.

'And Mrs Weasley,' he said a little nervously. 'What a pleasure to see you.'

'I wish I could say the same, Mr Jinks,' Hermione said in acid tones. 'But we both know that would be a lie.'

'I – I understand your feelings on this matter, Mrs Weasley,' he stammered. 'But you have to remember that I'm just doing my job. And I do happen to have some serious causes for concern, which do need airing… But this is not the time and place.'

'I don't see why not,' Hermione sneered, her hands suddenly itching to slap his flushed, flabby cheeks. 'The least you can do is give me an honest appraisal, face to face. Or are you too much of a snotty-nosed little coward?'

Mr Jinks was open-mouthed with embarrassment. 'There's no need for insults, Mrs Weasley,' Mr Jinks retorted, breathless with outrage. 'Rest assured, I'll be raising this… this ill-advised behaviour with your superiors.' Beads of sweat had erupted onto his forehead as he spoke, which he now wiped away with a dramatic flourish of his napkin.

'Hermione,' Ron whispered urgently, aiming to steer her away from any further confrontation before she attracted too much attention. 'Leave it alone.'

'I don't like my abilities being questioned unfairly, Ron,' she said, a fiery expression in her eyes that Ron knew all too well.

'Of course you don't, dear, but he's right. This isn't the time and place,' Ron said soothingly. 'Have it out at the hearing.'

Mr Jinks had already used this distraction to change tables and was now seated at the opposite end of the restaurant.

Hermione sniffed disdainfully and made a great show of studying the evening's menu although, inwardly, she was still seething.

She'd rationalised this Jinks business by now. She knew it was all rubbish, of course. An excuse to undermine her.

Privately, however, she was starting to seriously worry about exactly WHO she had offended and how. She even worried that she was being deliberately targeted as a high-profile scapegoat, due to her successful record pushing for equal opportunities in the workplace. In recent months, there had
been increasingly insistent calls, usually aired in the shrillest sections of the Daily Prophet’s letter page, for an end to 'positive discrimination' favouring Muggle-borns.

One memorably vehement article, Hermione recalled, claimed that excellent pure-blood candidates were being deliberately overlooked and even edged out of their jobs, so that the Ministry, in particular, could install Muggle-borns instead.

A flash of silver notepaper prominently sporting the Malfoy crest and which appeared to have been dropped onto her plate by an invisible owl, worsened her mood. She snatched it open, furious at Malfoy's temerity in communicating with her in public. She was even angrier when she read what the note said.

'I hope you wear something more suitable tomorrow night in Berlin. DM.'

Suitable? What a cheek. She was perfectly suitable. Okay, so her gown was a little shorter than what she normally wore, but compared to a large proportion of the witches currently crowded into this establishment, she was the model of polite decorum.

And how the hell did he know what she was wearing anyway?

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, subtly tugging at the hem on her gown so that it was stretched southwards as far as was materially possible. Her eyes feverishly scanned the restaurant, seeking out Draco's foppish silver hair and indolent smirk. Where was he? How dare he?

But he was nowhere to be seen.

'What's that?' Ron asked, nodding at the note now crumpled in her hand.

'Nothing important,' she muttered, screwing it into a tight ball and vanishing it with a sharp tap of her wand.

XXX

Dinner was a splendid six-course affair, but Hermione was wound so tightly that she could hardly swallow. Ron made the most of her disability, adding half her portions to his own.

The Jinks had been replaced by the Osgoods. Hillary Osgood was something senior in the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office and happily engaged Ron in long conversation.

Hermione had known his wife Melissa at Hogwarts and she now worked as a lawyer at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, although in a considerably junior capacity compared to Hermione. She had, however, recently been appointed chief counsel in a major property dispute, which seemed worth toasting with a particularly expensive bottle of Pink Exultante.

Melissa's conversation was stimulating and she seemed very pleasant, but in her current mood, Hermione had precious little interest really in talking to anyone, and was beginning to wish she had stayed at home.

After dinner, Ron had spent a good twenty minutes engaged in a bout of hearty mutual backslapping and Butterbeers with some of the Senior Aurors from his new department. But even he was now looking a little lost.

He rejoined her at the table.

'Tony Goldstein's here,' he said, nodding towards a slightly built, dark-haired man in a smart black
robe, standing alone at the bar. 'You can finally catch up with the guy.'

Tony looked to be scrolling through messages or text of some sort on what looked at this distance to be an enchanted parchment communication device. He didn't seem best pleased with what he read.

'I'm really not in the mood for all that rubbish tonight,' Hermione huffed. 'That's your territory from now on, Ron, and yours alone. If Padma was here -'

'Come on, Hermione, cheer up. You've got a face like a wet weekend. Look at the poor devil. Bit out on a limb over there, don't you think?'

'Alright,' Hermione said reluctantly, dragging Ron behind her. Best to be sociable.

Ron, however, had other ideas, slipping away to 'mingle' elsewhere, as he put it.

XXX

Twenty minutes of turgid social chitchat later and Tony Goldstein was fast proving himself to be the boring bastard Ron had originally trumped him up to be. Without Padma's cheery presence to smoothly manage their social interaction, conversation was stilted and slow.

Hermione was already onto her third Exultante.

'Padma was telling me how much you love your job,' she said brightly.

'Yeah. It's great.'

'Your lab… best lab in Europe, I hear!' she said, desperately trying to inject a note of enthusiasm into her voice.

Tony thought about this for a moment. 'Almost. Not quite as good as The Jeroboam Foundation in Geneva. Now I hear that's amazing.'

'Maybe you could work there one day?' Hermione asked. 'I've always thought it'd be great experience to work abroad for a while, get to see the world, don't you think?'

As she spoke she felt an almost tangible tug at her insides. God, she missed Harry so much. And, God, how she envied him.

There was a strange flicker of interest in Tony Goldstein's eye, which was quickly extinguished. 'I'm happy where I am,' he said with a nonchalant shrug.

'Sure,' Hermione said, nodding pleasantly, frantically scanning the room for somebody else to talk with instead.

She took a deeper sip of her Exultante and watched the restaurant manager swish his wand extravagantly, dipping the lighting and clearing a sizeable space in the atrium at the heart of the venue. The orchestra was replaced by a band, tooting and trilling in bursts as the musicians tuned up for their performance. Judging by the excitable gaggle of witches milling to the side of the atrium, dancing was soon to start.

Thinking about it, she could always use the dancing as a suitable excuse to wrap up this conversation. Or she could make her excuses to Tony and hide out in the bathroom? Or, she could say she needed to rescue Ron from making an absolutely arse of himself. Having an inappropriately
loud argument with an ex-Slytherin about the merits of Chudley Cannons manager Oliver Woods's new Beater system could only end badly.

The last excuse was true, of course, and Hermione was about to spring into action when she saw that Ron, face scarlet with outrage, was rapidly approaching, knocking into the dancers now thronging the dance-floor as he lumbered towards them.

How many drinks had he had this evening? Hermione thought wretchedly, her mood plummeting fast. Not just Exultantes, that was for sure.

'Slimy Slytherin pillock,' he snarled. 'Dared to suggest that Woods's new screw down system will decimate Chudley's score-rate ten-fold and that Woods won't last the season.'

He halted his rant the moment he saw Hermione's eyes had glazed over and turned to Tony Goldstein instead. 'Oh. It's you,' he mumbled, barely able to conceal his disappointment.

He turned to the bar for inspiration. 'Just getting a beer.'

If Tony had indeed noticed Ron's rudeness, he chose not to show it.

'Sorry about cancelling our appointment,' Tony said suddenly. In the midst of events, Hermione had clean forgotten about it.

'That's okay. Don't worry about it.' She smiled warmly.

'Yeah. Things got kind of hectic at work.'

Hermione's ears pricked up at this point. She knew it probably wasn't true, but hadn't Draco and Ron inferred that Tony and his cohorts at Arcana might have been particularly busy because of the Dark Flux manifestation in Paraguay?

Or Bolivia, as it now turned out.

'Anything… exciting?'

'Yeah. The company got sold.'

'Sold?'

Tony clicked his fingers at a tray of gleaming blue Exultantes wafting past them at a fair lick. He snagged a glass for himself and Hermione.

'Yeah. This Yank chap, Ephraim Golowitz, bought the lot. Lock, stock and barrel.'

'Was that very sudden?' Hermione asked, beginning to wish she read the business pages in the Daily Prophet. This was the only explanation she could think of for missing out on the incredible news that the Malfoys had ever been bankrupt. That, and her almost visceral allergy to the name whenever she saw it in print, of course.

'Yeah. Kind of out of the blue, actually,' Tony said. 'Saul… that's Mr Jeroboam… He's been the big boss at Arcana since I started there straight after Hogwarts. Well, he decided to move all his business interests out of the UK. He owns a major company in Switzerland. RedStar? You might have heard of it.'

Hermione hadn't, but privately decided it might be worth looking into. Ron, Draco, and Dark Flux aside, this mysterious magnate was increasingly piquing her own interest.
'What was so wrong with the UK?' Hermione asked. She took a long, deep sip of her Exultante.

Tony shrugged. 'Never said.'

'What's he like?'

'He's super-super-clever. A brilliant wizard. But not particularly personable…I’ve heard he’s bit of a cold fish.'

'Really?'

'The new guy, Golowitz, heads up Gilgad Inc, which is huge and has stacks of money. He's promised me unlimited funding for my work on Gimlott's Disease,' Tony grinned.

'Sounds great,' Hermione said, beckoning one of the enchanted drinks trays with a cursory snap of her fingers. One more Exultante couldn't hurt, she thought. It had been a tough week.

Ron had returned from the bar clutching a large tumbler of Firewhisky. So much for sticking to beer, Hermione thought wearily. He'd have a sore head in the morning.

'Still hate Quidditch, then?' Ron barked at Tony.

'Not my thing,' Tony sniffed. 'Mind you, a few years back, I came across some really intriguing statistical research that showed how a high percentage of Seekers happened to be Epsilon blood-types – which was kind of interesting seeing as Epsilon pure-bloods, and in particular Epsilon half-bloods, are the least common blood group variety in the wizarding world.'

'Really?' said Ron, rooted to the spot in surprise. 'That's fascinating.' Then, with even greater emphasis after feeling the full force of one of Hermione's death-stares, 'No, really, that is fascinating.'

'Sounds a bit suspect to me,' Hermione muttered, pursing her lips tightly. If this was one of Jeroboam's research projects at Arcana, maybe she should be a little more suspicious after all?

'But I'm Epsilon,' Ron said, obviously feeling peeved to have missed out on the greater celebrity status usually afforded a team's Seeker.

Oh, no. Wounded ego, Hermione thought contemptuously.

'Your siblings, Ginny and Charlie, both Seekers,' Tony pointed out helpfully. 'And the Diggorys have a well-known Epsilon bloodline. The Malfoys, of course, and the Blacks. Even Cho Chang… But then, the most talented pure-blood wizards of Asian descent are more often Epsilon than Alpha or Beta, aren't they?'

Ron shrugged. 'No idea.'

'Then there's the true greats like Viktor Krum and Josep Wronski, both famously of Epsilon heritage.'

'What about Harry? Harry Potter?' Ron asked.

'Half-blood. So probably a rare Epsilon+,' Tony mused. 'Can he perform wandless magic?'

'I can perform wandless magic,' Hermione interjected, quietly seething at this ridiculous, racist conversation that her own husband was so happily contributing to. 'And I'm only a paltry little Gamma.'
Indeed, as expected, this had been confirmed by her blood tests at St Mungo's.

'Hmmm… there's remarkably few Muggle-born Seekers, it must be said,' Tony said, oblivious to her sarcasm.

Hermione could feel hot anger bubbling up inside of her. So much so that the burble of voices and muddle of bodies bustling excitedly onto the dance floor as the band upped its tempo and volume with a brash, jazzy number, seemed to fade out.

Or, at least, she wished it would. Sometimes she **hated** this place, this wizarding world, with its stupid, archaic notions. No, Hermione thought, she couldn't let this one go.

'Has it not occurred to you both, that Muggle-borns are less likely to be picked as Seekers because of the ingrained prejudices of their Quidditch teachers and team selectors? Pure-bloods are **expected** to be more proficient, so there is a natural bias.'

Ron visibly flinched. He knew from bitter experience where this might be headed. Tony Goldstein, however, remained impassive, even curious.

'This research you're peddling, Tony,' Hermione continued, 'seems to ignore any sociological factors and their implications. It panders to nonsensical, bigoted notions that Epsilon blood-types make better wizards.'

'That's not what he's saying, Hermione,' Ron sighed, rolling his eyes in Tony's direction in a show of solidarity. 'You don't need better *magic* to be a Seeker; just better reflexes, better flying skills. But seeing as you know absolutely fuck-all about Quidditch, you wouldn't know that, would you?'

'There's no need to be so rude, Ronald Weasley,' Hermione hissed, taking a deep swig of Exultante; Exultante that suddenly didn't seem to be working. She was feeling heady and loose, but without the happy, buzzy little vibe that usually came with it.

'And there's no need to keep seeing prejudice where none is intended,' Ron countered, his face flushed with irritation. 'You always do it, Hermione, and it's beginning to really wind me up.'

'In the spirit of academic fairness,' Tony said diplomatically, 'Muggle-borns might well be at a disadvantage when it comes to Quidditch because of less practiced flying skills. Pure-blood wizards have the advantage of being reared on broomsticks from an early age.'

'And does this research you quote so authoritatively happen to mention this little fact? It does seem rather relevant, doesn't it?' Hermione said, prickling with irritation.

'As it happens, sociological factors *were* excluded… and yeah, on reflection, that's kind of an oversight,' Tony said. 'Just to say, though, this research was part of an ongoing haematology project at Arcana. The objective at that time was *not* to allocate specific characteristics to different blood-types.'

'What was it for then?' Hermione asked, uncomfortably aware that a shrill tone had crept into her voice and that fellow diners, who were now queuing for drinks at the bar, were being drawn into their conversation.

Ron was clearly very conscious of this fact and had casually draped an arm around his wife's shoulders. 'Hey, Tony, fancy a *proper* drink?' he said with forced jollity, nodding at Tony's empty champagne flute. 'And you too, honey. How about another Exultante?'

'Get off me,' Hermione said, squirming free of his grasp.
She stumbled backwards, her limbs suddenly feeling cold and jellied and collided with someone standing close behind her.

_Something_ wasn't right, she thought, her heart racing wildly.

'Dear me, Mrs Weasley. Had a few too many this evening, have we?' came a familiar, sardonic drawl.

Well, now she _knew_ something wasn't right. She had to pull herself together, and fast.

'Shut up, Malfoy!' Hermione snarled, spinning round unsteadily on her heel to face him. He was sporting his trademark smirk and looking pretty dapper and self-satisfied with himself in a sprucely-tailored, charcoal-grey gown. 'What do _you_ want?'

Draco feigned a hurt expression, although his eyes were twinkling with merriment. 'I'm here on a philanthropic mission, if you must know. You looked such a glum bunch that I thought some Cheering Charms might be in order.'

'We don't need cheering up,' Ron said. 'We were having a healthy discussion, that's all.'

Draco had switched his attention to Tony Goldstein who was shuffling uncomfortably, toying with his empty champagne flute.

'You look like a man in need of a drink,' he said firmly, signaling to the barman with one hand.

'No need. I was just getting the drinks in,' Ron said. 'Wasn't I, Tony?' he shouted, having to raise his voice a little to be heard over the music, which had suddenly cranked up in volume.

Tony nodded sheepishly, flicking his eyes nervously between Ron and Draco.

'Do what you like, Weasley,' Draco grinned, grabbing an Exultante from a floating tray.

'I'm getting a headache,' Hermione surreptitiously mouthed to her husband. And it was true. There was a sharp, insistent pain drumming at her temples.

Draco was clearly an adept lip-reader. 'Surely you're not leaving us already, Mrs Weasley? The party's just getting started.'

'I'm sure you'll survive without me.' Hermione turned to her husband. 'Ron?'

Ron had a pained expression on his face. 'But I've just ordered more drinks.'

'Oh, come on,' Draco grinned. 'Don't ruin the poor man's fun.'

'Just go away, Malfoy! Nobody wants you here,' she retorted, furiously snatching a fresh Exultante for herself from the drinks tray, which was still hovering close by expectantly.

'I was just thinking,' Draco said, studiously ignoring her outburst, his eyes on the dance floor. 'I don't think I've seen you dance since Hogwarts.'

Not only was the music louder, but the lights had dipped. Constantly curling whorls of multi-coloured lights swished and whirled high above the dancers, moving in rhythm to the band's pulsating beat.

'Don't hold your breath,' Hermione said brusquely, taking a large gulp of her Exultante. 'It's not my thing.'
'I can believe that,' Draco muttered under his breath.

'It's not that I can't dance,' Hermione said pointedly, rounding on Draco melodramatically. Draco instinctively stepped back.

'I'm just not in the mood.'

Oh, Merlin. Why was she even justifying herself?

'I must say, Mrs Weasley, that's a very short dress you're wearing this evening,' Draco said abruptly, overtly eyeing her up and down in a deliberately aggravating manner.

Hermione recoiled in disgust. 'How old are you? Twelve?' Darn it. She really was beginning to feel pretty bloody peculiar. Strangely hazy, as though a warm fuzz was creeping slowly through her body.

She could feel herself swaying and, for a moment, she felt overcome by a swooping sensation, like vertigo….

She planted a hand firmly on Draco's arm to steady herself, gulping for air.

'I'm just pointing out that you don't normally wear such revealing clothes,' he explained chirpily, his cool, grey eyes quietly appraising her. 'Doesn't mean I like what I see.'

'Shut up, Malfoy,' she snapped, instantly snatching her hand away from his arm, as if stung.

For the second time that evening, she was seriously tempted by violent outburst. Her fists were smarting to pummel the sneer off his face, to strangle him with that bloody silver rose chain dangling around his neck.

It must have shown in her face, or maybe she lurched a little aggressively towards him, because a glint of fear, even contrition, shaded his features.

'Okay,' he conceded. 'You look… nice. Alright?'

'I don't care what you think, Malfoy, and I never will,' Hermione countered, her eyes blazing with white-hot rage. Her head was drumming, throbbing. It felt like a burning hot band was being wrapped tightly around her forehead.

'So why are you so angry?'

'Look. Leave me alone, will you? Why you talking to me anyway?'

Does he know about my Tribunal? she wondered, suddenly bristling with suspicion. It would be just like him, to want to gloat over her misfortunes.

Another wave of hot wooziness swirled through her with such force that she tottered backwards, instantly alarming Tony Goldstein, who dashed to her assistance. But she elbowed him aside, falling against Draco instead.

Draco eased her into a vertical position, then slid his arm around her waist to keep her upright. She lolled heavily against him.

'I fucking hate you so much,' she snarled, her face so close to his, she was half-tempted to bite a chunk out of his cheek. 'If you get my husband killed on this fucking stupid little adventure of yours, I'll hex your fucking balls off.'
There was a sickly feeling rising within her from the pit of her stomach. This was all wrong. This shouldn't be happening. But she seemed powerless to prevent it, almost like the real, sane Hermione had been locked deep inside of her.

'You're really not a fun drunk, Mrs Weasley,' Draco said. His mouth was so close; she could feel his breath on her face, ticklish and warm.

Yet another swirl of intoxication spiralled through her like a spinning top. She felt nauseous and a little clammy.

'I think… think someone spiked me… spiked my Exultante,' she stammered, her legs buckling a little. She scrambled back into a standing position and held tightly onto Draco's robe with tight, screwed-up fists. Everything was beginning to fade a little at the edges. Hermione tried to tell them that she needed to get out of there, but this wasn't translating into words.

'You're paranoid, you know that?' Draco said in quiet, low tones.

'So are you,' she retorted, tipping forwards and leaning her forehead on his shoulder.

'You're not going to be sick are you?' Draco asked, an undeniable frisson of alarm in his voice.

Hermione stared at his highly polished leather boots and, for a moment, thought it would be a wonderfully hilarious thing to do. She closed her eyes, allowing a thick swirl of bright white to momentarily envelop her.

'Let's sit you down,' Draco murmured hastily. 'Weasley!' he shouted in the direction of the bar, but it was Tony Goldstein who stepped forward instead.

'Where's that fuckhead Weasley got to?' she heard Draco ask Tony in low, urgent tones.

Fuckhead. She liked that. Hermione burst into a fit of uncontrollable giggles, which she promptly smothered into somebody's shoulder, though she wasn't sure whose. She was now sitting down, although she wasn't sure how she had got there.

It was dawning on her fast, through the mist of dizzying confusion, that she had to get home - home to her children. She had to get away from this place, away from prying eyes.

She hoped she looked normal. She really, really hoped she looked normal.

'Do I look normal?' she whispered, to the person next to her.

'Honest answer?'

Shit. It was Draco. How humiliating. Bet he's loving this, she thought miserably.

She prised her eyes open, which was much more difficult than she could have ever imagined. She was in a shadowy corner, that much she could make out… and the lights were low. That was good. Very good.

A shadowy figure standing before her offered her a glass of cold water, which she gulped back greedily.

It was Tony, she realized.

'Thanks, Tony. You know something… I thought, I thought you were really boring… but actually… you're kind of nice.'
Beside her, Draco was snorting with laughter.

'I like you very much,' she said, in a singsong voice she hardly recognised as her own.

What the hell was this? A mutated form of Veritaserum? Why would someone do this to her? She then turned to Draco, fired with fury by his mocking laughter, and grabbed him by the lapels on his robe so that his head was bent close to her own. 'But you… I don't like you at all,' she growled.

'I think we know that already.'

'You think you can do anything you like. You think you can get away with it. All these things you've done… You're… you're a prat, and you can steal, and cheat, and torture Muggles, and whatever fucking horrible stuff you want to… and… and… nothing. Nothing at all! Like you don't exist. Like a ghost… nothing. Your records. Blank. Like nothing ever happened…'

'Tony? Do you want to go get Weasley? I think this one's had enough tonight.' There was a silence. 'Run along, now. I won't eat her,' Draco said in fierce, wolfish tones.

Hermione heaved a huge sigh and collapsed against Draco, her head bouncing against his chest. 'And now you're going to kill my husband.'

His laugh seemed deeper, more rumbling than usual, but she realised that was because her ear was pressed to his chest. 'You are so going to regret this tomorrow,' he chuckled.

'You'd like that, wouldn't you?'

His chest rumbled with laughter again. 'If you say so.'

'I'm going to lose my job next week,' she groaned. 'And I love my job.'

'Don't be silly. You're just pissed.'

'No, it's true. Got a Tribunal hearing… in the dungeon.'

'What for?'

'… Irreg… irreg-ul-ar-it-ies.' She pulled a face, vaguely making out Draco's silver hair in the shadows next to her. 'But it's not fair. I work so hard. All the fucking time. I hardly see my own fucking children… and now, all gone. All for nothing. And you know what? Sometimes, sometimes, I just want to be a Muggle again. A nice, normal Muggle. Back in the real world… but you wouldn't know anything about that. You and your kind.'

'Hermione…'

'No. Don't shut me up. Don't even try… Because I want you to know, Draco. Want you to know that we – the dirty little Mudbloods you so love to hate – we get a second chance. Which is fucking great… another world, another life… but you… you have to live here forever, trapped behind your spells and your wards and your glamours… pretending you don't exist… with all your stupid little prejudices that mean jack-shit… so sometimes…' She paused, touching his face, checking she wasn't alone, ranting into the darkness. 'Sometimes… I just want to go home.'

'Have you told Ron this?'

'Please. Please don't tell Ron.'

'Don't tell Ron what?' came Ron's booming voice.
Draco instantly stood up, leaving Hermione to slide slowly sideways, crumpling downwards, until warm hands – that she knew to be Ron's – saved her from cracking her head on the chair beside her.

'What you gone and done to her, you jerk?' Ron said gruffly. 'I've never seen her like this, ever. Tony, give us a hand will you, mate?'

Hermione felt two strong pairs of arms hoist her from her seat. She nestled lazily against Ron, who roughly pushed past Draco in his eagerness to get them away. Hermione could distantly hear Draco calling after them.

'Hey, Mrs Weasley! I hope you behave better tomorrow night!' she heard, but his voice was quickly swallowed up by the clatter and bang of the band as the percussion burst loudly into life.

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CHAPTER TRACKS:

"LONELINESS" by TOMCRAFT

&

“THIS PARTY FEARS TWO” by THE ASSOCIATES

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Hermione's night out in Berlin with Narcissa Malfoy takes an unexpected turn for the worse. Hermione finds she is being drawn deeper into the world of Draco Malfoy... which is the very last place she wants to be.

5. Of Passion and Pathos

Hermione lay in bed, gazing up at the ceiling and replaying her scant memories of the evening before over and over again.

She could hardly believe she'd got so drunk. It had never happened to her before. Sure, she'd got tiddly now and then, high days and holy days. But paralytic? Never.

And, judging by her pounding headache and dry, parched throat, she vowed never again. She was too old for this.

Ron breezed into the room, carrying a tray piled high with warm buttered toast, a cup of hot tea, and best of all, a glass of Ginny's famous homemade Hangover Draught.

'Thought you needed a bit of pepping up,' Ron said cheerfully. He placed the tray on Hermione's bedside table and swung open the curtains, allowing a bright shaft of winter sunshine to flood the bedroom.

Hermione groaned loudly, crawling under the bedclothes and burying her face into the pillow.

'Sorry, love,' Ron muttered, rapidly closing the curtains again, plunging them back into grey gloom.

'Just wait until I've drunk this,' Hermione croaked, reaching out for Ginny's draught. It was cool, minty and hugely refreshing. She gulped it back greedily. It wasn't a cure-all, but it helped.

'I hope I haven't made too much of a fool of myself, Ron.'

'Don't be silly,' he said tenderly. He gingerly sat on the bed next to her and stroked her forehead.

'You wouldn't lie to me, would you?' Hermione asked tremulously, for what must have been the hundredth time that morning.

Ron assured her, yet again, that she'd done nothing more than get a tiny bit argumentative with Tony Goldstein – which she remembered anyway – and was a little sleepier and less surefooted than normal.

'You were tucked away in a corner. Nobody could see you.' At this point, despite his outwardly sunny disposition, she was sure his lips seemed to tighten a little with some remembered irritation. Something he was keeping to himself. And why did she feel almost... guilty? She knew she hadn't done anything wrong, not really, really wrong; but there was still that nagging feeling.
The scary truth was that after a certain point in the evening she could remember just two things: Tony Goldstein had brought her a glass of water, and her head had rested on somebody's chest, which she presumed was Ron's - it had to be Ron's, except… it wasn't Ron. She could sense that. And this same person was laughing. A deep, rumbling laugh.

'Ron,' she asked in quavering tones, 'was Malfoy there?'

Ron nodded. 'Just being a prat as always, love. Don't worry about it.'

'Someone might have spiked my drink last night,' Hermione blurted. 'I think it was him.'

Draco was the obvious contender. He hated her enough to want her to make a fool of herself in public.

Ron burst out laughing. 'Sweetheart, you got drunk! That's all. And you were already well-pissed by the time Draco showed up.'

'But I only drank Exultante,' Hermione whined. 'A bit more than usual perhaps, but then I've been so wound up over this Tribunal business.'

'I know, I know,' Ron soothed. 'No harm done.'

How could he be so sure? She thought grimly.

'You're paranoid, you know that?' Ron murmured.

Hermione's heart beat a little faster. Last night, somebody else had said that. Those exact same words.

*Draco* had said that, she felt certain. She could even hear his voice – unusually low and soft-spoken, which was strangely disturbing in itself – resounding through her head. The sensation was so unpleasant that her stomach lurched horribly, threatening to eject Ginny's Hangover Draught even before it had worked its magic.

But Ron was right. She had to put this in perspective. She had definitely been feeling a little peculiar while she was talking with Tony Goldstein, which meant if her drink *was* spiked, logically, it had to have happened earlier in the evening.

Could Tony have done it? He had certainly procured an Exultante or two for her. Might he have slipped something into her glass when she wasn't looking? Except, he was Padma's boyfriend. Nice, harmless.

Then there was Melissa Osgood's Pink Exultante. Her father was an apothecary so she might well have the expertise… but the opportunity? The motive? It didn't seem probable.

Or might it have been something altogether different? An enchantment of some kind? Something she wore? There was her red dress, of course, which she had worn for the first time. But as that had been a present from her sister-in-law, it was hardly likely to be jinxed.

Hugo bounded into their bedroom and jumped on her bed, instantly dispelling any further rumination. She spent the next twenty minutes tickling him until he couldn't breathe for laughing, all the while desperately trying not to throw up. Ron eventually bustled him away to finish getting dressed for school, claiming that Hermione had gone a strange hue of sickly green.

'T'll owl your office if you like. Tell them you've gone down with something,' he said helpfully.
'Get some sleep, love. You'll need energy for this evening.'

This evening? What was happening this evening? she wondered blearily. Oh no. Blasted Narcissa Malfoy and the Berlin Phil. That was what was happening this evening.

Hermione sighed in exasperation and snuggled deep into her bed, piling a pillow on top of her head to shut out the world.

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If it had been the son, a rude rebuttal would have been easy enough. But she couldn't do that to the mother. She'd been brought up to respect her elders.

So here she was in Berlin, freshly nauseous from a decidedly juddery Portkey experience, and squeezed a little too tightly into a jade green mandarin dress that her mother had passed onto her, insisting that she, of all people, could 'carry it off.' Hermione was having serious second thoughts about her mother's good judgment. She genuinely feared that her ribs might cave in, accidentally spearing her lungs.

Still, she had to admit that the rather zany, modernist design of the Berlin Philharmonie - the concert hall where the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra regularly played - was spectacular, even if it reminded her a little of a half-eaten, yellow-tiled piecrust, or perhaps a misshapen crown. The auditorium itself was a vast yet orderly space, famous for its acoustics, and to her surprise, was populated entirely by witches and wizards in full-gowned regalia. Indeed, Hermione was probably the only audience member in what looked like Muggle dress.

Possibly to her credit, Hermione thought, Narcissa Malfoy showed no embarrassment in venturing out to what was clearly a prestigious wizarding event with what looked like a 'Muggle.' Indeed, Narcissa had seemed perfectly sincere in her compliments, calling Hermione's dress 'exquisite' and praising Hermione's 'neat little figure'.

This had been the first surprise of the evening and a fairly pleasant one at that.

The same could not be said for the second.

'I'm only staying for the Wagner,' Narcissa informed her the moment they had settled themselves into their rather plush aisle seats, located about ten rows back from the stage where the orchestra was currently tuning up. It's that obnoxious little man Beethoven after the interval. His third. The Eroica. Do you know it?'

'I've heard it,' Hermione said, wondering why she had bothered coming at all.

'I simply can't stand all those swirling circles he likes to paint with his orchestras… up and down, round and round… it's positively exhausting. Makes me feel horribly queasy,' Narcissa explained. 'Still. At least the Prelude to the Lohengrin will be nice enough, although the Tannhauser's a bit too bombastic for my liking. I much prefer Tristan and Isolde, don't you?'

Hermione really didn't know what to say.

Narcissa seemed to take her slack-jawed silence as concern for her well-being.

'Don't concern yourself, Mrs Weasley. I'll be absolutely fine. I've already spoken with Dorothy Nott and we'll be going home together. Theo's wife Honoria had twins last week – a very difficult birth, apparently - so we'll have lots of news to catch up on.'
Hermione was about to ask if she should accompany them, but then the lights dwindled and an expectant silence fell on the darkened auditorium. Hermione's eyes were drawn to the stage where the orchestra looked set to play.

'Of course, I won't be leaving you alone,' came Narcissa's voice, pressed close to her left ear. 'Draco's arriving in the interval.'

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Any enjoyment Hermione might have ever had from the 'Wagner' had been totally quashed by this news. By the time the Tannhauser Overture had completed its never-ending cycle of climbing scales and brassy crescendos, her nerves were jangling.

'Oh dear,' Narcissa sighed, fanning herself with her concert programme. 'He completely lost control of the brass section, didn't he? What a mess.'

'Who did?'

'The conductor, of course! Oh look, there's Draco,' Narcissa said, waving her programme in the air to attract his attention.

Draco was standing by the stage, scanning the audience, and to Hermione's surprise, was wearing a dark three-piece suit. She hated to admit it, but the Muggle look really suited him.

No wonder his mother hadn't been phased by her appearance.

'I hope he's not tired himself out,' Narcissa sighed. 'He's come straight from work.'

He had spotted them and was striding up the stairs in their direction.

He did look terribly tired, Hermione thought uncharitably. Not that she cared. She had the distinct impression that Draco's presence last night had exacerbated her strange behaviour. Even if he hadn't actually drugged her, she felt sure his vitriolic manner had driven her to greater excess than she was accustomed to.

Draco raised his eyebrows in vague greeting, which she acknowledged with a chilly smile.

'Evening, Mother,' Draco said. Hermione instinctively recoiled as he leaned across her, planting a kiss on Narcissa's cheek.

'How was the meeting in Dresden, darling? You look worn out,' Narcissa cooed, briefly caressing her son's cheek.

'A little longer than the meeting in Prague.'

'Oh dear. And the meeting with Ephraim this morning, too?'

'He's decided to come along as well. Said he would pay his respects to you.'

'Narcissa!' came an avuncular American voice from the aisle. 'How lovely to see you.'

Hermione wondered if this was the same 'Ephraim' Golowitz, Tony had referred to last night. The same 'super-rich' guy who had bought Arcana. Tony Goldstein had praised him to the hilt, and Hermione had to admit he was a pleasing-looking man. Like Draco, he too was wearing a Muggle suit; beautifully cut, with a deep crimson silk tie. She guessed he was mid to late fifties. Tall and well-built with craggy, handsome features and an earthy charm.
Narcissa appeared to think so, too, Hermione thought. Her eyes were twinkling and her cheeks were aflame. 'I hope you haven't been working my poor boy too hard, Ephraim!' she chortled.

Draco shifted position, enabling Ephraim to assist Narcissa from her seat. 'Word of warning, there's a pretty nasty squall brewing out there,' Ephraim said, draping Narcissa's thick purple velvet cape around her shoulders.

'It's been such a pleasure, Hermione. I can call you Hermione, can't I?' Narcissa gushed. 'Do come for tea next week, my dear. I'm sure Sylvestra would love to see you.'

'Ah! You know my little girl, do you?' Ephraim said gleefully. He now turned his full attention to Hermione. She couldn't help but feel a little mousy and shrunken in his presence, so much so that she wondered if he had covertly cast an inferiority spell of some kind, but swiftly realized it was the effect of his penetrating, blue-eyed stare.

Ephraim eagerly grasped Hermione's hand in greeting. He had large, smooth hands, pleasantly warm to the touch, sporting a giant ruby ring the size of a small walnut.

'We - we met a few days ago,' Hermione said, a little too timidly she feared.

'Sylvestra is very impressed with Hermione,' Narcissa said kindly.

Hermione blushed deeply. She really had no desire to mean anything at all to these people, let alone impress them. Her displeasure was further piqued by a keen awareness that Draco was listening intently to this exchange, a sly, mocking smile on his face.

'It's been very nice to meet you,' Ephraim said cordially. 'I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name?'

'Hermione. Hermione Weasley.'

A brief flash of recognition sparkled in his eyes, which then darkened with interest, but he was quick to collect himself.

'It's a great pleasure to meet you, Mrs Weasley,' he said. 'Now if you'll just excuse me, I need to escort Mrs Malfoy to the Portkey station.'

He patted Draco on the shoulder in a friendly, familial manner and led Narcissa towards the exit.

Hermione sighed inwardly, realizing her night was about to get a whole lot worse.

'You don't have to sit with me, Malfoy,' she said wearily. 'In fact, I'd really rather you didn't.'

'That's remarkably uncivil of you, Mrs Weasley,' Draco said, barging past her knees and landing heavily on Narcissa's freshly vacated seat beside her. 'I really don't understand what my mother sees in you.'

'She doesn't need to be so nice,' Hermione said frostily.

'No, she doesn't,' Draco mumbled, picking up the concert programme his mother had left on her seat. 'Maybe she's trying to make amends.'

'Amends?' Hermione asked, a little stunned. He could only be referring to what had happened all those years ago at Malfoy Manor. After all, it had been Narcissa's own sister, Bellatrix, who had tortured her.

'Yes. You heard me,' Draco said irritably. 'It's very stuffy in here, isn't it?' He stripped off his
jacket, folding it neatly onto his knees, and loosened the top button of his shirt.

Draco seemingly hadn't noticed her perturbation and was now flicking casually through the programme, acting like he had said nothing out of the ordinary.

How could he say something like that, something so hugely meaningful for her, and then… nothing? What was he? A sociopath?

Hermione stared fixedly ahead, watching the audience gradually filtering in to the auditorium, returning to their seats. There was a gradual hum and bustle about the place, punctuated by the occasional shrill burst of laughter.

On the plus side, she supposed, he hadn't made any cutting remarks about her behaviour last night, which was surprising to say the least.

Yet she soon found Draco's stony silence gnawing away at her.

'Is that something your mother has told you?' Hermione asked archly. 'That she wanted to make amends?'

'Not in so many words, no,' Draco said. He continued to browse through the programme, not even bothering to look up.

'So that's your take on it?'

Draco sighed. 'I wish I hadn't said it now.'

They returned to weighty silence. A silence that grew ever more disconcerting as each minute passed, because it now occurred to Hermione that, rather than being a source of comfort, Draco's notable silence on the subject of last night was possibly most disconcerting of all.

He would never normally have passed up a major opportunity to take the piss out of her. So why now?

She had to say something, if only to dispel any idea in her own mind, that there may have been a moment last night, of what she hesitated to call intimacy pass between them. Something so alien and unwanted, that it made her feel sick just thinking about it.

The problem was, she had a strange, buried sense deep within her, that somehow this had been the case. She just didn't know how or why. Truth be told, she couldn't bloody remember, that was half the problem in a nutshell.

Hermione decided attack was her best tactic in this situation. She needed to break the deadlock. To move their relationship – if that's what mutual loathing could be called – back onto an even keel.

'Was it you who spiked my Exultante last night?' she asked in accusing tones.

'Don't be pathetic,' he drawled. 'Babysitting you when you're drunk isn't my idea of fun you know.' He gave her a swift sidelong glance. 'I'm amazed you made it here in one piece, actually.'

'I nearly didn't.'

'You wouldn't have been missed.'

She was desperately trying to conjure a pithy, witty retort when Draco suddenly declared, 'I really don't know why my mother wanted to come to this concert anyway. She hates Beethoven.'
'Yes, I know,' Hermione replied, relieved that the conversation had shifted so quickly to neutral ground. The strange awkwardness between them had dissipated. This was a good sign. Maybe he'd seen no reason to taunt her about last night because nothing had actually happened.

'I think the *Eroica* is a bit too martial for her liking. Too intense,' he continued. 'She prefers music with a lighter touch. More feminine.'

'What's that then? Thrumming harps and choirboys? Little dicky birds tweeting in meadows?'

Draco looked at her askance, his brow furrowed quizzically.

'Maybe it's all that 'Passion and Pathos'? Hermione murmured, referring with deliberate irony to the title of the concert programme, which described the *Eroica* using these same words. 'It's all a bit misleading really. Sounds like a love story, rather than a homage to a trumped-up, pint-sized dictator.'

'Passion and pathos. Is that really your idea of a love story?' Draco cackled. 'There must be more to Ron than I thought.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Hermione asked tetchily, instantly craving the stilted silence she herself had broke.

'Just that I wouldn't have put you and Ron in the 'Passion and Pathos' category myself.' Draco smirked, his cool, grey eyes dancing with amusement.

'And why's that then? Actually, no. Don't answer that. I don't want to know what you think,' Hermione said, grabbing the programme from Draco and furiously thumbing through the pages.

'Whoa there, you've just skipped all the interesting stuff about Napoleon!' Draco said. 'I was still reading that.'

Hermione impatiently thrust the programme back at him. 'I forget. This is probably very educational for you. I bet you don't even know who Napoleon is!'

'Of course I know who Napoleon is! What do you take me for? An imbecile?' Draco scoffed. 'I have an ancestor who served in Napoleon's Imperial Guard, I'll have you know.'

The orchestra had returned to the stage and the audience erupted into appreciative applause. Hermione was glad, even though something was rankling her.

She really, really knew that she shouldn't rise to the bait. Leave it alone, Hermione, she told herself, but it was too late, she couldn't help herself… she was already asking.

'Go on then, Malfoy. Amaze me with your wondrous powers of observation. What *category* would you put us in?' she asked in a shrill whisper as the audience simmered down and the orchestra briefly retuned their instruments.

Even though the lights had dimmed, she could feel Draco's eyes appraising her curiously, even triumphantly. She was glad of the relative darkness, as she could sense the heated glow of humiliating retreat staining her cheeks.

'You and Ron?'

'Who else would I be referring to?'
'I dunno. I always thought you and Potter might get it on –'

'Harry? That's ludicrous!'

'The lady doth protest too much, methinks,' Draco said in wheedling tones. 'Broke your heart, did he?'

There was hushed anticipation in the auditorium as the conductor raised his baton.

'There was never anything between Harry and me,' Hermione said sternly, aware of the tension in her voice.

'He'd have been a better bet than Weasel,' Draco said drolly. 'Less of the cozy comfort and carpet slippers…'

'Oh, shut up, you pillock,' she snapped, her voice ringing out a little too loudly.

'Control yourself, Granger,' Draco chuckled softly in her ear. 'You'll get us thrown out.'

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'Mother definitely wouldn't have enjoyed that,' Draco asserted, as they streamed out of the busy concert hall into the crowded lobby, following signs for their appropriate Portkey station to whisk them back to England. 'It would have made her very dizzy.'

'Isn't that your friend Ephraim waiting for you?' Hermione asked.

Ephraim was an unmissable, imposing presence; holding court with a number of wizards who seemed to hang on his every word, close by the entrance to the UK Portkey stations.

Draco glanced furtively towards him, then tugged Hermione's arm and pulled her away from the flow of UK-only traffic and into the path of 'Frankreich/France' instead.

'We'll take the long way around,' he said curtly.

'But I'd rather get home as quickly as possible,' Hermione complained.

'I have my own Portkey.'

'I'm not travelling with an unauthorised Portkey,' Hermione said snippily. 'Look, there's more UK stations over there.'

Sure enough, a sign pointed into the car park.

Outside there was a light drizzle and a chill wind, not quite the 'squall' Ephraim had warned against. Draco flipped open his attaché case and produced an umbrella, for which Hermione was glad of.

The Portkey stations were arranged in an ordered line on the opposite side of the car park, each manned by an efficient-looking wizard. The queues here were much shorter.

'So, tell me, Malfoy. Were you deliberately trying to avoid Mr Golowitz? I presume that's who he is,' Hermione asked, buttoning up her black Macintosh.

'It's been a long day,' Draco said. 'We've seen plenty of each other as it is.'
'Tony Goldstein told me he now owns Arcana.'

'Yes. I found that out today myself,' Draco said, a little peevishly Hermione thought. 'He's a shrewd businessman. Arcana's stock will soar.'

'Tony seems to like him.'

'Ephraim's a good man. Very clever.'

As they walked across the car park, Hermione couldn't help but wonder exactly what being a 'good man' entailed for someone with Draco's dubious morality.

'He's just your kind of wizard actually,' Draco said, a little caustically. 'Actively worked against Voldemort in both wars. Raised funds. Provided safe houses. Lots of do-gooding stuff, that I'm sure you'd find very impressive.'

Hermione was surprised to hear Draco use Voldemort's name so casually. Clearly Ron was right. Time had definitely moved on since the end of the Second Wizarding War.

'Where's Ephraim from?' Hermione asked.

'Ohio.'

'So how do you know him?' Hermione asked, bewildered how a decent wizard like Ephraim Golowitz had managed to get himself embroiled with the Malfoys.

'Is that a serious question?' Draco asked in bemused tones.

'Don't mock me, Malfoy. I've taken as little an interest in your life as possible these past fourteen years,' Hermione said sniffily.

'He's my father-in-law. And no, I'm not married to Sylvestra,' Draco said tersely. 'Her sister… her sister Katya was… is my wife,' he added, a little hoarsely.

'Oh,' Hermione said, thinking back to Padma's instructive conversation the other day, the pieces now falling into place. 'So Ephraim Golowitz became an investor in Herb Healing and that's how you met Sylvestra, and-'

'Yes, yes. He's my business partner. Enough of the fucking inquisition,' Draco huffed. 'There's a Portkey there going to my local village. You can floo home from the manor.'

'I'd rather Apparate, thanks,' Hermione muttered.

'Actually, I've got something for Ron. It's too heavy to send by owl.'

Hermione rolled her eyes. Would this torture never cease?

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CHAPTER TRACKS:

"TRISTAN UND ISOLDE: PRELUDE" by RICHARD WAGNER

&

"GOYA! SODA!" by CHRISTINE & THE QUEENS
Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Though This Be Madness

Chapter Summary

Who is Draco's missing wife? And what happened to her? A night of unexpected revelations at Malfoy Manor…

6. Though This Be Madness

Narcissa had clearly expected to have a drink with her son once he returned from Berlin, as signified by a crystal decanter of something dark and reddish and two small glasses, perched on a tray on the glass table in the centre of her darkened salon. The sole illumination was a faint glow emanating from the orange and yellow tongues of firelight flickering and crackling in the fireplace.

Narcissa herself was reclining on one of the vast white sofas, lightly snoring.

There was a sickly smell emanating from an ashtray, where a cheroot was still burning. Hermione instinctively flicked her fingers, extinguishing it by magic.

'I should go,' she whispered.

'Of course,' Draco said, 'unless… would you like a drink?'

'I'm not sure that's a good idea, Malfoy,' Hermione said in low tones, afraid to disturb Narcissa and ill at ease with the idea of spending even more time with Draco than was strictly necessary.

'No, it is. It's a very good idea,' Draco said firmly. 'I'm going to be working a lot with your husband. Starting with this trip to South America next week. It would make things easier if we got along.'

'I don't like you, Malfoy. That's not about to change, you know.'

'And I've never liked you. But I'm being sensible here. We might be seeing a lot more of each other than we would normally choose.'

'You? Sensible?' she scoffed.

Impatience flashed across his features. 'I am a perfectly rational being, Mrs Weasley. Despite your best attempts to paint me as some kind of manic Muggle-hating monster.'

'There can never be anything intellectually rational about a man who holds such mean-minded and elitist views as you do,' Hermione said disdainfully.

'Yes, yes, we know all that,' Draco said in bored tones. 'Do you want a drink or not?'

Hermione heaved a deep sigh. In truth, she was suddenly feeling a little light-headed, as a wave of fatigue washed over her. She wondered idly if the smoke from Narcissa's cheroot had been laced with some kind of narcotic. Slumping on one of these sofas suddenly seemed an excellent idea.

'Okay. In the spirit of cooperation,' which in her mind meant, for Ron's sake, 'I'll have a drink with you. But it doesn't mean we're friends,' Hermione stated plainly.
'Agreed,' Draco said, pouring them both a small glass of the thick, reddish liquid and joining her on the sofa. 'Here's to non-friendly toleration.'

Hermione took a long sip of the drink Draco had offered her. It was sweet and warming. Not unpleasant at all.

He silently sipped his drink, staring deeply into the fire, his face cast in half-shadow. Soft orange firelight flickered across his sharply sculpted cheeks, dappling his hair in fingery shadows.

'In retrospect,' Hermione added with an icy smile, suddenly and inexplicably seized with a desire to wound. 'You've always been more pathetic than menacing. Hating someone as trivial as you seems an awful lot of bother when I come to think of it.'

'Thanks for that,' he smirked sarcastically in return. He quickly drained his drink and gently placed it back on the tray. 'I'll get that box.'

Draco got up and left the room, returning moments later with a box of files and a metal attaché case. 'You can call it homework,' Draco said, dropping the box onto Hermione's lap. 'For Ron,' he added pointedly, in view of the thunderous expression on Hermione's face.

'You know I don't want any part of this,' Hermione stated firmly.

'I know,' Draco said with a nonchalant shrug. 'Just tell Ron these files contain documents dating back almost thirty years. All about Jeroboam. His work, businesses. Some research data. I've had a look myself, obviously. There's a lot of rubbish in there, but it's best to be comprehensive.'

'Who collated all this?' Hermione asked, brushing dust off the files, her curiosity sparked in spite of herself.

'Rivals,' Draco declared, flashing her a strange smile. 'Welcome to the murky world of industrial espionage.'

'And the case?'

Draco cringed a little. 'Can't be sure. We're kind of hoping Ron can find out. Or... maybe his brother. Is it Bill? The one who's particularly good at curse-breaking.'

'You can't get into it?'

'Not for lack of trying.'

'What do you think it is?'

Draco glanced furtively at his snoozing mother and then bent his head closer to Hermione's. 'You remember I said there was a break-in at one of Jeroboam's warehouses in Switzerland?'

Hermione nodded.

'This case was found there. We think it contains a prototype mobile scanner. To be used to trace Dark Flux.'

'Why would Jeroboam build a machine?' Hermione asked incredulously. 'Why not develop a diagnostic spell? Or a modified sneakoscope? It would be a lot simpler. And,' she picked up the metal case, feeling its weight, 'a lot less cumbersome.'

'Our analysts believe this is kind of like a hybridic probity probe. One which Muggles can use, too.'
"Why would Muggles use it?"

'Well, like most globalised wizarding businesses, Jeroboam probably employs a fair few Muggles. It's almost unavoidable these days,' Draco said, almost a little too ruefully for Hermione's liking. 'Just give the case to Ron, will you? See what he can do. And tell him not to forget to bring it to Argentina on Monday. Is that clear?'

'I thought it was Bolivia?'

'Things change,' Draco said breezily. 'And remind him to make sure Bill goes easy on the case, because we don't yet know the effects too much magic might have on this type of technology. Apparition is to be avoided at all costs and probably travel by Portkey too.'

'Good grief, Malfoy, you don't expect me to lug this lot home on the back of a broomstick, do you?' Hermione protested.

Draco grinned. 'We reckon floo travel should be fine.' He cast a pitying look in Narcissa's direction. 'I guess I'd better call Dryden. He can sort poor mother out.'

Hermione couldn't help but shudder a little at how, in this dim light, the pupils in Draco's eyes were vast, all-consuming, rendering his eyes a dense, impenetrable black.

'Who's Dryden?' she said quickly.

'Mother's personal house-elf. Mother named him after her favourite poet. My mother loves the great Muggle poets… although Dryden happened to be a wizard, actually.'

'I've never read him,' Hermione said.

'Me neither. Although my parents made me read most of the established literary canon by the age of ten.'

'I find that hard to believe,' Hermione scoffed. He hated Muggles far too much.

'Why's that? And it's hardly my fault, by the way, that Mother has such piss-poor taste in poets. I prefer the exciting chaps, like Shelley or Byron.'

Hermione could barely keep a straight face. 'All that 'Passion and Pathos', Malfoy! I really wouldn't have thought that was your style.'

'Talking of passion and pathos,' Draco said abruptly, instantly changing the tenor of their conversation. 'You never met my wife, did you?'

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'Come on, I want to show you something,' Draco said, leaping up from the sofa. Something in his manner made Hermione think he was acting on impulse rather than premeditation, which made it so much easier to simply follow suit. She quickly drained her drink, almost retching at the bittersweet undertone, and allowed him to lead her to the main staircase.

But that was as far as she was prepared to go without any further explanation.

'Are you coming?' Draco asked. 'I won't bite.'

'I don't trust you,' she said simply, but even as she spoke, she found she had one foot on the stairs, ready to ascend.
Draco turned his back on her and started walking upstairs.

Hermione was caught between her own burning curiosity and a powerful temptation to turn and run before it was too late... before she was pulled inexorably into Draco Malfoy's world. To her left was the fireplace, from which she could floo home, without any fuss or worries. To her right, was the staircase and Draco's gradually receding figure.

Draco paused at the landing. 'What's keeping you?'

She took a deep breath and followed; increasingly unnerved as the candles lining the wall became fewer and fainter the higher they climbed.

They paused momentarily at a darkened corridor, which wound its way into the west wing. This was the eerie, shadow-world where Lucius Malfoy reputedly lived in his splendid seclusion. Here, all candlelight seemed extinguished, bar one solitary candle, dipping and dancing to the tune of a light, chill breeze. Paintings lined the walls, but they had all been covered by black drapes. She wondered if this was to prevent the portraits gossiping to others about what they saw up here.

'I guess you already know the rumours,' Draco murmured. In the faltering candlelight, his face was cast in shadow, his cheeks hollowed and gaunt. He looked tired and wretched.

'A little –'

'But I get the feeling – I think you can keep a secret.'

'Yes,' she stammered. Her voice seemed to echo in her head, long after she had spoke.

'Good,' Draco said. He closed his eyes, as though taking a moment to collect himself.

'I don't know what the hell I'm doing here. This is madness,' he breathed. 'Maybe I'm all stirred up by the Beethoven?' he added with a sardonic smile.

'I didn't think you liked it,' Hermione said, laughing nervously.

'I said my mother wouldn't have. It's not the same thing.'

To her surprise, they passed the corridor where Lucius lived – for one moment, she had been certain that Draco's secret referred to his father – and Draco led her to a different part of the house altogether, which was noticeably better-lit and more hospitable.

He ushered her into a room, partly brightened by silvery moonlight streaming through a wide bay window. She watched him, her heart racing in sudden fear and anticipation, as he fumbled in the half-darkness for what turned out to be a box of matches. He struck a match and lit a large church candle, positioned, she now saw, on a desk in one corner of the room. He then lit two more candles, resting in crystal sconces, attached to the wall.

It would have been so much easier to use magic, Hermione thought, and was about to accuse him of becoming a Squib – if only to lighten the mood between them – when her attention was drawn instead to a large framed studio photograph, positioned prominently on top of a gleaming, highly polished piano.

This was her room, Hermione thought, recalling Sylvestra's acid tones when she had mentioned it the day when she had come here with Ron for tea. His wife's room.

It was a posed, family portrait. Draco was reclining on a plush cream rug. He was embracing a
young boy, about Rose's age Hermione thought; their pale heads of hair almost melded into one. She guessed this must be Scorpius, Draco's son by his first wife, Astoria. They looked to be sharing a private joke, judging by the way Scorpius was giggling. Snoozing on the rug beside them was a superbly marked snow white tiger cub – a typically narcissistic touch, Hermione thought wryly.

'How did you get the tiger to stay asleep?'

'We are wizards, you know,' he said, in cutting tones.

She found herself studying the portrait more closely, as though drawn in by... by what exactly? There was something missing. An absence.

But of course. The picture was incomplete. The absence of the wife, the mother, could hardly have been starker.

'His mother left us while Scorpius was still a baby,' Draco informed her. 'Katya's been more of a mother to him than Astoria ever was. And, I guess Sylvestra's taken on that role since... well... you know.'

Hermione didn't know. She almost hated the fact that she found herself wanting to. 'When did you and... and Katya get married?' Hermione asked, strangely tentative about using Katya's name in this room, in Draco's presence.

'Three and a half years ago. We met in May and were married in June. On my birthday.' He smiled. 'I was actually dating her sister at the time.'

'Sylvestra.'

'The one and only.'

'That must have been awkward.'

'It wasn't so bad. Sylvestra and I were never serious,' Draco said. 'And then... and then,' he said, lowering his voice. 'Last year, the day before Beltane... Katya disappeared.'

'That's terrible. You've... you've looked for her?' Hermione said, genuinely pitying him. As much as she didn't like Draco Malfoy, she could see he felt this deeply. It would have been inhuman not to feel some compassion.

'High and low.' He exhaled wearily. 'Obviously we've tried to keep most of it under wraps. Away from the public eye. The Daily Prophet would have a field day if they knew the whole story. I imagine I'd be accused of all sorts.'

'I doubt anybody would think–'

'Yes, they would,' Draco said brusquely. 'I know exactly what they'd think. What they do think... too many things for my liking,' he added in dark tones.

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

And he was right, Hermione thought, bearing in mind it was Agatha Thrussington manning the gossip desk at the Daily Prophet.

'But she's not dead, you know. I have proof,' he said in a husky, almost inaudible whisper, forcing Hermione to come closer to the desk where he was busily unlocking a drawer with a small, silver
He unveiled a small, brightly painted box with a floral design, which Hermione suspected had belonged to his wife. Using the same silver key he had used to open the drawer, he now unlocked a padlock which secured the box, flipping it open and spilling its contents onto the desk.

‘Nobody else knows this, but since Katya left, she has been sending me these,’ Draco said, his fingertips gently caressing a handful of small, silver rose charms, which glinted in the candlelight.

Hermione instantly recognised the charms as identical to the single rose charm he wore on a chain around his neck. Each rose, she noticed, was actually two halves of a blooming rosebud, fused together, each half facing away from the other.

'These were originally part of a necklace,' Draco explained. 'My wife received them as a gift about a year before her disappearance. The day she left, I found this box,' he stroked the floral painted lid affectionately, 'with a silver chain and a single rose charm inside. There was also a note. Never Forget.'

'Can you be sure it's your wife sending these?' Hermione kept her voice low and measured, matching his own.

'She left me this, didn't she?' He gestured to the chain around his neck. 'I then received a second rose on my birthday, just a month or so after she left… and since then, there has been another rose, every few months. Special days… New Years, Scorpius's birthday in March.'

She quickly counted the roses. 'Six so far.'

'No, seven.' Draco brandished the rose dangling from the chain around his neck. 'I received this one in September. I always wear the last one to be sent,' he said. 'The last one to be close to her… if that makes sense. I'm convinced she's trying to tell me something,' he whispered urgently. 'Telling me not to give up on her. To continue my search.'

Draco looked at Hermione intently, as if trying to read her expression. She felt he needed some kind of reassurance. Some kind of confirmation. Although she wasn't sure how she should react at all. Dealing with Draco Malfoy, one could never be certain. She half-feared this was some kind of elaborate practical joke at her expense.

'You're certainly being told something,' she said.

'Can't quite work out what though,' he said, a crooked smile on his face. He scooped the roses into his palm, returning them to their box. He then locked the padlock with a harsh twist of the small, silver key, which he promptly pocketed.

'The weirdest thing though… she always sends me the roses by Muggle mail. Not here, but to Herb Healing's Muggle office in London,' Draco said pensively.

'What was she like?' Hermione asked, genuinely curious.

'Kind. Generous. Scorpius adored her.' Draco then gestured towards a framed photograph, hanging by the door. 'You can see what she looked like for yourself. This was taken the week before she left.'

Hermione edged towards the photograph, suddenly aware of Draco's eyes boring into her, watching her closely.
Hermione struggled to find the right words. 'She…'

'She was beautiful, yes,' Draco murmured. 'And you'll see that she's wearing the necklace,' he added earnestly. 'Look.' He pointed to the twinkling silver chain of roses around Katya's neck.

It was a highly romanticised image, Hermione thought. The perfect sweetly smiling wife. A little younger than Draco, but with an air of calm, refined maturity. She was sitting demurely, hands clasped tightly together in her lap. Her hair was soft and tousled, rippling gently in a light breeze.

She was also, quite clearly, pregnant.

Hermione had a sudden, urgent desire to escape the weighty sadness which permeated the room. She felt oddly suffocated.

'I - I really should be getting back,' she said politely, aware that her face was suddenly flushed and warm, her palms sweaty. 'Ron will be wondering where I've got to.'

'Of course,' Draco said coolly, in a brisk, businesslike manner. 'I'll owl Ron with details about our trip.'

He glared at her dismissively, almost as though he was already regretting his decision to share this secret, this room and all it contained, with her.

Just minutes later, Hermione had Flooed home, tightly clutching the metal attaché case with the box of files balanced precariously on top.

She had never been so glad to step out of her hearth into her familiar, friendly living room, currently strewn untidily with an abundance of her children's toys.

Hermione shook her head in disbelief, still panting slightly from her hasty exit.

What an odd end to her evening. Why had Draco told her all this? What did he want from her? It didn't make sense.

And then there was Katya. Poor Katya Malfoy and her child, which surely must be born by now.

Hermione chilled, recalling Katya's face, gazing out at her from the portrait. Knowing she was missing, possibly even dead, there was a peculiar poignancy about her soft, lilting smile, the distant look in her clear hazel-brown eyes.

She was nothing like her striking blond sister, Sylvestra, that was for sure. Nothing like the identikit girls Draco so famously favoured. If truth be told, she had more closely resembled herself, with her wavy, brown hair - though perhaps not quite as unruly as her own - and creamy, lightly freckled complexion. Though that was probably where all resemblance ended, as there was something altogether more sedate, more tamed in Katya's appearance. An air of quiet, poised sophistication.

Why would a young woman like that, and in her condition, leave her husband and home when she most needed it? Where had she gone, and where was she now? And what was the meaning of her secret communications with Draco? What was she trying to tell him?

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CHAPTER TRACKS:

“MOONLIGHT SONATA” by BEETHOVEN
Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Ghost Pin

Chapter Summary

Events take a sinister turn on the eve of the mission to South America. Someone... or something... is determined to stop further investigations into Dark Flux, and at any cost.

7. Ghost Pin

Hermione could see Ron was in a terrible hurry to tell her something. Watching from her study window, where she had been organising case files for her Tribunal hearing later that week, she saw him fly at unusually great speed into the garden. He then leaped from his broom, straight into a skidding run, leaving the unpiloted broom to crash heavily into a low-hanging branch of the crab-apple tree at the bottom of their garden.

Hermione hoped his news was actually worth the price of a good broom.

She hurried into the kitchen, convinced that he was going to bust the back door off its hinges in his haste to get indoors, but was glad to see that somehow the door had withstood the force.

'Hermione! You're not going to believe this,' Ron panted, his face flushed with exertion. 'Draco Malfoy's been shot!'

Hermione didn't answer at first, convinced he must have been hit by a jelly-brained jinx. She silently cursed his brother George, who Ron had just been visiting.

'Didn't you hear me? Draco Malfoy's been shot! MUGGLE shot,' Ron repeated, his eyes agog.

'Yes, I heard you, Ron,' Hermione said wearily, reaching out for her trusty 'Oakum's Compilation: Counter-Spells & Counter-Curses for the Persistently Unlucky' which she always kept handy on a bookshelf alongside her favourite Muggle cookbooks. She was sure she'd seen a nice and easy counter-curse for just this thing.

'It's true, Hermione. It's not just wishful thinking. He was shot. In Central London,' Ron said, exasperated. 'Put the bloody book down and listen, will you?'

'Hold on. Did you say wishful thinking? You actually wanted him to get shot? That's not very nice, Ron. Not nice at all,' Hermione said, beginning to see that her husband was in deadly earnest. 'So... is he... is he alive?'

'Oh yes, he'll live,' Ron said breezily. 'He's in St Mungo's. But don't you see? This might affect our assignment.'

Hermione would have danced with relief if it hadn't been for her reprimanding Ron just moments earlier for wishing ill on Draco. 'Well, I guess he can't go haring off to South America with a gunshot wound, can he? Where was he shot exactly?'

Ron pondered this a moment. 'Not too sure about that one. George said it was somewhere like HoHo… or Boho….'
'SOHO,' Hermione corrected, in cross tones. 'And I meant, where on his body?'

'Shoulder or leg. One of the two. We can ask George later. He's popped to The Leaky Cauldron to get the latest news.'

Hermione poured Ron a pumpkin juice. He was still glowing pink from his flight.

'If it's just a flesh wound, St Mungo's should be able to sort him out pretty quickly,' she said. Once the bullet had been removed, a spot of Vulnera Sanentur should do the trick, she mused. 'Seems kind of peculiar though, don't you think? I can't remember the last time I heard of a Muggle shooting a wizard, can you? I wonder what happened.'

'He was lying in an alley for over an hour before anybody found him. And he didn't have his wand, so he was pretty defenceless.' Ron paused to glug back some pumpkin juice. 'The shooting happened shortly after midnight, apparently.'

'Really?' Hermione was very surprised to hear this. She had been at Malfoy Manor until half past eleven, she reckoned, so he must have headed into London almost directly after she left.

'That's all we know at the moment.' Ron gulped back the rest of his juice and slammed the glass onto the kitchen table. 'Stupid bloody sod,' he said, spluttering with laughter. 'Looks like he pisses Muggles off as much as he does us wizards!'  

'You'd better owl him, Ron. Check what's happening with your trip,' Hermione sighed, putting trusty 'Oakum's' back on the shelf. 'And… check he's okay while you're at it,' she added, almost as an afterthought.

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Draco was adamant that the trip to Argentina should go ahead. He insisted that it was only a flesh wound and that the Mediwizards at St Mungo's had performed wonders on him. Apparently, he had already checked himself out and was being fussed over by his mother at Malfoy Manor.

'But does he say why he was shot?' Hermione demanded, desperately trying to read Draco's short missive over her husband's shoulder. It was the why that had begun to worry her most.

Based on the latest gossip, George was now convinced that Draco had simply walked in on something he shouldn't have. A drug deal, maybe, or a mugging. He'd heard that sort of thing often went on in Central London. Particularly, late at night. Draco had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But Hermione feared something altogether more sinister. What if it had been a wizard trying to look like a Muggle, and Draco was the intended target all along? What if this was a shooting that was meant to do more than simply wound? If that was the case, maybe Jeroboam had got wind of Draco's mission and was intent on stopping him. And if that could happen to Draco, exactly how safe was Ron?

Hermione also wondered what Draco was doing hanging around Central London, alone, in the middle of the night? And why Soho in particular? Soho was a party zone. A place of clubs, pubs and restaurants …but also the heart of London's seedy underworld. Nobody else seemed to be asking why he was there – not yet at any rate, although she was sure those questions would soon be coming thick and fast once it was obvious that Draco was recovered.

Hermione had her own pet theory on the subject. One she felt she couldn't share with anybody, because, despite their chequered history, she felt honour-bound to respect Draco's privacy. She
couldn't help but wonder if Draco's presence in Soho at that late hour was connected to Katya Malfoy.

Hermione remained utterly perplexed at Draco's entrusting her with such intimate information concerning Katya's disappearance and the periodic arrival of the roses. But she also wondered – worried, even – about what Draco really wanted from her. Was it assistance in tracking Katya down? This wasn't entirely unfeasible, particularly if Katya was hiding out in the Muggle world, living as a Muggle… sending Draco silver roses by Muggle mail. If she was thinking this, then Draco was surely doing the same.

And if Draco hadn't stopped searching for Katya, then maybe he was looking to tap into Hermione's superior experience and knowledge of Muggles? Draco would struggle to understand Muggle life, in view of his pure-blood upbringing. He could easily wander into the wrong place, at the wrong time… most especially if he did happen to be trawling the sex clubs and bars of Soho looking for his estranged wife.

It was all wild speculation, of course. She had no idea how Draco Malfoy's mind worked, and she doubted she ever would. But the disappearance of Katya, in addition to Draco's potentially perilous mission to ensnare one of the most powerful wizards in the world, and now this seemingly random shooting, was making her head spin with unvoiced fears.

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Clearly unperturbed by his brush with potential death and serious injury, Draco sent Ron an itinerary of their trip that Sunday afternoon. They were to meet at Heathrow Airport early that evening, presumably to depart from the International Portkey Terminal for Buenos Aires.

They would be staying at the Alvear Palace Hotel, which sounded remarkably grand to Hermione. She assumed Draco was footing the bill. They had a meeting arranged with a key witness on Monday, and then there was a possible 'excursion' scheduled for Tuesday, although it wasn't specified where to. They were to return to Buenos Aires on the Wednesday and would be back in the UK by Thursday morning, at the very latest.

Draco reminded Ron to bring the metal attaché case, which had been lodged at Shell Cottage for the past twenty-four hours, frustrating the hell out of poor Bill Weasley. Ron hadn't told Bill how he had obtained the case, but Bill didn't seem to need a reason for some extracurricular puzzle solving.

Hermione could tell that Ron was excited by the whole thing, although he did his best to conceal it from her. In truth, she was a little envious. Her own working life felt bogged down in the minutiae of department meetings and case reviews. A trip overseas felt very exciting in comparison.

Of course, it was a sobering thought that Ron would be at the other side of the world chasing dark wizards – possibly even the same wizards who had taken a shot at Draco - while she would be stuck at home with the kids, desperately trying to keep calm ahead of her Tribunal hearing on Thursday morning. Ron had suggested she take some leave, seeing as she was owed at least three months' worth, to review all her case files from the past year or so. Make sure she was on top of everything, in case of any awkward questions. She thought this was probably a good idea.

What frustrated Hermione most, however, was the feeling that she was unable to vent her anxiety about Ron's latest venture. Relations with Ron had become so tetchy she steered clear of the subject, to avoid arguments. She couldn't even confide her fears to anybody else, because Ron had ordered her not to breathe a word about it – especially to Harry, who was the one person she ached to talk to most. Harry was her regular point of reassurance. Without his support, she felt untethered;
strangely unprotected.

As she watched her husband gleefully packing a change of gown, t-shirts and a pair of Muggle jeans into a khaki cotton hold-all, she thought about how much she'd been wanting to talk to Harry, but had held back, because she didn't feel she could be entirely candid with him. Maybe she'd contact him when Ron was away? But what would she tell him if he asked about Ron? She couldn't stand the idea of lying to him.

'What have you told your Mum about this assignment?' Hermione asked. 'You know how much she loves to know where you're going all the time.'

'I've told her the same story I've been telling most people, including Auror Carmichael,' Ron said, flashing her a self-satisfied grin. Carmichael was Ron's immediate boss. 'I've said I've got a hot lead on an Eastern European cartel illegally trading in hellebore and asphodel. Bennet and McLaughlin will cover for me if any awkward questions get asked.'

'And what happens when you don't produce any evidence that this cartel actually exists?' Hermione asked, decidedly nettled. She didn't like all this sneaking around one jot.

'Well, by the time I have to file my final report, I'll have landed a much bigger fish,' Ron said, stuffing a pair of trainers into the hold-all's side pocket. He looked at Hermione, a mischievous smile on his face. 'Mr Saul Jeroboam!'

Hermione smiled wanly in return. She sat on the edge of the bed, smoothing creases out of Ron's Muggle corduroy jacket, which was spread out, next to her.

'Yes, darling. By then, you'll be the saviour of the wizarding world,' she muttered, unable to expunge the sarcasm from her voice.

Ron stopped folding his t-shirts and cast her a dark look. 'You know what, Hermione? I'm getting pig sick of your attitude.'

'I'm just worried,' she sighed.

'Well, quit worrying and help me out. I've got to meet Draco in less than three hours. And I need to Floo to Shell Cottage to pick up the scanner.'

'Bill's got into the case?'

Ron pulled a face. 'Fat chance.'

'I tell you what, Ron,' Hermione said, desperate to make peace. 'Let me go to Shell Cottage. I'll take the kids. They always have such fun playing with Louis.'

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Rose and Hugo had been overjoyed to spend some time at Shell Cottage and had begged Aunt Fleur and Uncle Bill if they could stay longer. Rose, in particular, had a very close relationship with her young cousin, Louis, and was desperate to have a sleepover. Normally this would not have been allowed on a Sunday night, but the adults all agreed amongst themselves that it might be a good idea if the kids stayed at Shell Cottage for a few days, enabling Hermione to catch up on some work ahead of the Tribunal hearing. Fleur assured Hermione that she would get the kids to school on time every morning and that they could pop round for hugs and kisses at teatime.

Hermione knew it was for the best, as she really needed some time to concentrate on her work, but
with Ron away too, she dreaded the long, lonely nights.

Hermione had spent a little longer than expected at Shell Cottage and grey autumnal dusk had now set in. Bill had already Floo-ed over to Wisteria Cottage to drop off the case and explain to Ron the various break-in procedures he had tried and failed and still managed to get back to Shell Cottage with plenty of time to take another cup of tea with Hermione.

Hermione realized she had just half an hour to spare before Ron was due to set off for his rendezvous with Draco Malfoy at Heathrow Airport.

Hermione hurried home. Apparating into her back garden. However, as she approached her cottage, an involuntary shiver rippled through her. She felt a strange bristling of the fine hairs on her arms. She had always insisted that she didn't want to live in fear – not after everything they had gone through during the Second Wizarding War – and had refused to set up wards at the cottage. But in this instance, she didn't even need them. She just knew, from somewhere deep within her, that someone had been there. Someone unwanted.

The cottage seemed dark and silent, its windows blankly gazing at her.

A wave of foreboding rushed through her. She felt eerily alone - yet watched.

Instinctively, Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She stood stock-still, listening, absorbing, and trying to feel with her mind the faint trace of foreign magic that had assailed her senses.

There was a low hum, a brushing whisper of movement. The dark trees which encircled the garden seemed to shush and sigh. A light wind teased the treetops. There was a crack of twigs and the scurrying of small animals hastening for cover in the undergrowth. A murder of crows squawking, leaves rustling, and there, in the furthest corner of her mind, Hermione saw it: a blur of movement, a flash of colour.

Red. Vivid, scarlet red.

And then darkness.

Ron, she breathed. Please God, no. Ron.

Heart racing, she sprinted to the back door, slamming it open with a single brisk flick of her wand. She entered, wand held stiffly ahead of her, every nerve and fibre tingling with adrenalin and fear. She could barely hear above the thunderous sound of blood rushing in her ears.

It was still inside. Not a single sound.

Maybe it had been her imagination? Maybe Ron had left without saying goodbye. But then there was a faint groan coming from the living room.

'Ron!' she cried, dashing towards him.

He was lying on the floor, seemingly unable to move or speak. His eyes were rolling in panic.

'Ron! What's happened to you?' she shrieked.

She realised he had been immobilised, probably at the receiving end of a Petrificus Totalus, except he then twisted his upper body round to face her.
'Hermione,' he croaked, his face screwed up with pain.

'Oh Ron,' Hermione squealed, rushing to his side. His face was a ghastly white, his eyes wide and staring. She gently slid a hand under his head. His hair was thick with cold sweat.

'Unfreeze my legs,' Ron gasped. 'It was… Locomotor Mortis.'

Ron clenched his teeth, jolted by another spasm of pain.

Hermione quickly released him from the spell. Ron cautiously raised one leg, wiggled his foot, and then returned the leg to the floor, gasping in discomfort. He then repeated this procedure with the other leg.

Hermione was puzzled. In some instances, a leg-locker curse could leave the victim with a slightly frozen, tingly sensation in their extremities, but never the type of pain Ron was clearly experiencing.

'What's hurting?'

'It's my back,' Ron moaned. A slightly sheepish look shaded his features. 'I fell awkwardly.'

Hermione gently moved him onto one side and applied soft pressure to his back, starting from the shoulders and working downwards. Her husband winced as she gently massaged the vertebrae around the midway point.

'There,' he rasped, his body flinching from her touch. 'I must have jarred it.'

'Who did this to you, Ron?'

Ron shook his head. 'Dunno. It happened so fast.' He tried to sit up, gritting his teeth. He grabbed hold of Hermione, who pulled him forwards so that his head fell against her chest.

'Come on, Ron,' she urged, rocking back on her haunches and raising herself slowly, tortuously dragging his bulk upwards into a standing position. Hermione hadn't realised how heavy her husband was. Ron inched away from her, and then, with one supreme effort, flopped heavily into his favourite armchair.

Hermione glanced through the open door at his hold-all, jacket and Draco's darned attaché case, waiting in the hallway.

'There's no way you can go to Argentina, Ron. Not in this condition.'

'A few healing spells and Mum's hot beef tea and I'll be right as rain,' Ron said with a crooked smile.

'But you're meant to meet Draco…'

'You go for me,' Ron interrupted, fixing his wife with a steely glare.

'No, Ron! I don't want to get mixed up in this,' Hermione shrilled. 'Please don't ask that of me.'

'You're the only person…'

'What about Harry? It's about time he got involved. If Malfoy's telling the truth, then this assignment's way too big for you!'
'No!' Ron shouted. 'Do this one thing for me, Hermione. It has to be you, don't you see?'

Hermione didn't see. Didn't want to see.

'You're my wife and you're a brilliant witch. I trust you more than anybody in the world,' Ron continued. He gazed at her pleadingly, his eyes a large glittering blue.

'There's no way, Ron. It's too dangerous. It can't be a coincidence that Malfoy got shot, and now this has happened. Someone came into our home and hurt you,' she said plaintively.

'I'm alive, aren't I?' Ron said, with a shrug. 'It was a simple leg-locker curse, that's all. Maybe they just wanted to delay my departure? And if that's the case, that's all the more reason to get the hell out to Argentina and see what's going on out there.'

Hermione sighed. He was probably right. And yes, she could do this one thing for Ron, she knew that, even though it required some sacrifice on her part – namely her preparations for the Tribunal on Thursday. But the kids were safely stowed at Shell Cottage and she had leave in hand.

'Couldn't you and Malfoy just postpone your trip for one day? You might feel better tomorrow.'

Ron vehemently shook his head. 'Come on, Hermione. It's only two full days in Argentina. Three at the most.'

Three days with Draco Malfoy. Hermione could barely repress a shudder of revulsion and dread.

'Okay, Ron. Okay. But I'll take the mirror,' Hermione said in clipped, efficient tones, referring to her part of a two-way mirror set that Harry had given them on their wedding day. This way she would be able to stay in contact with Ron. 'If your back improves, maybe you could come out to Argentina tomorrow and take my place?'

As she spoke, she sped into their bedroom and began pulling clothes from her cupboard and drawers, which she folded and packed into a small leather suitcase with a series of expert flicks of her wand. She rooted out the mirror from a concealed drawer in her dressing table, placing its matching counterpart on Ron's pillow.

Ron had levered himself with some difficulty into a standing position and limped into the bedroom after her. He leant against the doorpost.

'I really appreciate this, Hermione.'

'I should hope so,' Hermione muttered under her breath. This is madness, she was thinking bitterly. Damn that bloody Draco Malfoy. Since he had barged uninvited into their lives, their world had gone topsy-turvy. 'Send 'Grumio' to The Burrow with a note, Ron. Get Molly to come and give you a hand.'

Ron nodded dumbly.

'Please remember to contact my office. Tell them I'm taking some holiday. And give Rose and Hugo a big kiss from me, won't you? Luckily, Fleur's already agreed to keep them at Shell Cottage for a few days.'

Minutes later, Hermione was standing in their living room, leather case and handbag at the ready. She was planning to Floo to the Express Lounge at the International Portkey Terminal at Heathrow Airport, which was just a short walk, Ron assured her, to her meeting place with Draco.
Despite her feeling shell-shocked at this sudden turn of events, the sincere gratitude on Ron's pained face melted her heart. 'Come here,' she whispered. She brushed her lips across his cheek, then picked up the metal attaché case. 'This had better be worth it,' she said, with a heavy sigh. She felt overwhelmed by a dark sense of dread. 'Please look after yourself. Maybe talk to Bill about finally getting some wards set up?'

Ron looked pensive. 'When I think about it... they came through the back door.' He spoke clearly and slowly, as if his memory of what had happened had suddenly sharpened, come into focus. 'I was in the living room looking for my wand when I heard the back door open. I simply assumed it was you, but then I realized somebody was standing in the hallway, looking at me.' He paused. 'And then there was blackness.'

'They stunned you?'

'No. It was different. More like Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder. And then I heard it. The curse. It was a man's voice. Kind of like a harsh whisper. Grating. And I just keeled over.'

'And before the darkness? What did you see?'

'Dunno, Hermione. Can't say. Just a flash really.'

'A flash of what?' Hermione asked, her heart suddenly beating fast in her chest.

Ron seemed to struggle here and then a thought struck him. 'It was red. A flash of red. Then there was nothing.'

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CHAPTER TRACK: "SOMEBWHERE A CLOCK IS TICKING" by SNOW PATROL

 Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Chapter Summary

ACT 2: ‘BUT KNOW NOT WHAT WE MAY BE…’

Hermione embarks on a long journey to South America with Draco and finds she is thrust into a situation of far greater personal intimacy with her former enemy than she had ever anticipated...

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8. Not So Easy to EZE

Finding Draco Malfoy at Heathrow Airport was a lot more difficult than Hermione had anticipated.

She Floo-ed straight to the Express Lounge at the International Portkey Terminal, which she had visited on numerous occasions. From there, she followed the signs for Terminal Five, which was for Muggle flights only. She was already late and had to jog for fifteen minutes in driving rain through acres of car parks and across a busy road - getting stuck on a roundabout in the process.

Terminal Five was impressive yet dispiriting; a gigantic facade of featureless glass, accessed by pedestrian walkways spanning a narrow, vertiginous gully. Hermione shuddered at the thunderous wall of sound - the roaring engines of a jet plane, taking off from a nearby runway – that seemed to echo from the glass expanse ahead, encircling her.

She hated flying, in all its forms, and hadn't set foot on a Muggle plane since the fateful time she flew her parents to Australia fifteen years ago. She had wept for the entire journey - not just because of what was happening with the War and the threat it posed to those she loved, and not just because she was losing her parents for an uncertain period of time, but because she was petrified of the whole flying experience.

Hermione was both bewildered and a little apprehensive that Draco had arranged to meet Ron here at all. Surely he didn’t expect Ron to fly to Buenos Aires when a Portkey would take a fraction of the time? There had to be another more rational reason for this particular rendezvous.

Her mood was worsened by the sight of Draco's scowling face waiting at one of the entrances to the terminal. He was trussed into a long, grey raincoat, umbrella aloft, his silvery hair glistening in the purplish light of dusk.

By the time Hermione was alongside him, she was panting hard from the effort of carting the metal attaché case and her leather suitcase all the way from the Portkey Terminal and was mentally berating herself for not casting a simple lightening charm.

Draco literally took three steps backwards as she approached.
'No, Ron, no! Please tell me you've had an accident with the Polyjuice!' he yelped.

'Is it really so bad to see me?' Hermione snapped, more offended than she could have ever imagined possible. 'Let's get inside, I'm soaked.'

It was brightly lit inside the terminal building; a vast, open space, stylishly designed – all white, glass and chrome. It was hugely busy as the countdown to the overnight international flights was clearly underway.

‘Guess I shouldn’t be surprised that Weasel's chickened out,' Draco said in scathing tones. He pointed at the metal attaché case in Hermione's hand. 'Any luck getting into that thing?'

'None at all... and Ron hasn’t CHICKENED OUT,’ Hermione said sharply, ‘he’s hurt his back, which means you've got ME instead.'

'Clumsy clot,' Draco sneered. Hermione could feel his eyes looking her up and down. She automatically reddened, knowing she had to look a sorry, sodden state. Her riotous hair had broken free from its tightly-wound chignon around the time when she was trotting at a fair lick through Car Park C. Thick curly tendrils of hair were now clung to her cheeks and dripping globs of rainwater onto her flushed face.

'Ron was attacked in our home. Kind of convenient, don't you think?'

'Convenient? In what sense? Draco narrowed his eyes. 'Are you accusing ME of something here? I'd much rather have him here than you!'

'Listen, dipshit!' Hermione yelled, frustrated by his selfishness. 'What I mean is that you go and get shot just before this trip, and now Ron's been sidelined too. Doesn't that seem strange to you?'

A look of genuine surprise and anxiety flashed across Draco's features. 'You mean… someone knows about our plans and is out to knobble us?'

'That's exactly what I mean. What happened to you anyway?'

Draco shrugged. 'I honestly don't know. I was meant to be meeting somebody. I got an anonymous note telling me they had some… information. About… well… you know.'

So, she'd been right, Hermione thought, barely able to suppress a self-congratulatory smile. He had been looking for Katya.

'I was waiting in an alley – my contact insisted we were discreet, you see - and then, Bam! That was that.' His eyes darted nervously from side to side.

‘Meeting a stranger in an alley! That’s pretty dumb stuff, Malfoy! What the hell were you thinking?’ Hermione said in rebuking tones, although, inwardly, she was equally amazed he hadn't invented some tall tale of grand heroics instead.

Draco shrugged. ‘Desperate times call for desperate measures and all that … Look, we need to get going,’ he muttered, casting a worried glance towards the check-in queues. 'You'd better come with me to the ticket office.'

'Ticket office?' Hermione screeched. 'You mean we're actually flying?'

'In case you hadn't noticed, Mrs Weasley, we're at an airport,' Draco said sarcastically. 'Flying's what you do when you come to these places.'
'I'm quite aware of that, Malfoy. And equally aware that the Portkey Terminal is close by too, which will suit me nicely, thank you very much.'

'We have to fly.' Draco gestured at the metal case in Hermione's grasp. 'We can't risk taking that by Portkey. It's too important.'

'What the hell can happen? It's magically sealed, Malfoy. And you told me it was a hybridic Muggle-Magic technology, so I don't think x-rays are going to do it much good either, do you?' Hermione fumed.

There was no way she was going to fly. No way. One of the greatest perks of living in the wizarding world was the ability to use Portkeys and Apparition instead of aeroplanes. Draco could fly if he wanted. But it didn't mean she had to.

Draco grabbed Hermione by the elbow and steered her away from the swishing automatic doors at the main entrance, deeper into the airport.

'I'm not risking something happening to that scanner,' he said in firm tones. 'It's the only one we've got.'

He still had a hold of Hermione's arm and was now frog marching her towards a British Airways information booth, hosted by a line of smartly uniformed assistants sporting saccharine smiles.

Hermione tried to squirm free, but his grasp tightened. 'You'd better have your passport,' he added gruffly.

She finally shook her arm loose, eyeing him in disgust. The rain had matted her hair to her scalp and now a pristinely attired and poised sales assistant was watching them. Hermione instinctively pushed her hands through her hair, trying to make herself look presentable.

'I have my passport. Doesn't mean I'm going to fly,' she said in low tones, not wanting to make a scene in front of their audience. 'And don't say you need my help because of getting shot. You seem perfectly well to me.'

'It hurts like buggery.'

'Well, you seem to be coping perfectly well on your own,' she replied haughtily.

'Look,' he whispered harshly, pulling her close. He half unbuttoned his grey raincoat. Underneath, he was wearing a black jumper and silk shirt over black jeans. He dropped his travel bag and briefcase to the floor. Then he undid a few shirt buttons with one hand, pulling his jumper and shirt aside as covertly as possible so that she could see the swathe of bandaging wrapped around his left shoulder and around his chest. Katya's silver rose pendant hung loosely over the bandage, which was stained crimson, as freshly oozing blood suffused the crepe from his shoulder down to his ribcage.

Hermione had never wanted to see Draco Malfoy's chest, and even if she had, having to gawk at his body in the full glare of British Airways's finest sales staff would never have been her preferred option. But she was compassionate by nature and was keenly aware that moving his shoulder hurt Draco dreadfully, judging by the pained glint in his eye and his sharp intake of breath.

'Any good at healing spells?' he muttered.

'Merlin, Malfoy!' Hermione said. 'You should still be in St Mungo's.' Draco grimaced as he gingerly buttoned up his shirt. 'The blood will ruin your shirt if you're not careful,' Hermione warned primly.
'I've got spares.'

'That's not the point.' This was a nightmare, she thought, her head spinning. She hated flying. She hated Draco Malfoy. The two in combination was enough to make her scream in blind panic. But the man was in no fit state to fly halfway across the world without some support.

'Why are you still bleeding?' she asked urgently. 'The Mediwizards at St Mungo's should have been able to stop that with a simple charm.'

'I know. It doesn't make sense. Our private healer assured me that traveling wouldn't be a problem. But the wound started bleeding again the moment I got here.'

Hermione glanced around the airport, past the milling crowds queuing at the check-in desks, towards shops and bars, glutted with Christmas decorations.

'You might be best off going to the First Aid office,' Hermione murmured thoughtfully. She hoped that would do the trick. The last thing she wanted was to have to heal him herself. That involved far too much close, personal contact.

'Only you would get a magic-resistant wound, Malfoy,' she complained bitterly. 'And we have another problem,' she sighed. 'Me.'

'Go on,' Draco grunted impatiently.

'I'm – I'm scared of flying. And I very much doubt you have a Draught of Peace tucked away in that briefcase of yours, do you?'

'Oh,' Draco said, a little nonplussed at this development. 'Yes… that's right. You always hated it, didn't you? You were crap at Quidditch.'

Hermione glowered at him, beginning to feel a genuine sense of rising panic that this whole, stupid situation was already beginning to spiral out of her control. If she had any chance of getting on that plane to Buenos Aires, she desperately needed a little magical pick-me-up.

She inched closer to Draco - just in case the British Airways sales staff had supersonic hearing - and said in hushed tones, 'There's a Calming Charm. Works brilliantly with fear of flying. But I can't cast it on myself. You'd have to do it for me.'

Draco licked his bottom lip thoughtfully. 'Look. Don't worry about it. We'll sort something out,' he said in appeasing tones. 'Come on. Give me your passport.'

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Draco had to buy a brand-new ticket for Hermione. She was relieved to notice that they were flying Business Class. If she was to undergo prolonged torture, at least it would be in less cramped, more comfortable surroundings than Coach.

'Should we check the scanner into the hold?' she asked, once they were in line at the British Airways fast-track check-in desk, headed to Ezeiza Airport (EZE) in Buenos Aires.

'I think we'd better keep it close by,' Draco murmured. 'Maybe you could cast a disillusionment charm or something, so that we get it past security without any questions.'

'Don't they have all that top-notch x-ray equipment these days?' Hermione asked.
It occurred to her that Draco flew quite often, judging by the air miles she noted he'd used when purchasing her ticket. 'Even if a Muggle can't see the case, a machine might. That could get awkward.'

'Good point. We'll chance it then,' he said, picking up the metal case. 'I'll take it.'

They decided to get through security as quickly as possible. Hermione's heart was galloping wildly in her chest and she couldn't stop smiling; an inane, icky smile that she often had when she was feeling guilty or nervous. Silly, really. They weren't doing anything wrong! Okay, it might look odd that they had a machine hidden in a box, which nobody could actually open… but it wasn't actually a bomb.

Draco, on the other hand, seemed remarkably composed. He was wearing a cold, blank look on his face, all emotional response neatly packaged away. It was a look, she realized, that she had seen on him multiple times in her life when at school. She had always assumed it was a sign that he was devoid of feeling, a cold fish.

Draco ushered her through security ahead of him. She was quickly checked through. She only had her handbag and her full body scan revealed nothing out of the ordinary.

She loitered on the other side, smiling sweetly at the guards. Draco was coming through now. He was instantly pulled over by a burly guard for a full body check. Hermione saw him wince with pain as the guard's large, flat hands slapped their way down his body. The guard was now making him take off his coat and then his jumper, mussing up his pale hair in the process so that it was standing on end. A brief glance at Draco's face showed Hermione that his mask of cool composure was starting to slip. He was having to explain something. Knowing his feelings about Muggles, she was surprised he hadn't stuck his tongue out or whipped his wand out, transfiguring the hapless guard into a toad or a slug.

She edged a little closer to the security desk and the bank of TV screens displaying the interiors of bags as they came through the x-ray machine.

That was it! The scanner. She was sure of it. A smooth grey image of what looked like a bulky, square-shaped gun in a small case. And clearly its appearance had prompted some consternation amongst the guards who were huddled together, murmuring and shooting strange looks at Draco, who was now arguing quite forcefully with the burly security guard.

'Excuse me, sir,' one of the guards called to Draco. He nodded to Draco's guard who then prodded Draco closer towards the security desk. Draco shot a brief warning glance at Hermione, prompting her to step back.

'Could you open this case, sir?' one of the guards, a severe-looking woman with swarthy features and a moustache, demanded in clipped tones.

Draco repeatedly tried, but failed, getting increasingly flustered at each abortive attempt. The murmurs were growing in volume. Draco now had three guards – four, including the guard who had body-searched him – in close attendance, watching him intently as he struggled with the case.

Eventually, the severe-looking woman lost patience and grabbed hold of the case. With one swift click she had opened it. She looked at the case's contents and with an injured sniff turned her back on Draco. She held the case open for her colleagues to peer inside. Draco's eyes, round with wonder, desperately sought to see past the woman's bulk so that he could catch a glimpse of the scanner for himself.
There was a bemused hum of whispered conversation from the guards, who then snapped the case shut.

'You're a very strange man, you know that?' said the severe-looking guard to Draco, slapping a bold green sticker on the metal case. 'You can reclaim this at EZE.'

Draco nodded, torn between wanting to keep hold of the metal case at all costs, and also relief that he hadn't been banged up in an interrogation cell.

'And see a nurse before you board. There's a First Aid post at Gate Thirteen,' the burly guard added in taciturn tones.

Draco had been dismissed.

Hermione helped him put his raincoat back on, neither saying a word whilst still in earshot of security.

'I think Gate Thirteen would be a very good idea,' she said, suddenly aware of Draco's sickly green pallor. She wasn't sure if this was the fault of the bleeding bullet wound or his close shave with security.

Draco shook his head in confusion. 'I swear, it didn't open for me. That doesn't make sense.'

'It looks like a gun,' Hermione whispered, as they scanned the information boards for news of their flight.

'Fucking great,' Draco muttered darkly. 'Look. Sod the bloody nurse. There's an executive lounge right by our gate. Drinks are free.'

However, as they approached Gate Thirteen, a pretty, young Muggle in a nurse's uniform passed them and entered the First Aid office.

'On the other hand,' Draco said in lighter tones, instantly following her. 'I'll meet you in the lounge.'

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Amidst all the drama of security, Hermione had almost forgotten the reason why she was now standing alone in a British Airways Club Class lounge in the middle of a bustling airport.

And then it hit her… How the hell had she got to this point? Had Draco covertly cast an Imperius curse on her? Or was this a case of straightforward hypnosis? The simple fact remained - she had to get on board a flight in around forty-five minutes and wouldn't be allowed off that flight until some fourteen and a half hours later.

An icy knot of nerves in her stomach tightened and her pulse rate notched upwards at the mere thought of it. Boy, she needed that Calming Charm, but in the meanwhile, she would have to make do with the free drink Draco had promised.

She had to admit the British Airways executive lounge appeared to be a particularly salubrious place. There was a quiet buzz of activity, but overall, the clean, modern design and low lighting made for a suitably stylish, yet serene atmosphere.

There were definitely worse places to be having a panic attack, Hermione thought, heading purposefully towards the self-service bar.
Twenty-five minutes later, Draco still hadn't showed up. She had already downed three gin and tonics in quick succession – each one progressively stronger - to quell the increasingly excitable butterflies jittering inside her tummy.

It wasn't that she feared the plane crashing. Her logical brain knew that this was an extremely remote possibility. Statistically, Splinching was a much more likely danger in her life. But she hated being cooped up in a tin can in the sky, 37,000 feet up, with nothing beneath her, above her, or around her. Nothing but empty space. It was disorientating. And that terrified her.

Maybe she should eat something? she wondered idly.

She sauntered over to the open buffet and scooped a decent mound of couscous salad and some tasty-looking buffalo mozzarella onto a plate, liberally lacing it with a dash of balsamic vinegar dressing. She ate her meal with gusto, using a hunk of crusty ciabatta to mop up the remains. There was a range of fine wines propped up in a long line of ice buckets for her to sample.

She poured herself a large glass of chilled New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc, followed by an even larger glass of Rioja; a rich, burnished red, which caressed her mouth with warm velvety goodness.

She was more relaxed than she could remember being in a long, long time, and delighted in this feeling of anonymity, of quietly sensual, hedonistic enjoyment. There were other passengers like herself, checking laptops, speaking into mobile phones, chatting, eating, enjoying a glass of wine. So many Muggles, she thought, a smile of amusement on her face. How did Draco cope?

'There you are,' Draco's voice rang in her ear. He was looking a little less disheveled, even though his shirt was still unbuttoned to his chest. She could see he was now wearing a fresh white bandage. 'The nurse gave me these,' he said, brandishing a small box of pills. 'I said I was a pathetic little crybaby who was too scared to fly. Humiliated myself actually…'

Hermione pocketed the pills. 'I'm amazed you allowed a Muggle to touch you so intimately,' she said archly. 'But then again, it was a pretty young nurse…'

'With soft, warm hands,' he smirked. 'Wait here. I'm going to grab a beer.'

Hermione's moment of calm had evaporated. To think she'd actually felt sorry for him when she'd learned about Katya and her disappearance. He really was an obnoxious little twerp.

She glanced at the departure screens. Their flight was due to board. And still no Calming Charm. She was running out of time. And why the hell had Draco just given her these pills instead?

She took a deep breath then gulped back a deep mouthful of her Rioja, but instantly regretted it as a scorching sensation travelled the length of her gullet. Her palms, moist with perspiration, slid on the wine glass. She tentatively placed it on a nearby counter, aware that she was trembling.

She frantically fished the pills out of her pocket. If Draco didn't get back soon, maybe they'd be better than nothing. Her heart sank when she read the notice affixed to the packet, warning against taking this medication in conjunction with alcohol.

'Bugger,' she cursed. 'Have you got your wand handy?' she asked Draco the moment he had returned, clutching a frosted glass of ice-cold lager.

'No. Why should I?'

'You're a wizard, moron,' Hermione seethed. 'Or have you somehow forgotten that?' She always shrunk her wand and wore it as a pendant whenever she wasn't wearing a robe. Most wizards had
similar means to keep their wands both concealed, yet handy.

'I've lost it,' Draco glared defensively at Hermione.

'Lost it? But I need the Calming Charm!' Hermione groaned. 'You promised.'

'Have another drink instead,' Draco said moodily. He snatched her wine glass and filled it to the brim with red wine.

'I'll be sick if I drink anymore,' Hermione whined.

Draco’s eyes were a chill, glacial grey. Hard and without feeling, Hermione thought miserably. She reluctantly took the wine and slurped it back in one foul swoop. She felt she had drunk more in the last week than she had in the entire preceding year.

Still, the last glass of wine seemed to have had an undeniable effect on calming her nerves, Hermione conceded, as they traipsed through passport check and then onto the plane. By the time she was strapped into her seat, next to the window, a luxuriant warmth had suffused her limbs. She felt heavy, soporific, and as the engines roared to a crescendo and the plane surged forwards, she closed her eyes, slipping into sleep.

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She was awoken from her slumber by the clattering of a catering trolley being trundled up the aisle. Her mind was foggy, disorientated, trying to make out what a plump-cheeked woman in a navy uniform was saying to her.

'Chicken or salmon, love?' she asked in bright, brassy tones. 'Oh, I'm sorry, did I wake you?'

Hermione smiled politely. 'No. I was just resting my eyes.' She opted for the chicken and was so busy fiddling with the tiny condiments and plastic wrapped dishes on her tea tray, it was a good few minutes before she realized that the seat beside her was empty.

It didn't take long after that for the full impact of her situation to overwhelm her. She was alone, on a plane, and she had a queasy sensation swilling through her stomach and a dull, thudding headache. Any alcohol she might have consumed to help get her on board was fast evaporating from her bloodstream.

She peered out of the window into the thick blue-black of the night sky, mesmerised by the incessant twinkling of a small, white light positioned behind her on the wing of the plane. She became uncomfortably aware of the thrum and roar of the engines, a low-pitched growl which was even louder when she placed her ear tightly against the cold plastic window.

She took a deep breath, trying to still the shooting sensations which were surging through her legs. She didn't want to descend into panic. Didn't want her chest to feel tight and constricted. Didn't want to feel like she wanted to throw herself from the plane. She tried to block these thoughts, toying aimlessly with her food instead.

Where the hell was Draco? First, he'd dragged her onto this plane under false pretences. And now he'd deserted her.

'Coffee or tea?' the plump-faced flight attendant chirruped.

'Coffee. Black,' Hermione said, eager for any interaction. 'Have you seen the guy who was sitting next to me?
'The blond chap?'

Hermione nodded.

'Oh, he moved.'

'Moved?' Hermione asked, barely able to disguise the fury in her voice. How dare he? Did she snore or something? 'Thanks.'

'You're welcome.'

Hermione gulped back her coffee and then slithered out of her seat to look for Draco. As much as she loathed him, she couldn't stand the thought of panicking alone for the next umpteen hours. She needed distraction.

She soon spotted him, three rows back, chatting to an attractive, middle-aged brunette, who seemed engrossed in a catalogue he was showing her. She could see it was a sales catalogue for Herb Healing. Hermione couldn't help but giggle. Here was Draco Malfoy, infamous Muggle-hater and pure-blood snob, looking for all the world like a cheap door-to-door salesman.

Even though she despised him with every fibre of her being, she had to privately admit to being surprised by his easy manner with Muggles. She knew he worked with them. Knew too that he travelled widely as Global Business Manager for Herb Healing. He'd obviously had to get used to them, whether he liked it or not.

She inched her way up the aisle towards him until she was looming over his pale head. He didn't even notice her and it was the brunette woman who acknowledged her presence first, looking a little sheepish for reasons Hermione didn't even want to think about at that moment in time.

'I think your friend wants you,' she said to Draco, a puckish smile on her face.

'Oh, you're up,' Draco drawled lazily.

'Have you moved here permanently?'

'You want me to sit with you?'

The brunette was listening keenly to this exchange, clearly suspecting a lover's tiff, which riled Hermione, but she put a brave face on it. 'There's stuff we need to talk about,' Hermione said. 'Work stuff.'

Draco pulled a face. 'Duty calls,' he said apologetically to the brunette, who was twittering her thanks for the catalogue and his company and hoping he cut that big deal he was after. Draco levered his tall frame out of the seat and followed Hermione.

'What do you want then?' he asked sharply, settling himself into the seat next to Hermione's.

'If you'd rather sit back there, I don't actually care,' Hermione retorted.

'She was pleasant enough. More fun than listening to you slobbering in your sleep.'

Oh God. So, she did snore. All these years Ron had been lying to her.

'I'm amazed at you, Malfoy. Talking nicely to a Muggle,' she said scornfully. 'Don't you want to kill them all?'
Draco clapped his hand over her mouth. 'Shut the fuck up,' he hissed. 'You can't say shit like that on a bloody plane. Muggles get very paranoid these days.'

Hermione instinctively reacted, sinking her teeth deep into the fleshy mound beneath his thumb. Draco roughly pulled his hand away, then gazed dumbly at it, too shocked to speak. She hadn't broken the skin, although it was red and wet and lined with neat indentations.

'I'm so sorry,' she breathed. 'I don't know what came over me.' She was shamefacedly aware that she had actually enjoyed inflicting pain on him. 'I think I must be a little bit… uninhibited,' she explained. ‘All that wine and gin at the terminal.’

'Rabid, more like,' Draco spat angrily. 'I think it'd be better if I sat elsewhere, don't you?'

'Look. Malfoy,' Hermione pleaded. She hated him having the high moral ground. It felt strangely alien. 'What I really want… what I need, is the Calming Charm.'

'What's wrong with the pills I gave you?'

'What's the worst that could happen?'

'I don't know. But I don't want to find out the hard way, okay?'

Draco rubbed his eyes. He was clearly very tired. A brief twinge of pain flashed across his features.

'Have you checked your bandages since take-off?' Hermione asked.

'No.'

'Well… why don't we go to the toilet, check you're not bleeding everywhere, and you can use my wand to calm me down?'

Draco looked at her oddly, his eyes brimming with amusement. 'Did I hear that correctly? You want us to go to the toilet together?'

Hermione groaned in exasperation. 'I know it sounds strange.'

'Too fucking right. What would Ron say?'

'Shit up, Malfoy,' Hermione said, wrinkling her nose in disgust at his insinuation.

The plump-faced flight attendant was hovering. 'Is there anything I can get you?' she trilled.

'We're fine,' Hermione said. Draco cast the attendant a cursory glance and shook his head.

'Not so nice to her, were you?' Hermione said sarcastically.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You only like the good-looking Muggles.'

Draco snorted with laughter. 'That's utter bollocks. She seems nice enough.' He thought a moment. 'British Airways often go for a more homely type of bird, which isn't a bad thing of course. Makes you feel looked after. Thai Airlines. Now that's a good airline. They go for out-and-out stunners. And Singapore. Gorgeous girls and a brilliant safety record.'
'I guess the ease with which you would resort to stereotypes in the Muggle world is only to be expected,' Hermione huffed.

Draco didn't reply and seemed inclined to drift off to sleep, much to Hermione's frustration. Supreme irritant that he was, at least he kept her mind off her situation; the sudden cold fear that would clutch at her insides, every time her eye was inadvertently drawn beyond her immediate space. That endless winking light on the wing was a peculiarly menacing attraction, reminding her of the vast emptiness outside.

She guessed they were flying over the ocean by now, which made it worse.

She had to stop these thoughts. Had to stop the dizzying whirl of panic which was already beginning to sweep through her.

'This isn't fun, Malfoy,' she gasped. 'I don't know if I can put up with this for much longer.'

'You've no choice,' he mumbled, still with his eyes closed. 'We're stuck in the sky for the next twelve hours.'

'Twelve hours?' she squeaked, tears springing to her eyes. She wished she'd brought her two-way mirror on board. Wished she could somehow speak to Ron and the kids.

Draco was watching her through narrowed eyes. He sighed deeply.

'Come on then,' he grunted. 'Let's do it.'

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She followed him to the toilet, which was mercifully empty. They squeezed inside, the dim light flickering on as the door swung shut behind them.

Normally, she rather liked being in the toilet on board a plane. It was an oasis of personal space. A small respite. She secretly liked the Lilliputian smallness of it all. The doll-sized sink and soap dispenser.

However, the last thing she really wanted in a plane toilet was to be squashed up tight against a groaning Draco Malfoy, struggling to remove his jumper. Draco flailed around, banging into the door, which he then leant against, panting.

'Give me a hand, will you?' he begged, his voice muffled by the black wool coating his head like a faceless balaclava. He stumbled forwards blindly, smashing her against the cistern, her foot jamming onto the flush pedal. She couldn't help but grin at the resultant whoosh and slurp of water being gobbled away.

She hooked her hands into the hem of his jumper and dragged it over his head.

With fumbling fingers he unbuttoned his shirt.

'Why are you laughing?' he said, red-faced with the effort of it all.

'Just… this seems a little surreal.'

He looked at her oddly. 'You sure you need a Calming Charm?'

Hysteria was bubbling up inside of her. 'Definite.'
He had completely unbuttoned his black shirt, which further added to the strangeness of the situation. His bare chest was lean and surprisingly well sculpted with defined musculature.

She fixed her eyes on Katya's rose, glinting in the weak, yellowish light, then ensured she kept her eyes firmly trained on his bandaged left shoulder. A faint rosy stain was already seeping into the creamy-white crepe.

'Is it bad?' he said, a note of worry in his voice.

'Not too bad.'

'Can I last?'

'How many hours did you say till we land?'

'About twelve. Maybe eleven and a half.'

Hermione gulped. That seemed a mighty long time.

'We'd better take a closer look at the wound,' she said quietly.

With trembling fingers, she unfastened the clips the Muggle nurse had used to secure the bandage and then slowly peeled back the crepe covering, aware that her hands were probably cool on Draco's skin, which was hot to the touch.

Not a good sign, she thought glumly to herself. She stuffed the soiled bandages into a bin built into the paneling under the sink.

A piece of lint, daubed in a vivid yellow antiseptic, was still glued with congealed blood to the wound. Removing it was going to hurt.

Hermione glanced at Draco. He was watching her intently. His breathing was heavy, gusting onto her cheeks in hot bursts.

'Go for it,' he said.

Hermione lifted the lint as delicately as possible. It clung to him, dragging clots of blood and tissue in its wake, leaving small, fluffy fibres embedded in the wound.

Draco gasped, clapping the miniature sink with his right hand to steady himself.

'What's it like?' he asked hoarsely. He was looking away, watching them both in the mirror.

'Your pretty nurse made a botch-job of this,' Hermione said wryly.

'Maybe she was too distracted by my handsome looks and razor-sharp wit,' Draco said between gritted teeth.

Hermione snorted in derision. 'I very much doubt that.' She leaned closer, getting a good look at the wound.

The wound was a perfect red circle with angry-looking, puffy, correlated edges. It was bleeding - though, thankfully, not fast flowing – and weeping a glistening ooze. The skin immediately surrounding the wound was red and puckered and worryingly warm. Equally concerning, was the hot pink discoloration radiating from his shoulder towards his chest, neck and armpit.
'You have to see a doctor as soon as we land,' she said authoritatively. Draco nodded. He still had his face turned away, drawing her attention to the thick cord of neck muscle which traced its path from his collar bone to the hairline behind his ear.

Hermione tugged at her necklace, from which her wand was hanging.

'Hold still while I get this off, will you?' she asked.

Instead, to her surprise, Draco encircled her with his arms, gently tipping her head forwards so that he had better access to her neck. Her hair flooded forwards, brushing against his stomach. With nimble hands he unfastened the chain, his fingertips softly grazing her neck. He then slipped the wand off the chain and handed it to her.

'Thanks,' she said, acutely aware that her skin was still ticklish from his touch.

She returned the wand to its normal size and directed it at Draco's wound. She cast a quick Tergeo, cleaning the blood from his wound as best she could, priming the site for a Healing Charm.

Draco's breathing was laboured and fresh perspiration coated his neck and torso. Her eyes were drawn to his Adam's apple, which shifted prominently in his throat as he gulped in response to the pain. She couldn't help but notice that his stubble was darker, coarser, than she expected.

She firmly fixed her concentration on the job in hand. She then delicately positioned her wand against his skin and traced a pattern. She moved the wand over his shoulder and round his chest, holding his shirt away from his body so that it didn't impede her progress. A fresh, lightweight bandage, spun slowly from the end of her wand, and she fastened it around his body. Draco lifted his arms higher to ensure she had unfettered access to his back.

'Now me,' she said firmly.

Draco adjusted himself back into his clothes.

'What about you?' he said, buttoning up his shirt. He seemed reluctant to look her in the eye.

'I need a Calming Charm, remember? That was the deal.'

'You seem perfectly calm to me.'

'I'm fine when I'm in here,' she gestured to their cramped quarters.

'Stay here then. I'll tell them you're sick.'

'Not so fast!' Hermione said sternly, thrusting her wand into Draco's hand. 'Look! I'm trusting you completely here! I don't let anyone touch my wand. Ever!'

'Not even Ron?'

Especially not Ron, she thought privately.

'Do you even know a Calming Charm?' she asked.

'Of course I do,' he sneered, looking like the insolent teenager she once knew and loathed.

'Then get on with it!' she yelled excitedly.

There was a cough outside the door, which alerted them to the fact that their prolonged presence in
this cubicle might well be drawing unwanted attention.

'Quickly, Malfoy. Come on. You can do it,' she pleaded. She couldn't face however many more hours of this. She was already sick and tired of her heightened heart-rate, that sense of sweaty panic constantly lurking beneath her skin, threatening to break out at any given moment.

'Fuck,' Draco said, clutching her wand tightly in his palm. He shut his eyes, mumbling an incantation over and over.

'Just point the bloody wand at me, will you?'

He looked at her. His eyes wide and staring, hot, molten grey.

'Hold still,' he barked. And with one quick flick of her wand he had done it. A cool, soothing balm eased through her. She felt like crying with relief.

Draco, however, had fallen sideways, crashing into the sink. Her wand tumbled to the floor. She quickly retrieved it, in case he snapped it with his feet, which were flailing for a firm footing.

'What's wrong with you?' she cried, holding him steady and allowing him to lean on her. He pushed her roughly out of the way and vomited into the toilet.

'I don't know. Get out of here,' he croaked.

Hermione hastened out, colliding with the attractive brunette woman who Draco had been sitting next to.

'Sorry about the wait,' Hermione said, a little breathlessly. 'My friend, he's sick.'

'Oh dear, poor thing,' she cooed, looking genuinely concerned. 'Should we call one of the attendants?'

'He'll be fine,' Hermione assured her.

Thank god for the Calming Charm, she thought, amazed at the blithe, rested feeling that was humming through her. Under any other circumstances, being cooped up in such close quarters with a puking Draco Malfoy would have spiralled her into paroxysms of skin-crawling horror that would have been hard to recover from.

But why did he have such a visceral reaction to using magic? What had happened?

It was only when she reclaimed her seat that she noticed that she had walked almost the entire length of business class, wielding her wand. She hoped the Muggles didn't think it was a weapon of some kind.

Draco soon rejoined her. He was pale and wan-looking.

'What was all that about then?' she asked.

'I don't want to talk about it,' he said testily. 'Let's - let's just pretend that none of that happened.'

'You've been banned from using magic, haven't you?' Hermione said snidely. Her suspicions had first been raised by his unwillingness to Apparate and his use of matches at Malfoy Manor rather than a simple spell, but now his reluctance to use a wand – even his claim to have lost his wand – sealed the deal, as far as she was concerned. This had been his punishment for trading in Dark Artefacts, she felt certain.
'I haven't been banned,' he groused. 'And I've been itching to hit you with a Langlock for quite some time.'

'Don't lie to me, Draco Malfoy,' she said in hoity-toity tones. 'You've been cursed, haven't you? Anytime you use magic, you get sick. That's it, isn't it?'

'You really are a self-righteous little prig,' he said, curling his lip in disdain.

'I'm right though, aren't I?'

'Shut the fuck up, you don't know what you're talking about,' he groaned, closing his eyes. 'On second thoughts,' he said, his eyes snapping open. 'Give me those fucking pills.'

Hermione snapped open her handbag where she had closeted the pills and handed them over. Draco signaled for a glass of water. The flight attendant hastened over with a plastic beaker in hand.

'What are you doing?'

'Knocking myself out,' he muttered, popping three pills from the packet and scooting them into his mouth. He swallowed them down with a mouthful of water. 'That way I won't have to listen to your endless chuntering drivel.'

'You're so rude.'

'And you're pissing me off. Fuck knows how Ron puts up with you… the guy's got to be a flipping saint.' He pulled a complementary eye-mask out of his British Airways Welcome Pack, which was tucked into the seat-pocket in front of his legs. 'Enjoy your flight, Mrs Weasley. I'll see you in Buenos Aires.'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"FLY ME AWAY" by GOLDFRAPP

&

“SPEED” by ZAZIE

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
9. **Recoleta**

As the flight to Buenos Aires dragged on, Hermione began to see why some wizards had an innate sense of superiority. What took hours using Muggle technology could have taken a matter of minutes with magic.

Instead, she had to watch Draco sleeping the sleep of the dead for what felt like an eternity. Thankfully, she suppressed the temptation to pluck his eyelashes out one lash at a time by succumbing to sleep herself. When she awoke, the sprawling city of Buenos Aires stretched out below them, abutting a vast mud-brown river.

Draco stumbled blearily through Ezeiza Airport and promptly fell fast asleep again the moment they were sat in a taxi heading towards the city.

It was a blistering hot morning. In her haste to pack, Hermione had clean forgotten that it was summer in South America and was stupidly over-dressed in jeans and a jumper. The taxi had an aircon unit, rumbling loudly at full-blast, but she was soon sticky with sweat.

She envied Draco, who had stripped down to his shirt in the airport and looked surprisingly cool, his head lolling against the back seat as he slept. His shirt had slipped open a little and she could see that the bandage she had conjured on the plane was now stained red. That was a bad sign; further proof that the Medi-magic treatment meted out by St Mungo's hadn't worked.

It was a half hour journey into Buenos Aires. At first, they travelled past a string of dismal-looking suburbs; breezeblock buildings stained black from exhaust fumes and clusters of ramshackle, half-built houses. But before long, the city itself had reared up ahead; tall gleaming office towers, grand palatial buildings and oversized billboards lined their route. The road had flowed into a broad multi-lane avenue, crammed with traffic. At the far end of this avenue was an imposing white obelisk, proudly pointing skywards.

The taxi soon ducked into a fast-flowing one-way boulevard packed with classy boutiques, its pavements bordered by dusty trees.

They pulled up in front of a swanky-looking mansion.

'Malfoy! Wake up!'

Draco stirred and stretched, blinking rapidly. 'What is it?' he grumbled, smothering a yawn with his hand. 'Where are we?'

'We've arrived,' she said.

Hermione was being ushered out of the taxi by a smartly attired doorman, while a bellboy handled their luggage. An unexpected fillip of excitement throbbed through her as she ascended the hotel
steps and entered an impressive marble lobby, crowned by a resplendent glass chandelier.

She glanced back at Draco, who lurched out of the taxi and pulled his wallet from his jeans pocket to pay the driver.

'Come on then,' Draco said, seemingly unimpressed with the place. 'Let's check in.'

A uniformed concierge sporting a top hat smiled. 'Welcome Senor, Senora, to the Alvear Palace Hotel.'

Draco ignored him, heading straight for the reception desk.

'We have a booking. The name's Malfoy,' Draco said impatiently, slapping a credit card onto the counter.

'Of course, Senor. Right away, Senor.' The receptionist took the card, directly passing it to an assistant for processing.

Hermione's attention was caught by a small ladies' clothes boutique, which was nestled in one corner of the foyer, half-hidden behind a tall, marble pillar. A sophisticated sales assistant with a forbidding air was smoothing invisible wrinkles from a dusky pink, silk shift dress, which was being modeled by a grey headless mannequin in the window.

Hermione sighed enviously. She'd never been into pink, but there was something dainty, yet sensuous, about this particular outfit. She imagined the soft, cool slide of the fabric over her skin and shivered. But it was probably far too expensive. And it wasn't the kind of thing she could imagine wearing on a regular basis – if ever.

She wandered slowly back to the check-in desk where Draco was waiting for his credit card to be returned. The receptionist passed it back and as Draco slipped it into his wallet, Hermione noted that it was a corporate card - not for Herb Healing - but for Gilgad Inc. Wasn't that Ephraim Golowitz's company? Clearly, he was an even bigger player in Herb Healing than she had first thought.

'You need a doctor,' Hermione reminded Draco.

He looked nonplussed for a moment.

'I'm not a trained nurse,' Hermione said sternly.

'We always have a doctor on call, Senor,' the receptionist said with an ingratiating smile. 'Would you like me to send him up to your room?'

'Yes, he would,' Hermione said firmly.

'Right you are, Senora. I can have someone with Senor Malfoy within the half hour.'

Draco scowled at Hermione. 'I've got a lunch meeting with a client. You can come along if you like.'

'Thanks, but no thanks,' Hermione said stroppily.

'Ah, Senor Malfoy!' the concierge interrupted, waving a piece of paper excitedly. 'I almost forgot. You have a message.'

Draco quickly scanned the slip of paper.
'It's our contact, Senor Canaro. He requests our company at three o'clock sharp. Says he has crucial information regarding *Los Rojos*.'

'What are *Los Rojos*?' Hermione asked as they headed into the lift and pressed the button for their floor.

'I have absolutely no idea,' Draco replied.

XXX

Hermione was glad to finally get some privacy. Her room was a little chintzier than she had hoped; old school floral fabrics and a Louis XVI chair with spindly, *faux*-gilted legs. A plasma screen television affixed to the wall looked out of place, but Hermione couldn't help but thrill to the novelty of multi-channel TV, hoping that there was a pay-as-you-go film service on offer too.

Her bathroom was a decent size and pleasantly luxuriant, with a basket of delicious-smelling Hermes toiletries for her perusal.

Moments later she had stripped off and was reveling in a cool shower, enthusiastically scrubbing the grime of long-distance travel from her hair with a scalp-tingling citrus shampoo.

She roughly towel-dried her hair and donned a thick white bathrobe, which she had found hanging in her wardrobe.

She had arranged to meet Draco in the lobby bar at half past eleven to review their plans, which gave her almost an hour to collapse onto her king-sized bed and relax.

But first, she wanted to speak to Ron, see how his back was doing and hopefully hear news on Rose and Hugo. She rifled through her case, plucking the mirror from a side-pocket, rubbed it clean with her sleeve and called Ron's name. There was no answer. She called a second, then a third time. But still no response. She guessed he was at The Burrow and had left his part of the two-way mirror at home.

She eyed the telephone beside her bed enviously. While travel was problematic, there were a few areas, communications being an obvious example she thought, where Muggles were ahead of the game.

Her reverie was interrupted by a sharp knock on her door.

'That better not be you, Malfoy!' she yelled. 'I'm trying to get some downtime here.'

As there was no reply, she hastened to open the door, fearing she had just shouted at a complete stranger.

'You won't want these then,' Draco smirked, tossing an armful of dresses into her arms.

Hermione was struck speechless, with an odd combination of offended irritation and girlish glee. 'You didn't need to,' she eventually said, also wondering if Draco buying her clothes was perhaps a little inappropriate. Would he have bought Ron a cool summer suit in similar circumstances?

Draco barged past her into the room and threw himself heavily onto her spindly-legged Louis XVI. He drummed his fingers furiously on an antique desk, the companion piece to the chair.

'I can't have you meeting my client looking like a dog's dinner.'
'But I'm not coming.'

'Senor Canaro's rearranged for midday, so I've had to move my client to three. Luckily, Canaro's place is close to where I've arranged to meet Miguel –'

'Miguel?'

'Miguel Culebra. Works in consumer pharmaceuticals. You'll like him.'

'I don't plan to meet him,' Hermione said drolly.

His cool, grey eyes appraised her. 'How was your shower?'

'Perfect.'

'Do you like the dresses or do I take them back?' he said, crossing his arms and glaring at her.

'I hope you got these on expenses, Malfoy,' she murmured, laying the dresses flat on the bed. She instantly recognised them from the boutique, including the dusky pink shift she had admired so fervently. They were skimpier than her usual style, but in this searing heat, that was probably a good thing.

'I wondered if you could change my dressing,' Draco said bluntly. He was already unbuttoning his shirt, which was freshly on.

'I thought we agreed you were having the doctor come to your room?' Hermione said indignantly. So that explained the dresses. They were a bribe for medical services rendered.

'I changed my mind.'

'But it's a doctor you need, Malfoy! Not me.'

'I'm the judge of that,' he said dryly. 'I'll get Senor Canaro to recommend a mediwizard. In the meantime -'

'Oh, I see, Muggle medicine's not good enough for you,' Hermione huffed.

Draco had already removed his shirt and was grimacing with pain as he tried to unravel his bandage by himself. His hand kept brushing against his silver rose pendant, which bounced repeatedly against his chest.

Hermione's eyes were automatically drawn to the faded dark mark tattooed on his right inner arm. It was a little more livid than she expected it to be.

'I really wanted a rest. By myself,' Hermione said sulkily, grabbing her wand from the bedside table and vanishing Draco's bandages with one single swish and a mumbled Evanesco.

'Right,' she breathed, taking a good look at Draco's wound. He flinched as water from her hair, dripped onto his bare chest and stomach. 'I've got clean hands.' She looked him in the eye. 'Can I touch it?'

She didn't wait for an answer, immediately pushing one investigatory finger against the puckered edge of the wound. She could hardly believe she was doing this. Healing had never been her strongest suit and touching Draco Malfoy in such an intimate way was the last thing she would have ever wanted to do in normal circumstances. But needs must.
Draco laid a hand heavily on her shoulder for support. He grunted with pain.

'That fucking kills.'

'Hold tight,' she said, squeezing the cut open and peering inside. She knew she was hurting him, but she had to check for any foreign objects. *Something* was stopping this wound from healing.

Draco gasped, clutching onto her shoulder, his nails digging into her skin. 'Couldn't you have cast a numbing spell first? Or is this some perverse form of punishment?' he choked.

His face and chest were now glowing with a faint sheen of sweat, and Hermione could see the movement of his heart, beating hard and fast, beneath his skin.

She hated to admit it, she really did, but there was something ever so slightly thrilling about inflicting this amount of pain on Draco Malfoy. It rather scared her.

She could now see there was something small and knobbly lodged deep inside the wound. It wasn't the remains of gunshot, that was for sure, but something bluish. And it was seeping a translucent liquid – not pus, as she had first thought – in addition to blood.

'This is going to hurt,' she murmured, flicking a quick glance at Draco's contorted face. She gently eased the tip of her finger inside the wound. His skin was scorching hot and a warm, blood-streaked liquid oozed down the length of her finger.

'You're a fucking sadist, you know that?' Draco panted, a strange gleam in his eye. He was shaking, partly in pain, partly because he had tensed his muscles so tightly in response to Hermione's ministrations.

Hermione delved a little deeper, her finger grazing what felt like a soft grain. Her hand tingled and then a shooting pain darted with startling force, like an electric current, through the entire length of her arm, culminating in a fierce ache in her shoulder.

She shot backwards, steadied only by Draco's firm grip of her shoulder.

'What the hell was that all about?'

'It's magic. Definitely magic,' Hermione gasped. The ache was quickly subsiding, but there was a faint fluttering in her chest, as though her heart had missed a beat and was desperately trying to play catch-up.

'Brilliant,' he said hoarsely. 'So it wasn't a normal bullet.'

'No. Not Muggle.'

'Why didn't St Mungo's pick up on it?' he complained. 'You all right?' he said to Hermione, who was still reeling from the strange shooting sensation that had almost knocked her over.

'I'm fine,' she breathed, steadying herself and refocusing on the job in hand. She gently eased the tip of her wand into the entrance to the wound and muttered a healing spell. 'Must be pretty powerful stuff though. I doubt this will do much good.'

'Better than nothing.'

'How do you feel?' she asked. 'In yourself?'

Draco seemed momentarily at a loss for words. 'What do you mean?'
'Are you feeling sick? Feverish?'

'A little.'

She felt his forehead. He was warm, but not burning. Nothing too concerning.

Hermione quickly cleaned and dressed the wound using her wand, avoiding his gaze throughout, and suddenly wanting to get this over with as soon as possible. Something about the weight and feel of his hand on her shoulder was beginning to make her feel uncomfortable.

'Good. All done for now. I could do with my downtime,' she said a little more brightly than she actually felt.

'We need to talk,' Draco said shortly, pulling on his shirt. 'Let's go for coffee. There's a nice place close by.'

'Do we have to?'

'You're here in Ron's place, which in view of your skills and intelligence was a fair trade in my book,' Draco said in businesslike tones.

'Was that your idea of a compliment?' Hermione said, feigning shock.

'I'll meet you downstairs in half an hour,' Draco said curtly.

XXX

The hotel was a short walk from Recoleta, an upmarket area famous for its large and elaborate cemetery, populated by Argentina's most celebrated corpses. Hermione had picked up a tourist leaflet in the hotel lobby and was reading as she walked.

'Did you know Eva Peron's tomb is here?' she said. 'I'd love to see it.' She gazed longingly at the wrought iron entrance gates and the pitched concrete roofs of the mausoleums inside.

'Another time. You're not on bloody holiday,' Draco said scathingly. 'Once we've saved the world, get Weasel to bring you,' he added, a smarmy smile on his face.

Draco led her down a series of stone steps towards a shady area of parkland. Almost immediately the sounds of the city faded. Hermione was surprised to hear bursts of birdsong and the rhythmic drone of a lawnmower. She chased after Draco, who was striding purposefully through the park.

'Where are we going?' she asked Draco, impatient with his inability to communicate relevant information.

'Up here on the left.' He pointed to a busy café situated in the leafy courtyard-garden of a grand Palladian-style building.

They sat down at a table facing the park and ordered coffee.

The sun was beating down on them now. Hermione was relieved to be out of her jeans and decided that keeping Draco's dresses had probably been a good idea. Her new gauzy aquamarine sundress was a bit too revealing for her liking, but she couldn't deny that she enjoyed the admiring glances she'd received since wearing it.

There was something about this hazy, summer warmth, which made her feel like a wholly new person, melting away her brittle fatigue.
She couldn't say the same for Draco. He was suitably polished in a linen business suit, but he looked worried and tired and was clearly in perpetual pain.

The coffee arrived. Draco spooned a lump of sugar into his cup and stirred it dolefully. 'The man we're going to see, Senor Canaro, is an informant for the Argentine Ministry of Magic. Has his fingers in a lot of pies.'

'You mean he's a crook,' Hermione stated plainly. She should have guessed that Draco's contacts would be suspect.

'I have come across him before in less than honorable circumstances,' Draco admitted. 'But he knows a lot of people.'

'And what does he know about Dark Flux?'

'A contact of his was visiting a friend in Santa Maria. That's a small town in Patagonia. This guy claims there were suspicious deaths amongst Muggle-borns last week. Says he was the one to find the first victims.'

'How many died?'

'Three, four.'

'And what makes this Senor Canaro think it was Dark Flux?'

Draco shrugged. 'He can't be sure. We can never be sure. But he has a memory he wants to show us. It's from this contact. If we think it merits further investigation, we'll fly down there tomorrow.'

'We have to fly again? It hardly seems worth it when we can't open that bloody case, let alone use the flipping scanner inside it!' Hermione groaned.

'I've been thinking about that,' Draco said. 'What's the difference between us and those Muggle guards at the airport?'

'Well, apart from the obvious…'

'Which is?'

'That we can do magic, of course.'

'Exactly. I think the case can detect our magic and refuses to work for us. So, we have to get a Muggle to open the case instead. Simple.'

'Don't you think it might freak someone out to open a case and find a bloody great gun inside?'

'Maybe. Depends on what you offer them in return?'

Hermione sighed. 'Well, that's your department, Malfoy.' She sipped her coffee, shaking her head in exasperation. 'This Senor Canaro better have a spare Draught of Peace handy. I don't want to go through that little farce with my wand again, thank you very much.'

Draco grinned. 'I'm sure he'll be able to rustle up a little something. He's a former grandmaster potioneer.'

'Can he also tell us who to speak to when we get to Santa Maria? I don't want to arrive blind.'
'It's a small place. We won't struggle to find witnesses.'

'I hate feeling unprepared,' Hermione grumbled. 'We need a strategy.'

'Easy. We're checking for similarities between what happened here and other incidents.'

'But how will we know? Formal records of suspected Dark Flux cases are few and far between.'

'That's what we're here to rectify. We need to find a way to sift out the Muggle-made disasters from the Dark Flux. We need an objective understanding of what these sudden death clusters actually look like… and that means the bodies too.'

'Are you serious?' Hermione asked, spluttering on her coffee.

'Most definitely. You told me last week that you hadn't heard of a rash connected to Dark Flux. I'd heard the opposite.'

'Well. I can see the sense in that I guess. But we should also check out environmental factors, the weather, any particular magical rituals. There has to be some kind of correlating sequence of events behind these outbreaks?'

'Maybe even a person or people?' Draco sipped his coffee thoughtfully.

'We definitely need access to some good old Muggle data,' Hermione said, ignoring Draco as she warmed to her theme. 'Weather forecasts. Crop rotations. Lunar Cycles…'

'We've got a guy doing all that back home.'

'News broadcasts…'

'I said we've got someone doing that stuff already! You don't know him. Works in the lab at Herb Healing.'

'So… our main job is to interview survivors?' Hermione said, a little deflated. Deep down she still preferred 'library' work.

'And the bodies. Don't forget the bodies, Mrs Weasley,' Draco said, with a withering smile. 'That's one thing I definitely need you for.'

'I'm a lawyer, not a mediwitch. I thought – or at least I hoped – we'd established that.'

'I presume you have your Ministry of Magic pass with you? No self-respecting workaholic like yourself would ever be without it.'

'Yes… but we're in Argentina, Malfoy. I can't just swan into a Muggle morgue, waving my Ministry of Magic I.D. I'd be carted off to the nearest loony bin.'

Draco chuckled. 'Santa Maria's a wizarding town. Your credentials will be instantly recognisable. Just say you're conducting research on behalf of the British Ministry and you'll have an Open Sesame to wherever you want to go.' Draco took a deep sip of his coffee, watching her reaction over the rim of his cup.

'You don't need me at all,' Hermione said, with an injured sniff, which was actually for show. She wanted to draw him out further. 'You could have transfigured a Ministry pass. Or pretended to be an Auror. You could have used polyjuice to impersonate anybody you wanted.'
Draco laughed. 'No, Hermione. I wanted you. You and your big fucking brain and your research skills and your ridiculous Gryffindor bravado.'

'You mean you wanted Ron, seeing as it's meant to be him sitting here, not me,' Hermione said, tight-lipped.

Draco shrugged. 'Yeah. But like I said earlier. You're a fair trade.'

Draco signaled to the waiter for the bill. 'We'd best get going.' He then flicked a latch on his briefcase and to Hermione's immense surprise, pulled out a mobile phone, which he checked for messages before slipping it into his jacket pocket.

'Better Mugglefy myself before I forget,' Draco grumbled. Hermione guessed this 'phone' was for the benefit of his business client later that afternoon and not his own personal amusement.

'What a shocker!' she said, her eyes round with laughter. 'Draco Malfoy with a Muggle phone! Your ancestors must be turning in their graves!'

'I have to do business with Muggles,' he replied snippily. 'And they'd never get the hang of using owls.'

'I don't mind them,' Draco said breezily. 'They're harmless enough.'

'Oh, of course they are,' Hermione said, rolling her eyes. 'Such sweet, dear little creatures.'

'Now you're just being silly,' Draco sneered. 'Of course there's always exceptions to the rule. But on the whole, Muggles are too infantile to be truly dangerous to us wizards.'

They continued their journey through the park, the sun high in the sky, warming their backs as they walked. They followed a path, which ran alongside a busy thoroughfare, leading away from Recoleta.

'Too infantile to be dangerous? Could you be anymore patronising?' Hermione shrilled. 'You're talking about the vast majority of human beings on this planet, do you realize that?'

Draco's eyes glittered strangely. Whether it was cruelty or amusement, she couldn't tell.

'Of course I do.'

'So, you don't think world wars, nuclear weapons and, oh yes, impending environmental catastrophe aren't dangerous, then? All caused by Muggles,' Hermione argued.

'And, arguably, all infantile. See, you're making my case for me, aren't you?'

They had left the parkland and were now walking along a pavement headed towards a pedestrian crossing that spanned a busy avenue. The roar of traffic was unexpected after the relative tranquility of the park.

'You see, Malfy,' Hermione yelled, raising her voice to be heard over the traffic. 'It's that kind of ignorant, black-and-white assumption that you have about Muggles, which makes you such a prick. How can you call Muggles infantile, when you are the most infantile man I have ever met?'
'If you're basing your opinion of me as infantile from when we were actually children, then that's hardly fair, is it now?' Draco shouted in return, jabbing a button at the pedestrian crossing. They waited for the lights to change.

'I'm talking about now, this instance,' Hermione said peevishly. 'You call Muggles infantile and then fail to offer any real evidence to support your argument.'

'We're not in the fucking Wizengamot, Hermione,' Draco growled.

The lights had changed and cars had stopped, enabling Hermione and Draco to cross the road. A woman in an open-top cabriolet was applying her lipstick in a small mirror and being wolf-whistled by a couple of guys sitting in the back of an open truck. They pulled faces at her, licking their lips and pouting, playfully cupping their breasts.

Hermione's heart sank.

'See what I mean?' Draco said. 'Muggles never grow up. Most of them can't even dress properly.'

'There are plenty of Muggles who have to grow up very fast indeed! And their dress sense has very little to do with it.' Hermione was flushed with anger. 'There are children out there who have to work from an early age to keep their families fed. Single mothers bringing up kids on their own.'

'And you'd know all about those people, wouldn't you, Hermione?' Draco snarled. 'You and your desperately middle-class Mummy and Daddy, living in one of the nicer, more salubrious parts of London.'

'How the hell do you know anything about my Muggle life?'

Hermione seethed, hating how he enjoyed baiting her like this. She could feel his buoyant glee radiating off him in waves.

They were now entering a leafy enclave of large, wealthy houses, many sporting embassy flags. The streets here were cool and shaded.

'I'm surprised you don't have more empathy with Muggles, since you're banned from using magic,' Hermione countered, considering this a particularly pertinent blow.

Draco shook his head wearily. 'That's not it at all, Hermione. You really don't know what you're talking about.'

They walked rapidly, crossing the road, before turning left into a short side street, which led onto a tree-lined crescent.

'Anyway, those infantile guys acting out back there… that wasn't about being Muggle. That was just a male thing… that was about sex, which wizards happen to have too, you know,' Hermione said prissily.

'A lot less than Muggles,' Draco said.

'Now there you go again, Malfoy, spouting unfounded rubbish, as always.'

'Come on, you know I'm right. Muggle society is much more liberal than ours, and I don't just mean in that sappy, bleeding heart kind of way that really pisses me off. But when it comes to sex, wizards are kind of… strait-laced. It's like living in the 1950s or something.'
'Maybe wizards have stronger moral values?' Hermione said haughtily.

'Now that's priceless, it really is. Is that what you really think?'

Draco burst into loud, ringing laughter, prompting a murder of crows, plucking at carrion strewn across the asphalt road, into sudden flight.

They were walking deeper and deeper into this quiet, residential area. The sound of traffic from the main avenue was fast receding. The trees and hedges were more closely-knit here, their foliage denser, darker, guarding the grand houses and gardens from prying eyes. It was quite chilly on these shaded streets. Unconsciously, Hermione had folded her arms close to her body.

'You want to think that's true, but you don't believe it for one moment, Hermione. But hold on to your little fantasy, if it makes you feel safe,' Draco said. 'I'm not talking about sex here, by the way.'

'I know,' Hermione said in a tight, little voice.

'When it comes to sex, of course, you make the perfect little witch.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Hermione was outraged.

'Just that… you are possibly the most repressed person I have ever met in my entire life,' Draco declared.

'How dare you? You know nothing about my sex life!'

'And I bet poor Ron doesn't either,' Draco smirked.

Right. This was too much. Hermione had to ball her fists tightly to contain herself from punching him in the face.

'All that repressed sexuality bubbling away inside,' Draco chortled. 'Maybe helps explain your spiky aggression…'

'What spiky aggression?' Hermione asked tetchily.

'The type of behaviour you're displaying right now, actually.'

'Oh, shut up, you prat!'

'I think we're here,' Draco said, pointing at a tall, thin house, with long, peeling black shutters.

They silently studied the house on the other side of the road.

Hermione realized further argument was futile. Once Draco's focus had shifted, that was that. She'd never known someone so adept at compartmentalising.

'Right then. Let's think about this before we go in,' Draco said under his breath, almost as though he feared they might be overheard by the tall privet hedge which framed the garden. 'We want to see the memory, but do we both go into the Pensieve together, or one at a time?'

'You don't really trust this man, do you?' Hermione said, suddenly filled with an uneasy dread.

'On past form? Not a lot,' he said in a low whisper.
'Don't forget, we have to ask about Los Rojos, too,' Hermione said.

'Los Rojos... The Reds,' Draco said pensively. 'I doubt he's brought us all this way to discuss English Football.'

Hermione, however, had paled, suddenly tight-chested, remembering that faint flash of red, little more than a blur at the edge of her vision, that she had sensed in her back garden.

'What is it?' Draco asked sharply.

'When you were shot. Did you see anything? Or… or maybe not quite see, but sense something, sense an image?'

'Or a colour?' Draco said, his eyes moving rapidly from side to side as he recalled the moment. 'Yes, yes I did.'

'It was red, wasn't it?'

'Yes, it was. I assumed it was just the shock of it all. And Ron? The same?'

Hermione nodded. 'And me too. It sort of popped into my mind. Almost like I felt it.'

'You felt a colour?' Draco looked at her quizzically.

'Yes. No. I – I don't know how to explain it. Just before I entered the house. Just before I found Ron.'

Draco was staring at her fixedly. He gently laid a hand on her shoulder, flicking a glance at the tall, thin house with its long black shutters.

'Hermione. Do you feel it now?' he whispered urgently.

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CHAPTER TRACK: "BITTER SWEET SYMPHONY" by THE VERVE

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Hermione and Draco meet the mysterious Senor Canaro and are exposed to the true horrors of Dark Flux. Meanwhile Draco receives some devastating news...

10. **Los Rojos**

Hermione closed her eyes, clearing her mind of all thoughts.

‘No strange reds to report,’ she said assuredly. She snapped her eyes wide open. ‘Not that it means anything, of course. There’s got to be a logical explanation for what happened.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure of that,’ Draco said. ‘You might have some kind of latent psychic ability. A form of *synthesiser*, or whatever it is the Muggles like to call it.’

‘That’s Synesthesia, Malfoy, and it’s a neurological disorder,’ Hermione said snippily. ‘Nothing at all to do with Seers and all that rubbish.’

Draco glanced at the tall, dark house with the peeling, black shutters where Senor Canaro lived. ‘That’s as may be, but something about this place gives me the creeps.’

Hermione had to agree. Even the air seemed thicker, more stagnant here.

They rang the doorbell and waited impatiently.

A house-elf wearing nothing but a scruffy blue dishcloth answered the door and quickly ushered them inside. ‘Senor Canaro awaits you,’ the elf squeaked haplessly. He eyed them both with such a pitiable, mournful expression on his careworn face that Hermione was instantly inclined to think badly of his owner.

Inside, the house was much larger than its outward appearance belied. It was also surprisingly noisy, alive with the cacophonous din of birdsong emanating from what Hermione presumed had to be an aviary located further indoors.

The hallway was dark and dusty, so much so that Hermione had to suppress a coughing fit at the very moment when Senor Canaro hastened towards her, hand outstretched in greeting.

He was a tall, spindly-looking man with an oversized egg-shaped head capped by a scraggy-looking mop of hair and a long, knotted beard.

‘Buenos Dias!’ Senor Canaro exclaimed. ‘I am so glad to see you. I have moved our meeting to this hour because I have most important business this afternoon. I hope this time is agreeable for you both?’

Hermione and Draco both nodded polite assent and allowed him to usher them over the threshold into a long, dusty corridor.

‘We won’t take up much of your time, Senor Canaro,’ Draco said.
'Of course, you are here for the memory, no?' Canaro said, addressing Draco. 'And I have also some information which may be of interest to you.' He now looked at Hermione, his eyes narrowing quizzically. 'And your companion.'

'Oh, of course, please excuse me,' Draco apologised. 'This is Mrs Weasley. You were expecting her husband. But he is indisposed.'

Canaro grinned, baring a set of twisted, yellow-stained teeth and blackened gums. 'A fair substitute, no?'

Draco smiled weakly in response while Hermione could barely suppress the urge to open the front door and run away.

Canaro led them along the corridor, turning left into a large bright room with a pitched glass ceiling. The sunshine streamed through this window in a most unforgiving manner, highlighting the ankle-deep detritus of old food and bird droppings on the floor. Hermione could barely stop herself from retching at the fetid stench which assailed her nostrils.

The room was adorned with a plethora of bird and animal cages; some were strung from the ceiling or walls or were balancing on rickety sideboards and shelves. The piercing clamour and chatter of birdsong that greeted them in this room was almost deafening.

There was a rectangular black table placed in the middle of the room, weighed down with green glass jars containing various liquids and powders of dubious origin. Hermione couldn't help but recoil at one large bell jar full of snakeheads. Another contained a pulpy bubbly mixture which she eventually identified as frogspawn.

The table was also strewn with crumbs of bread and a rind of blue cheese. There was a putrid-looking ham-bone slapped on a tin plate. Its meat was tinged petrol-green and host to a cluster of black flies. Hermione realized, too late, that she was eyeing this disarray with unabashed distaste and Canaro was watching her with alert, beady eyes.

Canaro roughly swept his arm across the table, dispersing breadcrumbs and cheese rind onto the floor and slapped his hand on two chairs which he had pushed closer to the table, bidding Hermione and Draco sit down.

'Thanks, Senor Canaro, but we'd rather stand,' Draco said in a voice of cold civility. Hermione's mouth twitched in amusement. She guessed she could rely on pristine, fastidious Draco to be as repelled as she was by this scenario.

'Quite right,' Canaro beamed. 'No time for the relaxation, no? Let's to business. Directamente.'

'The memory? Relating to this reported outbreak of Dark Flux?' Draco said in clipped, business tones. 'That would be a good starting point.'

'Si, Si, Senor. Espera un momento,' Canaro said, reaching for a small glass vial with silvery liquid swilling inside, which was balanced precariously on top of a high sloping shelf.

He brushed against Hermione who had to quickly turn away to avoid gagging at the acrid stench of old body odour that assailed her nostrils. She collided with a low bench, springing back in alarm as her hands alighted on a glass box glutted with thick-bodied, shiny black spiders. She crashed heavily into Draco who was standing behind her, inadvertently crushing his toes. He winced in pain.

'I'm so sorry,' she whimpered, steadying herself with one hand on the table which was greasy to the
touch. She instantly retracted her hand, wiping it vigorously on the back of a chair.

'Aqui esta,' Canaro mumbled, grappling with the slippery vial which slid slowly from his grasp. Draco darted forwards, hands outstretched, only just catching the memory before it fell to the floor.

'Great. Where's the Pensieve?' Draco said sternly, tightly clutching the vial.

'Follow me,' Canaro chortled, leading them back to the hallway, then down a dark corridor to a small, shadowy enclave, which hosted a granite plinth supporting a black marble Pensieve.

'Senor Malfoy. Please excuse my appalling rudeness for not asking after your father's health?' Canaro said, baring his teeth yet again in an unctuous grin. 'He has not been well, no?'

'He's much improved,' Draco said, tracing the runes decorating the rim of the Pensieve with his index finger. 'Thanks for asking.'

'It's just that I hear from our old associates that he has become quite the stranger these days.' Canaro fixed his beady-eyed gaze on Draco, who continued to find the Pensieve's hieroglyphic symbols an object of intense fascination.

'This memory, Senor Canaro,' Hermione interceded brightly, 'was made by whom, exactly?'

Canaro sucked his teeth thoughtfully. 'A Senor Asusto. He is a Porteno – which is to say he is from Buenos Aires – but for much of the year, he lives in a town called El Calafate which is close to where the incident took place.' He emphasised 'incident' with lugubrious relish, again exposing his stained teeth and some blackened gum for good measure. Hermione was beginning to feel a little queasy and was eager to volunteer first to enter the Pensieve, just to escape the sight of him.

From the look on Draco's face, however, he seemed equally keen to escape Canaro's attentions.

'So how did you procure this memory?' Hermione asked. 'This Senor Asusto, is he a friend?'

'He is a business associate of many years. He approached me with the memory because he was feeling very burdened, you see, by what he saw and experienced in Santa Maria. He hoped I would ensure the relevant authorities on the matter were informed,' Canaro explained.

'Is he still in Buenos Aires?' Draco asked. 'Can we speak with him?'

Canaro vigorously shook his head. 'He had to leave Argentina on urgent business. He was here just one short hour. Time only to give me the memory and enjoy a single cup of Mate.'

'That's a shame,' Draco said ruefully. 'Do you know when he'll be back?'

Canaro shook his head, a regretful expression on his face.

'Has the Ministry of Magic here in Argentina, already sent a delegation to Santa Maria?' Hermione asked.

'I've no idea. I certainly haven't told them about the incident,' Canaro said, 'and I can't speak for Senor Asusto.'

So just who were the 'relevant authorities' Canaro was charged with informing? Hermione wondered dubiously. The fact that Draco seemed wholly unperturbed by this development indicated that he knew exactly whom Canaro was referring to.

Canaro took the memory in the vial from Draco. He unstopped it and then swirled the silvery
liquid into the Pensieve.

'As for what Senor Asusto saw in Santa Maria that fateful day, it is perhaps better you see for yourself… but I should warn you, Senora,' he rasped, placing a leathery hand on Hermione's arm. 'This memory is… muy desagradable.'

Hermione forced a brave smile, trying to extricate her arm from his clasp as subtly as possible.

'I've probably seen worse.'

Senor Canaro blinked slowly, a sorrowful, reptilian expression on his face. 'Quizas, Senora Weasley. Perhaps. As you choose.'

Draco turned to Hermione. 'Ready?'

Ready for what? Hermione thought. Surely he wasn't entering the memory with her?

To her surprise, as she plunged her face into the Pensieve, she felt his hand close around her own.

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They found themselves standing at a deserted crossroads on the outskirts of a small ramshackle town, which appeared to be little more than a collection of single-storey scrubby houses with red-tiled roofs. There was one main thoroughfare wending its way through the town, but not a single vehicle or other living creature in sight.

'I'm guessing this is Santa Maria,' Draco said, screwing his nose up in dismay. 'Let's hope this is all one big misunderstanding. I don't want to be spending any time here if I can help it.'

'What are you doing here?' Hermione said in sharp tones, rounding on Draco. 'I thought you didn't trust this Canaro guy?'

'I just want this over with,' Draco said tersely, 'the sooner the better.'

'We were meant to watch out for each other!'

'And this must be the mysterious Senor Asusto,' Draco said, ignoring her protestations.

He pointed to a pale, young man with greased black hair, pinched features, and an impatient scowl. Heaving a forlorn-sounding sigh, the young man sniffed the overcast skies.

'I think he's been stood up,' Draco declared.

'Can't say I'm surprised,' Hermione mumbled to herself, thinking that he was a most unattractive-looking young man. Draco grinned.

The pale young man reluctantly trudged into the town, heading straight for a café-bar: 'Bar Santa Maria.'

There was a sign positioned outside the bar announcing it was 'Abierto', which Hermione assumed meant open. This seemed far from true, however, judging by the bar's lack of customers. Indeed, the bar, the street, the entire town, seemed deserted.

Hermione cast a quick glance at their surroundings. There was a grey, monochrome quality to the place. The only sound was a faint whistle of wind whipping dust-clouds and sparse clumps of vegetation along the empty street. It reminded her of an archetypal scene from an old Western
movie. The type of uneasy scene which invariably signaled the calm before the storm.

The greasy-haired young man seemed similarly concerned by the lack of life. He tentatively pushed open the bar's thick glass door which creaked loudly in the weighty silence.

Hermione and Draco followed him into the bar. As they did, however, there was a brief swoosh of silvery fog which momentarily distorted their view. And then the scene was as it was before, except Senor Asusto now seemed a little more aggravated and was calling out in Spanish.

But there was no response. He called again, a nervous frown on his face.

'Did you clock the fog?' Draco muttered to Hermione.

'It might mean this memory's unreliable. Perhaps it's been falsified?' she said, instantly suspicious of Senor Asusto.

'Or, Asusto was so traumatised by what he saw that he hasn't been able to think straight since,' Draco countered.

'You think so?' Hermione whispered. 'But there's nothing here.'

'Oh yes there is,' Draco said with a heavy sigh. Hermione couldn't decide if he was sad to see the dead woman lying on the floor behind the bar or disappointed that this probably meant this was a case requiring further investigation after all.

Senor Asusto had also spotted the dead woman and had hastened to her side. He was breathing heavily, his eyes darting frantically around the bar, surveying the empty tables and chairs and deathly still fruit machine as though he half-expected her assailant to leap out and grab him.

Hermione inched closer to the corpse, grimacing at the sight of it, yet knowing that this was precisely the reason she was inside this memory.

The young woman was lying prostrate on the ground, her body contorted, her eyes wide and staring. Her lips were curled back, giving her a strangely feral appearance, and her face, arms and legs – any exposed flesh – were covered in livid purple welts which oozed a black, tar-like substance. Most peculiar of all, Hermione thought, was the distinct bright blue glow that seemed to lurk beneath the dead girl's skin.

'That's gross,' Draco said. He looked at Hermione, his eyes blazing with indignation. 'See? You said there was no rash with Dark Flux victims. What the hell are those ugly great welts all over her?'

'Haven't you also noticed she's turned blue, Malfoy?' Hermione snapped in petulant tones. 'You never mentioned that as a sign of Dark Flux, did you? It's a kind of obvious marker.'

'The Paris outbreak. 2008. The victims were blue,' Draco stated.

'And since then?'

'There was another case, but I can't remember where. Maybe a couple actually. The skin discoloration was attributed to environmental hazards. I'll dig out the files when we get back home.'

Hermione shuddered. Home. It felt very far away. Far away from this poor, dead woman and this ghastly memory.
It all seemed too much for Senor Asusto. The pale, young man began shaking in distress, staring disconsolately at the woman on the floor at his feet.

'Aña,' he whispered hoarsely.

'He knows her!' Hermione gasped.

'Maybe she's the one who stood him up,' Draco said in a deadpan voice which sounded distant and strange. Hermione could barely make out his face beside her.

There was another silvery blur, a disorienting scrunching of the scene before them.

'Definitely something off here,' Draco grumbled.

The fog lifted at the precise moment when the pale, young man seemed to turn around, staring straight at them. Hermione squeaked in surprise.

'It's like he can see us!'

'Of course he can't!'

'Oh God, oh no!' Hermione shrilled. 'Look!' she said breathlessly, pointing a few metres beyond the woman.

There was an overturned basket, a pink blanket spilling onto the floor beside it. Hermione could see what she feared was a small, cold blue arm, poking out of the blanket.

Hermione felt herself totter. Her throat was suddenly dry and she couldn't hear what Draco was saying to her, above the whooshing roar of blood rushing to her head. She thought she might be sick.

'What's that?' she groaned. She felt rooted to the spot, hardly caring that Senor Asusto had brushed past her; a ghost in a dream, which was bubbling and fraying slightly at the edges, like singed, silvery celluloid.

Draco was of sterner stuff, she thought, or maybe more cold-blooded. Or maybe he was already convinced that this memory wasn't real. He approached the basket and knelt down before it, examining its contents. He was very still.

'Is that… is that what I think it is?' Hermione asked in low tones.

Draco finally turned to face her. 'I'm afraid it is,' he said in a quiet voice.

Hermione was struggling to stifle a hysterical sob clawing at her throat for release. But she hated the idea of breaking down in front of Draco and it was this dread of losing control that enabled her to master her emotions.

Hermione looked at Senor Asusto who was now seated at a table, his head in his hands.

'I can't believe he didn't even *look* at the… the baby,' Hermione said, barely able to look herself. The sight was just too heart wrenching. Even if this wasn't real, even if this was a fiction, she feared the images of the dead woman and child she had seen in Senor Asusto's memory would be imprinted on her mind forever. She felt she was drowning, falling into a deep, sad emptiness, which threatened to overwhelm her. She thought of her own children, their pink, happy faces, warm with life, and her eyes drifted inexorably to the upturned basket.
'I want to get out of here.'

At that very moment, the memory swirled and swooped and they were thrown back into the comparatively welcome reality of Senor Canaro's shadowy house with its grim occupant awaiting them; a fixed, rictus grin on his face.

'Gracias, Senor Canaro,' Draco said. 'That was very... instructive.'

Senor Canaro nodded, his crinkled, reptilian eyes blinking slowly, surely. 'Reports say that three Muggle-borns died that day. But the baby isn't listed as one of them.'

'Why not?' Hermione asked in thin, querulous tones.

'It was probably Muggle spawn from El Calafate,' Canaro leered.

Hermione was struggling to beat down the red-hot rage bubbling up inside of her. Draco glared her a warning.

'So where is this baby now? Has it been returned to the Muggle authorities?' Draco asked in cool tones.

Canaro shrugged. 'I presume that it would still be in the morgue in Santa Maria. Nobody has confirmed its existence, which means nobody has claimed it, even though it must have come to Santa Maria with somebody.' He grinned. 'A baby cannot walk into town all by itself now, can it?'

Hermione felt like something was crumpling deep inside of her, bearing down on her like a cold, leaden weight. How could they talk about such a thing in this detached, facile manner?

'Frankly, Senor Canaro, we're not convinced this memory was wholly authentic,' Draco said curtly. 'There were serious flaws in the imaging. Blurring, fogginess. All signs of memory modification. Senor Asusto didn't even acknowledge the baby even though he was standing just a few feet from it, so for all we know, the baby was a false memory implant.'

'It is possible, anything is possible,' Canaro said nonchalantly. 'Although I myself have not tampered with it, if that is what you are thinking Senor Malfoy!'

'I'm not accusing you –'

'You may ask your father. Senor Canaro is a man to be trusted, no?'

'I – I don't doubt it, sir,' Draco said in appeasing tones. 'But did you watch Senor Asusto make the memory?'

'No. No, I did not. He arrived with the memory. Una cosa hecha. Y ya esta.'

Hermione felt nauseous and clammy. She had a desperate desire to be alone. Until this moment, she hadn't really understood what they were dealing with; the true evil of Dark Flux and what it could do to its innocent victims.

She returned to Senor Canaro's potions room, overcoming her squeamishness at her surroundings if only to be bathed in bright, white sunlight, vanquishing the gloom of the darkened hallway. She could hear the droning murmur of voices in the distance. Hopefully, Draco was asking salient questions, arming them for their trip into Patagonia. She had no doubt now that they would go, if only to prove or disprove the veracity of Senor Asusto's memory.
Minutes later, the two men had followed her into the potions room.

Canaro eyed her beadily. 'I warned you, Senora Weasley. I told you that memory was not a place for women. Especially a woman with children, no?'

Canaro clicked his fingers and his slovenly elf appeared.

'Mate,' he demanded. He looked to his guests. 'Would you like a hot beverage? Tea or coffee, perhaps? Senora Weasley, you look quite pale. A piping hot cup of tea might be of benefit. '

'I'm quite alright,' Hermione said stiffly. 'Gracias Senor.'

After some pressure, Draco accepted the offer of ice-cold lemonade. The elf returned promptly with his drink.

'There is one thing I would like, Senor Canaro,' Hermione said. 'I need to send a message abroad.'

Senor Canaro gestured to the myriad birdcages strung up around the room. 'You may choose any bird you like, but if it is very long-distance, I also have a Great Horned Owl – it is a very special bird I can assure you - who might best suit your purpose.'

Canaro summoned his elf again and rattled off a list of instructions. The elf beckoned Hermione, who followed him up a long, steep staircase. The staircase led to a landing devoid of any furniture, its wooden floorboards old and creaky underfoot.

A large, handsomely marked owl with round orange eyes, sitting in a brass cage, was watching them approach, a look of undisguised contempt on its face.

Hermione was offered a piece of parchment and a quill by the elf and set to writing a note to Ron. She told him that she had been forced to fly to Argentina, which had been a purgatorial experience, but that the hotel she was staying in was very grand and partly made up for the flight. She made light of Draco's problematic wound but urged Ron to beef up security at home and at The Burrow. She then informed him about Senor Asusto's memory, sparing him the gory details, and suggested he comb through the available research regarding Dark Flux incidents to find out exactly where and when any blue-tinged skin colouring had been noted on the victims. Finally, she told him to hug the kids for her, to tell them how much she loved and missed them.

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'It was one day after the Dark Flux outbreak that the six men arrived in Santa Maria,' Canaro was saying to Draco when Hermione returned to the potions room.

'All wearing bright red robes, you say?' Draco looked puzzled by this. He was fastening his shirt, indicating that he had shown Canaro his wound.

'I agree, Senor Malfoy. It is not the best way to avoid undue attention, no?'

'They sound like a religious order,' Hermione said, keen to contribute to the conversation which she guessed concerned the mysterious Los Rojos.

In truth, she was enormously relieved to hear that Los Rojos referred to real-life men and not inexplicable flashes of colour. She always preferred cold, hard facts to intangibles. Clearly, the red flashes both Ron and Draco had witnessed at the time of their attacks were these same red robes and the wizards wearing them. Draco presumably had a split second to catch sight of his attacker
before being shot, while Ron had been quickly blinded by the Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder.

Of course, this didn't explain her own red flash… but she didn't want to think about that just now.

'There is something, perhaps, in what you say, Senora Weasley,' Canaro said, touching his nose in a knowing manner. 'I think Los Rojos are followers of this Dark Wizard who lives in the mountains.'

Draco silently mouthed 'Jeroboam' to Hermione.

'And there is something else muy raro, very peculiar, to take into account here,' Canaro said. 'Estos Rojos. They always know exactly where to go to ask their questions and take their photographic images.'

'So, do they carry cameras or some other type of machine?' Hermione asked, fishing for information that might indicate that Los Rojos were using 'scanners.'

'No sé, Senora Weasley,' Canaro said. 'What type of machine do you mean?'

'Machines that look like guns?'

Canaro's wrinkled brow was puckered in confusion. 'I've not heard of this. All I know is that wherever there is an incident, they are there. They troop into town the next day or the day after that – perhaps even before? Who knows...? This was what happened last month.'

'In Bolivia?' Draco asked.

'And in Ecuador. Last year.'

Draco raised his eyebrows in surprise. Ecuador was clearly news to him.

Hermione chilled at this. If these cases were proven incidents of Dark Flux, then this was a much more common occurrence than she had ever been led to believe – and this scared the life out of her. Not to mention the more immediate fact that so much Dark Flux activity was being reported here, in South America. This made her, as a Muggle-born, feel peculiarly vulnerable. Until today, she'd never truly thought of Dark Flux as something that could target and kill her. This had changed since entering that Pensieve.

'And are witnesses positive that Los Rojos aren't already in place before the Dark Flux strikes?' Draco asked, a little warily Hermione thought. Was he already fearing it had been found and weaponised? Were Los Rojos the perpetrators?

'There is no sign, that I directly know of and can therefore tell, of Los Rojos, until after los muertos,' Canaro said firmly. ‘But as I have said, I do know that in every report I learn of … that they are there.’

Of course, this was only according to his own limited, second-hand knowledge, Hermione thought. Bolivia, Ecuador, even Patagonia were well over a thousand, if not many thousands of miles from Buenos Aires.

'So how do you get to know about these attacks?' she asked.

'I have my sources,' Canaro said smugly.

'If it hadn't been for Senor Asusto, would any of us know about Santa Maria?' Draco said, swilling the dregs of his lemonade slowly around the glass.
'It is in a very remote region,' Canaro said. 'As you will see for yourself.'

His eyes alighted on a small, blue bottle which was placed on a shelf behind where Hermione was standing. 'Senora Weasley,' he said, gesturing to the bottle. 'A Draught of Peace. Ready for your journey. Senor Malfoy has informed me of your condition.'

'Oh. Thanks,' Hermione said, her heart sinking a little at the thought of a flight to Patagonia.

'As for your other little problem, Senor Malfoy,' Canaro said. 'The mediwizard I would recommend to you is not in town today. Maybe when you return from Patagonia you can pay him a visit?'

Draco frowned in frustration. A flicker of pain scuttled involuntarily across his face. Clearly, any beneficial effects from the healing spell Hermione had cast on him earlier that day were wearing off.

'But I have a spare bottle of the potion I recommended to you,' Canaro continued in brighter tones. 'It might provide some small relief.'

'Thanks,' Draco growled. He pocketed the brown, glass bottle Canaro offered him without even glancing at it.

'I think you should try a little now,' Canaro said, his dark eyes twinkling, almost enjoying Draco's discomfort, Hermione thought.

Reluctantly, Draco removed the stopper, screwing his nose up at the smell of the potion inside, wondering if he trusted Canaro enough to actually taste the stuff. He cast a last, desperate glance in Hermione's direction and gulped back a mouthful of the potion, trying not to gag in the process. He then held his breath, waiting to see if he had survived. Once it was clear he had, he exhaled loudly, relief shining from his face.

'Well done, Senor Malfoy,' Canaro said. 'It is imperative you keep taking the potion. There is a very virulent magic inside of you. I can sense your blood crying out in pain.'

Draco grinned mirthlessly. 'That's cheerful.'

'Not really,' Canaro said bluntly, not understanding Draco's sarcasm. 'It is probable you will die unless you find somebody who can help you.'

'Oh. Right,' Draco said, momentarily lost for words. His face had drained of colour. 'Have I… got long?' he asked hesitantly.

Hermione found she was holding her breath, chilled by Canaro's words and off-handed manner.

Canaro beamed, baring his ragged gums. 'You have enough time to get the help you need, Senor Malfoy,' he said, nodding his head sagely. 'But I am confundido, bewildered by your condition. This type of magic is not supposed to hurt you.'

'Why's that?' Draco asked, a little shakily. Canaro fixed his reptilian, beady gaze on Draco's pale face and smirked.

'I think you know that already, don't you, Senor Malfoy?'

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CHAPTER TRACK: "SPELLBOUND" by SIOUXSIE & THE BANSHEES
Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
In Patagonia

Chapter Summary

Investigations into mysterious deaths in Patagonia take a deadly turn for Hermione and Draco...

11. In Patagonia

The glaring afternoon sun and stultifying heat came as a shock after spending close to two hours inside Senor Canaro's chill, dismal house. Hermione and Draco walked slowly through the leafy streets in deep silence.

'I think we should postpone this trip to Patagonia,' Hermione urged. 'You clearly need to see a mediwizard as soon as possible.'

'Senor Canaro said it can wait,' Draco replied, with an air of affected nonchalance.

'But for how long?'

Draco smirked sarcastically. 'Your concern for my welfare is very touching, Hermione, but I'm sure I can last another day or two before keeling over and dying, okay?'

'Look, Malfoy, unlike you, I happen to have a shred of humanity when it comes to others. You might be a prat, but I don't actually want you to die.'

'Blimey,' Draco said, spluttering with laughter. 'That's probably the nicest thing you've ever said to me.'

'What did Senor Canaro mean when he said you shouldn't be suffering from the type of magic affecting your wound?' Hermione asked, genuinely curious.

'Nothing!' Draco retorted peevishly, his face scarlet with sudden anger. 'The man's a blithering idiot.'

'But it sounds serious.'

'Look, leave me to worry about my problems,' Draco said heatedly. 'Our priority is to get to Patagonia as fast as we possibly can, preferably today. We need to verify this memory to see if it's false or not.'

Hermione's throat tightened at the mere thought. She fervently hoped the memory was false. She didn’t want to believe that anything like Dark Flux actually existed...if it truly did, the dangers it posed were unfathomable.

But if Draco was correct and there was a chance the memory had been falsified, who was trying to mislead them - and why?

'We need to visit the Santa Maria morgue before they move the bodies,' Draco continued.
'They've probably been claimed already.'

'Not necessarily.'

'I guess we'd better Floo there then,' she said in resigned tones. 'It'll be quicker than flying. Do you know any other wizards in Buenos Aires other than… Senor Canaro?'

'Affraid not,' Draco grunted. They both stopped in their tracks, turned about heel, and rapidly headed back to Senor Canaro's house.

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The tall, thin windows seemed even blanker than usual. The closed door seemed even more forbidding.

'He said he had business this afternoon,' Hermione remarked. 'We might have missed him.'

'I doubt it,' Draco said, knocking on the door with a firm rap of his knuckles. 'We only left five minutes ago.'

There was no reply.

'Surely his house-elf hasn't gone out too?' Hermione asked. 'Try again.'

This time, Draco banged his fist on the door with greater strength and for a more sustained period of time. But there was still no answer. Just a deep, brooding silence.

'Hold on, Malfoy!' Hermione said, staying his hand with her own. 'This can't be Senor Canaro's house. He had a door-bell.'

Hermione surreptitiously mouthed a revealing charm, just in case the doorbell had been concealed by magic. Then she hastened down the garden path back to the pavement to double-check that this was the right house on the right road. She craned her neck upwards to take in the full view of the tall, thin house with its peeling black shutters.

No doubts about it. This was definitely Canaro's.

'Try an Alohomora,' Draco suggested.

Hermione did just that. But nothing happened.

Their eyes locked, a swift communication of unease passing between them, then sped away, not daring to look back.

'Okay, Malfoy, this is looking odder by the minute,' Hermione muttered under her breath, almost as though she feared the trees and hedgerows and parked cars at the side of the road were eavesdropping on their conversation. 'We need a Plan B. And fast.'

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They soon returned to the busy avenue which bordered the parkland they had strolled through earlier. A few hundred yards to their right was a strikingly designed modern building - an art gallery, festooned with banners advertising Latin American art. A stylish, open-air terrace-restaurant was situated to its left.

The mid-afternoon sun was high in the blue, cloudless sky, beating down on them with an
unforgiving intensity. Feeling parched and over-heated, they headed straight for the restaurant.

Their table was set a little apart from the other diners beside an elegant water feature, with neat symmetrical lines of water-jets. Hermione always found the sound of babbling water soothing. She closed her eyes and wallowed in the rhythmic, sloshing rush of the water-jets rising and falling. She shivered luxuriantly, reveling in the deliciously chill tingle rolling through her.

'Such a hot day and you've got goose bumps.'

Hermione snapped open her eyes. Draco was watching her closely, a concentrated expression on his face.

'I find the sound of running water relaxing,' she explained, a little self-consciously.

She gestured to a harried-looking waitress. Draco seemed less keen to eat than drink, ordering an expensive bottle of Malbec and a sandwich. The last thing Hermione wanted was wine. There was still a faint dinning at her temples from the copious drinks she had consumed at the airport yesterday evening.

'Maybe you should Portkey to Patagonia and I'll follow on tomorrow with the scanner?' Draco said the moment the waitress was out of earshot.

'Don't you dare leave me to do all your dirty work!' Hermione said scornfully. 'These ROJOS - they've already taken a pot-shot at you and disabled my husband. So, I'm a little wary about going to strange places on my own, thank you very much.'

'You're right. It was a stupid idea,' Draco conceded. 'What worries me even more is how those bastards knew that Ron and I were coming here at all…'

He paused while the waitress brought Hermione a glass of coke and a plate of pasta and poured Draco a large glass of red wine.

'It's pretty damned obvious to me that Ron must have spilled the beans to somebody,' Draco continued haughtily, 'probably trying to impress his new Section A buddies.'

'No, Malfoy. He wouldn't do that!' Hermione said defensively. 'Somebody must have known your plans. What about your father-in-law? You used a Gilgad Inc credit card at the hotel this morning.'

'How very observant of you, Mrs Weasley,' Draco said sardonically. 'Although you forget that Gilgad is the majority shareholder in Herb Healing.'

'Does Ephraim Golowitz know about this trip?'

'Of course he does!' Draco took a long, thoughtful sip of his wine. 'But there's no way he'd betray us to Jeroboam, if that's what you're thinking. Ephraim hates Jeroboam with a passion.'

'You sure about that?' Hermione asked, meticulously winding a skein of stringy pasta onto her fork.

'God, yes. Gilgad and Jeroboam's RedStar are major business rivals. But most importantly, my father-in-law worked with Jeroboam, many years ago. They were part of The Geneva Group; a bunch of boffins trying to analyse the science behind Dark Flux, but the project fell apart when Ephraim discovered Jeroboam's true ambition – which was to use Dark Flux as a weapon of mass destruction.'
'Why didn’t you tell me all of this before?'

'Remember those files I gave you? It's all in there. I expect Ron took a look.'

Hermione couldn’t recall Ron giving the files more than a second glance.

'I think we should speak with your father-in-law. He probably has some very useful insights,' Hermione said prissily.

Draco shrugged. 'He doesn’t like talking about it – particularly with strangers.'

Hermione rolled her eyes in exasperation.

'That doesn’t mean he’s disinterested. He wants Jeroboam banged up in Azkaban… But he figures there's no point bad-mouthing him in public when there's no smoking gun, as you Muggles would say,' Draco stated baldly. 'He's probably right. It’d need more than a couple of leaked memos and some blabbing employees to nail a guy like that.'

'You told me and Ron you had hard evidence linking Jeroboam to Dark Flux!' Hermione exclaimed, outraged.

'I might have exaggerated a little,' Draco said sheepishly. 'We have the scanner of course.'

'If we can prove it works!'

'And Canaro said Los Rojos work for Jeroboam…and they’re DEFINITELY up to something,' Draco chewed his lower lip thoughtfully. 'I'd never heard of them before today. You’d have thought a bunch of guys running around in red dresses every time the local population keels over with some mysterious sickness would attract a bit more attention, wouldn’t you? I'll get Torquil to check them out.'

'Who the bloody hell's Torquil?'

'Torquil Haast. He's my father-in-law's main administrator, negotiates all of Gilgad's legal business with the Ministry; you've probably seen him around. He definitely knows you. He pretty much planned this whole mission, actually.'

'It would have been nice to be told this earlier,' Hermione protested.

Draco fidgeted uncomfortably. 'I assumed your bloody useless twat of a husband had briefed you properly before he sent you here.'

'Has Ron met this Torquil person?'

'Several times.'

Draco took another deep swig of his wine. 'Maybe Torquil knows of a local wizard to help us out with our current difficulty? Or we could hire a magic carpet? They haven't been banned in South America,' Draco said with almost childish glee.

A sudden trilling thrum emanating from Draco's jacket, interrupted them. Draco pulled out his mobile phone and slapped it to his ear, leaning away from Hermione so that he could converse more freely with the caller.

'That's great, Miguel, thanks for that,' Draco said, clicking his phone shut and squirreling it away before signaling for the bill. 'Come on. Eat up. I've got us a lift to Patagonia.'
Senor Miguel Culebra was a dashing fellow. He had a charming, rakish air, penetrating soft brown eyes and a full, sensuous mouth, which seemed to enjoy smiling.

'You did not tell me, Draco, that you were bringing such an enchanting lady-friend with you on this particular trip,' he said, his eyes roving Hermione's face and body in a most off-putting manner, Hermione thought.

'It wasn't planned,' Draco said brusquely. 'This is very good of you, Miguel.'

'No problem, we can talk business en route, no?' Miguel said, leading them into the sumptuously upholstered cabin of a small private jet. 'I will be getting off at Bariloche, which is just a few hours away, and then the plane is at your disposal to fly further south. Where is it you want to go?'

'El Calafate,' Hermione said crisply.

'It's a private matter,' Draco said. 'Kind of hard to explain.'

'You do not need to tell me a thing, Draco!' Miguel said, punching him playfully on the arm. 'You've done me many favours in the past; this is the least I can do.'

'I hope you haven't lost that Draught of Peace Senor Canaro gave you?' Draco whispered to Hermione, buckling his seat belt in readiness for take-off.

The Draught of Peace had done its job, Hermione thought with considerable relief. Boarding a plane so soon after the flight from London to Buenos Aires would have been an impossible task without it.

Instead, Hermione could hardly believe their luck and was even excited at the prospect of flying, relishing their speed as they taxi-ed down the runway and the ear-fogging intensity of take-off. She gazed at the sprawling mass of Buenos Aires and the mud-brown river which bordered the city, extending its spidery brown fingers into the surrounding countryside. Before long, the view had been swallowed up by thick, clotted clouds.

Once they were in the air, a young man in a smart burgundy uniform offered them a drink. Hermione opted to spoil herself with a gin and tonic, feeling she had deserved it after the horrors of the Pensieve.

Miguel and Draco were seated opposite one another, work papers already strewn on a table between them.

'So how long have you two been… you know…?' Miguel asked Draco, a mischievous glint in his eye. He cast a sneaky sidelong glance at Hermione, who was blushing furiously.

'We're not… you know,' Draco said emphatically.

'I beg your pardon. Please forgive me. So, you work with Draco?' Miguel asked, suddenly switching the full focus of his attention to Hermione, his dark eyes burning into her.

'Mrs Weasley is helping us out with a freelance research project,' Draco interjected neatly. Hermione could feel his cool, grey stare on her glowing cheeks.
The two men soon resumed their business negotiations, leaving Hermione in peace.

Before long, she had drifted off to sleep.

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Moments after waking, Hermione realized she was alone. There was no sign of either man - although, to her relief, Draco's briefcase was still parked on the table he had shared with Miguel. The metal case containing the scanner was also there, along with the bag crammed with clothes they had managed to grab from the hotel in the very short time they had before getting to the airport. This bag was open - its contents unstuffed and flopped onto the floor. Hermione guessed Draco was getting changed in the toilet, which didn't seem such a bad idea she thought. She imagined Southern Patagonia would be chillier than balmy Buenos Aires, so she rooted around in the bag for her jeans and a top.

She felt a little grungy after falling asleep for what must have been at least a few hours and felt a need to freshen up. To her annoyance, she couldn't find her toiletry bag and realized she'd left it, along with the pink shift Draco had bought her, in the hotel room. Luckily, Draco hadn't checked them out. He had business in Buenos Aires on Wednesday.

She leant her head against the window and stared out at the clouds, which parted occasionally to reveal vast swathes of endless brown terrain below them. The scenery here was far from exciting. This had to be the Pampas - baked, hard earth, sun-scorched grass, stretching as far as the eye could see. It was the sort of sight which normally would have panicked her - a vast, wide open space, disorienting in its remote nothingness. She listened to the steady drone of the engines, fervently wishing she'd had time to pack a book.

Where the hell was Draco? He was taking a very long time in the toilet, but then a faint shushing snort alerted her to somebody's presence. She peered behind her to the pair of seats nestled at the back of their cabin.

Draco was fast asleep, his coat draped over his body. His silvery hair was mussed up and his mouth was agape. He looked strangely innocent, Hermione mused, even angelic.

As the toilet was obviously vacant, she decided to spruce herself up. It was a more spacious in-flight bathroom than usual, with a full-length mirror and an array of decent towels, soaps and a sweet-smelling hand-cream. She undressed and had a proper scrub-down.

Her hair was a riotous mess of tangles; without any hair-care implements to hand, she resorted to magic, unfastening and re-sizing her wand pendant to fix the problem. Once her hair had been restored to some kind of sanity, she shrunk the wand back to its pendant size and re-attached it to the necklace, placing it on a small shelf above the sink while she nabbed a generous dose of hand-cream.

There was a banging on the door. 'Hermione?' came Draco's voice, in slightly belligerent tones.

Her hands were coated in cream and she was wearing only her underwear.

'What do you want?' she asked irritably.

'I need the loo.'

'I'll only be a minute.'

'I'm desperate,' he groaned.
'Okay, Okay, I'm coming!' She rubbed her hands on a towel and quickly donned her jeans and a green, long-sleeved jersey top, then grabbed her pretty blue dress and swept out of the bathroom, the door smacking Draco in the face in the process.

'No need for that!' he grumbled, rubbing his nose.

Minutes later, he rejoined her in the cabin. She had resumed her dreary watch of the interminable, blank brown scenery. The sole excitement was a slight buffeting from the dank, grey clouds which scudded past them at regular intervals.

Draco knelt on the seat in front of her so that he was facing her. He followed her gaze out of the window. She glanced at him, surprised to note that he was looking a lot less exhausted than earlier. His face had a healthier glow. His eyes too, were brighter, a warmer, deeper grey, currently reflecting the clouds outside.

'You missed the mountains,' he boasted. 'Stunning.'

'Never mind. At least I got to see all this lovely, endless… brownness,' she said.

'Not as bad as flying over Afghanistan…' Draco said. 'From the air, it looks like one great, big dog-turd.'

'That's a horrible thing to say!'

'Yeah, I remember I must have used about twelve different sets of Daydream Charms on that trip. You realize I've been hugely instrumental in forging George Weasley's millions, don't you? I hope those blasted Weasleys appreciate it.'

'I would have thought you'd find most of their stuff far too infantile for your liking,' Hermione said snidely, referring to their earlier conversation.

'Don't be ridiculous. I happen to feel deeply sorry for Muggles having missed out on the joys of belching powder and screaming yo-yos.'

'They've coped fine with such deprivation for many millennia and will continue to do so, I'm sure,' Hermione said coolly.

They were now beginning their descent and the scenery was rapidly changing, growing into something much more mesmerising. Lakes and rivers and snow-capped peaks in the distance.

'Half an hour to El Calafate,' Draco said. 'Miguel said there's taxis that can take us straight to Santa Maria. It's not far. We should shove our bags into a secure locker at the airport for now. We can retrieve them later.'

Santa Maria was as grim as they'd feared. Dusk was drawing in fast, rendering the small, ramshackle town even gloomier in the drab, grey light.

This place really felt like the end of the world, Hermione thought glumly.

'Let's try the café,' she said to Draco, pointing at Bar Santa Maria.

A group of men were huddled around a table, playing what looked like dominoes, except these dominoes were spelled to spontaneously keel over when least expected, adding an extra element of
urgency to the game.

Draco attempted to speak to the woman working behind the bar in his halting, incoherent Spanish, attracting a great deal of amused attention from the card-players, who shortled gruffly into their hands and sleeves.

One man, however, a broad-chested chap with sandy hair and a weathered, slightly grizzled-looking face separated from his companions and approached them at the bar.

'You guys needing a bit of assistance?' he asked in a friendly American accent.

Hermione grinned in relief. 'That would be great.'

'English?' he said, angling his head to one side and squinting a little as he examined them with unabashed nosiness.

Hermione nodded. Draco pushed past her, hand outstretched.

'I'm Draco Malfoy. And this is Hermione Weasley. We're from the British Ministry of Magic.'

On cue, Hermione fumbled for her Ministry ID, which she flashed at the sandy-haired American while he was still distracted by Draco's over-enthusiastic handshake. One ID pass seemed to suffice.

'I'm Jonas Arbuthnot,' the American said. 'I'm kind of head honcho in these parts. I'm guessing you're here to talk about these suspicious deaths we had?'

'We are,' Hermione asserted. 'Is there somewhere we can talk more privately?'

Their every movement was being closely tracked by the card-players and the woman at the bar, who was watching them with large, soulful eyes. There was something about those eyes, Hermione thought, something she was trying to communicate. Was it anxiety? Suspicion?

'I have an office in town,' Jonas said cordially.

'That would be great,' Hermione said. She turned to Draco and was surprised to see that he was ogling a TV, attached to a bracket high on the wall above the bar, showing what looked like a Brazilian Tele-Novela.

Draco looked aghast. He mouthed something. A name.

'Astoria. It's bloody Astoria!' he choked, caught between hilarity and horror.

Hermione gawped at the brassy blonde on-screen. There was no doubting the resemblance.

'Someone he knows?' Jonas asked, intrigued by Draco's odd behaviour.

'It's his wife,' Hermione mouthed.

'Ex-wife,' Draco said emphatically.

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Jonas's office amounted to little more than a dingy room on the ground floor of a civic building.

'I thought it best to get you away from the townsfolk,' Jonas said with a heavy sigh. He flicked his
wand, prompting a bulbous, white lamp to burst into life. 'They're getting mighty pissed at the constant quizzing over these deaths we've been subjected to. Anyone would think we'd murdered the poor bastards. And I've gotta say, I'm not really getting why your Ministry is so curious about something that happened thousands of miles away.'

'Who else has been here?' Hermione asked, trying to sound casual and hoping to defer further awkward questions. She glanced over at Draco, who was lost in thought, clearly still dumb-founded by what he had seen at Bar Santa Maria.

Jonas settled himself onto a large chair behind his desk, which was completely bare. He indicated to Hermione and Draco to take a seat.

'Well, I'm not too sure what I can or can't tell you. And I don't know how you even heard about our little mishap, because it ain't been aired on the Muggle news, that's for certain.'

'We found out from a Senor Asusto,' Draco said. 'He says he found the dead girl and baby in the bar where we met you.'

Jonas's eyes narrowed. 'I don't know this Senor Asusto,' he said in suspicious tones. 'And there weren't no baby either, as far as I know… and I darned well should know; I was first on the scene when the alarm was raised.'

'Who raised the alarm?' Hermione asked, deeply concerned now about Senor Asusto's testimony.

'Well, that was Dolores – the woman working at the bar? She runs the place. Her friend, Ana, was one of the victims.' A look of deep sadness shadowed Jonas's face. 'She was one hell of a witch, she really was.'

Ana. That had been the name Senor Asusto had cried when he found her body, Hermione thought, which meant the memory hadn't been entirely false.

'And she was Muggle-born,' Draco said pointedly.

Jonas's body language changed from amicable to defiant. He folded his arms tightly across his chest and eyed Draco with unalloyed suspicion. 'We don't hold no truck with such distinctions in this part of the world, Mr Malfoy. She was a witch, plain and simple. And a darned skilled one at that.'

Jonas cocked his head to one side and examined Draco closely. 'Your name is kind of familiar. Have we met before?' Draco vigorously shook his head.

'The thing is,' Jonas continued, 'this country, Argentina, has had many problems in the past. It's been a dark past. Too many acts of unadulterated evil, too many ghosts. Back in the late 70s, early 80s, the Muggle world descended into the kind of hell your Dark Lord 'Voldemort' was hell-bent on implementing in Britain and beyond. We call it 'La Guerra Sucia' – the Dirty War. Tens of thousands of people were murdered or spirited away, never to be seen again. So, we've seen the horrors that can happen when one bunch of folks gets too high and mighty, and we're determined not to let that happen again. Here or anywhere. Santa Maria is a community of blow-ins. Magical folks from all over the world can come here to live a life of peace and tolerance.'

'Until last week,' Hermione said succinctly.

Jonas curled his lips into a grimace. 'Until last week.'

'We heard that you had a bunch of investigators here, calling themselves Los Rojos? Wizards
wearing red robes? Is that true?' Draco said.

Jonas nodded. 'That's true. And we've no idea how they got wind of our situation, but they did. Maybe that too was the fault of your mysterious Senor Asusto?'

Hermione smiled wanly. 'Can you tell us exactly how many actually died in last week's tragedy?'

'Look, little lady,' Jonas said. 'I'm more than happy to talk to you, but if you happen to be allied to these guys-

'I can assure you, we're not,' Draco cut in.

'It's just that they were a little heavy handed in their interrogation process, you know what I mean? Scared the crap out of half the town, chanting and sprinkling some kind of dust, or it could have been ash, everywhere. Acted like they owned the goddamned place.'

'Ash? What kind of ash?' Hermione asked. 'Is there some we can look at? Maybe take a sample?'

'No chance,' Jonas cackled. 'You see the wind in these parts? It's all gone.'

'Did it look like the type of ash used to contain dark spirits? Or… or as protection from something outside?' Hermione asked, almost over-flowing with her excitement at this information. 'Was it pale, like bone-ash?'

'Hey, lady!' Jonas bellowed, silencing her with a thunderous look. 'Like I said, the wind took it far, far away from here. Maybe it was some kind of ritual. I dunno! And I didn't care. I just wanted my town back to normal. But then we had some other kook poking his nose into our business, and that was a Muggle. We were none too pleased about that, let me tell you!'

'A Muggle?' Draco asked.

'That's what I said, didn't I? Some Danish guy. Said he was a photographer. He didn't stick around long.'

A Danish photographer. How the hell did he know about this? Hermione wondered.

'Have you heard of Dark Flux, Mr Arbuthnot?' Hermione asked, deciding to cut straight to the crux of the matter.

'Of course I have,' he sneered, a little unpleasantly Hermione thought.

'How can you be sure?'

'Because I've seen it before.' There was a dark gleam in Jonas's eyes which chilled Hermione's insides. 'Paris. 2008. I lost a good friend, Marie-Louise. She was a Muggle-born. And a very fine witch.'

'And the bodies. Weren't they blue too? Like here?' Hermione asked, almost holding her breath as she spoke. She was taking a big risk…she didn't actually know if the bodies here in Santa Maria were blue or not.

Jonas opened his mouth to speak, then faltered. He seemed to ponder this information, then abruptly stood up from his desk, slamming his chair tight against the table as he moved to the door. Hermione and Draco instantly followed.

'You want to see these bodies? You've got ten minutes flat, you hear me? It's getting late,' he said,
plucking a large brass key from a keychain on this belt.

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The morgue was housed in the dark, shadowy basement of this same civic building and was accessible by a narrow staircase. There was a wet, musty odour to the place. Jonas led the way, holding high his wand, which he had illuminated with a simple Lumos. Hermione instinctively reached for her wand pendant, thinking that two wands would be better than one. But instead, her hand landed on bare flesh.

A sickening wave of dread surged through her.

'My wand,' she gasped, grabbing frantically at Draco in the darkness. 'Have you seen my wand?'

Draco abruptly stopped following Jonas, whose eerily-lit form was soon swallowed up into pitch-blackness. ‘You’re wearing it, aren’t you?’

‘It’s gone … it’s not here,’ Hermione said, her voice shaking. ‘It must have dropped off …’

‘Are you sure it hasn’t just … slipped down or something?’ As he spoke, Draco tentatively patted her neck and collar-bone in the darkness; his hand momentarily slunk under the collar of her top, his fingers skimming her skin and her hairline.

'Shit. It's gone. What the hell have you done with it?'

Hermione thought she might burst into tears. 'Oh, God,' she murmured. 'Oh no. I think – I think…'

She was actually finding it hard to think, not only because she was spiraling into panic, but also because the unexpected touch of Draco's fingertips on her bare skin in the dark, had sparked an unwanted response in her, a fluttery ferment of feeling she was struggling to tamp down.

Hermione was aware that Jonas was now waiting at the bottom of the steps, a quizzical expression on his face that was pooled in the solitary light afforded by his wand.

Hermione screwed her eyes tightly shut, recalling with sudden vivid clarity the moment she had placed her wand on the shelf above the sink in the bathroom on board Miguel's jet. Had she picked it up? She couldn't remember if she had. She couldn't recall putting the necklace back on again. Draco had interrupted her. That was right.

'Bugger,' she gasped. 'I left it on the plane.' How could she have been so stupid? She'd never lost her wand. Not ever. Ron had. Countless times. But not her. She didn't do stuff like that.

Until now.

'Something wrong up there?' Jonas asked.

'Everything's fine,' Draco proclaimed jovially. He gently squeezed Hermione's arm. 'I'll call Miguel the moment we're out of here. Let's just get this over with, okay?' he whispered.

She followed Jonas deeper into the pitch-black darkness of the morgue, Draco close behind.

'Is there any light down here?' Hermione asked, trying to maintain as steady and jocular a tone as possible.

'One moment,' Jonas grunted. He tapped a bar above a low trestle table. A garish white light exploded into life, directly above the electric blue body of a young woman who Hermione instantly
recognised as Ana from the bar. The light focused almost entirely on the contents of the table top, spilling just a few inches beyond its borders, so that only the chest and lower half of Jonas's face was clearly visible, his eyes concealed from view. His mouth and jaw were set into a tense, pouting frown.

Hermione gazed intently at the corpse stretched out before her. It was a sickening sight, and yet poignant, too. A nightmare made flesh.

'We're confused about these welts,' Jonas said, indicating the dark purple contusions distributed across Ana's body, disfiguring not only her limbs but also her torso and breasts.

'This isn't normal for Dark Flux victims, is it?' Draco mumbled.

'Not to my knowledge,' Jonas said mournfully. 'Nobody's seen anything like this. Our current theory is that Ana came into contact with some kind of infection in El Calafate where she'd been visiting a friend.'

He gestured to the tables behind them supporting other corpses, covered by a translucent shell which shimmered with the faint white glow of enchantment.

'None of these manifested the same symptoms, that's for sure. Apart from being… bright blue.'

Hermione counted three more tables, which made four bodies in all. Four victims - not three, as reports had suggested. Did this mean the baby was here after all?

'How many died that day?' she asked sharply.

'Three.'

'But there's four bodies.'

'Not all deaths are like this poor soul, Mrs Weasley. At the far end is a man we believe died from natural causes - nothing to alarm yourself with, whatsoever.'

'Can I see?' Hermione asked, suddenly brave, even though the skin where her wand would have rested was feeling eerily cold and tingly in the wand's absence.

Jonas opened his mouth to answer but a creaking noise from the top of the staircase alerted them to the presence of somebody else. There was the faint sound of a footfall followed by an odd buzzing sound.

The new arrival was yet to speak, but they could feel the morgue was being studied closely by an unseen pair of eyes.

Hermione could hardly breathe, aware that her pulse was suddenly racing and her chest had constricted uncomfortably. Draco tugged at her sleeve, pulling her away from the pool of light which hovered over the table before them.

'Hey! Who's there?' Jonas snarled, infuriated by this intrusion. 'Nobody's allowed down here without my express permission.'

Hermione saw that he had a tight grip of his wand and was pointing it as unobtrusively as possible at the staircase.

She inched backwards with Draco and was gradually enveloped by the darkness behind them,
rendering them spectators to the scene unfolding before them.

There was a glimmer of blue light emanating from the top of the stairs, which gradually seemed to grow until it was the size of a small golf ball. It hovered in the air, emitting an ominous hum, briefly illuminating a wand pointing in the direction of Jonas Arbuthnot.

A look of grim dread scuttled across Jonas's face, and then the blue ball of light spun at breakneck speed towards him, smashing into his chest with such force he fell backwards. Jonas crashed heavily into the table, instantly extending an arm to steady himself, which then landed on Ana's corpse. He yelped in fear and disgust, instinctively pushing at the body, which slid off the table, collapsing with a gut-churning thud onto the floor.

The blue ball of light continued to hover close by, zooming to and fro, occasionally charging at Jonas before zipping upwards, then circling the table, before making another swooping dive, homing in to sting its prey.

There was an unpleasant crackling sound and the acrid smell of burning flesh as the ball attacked again and again, striking Jonas repeatedly on his face, his hands, his neck.

Jonas recoiled in horror, pleading and crying for the ball of light to stop.

'Come on,' Draco said urgently, grabbing Hermione's hand. 'We've got to get out of here!'

But Hermione feared it was already too late. The shadowy figure at the top of the stairs was now descending, arm outstretched. Clad from head to toe in a long, red cloak, the figure was fast approaching Jonas, who was whimpering in fear, batting away the buzzing blue ball which continued to pepper him with burning blows.

'We should help him,' Hermione gasped.

'No, we fucking shouldn't,' Draco whispered hoarsely. 'We should help ourselves, Hermione, come on!' He grabbed her by the waist, hooking his arm firmly around her middle, and carried her as far from Jonas's screams and cries as seemed physically possible.

'No,' she squealed, wriggling free from his grasp. 'Get off me!'

She desperately tried to harness the mental energy to summon a spell which could assist Jonas, who had fallen to the floor and was squirming in fear and agony.

Draco was feeling along the back wall for an exit of some kind. 'Forget about him, Hermione, he's a goner!'

Hermione stood her ground, feeling the magic quivering through her fingertips. Focus, she said to herself. Come on, focus!

'Stupefy!' she shrieked, aiming her hand in the direction of the wizard wielding the wand, who was now a foot away from Jonas. There was a faint sizzling noise and a sharp pain which stabbed at her fingers, but no magic.

'Expelliarmus!' she cried; again, nothing... 'No, no, this can't be happening,' she sobbed. I can usually do this, she told herself. Why not now?

Jonas's caped attacker now had his wand poised and was pointing it straight at him. The wand sparked blood red as the Cruciatius Curse was inflicted over and over again.
Jonas's screams were deafening as he writhed in pain.

'Hermione,' Draco hissed. 'Get your arse over here now!'

Hermione was rooted to the spot, hysterical panic whirling inside of her. If only I had my wand, she thought over and over.

To her horror, the red-cloaked man was being followed by a troupe of similarly garbed assistants, each carrying a heavy black sack. She realized they planned to take the bodies.

'I've found an open window,' Draco called. 'But it's stuck.'

Sure enough, there was a faint draught to her right.

'Come on, help me out here,' he begged.

Draco grabbed Hermione's arm, his fingers digging deep into her flesh, and dragged her towards the back wall of the morgue. The sudden searing pain from his tight grasp jolted her to her senses.

She saw that he was frantically trying to prise open a small window, little more than a vent really, built high into the wall, by jumping as high as he could and shoving at the glass with his hand. The window was ajar but jammed too tightly to fully give way.

'Lift me up!' she yelled.

He placed his hands on her waist and hoisted her high into the air, so that she was able to smash her hands against the glass. His arms were quivering with the strain of holding her, his feet unsteady.

'It won't open!' she screamed, panic-stricken.

A piercing shriek rang out behind them and then a booming Avada Kedavra followed by silence. Hermione could see the green light of the deadly curse reflected in the windowpane.

She could hear the footsteps of Jonas's murderer fast approaching and hear the chilling hum of the buzzing blue ball hurtling towards them.

Draco was swaying beneath her, then he swerved, pulling Hermione away from the window, narrowly avoiding the blue ball which whizzed past them before shooting upwards, poised for a fresh attack.

Draco tottered, his knees buckling beneath him. Hermione slid inexorably down the length of his body, her head smashing heavily into the wall, aware only that his arms had tightly encircled her and were holding her close.

I'm going to die, she thought helplessly, hot, bitter tears stinging her cheeks, her face muffled by Draco's shirt which was wet with sweat. I'm going to die in a morgue at the end of the world with bloody Draco Malfoy.

There was a sudden crashing thunk, an explosion of bricks and dust, and the shattering of glass high above them. The window had vanished and a vast opening had been blown into the wall.

For a few brief seconds, Hermione wondered if she was dead; she felt she was floating, being flung forwards into the darkness of the night, before landing clumsily on a gritty, muddy pathway.

She was lying on the ground, her head was swimming, her vision starry.
'Venga!' came a woman's voice. 'Come with me!'

She was being hoisted upwards by two strong arms and dragged across the dirt-path, her shoes scuffing the ground.

A small house with a candle glowing in the window beckoned them. Draco kept hold of her. 'Can you walk?' he panted.

'Yes – yes, I think so,' Hermione said.

There was a woman ahead of them. She flicked her wrist and the door to the house swung open. 'Get inside!' she barked.

They ran inside and the woman slammed the door shut.

Hermione stared. It was the woman with the deep, dark eyes from the bar.

'You are safe now, I promise,' she said, in heavily accented English. 'My name is Dolores. Welcome to my home.'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"WIDE OPEN SPACE" by MANSUN

&

“SHE’S LOST CONTROL” by JOY DIVISION

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Crows' Nest

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Draco seek shelter with the mysterious Dolores; but have they found sanctuary or wandered into a trap?

12. Crows’ Nest

'Stay here!' Dolores commanded, circling what appeared to be the main living room in her tiny house, trailing a luminous white spark from her finger, which then crackled and faded.

The front door bolted, the curtains snapped shut, a fire in the grate burst into brilliant turquoise flames and a number of candles, arranged at strategic points around her small, cramped living quarters, instantly sprung into life. She then disappeared into a room situated behind them, casting defensive spells in low, guttural Spanish.

Draco stalked the main window facing the road outside, breathing heavily, his body tensed, sneaking glances behind the curtain to check they hadn't been followed. His wild-eyed prowling was making Hermione feel dizzy; her ears were still ringing from the explosion that had liberated them from the morgue.

Draco shook his head in wonder. 'Doesn't make sense,' he murmured. 'Where is everybody? This place is a bloody ghost town!'

'Es el miedo mortal. Everybody is very frightened, no? Unexplained deaths and then Los Rojos….' Dolores explained, re-entering the room holding a tray with three glasses and a silver teapot.

She settled herself on a plump red cushion next to a small round table and offered them each a glass of Mate which Draco refused.

Hermione accepted, wanting to show her gratitude to the witch who had probably saved their lives. She was a striking looking woman that was for sure, with lustrous, velvety dark eyes, a long bony physique and a torrent of thick, black hair, which tumbled freely down her back.

'You alright?' Draco said to Hermione, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

Hermione almost jumped in surprise. 'I'm fine,' she said, gulping back a sudden wave of emotion that threatened to swamp her. 'And you?'

Draco nodded wearily. 'That was a close shave.'

'Poor Jonas,' Hermione croaked. 'We should have done more to help him.'

Dolores watched them closely, a serene expression on her face.

'You must not blame yourselves,' she asserted, replenishing Hermione's glass with the strangely soothing Mate. 'Los Rojos would have found a way to enter the morgue and do what they wanted to do there regardless of your presence here.'
Hermione wasn't so sure. She couldn't shrug off a niggling feeling deep inside of her that the presence of herself and Draco had somehow led Jonas's attackers into this fatal course of action.

Draco gazed at their rescuer, a suspicious gleam suddenly alight in his eye. 'You seem pretty sure of that... Are you connected to these Rojos? How did you even know what was going on? This house is a good few hundred yards from the morgue.'

'I have extremely powerful wards which protect the perimeter of my property,' Dolores declared. 'The destructive magic that was unleashed by Los Rojos was so powerful – an extraordinary power, I can assure you - it triggered an alarm.'

'Do Los Rojos use a special type of magic? Kind of like an anti-magic…?' Hermione asked in tremulous tones. She shuddered as she recalled the malevolent, spinning, blue ball – zapping, stinging, burning poor Jonas. She'd never seen a weapon like it.

Dolores's eyes scanned Hermione's face inquisitively. 'You felt that?'

Hermione nodded. 'I could feel my magic surging violently and then dying inside of me.'

'There are others in Santa Maria who have experienced this same phenomenon since the arrival of Los Rojos. It is most troubling, no?' Dolores said. 'But you are safe now, I promise. I insist you rest here until dawn.'

'Thanks, but no thanks. We still have work to do,' Draco said in a firm, determined voice. He gestured towards the turquoise flames flickering in the fireplace. 'We could Floo straight out of here…'

'No, Draco Malfoy!' Dolores warned, her eyes suddenly stern and hard, 'there is very great danger for you in this place beyond this house, of that I am sure.'

Draco turned a dull shade of green. 'How – how do you know my name?'

'I knew you were coming,' she said in low tones.

'Who told you?' Draco snapped.

'I see things. It is … mi manera.'

Oh, lord, no, Hermione thought with an inward groan. A Seer.

A Seer who had neglected to mention that they had introduced themselves to Jonas Arbuthnot within her earshot at Bar Santa Maria.

'But I also see that you need to rest,' Dolores purred. 'You have much pain. And these events have made this very much worse for you. You have shown great bravery in your strength tonight.' She smiled at Draco, but her night-black eyes looked like they were boring into his soul.

Draco winced and looked away, his hand instantly covering his shoulder as though to protect himself from Dolores's dark-eyed scrutiny. 'It's not so bad,' he muttered.

'We both know that is a lie,' Dolores said snippily. 'Let me tend to your pain, then you must rest.'

A thin, reedy bleating suddenly rang out - the cry of a baby.

'Disculpeme,' Dolores said, smiling an amiable apology at her guests. She gathered a small baby from a wooden cradle hunkered into a dark corner of the room and held it close, gently rocking it
to and fro in her arms.

Hermione couldn't remember seeing the cradle when they had first entered the house, but she had been in such a confused state that was hardly surprising. She glanced around the room. It was plainly decorated; a few wooden chairs and a sofa loosely draped in brightly-coloured throws. A towering dark-wood dresser loomed from the back wall. Its shelves were lined with flickering tealights. A single, chunky church candle illuminated a small glass bowl which had been upended, entrapping a lump of roiling, crystalline red, which seemed to smoulder and glitter in the darkness.

She would have liked to investigate further but was distracted by Draco. Dolores was right. He was clearly suffering. He continued to covertly inspect the street outside from behind the curtains. Thinking he was unobserved, Hermione couldn't help but notice the ashen tinge to his complexion and an uncharacteristic stiffness in his movements.

Dolores was right. He needed rest, and hopefully some pain relief. Hermione hoped Dolores had something else to hand as Senor Canaro's potion, which had helped him so much earlier, was currently stowed in a locker, far away at El Calafate Airport.

Dolores beamed at her visitors. 'This is little Paco.' The baby in her arms was making throaty gurgling noises, his small hand tightly gripping her fingers.

Dolores seated herself on her plump, red cushion, cradling the baby in her arms. Then, to Hermione's amazement, Dolores peeled back the left side of her robe to reveal a creamy expanse of breast, her nipple standing bulbous and erect from an expanse of brown, mottled areola. The baby attached himself greedily, his small hand padding his mother's breast in tandem with his soft, mewling sighs of contentment.

Hermione’s cheeks instantly glowed with a sudden flush of awkwardness. She considered herself an open-minded, earthy sort of woman and had happily breastfed both Rose and Hugo, but never in public. And definitely not amongst strangers, in the midst of a potentially life-threatening situation.

Draco, to her surprise, appeared unphased. 'My – first wife, Astoria, never breastfed,' he said gruffly. 'I have a son,' he told Dolores, by way of further explanation. 'Scorpius.'

'How old is he?' Dolores asked.

'Seven,' Draco replied.

Dolores smiled sweetly. 'I see you love him very much. He’s very lucky, even though his mother deserted him.'

How did she know that? Hermione wondered. It must be an educated guess, she decided, based on Draco’s reaction to Astoria starring in the tele-novela on the bar’s TV.

'And what are the names of your children?’ Dolores asked her.

Dolores gestured to Hermione to take a seat, but she preferred to stand – easier for a quick getaway...

'Rose and Hugo,’ Hermione said.

'You are Muggle-born,’ Dolores stated. She cocked her head to one side and studied Hermione, her jet-black eyes narrowing to slits. The candle-flames on the wooden dresser briefly dipped and juddered, as though a cool eddy of breeze had swirled through the room.
'Yes, I am,' Hermione said, jutting her chin defiantly into the air. Inwardly, however, Hermione was panicking. How could she tell? Muggle-borns didn’t look any different to pure-bloods and half-bloods. There were no distinguishing features at all.

She shot a glance at Draco. He was staring hard at Dolores; a combination of suspicion and awe on his face, and then he spun around to resume his watchful vigil at the window.

‘I hope that isn’t a problem for you,’ Hermione added, tartly.

Baby Paco stirred a moment. His mother slightly shifted position and he soon snuffled back into place. Dolores snapped her attention back to Hermione and smiled warmly.

‘It’s never a problem for me,’ Dolores said, ‘nor for anybody here in Santa Maria. We are all seeking refuge from the ugliness of our pasts and the sins we committed and have had committed against us. I lived in Europe for much of my life. I saw great terrors. Atrocities celebrated in the name of those who would dare to set themselves up as the true arbiters of what is wrong or right, who can be loved and who must be hated …’ Despite her misgivings, Hermione found she was listening intently. ‘It was a time for cowards, a place for fools and for those who had forgotten how to love, and one I decided not to be part of for a moment longer. That is why I came here, to the furthest end of the world, to the edge of the map, where the sunlight is stronger and the sky is bluer and we are surrounded by the glory and violence of nature in all its terrible majesty. I made a new family for myself amongst wizards and witches who choose to live, free from judgement and pain.’

Hermione briefly wondered if Santa Maria was some kind of peacenik, hippy ‘sect’ for magical folk – it had a strangely incomplete quality to it, rather like it was making it up as it went along. As a concept, it wasn’t entirely unpleasant.

‘You wouldn’t like it here, Hermione,’ Dolores said with a soft cackle. ‘You know what it is to love but your heart remains vengeful and you enjoy the CHALLENGE far too much – in spite of the many cruelties you have experienced at the hands of others.’ Her eyes flicked to Draco. ‘But never forget, your strength can be your weakness, too.’

Draco shuffled away from the curtain and slumped into one of the wooden chairs opposite Dolores. He looked pale and defeated and for a moment Hermione truly didn’t care that he had been one of the chief architects of much of the happiness and loneliness that had beset her life in the wizarding world.

‘I think it’s all-clear out there,’ Draco said. He stifled a yawn.

‘And you will sleep soon, Draco Malfoy,’ the dark-eyed witch said. Her head dipped and she kissed her son on the head. He disengaged from her breast and his small, pink mouth lolled open, his eyes tightly shut against the world.

Dolores tenderly wrapped him in his blanket and returned him to the cot in the corner of the room. ‘He will sleep in my room with me and Hermione, and you,’ she nodded at Draco,’ will remain in here.’

Draco nodded mutely and was already eyeing the couch with considerable envy.

To Hermione's astonishment, Dolores suddenly grabbed his hand and pulled him closer, her eyes shining feverishly.

'And you will have such dreams; sweet, gentle dreams. Dreams you never dare to have. You will see her…your beautiful little girl,’ Dolores intoned. 'She is waiting for you to take her home.'
Draco instantly tried to retract his hand from her grasp, but Dolores clearly had a vice-like grip.

'You don't believe me,' Dolores said. 'I can see it in your eyes.'

'No. I – I don't know what to think,' Draco said. His eyes were wide with panic. He cast an anxious glance in Hermione's direction, but Dolores tugged at his arm, compelling him to return her gaze with his own.

'Your daughter, she has a look of you, your eyes especially… the colour of molten mercury.'

Hermione groaned in exasperation. ‘Please, Dolores. We’re very grateful for your help tonight, but this – this-' She didn’t know what to say.

Dolores blinked rapidly, as though an unwelcome image had suddenly impinged on her reverie. 'And… she has her mother's hair.'

‘You can see her?’ Draco’s eyes were round with curiosity. He seemed to be falling forward, closer to Dolores. 'Where are they now? Can you see what they’re doing?'

'Rest assured, your daughter is amongst those who love her very much,' Dolores said in a calm, measured voice.

'And my wife?'

Dolores's eyes darkened. Her hand released his, clapping his neck instead so that his face was pulled mere inches from her own. Her fingers slinked along the length of the silver chain supporting Katya's pendant. She unfurled the silver rose from the confines of his shirt and enfolded it in her palm. She bowed her head, closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly and deliberately.

'She is alive, isn’t she?' Draco implored in a slightly strangulated voice, half-swallowing the words the moment they sprung from his lips.

Hermione could feel red-hot anger boiling up inside of her. Toying with Draco's emotions like this seemed cruel and unfair. And the man was dog-tired and had been shot! ‘Dolores …’ she said, attempting and failing to intervene. The words she wished for hung heavy in her mouth, a leaden load on her tongue, and the thoughts she had hoped to express skimmed straight from her mind…

'I cannot answer this, Draco Malfoy. All I know is she's not in this world,' Dolores said curtly.

Frustrated, Hermione stepped forwards and firmly seized Draco’s shoulders, tilting him backwards, away from Dolores’s penetrating gaze. The pendant slipped from Dolores’s’ fingers.

Draco clapped his hand on hers. 'It’s okay, Hermione,’ he muttered. ‘I’m okay.’

‘But she can’t just say stuff like that and get away with it!’ Hermione exclaimed; she felt as though she had broken through a grey, filmy fog, and her tongue had been loosened; and a torrent of inchoate thought was crowding her mind. Damned, insensitive, know-it-all Seers! ‘What you say could mean anything!’ she said to Dolores. She was shaking with agitation. ‘… it could mean Draco’s wife is … not with us, anymore. But, equally, there are many ways of not being in this world, aren’t there? We live in oneworld and the Muggles live in another.’

'That is all I will say on the matter,' Dolores declared, with an air of finality. She fixed Hermione with an admonishing glare.
Hermione heaved a pained sigh and released her grip on Draco. Maybe it was best if they took their chances and headed back to El Calafate for the night…? Draco needed Canaro’s potion and this woman was clearly a Class A Kook.

Dolores was watching her with dark, beady eyes. 'I mean no harm,' she said dejectedly. 'When I see things, I have to say it… I see things about you too, but I know you will not want to hear them at this moment, so I will say nothing at all…'

'Probably for the best,' Hermione scoffed, retreating back into the darkness of the room. ‘I've always maintained that Divination is stuff and nonsense and I'm not about to change my tune.’

To her surprise, Draco jumped to Dolores's defence. 'Merlin, Hermione! She's just trying to help us; that's all!' ‘Is that so? We're here to find out about Dark Flux… not some bloody gibberish about your wife!’

Draco's silver eyes blazed with anger. 'She says I have a daughter! Don't you think that means something?'

'Sorry, but no,' Hermione retorted, swiftly succeeded by a guilty sigh levelled at Dolores. ‘I don’t mean to sound ungrateful; I’m so sorry.’

'I know you are, Hermione. At heart you are a kind girl, just a little lost…And your carefully constructed cage that you have locked yourself into is slowly but surely falling away from you. It is very frightening. I have felt it myself… And now I am free.' Dolores smiled warmly as she spoke, and it was this that did it. It had all been too much. Everything was too much.

'Please – excuse me,' Hermione gasped, her throat suddenly dry and aching with unshed tears. 'Can I get some water?'

XXX

Hermione stumbled into a small, dark kitchen illuminated by only a faint glow of streetlights from outside, streaming through the window.

She plucked a glass from a sideboard and turned on the tap. She waited for the water to chug through creaking pipes. She gazed out of the window at the dark backstreets of Santa Maria. It was a lifeless, drab little place – hardly the sweetest refuge from the world’s woes.

She sipped her water in silence, dawdling for what soon passed into long minutes, reluctant to return to Dolores and Draco.

She took a deep breath, fighting to stay calm. She’d made a fool of herself. And it had been a long and terrible day… the ghastliness of the memory at Senor Canaro's, losing her wand, the horror of poor Ana's lifeless blue corpse; uncannily similar in colour to the evil blue ball which had tortured Jonas Arbuthnot before he was so cruelly murdered. And now this… a sense that a whole new world of dark danger was closing in on them and there was nothing they could do about it.

She desperately needed to rationalise their situation, to apply a little cold, logical thinking. Experience had taught her that this was a surefire way to dampen down her fears and emotions when they were running high.

Dolores and her ‘inner eye’ might have unnerved her somewhat, but she was also useful. She lived and worked in this town and had discovered Ana's body.
This meant she had crucial information.

Hermione turned away from the window, already feeling a lot better, when something - she couldn't tell what it was - drew her attention back to the view outside.

There had been a moment. A presence. A feeling that she was being watched.

But there was nobody there. The lane outside the window was deserted.

She pressed her nose directly to the window, her breath fogging the glass, to peer outside.

Nothing. A flutter of large black birds balancing on a telephone wire high above the street, silhouetted against the night sky; that was all.

How odd, she thought, that a wizarding town like Santa Maria even bothered with telephones.

'Dolores met this Danish chap Jonas told us about,' Draco's voice rang out behind her. 'His name's Henrik Thyssen. He came into the bar where Dolores works.'

Hermione could see Draco reflected in the darkened window; a ghostly figure, his pale hair gleaming brightly, partly obscured by the reflection of her own face. His shirt was gaping open, so she guessed Dolores had been checking his wound.

'She says he was heading down to the glaciers. Some place called Perito Moreno,' Draco continued, in what sounded to Hermione like conciliatory tones. 'Maybe we should head that way tomorrow and see what he has to say?'

'I'd rather get going tonight if we can,' she said uneasily.

Draco's reflection was growing in size as he slowly advanced towards her, until he was so close, she could feel the warmth from his body.

'This witch saved our lives, Hermione,' he whispered. 'So please play nice. It’s just one night and we’re tired.' His breath was ticklish against her neck. She shivered involuntarily at the sensation.

'I suspect she's very powerful. And we know nothing about her,' Hermione said, turning her head to one side to face him.

Despite his obvious proximity, she was still surprised to find his face so close to her own. In this shadowy half-light, he looked eerily beautiful. All signs of tiredness and stress were erased. Instead, the clear-cut lines of his finely boned cheeks and chin and the shape of his lips were more strongly defined, while his eyes were glowing pools of liquid darkness.

She found she was holding her breath, almost scared that she had ever thought such a thing out loud, even in her own head.

'Let's at least wait till it's light,' Draco murmured.

'I'm sorry about what I said…' Hermione started, but halted, almost unable to speak as an unexpected rush of hot tears flowed down her cheeks. She brusquely wiped them away with the back of her hand. 'The bloody gibberish bit… you know…' She shuddered at the memory. 'I didn't mean any disrespect… to you or your wife. I'm not that kind of person, Malfoy.'

Draco didn't reply. She could feel his eyes studying her in the dim light and flushed with sudden self-consciousness. She had to look dreadful, she realized, after such a harrowing night.
'I don't know what's wrong with me,' she said, looking away to pour herself a fresh glass of water. 'My brain has gone to pieces.'

The sound of Paco crying and Dolores cooing words of comfort drove them back to their current reality. Draco's eyes flicked to the open doorway, then back to Hermione.

'I thought we were going to die tonight, Malfoy,' Hermione said, staying Draco with a glancing touch of her hand on his arm.

'Yeah. Me too,' Draco mumbled, shuffling uncomfortably. 'Kind of concentrates the mind, doesn't it?'

'I feel like we've been set up - and I don't know what for,' she said, apart from being lured to their deaths, she added inwardly, but didn't dare speak it out loud. 'I mean, the original plan was to come here tomorrow… if it hadn't been for what we saw in that memory… the baby… I don't think we would have been in that morgue tonight. Everything suddenly felt much more urgent. Do you understand what I'm saying?'

Draco sucked his lower lip thoughtfully. 'I think so … we needed to verify the memory I guess. Although It had clearly been tampered with. I've no doubts about that.'

‘But then again, NOBODY could have known that we would change our plans and come a day early. Los Rojos being in that morgue tonight … it was probably a ghastly coincidence.’ She sighed deeply. ‘Oh, god. I’m just over-thinking things, aren’t I?’

‘Perhaps.’ Draco continued to chew his bottom lip. His eyes flicked to their reflections in the kitchen window.

‘Would – would you have come here today, if Ron had been with you, instead of me?’

Draco blinked rapidly. ‘Probably.’

It had been the baby, Hermione thought. It was the baby that made the difference … they had to know … SHE had to know, if the baby was real. That was why they had changed their plans. That – and Draco’s condition. Not knowing how seriously ill he might become… how quickly.

‘Strikes me that the most important thing now is to find out who modified the memory, don't you think?’ Draco said.

'Oh, that's obvious,' Hermione said flippantly. 'It had to be Senor Canaro! He had the time and the opportunity.'

'As did Senor Asusto,’ Draco asserted.

‘Or maybe Los Rojos accosted Senor Asusto, cast a false memory charm, and then Obliviated him?’

'I guess that's possible,' Draco conceded, tightly pursing his lips.

'But we mustn’t forget that it was also Senor Canaro who alerted you to this memory in the first place! So, yes. Canaro is the chief suspect,’ Hermione concluded forcefully. A panoply of options were springing into life in her mind – each path seemed to lead in entirely different directions.

'Well, if it was Canaro, I can assure you he can't be working for Jeroboam,' Draco said decisively.
'Really? I'd have thought Canaro would jump at the chance to rid the world of Muggle-borns and Muggle spawn!' Hermione said with a sardonic sneer.

'Think about it, Hermione. If Jeroboam is harvesting Dark Flux, there's no way he’d want anyone snooping around Dark Flux sites. Especially someone like you!'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You're a respected Ministry lawyer. People listen to you.'

'So, if we were snooping around,' Hermione grimaced, 'he'd probably want us killed, wouldn't he?'

Draco smiled wolfishly. 'Based on the evidence of this evening? That’s certainly possible.'

But not definite, Hermione mused. Thinking about it, Los Rojos had the time and the space – a secretive place, far from the rest of the world – to do such a thing. There was no instant execution of the 'spares' – although… logically, death would have come soon enough. They’d witnessed Los Rojos torture and kill a man in cold blood.

'Well, Malfoy,' Hermione said heatedly, 'my gut feeling tells me that Senor Canaro knows much more about this business than he's letting on. The simple fact is, we were panicked into coming here by a suspicious memory that he showed us. Moments later, he's conveniently disappeared and his house is magically sealed! I want to know why!'

'Since when did you go by gut feeling?' Draco said, eyeing her sceptically. 'Okay, Hermione. Here's a plan. Once we've finished up in Santa Maria, let's go see that Danish fellow, then we can head back to Buenos Aires and quiz Canaro.'

They stared intently at each other, forging a silent agreement.

'Is everything alright?' Dolores asked from the doorway.

'Just coming,' Draco muttered apologetically, finally dragging his eyes away from Hermione's, before moving back to the living room.

Hermione turned to retrieve her glass of water which was still standing in the sink - and, in so doing, she caught a quick glimpse of Dolores's face, reflected in the window.

She gasped audibly.

In this half-light, Dolores's large, soulful eyes appeared as two huge black coals swallowing all the light from her face.

Of course it was an illusion, a trick of the night… but for a split-second, Hermione shivered with pure, unadulterated terror.

XXX

Dolores swiftly confirmed that she had met a Senor Asusto on a number of occasions when he had come into the bar to speak to Ana.

'I was surprised how much he liked Ana,' Dolores said.

Dolores was tending to Draco's wound, a look of deep consternation on her face.

'Why's that?' Hermione asked.
'I don't think he was the type of wizard who much liked Muggle-borns,' Dolores said dolefully. 'He was always very pleasant to me, of course, but then I'm pure-blood. He was kind to me, brought me gifts, helped out at the bar… Please hold still, Draco! How can I treat you when you keep squirming?'

Draco looked suitably chastened. Dolores doused her fingers in a rosy pink lotion and delicately prodded Draco's bullet-wound. He instantly baulked, but gritted his teeth, shutting his eyes to block out the pain.

'It was a very ordinary day when it happened… the day Ana died,' Dolores said. 'Nothing remarkable.'

'How was the weather?' Hermione asked.

Dolores shrugged. 'Perhaps a little windy? Paco was crying a lot. He's never liked the sound of the wind whistling around the house! And he is still so very, very young! Hardly alive. I had my usual business to attend to at the bar of course, which is when I found poor Ana…'

'It must have been awful for you!'

'It was shocking, it is true,' Dolores sighed. 'At first I thought it was Gimlott’s.'

'Really?' Hermione asked, prickling with curiosity.

'My husband's mother died of Gimlott's Disease. Her body turned a similar blue just before she died.'

'That's fascinating,' Hermione said. She recalled how Tony Goldstein was a leading expert in this field and determined to talk to him as soon as she returned to England.

'Yes, I believe this is usual with victims of Gimlott's Disease. Poor things. They suffer such a long, lingering death,' Dolores said, with a mournful sigh.

Draco jerked violently in response to Dolores's cleansing of his wound. His face was flushed scarlet.

'That bloody hurt!' he scolded. 'You trying to kill me?'

Dolores smiled weakly at his outburst and continued treating and dressing Draco's wound with an air of stolid indifference.

'Of course, I realised it was impossible for poor Ana and the other Muggle-borns here who died to have been suffering from Gimlott's Disease, because it only affects half-bloods - and they also died very suddenly…' Dolores gave a regretful smile. 'Please, Draco, stay still!

She placed her hand over the wound and incanted something in Spanish. A yellow glow emanated from her palm, encapsulating the wound in a bubble of golden colour.

'That's scorching hot,' Draco groaned in discomfort. He threw a pained look in Hermione's direction.

'Did you know the other victims well?' Hermione asked, ignoring Draco's histrionics.

'This is a very small town and they were regular visitors to the bar.'

Moments later and the glow had subsided and Dolores was cheerily bidding Draco get dressed. She
gestured towards the sofa - a rather unwelcome, lumpen-looking thing. Draco collapsed onto the
couch with an audible groan of relief.

A framed landscape painting depicting a small, stark mountain, its lower flanks dotted with thick
clumps of trees and foliage sporting vivid Autumn colours, was perched above the couch, dangling
lop-sided in a very precarious manner... Hermione regretted not having her wand to hand to secure
it.

Forlornly, she headed into Dolores’s room to bed down for the night. It was late and she was
exhausted. She had a strange reluctance to leave Draco; not because she craved his company, but
because he was her only link to reality. A reality that seemed to be slipping inexorably away from
her.

XXX

Long, sleepless hours had passed and there was a faint grey light gradually blanching the curtains
from the outside, signaling the approach of dawn. Hermione was lying on the bed next to a
peacefully sleeping Dolores, half-smothered by Dolores's long black tresses, which had extended
onto Hermione's pillow.

Paco was an astoundingly good sleeper, Hermione thought a little enviously, remembering with
astonishing, almost nostalgic clarity, the difficulties she had experienced with Hugo. Rose had
always slept soundly, but Hugo was too engrossed with the land of the living. He was also a bit of
a pig and had guzzled her dry, she recalled affectionately.

She was thirsty again. What was it about this place? She toyed with the idea of slipping out of the
bedroom to get a glass of water from the kitchen, but that meant passing through the living room
where Draco was sleeping. It really wouldn't be fair to wake him.

She listened to Dolores's deep, sonorous breathing and the faint whinnying snuffles of baby Paco,
swaddled in his Moses basket beside his mother's bed.

Come on, daybreak, she pleaded silently. She wanted to get to this glacier. Meet this Henrik
Thyssen. And then back to Buenos Aires - first retrieving her wand from Miguel - to face up to
Senor Canaro.

She sighed. Her brain ached with a confusion of tumbling thoughts and overwhelming tiredness.
Dolores's contented sleepy sounds were definitely beginning to grate.

Enough was enough. Hermione swung her legs out of bed and tiptoed out of the bedroom, easing
the door closed behind her. She glanced over at Draco's slumbering form on the lumpen sofa and
then instantly looked away, her face flooded with a sudden burning embarrassment.

Draco was wearing just boxer shorts and had clearly wrestled the thin cover Dolores had offered
him to the floor during the night – the room was stultifyingly hot. He was lying on his side, his
face mushed into a cushion.

She chanced another quick, curious look, reluctantly caught in unexpected admiration at his lean-
limbed physique. His undersheet had bunched up at the front of his body, concealing most of his
groin and chest, but the long sweep of his back leading to the rounded curve of his buttocks was in
full view.

His skin glowed silvery smooth in the grey dawn light.

Her eyes lingered guiltily on the shadowy v-shaped gap between the crumpled sheet and the crook
of his thigh and his flat and muscled lower torso.

She had a sudden, overwhelming desire to stretch out on the couch alongside him and bask in the warmth of his breath on her face.

She quickly dragged her eyes away and hurried into the kitchen and hastened to the sink, grabbing the same glass she'd used earlier. She splushed fresh water into the glass, allowing it to spill over as she found herself increasingly fascinated by a long line of crows – six in all - sitting on the grass verge a few metres beyond the window.

They weren't eating or rooting for worms or preening themselves or any of the other everyday birdlike activities she normally associated with such creatures. There was simply an occasional flapping of wings as one crow moved from one part of the line to another, almost as though they were sharing a conversation. But, for the most part, they seemed to be looking about themselves, heads cocked this way, then that, their dark beady eyes glancing furtively from one end of the lane to the other, glancing upwards, downwards, even straight ahead at the window where she was standing.

What were they waiting for? She wondered. What were they watching?

She raised the glass of water to her lips, the water sloshing over the sides and trickling down her hand as she drank.

One of the crows – the largest, with bold, bristling feathers crowning his sleek black head – suddenly lurched forwards from the rest of the group. With a frenzied flash of wings, he was perched on the windowsill, gazing directly into Dolores's kitchen.

Hermione instinctively pulled back from the window, her heart thumping wildly with an unformed, primal fear.

She could sense the crow's reddish-brown eye scanning the room, so she moved into the doorway between the kitchen and the living room, hoping to avoid its notice.

Surely its eye was too red for a standard crow? Too searching? Too knowing? There was something both familiar and awful in the feeling it gave her.

And then it struck her. The unseen pair of eyes at the morgue had sent a similar frisson of alarm careening through her.

She shrieked, the glass crashing from her hand and smashing onto the floor. The crow hopped in response to the furthest end of the windowsill and peered deep inside.

'What is it?' Draco yelled, flying towards her from the sofa, his bed sheet wrapped clumsily around him like a makeshift toga, hair mussed with sleep.

She ducked out of the crow's view, frantically pushing Draco away from the door, out of sight.

'We have to get out of here! This instant!' she gasped.

'Why? What's happened?' he shouted, holding his bed-sheet closed in one hand, while straining to hold her still with the other.

'We're being watched,' Hermione spluttered, pointing to the kitchen. Draco instinctively moved towards the open door, but she pulled him towards her and away from the kitchen. 'Don't let them see you!'
'Who?' he asked, his eyes wide and staring.

'The crows, Malfoy!' she cried. 'It's the crows! Los Rojos are Animagi… And they've been waiting for us all night… We have to get out of here fast.'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS: "EL NINO" by AGNELLI & NELSON

“DANCING AND BLOOD” by LOW

“FLY” by LOW

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
A mystifying meeting with a morbid Muggle who has a chilling theory into what causes 'Dark Flux' deaths…

13. Henrik's Hunch

Within minutes both Draco and Hermione were dressed and ready to leave.

Hermione was grateful to both Dolores and Draco for not accusing her of melodramatic paranoia, once she voiced her suspicions that Los Rojos were in fact Animagi. She wondered if the ‘Crows’ had been watching Draco and herself in Buenos Aires, or even earlier in England, waiting to see if they would come to Patagonia.

Dolores quickly sent an owl to a neighbour of hers – a man she vowed could be trusted – who would help them escape Santa Maria. Moments later, the owl had returned.

Draco then used this owl to send a message to Senor Canaro in Buenos Aires, telling him to expect another visit tomorrow - that was, Wednesday – morning.

'Don't give too much away,' Hermione warned, 'we want to catch him off-guard. And tell him we'll arrive early.'

'Not too early,' Draco remonstrated, 'it all depends on what time we get back to Buenos Aires today.'

'I want to be back in England tomorrow morning, Malfoy,' Hermione said. 'I plan to take a Portkey.'

'But I might still need you here,' Draco said, grabbing hold of Dolores's owl a little too roughly as it tried to squirm free from his grasp while he affixed the note to its leg. The owl pecked at Draco's hand in retaliation. Draco raised his hand, as though tempted to swipe the owl to the floor but thought better of it.

'As far as I'm concerned,' Draco continued, flushed pink with temper, 'you're Ron's replacement. He would stay if the job needed it.'

'Well, I'm not at your beck and call, Malfoy!'

Draco twisted his mouth into a dismissive sneer. 'Oh, go on, then, little girl. Run along home!' 

'I have to. I have –' Hermione slunk a sidelong glance at Dolores who was rocking Paco in her arms, and then dipped her voice, 'I have a Tribunal Hearing at the Ministry on Thursday morning. I need to prepare myself.'

'Of course! I'd forgotten about that,' Draco said, breaking into a surprisingly sunny smile.

Damn him! Hermione thought. He had known at Le Bonheur that night. She'd suspected as much.
'Who told you about it? I'd rather know who's broadcasting my personal affairs to all and sundry!' Draco burst into loud cackling laughter. 'YOU told me, Hermione. You were pissed out of your brains at the time, so you might be a little hazy on the details.'

He patted Dolores's owl on the head in a much friendlier manner than before and finally managed to securely fasten the note to Senor Canaro.

'That's – that's impossible!' Hermione blustered, although the ghastly recollection of her drunken blurtings was slowly eking back into her consciousness.

Draco winked. 'Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me. I can even give you a trial run-through, if you like.'

Hermione was about to point out that, considering she was a *lawyer*, that hardly seemed necessary, when a small, beige Muggle car stopped outside the front door.

Dolores quickly surveyed the street for any sign of danger.

'Your ride,' Dolores announced, gesturing towards the small, beige car. 'They're Muggles. Own a garage outside town. Very friendly, but no English.'

Hermione and Draco found themselves squeezed into the back of a tiny beige two-door Mini Clubman with a chocolate-coloured roof. Despite her immense discomfort, Hermione couldn't help giggling.

Their space was further encroached upon, forcing their knees almost into their chest, when Jorge and Raul, their rather portly driver and fellow passenger, occupied the front seats, leveraging them back to their furthest position to accommodate their hefty bulks.

'Buenos Dias,' bellowed Jorge the driver, flashing them a cheesy, gap-toothed grin. 'Es dos horas!' he added in a loud, nasal voice, holding up two fat fingers and nodding inanely as though he was trying to explain an extremely tricky concept to small children.

'That's *two hours*,' Draco muttered.

'Yes, yes, I think I got that,' Hermione said, smiling and nodding to Jorge in return.

'Vamos a *Los Notros*,' Jorge said, nodding dumbly again, as though somehow this would make him easier to understand.

'Aren't we meant to be going somewhere else?' Hermione asked Draco, a little alarmed.

'Perito Moreno.'

'That's not what he said.'

Draco shrugged. 'I'm sure Dolores has explained it all.'

It was too late, anyway. Jorge had already sped away from Dolores's house and was now hurtling along a long, lonely road at breakneck speed, leaving Santa Maria far behind them.

'Look!' Draco said, pointing to a large brown bird flying high in the vivid blue sky, just beyond the perimeter of the town. 'I think that's Dolores's owl.' But then his face darkened. He was still
watching the owl through his window, which was positioned on the left side of the car behind the driver. Once the owl had swung out of view, he swiftly twisted his tall frame around in the seat, his knees smashing into Hermione, half crushing her beneath him.

'I hope there's a good reason for this,' Hermione gasped, almost suffocated by his weight.

Draco was intent on craning his head to look out of the small, pillar-box back window.

'Hermione,' he said, jabbing his index finger skywards. 'Are those birds following our owl?'

He gestured towards a trio of large black birds, ominously resembling over-sized crows, who appeared to be following the owl's progress at a rapid rate.

'I hope not,' Hermione said disconsolately, wriggling round so that she too was facing the back of the car, Draco's warm body pressed against her.

They watched in gloomy silence as Dolores's owl circled higher and higher before disappearing from view, the crows close behind.

'When it comes to raw speed, I'm pretty sure an owl can outstrip a crow,' Draco said confidently.

'And how exactly would you know that?' Hermione sighed, casting him a bemused sidelong glance. Somehow she doubted Draco had a secret fondness for ornithology.

She then desperately tried to squirm her body as far away from Draco as she could possibly manage, to gain a fraction more personal space.

'Still,' she said, panting a little with the effort, 'we've learned one interesting new fact this morning.'

'What's that then?' Draco said, shuffling back into a forward-facing position.

'Muggles can use owls.'

Draco glanced at Jorge then back to Hermione. 'I still can't see them taking off in the business world, can you?'

They lapsed into silence, vaguely staring out of the window at what appeared to be scrubby wasteland and gravely hillocks bordering a sapphire blue lake. Their route was uneven and bumpy, and from time to time, they were tossed towards each other by deep potholes in the road.

'My Uncle Derek had a car just like this when I was a kid,' Hermione chuckled, 'this must be over thirty years old.'

'Let's hope it stays in one piece, then,' Draco grunted as the Mini surged over a particularly high rut, bouncing his head hard into the ceiling. 'What strange names you Muggles have…' he sneered. 'I mean, really… Derek, what kind of name is that?'

'Says the man whose grandfather was called Abraxas! What kind of name is that?' Hermione retorted.

Draco's face instantly clouded over, almost as though someone had reached inside of him and switched off the light. Hermione couldn't tell if he was angry or upset, and he didn't give her a chance to find out, immediately averting his head from her gaze to stare aimlessly out of his window.

XXX
At some point during the journey, they must have fallen asleep together. When Hermione woke up, she found she was sprawled against Draco, her legs intertwined with his long, sinewy limbs which were extended deep into her side of the car. Her head was resting against his chest, her face nuzzling his throat.

As consciousness gradually kicked in, she became painfully aware of the heavy heat of his arm holding her tightly against him, and a pleasant sensation on the right side of her neck where his large, warm hand was resting.

His thumb was gently tracing small circles on the soft skin just below her hairline.

It was the tiniest of actions - hardly an action at all, really… but still, every nerve in her body suddenly seemed to have centred on that small patch of exposed skin being fondled by his thumb.

It felt nice. Really, really nice, she thought, her throat suddenly dry and her breathing hitched in her chest.

His thumb continued to circle, to stroke, occasionally pausing, then re-starting, each time feeling more sensitive than before, to the point where Hermione felt almost sick with a sudden, surprising surge of mind-reeling arousal which swept through her.

She had to move… except his long, slim fingers were lightly brushing her neck, caressing her ear, tracing its shape with the most delicate of touches. It felt exquisite… so heart-stoppingly wonderful that she had to stifle a moan of pleasure.

She gently eased her face away from his throat and slid her right hand, which was resting close to the site of his wound, across his chest, keenly aware that his nipple pebbled in response to her feather-light touch.

He grumbled, his hand dropping from her neck to sweep her closer into his arms so that his face was now hovering above her own, his breath curling onto her cheeks like a warm zephyr, so close she could almost taste him.

This was wrong - very, very wrong, she thought, fighting an urge to explode into loud pants, almost like she had been holding her breath underwater for far too long and her lungs were aching for oxygen.

She buried her face into his neck, easing her breath out in a long, drawn-out shudder against his skin.

She now noticed his heart was clattering forcefully in his chest. There was a discernible tensing in his limbs and a slow, deliberate slide of the Adam's apple in his throat as he gulped.

Oh God. He's awake, she thought. And, like her too, he seemed to be holding his breath, easing it out in short, stuttering bursts.

She had to stop this now, had to untangle herself from this intimacy.

She made a great show of slow stretching and groaning, pretending to be in the throes of stirring into wakefulness. Then, bit by bit, she rolled her head away from its comfortable nook curled against his warm skin.

She gradually blinked her eyes open and braved a glance sideways, instantly locking her gaze with Draco, whose clear, grey eyes were staring straight at her.
Hermione immediately pulled her eyes away from his, fixing her gaze out of her window instead, her cheeks a-flame with hot embarrassment.

His arm promptly fell away from her shoulder, although he didn't retrieve it entirely, perching it across the back of their seat.

They were now traversing at a rapid rate along a country road which seemed to be getting even bumpier and more rugged by the minute. To her right was a rocky incline and the occasional glimpse of a landscape resembling green and gorsy moorland beyond, bathed in bright sunlight.

She chanced a look to the left, relieved that Draco was also focusing his attention on the scenery beyond his own window.

She caught her breath, mesmerised by the beauty of the landscape. Vast plains covered in a vibrant scarlet flower stretched out before her; a rich, rosy red as far as the eye could see, like fields of blood shimmering in the summer sun. And, behind the fields, the gleaming snake of a wide river, pale and shiny in the fierce white sunlight, was writhing through the countryside.

Draco turned to her, his eyes sparkling. 'Fucking mind-blowing, isn't it?' he grinned.

Los Notros turned out to be a wooden chalet-style hotel built at the edge of a lake hosting the famous Perito Moreno glacier. It was also the place where Henrik Thyssen, according to the hotel receptionist, had been staying. In fact, he was just finishing a 'trekking' trip on the glacier itself and could be caught if Hermione and Draco hurried.

Hermione had never seen anything as amazing in her life as this monumental expanse of blue-white glacier ice. It reared out of a milky blue lake, jagged and rutted, like a giant dragon's teeth frozen into a fierce grimace, roaring and creaking as huge chunks of ice broke away from the glacier and tumbled into the water below.

A troupe of hardy-looking trekkers, decked out in multi-coloured waterproofs, sporting goggle-style sunglasses which gleamed in the searing white sunshine, was fast approaching the immense, crenulated edge of the Perito Moreno. They boarded a zodiac and came ashore.

A hotel employee helpfully pointed out Henrik Thyssen. He was tall and robustly-built, probably in his mid- to late-twenties, with a lobster-tanned face framed by leonine blonde hair and a self-assured swagger.

'Do you want to do the talking or shall I?' Draco mumbled. They followed Thyssen at a reasonable non-suspicious distance as he ambled towards the comfortable-looking bar at Los Notros with his fellow trekkers.

'But what do we say?' Hermione said, guiltily conscious that they probably should have discussed this already, but since getting 'cuddly' in the car, conversation between them had been a little stilted.

'We mustn't forget he's a Muggle,' Hermione warned, 'so we can't reveal too much about ourselves, or even Dark Flux…'

'I wouldn't dream of it,' Draco scoffed.

Thyssen bought a beer at the bar and then sat outside the hotel on a terrace facing the glacier. He was conveniently alone.
Hermione summoned a waiter to order drinks and was about to ask Draco what he wanted when, to her surprise, she noticed he'd already grabbed a seat next to Thyssen and was introducing himself.

'I was just telling Mr Thyssen here that he was recommended to us by Jonas Arbuthnot,' Draco said chirpily.

Hermione flashed a genial smile at the Dane, who was looking a little baffled by this sudden hijacking. 'Nice man,' Hermione said simply, feeling a pang of sadness as she spoke.

The waiter brought them their drinks - a beer for Draco while Hermione opted for a gin and tonic.

'So, you came here on account of these mysterious deaths in Santa Maria?' Henrik said warily.

'That's right,' Draco said. 'For research.'

Thyssen pondered this a moment, silently sipping his beer.

'Kind of odd, don't you think, that there's no media covering this? You sure you're not press?'

Draco vehemently shook his head. 'Absolutely. We're just looking for answers.'

'Join the club,' Thyssen grumbled. 'I've been following sudden mass deaths like this for the last five years for a book I'm writing, and I'm still no closer to really understanding what the hell is going on. What university did you say you're from again, Professor Malfoy?'

'Oxford,' Draco said, after a split second's hesitation.

Henrik nodded sagely. 'I've got an old pal there. Anthropology. Fellow at Oriel, or it could be Merton…'

'My work is almost entirely in the field,' Draco cut in, 'isn't it, Mrs Weasley?' he said turning to Hermione who was quickly scrabbling to process the ramifications of his chosen cover story, and a little taken aback by Draco's stiff formality, which made her feel like little more than his frumpy assistant.

'Call me Hermione,' she said to Henrik, with a warm, syrupy smile.

Henrik's eyes flicked between them curiously.

'Look, I should warn you,' Henrik Thyssen said, 'I actually have to take the next bus out of here, which is leaving in about twenty minutes. There's been a coup in Gabon. Big story. But we can talk until then.'

Hermione couldn't even picture in her mind's eye where Gabon was, relative to this particular spot. A very long way, that was for sure. But then, everywhere felt far away from this place at the end of the world.

'Sounds great,' she said.

She settled herself on a wooden lounger, next to Henrik Thyssen's chair. She was facing away from the hotel towards the small shingle cove which abutted the lake, cordoned off in the bay by the glacier's imposing wall of ice, which seemed to stretch back as far as the eye could see, framed by snowbound mountains.

It was a surreal sight, most particularly as the warm sun on her face and the addition of a small paper umbrella in her glass of gin and tonic, made her feel that she should be gazing out to sea
'How did you know about these deaths in the first place?' Hermione asked, smiling sweetly.

Henrik grinned in response, his azure blue eyes twinkling. 'Now, I'm sure you know a journalist can never reveal his sources, Mrs…. Sorry, Hermione.'

'Of course, Mr Thyssen, I respect that. It's just that it wasn't covered on the news.'

'First up, call me Henrik. Second, how did you find out?'

Hermione instantly looked to Draco.

'A colleague,' he said with a non-committal shrug. 'It seemed mighty suspicious after the recent incident in Bolivia.'

'But what happened here is nothing like what happened there, I can assure you,' Henrik sighed sadly, pulling an album of photos from his knapsack which he passed to Draco. 'You can take a look, if you like,' he said, passing the album to Draco.

Draco started to thumb through page after page of photos depicting livid, gory images of corpses in various states of decomposition – most situated where they had been discovered, rather than a clinical slab in a morgue. Judging by the trance-like horror on Draco's face, he was finding this a particularly gruesome task.

'That was a tribal village located in tropical rainforest … nothing like Patagonia,' Henrik said. 'An industrial mining conglomerate polluted their water supply.'

'Did you get to take any photos in Santa Maria?' Hermione asked, pointing towards the impressive-looking camera poking out of a knapsack Henrik had placed between his chair and Hermione's lounges.

He shook his head. 'The townsfolk complained. And, for some weird reason, my camera just stopped working… the trip was a disaster.'

He took a long swig of his beer, which frothed onto the thick blond stubble above his upper lip.

'The thing is, most sudden mass death incidents are more like what happened in Bolivia… you know, something industrial. And then there's the few intriguing cases – like here in Santa Maria – with no obvious explanation.'

'There has to be some kind of common ground between these cases, surely?' Hermione asked quizzically.

Henrik fixed a steely gaze on Hermione. 'None at all. Except for the fact that the bodies turn bright blue, of course… which I believe was what happened here in Santa Maria, too.'

Hermione could feel her heart beating a little faster.

'That's right, they did,' she said tentatively. 'One girl also had strange purple markings.'

'You got to see the bodies? Oh man!' Henrik exclaimed, wide-eyed with wonder. 'Did you take any photos?'

Draco vehemently shook his head.
'It wasn't much fun,' Hermione grimaced. 'Have you any idea at all what's causing these deaths?'

'If I knew that, I'd have my book published by now,' Henrik guffawed. 'But I'm a bit of …' he seemed to be searching for the appropriate word, '… an impasse.' He suddenly sobered. 'Actually, I do have a theory… more of a hunch, really…'

'What's that?' Hermione asked eagerly.

'I've come to the conclusion that there's a serial killer on the loose.'

'A serial killer?' Draco repeated, snapping shut the photo album he was holding. 'Are you serious?'

'Absolutely, Professor Malfoy… I'm convinced there's a malevolent force at work, linking what appear to be random events in random places. Worryingly, the number of unexplained sudden mass deaths is accelerating rapidly.'

'We believe this is a naturally occurring phenomenon,' Draco said, sucking his bottom lip thoughtfully. 'Perhaps a kind of mysterious dust?'

'You have scientific data to prove this?' Henrik asked.

'Nothing concrete.'

'Hmmm… the only time I ever heard of any unusual dust was last year in The Ukraine, when dust-clouds swept through a small country town. Four folks died in mysterious circumstances almost identical to here in Patagonia,' Henrik said, a pensive expression on his face. 'Probably a coincidence.'

A white mini-bus with the *Los Notros* logo slapped onto its side had pulled up in the car park alongside the hotel. Henrik drained his beer.

'You staying here?'

Draco jumped upwards. 'No. We need to get back to El Calafate.' Dolores had told them about a Public Magical Transportation Office, complete with a Floo network, close to the airport.

'Well, hitch a lift, and we can continue talking. I'm getting the next flight out to Buenos Aires,' Henrik explained, zipping his belongings into his knapsack. 'You flying, too?'

'Actually no… no, we've got some unfinished business to attend to.'

XXX

They were the only passengers on the mini-bus to El Calafate, which was as well, because Henrik was gleefully brandishing some photos of the Ukrainian 'blue-bodied' corpses he had managed to track down.

One photo in particular caught Hermione's attention – it was of a young woman, about Ana's age, similarly blue with purple markings.

'These are the welts I was talking about earlier,' she said to Henrik, pointing at this particular photo. He examined it, his tanned face creased into a deep frown.

'I've only seen this a couple more times,' he said softly. He rooted into his knapsack pulling out his mobile phone, then flipped through some photos he had stored on there. 'There's this one and…
Two similarly marked victims, both women. Hermione hazarded a guess that one was a rural worker of some kind, likely from somewhere in Asia, whereas the other looked like a smartly dressed businesswoman.

'The first shot was taken in Vietnam. There were two incidents at separate sites last year.'

'Two in the same year? That's terrible,' Hermione said, aghast.

Henrik sighed. 'Thirteen dead, in all.'

'And this lady?' Draco said, pointing at the photo of the businesswoman.

'Paris. 2008. My first real investigation. Caused quite a stir that one, presumably because it was in the West. Got blamed on a gas leak, if I remember rightly. The autopsies showed no sign of infection or poison.'

'So, when it comes to mystery cases, we're definitely talking The Ukraine, twice in Vietnam – all last year - Paris in 2008, and now here in Argentina,' Hermione said. 'What about Ecuador?' she added, remembering Canaro's assertion that Los Rojos had been active there, too.

Henrik shook his head dubiously. 'There were rumours last year of suspicious deaths in New Zealand, which I still need to verify, and a very serious attack in Egypt earlier this year, which wiped out half a village…'

'How dreadful!' Hermione cried.

'And I'm pretty sure there's been other intermittent cases over the years that I haven't had the time or resources to check out,' Henrik said.

'We know for sure of one historical precedent; a town in Russia, called Zametsky,' Draco asserted. 'There were multiple sudden, unexplained deaths recorded at the start of the last century.'

'Zametsky?' Henrik yelped. 'That's now in The Ukraine. That's where I was investigating last year!'

Draco looked a little stunned to hear this. 'Really? I'm amazed we haven't heard about it.'

'That's almost too much of a coincidence, surely?' Hermione added.

They were now passing a sign for Santa Maria.

The journey to El Calafate had passed much more quickly in this corporate mini-bus than when they had been snugly cocooned in the Mini Clubman, heaving its way through rutted terrain like a small boat on a stormy sea. The trip this morning now felt like a voyage through another time, another world.

She thought back to the dust-cloud Henrik had mentioned in Zametsky. Was there a connection? Santa Maria was such a wind-swept, barren sort of place. And, thinking about it, Jonas had referred to the strong winds. And Dolores too had said how Paco was crying on the day Ana died because of the winds whistling around her house.

Would the locals even notice a dust-cloud in that place? she wondered.

But Paris? That was a different story altogether. A dust-cloud leaving corpses in its wake would attract considerable media attention.
'Henrik,' Draco said abruptly, 'in the course of your travels, have you met anyone who's actually witnessed someone dying from this sickness?'

'Whenever I visit a site, I try to interview almost everyone who has discovered a victim. I have transcripts,' Henrik replied. Hermione made a mental note to check these out if she ever got the opportunity. 'But you know what? I don't think anyone has ever told me how somebody actually dies. They always seem to find the body once it's dead.'

'You mean, they always die alone,' Hermione said glumly.

'And suddenly,' Draco said.

For a brief moment, they locked eyes. There was a haunted expression on Draco's face that bothered her greatly.

He quickly looked away towards the vast open spaces which bordered the roadside instead.

XXX

At the airport, they retrieved the metal attaché case containing the scanner. Henrik flipped it open with consummate ease, pulling out what looked like a chunky, polycarbonate gun festooned with an array of brightly coloured buttons which he turned over, again and again, in his hands, a puzzled half-smile on his face.

'So, Professor Malfoy, you say this can detect the dirty dust you've heard might be causing this fatal sickness?' he asked, seemingly incredulous. He looked Draco in the eye. 'Have you tried this yourself? I don't see how this works.'

Draco avoided eye contact, looking distractedly about the airport as though seeking out someone or something. 'My research students have tried it out at several locations.'

'Have they had any success?' Henrik said fiddling with the controls and looking a little nonplussed when a tiny red light suddenly ignited then disappeared. 'Woah! Was that saying there was this dirty dust, here, at this airport?'

Hermione instantly chilled. The airport was jammed with travellers.

'Sorry guys, it's definitely me causing this light to flash… see?' Henrik chortled. The red light was flickering on and off, primarily triggered, it seemed, by Henrik's index finger pressing a small, knobbly grey button positioned at the top of the gun.

'Look, you're nice people, so I'll be straight with you,' Henrik said. 'I'm not buying into this dirty dust theory; I still think we've got a serial killer out there. But, in the spirit of intellectual enquiry, I'd be interested to come along on an expedition with you, see how this scanner-thing really works. And maybe you can change my mind?' Henrik said, wielding the scanner in an ungainly fashion that Hermione feared might attract unwanted attention. She scanned their immediate vicinity for security personnel.

'Just put that thing away, will you?' she hissed.

Henrik instantly locked the gun back into its case and handed it to Draco.

'Which one of you should I contact first if I hear of more suspicious deaths?' he said, his eyes shining with amusement. He turned to Draco. 'I guess you'll be far too busy working in the field to be contacted easily, Professor Malfoy.' He grinned at Hermione. 'Maybe it would be better if
Hermione here could furnish me with her contact details instead?'

Draco was stony-faced, a grim set to his mouth. 'I can jot down her mobile telephone number for you. How's that?'

Henrik passed him a card and a pen and, sure enough, to Hermione's surprise, Draco did write down a number and her name in capitals – MRS WEASLEY – and passed it back to the grinning Dane.

Henrik slipped it into his wallet with what Hermione feared was half a wink in her direction. If he'd already guessed Malfoy was shamming his 'Professorship,' then it didn't augur well for his future co-operation in this mess, she thought miserably.

'I'd be really interested to go over your research with you,' Hermione said jovially.

Henrik eyed her thoughtfully. 'Sure, Hermione.' He fished out another card from his pocket and passed it to Hermione. 'This is the address of my website henrikshunch.com - I post regular updates on any sudden mass deaths.'

Draco glanced at the Flight Information Board behind them. 'Your plane's been called, Mr Thyssen.'

'We'll speak again,' Henrik said to them both in jocular tones. 'This has all been extremely... illuminating. Thank you.'

'Malfoy,' Hermione said, watching Henrik stride purposefully into the heart of the airport. 'I don't actually have a mobile phone.'

'You do now,' he muttered darkly.

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CHAPTER TRACK: "ELECTRICAL STORM (WILLIAM ORBIT MIX)" by U2

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Tango

Chapter Summary

Back in Buenos Aires. Paranoia, jealousy and the pitfalls of mutual attraction predominate...

14. Tango

The chintzy floral fabrics and staid Louis XVI furniture of her room at the Alvear Palace Hotel in Buenos Aires were oddly comforting to Hermione. What felt like an age since she had last been here was little more than twenty-four hours, but so much had happened in the meantime.

She was glad to be going home tomorrow morning, that was for sure, even if it meant she was heading back to her Tribunal at the Ministry. Defending herself from bigoted bureaucrats would be a lot less dangerous than evading evil wizards.

Plus, it could only be a good thing – a very good thing – to get away from Draco.

Hermione was honest enough with herself to know that something had changed between them, something she was struggling to grapple with… an overwhelming and unexpected level of consciousness and intimacy.

If she closed her eyes for the briefest of moments and relived the feel of his fingers brushing against her skin when they were crushed close together in that poxy Mini Clubman, she found she could hardly breathe all over again.

But this wasn't just about admitting that she found Draco attractive. Finding someone attractive could be conveniently ignored. It was something most people did every day. This was more than that. It was about seeing him, having a genuine sense of somebody, an innate feeling for their moods.

She quickly pushed these thoughts aside. They had an appointment with Miguel Culebra to collect her wand, and she was already running late.

There was hardly any time to refresh herself, so she quickly brushed her teeth, smoothed back her hair, and smeared a dash of gloss onto her lips before donning one of Draco's dresses; a nicely-fitted knee-length number in soft violet silk, which sashayed pleasantly over her hips before flaring a little over the knee.

She rummaged in her bag for her two-way mirror, thinking it would be a good idea to quickly contact Ron, tell him she was due back tomorrow morning - only to find that she had actually forgotten to take the mirror to Patagonia in the first place, and had left it on her bedside table. Thank God she'd come back to Buenos Aires, she thought, almost faint with relief. Ron would never have forgiven her if she had lost it for good.

Ron promptly responded when she called his name.

'I've been worried sick about you,’ Ron said, looking extremely unworried, Hermione thought a
little peevishly. On the contrary, he looked bright and cheery, so much so she suspected he'd had a
butterbeer or two. She could hear voices in the background and expected he had company.

'Did you get my owl?'

'Yeah. It came earlier today. Looked a bit bedraggled, poor thing. I take it you went to Patagonia?'

Hermione paused before answering, marveling at his lightness of tone.

'Yes, we did. It was all a bit… unpleasant,'

There was a commotion in the background. Someone was speaking to Ron.

'Who's there?' Hermione asked.

'Tom Bennet and Tana.' Ron beamed. 'Looks like Tana's going to be my partner in Section A. She's
just been promoted.'

Hermione smiled. Tana McLaughlin had worked with Ron as an Auror for many years in Section
D and had proved to be a loyal and caring friend to the family, and Ron in particular.

'Ginny's here,' Ron said stiffly, his eyes widened in warning. There was a flash of rich auburn hair
and then Ginny's face came into view in the mirror, jockeying for space with her brother, her
bright, brown eyes dancing with merriment.

'Hey, Hermione!' she yelped excitedly. 'How's tricks?'

Hermione managed a half-smile.

'Getting lots of work done?' Ginny asked.

Okay… Hermione thought. What had Ron told her?

'Yes, lots,' she nodded. 'I'm home tomorrow.'

'Oh, good,' Ron said. 'The kids will be back from Shell Cottage. I think Hugo's driving Fleur spare.'

Hermione smiled indulgently.

'Give my love to Bob and Jean,' Ron said hastily.

So that was the explanation for her absence! A few days with her parents.

'Is Harry with you?' she asked.

'He's at a conference… can't remember where…' Ginny said flippantly. 'I'm here to prime Ron on
his next big case!' she gushed.

'What's that then?' Hermione asked, feeling a little aggrieved. If Ron had seen the stuff she'd seen
these last couple of days, he wouldn't have time to take on new cases.

'Quidditch match-rigging!' Ron said, smacking his lips enthusiastically.

'Oh, good,' Hermione said weakly, the mirror slipping a little from her grasp. She quickly re-
focused it back to her face as she didn't want Ginny to notice that she wasn't actually sitting in her
parent's living room in Parson's Green but was in a rather grandiose hotel room instead.
'He's plugging me for all my old contacts from when I was reporting for the sports desk at the *Daily Prophet*,' Ginny teased. 'Still, it's all worth it. The sport's rotten to the core. Looks like Ferret-face might take a hit on this one too.'

'Malfoy?'

'Up to his eyeballs, apparently,' Ginny sniggered.

'That's not necessarily true, Gin,' Ron groaned.

There was a loud banging on Hermione's bedroom door.

'Hermione!' Draco's voice shouted out. 'It's me.'

Oh lord, Hermione thought.

'So why else are the Wasps being subjected to a full investigation, Ron?' Ginny asked, rounding on her brother. 'Mind you, with Malfoy at the helm, it's the least they deserve.'

'Malfoy's only on the board; that's all.'

There was a further knocking on the door, but this time, a little less forcefully.

'Well if you ask me, it had to be match-fixing which won the Wasps the league last year,' Ginny continued in acerbic tones, 'because their Chasers are utter crap!'

'I've got to go,' Hermione butted in, but Ginny clearly didn't hear her.

'… Everyone in the sport knows Malfoy's behind most of the dodgy deals that have been going on in Quidditch lately.'

Draco lightly tapped on the door again, slowly, insistently, reminding Hermione that he was still there and probably listening to every damned word her sister-in-law was ranting. Then he stopped. His silence was deafening.

'Ginny, please…' Hermione begged.

'And now Ron's got his big chance to bring the slimy ferret down, once and for all,' Ginny said triumphantly, 'and do us all a favour.'

Hermione sighed, feeling a little nauseous. 'I'm going now,' she said firmly. 'There's someone at the door.'

Ron looked aghast.

'Okay, love. See you tomorrow…. And my back's a lot better, by the way,' he added, almost as an afterthought, although Hermione wondered if there was a faint trace of irony in his voice. She'd completely forgotten about his darned back. Really. What the hell was wrong with her these days?

Hermione buried the mirror at the bottom of her case. She couldn't risk Ginny accidentally hearing Draco's voice.

When she opened the door, Draco was leaning against the doorpost, arms folded, and a twisted smile on his face.

'They're not very soundproof these doors, you know that?"
'I'm so sorry,' Hermione breathed, shaking her head.

Draco shrugged. 'Come on. Miguel's expecting us.'

Miguel Culebra had commandeered a comfortable leather sofa positioned conveniently at the front of a bar, which opened out onto the bustling boardwalk at Puerto Madero waterfront; Buenos Aires's swankiest riverside district.

He was enjoying a splendid view of the waterfront, its myriad shiny, upmarket bars and restaurants packed with a cross-pollination of late liquid lunchers and early revelers.

The wooden boardwalk was thronged with tanned tourists in sun-hats, applauding tango dancers, clitter-clattering in clippity heels, swaying and swinging to the jaunty, jingly throb and beat of tango music. The dancers were busking in pairs along the entire length of the riverbank, as far as the eye could see, and had drawn a good crowd.

Hermione couldn't help but feel buoyed by the lively atmosphere, seduced by the silvery ripples of the late afternoon sun glistening on the water.

The tango dancers provided an intriguing, even sexy spectacle. Some ladies were trussed into tight corsets, diamante suspenders and feathered garters. Others wore sparkling, slinky dresses, which were caressed and stroked by their male dancing counterparts, in their tight-fitting trousers and open-necked shirts. Hermione thrilled to it all, the tango's raw sexual melodrama and playful flirtation.

Miguel Culebra was instantly charming, welcoming her to a front-row seat alongside him on the sofa, while Draco occupied a armchair to her right. Miguel quickly ordered a bottle of wine from a passing waiter with a practiced wave.

'Una copa for the lovely Senora?' he said with a toothsome grin, bottle poised at the rim of her glass.

'Just a small one,' she said. Miguel leaned across to pour her wine, and in so doing, he closed the gap between them on the sofa, jamming his warm thigh tightly against hers.

Miguel looked at Draco, bottle in hand, but Draco was watching the antics of a scantily clad dancer draped in a pink feather boa who was performing with her partner directly in front of where they were seated.

Miguel continued to pour Draco a large glass of wine before switching his attention to Hermione.

'I have a little something of yours,' he grinned, plucking her wand-necklace from his pocket, which he presented to her with obsequious ceremony.

She snatched it greedily from his hands, melting with relief.

'A most unusual design,' Miguel murmured. 'Does it have special significance?'

'It was a gift,' she said, trying to fasten it around her neck with some difficulty as her hair kept getting in the way. Miguel lurched closer towards her to assist. Hermione automatically veered sideways, out of his reach. Draco leaned forwards instead, tilting her towards him. He scooped her abundant hair to one side, then fastened her necklace with light, nimble fingers.
To her profound irritation, she could feel a hot blush stealing across her cheeks, which she disguised as best she could by pretending to choke a little at the smoke from a cigarette Miguel had just lit.

'Was it from your husband?' Miguel asked.

'My necklace?'

'Of course,' Miguel said sharply, inhaling deeply on his cigarette.

'Yes – yes, it was,' Hermione lied. 'Thank you so much for retrieving it for me.'

Miguel blew a long plume of blue-grey smoke in Draco's direction.

'And thanks for the lift to Patagonia,' she added.

'It was my pleasure. The jet is not my personal property, sadly, but belongs to our parent company, Astrum.' His eyes shone excitedly. 'However, it is very much at my disposal whenever I wish.'

'I didn't know your company had been bought out? When did this happen?' Draco interjected, clearly perturbed by this development.

'The deal was finalised just last week, so nothing much has changed yet. Astrum's a European company, rebranded for the Latin American market.'

'Will this affect your contracts with Herb Healing?'

'Not at all! Astrum is entirely research-based. They're the geeks in the labs. We simply sell what they make to the general public. All the key marketing decisions remain my territory,' Miguel said smugly. 'And I get more money for making them! Not to mention more perks!'

'How convenient,' Draco said snidely, downing his glass of wine in one swoop. 'Why do I get the horrible feeling I'm being kept out of the loop these days? No-one tells me anything…'

He gestured with his glass towards Miguel, clearly demanding a refill. 'It's been a hard day,' he said, with a pained grimace.

Miguel exploded into loud guffaws of mocking laughter. 'In the company of Senora Weasley? How could that be possible?'

Draco wriggled uncomfortably in his seat. 'It's been tiring. That's all.'

'You need cheering up, my friend!' Miguel bellowed, eagerly sloshing fresh wine into Draco's glass. 'I take it this is your first visit to Buenos Aires, Senora Weasley?' he asked, continuing his ebullient tone.

'It is.'

'And does the Alvear Palace Hotel meet your approval?'

'Very much so.'

'Draco told me you had lunch at MALBA? Did you have a chance to view the art gallery while you were there?'

'Not this time, no.'
'It's not a very good collection,' Miguel said, pursing his lips in distaste. 'You have better paintings back home.'

'Oh, you've been to England?'

'Many times… I used to play polo and we frequently toured England, amongst other wonderful European destinations,' Miguel said. 'I've even played polo in Ottery St Catchpole, would you believe?'

In fact Hermione found that rather hard to believe, seeing as polo wasn't even played there. Come to think of it, she hadn't even told Miguel that she lived in Ottery St Catchpole. Presumably Draco had.

Miguel then turned his attention to Draco. 'In fact, the last time we met was in England, wasn't it? You remember that funny little place we went to in Chipping Bassett? What a hoot we had! And there was that lovely, sassy blonde, if I recall.'

'No. She was in Hartingford. After Fenster's wedding,' Draco said in dry tones.

'So she was! So she was!'

The two men fell into a long, involved discussion along these lines, mainly reminiscing about rowdy drinking sessions and sexual conquests.

It seemed most peculiar to see Draco laughing so naturally and easily with a Muggle. To be honest, it was peculiar enough seeing him laugh at all, Hermione thought, daintily sipping her glass of wine.

She watched him, as subtly as possible, from behind her wineglass. Yes, Draco was different in the Muggle world. There was something more open and lively in his manner.

He also had presence, which surprised her. She'd supposed that someone so prominent in the wizarding world would be subsumed by the seething mass of Muggle humanity, but it was as though his personality, his moods, even his grumpiness, were all magnified, almost electrified. He pricked with a quirky, patrician charisma.

Maybe he was more relaxed? There were no prior expectations, no infamous family connections. She herself had often enjoyed getting away from being Hermione Granger-Weasley, with all the high acclaim and constant scrutiny that entailed, whenever she visited her Muggle family.

'If you'd just excuse me,' Miguel said suddenly, jumping up from the sofa with surprising alacrity considering how snugly entrenched he'd been. 'There is a friend I must speak with.'

Miguel approached a man in a suit loitering by the bar, slapping a large, friendly hand on his shoulder.

'He's quite a character,' Hermione said.

Draco nodded in agreement.

Hermione caught a waiter's attention and signaled for an espresso. After such a long and tiring day she needed a quick pick-me-up before she made her way back to the hotel, as she suspected Miguel and Draco had their own plans. Then it struck her that she didn't actually have any money.

'Malfoy,' Hermione said apologetically, 'this is kind of embarrassing, but could I borrow some
'Cash?'

'What for?'

'A taxi,' Hermione said. 'Oh, and to pay for this coffee,' she added as an afterthought, staring guiltily at the tiny china coffee cup the waiter promptly deposited on the table in front of her.

'Miguel will pay,' Draco grunted distractedly.

'I still need to get a taxi,' Hermione remonstrated.

'Not alone, you don't.'

'I beg your pardon.'

'You heard me.' Draco swigged his wine. 'I don't want you wandering around this place on your own.'

'How very touching,' she said, flashing him a phony grin. 'But I can look after myself. Particularly now I've got my wand back.'

'For fuck's sake, Hermione. I don't like the idea of ME walking around alone after what we witnessed in Santa Maria, let alone you.' He fixed her with an insolent glare. 'Ron would kill me if something happened.'

'Oh, I see. Well, isn't that just typical?' Hermione said archly. 'You're not actually concerned for my personal welfare at all, but more worried about saving your own skin.'

'Look, it's a very dangerous world out there, Hermione,' he grunted.

'I think I've twigged that, Malfoy!' she said sarcastically.

Draco paused to drink more wine. He was drinking very quickly, Hermione thought. The bottle Miguel had ordered was completely empty.

'You've no idea… Dark Flux isn't the only magical material that kills by blood type, you know… There's other curses and potions.'

'That's hardly new. There's always been dark magic artefacts which distinguish between pure-bloods and Muggle-borns.'

'I'm talking stockpiles, Hermione,' Draco said, a haunted expression in his eyes. 'You're going to need extra protection when you get back home, too.'

Hermione was a little taken aback by his earnestness. Maybe his close brush with Voldemort and his murderous Death Eaters when he had been a teenager had affected him more deeply than she had ever supposed?

He had truly seen the face of evil.

But, unfortunately, it was because of that same background and his associates that she still struggled to trust him… increasingly against her own wishes.

'The fact you even know this stuff really scares me, Malfoy,' Hermione sighed. 'For all I know, by working with you, I'm now in cahoots with dark wizards!'
'Ephraim isn't a dark wizard,' Draco said assuredly.

'And what of this Torquil Haast?'

'Harmless.'

'In your opinion…'

'Ask Ron. Anyway, you can see for yourself. Torquil always comes to the Yuletide Ball at Malfoy Manor.'

'Well, seeing as Ron and I haven't actually been invited, that's hardly relevant.'

'But of course you're invited,' Draco said. 'And you'll meet Scorpius, too.'

'Look, Malfoy,' Hermione said in firm, furious tones. 'Just because we're stuck together on this mission of yours, doesn't mean we're friends. Alright?'

Draco's clear, grey eyes darkened. 'I never said we were!' he growled. 'I was being polite.'

Miguel returned, jovially swinging another bottle of wine, which he promptly used to refill his and Draco's wineglass. Hermione refused.

'Sorry to abandon you,' Miguel said, a small smile on his face. 'You seem flustered, Senora Weasley. Has something happened?'

'No, nothing, I'm fine,' Hermione lied. 'Just a little tired. I was about to head back to the hotel.'

'Que Pena! What a shame! How long are you in town?' Miguel asked in jocular tones, his knee banging against her thigh in an insistent manner.

'Until tomorrow,' she said shortly.

'Then tonight, we will go dancing, no?' Miguel exclaimed, looking like he might burst with happiness. 'You have no qualms, Draco, if your lovely friend accompanies us?'

Draco took a long, deep drink of his wine and shook his head. 'Not at all. I was going to suggest it myself.'

'Maravilloso!' Miguel said gleefully. 'We will have a famous night to remember, no?'

XXX

Miguel texted through details about their evening, just minutes after Draco and Hermione had hailed a taxi to get back to the hotel.

Draco scowled. 'He says you're to dress up, apparently. He so obviously fancies the pants off you!'

'No, he doesn't, he's just teasing,' Hermione sighed, 'and who cares if he did? I'm a married woman. Nothing's ever going to happen.'

'He's an attractive man.'

'What of it?'

'Ah… so you don't deny that you find him attractive then…'
Hermione groaned. 'You're such a child.'

Draco continued scrolling through the texts on his mobile phone when he stopped, his gaze lingering on his mobile phone screen, a deepening frown on his face.

'What's wrong?' she asked.

'Your Danish friend, Mr Thyssen,' he muttered.

'He's hardly my friend, Malfoy! He's our informant,' Hermione spluttered.

'He's texted you.'

'Me? That's your phone.'

'After tonight, it's yours,' Draco said.

'After tomorrow morning, I won't be your assistant, Professor,' Hermione said, rolling her eyes sardonically. 'From then on, you can be Henrik's contact instead.'

'If you hadn't noticed, he only wanted to deal with you!' Draco said, curling his lip in distaste.

'Well, what does he say?' Hermione said impatiently.

'He wants to meet you when you get back to the UK – in London. He has something "extremely important" he wants to discuss with you,' Draco drawled. 'Well it can't be that fucking important! He only saw you this morning.'

Draco flipped his phone shut and stared out of the window.

XXX

Hermione had ordered a light meal from room service and managed a long soak in the bath. She was soon to meet Draco in the bar downstairs. Miguel was sending a limousine to pick them up – another perk from Astrum, apparently.

She gazed at the dusky pink silk shift which she had yearned for, spread out on her bed. Of course, seeing it as an object of desire in a boutique window was quite different to actually wearing it. And pink wasn’t her colour.

This particular pink was labelled 'Cenizas de Rosas', which was translated in parentheses on the label as 'Ashes of Roses'. She slipped it on, reveling in the feel of the soft, silky fabric against her bare skin. She rarely wore clothes like this. But she had braved the world in Fleur's red dress; surely, she could do the same again here?

She was surprised at how well 'Cenizas de Rosas' suited her colouring. With her hair flowing free and tousled, she looked rather pretty.

But there was one major sticking point. Her bra looked cumbersome and bulky, puckering the dress's delicate fabric. But once she'd removed it, the diaphanous silky material clung to every line and curve of her body, leaving very little to the imagination. Her nipples were clearly visible, a dark rosy pink under the thin fabric, and there was a slight dent over her navel.

She deliberated for a good few minutes. She knew she looked good, even sexy, which was kind of shocking for her, to be honest. But she also knew she was not the daring sort of person to be wearing see-through clothes.
Hermione was torn between her natural reticence and a strange desire to be somebody else… even if it was for just for one evening.

There was a sharp knock on the door that she already recognised as Draco's. He was far too early. This couldn't be about his wound; he'd assured her that there'd been no more bleeding or oozing and, best of all, no more pain since last night.

'What do you want?' she huffed, reluctantly opening the door.

Draco barged past her into the room, throwing himself heavily onto her bed.

He was dressed from head to toe in black, his bright blond hair glowing in stark contrast.

His head was flopped backwards against her pillow, his long legs, clad in black denim, stretched out before him. He'd brought a glass of iced brown liquid which Hermione guessed might be whisky, which he dangled perilously from his hand over the side of her bed.

'I knew not to trust that Danish guy!' he railed. 'The moment I met him, I knew there was something not quite right… he was almost too welcoming! Too friendly!'

'Oh, of course,' Hermione muttered. 'Because being nice is such a bad thing, isn't it? Don't you ever get tired of thinking like a Slytherin?'

Draco ignored her. 'I spoke to Torquil earlier… asked him to check out this Henrik Thyssen's credentials.'

'How very trusting of you…'

'And guess what?'

Hermione headed into her bathroom. 'Amaze me!' she called.

She rummaged in her toiletry bag for a touch of makeup and pulled out mascara and a lipstick, which she applied using the glaring, bright light positioned above the bathroom mirror.

'So far, they've turned up nothing! The guy doesn't seem to exist!' Draco shouted from the bedroom.

'Maybe Henrik Thyssen's just his pen-name? He's a photo-journalist, remember… did you get Torquil to check for by-lines in the Muggle media?' Hermione yelled back in return.

'Of course he did! Torquil's nothing if not thorough. But think about it, Hermione. If Henrik's not who he says he is, who is he?' Draco said irritably. Then, his voice suddenly much nearer. 'And why would he have so many ghastly pictures of Dark Flux victims?'

Hearing this, Hermione felt a little sickened. Yes, if true, that would be very odd indeed.

She could see in the mirror that Draco was now standing in the doorway between her bedroom and the bathroom and was staring directly at her. She burned with sudden self-consciousness and felt almost afraid to turn and face him, as she waited for some caustic comment about her ridiculously see-through dress.

She knew he'd noticed. She could feel his eyes, hard gunmetal grey, sliding over her body, but his face was implacable.

'He's definitely a Muggle, though, he didn't lie about that,' she said breezily, trying to ignore the
sudden weighty silence which had fallen between them.

She smoothed down her hair and then pushed roughly past him to return to the bedroom. She could sense he was following her every move with his eyes and was thankful that she only had a single bedside lamp lit, ensuring the bedroom was darker than the bathroom, where she had felt more fully exposed to his gaze.

She seated herself on the Louis XVI chair, quickly re-adjusting her dusky pink dress which had risen high up her thighs, exposing long, smooth limbs, and pulled on a pair of high-heeled open-toed sandals. These had been acquired that afternoon, courtesy of Draco's corporate credit card, once she'd explained at length, in tones that Ron would have described as her nagging best, how she couldn't possibly doll up for a night out without them.

'Don't forget,' she continued, casting a sidelong glance at Draco, 'Henrik was able to open the scanner case.'

'What are you wearing?' Draco eventually said, looking a little shell-shocked.

Hermione cowered a little under his heated gaze. She raised one leg at a time, and wiggled each foot, displaying each sandal to its best advantage.

'You bought them for me this afternoon, don't you remember?'

'No. The dress,' he said hoarsely.

Hermione blushed hotly, searching with unsteady hands for a pair of earrings that she had left on the antique table.

'You bought the dress for me, too, Malfoy. When we first arrived here.'

Once she'd found the earrings, she put them on with the aid of a small dressing table mirror. She could see Draco's face looming behind her. He was still staring fixedly at her, a curious, pensive expression on his face. Did he like what he saw? Or was he hating her? She couldn't tell, and really, she told herself, she shouldn't care either.

'So… do we think it's a good idea I meet Henrik Thyssen or not?' she said slowly, trying to elicit some conversation, move them back to a normal footing.

'He might be dangerous. For all we know, he works for Jeroboam. Remember, RedStar employs a lot of Muggles.'

'All the more reason to keep tabs on him then, don't you think?' Hermione said, swinging round to face him. Her hand automatically felt for her wand pendant. She broke into a relieved smile to feel its reassuring presence.

'You can't go alone,' Draco said.

'Oh, I won't,' Hermione grinned. 'I'll take Ron.'

XXX

Miguel was waiting for them in the Cigar Bar, reclining on a plush cream sofa, plumped up on all sides by leopard-skin patterned cushions.

Hermione felt she had stepped into the saloon of a 1930s cruise liner, complete with long metallic
bar, art deco motifs, an array of glasses and bottles glinting in the low-pitched lighting and the pleasant brassy throb of a big band orchestra playing over the sound system.

Miguel downed his beer and hastened towards them, a huge grin plastered on his face.

'You know, you don't have to come along if you don't want to,' Draco said to Hermione in hushed tones.

'And there I was thinking you didn't want to leave me alone, just in case some big bad wizard in a red dress attacked me,' Hermione retorted. She glared at him angrily.

'How lovely to see you both!' Miguel exclaimed. 'Hermione! You look like a goddess, no? Our car is waiting outside.'

Miguel hurried them out of the hotel onto the street where it was still balmy warm, in spite of the late hour. A black limousine awaited them with a uniformed chauffeur in attendance.

'All I'm saying,' Draco continued, standing close to Hermione, 'is that when Miguel and I go out together, things tend to get a bit raucous… wine, women and song, that kind of thing…'

'Nothing I can't handle,' Hermione sniped, although privately she was having doubts. She wasn't what one could call a rip-roaring party girl.

'Don't be so sure of that,' Draco said cockily, but then he stopped short, his eyes wide in terror.

'What is it?' Hermione asked in alarm. She followed the direction of his eyes. He was staring at a large black crow standing on the pavement.

'Look, Malfoy. Sometimes a bird's just a bird!' she said, in as casual a manner as possible. 'Come on!'

The crow flew away, alighting on a tree on the other side of the road. Hermione shivered involuntarily, then stepped into the waiting limousine, Draco close behind her.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"JALOUSIE" by JACOB GADE

"PROPANE NIGHTMARES" by PENDULUM

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Cenizas de Rosas

Chapter Summary

Heated emotions on a hot night in Buenos Aires…

15. Cenizas de Rosas

Their first stop was an achingly hip bar in Palermo Viejo, a historic *barrio* with a bohemian vibe that was thronged with late night revellers.

The bar was gleaming white throughout, with vast, ornate wrought iron chandeliers hanging from the ceiling; it was heaving with excitable, smartly dressed young Muggles.

Hermione felt comparatively old and even a little ashamed of her diaphanous, dusky pink dress. She folded her arms tightly across her chest to deter onlookers; her excitement for the evening was evaporating fast.

'What are you drinking?' Draco said.

Hermione pulled a face. 'I don't mind. I'm not really in a drinking mood, to be honest.'

Draco signaled his order to Miguel and then guided Hermione to a bank of seats, far from the scrummage of laughter and flirtation at the bar.

She soon wondered why he'd bothered, because he showed zero interest in speaking to her and had barely even looked at her since leaving the hotel.

Yet another of his frustrating mood-swings…

She could see his flint grey eyes, constantly scanning the room, appraising each woman who passed by with cold, clinical candour.

'You'd have more luck if you weren't sitting with me,' Hermione said sardonically, raising her voice above the clamorous din of chatter and thumping electronica lounge pop.

'What was that?'

'You'd have more luck if… oh, forget it,' Hermione said. There was no point competing with the noise in this place.

She was thankful to see Miguel approaching with an iced pitcher of mojito cocktail and whisky chasers for himself and Draco.

'I planned to meet some friends here, but they've already moved on,' Miguel said. 'We can catch up, but we need to drink this fast.'

'Suits me,' Draco grunted, pouring himself a large drink.

Miguel lit himself a cigarette, poured a mojito for Hermione, and proceeded to ply her with inane
conversation: light, frothy, aimless chitchat, chiefly focusing on his plans for a new car – he
couldn't decide between an Aston Martin or a Porsche. He'd also bought a boat where he planned
to spend tomorrow – a day off work – relaxing.

In turn, Hermione told him about Rose and Hugo, and how Ron was a police detective,
emphasising the Muggle terminology.

But she was distracted throughout, sensing Draco's deepening morosity, a looming dark presence,
which seemed to worsen the more he drank.

She wondered if his pain had returned.

Miguel was remarkably unfazed, giving Draco a wide berth, as though he was an injured animal
who needed to lick his wounds in private.

'Let's go dancing!' Miguel said excitedly, clapping his hands in glee.

'I think I'll head off,' Hermione said.

'I'll take you back if you like,' Draco said abruptly.

'NO! You are a mad man! I am meeting a very nice lady-friend…' Miguel exclaimed, seemingly
panicked by the potential loss of Draco's company.

'Senora Weasley!' Miguel pleaded, a desperate gleam in his eye. Hermione couldn't help but smile.
She'd asked him repeatedly to call her Hermione, but he was unable to master it. 'Let me tempt you!
Villa Ofelia is a five-minute walk from this place. Come for just one drink, two drinks… nothing
more.'

XXX

Hermione soon discovered the mojitos, which had slipped down a little too easily, were mighty
strong, as she was a little giddy and pink-cheeked - a combination of the alcohol and the relentless
warmth, she guessed, even though it was past midnight. She found she was tottering a little in her
high-heeled sandals and was grateful to have Miguel's arm to lean on.

Draco marched rapidly into the distance - his tall, dark figure, crowned by his fiercely blond hair,
serving as a beacon to guide them.

'Not a happy man,' Miguel said, in hushed tones, once Draco was out of earshot. 'The fault of that
wife of his. You know Katya?'

'Not really,' Hermione said tentatively. 'Have you met her?'

'Twice.' Miguel heaved a melancholic sigh. 'Very sweet. Muy tolerante.'

'Well, I guess she'd have to be, living with Malfoy!' Hermione joked, although, judging from
Miguel's puzzled expression, her quip had fallen a little flat.

'There was much love, but much sadness, too. That last year, before she was gone… muchas
problemas. Money, the child, and Draco's little problem with the policia…'

'When you say 'child', you mean Scorpius?' Hermione asked, burning with curiosity.

'Oh, yes… the boy refuses to talk…'
'How sad,' Hermione murmured.

'And Draco hated Katya's family always living in his house… But he needs the money, no?'

'From Katya's father? Ephraim Golowitz?'

'But of course.'

'Malfoy doesn't need money, Miguel! Herb Healing's a very successful company.'

'For sure! But it's not Draco's. His father is a nominal *Presidente*, but is a very sick man. Alzheimer's.'

'Alzheimer's? Are you sure?' Hermione asked, incredulous. Alzheimer's rarely affected wizards. It had to be a cover story for something else.

'The *true* owner of Herb Healing is Ephraim Golowitz. He owns Draco and his family - even his home - lock, stock and barrel.'

They had now approached a rambling old house, built in the colonial style, set in a lush garden, with tables and chairs and an open-air bar. There were white fairy lights and lanterns strung between the tall trees and bushes which encircled the garden. A Latino jazz band was playing on a raised stage underneath a vast awning, while a further light-set was aimed at an astro-turf dance floor, situated between the stage and the bar.

Draco was waiting for them at the entrance. 'Hurry up. I'm dying for a drink,' he carped, an impatient scowl on his face.

Two large bouncers were eyeing him suspiciously, which was hardly surprising, Hermione thought, recalling the amount of wine and whisky he had downed during the day. There was something a little wild-eyed about him already.

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The clientele at 'Villa Ofelia' were much more varied than the cooler cocktail bar in the heart of Palermo Viejo. Here, there was a combination of hip young things who were warming up for a long night's clubbing and a slightly older, well-heeled set.

Miguel nabbed a table situated close to the bar and dance floor, facing away from the band.

'Ah! My friend Rosario!' He beamed at Draco. 'And she has a friend with her. *Una guapa*!

Two young women were hot-footing it to their table, wreathed in smiles and kisses for Miguel.

Rosario was a petite redhead with a squealing laugh. Her friend, Estrella, was tall and lithe-looking, with deeply tanned skin and long blonde hair, tightly scraped back from her face with a silver comb. She was clad in skin-tight black leather and teetered perilously on red patent stilettos. Hermione half-expected her to be wielding a whip and sporting pink fluffy handcuffs.

She was also destined to be 'Draco's date', from the look of things. Notably, Draco's blank, unashamedly bored expression never altered. The girls didn't speak any English but giggled profusely to compensate. They barely acknowledged Hermione's presence.

Draco went to the bar and returned with bottles of beer and yet another jug of mojito. Hermione promised herself that two mojitos would be her absolute limit; they had to see Senor Canaro first
thing, and she had to Portkey home.

The band had upped its tempo and wheeled a set of bongo drums onto the stage. Salsa seemed to be the new groove. A number of couples sashayed enthusiastically onto the dance floor.

'Would you do me the honour, Senora Weasley?' Miguel exclaimed, leaping to his feet with surprising alacrity, hand extended.

'I don't dance'.

'No matter,' Miguel pouted. 'You can stamp on my feet all you like. How's that?'

XXX

Naturally, Miguel was a very fine dancer. Hermione wasn't accustomed to being swung about on a dance floor in such a practiced manner and was soon gasping for breath.

The next number was slow. Hermione instinctively made a move back towards their table, but Miguel grabbed her arm, spinning her close with one sweeping movement, and pulled her flush against his body.

'I'm danced out,' Hermione said in vexed tones, swivelling away from him. She glanced over at Draco, who was being bombarded with drinks and attention by Rosario and Estrella.

'May I say, Senora Weasley, you look particularly ravishing tonight,' Miguel sighed melodramatically, his eyes twinkling saucily.

'Flattery will get you nowhere, Senor Culebra.'

'How about a drink, instead?' he said, looking suddenly like a glum little boy who'd been told off for playing rough.

XXX

Hermione hoisted herself onto a high barstool while she waited for the barman to make her mojito, drumming her nails impatiently on the bar.

She noticed that Estrella and Rosario were now seated alone at their table, working their way through the jug of cocktail. Draco was nowhere to be seen.

Her mojito arrived. It was cool and limey, possibly a little over-stuffed with mint leaves, and very alcoholic.

'You like?' Miguel asked. He sipped a gin martini, gagging a little as he did.

'Too strong?'

Miguel pushed it towards her. She vehemently shook her head.

'Just try it,' he urged.

'Really. No,' she said adamantly. She could see that Draco had returned to the table. He radiated depression... yes, that was the word for it, she thought. It was hardly surprising, when she thought about it. His entire life was in hock to this Golowitz man, who she wasn't sure he much liked, his wife and child had vanished, Scorpius was voluntarily mute, and his father was incapacitated.
The lithe blonde *leech*, as Hermione privately nicknamed Estrella, had definitely decided to make a play for him. She sprawled against him, simpering and giggling. Draco seemed remarkably unperturbed by her attentions, stolidly drinking his beer instead.

'Draco has made a conquest… A good thing, no?' Miguel chortled.

'He's still married,' Hermione said primly.

'His wife is missing a long time, and Draco has many enemies. I suspect she's been abducted and killed.'

His blasé manner distressed Hermione more than she could have ever imagined.

'Don't be so quick to consign her to the graveyard,' Hermione said archly, thinking of the silver roses *someone* was still sending Draco.

'But everything points to it. She goes on a shopping trip to London – as you ladies love to do -'

Hermione had never really enjoyed shopping for the sake of it, but there was no point arguing at this juncture.

'– and never returns. Not even a ransom note. *Nada.* Most strange, no?'

'Yes, it is,' Hermione agreed, thinking that if Katya's last shopping trip was to Diagon Alley, surely someone had spotted her?

'Ah, Rosario is trying to persuade Draco to dance…' Miguel said in jocular tones.

Sure enough, the music had changed. The band had stopped, and instead of Latino dance music, there was a slower, soaring female vocal and a languorous, sexy backbeat.

Rosario was dragging Draco towards the dance-floor in a determined fashion.

Draco now spotted Miguel and Hermione by the bar. He violently shook off Rosario, a furious look scuttling across his face.

Rosario approached Miguel in quiet desperation.

'I think a little friendly intervention is needed,' Hermione said under her breath.

Looking a little disgruntled, Miguel expertly drained his gin martini and scooped Rosario into his arms, whizzing her onto the dance floor.

This left Hermione facing a decidedly unhappy Draco Malfoy, who was staring intently at her, a savage - yet lost - look in his eyes that rather frightened her.

The mojitos coursing through her veins had made her bold.

'Cheer up, Malfoy. You've got a face like a wet weekend,' she laughed.

'Don't pretend you care, Hermione,' he replied, lip curled peevishly, instantly reminding her of her teenage tormentor.

Instead of feeling a surge of revulsion, she felt strangely fond of him. Maybe it was the shock of the familiar amongst all the dark chaos of the unknown they had experienced these last couple of days together? A reminder of their personal inter-connectedness over twenty years, the long mutual
history of hatred and antipathy that had raged through their lives like an infernal Greek Chorus...

'Merlin, Malfoy!' Hermione said, exasperated. 'I was trying to be nice.'

She looked past him, towards the dancers, throbbing on the dance floor, illuminated by a bubbling string of strobe lights weaving its way through the crowd. She thrilled to the vibrant sway of the music.

'Do you want to dance?' she asked, before she'd had time to stop herself.

He instantly stepped forwards and enveloped her in his arms, hoisting her off the bar stool and pulling her close.

They stumbled backwards towards the dance floor.

It scared her how well their bodies moulded together. How comforting she found the soft warmth of his cheek against hers.

Even scarier was how she luxuriated in the feel of his hands, warm and firm, sliding against the sheer, silky fabric of her dress.

He pulled her closer still, so close she could feel the heat of him burning into her.

This was probably the wrong dance, she thought blissfully. It felt far too intimate. She sighed into his skin, surrendering to the incandescent bloom of dazzling white that filled her mind and the exhilarating pulse of the music pounding through them, urging her to writhe rhythmically against him.

One of his hands drifted lower from its holding position just below her waist, his fingers softly skirting the top of her buttocks. Then, ever so slowly, his hand trailed upwards, tracing the length of her torso, dancing over her ribs, his fingers lightly grazing the side of her breast before his hand came to rest, flat on her back.

She was sharply aware that her body was responding to his touch, that her nipples had hardened painfully.

'What you do that for?' she breathed.

'Do what?' he murmured, sliding his hand down to the small of her back in a single sweeping motion. He turned his face to look at her, his eyes glowing silver. His breath was hotly alcoholic on her mouth.

She had to fight back a sudden, unexpected urge to grind against him, to slide her lips across his, so she snaked her arms around his neck instead, burying her face in his shoulder, dissolving into his warmth, relishing his scent. Her heart was galloping wildly inside of her, thrillingly alive to the feel of his obvious arousal pressed hard against her body, his harsh, ragged breathing smothered into her hair, and the soft, ceaseless stroking motion of his fingers on her lower back, close to her buttocks.

She was drowning in the feeling of it all. Her heart was beating so fast she feared she might be sick.

This is too much, she thought, a rising panic beginning to take hold of her.

The music had also changed from a sensual sighing beat to a heavy, growling rhythmic thump. Couples were rapidly pulling apart, and the swooping, single string of bubble-lights weaving its
way amongst the dancers had been supplanted by a medley of quickfire strobes chasing each other maniacally without purpose, drenching the dancers in a flood of hot, bright white.

Hermione clawed herself away from Draco's grasp, instantly missing his solid warmth, but trembling, too, at the stinging realisation that things had very nearly spiralled out of control. That, yet again, they had been horribly inappropriate. Much like they had been this morning, squashed together in the beige mini.

'You can't just... just grope me whenever you want,' she stammered.

Draco stared at her, gob-smacked. 'What did you say?'

'You heard me. We can't do this...'

'Do what?'

'THIS!' she shouted, red in the face. 'You know exactly what I mean! Don't pretend otherwise.'

Draco shook his head, seemingly stunned and confused.

'You're drunk, Malfoy,' she said dismissively. 'If it's a quick feel you want, I'm sure there's plenty of girls here ready and willing to oblige!'

Hermione spun on her heel and marched purposefully towards the table where their half-finished jug of mojito was looking sadly lonesome.

She could sense he was following her.

She smoothed her hands over her dusky rose dress, trying to shake off the lingering sensation of his hands on her body, and sat down, unsteadily pouring herself a fresh glass of mojito.

'I'm surprised at you,' she said, trying to sound more in control than she actually felt, even though she was struggling to breathe normally. 'I thought you'd be fully focused on pulling one of those tarty girls Miguel's hooked you up with, rather than wasting time with me.'

'Hermione... have you lost your mind? YOU asked ME to dance!'

'I didn't expect you to be so... enthusiastic...'

Draco slowly sat down on the chair next to hers, shaking his head in disbelief.

'You wanted me to refuse?'

'No. That's not it at all,' Hermione said, suddenly aware that her head was throbbing, flooded with a swirling, vivid mess of colour.

She cast her eyes around the garden, crammed with revelers, surrounded by tall dark trees shuddering gently in a warm, summer breeze... avoiding Draco's gaze.

How could she possibly say what she really meant - that she'd never expected him... them to be so darned attracted to each other - without then making it real?

She found herself staring at his silver rose pendant, which was nestling innocently against his chest.

'I can't believe I ever felt sorry for you,' she said bitterly. 'Everything you told me about Katya, the
way you talked about her… it was bullshit, wasn't it?'

He paled. 'What the fuck are you talking about?'

'You're still married, and yet you've eyed up just about every woman who's crossed our path tonight.'

'Oh yeah? And what about you? Ron's stuck at home with a bad back, and you're swanning about in a fucking see-through dress!' Draco groused, fiddling with the damp label on his chilled beer bottle, which was streaked with condensation.

'Your concern for my husband's best interests, Draco, is very touching!' Hermione said sarcastically. 'But how can YOU complain about my dress, when you're the one who bought me the bloody thing in the first place?'

'I didn't think it would look like THAT.'

'Like what?' Hermione asked, mortified by his sneering tone.

'You might as well be naked.'

There was a part of Hermione that was seriously frightened by what he said, which was why her cheeks were smarting with shame. She had betrayed Ron tonight; it was true. She had wanted to look desirable… to be desired.

She glanced at Miguel, who was now standing with Rosario at the bar, watching them intently. Estrella, the lithe blonde leech in skin-tight leather, had joined them and winked at Draco, who continued to mush the label on his beer-bottle in silence.

'Anyway, YOU'RE the one who's pulled,' Hermione said snidely. 'If you fancy meaningless sex with a woman who looks like a plastic blow-up doll, then this is your lucky night.'

Draco's face had darkened.

Hermione couldn't resist goading him.

'I mean, she couldn't look less like Katya, could she? Katya had a much more natural look.'

Draco seemed to flinch at these words. His sudden movement frightened her. For one brief moment, she seriously thought he might strike her.

'Why are you doing this?' Draco said, his voice laced with menace. 'You're making a fool of yourself.'

'What do you mean?'

'You know exactly what I mean.' He was now staring at her, his eyes ink-black and hollow. 'You're punishing ME for something YOU feel.'

'I don't understand,' Hermione stammered. 'Just because I happen to have some empathy for your poor wife…'

'Don't pretend you care two hoots about Katya. You didn't even know her name until I told you the other night. And then you couldn't wait to get away. You couldn't give a shit that I told you stuff about her, stuff I haven't mentioned to anybody else.'
'I felt awkward… she was pregnant. I didn't expect that.'

Draco's eyes were glassy and cold. The bright white fairy lights dangling in the trees were reflected in his gaze.

'No, Hermione. You were embarrassed because you thought she was dead, and you still do. Knowing your real opinion of me, you probably assume I murdered her.'

'I don't think anything of the sort!' Hermione seethed, suddenly consumed by white-hot rage. 'The thing is… crazy as it sounds, I felt a connection with her. A similarity.'

'A 'connection'? I very much doubt she'd even like you. As for similarity…'

'Look, just forget I ever said it!' Hermione stood up, suddenly wanting to get as far away from Draco as she possibly could.

'No, let's talk about this,' Draco said, grabbing her arm and roughly pushing her back into her seat. He narrowed his eyes, scrutinising her carefully.

'Okay. Let's see… Sure. There's maybe a few similarities with Katya … across the eyes, and… the way her lips tapered slightly upwards when she smiled. And yes, you're completely, fucking, insanely beautiful.'

Hermione tried to extricate her arm from his grasp, but he pulled his chair closer to hers with one quick movement and pressed one large hand flat against her back, his other hand pinioning her arm to the table. He thrust his face close to hers, so close she could feel his spittle spraying her cheeks and mouth as he talked.

'But Katya was nice. Whereas you… you have such a repellant personality.'

'Look who's talking!' Hermione fumed.

But Draco didn't seem to hear her. 'You're arrogant, bossy, self-seeking, over-competitive, you don't seem to give a stuff about your children - or your husband, come to that - you're obsessed with your work and all the fucking wondrous good you do, saving poor Muggle-borns everywhere…'

'Which is precisely why I'm here at the other side of the bloody world helping you!'

Draco opened his mouth to reply but seemed to reconsider.

'Really, how you, of all people, can sit there, so smug and self-righteous, and say all that to me… it beggars belief…' Hermione continued, grappling for her handbag. 'After tomorrow morning, I never, ever want to see you again. You can do what the hell you want with Ron, I really couldn't care less… I won't be part of it. In fact… in fact, I won't even be around.'

She wanted his hand off her arm. She could feel his hand on her back, a deadweight, scorching hot through the thin fabric of her dress. She needed to escape this invasion of her personal space, to slap away his eyes and mouth. She was seized by a fierce temptation to head-butt him with such violence, such force, that his nose and lip would split, spewing blood, and was then shocked by the intense feeling of sexual excitement this momentary fantasy inspired in her. She found she was grinding her teeth and shaking uncontrollably, a tight heat clenched deep inside of her.

This kind of physical, visceral hatred couldn't be healthy, she thought to herself, taking deep breaths to calm herself down.
'And now,' Hermione said in a shaky voice, 'I'd like to get a cab back to the hotel.'

Draco refused to budge, a sullen, sneering expression on his face.

'DRACO. I said I want to leave,' Hermione said in louder, firmer tones.

'I heard you.'

For a brief moment, he seemed to struggle inwardly, as though he was about to say something, and then thought better of it.

'I can't let you go back on your own,' he said, tightening his grip on her.

'Well, I don't want you anywhere near me,' she hissed, tears pricking her eyelids. 'I'd rather take my chances with Los Rojos.'

'But they could hurt you.'

'I don't care. All I know is I can't stand the sight of you for one minute longer.' She was quivering with pent-up rage and a desire to sob uncontrollably.

'Hermione…'

'Get your hands off me,' Hermione snarled, pushing Draco in the face.

'Hey! What's going on?' Miguel bellowed excitedly, forcing himself between them.

'I'm going back to the hotel,' Hermione said to Miguel, her eyes blazing with anger.

'And I'm going with her,' Draco said.

Hermione saw there was undeniable pain in his eyes, and for a moment she felt bad. And then she remembered who she was dealing with.

Miguel looked alarmed. 'Hermione… my driver can take you back to the hotel, look…' He pulled out his mobile phone, wagging it frenetically in the air. 'I can call him straight away. He's waiting around the corner.' He then turned to Draco. 'Come on, old friend… cheer up… the night is still young…' He nodded lecherously towards Rosario and Estrella, who were watching this little scene with open-mouthed fascination.

'Thanks for everything, Miguel,' Hermione said flatly. 'I'll wait outside.'

'Let me at least wait with you,' Draco said, jumping to his feet.

'You don't need to do that.'

Hermione slipped out of her seat and headed towards the exit, quickly weaving her way through a cluster of drinkers and dancers. Draco was close behind.

He grabbed her arm in an effort to detain her.

'For fuck's sake, Hermione! I'm sorry, okay?'

She roughly shrugged him off, not daring to look him in the face.

She could hear Miguel scampering after them.
Miguel placed a firm, proprietorial arm around her, swiftly leading her away from Draco. He was already barking orders into his mobile phone, and, by the time they had arrived at the exit gate, the chauffeur-driven car was waiting for them.

A burgundy-uniformed chauffeur with the Astrum logo imprinted on his jacket pocket hastened to open the door for Hermione.

'It's been nice to meet you, Miguel,' Hermione said, planting a quick kiss on his cheek. 'Take care.'

'And you, too,' Miguel said, a forlorn, anxious look on his face.

XXX

Even with the air-conditioning blaring at full pelt in her hotel room, it was a boiling hot night. Hermione stripped off her dusky pink shift and collapsed onto her bed, not even bothering to untuck the bedcovers. She lay there, mentally pleading for the occasional whoosh of cool air from the aircon unit to sweep across her skin.

She took deep breaths, trying to refresh herself in this overheated, airless atmosphere, still feeling over-wrught from her argument with Draco. It vaguely occurred to her that she should take a shower or at least remove her makeup. But the bathroom seemed very far away, and the sluggishness oozing through her body soon meant she didn't even have the energy to reach over to the lamp on her bedside table to switch it off.

She ran through the evening's events in her mind, over and over, each time feeling increasingly sickened by her own behaviour – in every department.

She suddenly felt nauseous. Her head was spinning. It was so hot and stuffy in this room… How she longed for the cool comfort of her journey in the Astrum limousine. The windows had been down, a keen breeze slicing across her face and pleasantly ruffling her hair as they hurtled through the bustling city, which seemed as alive in the middle of the night as it did during the day.

The chauffeur had been pleasant, smiling at her benignly in the mirror, his cap, offset at a jaunty angle, subverting his officious image.

She started to drift off to sleep… there was something about that cap… that uniform…. Something nigging her mind… A vague memory - more a splodge, really - a splash of colour, a shape… the logo for Astrum.

A star. A red star. Yes, the logo for Astrum was a Red Star.

Where do I know that from? she wondered idly, exhaustion easing through her body, gradually shutting down her consciousness.

She hoped Draco was alright. That he'd forgive her… The image of his face, his pained look, hovered in her mind's eye, then faded, as sleep overwhelmed her.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“WAITING ALL NIGHT” by RUDIMENTAL (ELLA EYRE)

"YOU DON'T HAVE A CLUE" by ROYKSOPP
Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters
A dead body, a mysterious, cryptic message, and Draco's losing his mind. A fraught and frightening night takes a surprising turn for Hermione and Draco... will things ever be the same again?

16. What Dreams May Come

Hermione had no idea how long she’d been asleep, but her name was being called and someone was roughly shaking her.

She felt heady, heavy-limbed. Unable to stir or speak.

She had to be dreaming.

Again, someone was calling her name. Over and over. With increasing urgency.

She could feel the mattress dip in response to somebody’s weight... somebody who had joined her on the bed.

Maybe this wasn't a dream, after all.

'Hermione, wake up!' The voice was clearer now, projected directly into her ear. She could feel large hands – one behind her neck, the other cradling her chin - gently moving her head from side to side.

There was a warmth against the length of her body, the feel of heated skin on skin.

'Can you hear me?'

It was Draco's voice.

Relief flooded through her.

She'd had such a disturbing dream... one where she'd left Draco in great danger.

'Hermione!' Draco shouted.

Hermione woke with a start, her heart pumping violently as a surge of adrenalin coursed through her. Draco was hanging over her, chest heaving, panting loudly.

'What the hell are you doing? Oh my god, Draco! What's happened to you?' she cried, recoiling at the sight of him.

Draco was shivering uncontrollably, his teeth chattering. He was half-naked, his jeans slung low on his hips and unbuttoned at the fly. His back and chest were covered in deep scratches, and his bullet-wound was bleeding profusely.

Hermione followed his shiny-eyed gaze to her own body. Her bare breasts and belly were thinly
smeared in his blood where he had inadvertently touched her, whilst waking her.

Horrified, she grabbed a pillow to shield her body as best she could and shuffled into a kneeling position.

‘What is it?’ she asked again, trying to still the panic in her voice.

‘I thought you might be dead!’ he explained, burying his face in his hands.

‘Dead? Why would I be dead?’

Draco took deep breaths and swallowed hard, forcing himself to meet Hermione’s gaze. The grey irises of his eyes had been entirely swamped by the deep black of his pupils and there was a slight slurring in his speech.

‘I don’t know how to tell you this.’

Suddenly, her chest felt tight, fearful of what he might say. There was something terribly ‘off’ about him…

‘There's – there's a dead girl in my bed.’

‘A WHAT?’

‘A dead girl,’ Draco repeated forlornly.

Hermione sprung off the bed and scrabbled urgently on the floor for the dusky pink shift she’d discarded last night. She wriggled the dress over her head, not caring that the pillow she was hiding behind fell to the floor as she got dressed.

She had to do something, get help…

‘Tell me truthfully, Draco,’ she said. Her mouth felt dry and she was struggling to swallow. She couldn’t stop imagining some kind of gruesome Muggle-torturing sex play that had got out of hand. ‘Have you killed someone?’

‘No… NO! It’s not like that… I didn’t do anything!’ Draco remonstrated, his voice rising to a hysterical pitch. ‘I just found her there, lying beside me…’

‘Who is she?’

‘Rosario. From last night?’

‘What the bloody hell was she doing in your bed? No, sorry… don’t answer that…’ Hermione said with a frown.

‘I honestly don’t remember how it happened,’ Draco said earnestly. He closed his eyes, grimacing, as a spasm of pain rocked him. ‘My head’s pounding. Feels like it might blow off.’

Hermione picked up the receiver of the phone next to her bed and tried to dial ‘Reception’ with shaking fingers.

‘What are you doing?’ Draco squealed in alarm. ‘Don’t drag the Muggles into this!’

Hermione fixed him a steely look and continued dialing.
'They'll think I've fucking killed her!' Draco growled, teeth bared. He flung himself at her and wrestled the receiver from her grasp, slamming it back into its cradle.

'We have to report this, Draco! This is what you do in the Muggle world, or don't you realise that?' Hermione said, feeling a little frightened by his strength and the ease with which he’d overpowered her.

'But I haven't done anything wrong! Not deliberately.'

'How can you be so sure?' Hermione snapped, unable to suppress the feeling of spiteful fury that rose up inside of her.

'Please, Hermione. Please help me…' Draco said in softer, beseeching tones. He gripped her hand, clutching it tightly in his own, and tugged her away from the phone and towards him. His hand was hot and clammy. ‘You’ve got to come and see… She’s turned blue …’

‘BLUE?’

‘*Dark Flux blue*…’

XXX

‘Hold on… how the hell did you get into my room?’ Hermione asked, as they hastened towards Draco’s room at the far end of the corridor.

'I don't know.'

'You didn't *consciously* cast a spell?'

'It all happened so fast.'

Draco pulled his key-card from his jeans pocket and slipped it into the required slot on his door. He paused; taking a deep breath, preparing to face whatever was waiting for him inside.

'Why weren't you sick?'

'Why wasn't I… What? What the fucking hell are you on about?' Draco said impatiently, as he inched the door open.

XXX

Hermione cast a *Colloportus* on the door behind them and a standard intruder spell, ensuring an alarm would sound if anyone – or anything – tried to enter.

The room was in complete disarray. Furniture was overturned. A bottle of champagne was lying on its side on the antique table and had dripped its contents onto the matching Louis XVI chair. Clothes were heaped shambolically or were hanging from various parts of the room where they had been flung, including a scarlet satin bra, which was dangling from the overhead light-shade.

'She's gone!' Draco cried. He stumbled backwards, collapsing heavily onto the wet Louis XVI chair, looking pale and shaky, his eyes huge and wild.

Hermione studied the bed. There was a pile of heaped up bedclothes and a bloody stain on the under sheet – but definitely no body.

'Then she can't have been dead.'
'Or somebody’s moved her body.'

Hermione quickly cast a Homenum Revelio, followed by a Homorphous Charm, just to check that there wasn't anybody still lurking.

Draco was shaking his head in disbelief. He half up-ended the champagne bottle; then, noticing there were still some dregs in the bottom, he glugged the liquid down before throwing the bottle to the ground.

'I don't get it, Hermione. I swear to you. She was lying there, dead and cold.'

'And you're sure this wasn't some kind of hallucination?' Hermione asked in a crisp, clear voice, desperately trying to maintain an outward veneer of calm.

'She was blue… electric blue,' Draco said in halting tones, 'like… like that Ana girl,' he added, his lip curled in revulsion, 'and she had those horrible purple welts.' He threw a pleading look at Hermione. 'You do believe she was here, don't you? I'm not going mad…'

Hermione glanced upwards. 'Well, there has to be an explanation for that bra hanging up there. So yes, I believe you.'

'Good… because… oh hell… I feel very strange…' Draco mumbled incoherently, falling forwards, almost tumbling off the chair. Hermione lunged towards him, hauling him upright.

He looked terrible, she thought. She wondered if she should call a doctor. He was wheezing and there was a greyish tinge to his lips.

'Look at me,' Hermione said, tilting his head backwards, so that she could examine his eyes, which had suddenly glazed over, his pupils swirling.

'Did you eat or drink anything unusual tonight?'

He shook his head. 'Just booze and...Turkish light…' He thought a moment, brow furrowed in an effort of stern concentration. ‘Turkish de-light.'

'Right, where was that?'

'Boat… Miguel's boat.'

Miguel's boat, she thought glumly. Miguel who worked for Astrum, a.k.a. RedStar. Her memories of the chauffeur with the 'RedStar' Astrum logo on his uniform came flooding back.

Surely Miguel wasn't involved in this? He was Draco's friend…

Even so, her suspicion that Draco was suffering from the after-effects of a powerful hex or potion washardening by the moment. His condition was fast deteriorating.

'I think you've been cursed, Draco,' she said. He blinked repeatedly, seeming dazzled. 'Hold still,' she cried, wand aloft. She focused her magical energies on a Finite Incantatem, adding in a few flourishes of her own that she hoped might help to rejuvenate him.

'Any better?'

Draco's grey pallor had mutated to a ghastly green. His skin was moist with perspiration.

'Oh fuck, I'm going to be sick,' he gagged. He brusquely elbowed Hermione aside and sprinted into
Hermione stood alone in the middle of his destroyed bedroom, listening to him emptying the contents of his stomach; gut-churning wave after wave of loud, honking vomit.

She closed her eyes tightly, shutting out the sound. Felt the darkness with her mind… had Los Rojos been here, in this room, tonight?

As if from nowhere, there it was… at the edges of her vision. A tail end. A tiny flash of colour. A flash of red.

Her reverie was interrupted by the abrupt flush of the toilet, followed by Draco's voice calling her name. He sounded panicked.

She dashed into the bathroom where Draco was struggling to stand. He staggered, smashing sideways into the wall. Hermione hooked her arm around him.

'Sorry,' he croaked. His voice was gravelly from vomiting.

'You'll feel better soon,' Hermione said in comforting tones. Her eyes dropped to his bloodied chest and the gaping shoulder wound. It looked worse than ever. 'You could do with a shower.'

He immediately began sliding his jeans off his hips. Hermione averted her eyes, leaping away from him, to the doorway. She gazed instead at the chaotic bedroom. What the hell had happened here? The place had been utterly wrecked. Had there been a fight?

Draco pitched into the shower cubicle behind her. The cubicle door clanked shut, followed by a loud burst of shower water.

'Chuck me my tooth stuff, will you?' he called, opening the shower door a notch and slinking out a wet hand. She grabbed a tooth-mug holding a toothbrush and paste and thrust it at him.

In that exact same moment, she caught sight of a large-lettered message, daubed in what looked like blood, on the vanity mirror above the sink.

'For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come.'

Swathes of condensation on the mirror were slowly erasing the message, which was dripping down the mirror in long, thin red rivulets, before pooling on the white ceramic sink unit below.

She stared at the mirror, frozen to the spot. Her heart was thumping maniacally in her chest, her mind racing. She shivered, rubbing her arms in response to an outbreak of goose bumps.

'Draco? Can you hear me?' she yelled, raising her voice to be heard over the roar of the shower.

'Yeah!' he shouted back, his voice slightly muffled by the water.

'There's – there's a message on the mirror,' she stammered. 'I - I think it's Shakespeare.'

'Shakespeare? What the…?' The water instantly cranked off. 'I need a towel,' Draco said in truculent tones. The shower door swung open. Hermione instinctively screwed her eyes shut and shoved a towel in his direction.

She could hear him vigorously drying himself. 'You can open your prudish little eyes now,' he drawled.
He'd wrapped the large white towel around his waist and roughly dried his hair into a spiked frenzy.

He was staring at the mirror, open-jawed. 'It's not something I did, if that's what you're thinking,' he said.

'No… this is a message from Los Rojos,' Hermione said dazedly. 'I've had that 'Red' feeling again.'

Draco gave her a sharp look; then, he peered closely at the dripping message on the mirror. 'Is this blood?' he asked, sneering in disgust.

'I doubt it,' Hermione said, dipping a fingertip into the bloody mixture pooling on the sink. She sniffed it.

'What the hell are you doing?' Draco yelped. 'Are you mad?' He forced her hand under the tap, and then twisted the water tap on at full pelt, so that all traces of blood were washed away. 'It could be diseased or something.'

'It’s paint,’ she said flatly, snatching her hand from Draco’s clasp.

'For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come,' Draco read. 'What does it mean?'

'Isn’t it obvious?’ she scoffed. She was raging inside, suddenly furious that Draco had got himself – got them BOTH – into such a bloody stupid mess.

'No, Hermione, it’s not obvious,’ he retorted, clearly picking up on her tone.

'DREAMS, Draco, it says DREAMS… you were enchanted so that your dreams felt real…'

'It was real.'

'No, it wasn’t. You thought Rosario was dead from Dark Flux, remember? And then you thought I was dead too? It doesn’t make sense, does it now?'

'Everything was woozy… like my head was going to explode.’

'Exactly. You’d been enchanted.’

'But she was here. Rosario was here,’ Draco said firmly.

Yes, there was no denying that, Hermione thought sourly, grimacing at the mess of scratch marks on Draco’s chest.

Her eye alighted on Katya's silver pendant hanging around his neck. Draco looked a little uncomfortable under her keen-eyed scrutiny. He lightly traced one of the scratches with his finger.

'She was a little over-enthusiastic.’

'Please. Spare me the details,' Hermione said, tight-lipped.

'Not that much to say anyway,’ he muttered. 'All a bit of a disaster actually…’

Hermione studiously ignored Draco, returning her attention to the mirror. 'For in that sleep of death…’ she said pensively, ‘it might mean a Draught of Living Death?'

‘To make her look dead?’ Draco raised his eyebrows quizzically. ‘That’s just weird!’
‘It’s all bloody weird,’ Hermione said, surprised at how angry she felt. ‘For some reason, they really wanted to freak you out!’ She vanished the strange, Shakespearean message on the mirror with a quick flick of her wand.

It was better to do something… get active. Somehow exorcise this bottled-up emotion welling up inside of her.

Returning to the bedroom, she busily embarked on a series of tidying spells, including a few very necessary Reparos. She couldn’t possibly let the chambermaids see Draco’s room in this state. They’d get the police onto him.

‘So … have we concluded that Rosario definitely isn't dead?’ Draco said, following her into the bedroom. He leaned wearily against the bedroom wall. He pinched the bridge of his nose, and screwed his eyes tightly shut, tottering a little. ‘Because thinking THAT is the only thing keeping me sane.’

‘Paint on the mirror…. a cryptic message…. and a disappearing corpse. Not to mention, you scared out of your bloody wits and having hallucinations!' Hermione started on the arduous job of scourgifying his bedclothes. ‘What do you think?’

Draco shook his head. ‘But it seemed so real.’ He chewed his nails nervously. ‘I can't think how somebody got that close to cast a Confundus Charm, or whatever the hell it was that addled my brain like that.'

‘Maybe Rosario was a witch?’

‘No way,’ Draco said. He was pulling his jeans back on underneath his voluminous towel, and was focusing on re-buttoning his fly, before letting the towel fall to the floor.

‘How would you know?’

Draco laughed, a low, insidious laugh. ‘I know, believe me.'

Hermione halted her cleaning spree and stood gaping at him, hands on hips, head held high, challenging him.

‘Let me guess... you think Muggles and witches are different in bed?’ she said, bristling with indignation.

‘Funny you should say that. There is something.'

‘That's disgusting... I don't want to know.'

‘... Something I can't quite put my finger on...' 

Hermione was frenziedly persisting with her cleaning spells, her wand fizzing with exertion.

‘I'm not listening.'

Draco approached the bed, catching hold of one end of the bedcover Hermione was now grappling with, to assist her, as she attempted to scourgify another bloodstain out of existence.

‘I like Muggles. They're more… there. More in the moment,’ he smirked, clearly enjoying Hermione’s discomfiture. ‘Witches are more melodramatic.'

‘That's utter rubbish,' Hermione snarled, turning her back on him. ‘You should meet my Aunty
'Rita,' she added, under her breath.

She stood on tiptoe, hooking the end of her wand into Rosario's bra and releasing it from the light-shade. She glanced quickly at Draco, acutely aware that he was watching her intently, a rapt look on his face.

'Curiously, I've never shagged a Muggle-born witch,' he mused, sitting down heavily on the bed.

Hermione continued to feel his eyes lingering over her, as she moved briskly around the room, upending overturned furniture, straightening ornaments. 'They know to avoid you,' she sniped, prickling with an odd consciousness. 'Anyway, if you like Muggle women as much as you claim to, Draco, how come you only married witches?' She flashed him a sickly smile, which she hoped would defuse the weighty feeling building inside of her.

'I think your 'liking' Muggle women is a sham, Draco Malfoy. It's the worst kind of 'racism' there is, because it treats Muggle women like disposable whores.' She paused, brandishing her wand for dramatic effect as she spoke. 'I mean… really… compared to all those lovely pure-blood and half-blood witches, do I – a measly Muggle-born- LOOK that different? Do I SMELL different? Or TASTE different?'

Draco lay back on the bed, hands folded beneath his head, continuing to stare at her. He was biting his lip, as though trying to stop himself from saying something he might regret.

She approached him, her eyes firmly trained on his face.

'I doubt you've spent more than three hours alone, if that, in the company of a Muggle woman – beyond having sex, of course.'

Draco burst out laughing. 'Well, that's patently not true, Hermione. Apart from a few hours sleeping, we've been together now for… let's see… almost sixty hours straight? And the last time I checked, YOU are a Muggle woman.'

'Interesting, Draco. So you see ME more as a Muggle than a Muggle-born witch? Which is what I AM, by the way!'

She swiftly flicked her wand and shouted 'Incarcerous!' Draco blanched and tried to dodge the spell but was instantaneously pinioned to the bed by ropes that Hermione had conjured to entrap him with.

'What the fuck?' he spluttered, trying in vain to break free.

Hermione smiled smugly. 'See? Definitely NOT a Muggle!'

'Okay, Hermione! Point taken – you're a fucking WITCH! You don't need to keep me tied up. Now let me go!' he yelled, contorting his body. He suddenly winced, anxiously flicking his eyes towards his wound, which was oozing nastily.

'That looks horrible!' Hermione said, a look of consternation on her face. She reached out and placed her hand on his chest. His skin was scorching hot. It had to be infection from the wound. 'You're burning up.'

'Get your hands off me!' he said hoarsely.

Hermione rolled her eyes impatiently. 'You didn't seem to mind me touching you before! Oh, I see… Have you had enough of being touched by MUGGLES for one night then, Draco?'
She knelt on the bed beside him, positioning her face just a few short inches from his own, forcing him to look up at her.

‘I need to do this, okay?’ She proceeded to apply a rudimentary cleansing spell to his wound.

Draco frantically tried to twist away from her, straining against the bonds tethering him to the bed. ‘Please, Hermione. Don’t. I’m begging you!’

‘Begging me? Don’t be silly,’ she scowled. ‘I’m only trying to help.’

‘I don’t need your fucking help,’ he said. ‘Just get away from me!’ He glared at her defiantly, but Hermione couldn’t help but notice that he was trembling.

‘Please… Untie me.’ His eyes glowed bright with hot terror.

‘Only if you stay still and let me at least heal you,’ she demanded, unfettering him with a brief sweep of her wand.

He immediately sprung up, like a caged animal, forcing her to slap him back down again, using the flat of her palm on his wounded shoulder, whilst jamming her knee against his thigh.

He hissed in response, tightly clenching his stomach muscles.

‘You fucking cruel cow,’ he cursed.

She sat up, still keeping her knee firmly in place on his thigh, before realizing, with a hot flush of shame, that she was effectively straddling his legs.

‘Let’s just get this over with, shall we?’

She quickly cast an Episkey, hoping this would at least stem the flow of blood and goo seeping from the wound.

‘Just don’t touch me,’ he warned. There was a strange light in his eyes. She could feel the heat pulsating from him, enveloping her in his warmth.

He stayed her arm with his hand.

‘I mean it, Hermione… You can’t touch me because…. Because the wound…it’s turning blue.’

‘That’s not possible,’ she said. But even as she spoke, she could see there was a faint purplish tinge to the skin at the circular puckered edge of his wound. Without thinking, she delicately brushed her fingers against the opening, and yes, it was distinctly blue inside; the same sort of glacial, electric blue, Hermione thought with a heavy heart, that affected Dark Flux victims.

‘Don’t you ever fucking listen? I said, DON’T TOUCH IT!’ Draco cried, red-faced with fury, thrusting her off his lap and onto the bed beside him.

She glared at him, smarting with stunned humiliation.

‘Sorry, I’m so sorry,’ he apologized, levering himself upright. ‘I just don’t want to hurt you, that’s all!’

‘But I’ve healed you before, Draco,’ Hermione argued, eyes flashing furiously. ‘If you were infected with Dark Flux, I’d probably be dead by now!’
Draco rubbed his eyes. He looked exhausted.

‘There’s no way you’ve been infected,’ she said in calmer tones.

‘Those fucking Rojos,’ he spat. ‘I wouldn’t put it past them.’

‘Draco… you’re a pure-blood wizard. Dark Flux can’t hurt you,’ Hermione said, tenderly touching his face, coaxing him to look at her. ‘Please let me heal you.’

She didn’t wait for an answer. She cast a healing spell, followed by a spell designed to soothe any pain he might be feeling, which was quickly succeeded by an unmistakable look of relief on his face.

She speedily conjured fresh dressings, which she started to wind around his body.

'See. I survived,’ she said with a reassuring smile, her hands dancing over his skin in quick, rapid movements. 'You didn't kill me.’

‘I bet you think I’m a right prat.’

‘Well, you’re being super-paranoid,’ Hermione replied. ‘But then… It's been a pretty peculiar night all-round,’ she added with a sigh.

‘When I thought the girl – Rosario – was dead, I was sure it was my fault. You see, I’d noticed the bluish colour of my wound before we went out, but I just figured that was probably infection… but once the whole DEAD thing happened, I suddenly feared that I was infected with Dark Flux… that I’d been made into a walking weapon…please don’t laugh, Hermione, it’s what I thought… I was convinced I could kill Muggles and Muggle-borns… And then I remembered we’d been dancing, and how close we’d been, and I couldn’t stop thinking, couldn’t stop worrying, that I could kill YOU too.’

He exhaled deeply, shaking his head, almost as though he was trying to vanquish an image from his mind.

‘It was all I could think about…’ he said, staring at her intently. ‘I couldn’t give a toss about the dead girl on the bed beside me. I was seized by this… horrible dark fear… like the air was being crushed out of my lungs… I just had to know you were alive.’

Hermione stopped mid-spell, her wand falling from her grasp, unexpectedly captivated by the intensity in his voice and the heated warmth in his eyes. Soft crepe wound inexorably from her wand in one long spool, falling from the bed onto the floor.

‘But you hate me,’ she said, in a small, strangulated voice, remembering the cold fury he’d unleashed on her earlier at Villa Ofelia.

‘Because you hate me,’ Draco replied in cool, sardonic tones.

They stared at each other, barely able to breathe. For a moment, it was as though the air between and around them shimmered, Hermione thought. Like a modified memory.

She placed her hand on his cheek, gazing at his eyes, his face. Had he always had such a beautiful mouth, she thought, tremulously tracing the curve of his lips with her thumb.

She never knew what possessed her to do it.
Drawn forwards, as though by an invisible thread, she snaked her arms around Draco’s neck and kissed him, a soft, moist slide of her lips over his.

‘Oh God,’ he groaned, encircling her in his arms, capturing her mouth greedily with his own. She closed her eyes, losing herself in the luxuriant heat of his mouth, the taste of him, the feel of his fingers on her skin.

She allowed him to ease her backwards onto the bed. His hands felt large and warm, gliding sinuously along the length of her bare thighs and up her body. She shivered with pleasure as his fingers lightly brushed her painfully hard nipples, which were grazing the thin fabric of her dress. Unable to fight the sudden fierce surge of arousal sweeping through her, she instinctively wrapped her legs tightly around him, urging him closer, molding herself to him. She could feel his excitement, pressed hard against her. His breathing, harsh and heavy, was hot on her face.

‘Hermione…’ he murmured, as he trailed kisses across her jaw line to the soft skin beneath her ear. The feel of his hot, wet mouth on her neck was so exquisite, so tantalizing, she couldn’t breathe. He buried his hands deep within her hair, bending her face to his, drawing her into another burning kiss, plundering her mouth with such ferocity, it was as though a white, hot glow had bleached her mind.

She blissfully succumbed, moaning into his mouth, caressing his bottom lip with her tongue, tugging at it with her teeth, barely resisting a growing temptation to bite him, to taste his blood. The urge was so strong, so violent, she was finally able to wrench her mouth away, to regain the cool air of sanity.

'No… No, Draco… It’s not right…' she gasped. She hadn't meant for this to happen.

'Just - Just shut the brain down, Hermione, this once,' he said gruffly. 'Please.'

She tried to squirm free from under him. 'Let me go,' she insisted, pushing at his chest and arms, which had firmly locked her into a tight embrace.

She had to stop this before they went too far, so she shoved her hand hard into his face.

Draco instantly rolled away from her, holding his hand to his nose as though in pain. He sat up and checked his hand for any sign of blood, shaking his head in disbelief. The shock and hurt in his eyes were palpable.

'I’m not some fucking rapist, Hermione. I was stopping, okay?’ he said in accusatory tones. His eyes were velvet-dark with excitement and he was still panting heavily.

‘We can’t do this,’ she said bluntly, fervently wishing her wildly drumming heartbeat would slow and that she could regulate her erratic breathing.

Draco nodded wearily. ‘So you keep saying.’

‘I mean it!’

‘You kissed me first, Hermione.’

‘Just… just shut up!’ she snapped. ‘Forget it ever happened!’

She retrieved her wand.
‘Now then… where were we?’ she continued in shaky tones, avoiding his smoldering gaze. ‘Yes… I had to finish your bandage… Stay still, please.’

She resumed her dressing of his wound with an unsteady flick of her wrist.

He sat motionless, allowing her to wind crepe bandage around his shoulder and chest, but she could feel him staring at her.

‘I was going to stop, Hermione, I promise you,’ he said.

‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ she said in cutting tones.

‘You have no idea how much I’ve been wanting to kiss you.’

‘Forget it, Draco. It was nothing,’ she asserted, trying to fasten his bandage with her wand and failing. For some unfathomable reason, the wand was sparking in her hand.

‘It wasn’t NOTHING.’

‘I was merely proving a point.’ She irritably slammed her wand onto the bed.

He narrowed his eyes sceptically. ‘And what point was that, then?’

‘That you’re not infected with Dark Flux. That you're not a walking Muggle-killer,’ she said in a tight, controlled voice, painfully aware of how ridiculous she must sound.

Draco shook his head. ‘You're the saddest fucking liar I've ever met. You wanted to kiss me, too.’

She quickly finished fastening his bandage with fumbling fingers, her cheeks burning with embarrassment. ‘All done,’ she said, vigorously pushing her hair back from her face and smoothing down her dress.

Then she grabbed her wand, and focused with all her might, flourishing it in Draco’s direction.

‘Incarcerous!’ she screeched, conjuring sufficient rope to bind his limbs together so that he couldn’t follow her.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake, not again,’ Draco groaned.

‘That’s better,’ she grinned, relieved to see her wand was working properly after all.

She stalked out of the room but was only halfway down the corridor before Draco had rejoined her, shaking off the ropes she had used to tether him with.

‘So you can use magic!’ Hermione cried.

‘Only when I have to,’ he said. ‘In an emergency.’

She opened her bedroom door with a swift swish of her wand.

Draco followed her into her bedroom, forcing the door open with his right shoulder before she had managed to close it behind her.

‘What are you doing?’ Hermione shrialled. Her head was beginning to thrum with a piercing falsetto, whining in her ears like a sudden attack of tinnitus. She needed to escape from this emotional rollercoaster, from him…
'I don't think it's a good idea to be alone at this juncture, do you?' Draco said pointedly.

'Just because we had a tiny little moment of madness, doesn't mean you need to follow me wherever I go!'

‘You really are an egotist of the highest order, aren't you, Hermione?’ he retorted. 'There's a bunch of fucking maniacs out there spying on our every move, hexing me into fucking la-la land. This is not the time to indulge in splendid isolation!'

Hermione frantically rummaged through her pile of clothes, currently heaped in and around her suitcase, pulling out some fresh underwear and the blue dress Draco had bought her. She then stuffed everything else back into the case and whizzed into the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind her.

Once inside, she ripped off her dusky pink shift and knickers, and fell into the shower, scrabbling to turn the water on.

She sighed deeply, leaning her forehead against the cold, tiled wall of the shower cubicle, the water sloshing over her, as she watched Draco's blood dripping from her body, streaking and staining the water, before being sucked into the drain's swirling vortex.

Why had she done it? Why had she kissed him? Not just once, but over and over… and, even then, she'd wanted more.

Her stomach flip-flopped at the memory of his mouth on hers, on her neck, her jaw. She'd loved the feel of him, the taste of him, the pressure of their lips together, the teasing sweep of his tongue against hers.

She groaned in frustration, but also confusion. What she'd done was so bloody stupid. So completely out of control…

'You alright in there?' Draco called, smacking his hand loudly and repeatedly on the bathroom door.

‘I'm fine,’ she replied, her heart jumping inside of her.

She glimpsed the blue blur of the dress Draco had bought her through the frosted glass of the shower cubicle door.

She had to be stark, raving mad! There was no way she could wear that back to England. How could she ever explain it to Ron?

RON… His name sank into her stomach like a cold, heavy stone. He could never know what had happened here. Never, ever know how she had kissed Draco Malfoy. It would destroy him.

She scrambled out of the shower, seizing a towel, which she muscled through her thick, wet hair, before fixing it with a scrunchie. She wrapped the towel tightly around herself and headed into the bedroom, determined to act as normal. To pretend that nothing had happened between them.

Draco was sitting on her bed, looking drained and ill. The poor man needed sleep, Hermione thought, but there simply wasn’t time… they had too much to do, too much to resolve before she headed home that same morning.

'Come on, Draco. We've got to get to Senor Canaro's,' Hermione said urgently, retrieving her jeans and a top from her suitcase and heading back into the bathroom to get changed. 'Have you got a lot
of business meetings today?' she called out, in forced sprightly tones.

'A few, but later. Miguel suggested I go for a spin on his boat this morning.'

So clearly Miguel hadn't expected him to be dead or imprisoned. Even so… she had to warn him…

'Draco. I think Astrum is RedStar… Jeroboam's RedStar…' she said plainly.

'What?'

'Astrum. The company Miguel works for!' Hermione re-emerged from the bathroom freshly clad in her jeans and green jersey top. 'I noticed the chauffeur who drove me home last night had a red star logo on his jacket.'

'Astrum,' Draco repeated slowly, deliberately. He licked his lower lip, momentarily lost in thought. 'But, of course… it's Latin.'

He buried his face in his hands. 'Shit! I'm such a fool. Rosario…. Estrella…. Red Star. Maybe Miguel was trying to tell me all along? To warn me off!'

'That's not quite true,' Hermione said, rifling through her rather jaded memories of the night before. 'We tried to leave earlier in the evening, but Miguel insisted we went to Villa Ofelia.'

'I just thought Miguel wanted to get into your knickers.'

'Maybe his job was to keep us apart?'

Draco pondered this, a sullen expression on his face. 'I hope you're wrong. I've had good times with Miguel.'

'I don't think the main aim of last night's extravaganza was to kill you, Draco,' Hermione said, hoping this was some form of comfort. 'But to frighten you.'

'Well, it certainly succeeded,' Draco said bitterly.

'The fact is, Los Rojos clearly know where we're staying and what we've been doing… they've had every chance to kill us both… but they haven't,' she added thoughtfully.

'You forget it was Miguel's Astrum plane that flew us to Santa Maria? We could have died in that bloody morgue!'

'We need to see Miguel and find out precisely what he knows about all this,' Hermione said in efficient, clipped tones. She patted flat her clothes in her suitcase and zipped it shut in one clean, brisk movement.

'I thought you were going home,' Draco said, unable to smother the gleeful smirk which had exploded onto his face.

'I'll leave straight after. Pity you can't Portkey with me… You should be in St Mungo's, not gallivanting around Buenos Aires.'

'If it wasn't for that bloody scanner…'

They locked eyes.

'You had it hidden from view, didn't you, Draco?'
Draco blanched. 'Fuck. I think I showed it to Rosario.'

'You what?'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"WHITE RABBIT" by JEFFERSON AIRPLANE

“YOU’LL BE MINE” by THE PIERCES

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
A Pin's Fee

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Draco confront Senor Canaro and Miguel... with ghastly consequences.

17. A Pin's Fee

The scanner was gone from Draco's hotel room.

'And you're still sure Rosario was a Muggle?' Hermione asked Draco, arching a sceptical eyebrow. 'She's clearly working for Los Rojos.'

'To be fair, getting the scanner out was all my idea. I wanted her to check me for Dark Flux,' Draco said peevishly. 'The bloody thing kept beeping furiously every time Rosario pointed it in my direction... Seemed a little ominous to me.'

'Maybe it was malfunctioning?' Hermione said brightly. 'It beeped when Henrik was holding it too, remember?' Although the thought did occur to her that Draco had also been standing next to Henrik at the time.

'Anyway. Los Rojos have the scanner now,' Draco said glumly. 'Maybe my 'good' friend Miguel can cast some light on its whereabouts, seeing as last night now looks like one big set-up.'

He was right, of course, Hermione thought. Clearly Draco had been hexed or drugged, seduced, then duped into believing he had killed Rosario – and in the process, Rosario or her accomplices had stolen the scanner from Draco's hotel room.

Even so, it seemed an unnecessarily convoluted way to just get hold of that scanner, Hermione reflected. There had to be something else going on...

'We can grill Miguel when we see him later. Let’s first see what Senor Canaro has to say for himself. I'm sure he's up to his neck in this business.'

XXX

The moment the taxi pulled away, leaving them alone on the pavement outside Senor Canaro's house, Hermione half-regretted that they had come at all. There was an odd, knotted broiling sensation churning through her stomach – something she soon recognized as serious foreboding.

The house was forbiddingly dark in the purplish light of incipient dawn, blank and faceless. Hermione soon saw that Draco was feeling similarly rattled. He kept blowing out his cheeks nervously, studying the house with unalloyed suspicion.

'You feel it too?' she asked in a still, quiet voice. There was something about this place, this street, that made her feel preyed upon, as though there was a dark, skulking presence watching her every move, listening to her every word, and even reading her thoughts.

Draco didn't say anything, but then he didn't need to. His eyes were darting to and fro, alert to the
slightest rustle of soft wind whispering through the trees or the distant screech of tyres braking on the main road far away in the distance.

'Let's get this over with. My shoulder hurts like buggery,' he murmured.

'Don't forget to ask Senor Canaro about that mediwizard he knows.'

Draco frowned. 'Canaro's hardly likely to help me once we've accused him of sending us to our deaths in Patagonia with a false memory, is he, now?'

'You ask him about the mediwizard FIRST, Draco. Isn't that obvious?' Hermione said in practical, prissy tones.

To their surprise, and adding to their sense of dread, the door was slightly ajar. Draco hesitantly pushed the door wide open. Inside, the hallway was pitch-black, a gaping vacuum.

'Give me your wand,' he hissed between his teeth.

'But….'

'Just fucking hand it over,' he said grappling with her hand in the dark, forcing her to relinquish the wand. 'Stay here.'

'Oh, for god's sake, Draco, don't try to be the hero, it doesn't suit you,' Hermione protested, brusquely reclaiming her wand and clutching it tightly.

Hermione pushed past Draco into the dark hallway, wand aloft. She muttered 'Lumos,' and a welcome glow shone from the tip of her wand, illuminating the entry to the house.

Draco bit his lip nervously, his eyes flicking from Hermione's face to the hallway beyond. The light from Hermione's wand only extended to a mid-way point down the long, shadowy corridor which led to the enclave which housed the Pensieve, before being swallowed up into the thick, velvety darkness.

'Not so fast!' Draco retorted, lunging forwards and twisting her wand out of her grasp in a surprising show of strength. 'I'LL go first,' he said petulantly, heading deep into the hallway. 'Senor Canaro!' he called.

His voice echoed eerily, ringing out in the silence… a silence so deep, so dense, it was palpable. She could hear her heart pumping loudly in her chest, almost like it belonged to a separate entity, standing alongside her.

There was something very odd about this lack of noise, she realized.

Where was the cacophony of birdsong?

Draco strode forwards, pausing at the entrance to Senor Canaro's potions room. He thrust Hermione's wand into the room before him, then stepped inside.

From where she was standing by the front door, Hermione could see the dancing flashes of light from her wand, waving to and fro, up and down, reflected onto the hallway wall opposite Canaro's potions room.

And then the light stopped. Frozen in its tracks.

'What is it?' Hermione shrilled.
She sprinted to the open door, colliding with Draco, who was charging out of the potions room, his eyes wild with terror.

'You can't go in there,' he warned, his hand shaking so much, the light from the wand pooling at their feet was juddering uncontrollably. Hermione tried to push past him, but he flung her back against the wall.

'Merlin, Draco! I don't need mollycoddling!' she sniped, although the fear in Draco's face, gaunt-looking in the half-shadow, and the strange look in his eye, was giving her undeniable pause for thought.

'No, Hermione, you've got to trust me on this,' he said firmly, placing a large, flat hand against the side of her neck. 'You really don't want to go in there!'

'Get off me,' she growled scornfully, wriggling free. 'I've seen my fair share of horrors these last couple of days. What about poor Ana? What could be worse than that?'

'This is MUCH worse than that.'

Hermione seized his arm holding her wand and jerked him towards her, then directed her wand into the room so that she could see inside.

The room had been brutally vandalised. The bird and animal cages had been opened and all living creatures were missing or lying dead, in pools of blood, feathers scattered, eyes glassy and cold. Every single bottle and jar had been smashed to smithereens, the ingredients and fluids spilled and flowing into a thick, viscous sludge.

There was a fetid stench, so acrid, so pervasive, Hermione felt sure the tiny hairs inside her nasal passages were being singed. She recoiled in disgust, instinctively shoving a hand over her face to stop the warm bile which had flooded into her mouth from spilling over.

But it was too late. Her stomach heaved involuntarily, forcing a thin trail of burning acid to erupt onto her hand and then onto the floor. She wiped her hand on the wall beside her, and in so doing, turned her head sideways. The sight that greeted her eyes was grotesque, monstrous; she could hardly believe it was real.

She felt her knees buckle beneath her and started sliding downwards, her shoes slipping in the putrid, sticky gloop that coated the floor. Draco caught her, hooking both his arms tightly around her waist. The wand was now jabbed against her middle, but its light-bearing tip was pointing directly ahead at the gruesome spectacle of Senor Canaro, tethered to a chair in a spread-eagled position.

He was naked, but this was barely relevant, as he had been sliced open from his gullet to his groin, his flesh peeled back, and his entrails ripped from him. His long, looped intestines dangled loose and limp, like a bloodied string of sausages. His face was contorted in shock and pain, and his skin sagged, his beady eyes sunken and dulled. His mouth had been forced wide open, exposing blood-spattered, chipped teeth, smashed and broken against a large rock wedged with considerable force deep inside his gullet.

'What kind of magic was this?' Hermione whispered hoarsely.

Draco was pressed taut against her back. She could feel the rapid movement of his stomach and chest, pushing in and out, in tandem with his ragged breathing.

'At a guess, this was Muggle.' His voice rang loud and abrasive in her ear. 'I've – I've seen the
effects of an entrail-expelling curse, and it's nothing like this.' He unconsciously dug his nails into her arms as he spoke. 'What is it with you Muggles? Why's everything so fucking bloody? So filthy?'

Hermione frantically clawed herself from his vice-like grip. She rubbed her arms where he had hurt her. A whiny hysterical voice was ringing in her head, telling her to get out of this place. Draco suddenly seemed so cruel and unknowable in this eerie half-light.

She made a dash for the door, then remembered he had her wand. She paused on the threshold, looking back into the darkness.

The faint glimmer of light afforded by her wand was coming closer, gaining in strength and volume. Within moments, Draco was standing directly in front of her, his pale hair shimmering, his eyes gleaming brightly.

'You're frightening me,' Hermione whimpered, ashamed of the hot tears stinging her cheeks.

'There's a dead man with his guts spilled out, and you're scared of ME?' Draco bellowed. 'That's just about the most pathetic thing I've ever heard.'

'Can we go now?'

Draco shoved her wand into her shaking hand, then pushed roughly past her and stalked off into the grey morning light.

XXX

'I don't understand why you think it was Muggles who killed him?' Hermione whined, desperate for some kind of response from Draco who was grey and stony-faced. They had stumbled outside and were sitting on the kerb of the pavement facing the dark, forbidding frontage of Canaro's house on the other side of the road.

'Wizards prefer a clean kill,' Draco said pointedly.

'That's utter crap!' Hermione shrieked. 'This had to be the work of Los Rojos, and you know it!'

'And we also know that JEROBOAM employs Muggles, don't we? Including, it seems, my erstwhile friend Miguel…'

Hermione sighed. 'Don't jump to conclusions, Draco. Miguel probably didn't have anything to do with this!'

'Well let's go find out,' he grunted in reply. 'Come on.'

XXX

Miguel's boat was docked in a small, chic harbour a few miles outside of the main city of Buenos Aires. There were a number of similarly sized sailing boats lining this section of the River Plate. Miguel's was one of the largest and flashiest, its freshly applied paintwork glistening in the bright morning sunshine.

Standing on the wooden jetty, which abutted his boat, Hermione and Draco could see Miguel moving around inside the sizeable cabin. He had company.

'Fuck,' Draco hissed between his teeth, his eyes burning with indignation. 'It's that Rosario bitch!'
Hermione shot him a furious look. 'You could be a little happier that she's actually alive!'

The commotion prompted by their arrival had been noted by Rosario, who peered inquisitively out of the cabin window, eyes screwed tight against the bright sunshine.

Draco and Hermione scurried back to the safety of the car park and ducked behind a car.

'Did she see us?' Hermione asked.

'No, I don't think so,' Draco said irritably, his eyes alighting on Hermione's brown leather suitcase which had been left, slap bang, alone and slightly surreal-looking, on the jetty.

'Damn,' Hermione muttered. She swished her wand, concealing the bag from view with a Disillusionment Charm. 'Right, Draco. Maybe our best bet is to Apparate on board.'

Pained apprehension swept across his face.

'Look… the thing is….'

'Another time, Draco,' she said impatiently, scrutinising the deck of Miguel's boat. 'Just hold on.' She instantly Apparated, Draco in tow, onto Miguel's boat.

Miguel had settled himself comfortably into a deckchair. He was dressed in a baggy white vest top and underpants and was glugging a bottle of Quilmes lager, even though it was still early in the morning.

He certainly didn't look like a man who had spent the night torturing and disemboweling Senor Canaro, that was for sure.

Miguel instantly screamed in horror, the lager bottle crashing from his hand onto the highly polished wooden deck, at the sight of Hermione and Draco suddenly materialising from thin air in front of him.

'No, no!' he cried in abject terror, his tanned complexion suddenly pale. 'They promised me…. They said you wouldn't be killed!' he snivelled, quivering in fear, thick globs of sweat beading his forehead.

Draco stepped towards him, prompting Miguel to shrink into the deckchair. 'What the hell are you?' he squeaked. 'Fantasmas?'

'Ghosts?' Draco smirked. He cocked his head at Hermione, a mischievous glint in his eye. 'You hear that, Hermione? He thinks we're ghosts!'

Hermione gave Miguel a pained, weary look. 'No, Miguel, we're not ghosts.' She brandished her wand, and with a deft flourish, transformed Miguel's deckchair into a plush red sofa, up-ending Miguel in the process. He flopped clumsily onto the floor. 'We're wizards!' She grinned puckishly.

Draco nodded. 'Don't act so surprised, Miguel. You know wizards exist! Someone hexed me last night, and you know exactly who it was, don't you?'

'No, Draco… I – I,' Miguel gasped, breathlessly. 'I don't know what you're talking about! Honest!' Draco's eyes narrowed in disbelief.

'You fucking cretinous liar,' he jeered, his voice laced with menace. He stepped closer to Miguel, who rapidly retreated, cowering behind the newly-conjured red sofa in a vain attempt to avoid
Draco's penetrating stare.

'You set me up last night!' Draco spat, towering above his friend. 'I could have died! I was hexed so bad, I thought my brain might explode!'

'What is this HEXED you talk about?' Miguel said in pleading tones.

'I was so fucking delirious, I even thought I'd killed Rosario, you fucking moron!' Draco bellowed. 'Speaking of which… Hey! Rosario! We know you're in there!' he called in the direction of the cabin.

Hermione immediately levelled a Reducto at the cabin. There was a clamorous crunching din as glass shattered and wood splintered.

Rosario was clearly visible, exposed by the gaping hole Hermione had blown into the cabin's frontage.

Clad only in a skimpy leopard-skin bikini, the girl was whimpering with fear.

She stared fixedly at Draco, whose face was contorted with loathing, his lip curled in snarling derision.

'I-I was told to do it. It was a job… nothing personal,' she stuttered.

'Oh, I see,' Draco sneered. 'So, you speak English now, do you? And I bet you work for Astrum, too,' he said in cutting tones. He turned to Miguel. 'Astrum. Or 'RedStar,' as we call them in Europe. Owned by a Mr Jeroboam. Did your directive to fuck me over come straight from the big man himself?'

Miguel shook his head vehemently. 'I don't know who… everything has been by telephone… mainly from London…'

'London?' Hermione asked. But Jeroboam was based in Geneva.

Miguel nodded sheepishly. He tried to deflect Draco's fierce gaze by addressing his comments to Hermione instead. 'I had specific orders, Mrs Weasley, to ensure that YOU were kept out of harm's way throughout the entire operation.'

'Who told you this?' Hermione asked, her eyes hard and blazing.

Miguel shrugged helplessly. 'I never knew his name. But he was definitely an Englishman and works for Astrum – or RedStar, as you call it - in London…'

Hermione bristled with suspicion. Jeroboam had recently withdrawn all RedStar operations from the UK… so did Miguel mean RedStar's subsidiary, Arcana? That couldn't be possible. Ephraim Golowitz had bought Arcana just last week. At that point, no one— including herself – had any idea that she would be accompanying Draco to South America … until, of course, Los Rojos had attacked Ron.

'You see, I needed the money… ' Miguel continued, in a beseeching tone. 'They threatened to fire me if I didn't do what they said.' He turned towards Draco, although he still couldn't quite summon the courage to look him in the eye. 'I'm so sorry.'

Draco shook his head in exasperation, and yet something in his stance - a slight relaxation of his shoulders - suggested to Hermione that his undoubted fury at Miguel's betrayal was tempered by
the knowledge that it had only been short-lived, presumably only since Astrum took over his company.

Miguel tried to get up from the floor, hoisting himself into a standing position using the transfigured sofa as a support.

He then flopped heavily onto the sofa, shoulders heaving, gasping for breath.

'Okay, let's get this clear, Miguel,' Draco said, 'what was the objective of this little operation? Because there's got to be better ways to get hold of that fucking scanner other than hexing me into bloody oblivion!'

Miguel looked puzzled. 'What do you mean, SCANNER? What are you talking about?'

Draco grimaced at Rosario. 'Which means it had to be YOU who took it; or did you have an accomplice?'

'My task was to isolate Draco, that was all,' Rosario responded, in pristine, lightly accented English. 'Nothing about a scanner.'

She then glanced sideways before staring stiffly ahead, chin held high. However, it was this tiny, involuntary movement which told Hermione the likely current whereabouts of the scanner.

Hermione immediately whispered 'Accio', focusing on the metal attaché case, which instantly spun through the air towards her. She quickly grabbed it.

Both Miguel and Rosario were open-mouthed in amazement.

'How did you do that?' Miguel choked.

Hermione ignored him, keeping her wand firmly trained on Rosario. 'You're a liar! You took this from Draco's room, didn't you? Who told you to take it?'

Rosario's reply was inaudible, her eyes wide in confusion.

Hermione stepped forwards, grabbing the girl by her wrist and pulling her closer.

'Speak up!' she demanded.

Rosario opened her mouth to speak, but instead emitted a dry, coughing sound, her eyes flitting nervously from side to side. For a split second, Hermione thought her eyes lingered a moment longer on the car park.

Miguel addressed Rosario in Spanish. He sounded defeated and weary.

Rosario snapped back, railing at him in quick-fire Spanish.

'Hey! English!' Draco shouted.

'On my mother's life, I never took anything, I promise,' Rosario said in a small, mousy voice. She turned to Draco, blushing furiously. 'While you were sleeping - two men came to your room."

'You let them in?' Draco asked, a crooked smile on his face.

'I don't know,' Rosario sighed. 'Everything's a blur. They gave me a drink. Told me to sleep, and from that moment on, I don't remember a thing.'
Hermione sighed. She suspected Rosario was telling the truth. Rosario had clearly drunk a Draught of Living Death; all part of this elaborate ruse to terrify the hell out of Draco.

'But why's the scanner here?' she asked.

Rosario shrugged. 'This case was here when I woke up. I recognised it because Draco showed it to me last night… I didn't know what it was, and I still don't… I guess it's not that important.'

'Look, Draco. Mrs Weasley,' Miguel remonstrated. 'Nobody ever mentioned this damned SCANNER…. I was to get you drunk, Draco… to keep you distracted!'

'I was much more than drunk, Miguel! I was hallucinating!'

Miguel vehemently shook his head, protesting his innocence, but Rosario butted in before he could speak. 'It was me. My fault. I was given sweets to give to you. I think they were drugged.'

'Who gave them to you?'

'Was it one of the two men who later came into Draco's room?' Hermione asked shrewishly.

Rosario nodded. 'Yes. One of them drives the company limousine.'

'But of course,' Hermione muttered, more to herself.

'He drove us here from Villa Ofelia.'

Which meant that Los Rojos knew where Miguel harboured his boat, Hermione thought with a chill. They could be here now…

She exchanged a worried look with Draco. Clearly, the same thought had occurred to him too.

Miguel stood up from the plush red sofa, arms outstretched in a dramatic show of attempted reconciliation.

'Draco. You are my friend. My dear, dear friend. I am truly sorry!' he wailed. 'I had so many debts… I was weak…'

Draco surveyed the lavish boat with a sarcastic leer. 'Oh, yeah… really, really suffering, weren't you?'

However, any further insults were suddenly curtailed by a swooping whoosh and a blood-curdling cry from Miguel.

He stumbled forwards, his face frozen into a rigid mask of unexpected pain, collapsing into Draco's arms.

Draco fell backwards, overwhelmed by Miguel's lumbering weight.

To Hermione's horror, she could see an arrow had been fired deep into Miguel's back.

'Shit!' Draco cried. 'Where the fuck did that come from?'

Draco swiftly eased Miguel towards the sofa, and into the comfort of Hermione's arms, then sprinted to the side of the boat, scanning the area for Miguel's attacker.

Rosario had dashed to the side of the boat too and was hastily scrambling overboard, making a run
'Get back here! We haven't finished with you yet!' Draco yelled, running to grab at her before she disappeared from view.

He was left clutching at thin air.

He cast a look of deep frustration at Hermione.

'Take this!' she called, throwing him her wand, which he caught in one hand, exercising his Seeker reflexes, before clambering over the side of the boat in hot pursuit.

He was gone.

Alone with Miguel, Hermione could feel panic rising dizzily up inside of her.

Miguel's hefty bulk seemed to be getting heavier and heavier by the second.

She gently levered him onto the sofa. He lolled against her, his head slumped onto her chest. The arrow impaling his back remained upright; stiff and bloodied.

Her mind was racing. Whoever had shot the bow and arrow was probably still out there.

With Draco.

Her stomach clenched in fear.

Draco might be running straight into danger…

She had to suppress the urge to push Miguel aside and chase after him.

But there was no way she could do that, not now. Miguel was clinging to her, his face rocked with spasms of pain, and he had turned a ghastly white.

'Get – get it out,' he croaked.

'I can’t,' Hermione said. 'It would kill you.'

'I insist.'

'No, Miguel… I’m sorry.'

Miguel looked sadly despondent. He reached behind himself with one arm, face contorted with pain at the effort, and tried to yank the arrow out himself.

'I can’t bear it inside of me! Please… Mrs Weasley… Herm-Hermione… I’m begging you!' he groaned.

'Ooh hell,' Hermione muttered, blinking back tears. Was he likely to die anyway? Would removing the arrow simply hasten the inevitable? Maybe there was a fighting chance she could use magic to staunch the flow of blood once the arrow was out of him?

Hermione reluctantly folded her palm around the arrow and tugged it gently, repelled at the bloodied jelly which was already coating the wood and the ripping sound of the arrow tearing through Miguel's flesh.
'Harder,' he begged.

'No. Sorry,' she said, instinctively retching. 'I can’t… I won’t.'

Miguel steeled himself and reached around to pull the arrow. Before she could stop him he’d pulled, and the arrowhead burst from his body with a flurry of blood. He flinched, gasping at the intense pain.

The exit wound was large and gaping, blood spewing freely. Within moments, Miguel’s white vest top was saturated in bright, crimson blood.

Hermione closed her eyes and focused hard, muttering charm after charm – anything she could think of to try and help Miguel; but nothing seemed to stem the flow of blood. Who had done this? Was this the work of Los Rojos? Were they trying to silence Miguel before he spilled the beans?

'Listen. This is important,' Miguel said, breathlessly, his eyes rolling, blood frothing from his mouth. 'Astrum… RedStar. I swear to you, they didn't want to kill Draco. You must believe me.'

'Are you absolutely sure about that?' Hermione asked in firm, insistent tones. Sure, Los Rojos had the chance to kill Draco – and indeed herself – and had chosen not to. But they had also shot Draco with a potentially lethal magic… one which might still kill him.

Miguel lowered his eyelids in assent.

'They've decided he's a pawn and not a player. A decoy… The man from London – he said… he said…' Miguel screwed up his eyes in pain, suddenly unable to continue speaking.

'Said what?' Hermione urged.

Miguel took a deep, wheezy breath, summoning the energy to go on. 'He said they wanted to frighten Draco. To warn him off… and that I was to keep tabs on him – and you, of course – that's all,' he gasped, trembling with the effort of speaking.

'But I fear, Mrs Weasley, I fear there is a greater game afoot, into which we – you, me, maybe even Draco too – have blindly stumbled. The man from London, he fears it's too late…'

'Too late? What for?'

'He said that… that…' Miguel spluttered, choking on his blood. 'Sorry… I – I…'

He opened his mouth to speak further, but instead of words, dark blood gushed out, streaming down his chin and neck.

'It's okay, Miguel,' Hermione whispered, her throat tight with emotion. 'Everything’s okay…'

However, he was still desperately trying to tell her something, his eyes wide with meaning, as he frantically strained to shape the words he wanted to say with his lips, but was then overcome by a strangulated gurgling, as red bloody froth oozed from his mouth.

He was drowning in his own blood.

'So much I wanted to do… so much,' he rasped, clutching her hand so tightly she had to gulp back a cry of pain. He was shaking uncontrollably, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Hermione wanted to reassure him, but the words jammed inside her mouth. She held him close instead, barely able to suppress the sobs which brimmed up inside of her.
Miguel was now convulsing repeatedly, battling to breathe, but she could feel the strength sapping inexorably away from him. The fight was gradually deserting his body.

'Hermione!' Draco yelled.

He was shouting from the jetty below them.

'Hermione! Where are you?' he cried.

Hermione continued to hold Miguel. 'I'm here,' she murmured softly. 'I'm still here.' She gently stroked Miguel's hair, which was sticking clammy to his forehead.

Miguel's breathing was increasingly laboured. Long, protracted rattling breaths… which suddenly stilled.

'Hermione?' Draco said, his voice much nearer. He had scrambled back onto the boat and was now standing next to her, holding her wand.

'Oh fuck,' he groaned. He knelt down next to Hermione and Miguel and placed his hand over Hermione's. He paused for a long moment, then gently tipped Miguel away from her, so that he was lying on his back on the sofa, his eyes staring skywards, blank in death.

They both stared solemnly at Miguel's lifeless body.

'I – I take it Rosario got away,' Hermione eventually said in a constricted, small voice, tears now flowing freely down her face.

Draco nodded, seemingly numbed by what had happened.

'What do we do now?' she whispered.

'I'll deal with him,' Draco said in reassuring tones. 'I know his mother.'

He sighed deeply and looked at Hermione: a long, lingering look.

'Come here,' he said tenderly, pulling Hermione upwards from the sofa into a close embrace.

Hermione suddenly felt overcome with emotion, bursting into loud, wrenching sobs. She buried her face in Draco's chest, glad of his warmth and closeness.

Draco tilted her chin upwards. 'Everything's going to be alright, Hermione, I promise,' he said in soothing tones, smothering her face in hot, wet kisses, brushing away her tears with his lips.

For a brief moment, she succumbed to the soft, warmth of his mouth gliding across her skin, before harsh reality intervened.

'No, Draco, you can't do that… it's not your job. I don't need your comfort,' she sobbed, tearing herself away from his grasp. 'It isn't right.'

'But it feels right,' he said huskily, his voice cracked with emotion, 'it feels like the most natural thing in the world.'

She turned away from Draco, facing Miguel instead.

The sight of his blood-soaked body sprawled on the plush, red sofa was an obscenity, she thought. Such a tragic waste of a bright, young man's life. And for what?
'Did you see who did it?'

'I think so.' Draco swallowed hard. 'It looked like that Senor Asusto… you know, the guy from the memory?'

'Are you serious?'

'We know he lived in El Calafate… there might be somebody there who remembers him… I think I'll head back to Patagonia, see what I can find out.'

Hermione could feel her heart thumping loudly in her chest. She didn't like the sound of that.

'Can't you wait?' she asked, spinning round to face him. 'Remember you need to see a mediwizard, and then – and then I could come back, once this bloody stupid Ministry Tribunal's over…' It suddenly felt so small and petty. She could hardly believe she'd ever attached any importance to it at all.

'No, Hermione. Just get yourself home. Safe and sound.'

'What about Ron? He can replace me!' she said urgently. 'It's not right for you to do this alone, Draco.'

'I can manage,' he said, but then a sullen shadow scuttled across his face. 'When are you leaving?'

'Pretty much now. I can Apparate to the airport and Portkey from there,' she said, lips pursed, eyes shining brightly.

She cast a last, lingering glance at Miguel's body slumped on the sofa, and gently prised her wand from Draco's grasp.

'Wait,' he said, tightly enfolding her in his arms, ensuring that he side-Apparated with her, away from the boat and back to the jetty, where Hermione's brown leather suitcase was waiting for its owner. 'You can't just go without saying goodbye.'

He fished his mobile phone out of her pocket and thrust it at her. 'And you need this too.'

She turned the mobile over in her hand, her eyes glazed with tears. 'This has been awful,' she said in a quiet, choked voice. 'Truly, truly awful.' She leant forwards, falling into Draco, and balanced her forehead against his, keenly aware that his mouth was open and inviting, so close to her own, his breath bathing her lips in luxuriant warmth.

'Please be careful,' she whispered.

'I'll be fine,' he murmured, pulling her closer.

Hermione momentarily allowed herself to melt against him, slipping her arms around his neck.

The consciousness that something huge and undeniable had happened between them during these last few days weighed heavily inside of her, suffusing every inch of her, robbing her of the ability to think or breathe normally.

As much as she knew she had to leave him here, to head home to her family, to the people she loved… at heart, she didn't really want to. At heart, she wanted to give in to the heated impulses raging through her body, to stay close to him, to protect him… so much it hurt.

She hated feeling like this.
She took a deep breath, extricated herself from Draco's arms, and picked up her leather suitcase. It was time to go.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"THE OTHER SIDE" by WOODKID

"WHO KILLED MR MOONLIGHT" by BAUHAUS

“STARLIGHT” by MUSE

Disclaimer: I own nothing but my original characters.
Hermione glared with rising fury and frustration at the Ministry missive, stamped with its florid golden 'MoM' crest, which had been delivered that morning by owl. She could hardly believe her eyes.

She had left Draco in a perilous situation and dashed back to England to prepare for this damned Tribunal, assuming this was a make-or-break moment for her career at the Department for Magical Law Enforcement. But instead, she had been 'suspended pending further investigations.' The Ministry Tribunal was cancelled.

A second message soon arrived from Padma.

'Hermione,

I speak for everyone in our office – we can't believe you've been suspended! It's that evil Mr Jinks!

He's taken to sitting at YOUR desk, by the way, while you've been on leave, watching us all like a wizened old bird, waiting for us to slip up.

Hope you can come back soon!'

'What does Padma have to say about all this?' Ron asked. He sat next to Hermione on their worn, brown sofa and tugged Padma's note towards him. He quickly scanned the note, his frown deepening.

'Looks like Jinks planned this all along,' Hermione sighed. ‘Makes me wonder why…? What have I done to him to deserve this?’ She reflected that her grumpiness at Le Bonheur probably hadn’t helped matters.

'Seems obvious to me,' Ron sniffed peevishly. 'Jeroboam’s spies know you’re involved in investigating him… Jeroboam's got friends in high places - including the Ministry. I bet Jinks is his poodle.'

'Perhaps,' Hermione said in a low, soft voice, although, privately, she wasn't sure if Jeroboam was as big and bad an enemy as she’d first feared.

Something about Miguel's dying words had certainly struck a chord…

And the circumstances of Miguel’s death also puzzled her greatly. She’d assumed that Senor Asusto was working for Jeroboam; after all, it was his modified memory which lured them to Patagonia. But If Draco was right, then it was Senor Asusto who had murdered Miguel! Well, that
didn’t make sense if Miguel was working for Jeroboam too…

Ron, however, remained convinced that Jeroboam continued to orchestrate events to his own liking.

'These Rojos sound like right bloody bastards if you ask me,' he remonstrated. 'They shot Draco and offed that Sheriff guy and the potions man. And then you saw them steal the bodies of those Dark Flux victims from that morgue.'

Hermione nodded glumly. It was undeniably true.

'Well… there you have it! Classic open and shut case,' Ron declared. 'They wanted the bodies to extract this Dark Flux matter but this Jonas chap was in their way, so they finished him off.'

'And Miguel?'

Ron sighed deeply. 'Look, Hermione, I know you liked the guy, but he was clearly Jeroboam's patsy. Don't believe a word he told you!'

But Hermione was unconvinced. She was still haunted by Miguel's last gasp revelation that the man from London, Jeroboam's fixer – whoever he was – had claimed it was already 'too late.' What had he meant by this?

Then there was Henrik Thyssen's dour conclusion, after many years of investigations, that these Dark Flux deaths were the result of a serial killer – or killers – which could only mean, if Henrik was right, that Dark Flux had ALREADY been weaponised.

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The weekend passed in quietly anxious domesticity. Hermione hoped to hear from Draco, but his weighty silence sent dark premonitory shivers trembling through her. By the time Monday arrived, Hermione was feeling decidedly perturbed.

She was due to spend the day alone at home. Having been named Chief Investigating Auror on what was fast becoming an international Quidditch corruption scandal, Ron had a mountain of work to get through and was stuck at the Ministry. Rose and Hugo were at school.

She was suffering a ferocious headache and had the inklings of a cold, worsened by the distinctly wintry temperatures of a British December. She'd got too used to the summer sun of South America.

She gazed disconsolately out of her kitchen window at dank grey skies overhead, promising rain.

Had Draco found a mediwizard? This was one of her predominant concerns, constantly rumbling through her head. If only she could return to Argentina to help Draco track down Senor Asusto.

But this was impossible. Ron was due to head off to Slovenia that same evening to interview potential witnesses in his Quidditch investigation.

And Rose and Hugo had missed her terribly.

But nothing could silence the nagging worries raging through her.

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Unable to sit at home fretting for a minute longer, Hermione walked into the village of Ottery St
Catchpole to telephone the Alvear Palace Hotel using Draco's mobile phone, to see if Draco had returned to Buenos Aires. She had tried to dial from home, but the plethora of magical energies swirling through Wisteria Cottage negated the usage of any electrical or telecommunication devices.

Standing outside St Botolph's Primary School, buffeted by a strong, chill wind, Hermione finally found a decent signal and was able to track down a number for the hotel. She eventually spoke to the rather snooty receptionist Draco and she had first encountered at check-in. He clearly recalled Senor Malfoy and informed her that Senor Malfoy had checked out of the hotel on Saturday morning.

Had he already been to Patagonia? she wondered. If so, why hadn't she heard from him? Had something happened or was he just avoiding her?

She glanced at the school building where her children were currently in class. If she squinted hard enough at one of the windows, she even fancied she could see the shady outline of her daughter's voluminous auburn hair, seated at the front of a classroom. She smiled proudly. Rose was rapidly turning into a model student – much as she herself had been. Odd, really - even though she had only been away from home for a few short days, Hermione couldn't help but notice an incipient maturity in her eldest child: a quiet, gracious demeanour which actually reminded Hermione of her own mother.

Mother… she thought. But, of course… Draco might have made contact with Narcissa!

Hermione sped home to dispatch an owl to Malfoy Manor asking Narcissa if she had received any news about Draco, making sure that her missive sounded like a professional enquiry.

Narcissa sent a prompt reply, urging Hermione to come and have tea with her. As for Draco, he was working abroad, but she had no idea where. Maybe Ephraim could help? After all, he was Draco's boss.

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Ephraim Golowitz was at a business meeting, his rather prim secretary at Arcana’s London office said.

'Any idea when he'll be back?' Hermione asked.

The secretary eyed Hermione suspiciously over half-moon spectacles. 'And what did you say your name was?'

'Hermione. Hermione Weasley,' Hermione said irritably. They'd already covered this.

The secretary sighed. 'I'll tell Mr Golowitz you visited. How can he reach you?'

Hermione jotted down her address in Ottery St Catchpole on a slip of paper and handed it to the secretary. The secretary gave her an oblique look, adjusted her spectacles, and studied the note. 'Have you got a contact number?'

'Oh. Yes. But of course,' Hermione said hastily. Ephraim's secretary clearly thought she was a Muggle. She quickly navigated the menu on Draco's mobile phone, finally tracing its number, which she then gave to the secretary. The secretary jotted this down, promising to inform Mr Golowitz of her visit.

Hermione dawdled along a corridor heading back towards the front entrance to Arcana
Pharmaceuticals, which was situated in a modern, commercial district of Muggle London not too far from the Ministry of Magic.

'If it's more convenient, you can always Floo from my office,' came a familiar voice.

It was Anthony Goldstein.

'Tony!' Hermione exclaimed. 'Thanks for that, but I was thinking of paying a visit to my family. I can catch a bus from here.'

Tony furrowed his brow in confusion.

'They're Muggles, remember?' Hermione said in lowered tones. 'It might look a bit odd if I suddenly sprung out of the fireplace!'

Tony nodded. 'Yeah, I forgot.' He paused, seemingly stuck for words. 'Last time we met – you seemed a little upset,' he said eventually.

Hermione coloured. But of course. He'd been with her that fateful night at Le Bonheur. Lord knows what she'd said to him!

'Merlin, Tony! I'm so sorry about that…'

Tony shrugged it off with a good-natured smile. 'I was worried about you, that was all.'

'I was very stressed,' she explained.

'Things better now?' Tony asked, seemingly genuine in his concern for her, which surprised Hermione. There was something about the strange glint in his eye which also intrigued her.

She couldn't help but wonder if Tony knew anything about the identity of Miguel's 'RedStar' liaison in London? After all, he had been working at Arcana throughout this entire period, and Arcana had been Jeroboam's only remaining London outpost.

'Things are… complicated,' Hermione said slowly, holding his gaze with her own. 'I was due to represent myself at a Ministry Tribunal… you might have heard…'

Tony nodded vigorously.

'… Well, I've been suspended, instead… pending departmental investigations.'

'Yes,' Tony muttered. 'Padma said.' He shook his head mournfully. 'It's not fair.'

Hermione sighed. 'How's Padma coping?'

Tony pulled a face. 'She's not. I shouldn't tell you this, but she's applied for a job elsewhere.'

'Oh. Really?' Hermione said, her heart sinking. 'Where?'

Tony folded his arms a little defensively. 'Sorry, Hermione. But I'm honour-bound!' He glanced towards a door leading away from the public foyer. 'Look, do you fancy a cup of tea?'

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Tony Goldstein's lab was markedly different to the clinical 'Muggle' style laboratory she first passed through. This was clearly an enclave of magic hidden deep inside the otherwise modern
Arcana building. The room was comparatively dark and the walls were adorned with heavily decorated wooden panelling. On closer inspection, Hermione could see a number of magical symbols carved into the wood. She recognised most of them from her study of runes at Hogwarts, as markers of magical protection.

Whatever was being developed in this room was clearly of a very secretive nature.

Tony's desk was laden with a stack of well-worn books. Alongside this, was a range of shiny silver instruments and a small glass vial containing a spoonful of glowing blue liquid.

Hermione instantly winced. She recognised that blue... it was the type of blue she had seen embodied in the burning blue ball unleashed by Los Rojos in the morgue at Santa Maria and was similar to the skin colouring of Dark Flux victims. Its lurid glow also resembled the blue inside Draco's wound... The thought of this made her stomach lurch in anxiety.

Tony shot her a panicky glance. 'It's nothing to be scared of,' he assured her, realising she was staring, wide-eyed, at the blue liquid.

'What is it?' she hissed suspiciously.

'That's a distillation containing Gimlott's Disease,' Tony said in matter-of-fact tones. He picked the glass vial up, holding it between two fingers. The liquid smouldered and rolled within its glass container, illuminating Tony's face and his immediate surroundings with a ghostly blue light. Tony's face looked oddly pointed and saturnine, Hermione thought, his spectacles blazing bright.

'You know that Gimlott's is my speciality, don't you?' Tony said. 'I'm the world's leading authority.'

Hermione nodded dumbly. Yes, she could even recall Tony telling her this, that fateful night at Le Bonheur.

Another memory – even more recent – now occurred to her.

In Santa Maria, Dolores had said that the blue colour associated with Dark Flux victims reminded her of her mother-in-law, who had died from Gimlott's Disease.

'I know very little about Gimlott's,' Hermione said. She watched Tony as he returned the glass vial to his desk and set about preparing a pot of steaming hot tea for them with the aid of his wand. He Accio-ed a tin of teabags from the desk of his neighbouring worker.

'You have to try this!' he smirked, brandishing a small grey teabag. 'It's a bush tea that my colleague, Binta, has introduced me to.' He grinned enthusiastically. 'It's phenomenal.'

'She won't mind?'

'Not at all,' Tony said.

Tony was right about the tea, Hermione thought. It was subtly flavoured and had a warm, soothing quality, yet was also remarkably refreshing.

Hermione instantly felt a lot cheerier. For a few, short minutes, the fear and panic constantly clawing at her insides slightly ebbed.

'I guess you've never had reason to know much about Gimlott's,' Tony said. 'It doesn't affect witches like you.'
'Oh, yes. Half-bloods only,' Hermione said.

'Not just ANY half-bloods, Hermione,' Tony said, nodding sagely as he spoke. 'EPSILON half-bloods. Those half-bloods considered the most powerful in our society. Indeed, there is mounting evidence that Epsilon half-bloods are even more powerful than the most powerful pure-bloods! Which remains a great embarrassment for the pure-blood community,' Tony added with a sickly grin.

Hermione barely repressed a sneer. How she hated all this blood-talk.

'Of course, Gimlott's is pretty rare… but as it affects some of our most famous witches and wizards, there's been a fair amount of galleons chucked at it over the years in a desperate competition to find a cure!'

'And are YOU going to be the first to find one?' Hermione asked, sharply aware of the faint tone of triumph which had snuck into Tony's voice. His eyes were shining with a peculiar brightness which she instantly recognised as boastful pride. Indeed, she worried that she herself had often projected that same gloating look.

Tony shook his head. 'I can't tell you that, Hermione. As you know, this business has just been bought out by Gilgad Inc…'

'Ephraim Golowitz.'

Tony nodded. 'Some matters still need resolution. For now, this lab’s in limbo.'

'So, are you still working on Gimlott's Disease?'

'Of course. It's my life's work. But I'm also researching blood types… mapping magical genomes… you're participating in the project yourself, remember?'

'Yes, that's right,' Hermione mumbled, suddenly feeling a little uncomfortable that she was assisting such a project at all. She'd had her doubts, but had been talked out of them.

'I have to say, Tony,' she said hastily. 'I don't think I know anyone who's had Gimlott's.'

Tony laughed. 'Oh, I bet you do! It's just that most sufferers tend to hide their symptoms.'

'Why's that?'

'Because they're often pure-bloods who didn't know they were actually half-bloods… or they've been lying about their true blood heritage all along.'

'You can't be serious!'

'It's true!' Tony said. 'There's often great shame associated with Gimlott's.' He leant closer to Hermione, lowering his voice. 'There's a pretty well-founded rumour that Lucius Malfoy has Gimlott's, for example.'

'Lucius! But the Malfoys are one of the most famous pure-blood families in Britain!' Tony sniggered into his tea, his face alive with malicious amusement. 'Yes… a fitting irony, don't you think?'

'What makes you think Lucius has Gimlott's?'
'He's been a recluse for some years now, but before he disappeared from public life, he had developed a bit of a reputation for having lapses.'

'Lapses? Whatever do you mean?' Hermione asked, burning with curiosity.

'Magical lapses… His magical abilities were clearly degenerating. There was huge speculation at the time, which must have been about seven or eight years ago. I'm amazed you never heard about it,' Tony said. He took a deep gulp of his bush tea, steaming up his spectacles as he drank.

'No, I – I generally ignore Malfoy news,' Hermione said, unable to suppress an inner pang.

Poor Draco, she thought. Just a week ago, she would have been jubilant to hear that Draco's life, his entire identity, bound up with all that arrogant family honour and self-satisfied snobbishness, was a sham. But now, all she could feel was genuine pity.

'So tell me, Tony, when does Gimlott's usually manifest itself? What happens?'

'Gradual deterioration of magical faculties leading to an inability to perform basic magical tasks, a weakened immune system, huge fatigue, eventually madness,' Tony said in clinical tones. 'Usually in later life…'

'Is this condition amplified by using magic?' Hermione asking, recalling how Draco had been sick after casting a Healing Charm on her when they had been flying to Buenos Aires. But then there had been his use of wandless magic at the Alvear Palace Hotel? The two things didn't tally.

'Oh yeah, for sure. There's a definite correlation between magic expended and symptoms, which is why Gimlotts is often associated with DARKER wizards.'

'You mean, dark magic is more depleting?'

'Pretty much,' Tony agreed. 'Ironically, though, Healers are also typical sufferers, because they have to constantly use powerful magic in their work.'

'How tragic,' Hermione muttered.

'You bet it is. I mean, it seems kind of fair that some old bastard like Lucius Malfoy should have a slow, lingering death…'

'So if you feel like this, Tony, why have you spent so much time and energy looking for a cure?' Hermione asked, barely able to disguise her irritation at Tony's rank hypocrisy.

A broad grin erupted onto Tony's face. 'The usual. Money. Finding a cure for Gimlott's has attracted very wealthy backers.'

'Including Saul Jeroboam.'

Tony nodded enthusiastically. 'For sure. Gimlott's is very much part of his pioneering research into the Epsilon allele. Jeroboam's been working in that area for a very long time. Over thirty years, I believe.'

'Is that when he was working with The Geneva Group?' Hermione asked, a little smug at having some 'inside track' on Jeroboam's past. She recalled Draco's account of how Jeroboam had once worked with Ephraim Golowitz – although that had been investigating Dark Flux…

Even as she thought this, she had the curious sensation that something at the back of her mind was
falling into place. She could feel the jagged pieces of a puzzle gradually piecing together, but couldn't yet discern the whole picture.

'The Geneva Group?' Tony said. 'Yes, of course. Jeroboam was the founding member.'

'And The Geneva Group was studying Dark Flux, wasn't it?' Hermione continued, unable to suppress the hectoring tone in her voice. 'And Gimlott's is related to Dark Flux, isn't it, Tony?'

Tony supped his tea in quiet consternation, eyeing her thoughtfully over the brim of his teacup.

'In the sense that Gimlott's appears to be a condition whereby excessive magical force is gradually sapping the life of its victim…' he eventually said in slow, deliberate tones, picking his words carefully, 'then, YES, there is a similarity… but Dark Flux is a sudden, traumatic event. Gimlott's takes years to kill.'

'How many?'

'It varies,' he said, nursing his cup of tea. 'In Lucius Malfoy's case,' he said a little more pointedly, focusing his bespectacled gaze on her face, 'I doubt he can last much longer. It's amazing how long he's held out already, although he's had the benefit of cutting-edge experimental drug therapies - courtesy of his friends at Gilgad Inc,' he added snidely.

Of course, Hermione thought. Gilgad Inc was competing in the same market as RedStar and Arcana. As a particularly close friend to the Malfoys, Ephraim Golowitz must have proved invaluable.

'As for Draco,' Tony said suddenly, his gaze hardening as he spoke, prompting Hermione to blush heatedly, 'he's not in danger – not yet, anyway. As long as he steers clear of dark magic, he might even avoid his father's fate.'

Hermione swallowed hard, unable to tear her eyes away from Tony's incisive, intelligent face.

'But then again,' Tony continued blithely, 'the shame of knowing he wasn't actually a PURE-BLOOD - or even a Malfoy - would be particularly aggravating for Draco, don't you think?' Tony snorted with sudden derisive laughter. 'Probably as bad as contracting Gimlott's, actually!'

Hermione could feel her heart sinking like a stone inside of her. Poor Draco.

Everything about his behaviour: his reluctance to use magic, his flinching when she mentioned his grandfather Abraxas that time when they were in Patagonia… suddenly it all made much more sense. If indeed there was some 'dirty family secret', then Draco would feel it acutely.

'So, if you figured you might get Gimlott's Disease,' she said, 'it might be better to avoid using magic altogether?'

Tony nodded. 'It's been known.' He flashed her another disarmingly bright grin.

He was enjoying this far too much, Hermione thought. He'd hated Draco at school, and clearly still did.

Hermione hastily gushed back her tea.

'I'd better get going,' she gabbled.

'Of course,' Tony said, placing his now-empty cup on his desk.
They exited Tony's office and headed back towards the main lobby of Arcana, passing through the brightly lit Muggle labs. Tony seemed deep in thought.

'Actually, Hermione,' he said, just as she was about to leave, 'I hope you don't mind my asking this, but why did you come here?'

'To Arcana?'

'Yes.'

'I wanted to speak to Ephraim Golowitz.'

'I see.' His eyes flicked upwards, to a point beyond Hermione's shoulder. 'Well, it looks like you're in luck.'

Fast approaching was Ephraim Golowitz, tall, burly and handsome, flanked by Auror Tom Bennet and a slight-looking, pale fellow with sleek black hair. Dawdling behind them was a tall, gangly woman with a lightly freckled face, cropped brown hair and, the moment she saw Hermione, a beaming smile. It was Tana McLaughlin – Ron's new partner.

In any other circumstance, Hermione would have been delighted to see her, but her priority was asking Ephraim if he had heard from Draco, which she realized she'd rather do without this particular audience in tow.

'Mrs Weasley!' Ephraim guffawed, slapping a large hand on her shoulder. 'What a pleasant surprise!'

He glanced towards Tony, a slightly quizzical expression on his face.

'Ah! I see you're here on a friendly visit.'

'Yes,' she said quickly, 'I came to see YOU, actually.'

Ephraim raised his eyebrows. 'Well, I have a little bit of business to finish up,' he said, casting a sidelong glance at Aurors Bennet and McLaughlin. 'A nasty case of suspected industrial espionage, I'm afraid – really, you can't trust anyone these days – but once I'm done, then it would be splendid to meet for a chat.'

Hermione smiled. 'It was just a few words I wanted, really… no big deal.'

Ephraim turned to the sleek young man standing beside him. 'Maybe Torquil here can help you instead?'

The sleek young man fixed Hermione with a dark, beady-eyed stare and extended his hand towards her in greeting. Hermione tentatively placed her hand in his. His grip was cold and slightly clammy.

'Torquil Haast,' he said in clipped tones. 'It's a great pleasure to finally meet you properly, Mrs Weasley.'

'I was wondering if you'd had any news,' Hermione said in hushed tones. 'About a mutual friend of ours,' she said, leaning towards him.

Torquil steered her away from Ephraim and the Aurors who were heading deeper into the building. 'Not a dickie bird,' he said in worried tones. 'I was rather hoping YOU had news actually.'
Hermione shook her head vigorously. 'He was heading back to Patagonia when I last saw him.'

Torquil frowned. 'Why the hell did he do that?' he asked.

Hermione opened her mouth to explain more, but then thought better of it. There was something about the eager, inquisitive look on Torquil Haast's face which she found hard to trust.

Hermione shrugged. 'I don't really know,' she muttered. 'One of his whims…'

As she spoke, she could feel the penetrating gaze of Tony Goldstein burning into her, almost as though he was trying to lip-read.

'Well, Mrs Weasley,' Torquil said, prompting her from her momentary reverie. 'Here's my card. Please contact me the instant you hear from him.' He leaned closer. 'We're getting a little bit worried about him, actually,' he said in deep, lugubrious tones. 'Rather fearing he might have met a sticky end.'

A frisson of fear careened through Hermione.

'Of course,' she said, fingering Torquil's card. 'I'm sure he'll show up soon enough,' she added with a bright smile.

'Let's hope so, Mrs Weasley,' Torquil said, an earnest expression on his face. 'Let's hope so.'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

THE ORANGE THEME (Moonmans OJ Mix) by CYGNUS X

SYMPHONY No.7 in A MAJOR– 2nd MOVEMENT (Allegretto) by BEETHOVEN

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Chapter Summary

A fateful encounter with a familiar face from Argentina, a surprise meeting with an old friend, Hermione makes an enemy, and exactly what has happened to Draco? Hermione finds out...

19. The Woundless Air

There was no mistaking the tetchy tone of Narcissa Malfoy’s latest reply to Hermione’s persistent requests for news about Draco.

Dear Hermione Weasley,

Nothing has changed since yesterday. Draco is still away on business. While I understand that you have a very important Ministry matter to discuss with him, please trust that I will contact you the moment he returns home. I have considerable daily correspondence to keep up with and can’t always rely on having an Owl at my convenience to dispatch to Devon.

May I suggest you try to send an Owl directly to Draco?

Best Regards,

Narcissa Malfoy

Hermione had already tried that. ‘Grumio,’ their owl, had got lost for three days, and had developed a nervous ‘bark’ since returning home. Ron had immediately banned her from trying again.

‘This is getting silly,’ he then groaned, as she tried for the umpteenth time to send Draco a message via her Patronus. For some reason, the damn spell wouldn’t work. It was driving her crazy. ‘Has it occurred to you?’ Ron continued, ‘that Draco’s probably having a right rollicking adventure, and doesn’t want to be disturbed.’

‘He’s ill, Ron! He needs a mediwizard.’

‘And you think he hasn’t worked that out for himself? He’s a big boy, Hermione. He doesn’t need you badgering him.’

‘He might be dead,’ Hermione argued, unable to extinguish the anguish in her voice.

‘Since when did you care?’ Ron said in cutting tones.

But she did care. And the longer Draco stayed in Argentina, the guiltier she felt, that she’d abandoned him to deal with the hopeless fiasco they’d found themselves in, alone.

Hermione decided to ask the Department of International Magic Cooperation to alert the Argentine authorities to what had been going on. Maybe that would help smooth matters for Draco.
This meant venturing into the Ministry of Magic, much to Ron and his family’s surprise. The Weasleys assumed her low spirits were the result of her Ministry suspension, so out of sensitivity to ‘poor Hermione’, Arthur and Molly had forbidden any mention of the Ministry at The Burrow, which made for some surreally circuitous conversations.

Truth be told, Hermione hankered for a heated debate on the efficacy and motives behind Silas Witchell’s latest tranche of ‘New Broom’ policies, but there was zero conversation to be had during her seven-hour wait in an isolated waiting room at the Department of International Magic Cooperation. Luckily, she’d brought an armful of books to keep her occupied.

She finally got to speak to a Second Assistant Liaison Officer for South America. She urged him to report the murders of Senor Canaro in Buenos Aires and Jonas Arbuthnot in Santa Maria, describing what she had seen. He point blank refused to hear about Miguel Culebra as that was ‘Muggle business.’

An owl arrived some days later with a message from the Ministry. Apparently, there were no records of a Senor Canaro having ever existed in Buenos Aires. As for Jonas Arbuthnot, the Argentine Ministry of Magic had certified his official cause of death as food poisoning.

Hermione was outraged. Had the Ministry even bothered to properly investigate, or was this some kind of cover-up?

But what could she do?

Argentina felt so far away – not just geographically – but increasingly, as a ‘reality’. It was as though everything that had happened to her there, was melting away; a violent splash of colour receding into grey.

An ugly truth was dawning on her. Despite her love for Ron and her family and the safe, happy life they’d built together, her few days with Draco in Argentina had awakened something buried deep inside of her.

To her private shame, she often found herself reliving in her mind, in explicit detail, the fear and excitement of all she had experienced.

Even more disturbing, was how her feelings towards Draco had changed so dramatically. She simply couldn’t deny their powerful physical connection and the gaping emotional void she now felt with his absence.

She was haunted by the memory of dancing with him at Villa Ofelia, on a sticky, summer’s night; the sensation of his hard, lean body pressed against her and the overwrought maelstrom of feeling he’d evoked in her. How she’d hated him!

Neither could she stop thinking about the time she’d kissed him… had it been curiosity or lust or just an overflow of feeling that had built up between them? She wasn’t sure. All that remained, was the persistent, throbbing memory of the heat of his mouth on hers, the harsh, guttural sound of his breathing, and the fierce white glow that had flared inside of her.

She wasn’t sure she’d ever felt that before.

All too often, she found herself lying sleepless in bed next to Ron, moaning in frustration into her pillow, worrying that she might never feel something like that again.

What if this was it? What if this was the sum of her life’s experiences? A long, slow crawl into ‘contented’ oblivion…
It didn’t help that Ron was so often away from home, at a time when she desperately needed to remember why she’d fallen in love with him in the first place. However, Ron’s investigations into corruption in Quidditch led him and his Auror-partner, Tana McLaughlin, from Latvia to Turkey then to Germany.

He didn’t think he’d make it home until Christmas.

This meant Hermione had to attend the Christmas Nativity Play at St Botolph’s on her own, for the first time since Rose had started school. Molly had offered to come in Ron’s place, but was stuck at home making a huge vat of Pepperup Potion for George and his family; all of whom seemed to be suffering seasonal sniffles and aches of one sort or another, while Roxanne, their daughter, had a suspected case of Mumblesmumps.

Hermione was looking forward to the play. Rose was playing an angel, sporting a huge pair of gossamer wings, while Hugo had been proudly practising his Baa-s for days, in preparation for his role as a sheep.

It was a crisp, winter’s afternoon. Hermione relished the chill air flushing her cheeks as she set off for a bracing walk into the heart of St Ottery Catchpole. She spotted a gaggle of local mums, likely headed to the school play, clogging the path ahead. She slowed her pace a little. She’d learned from bitter experience to avoid too much interaction and was sharply aware that the Weasleys were considered ‘nice’ but kind of ‘hokey’. There were even rumours they belonged to a religious sect.

One particular lady, some twenty feet or so ahead, seemed a little out of place, and was actually walking away from the school and towards Hermione instead. She was notably taller and more erect in stature than the huddle of Muggle mums she swept imperiously past. She had a glorious mane of golden hair, which seemed to irradiate her immediate environs.

Hermione froze. There could be only one reason for Sylvestra Golowitz to come visiting - and that was news about Draco. Probably bad news.

Hermione didn’t immediately notice the striking figure of Ephraim Golowitz extricate himself from the admiring glances of the pack of Mums, who had slowed when he passed. He fast approached, a broad smile etched on his bronzed face. Was that a glamour? Hermione wondered. Or simply a side effect of the robust health and dynamic energy that Ephraim seemed to emanate, cowing all around him.

‘Mrs Weasley!’ he hollered in jocular greeting. ‘Just the person we wanted to see!’ His deep, burnished American accent seemed to melt the cold, winter’s air between them.

‘Mr Golowitz … Sylvestra. What a nice surprise,’ Hermione said, hoping to conceal any trace of trepidation with a polite smile.

‘We’d like a little chat with you,’ Ephraim beamed.

‘A chat? Yes - yes, of course. Unfortunately, now’s not a good time. I’m actually on my way somewhere,’ Hermione gabbled, feeling oddly diminished and silly in their presence.

‘Ah, yes! To see young Rose and Hugo perform,’ Ephraim said, his eyes gleaming. Hermione cast him a swift, piercing look. How could he possibly know such a thing?

Ephraim burst into loud, raucous laughter. ‘Don’t fret, Mrs Weasley. We’re not spying on you,’ he chortled. ‘Are we Sylvestra?’

‘We’ve been walking through the village. Such a pretty place! And we couldn’t avoid the
gathering at the school gates,’ Sylvestra explained. ‘It was impossible not to know that today’s the school play.’

‘Please don’t get yourself in a tizzy, Mrs Weasley. We won’t make you late, we promise.’

‘And don’t worry, this isn’t about Draco either,’ Sylvestra added brightly.

‘Oh, I wasn’t worried about that…’ Hermione asserted. ‘Just – just wanting to get to the school play on time, that’s all.’

Sylvestra smiled in response, her unblinking gaze fixed firmly on Hermione’s face. Hermione instantly tried to blank her mind, to focus on the rustle and creak of the trees being harried by a suddenly stiff winter breeze…on the minutiae of the walk from here, close to her house, to the school…icily aware that she was in the presence of a highly skilled Legilimens.

‘Well, let’s walk with you,’ Ephraim said, offering her his arm for support, as they strode towards the school.

‘We’d be relieved to hear from Draco, of course we would,’ Ephraim sighed, ‘but we trust he’s sensible enough to steer clear of trouble.’

‘You realise he planned to return to Patagonia?’ Hermione said.

‘Yes. Draco sent us some very interesting reports concerning your adventures there.’ He glanced at Hermione beside him. ‘Well, less adventures, more nightmares really, wouldn’t you agree, Hermione?’

Hermione shivered involuntarily. The cerulean blue of Ephraim’s eyes seemed to fill her mind as he spoke.

‘I would even venture to say, Hermione, that what you and Draco witnessed, could be termed crimes against humanity.’

‘If this Dark Flux outbreak turns out to be a man-made attack, then yes, that could most certainly be seen as -’

‘I refer to the depraved murders committed by these Rojos; these followers of Jeroboam,’ Ephraim interrupted, in firm, deliberate tones. ‘Such crimes demand public exposure.’

‘The Argentinian authorities are denying that any murders have actually taken place, Mr Golowitz,’ Hermione snapped. ‘You should address your concerns to them!’

‘Ministry investigations are notoriously lazy,’ Ephraim said in an offhand manner. ‘What is needed, Hermione, is someone with a sharp legal mind and a fine reputation – someone like you - to openly accuse Saul Jeroboam in the British Wizengamot. After all, we both know the true extent of his murderous ambitions, don’t we?’

‘No, Mr Golowitz. I can’t honestly say we do,’ Hermione countered, noting in growing exasperation, that the crowd of parents who had been milling outside the school, were now streaming rapidly through the gates.

‘Are you sure about that?’ Ephraim slapped one large, warm hand on Hermione’s shoulder, tilting her chin upwards with the other, so that she was meeting his earnest, blue-eyed gaze.

‘Please, Mr Golowitz!’ Hermione protested, trying to wriggle free from his grasp. ‘The Ministry
won't take anything I say seriously, unless I have compelling, clear-cut evidence.’

Ephraim shook his head regretfully, dropping his hand from Hermione’s chin. She noticed how the bold ruby ring on his left hand glinted in the pale winter sunshine.

‘But you have your mind, Hermione; your memories.’

‘A single person’s unverified ‘memory’ is no longer admissible as objective proof in any criminal proceedings. That was one of the major stipulations in Kingsley Shacklebolt’s Great Reform Bill, after the Second Wizarding War,’ Hermione said tartly.

‘But exceptions can be made…’

‘Not by me, Mr Golowitz. I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I’m not exactly the Ministry’s favourite person these days.’

‘Yes, that is very, very wrong, quite incomprehensible. Even so, Hermione, I feel certain that Minister Witchell would be extremely keen to learn the truth about Jeroboam. You should consider the potential rewards that might come your way if you were to speak out.’

‘You mean I might get my old job back?’ Hermione said in acerbic tones.

‘Don’t underestimate your own value,’ Ephraim said silkily. ‘You have a formidable reputation. People listen to you. I have absolutely no doubt you could mount a full-scale international prosecution against Jeroboam if you put your mind to it.’

Hermione desperately fought off the dark suspicions crowding her mind. Was it Ephraim’s fault that she’d been suspended from her job in the first place? After all, Ephraim was a powerful man, with friends in high places.

‘I’d rather wait for Draco to come back,’ she said, changing tack and smiling sweetly, suddenly aware of Sylvestra’s penetrating stare on her face. ‘I’ve no doubt, with his backing, the Wizengamot would take any moves against Jeroboam much more seriously.’

Ephraim opened his mouth to speak, then seemed to think better of it.

He abruptly switched his attention to St Botolph’s.

‘What a charming little place that is, don’t you think, Sylvestra? Such a delightful, old-fashioned architectural style.’

‘Sure is quaint,’ Sylvestra agreed. ‘Is it usual, in this country, to send young witches and wizards to Muggle School?’

‘Not very,’ Hermione said.

The school appeared ominously silent and still. Clearly the audience had taken their seats and were waiting for the performance to begin. Everyone but herself, Hermione thought bitterly.

‘I see – which means you’re something of a radical!’ Ephraim proclaimed heartily. ‘Tell me, Hermione, in your estimation, how many children would normally attend a cute little village school like this? One hundred? One hundred and fifty?’

‘I really don’t know,’ Hermione said, exasperated.

‘All Muggles?’ Ephraim asked coolly. ‘Apart from Rose and Hugo of course.’
'Yes. All Muggles. Look, I think the play’s started. I really need to get going.'

‘Of course,’ Ephraim said. He flashed her a brilliant smile and squeezed her shoulder with his hand. ‘Really good to see you again, Hermione. Keep in touch.’

‘Come and have tea sometime,’ Sylvestra said cheerily.

‘I’d love to,’ Hermione lied.

Two sharp cracks later and they had vanished from sight. Hermione instantly scanned the area for onlookers, but luckily there didn’t seem to be anybody around.

But of course not. Everybody else was indoors watching the damned play! She marched purposefully into the school playground. How dare they? How dare she? Sneaking into her mind like that.

And Ephraim! What a pompous, blackmailing shitbag, trying to sucker her into his personal vendetta with Saul Jeroboam…

A rising sense of panic mingled with a stinging pang of betrayal bubbled up inside of her.

Had this always been Draco’s true motive for recruiting Ron and herself? Not to investigate what caused Dark Flux; but to set up Jeroboam?

A burst of shrill, tremulous voices breaking into song, roused her from her anguished reverie.

The play had started, without her.

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Boxing Day was to be spent with The Pickles, much to Ron’s displeasure. He was hugely fond of Hermione’s parents, Robert and Jean, but was discomforted by too much Muggle company; most especially Hermione’s Uncle Derek and Aunt Rita.

Rita was large and outspoken with a loud, shrieking laugh. She was also intensely neurotic. Lately, she’d become convinced that quiet Mr Hamid at number 47 was a member of an Islamic extremist terrorist cell, (based on visits from his two young nephews), planning action, here, in their own particular neighbourhood. Hermione had strenuously argued that Borehamwood was a most unlikely terrorist target, adding that Mr Hamid had always been a model neighbour – pleasant, smiling, co-operative. Despite this, Rita continued to sully his name to anyone who would listen.

Uncle Derek was a different kettle of fish altogether. He was the elder brother of Hermione’s mum, but much more taciturn and remote. A man of awkward silences. Despite this, Hermione was fond of him. He was a constant family fixture, soft-slippered in a beige cardigan and horn-rimmed spectacles, always with a kindly ‘Would you like some tea, love?’ so that he could slip off to the kitchen, rather than struggle to make conversation.

Today, Uncle Derek was even more subdued than usual. He was notably thin, frail and stooped, after a prolonged and intense bout of chemotherapy. He was being treated for bowel cancer.

Derek and Rita’s only child Gwen, and her seven-year-old son Alfred, had moved into their rather boxy semi-detached house to help out. This meant their pocket-handkerchief sized living room was awash with plastic robot toys and colourful chunks of Lego. Alfred had commandeered the TV. He was rooted to a spot on the taupe carpet some thirty centimetres or so from the screen, clutching a video game console. His latest obsession, Gwen explained wearily, was Space Force 7; a Shoot
‘Em Up game based on a popular TV show. Alfred was in total disbelief that Rose and Hugo had never seen it. Luckily, Alfred had received the latest DVD box set for Christmas and insisted on Rose and Hugo watching it all before they went home.

‘That’ll keep them busy,’ Gwen said, sighing in relief.

Aunt Rita rolled her eyes dramatically. ‘Not that bloody awful space malarkey again! All this telly; it’ll rot their brains you know!’

‘Don’t be silly, Mum,’ Gwen groused, clearly sick of their current living arrangements already.

‘There’s scientific proofs you know, that all this shooting and murder and whatnot, dangerously raises their cortisone levels!’

‘Cortisol,’ Hermione’s Dad interjected gently.

‘That’s what I said, Bob,’ Rita remonstrated. ‘Cortisone.’

Robert opened his mouth to correct her, but then thought better of it.

Uncle Derek levered himself up slowly from an armchair tucked into the corner of the room, next to the Christmas tree.

‘Would anyone like a cup of tea?’ he asked. His hands trembled as he spoke.

‘Let me help you,’ Jean said, springing up from the sofa. She hooked her arm affectionately around her brother’s waist, to guide him into the kitchen.

Hermione followed.

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Once Uncle Derek had taken a tray of teas back to the living room and they were finally alone, Hermione confessed to her Mum that she was having a few problems at work and that she’d been temporarily suspended.

Jean looked shocked. ‘You? Suspended? Whatever for?’

‘Oh, it’s just some silly nonsense. Nothing I can’t handle,’ Hermione said in a tone of forced jollity, instantly regretting her moment of unguarded honesty.

‘Is someone bothering you, Hermione? Like – like one of those harassment cases you’re always hearing about,’ Jean said, tightly pursing her lips.

Hermione pondered a moment. In a way that was precisely what it was; just not the kind of harassment her mother was meaning.

‘No, Mum, nothing like that.’ She gave her mother a reassuring smile. ‘I’ll be fine. Promise.’

It didn’t work. Jean’s brow was puckered into an anxious frown, and her kindly hazel eyes were boring into her daughter’s face, searching for clues.

‘Everything’s okay with Ron, isn’t it?’ Jean asked, lowering her voice.

Hermione reddened. ‘But of course.’
‘You sure?’

‘Mummy,’ came Rose’s plaintive voice from the kitchen doorway. ‘When are we going home?’

‘Aren’t you enjoying your TV show?’

Rose vigorously shook her red hair so that it all but coated her face. ‘Boring,’ she mumbled peevishly.

‘Well, the boys are enjoying it dearie,’ Jean said kindly. And indeed they were. Alfred and Hugo were whooping wildly in the other room, firing at each other with toy ‘Galinkas’, the weapon of choice on Space Force 7.

‘Why don’t you ask Grandad to do a puzzle with you?’ Hermione said brightly.

Robert was only too happy to oblige, having found conversation with his son-in-law a little stilted after discussing today’s football fixtures. Little did he know that Ron had spent a good hour that same morning, practising the names of all the Premiership football teams by rote, so that he could have this conversation.

Robert and Rose quietly settled into a 1000-piece puzzle depicting an enchanted castle, which Hermione thought bore an uncanny resemblance to Hogwarts.

Hermione glanced at her uncle, who appeared to be snoozing in his armchair, oblivious. How he could sleep at all defied belief, as Gwen yelled at Alfred for thwacking poor Hugo on the head with his Galinka.

Hugo, however, was dead-set on revenge, and swung his Galinka into the elder boy’s face with as much force as his burly little body could muster. A spurt of crimson blood exploded from Alfred’s nose, splattering his chin.

The boy was so shocked, he forgot to cry, leaving that honour to Hugo, who collapsed into loud, ranting wails, horrified at what he had done. Hermione wrapped him tightly in her arms, while Gwen whisked Alfred to the bathroom.

‘What’s happened?’ Rita cried. ‘Has World War Three broken out?’

‘Not quite,’ Ron muttered under his breath, clearly wishing he was anywhere but here.

‘That was very, very naughty,’ Hermione hissed, spinning Hugo round to face her.

‘He was being attacked,’ Ron argued. He’d never liked Alfred.

‘That’s no excuse!’ Hermione foisted Hugo into Ron’s care and went to check on Alfred, who was bawling in the bathroom.

‘Hold still,’ begged his mother, brandishing a tube of ‘Herb Healing’ ointment. ‘This will make you feel better. Like magic!’

Hermione smiled at the irony.

‘There’s a kids’ painkiller in the medical cabinet, Hermione. Do you mind grabbing it for me?’ Gwen asked, rubbing luminous green salve on Alfred’s nose, which was shiny red but now clean of blood.

Yet another Herb Healing product, Hermione noted. In fact, there were lots of them, by the looks
of it: a nasal spray for sinusitis, a children’s strawberry-flavoured toothpaste, a cleaning gel and an aromatherapy oil to enhance ‘Wellbeing.’

She scanned the bottle containing a ‘natural, fast-acting remedy for aches and pains of all kinds,’ featuring a picture on the front of a grinning blonde kid with a toothy smile. He reminded her of the studio portrait of Scorpius in Katya’s study.

‘Hand it over,’ Gwen said irritably.

There was an insistent buzzing in Hermione’s jeans pocket. It was Draco’s mobile phone, which she’d managed to fire into life by charging up the battery, the moment she’d arrived.

‘I’ve got to take this,’ she said urgently.

It wasn’t Draco. It was a long line of text messages from Henrik Thyssen instead, dating from a week ago to that same morning – all downloading at once.

Henrik planned to be in town on the 26th. That was today. Could they meet at The Porcupine on Charing Cross Road, at 4pm?

Just yards from Diagon Alley, Hermione thought.

Ron could meet him. In fact, Ron really should meet him, she thought.

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‘Well, that was a pathetic excuse for getting out of the house. You do realize it’s Boxing Day, don’t you?’ Hermione said in acid tones. ‘The banks are closed.’

‘Muggle banks might be closed, but not Gringotts,’ Ron said crankily, grimacing at the rain. He patted his trouser pocket. ‘Anyway, I really do have business at the bank! I’ve got a bonus to pay into our vault.’

‘A bonus? That’s great, Ron!’ Hermione smiled, although she couldn’t help but think that Ron’s pocket didn’t exactly look over-stuffed with galleons. Maybe he had an extendable money-pouch tucked in there?

Hermione asked Ron to also get some Muggle cash from Gringotts. They’d need it with Henrik.

‘Who’s this Henrik chap again?’

‘The Danish journalist we met in Patagonia. He’s useful, Ron. We should plug him for information.’

As soon as they were safely out of sight of the Pickles’ pebble-dashed semi, they Apparated.

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After Gringotts, they headed to The Leaky Cauldron. The landlady, Hannah Abbott, an old acquaintance from Hogwarts, told them that Harry Potter had been in earlier.

‘He says he wants to see you. Urgent business apparently!’ she said to Hermione.

‘Damn,’ Ron grumbled. ‘Shame we missed him. Hmm. I wonder if this urgent business was what kept him in Paris yesterday? Mum was so sad he couldn’t make it for dinner.’ He eyed Hermione curiously. ‘Wonder what he wants with you?’
‘I am his friend you know!’ Hermione retorted. ‘Anyway, we should get going to our meeting…’ she muttered, aware that Hannah was eavesdropping.

Ron was counting sickles for a butterbeer. ‘There’s no time for that,’ Hermione said irritably. Ron scowled, and instead dropped the coins into a gaudy china moneybox shaped like a Russian doll, which was sitting on top of the counter, beside a sign inviting donations for the Romanian Longhorn Preservation Fund.

‘Alright then,’ he grunted. ‘Hey, Hannah! If Harry comes back in, tell him to stay put, will you?’

Thankfully, in view of the persistent rain, The Porcupine was almost directly across the street from the inconspicuous entrance to The Leaky Cauldron.

Cars and taxis sloshed filthy brown puddle water onto them as they waited on the pavement outside the pub, huddled under an umbrella which Hermione had surreptitiously transfigured from a pencil in her handbag.

The Porcupine consisted of one single curving bar and a noisy flashing fruit machine.

‘We might as well go inside and grab a beer while we wait,’ Ron said huffily. ‘You got that Muggle money on you?’

Hermione fished a five-pound note out of her purse and offered it to Ron. He looked distinctly uncomfortable.

‘I’d rather you did it.’

‘Yes, I know you would, Ronald Weasley. But practice makes perfect.’

‘But when do I ever need to use Muggle money?’ he whined.

‘Let’s see. How about right now?’

Ron ducked indoors, out of the rain.

A demanding squawk to her left drew Hermione’s attention. She instantly jumped, heart pumping violently.

‘What the hell?’ she gasped, recoiling at the rush of dark, black wings, speeding into the sky and out of sight. Large black birds were pretty much the last thing she wanted to encounter after her experiences in Patagonia. Her eyes were drawn to a small blue ball of screwed up paper beside her on the pavement. She bent down, grabbing the paper with trembling fingers.

_Please_ be from Draco, she silently pleaded as she opened the note, and then instantly felt guilty when she saw that it was from Harry instead. He confirmed what Hannah Abbott had already told her; that he would be at The Leaky Cauldron late that afternoon, once he’d wrapped up some work at the International Magical Office of Law at the Ministry.

‘Something very strange has happened. We need to talk.’

About what? Hermione wondered, an odd, curdling nervousness coiling deep inside of her.

She quickly scanned the streets for a sign of Henrik. Maybe he hadn’t come after all. She’d probably replied to his text too late. She checked her watch. Already half past four.
She was torn. Should she wait a little longer? Or head to The Leaky Cauldron, where it was warm, dry and welcoming, to hopefully see Harry?

Muggles in shiny, waterproof clothing, clutching umbrellas of varying shape and size, were dashing past. The driving rain was gaining strength and power.

‘Ron!’ she yelped, waving the note. Ron was waiting to be served.

Ron reluctantly joined her outside. He jostled for room under her umbrella, which she covertly expanded an inch or two to encompass them more comfortably.

‘What about this Henrik guy?’

‘Forget him for now. We need to see Harry.’

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Ron eagerly downed a Butterbeer, a slow smile of satisfaction spreading across his face.

‘Well, it can’t have been that important,’ Hermione said grumpily, ‘or he’d be here.’

‘He’s probably got held up. You know what it’s like at the Ministry. You pop in for two minutes for some tiny little errand, and wind up stuck there for two hours instead.’

Hermione frowned deeply.

Ron winced. ‘Oops. Sorry, Hermione. Could have been a little more sensitive there.’

Hermione stood up with a heavy sigh, surprising Ron. ‘It’s no good,’ she breathed. ‘I can’t just sit around here waiting. I’ve got to do something,’

‘Why you so nervous?’

‘I don’t know.’ Except she did. She was filled with sickly dread. She had a feeling that this was about Draco.

‘Look, Ron, there’s a little Muggle shop close by which sells comic books. I thought of getting a couple for the kids,’ she said.

‘Good idea,’ Ron said, swigging his Butterbeer. ‘Hey! See if they’ve got anything on that Muggle outer space stuff that Hugo was watching on the tellybox.’

‘Television, Ron,’ she said fondly.

‘Yeah, that’s what I said.’

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The rain had eased, but Hermione didn’t fancy dawdling. She jogged down Great Newport Street, heading away from Charing Cross Road, and then turned right towards St Martin’s Lane. Here, a large white van was reversing into a tight parking spot and was jutting out at an awkward angle, slap bang in the middle of the road. A long line of cars honked their disapproval in discordant clamorous tones.

Hermione trotted rapidly past the logjam, then swung right into a quiet pedestrian alleyway, crammed with antiquarian bookshops. Instantly, the sounds of the street dissipated. Only the
determined pit pat of raindrops and the slapping of her footsteps on shiny, wet flagstones remained. She paused to gaze at the comic books arranged in the lead-latticed windows of the ‘Comic Shop’ and smiled.

Sure enough, there it was on display. Space Force 7: The Original Comic Book Series. She planned to buy an old illustrated comic book of Scaramouchefor Rose, having spotted one here before, sweeping her into nostalgic pining for her own childhood. It was only fair that Hugo had something to enjoy as well.

She gazed at the cover page for Space Force 7. The fierce-looking hero was armed with a Galinka; a squat, gun-like object, with topside buttons arranged close to the grip for easy firing access.

Funny, she thought, it looked exactly like Jeroboam’s Dark Flux scanner. Maybe Jeroboam was a secret Space Force 7 fan and had actually modelled it on the Galinka? Unless… but no. That was too horrible to even contemplate.

She was so lost in thought she didn’t notice the flurry of fast approaching footfalls and was jolted into reality by a hard object jabbing into her side. A strong, Macintoshed arm encircled her, pulling her close. It was a tall, stocky man - broader than Draco, she immediately thought with a pang of disappointment – and his stubby chin was scratching her cheek.

‘Looks familiar, huh?’ Henrik said in grating tones. He prodded her with what she feared might be a gun.

‘Expelliarmus!’ she shrieked, flinging open her arms, forcing Henrik to stumble backwards and crash onto the sodden pavement. The gun slipped from his grasp and spun out of reach.

Hermione muttered an Accio and snatched the gun.

It was lighter than she thought it should be and plasticky. She turned it over and over in her hands, a puzzled expression on her face. But of course, it was the spitting image of the Galinka from Space Force 7.

And yes, it was also an exact replica of the scanner.

‘This is a toy,’ she spluttered.

Henrik was staring at her, eyes round in wonder. ‘How did you do that? That was amazing?’

Hermione bridled with irritation. Really, she’d done something very stupid, even if it was instinctive self-defence, she thought sullenly. But there was no time to dwell on it. She had to behave like nothing out the ordinary had happened… Persuade Henrik he was suffering some kind of self-delusion, and then quietly obliterate him as fast as her wand would let her.

‘You threatened me with a toy gun!’ she spat furiously, sneering at the blonde Dane crumpled on the wet pavement before her.

‘You made the gun fly!’

‘You shouldn’t jump up on people like that!’

‘You talk to birds!’

‘I could have really hurt you!’
'You walk through walls and magic fucking umbrellas from nowhere!'

'I what?' Hermione screeched. 'What are you talking about?'

The guilty look on his face said it all.

'You were watching me?'

Henrik grunted in reply, levering himself off the ground. 'I didn’t know who the ginger guy was. You could be fucking CIA, for all I know.'

'CIA?' Hermione laughed.

Henrik nodded vigorously. 'Yup. That or some freaky voodoo chick.' He shook his head in disbelief. 'I honestly don’t know what’s worse.'

Hermione pursed her lips tightly. 'You’re deranged, Mr Thyssen.'

'I’m weirded out, that’s all,' Henrik argued, his thick blonde stubble bristling, blue eyes flashing. His rich warm tan appeared grey and pallid, in this cold, wintry light.

'Look,' Henrik continued. 'Is there somewhere we can go? Get out of this goddamned shitty weather.'

'I’ve got another appointment, so it’ll have to be quick,' Hermione said haughtily. 'We can talk in here,' she said, gesturing towards the comic book shop.

XXX

'I think you should know, Mr Thyssen, that our people couldn’t find anything about you; no bylines, no personal data… it’s like you don’t exist,' Hermione whispered. They were huddled behind a magazine rack by the shop window, hoping not to attract the shopkeeper’s attention. Hermione considered casting a covert Muffliato but couldn’t risk performing magic in front of Henrik again.

'I have numerous aliases, Hermione. I prefer to keep a low profile,' Henrik grinned amiably. 'You see, I’ve pissed off a lot of very powerful folks in my time; mainly drugs, gas, mining and chemical conglomerates.'

'Accusing them of poisoning the population?'

Henrik shrugged. 'Yeah… Pretty much that. Now I take sensible precautions. Look. Listen up. I’ve done my research. You seem like a nice person. Are you sure you know what - or who you’re mixed up with?'

'I take it you’re referring to Mr - I mean - Professor Malfoy?'

Henrik snorted with laughter. 'Yeah, your Professor who has absolutely no connection whatsoever with Oxford University.'

Hermione grabbed a comic book off the magazine stand they were hiding behind, unwilling to meet Henrik’s eye.

'Some girls might find a guy like that attractive. You know, fall for his lies. But you seem cannier than that.'
Hermione felt a rosy warmth of embarrassment suffuse her cheeks. She kept her face averted from Henrik’s searching gaze, blindly perusing the contents of her comic book.

Henrik stepped closer.

‘Your Draco Malfoy has zero academic credentials. He works for a world-renowned OTC pharmaceuticals manufacturer called Herb Healing. His company is now owned by Gilgad Inc, a multinational conglomerate specialising in manufacturing vaccines - amongst other things - with a reputation for some rather nasty scientific research.’

Hermione dared to look at Henrik now and was struck by the seriousness of his expression. ‘There’s some scary shit attached to that company, believe me.’

‘Why should I take anything you say seriously? You’re just a paranoid conspiracy theorist,’ Hermione sniffed. ‘I’m sure everything looks suspicious to you.’

Henrik vehemently shook his head. ‘It is suspicious. Either that or the most damnable bloody coincidence, that most of the recent mass deaths resulting in blue bodies…’ he paused, lowering his tone to a barely audible hiss, ‘occurred close to a Gilgad research centre.’

‘There was no facility of any kind belonging to Gilgad or Herb Healing in Santa Maria, Mr Thyssen, I can assure you,’ Hermione replied in a strong, firm voice, although her hand holding the comic book was trembling. ‘And seeing as you’ve been there yourself, and saw the town for what it is, I’m surprised you could make such a suggestion.’

‘Okay, not exactly in Santa Maria, but close enough, close to El Calafate.’

El Calafate, where Senor Asusto lived…. ‘And how do you know this?’

Henrik cackled. ‘Like I said, my own investigations. None of this can be found on Gilgad’s corporate website, that’s for sure.’ He paused, eyes twinkling. ‘After meeting yourself and Mr Malfoy, I decided to delay my little trip to Gabon. I made a few enquiries – which is when I found that Professor Malfoy was not quite who he said he was -’

‘- Which is why you texted me that same day.’

Henrik nodded. ‘The next morning, I returned to El Calafate. I soon found that Herb Healing had a distribution office in town.’

‘That’s hardly surprising. It’s a major household brand.’

‘I quite agree. Though it’s perhaps a little bizarre, seeing as deepest, darkest Patagonia’s pretty damned remote from any real population centre, but we’ll let that one go… especially since I made a far more crucial discovery.’ Henrik paused, ensuring Hermione was suitably attentive. ‘I then discovered that Gilgad Inc had a top-secret research laboratory some forty-five kilometres from El Calafate, tucked away in a disused estancia close to Puerto Bandera, on the shores of Lago Argentina.’

‘You sure?’

‘Absolutely. I went there myself. And believe me, having such a high-tech, high security establishment like that, in such a desolate place, means you definitely have something to hide! Puerto Bandera’s little more than a stop-off point for tourists visiting the Uppsala Glacier.’

‘Did you manage to get in? Have a look around?’
Henrik snorted with loud laughter. ‘You’ve got to be kidding, right? The place is like fucking Fort Knox.’

Why didn’t Draco know about this? Hermione wondered solemnly.

‘So, this got me delving deeper,’ Henrik continued. ‘I found out they’ve got labs or facilities of some kind in Vietnam, Egypt, New Zealand and Lvov, in The Ukraine, otherwise known as this Zametsky that your colleague called it. And as you know, there have been mass death incidents in all of these places over the past two years.’

Hermione prickled with nervous curiosity, accompanied by a sickly feeling.

‘There’s plenty more research facilities than that of course,’ Henrik said, reaching for a sheet of A4 paper scrunched into his coat’s inner breast pocket. He pulled it out with a loud crackling rustle and presented it to Hermione. ‘See...’ he said, jabbing at a long list of place-names scrawled in blue biro down the length of the page.

It was hardly scientific-looking, Hermione thought warily, but even so, she couldn’t help feeling that there was something honest about Henrik’s demeanour.

She quickly scanned the list. It was as Henrik said, but there were also facilities in Thailand, the USA, Spain, Israel and – even closer to home – England.

‘Reads like a hit list, doesn’t it?’ Henrik said in fatalistic tones.

‘That’s assuming Gilgad’s involved of course,’ Hermione said primly. ‘This doesn’t count as hard evidence.’ However, even as she spoke, a cold sense of dismay churned through her. If Gilgad was indeed involved in propagating Dark Flux, then that probably meant Draco too.

After all, Draco liked and praised Ephraim Golowitz. His business, his house, his whole life was in hock to Ephraim… Surely this meant he would be up to his eyeballs, in any crazed, genocidal scheme his father-in-law might be hatching?

Henrik vehemently prodded the list with his finger. ‘I’ll admit, there’s no hard evidence YET. But it’s my guess that Gilgad is testing some kind of drug, or a new form of biological or chemical warfare!’

Their close conversation was interrupted by a loud ‘harrumph,’ as a diminutive man in a tweed suit cleared his throat, in an attempt to distract them.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said in wheedling tones, ‘but could you keep the noise down a little?’ He rolled his eyes in the direction of a couple of customers engrossed in comic books, standing nearby.

Hermione promptly returned the comic book she’d been holding to its appropriate spot on the magazine rack and slipped Henrik’s list into her handbag.

‘Shall we go?’ she said, turning to Henrik.

XXX

The rain had stopped, and a faint glint of white winter sunshine was finally peeking through the dark clouds. Hermione realised she couldn’t head straight back to The Leaky Cauldron with Henrik in tow.

‘I actually meant it when I said I have an appointment,’ she said apologetically.
‘Yeah, I’ve got to be someplace else too,’ Henrik said. ‘But I want to keep in touch on this. I think you can help me out… We can help each other out,’ he added a little more diplomatically.

‘Of course.’ There was an awkward pause. ‘The red-headed man you saw earlier.’ Henrik nodded. ‘That’s my husband.’

‘Mr Weasley.’

Hermione smiled. ‘That’s right. Oh, and I already know Draco’s not a professor.’

‘So why are you working with him? He has to be a company stooge of some sort. Seems a bit weird to be investigating his own company’s work and dragging you along too, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes, yes it does,’ Hermione said pensively. ‘That’s if it is his company who’s responsible for these atrocities!’ she added hastily, in the spirit of fairness. ‘You never mentioned a Gilgad facility in Paris, did you?’

Henrik’s face puckered a little. ‘Damn. Paris. Forgot that one. Still, there’s got to be some kind of connection. I’ll go sniffing, see what I can dig up.’ His face brightened and he grinned a wide, beaming smile. Hermione found herself involuntarily admiring his teeth, which had to be the cleanest, straightest, whitest set of teeth she’d ever clapped eyes on.

‘Oh... And if you ever fancy explaining to me exactly how you pulled off that flying trick with the toy gun earlier, then I’m all ears!’ Henrik added.

‘You imagined it,’ Hermione said, strangely reluctant to obliviate him, which she knew was what she was supposed to do in these circumstances.

‘Of course I did,’ Henrik smirked.

XXX

Hermione’s head was so full of the conversation she had just shared with Henrik, she barely noticed that it was Harry who was coming towards her, arms outstretched to embrace her. Ron was ordering a bottle of firewhisky at the bar.

Harry immediately shook his head. ‘Sorry, Ron. I’ve only got an hour to spare at best.’ He turned to Hermione. ‘I’m here on business, unfortunately.’

‘Well, a couple of drinks won’t hurt now, will it?’ Ron asserted, returning his attention to Hannah at the bar.

‘Shall we sit down?’ Harry said, a little formally Hermione thought.

XXX

‘Okay, Hermione,’ Harry said, taking a deep breath. He’s nervous, Hermione thought anxiously. ‘I hate to ask you this...but what’s your connection with Draco Malfoy?’

‘With Malfoy?’ Hermione spluttered in feigned outrage. ‘You know me, Harry,’ she said, fixing him with a cool gaze. ‘I think he’s a snivelling little shit. Same as always.’

Harry momentarily flicked his eyes towards Ron who was guffawing loudly with Hannah at the bar, then back to Hermione.

Hermione felt she was struggling to breath under Harry’s penetrating stare.
‘Well, he’s sick…very sick actually.’

‘Where is he?’

‘Where’s who?’ Ron asked, settling himself down at their table, his hands full of glasses and three packs of Chocoballs.

‘Malfoy,’ Hermione said.

‘We picked him up yesterday in Paris,’ Harry added.

‘Paris? What’s he doing there?’ Ron said.

‘Well, that’s what a particularly officious Muggle homicide detective wanted to know too,’ Harry said with a wry smile. ‘Because, as it stands, Draco Malfoy is their number one suspect in a murder case.’

‘MURDER?’

‘At least he was…until we made sure the Muggle gendarmerie conveniently forgot that it was Malfoy who’d been found holding a dying woman in his arms by the banks of the River Seine.’

Harry took a deep swig of his drink. ‘She’d been horribly tortured,’ he added, sounding a little choked.

Hermione felt sick. ‘You think he killed her?’

Harry shrugged. ‘Don’t know what I think to be honest, though I need to find out. Whoever did this was a bloody maniac! She’d been tortured by magic, but Malfoy didn’t have a wand, which in itself was mighty peculiar.’

‘You’re telling me,’ Ron muttered darkly.

‘And he was delirious…ranting over and over about his wife Katya, and…other things. Rubbish really.’

Harry’s eyes briefly passed over Hermione’s face and he shuffled uncomfortably in his seat. He’d mentioned her, she knew it.

‘This corpse wasn’t his wife, then?’ Ron asked.

‘No. It was an older woman. We’ve identified her as a Svetlana Kerpin. We think she lived at an unplottable address. Probably in Paris. Unfortunately, there’s no chance of finding out exactly where any time soon. The bureaucracy’s going to drag a bit on this one.’

‘But the Muggles thought Draco was their man,’ Ron said.

‘The circumstantial evidence was overwhelming,’ Harry agreed.

‘What happens now?’

‘Well, Auror HQ wanted to move him to their own high security Medi-magic clinic somewhere in Belgium - it’s where the Azkaban lifers get treated if they’re ill - but I thought he was better-off staying at St. Gaspard’s, which means he’s been bound over into my care until he recovers.’

‘Special privileges for Malfoy?’ Ron chuckled. ‘You’re getting sentimental, Harry.’
‘Not at all,’ Harry said flatly. ‘St. Gaspard’s is the finest hospital in Europe, and I need him to recover soon. Without his testimony, my investigation’s screwed. All I’ve got to work on so far are his mindless ramblings. And the freakiest thing about those, is how desperate he is to talk to Hermione.’

Hermione’s heart beat a little faster.

‘He means in a legal capacity, surely?’ Ron said, eyes narrowed.

‘God knows. Right now he’s in an extremely weakened state and getting worse by the day. He’s pretty much comatose actually.’

‘Must be one helluva poison he got shot with,’ Ron said soberly.

Harry arched his eyebrows in surprise. ‘How do you know that?’

‘It was all over the news,’ Ron declared stoutly. ‘Wasn’t it, Hermione?’ he added, cramming a Chocoball into his mouth.

Harry gave Ron a long, shrewd look, then turned to Hermione, a grave expression on his face.

‘I’m really sorry to ask this of you, Hermione,’ he said hesitantly. ‘But in view of the circumstances – once Malfoy regains some form of consciousness - would you mind coming to Paris to help me talk to the guy? I think you might be our only hope of getting a modicum of sense out of him before it’s too late.’

‘Too late for what?’ Hermione asked. She could feel the colour draining from her face.

Harry eyed her quizzically. ‘Before he dies of course.’

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“SOUTHERN SUN” by OAKENFOLD

“KARMA POLICE” by RADIOHEAD

“FADE TO GREY” by VISAGE

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
More Matter With Less Art

Chapter Summary

Facing up to Draco, and Harry takes charge…

20. More Matter With Less Art

Ron was going away again. This time to Georgia, where the Tbilisi Tigers, a popular Quidditch team, were embroiled in a juicy betting scandal.

Hermione felt relieved. They’d done nothing but quarrel since Harry’s revelations about Draco.

‘I don’t want you anywhere near Draco Malfoy, even if it’s helping Harry out. Do you understand, Hermione?’ Ron insisted.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ she retorted, bridling at being told what to do.

‘He’s obviously flipped his lid. And now it looks like he’s killed this poor, old lady. He can’t be trusted!’

‘There’s no proof yet that he’s killed anybody,’ Hermione countered sternly. ‘He didn’t have a wand, remember?’

‘He could have killed her and then chucked his wand in the river.’

‘He didn’t have a wand in Argentina, either,’ Hermione argued, jadedly. They’d been over this, countless times already.

‘I don’t believe that for one instant,’ Ron said churlishly. ‘How could he have done anything?’

‘He lived like a Muggle.’

‘Like a Muggle? He hates Muggles. He was having you on, Hermione,’ Ron scoffed.

‘You’ve changed your tune! You couldn’t get enough of him before we went to Argentina!’

Ron eyed her suspiciously. ‘And you’ve changed too! You say you hate this guy with a passion, and yet since getting back from your little adventure together, all you’ve damned well gone about is poor sickly Draco and how he might be in danger!’ He clenched and unclenched his fists as he spoke. ‘Seems to me like he’s somehow got under your skin.’

Hermione flushed scarlet. ‘That’s – that’s preposterous, Ron!’

‘Of course, it fucking is!’ Ron yelled. ‘It’s bloody Draco Malfoy. Which makes it all the more DISGUSTING that you keep defending him.’

Hermione took a deep breath. ‘I’m not defending him. Just saying that we don’t know what’s actually happened.’

‘I don’t want to know,’ Ron said. ‘I want us to steer clear. The man means trouble. He always did.’
She felt like crying.

What if Ron was right? What if her original instincts of hatred and mistrust towards Draco had been right all along – in fact, worsened?

After all, if Henrik’s insinuations were correct and Gilgad was orchestrating Dark Flux attacks against Muggles and Muggle-borns, then that probably meant Draco was involved too. The tattoo on Draco’s arm might be fading, but at heart, he might still remain a Death Eater.

XXX

A week after Ron had left for Georgia, Harry finally arrived with news of Draco.

Hermione had been gazing out of her kitchen window, watching the antics of three incongruously over-sized crows, eyes glinting red in the weak wintry light, whisk over her back lawn in a flypast.

It had been the third time today; always accompanied by an unmistakeable fluttering of red at the corner of her eyes.

Oddly, despite everything that had happened, the crows didn't frighten her anymore. She was now convinced that Miguel had been telling the truth… Los Rojos didn’t intend to kill her.

And in a strange way, the crows were a welcome distraction from the dank depression she sometimes felt she was sinking into. Alone at home, with Ron away and the kids in school, she’d been forming a rather worrying addiction to large doses of Dr Ubbly's Oblivious Unction.

The moment Harry Apparated into the garden, the crows scuttled high into the elm trees and settled weightily on a branch, maintaining watchful sentry duty.

‘Where’s Ron gallivanted off to this time?’ Harry asked, giving Hermione a warm hug.

‘Georgia. For now.’ She smiled nervously.

‘Fancy a cup of tea?’ She reached for a floral cake tin. ‘Molly’s made some Rock Cakes.’

Harry’s eyes lit up. ‘Is it too early for a glass of wine?’

XXX

The mediwizards at St. Gaspard’s had chanced on a ‘highly unusual’ course of treatment for Malfoy, ‘nothing short of a miracle,’ Harry said, as he settled himself into Ron’s favourite armchair, carefully placing the large glass of Rioja Hermione had offered him on a side-table.

‘They reckon we can speak to him tomorrow, if that’s alright with you?’ he asked tentatively.

‘That should be fine,’ Hermione said, positioning herself on the sofa opposite Harry. Her mouth suddenly felt dry. Tomorrow was very soon.

Thankfully, Ron would still be away.

‘Malfoy will be furious when he finds out what saved him,’ Harry smirked. ‘MUGGLE BLOOD! When they gave him a transfusion using his own blood type – Epsilon - he very nearly died.’

‘But that doesn’t make sense.’

‘Yeah… Like most things in this case,’ Harry sighed. ‘All we really know is, Malfoy was shot with
a fatal pathogen, encased inside an enchanted pellet, which prevented his wound from healing.’

‘You mean a bio-weapon?’

‘One we’ve never seen before. Gimlott’s Disease.’

But of course, Hermione thought. The perfect riposte to a Malfoy… Jeroboam had been having a particularly cruel joke at Draco’s expense.

‘But Gimlott’s is a degenerative disease, Harry. It takes years to kill. Malfoy was weakening fast,’ Hermione said.

‘This is some kind of hybrid. It accelerates the process, meaning Malfoy’s symptoms were the same as someone with longer-term Gimlott’s.’ Harry pondered a moment, a sombre look on his face. ‘He was in a right bloody mess when we found him. He’d completely lost the plot and was so frail he could hardly stand. I’ve never liked the guy, but it was quite distressing, actually.’

Hermione desperately tried to dash the image from her mind. She needed a clear head to think this through.

She recalled Draco’s ludicrous fear that night in Buenos Aires. He’d convinced himself he was infected with Dark Flux. After all, there was that same eerie blue which afflicted the victims…

‘Can this new Gimlott’s strain affect anybody, Harry?’

‘No. Even in this form, it can only affect half-bloods apparently. Which means-’

‘That the rumours about Lucius Malfoy are all true.’

‘And Malfoy’s a half-blood.’

That was another chilling similarity, Hermione thought. Both Dark Flux and Gimlott’s affected specific sectors of the population… Dark Flux killed Muggles and Muggle-borns. Gimlott’s killed half-bloods.

Hadn’t Tony Goldstein once mentioned that Gimlott’s only affected Epsilon blood types? Like the Malfoys? And if that was further narrowed down to only Epsilon half-bloods, then maybe it was only the exclusive Epsilon+ blood group which was truly vulnerable?

As for Dark Flux affecting Muggle-borns… well, they were predominantly Gamma blood types.

This meant both Gimlott’s and Dark Flux targeted precise blood groups only. Yes, that had to be the key, underpinning factor.

So why did Dark Flux kill Muggles too?

They needed hard, scientific facts. They needed to speak to Tony Goldstein. Interestingly, he’d never actually DENIED there was a connection between Gimlott’s and Dark Flux when she’d asked him straight.

‘You know that Tony Goldstein is the world’s leading authority on Gimlott’s Disease, Harry?’

‘Yes – and he’s on holiday,’ Harry said with a wry smile.

‘Oh. That’s a shame.’ Or a convenience… ‘Can’t you recall him? This is urgent stuff!’
Harry shook his head. ‘No one knows where he is. Not even Padma. And Arcana have closed his
lab down in his absence. According to the new MD, Torquil Haast, there isn’t anyone else at
Arcana covering his field.’

‘He’s lying,’ Hermione said, a little more vehemently than she’d first intended.

‘Really?’ Harry said, surprised. ‘I’ve known Torquil for some years now. He was our neighbour in
Paris. He’s always struck me as a straight-up sort of bloke. His closeness to the Malfoys has given
us a lot of inside track into the dark artefacts market.’

‘Well, he failed to tell you that Tony has a colleague called Binta.’

Harry nodded thoughtfully. ‘Okay. I’ll see if I can track her down.’

‘And then there’s The Jeroboam Foundation. Tony used to work for them too.’

‘Their Communications department told us to talk to Tony.’ As he spoke, Harry fished out a silk
hanky from his pocket, removed his glasses, and brusquely cleaned the lens.

‘A quick Tergeo would have done just as well, Harry.’

‘There’s some things I still prefer to do myself,’ he said, flashing her a brief, warm smile. He
looked awfully tired, Hermione thought.

He sighed deeply. ‘Gimlott’s being used as a bio-weapon is very scary, Hermione. It’s a
particularly malicious way to try and kill someone. It’s not a quick death – that would probably be
kinder – but cruel and debilitating. It eats away at its victims. Like a cancer… No one deserves to
die like that. Not even Lucius and Draco Malfoy.’

Hermione shuddered; Harry’s words sent a chill through her. For all her confusion and angst about
Draco, the thought of him suffering like this plummeted her into cold despair.

‘But what makes it worse - what makes it terrifying - is this nagging feeling in the pit of my
stomach that there’s something I’m missing here,’ Harry continued in low, deliberate tones. ‘That
this is a small part of something even bigger and scarier.’

Harry held Hermione’s gaze.

‘My gut instinct tells me that Malfoy has important information. That he’s my way in. This was a
personally motivated attack. A message. I need to find out who shot him and why.’

Harry paused momentarily as if gathering his thoughts, but there was no mistaking the earnest,
slightly awkward expression on his face.

Oh God. This is it, Hermione thought. She’d known it was coming.

‘Now, Hermione, we both know that you know a lot more about this case than I do…’

‘Listen, Harry. It’s not what you think. Please ignore anything he might have said! He was
delirious!’ Hermione gabbled, standing up in sudden panic.

Harry held up his hand and gestured to her to sit back down again. ‘He’s said a lot of things,
Hermione. But nothing for you to worry about.’ He grinned. ‘I’m not a fool. I know how you feel
about him.’

Hermione sunk back onto the sofa. Her heart was pounding so loudly in her chest she was amazed
Harry couldn’t hear it.

‘I know that you hate his guts and always will. It must have been hell having to work alongside him. But I need your help, Hermione. I’ve tried to make sense of Malfoy’s hallucinatory rants, but I’m floundering. I need to know everything you know too.’

Hermione nodded, cowed a little by the unusually fierce intensity of Harry’s gaze, oddly reminiscent of Ron in one of his deepest fervours. Draco must have rambled on feverishly about a lot more than she’d first thought. Nothing short of a new Dark Lord and full-blown Muggle Armageddon could have wrought this effect on Harry.

‘You see, Hermione,’ Harry continued. ‘I’ve got a feeling that this might blow up to be a very big case, involving some very important wizards. And it’s going to take a lot of hard work to get to the bottom of it. And I want complete confidentiality – no leaks.’

‘Of course,’ she said, in a tight choked voice. She had the distinct feeling she knew where he was headed with this. ‘You never know who you can trust these days.’

‘Especially Aurors,’ Harry said, ruefully. ‘As far as the paperwork goes, Malfoy remains bound into my care until we can close the Svetlana Kerpin case. That’ll give us time to work on him.’

Hermione smiled wanly. ‘By US, you mean…’

‘Yes, US…though I suspect you might have more success handling Malfoy than me,’ Harry muttered, raising his eyebrows.

Hermione reddened. ‘What do you mean?’

Harry laughed. ‘Don’t worry about it, Hermione. The guy’s a bit mixed-up, that’s all.’ He took a deep swig of his glass of wine. ‘But seriously, will you work this case with me?’

Sod Ron, Hermione thought. This was too important. And Harry needed her.

‘Yes, Harry, I will.’

XXX

The Potters lived in a large, sumptuous penthouse on La Rue Vieuville, close to La Place Des Abbesses in Montmartre. Hermione always loved to visit. The rooms were spacious and bright, immaculately, if a little minimally, decorated – lots of cream and white and apposite splashes of luminous colour.

The penthouse terrace was an oasis of calm, brimming over with lush vegetation and tropical flowers, which Ginny carefully cultivated with warming spells. Up here, the sounds of Paris became a distant hum. A soft, trickling of water from a small stone fountain into a fishpond, stuffed with sleek golden and calico fish, added to the soothing ambience.

Hermione liked nothing more than sitting on a low wooden-slatted deckchair next to this pond, gazing out at the splendid view of Le Sacre Coeur, gleaming white and exotic-looking, perched on the hill just above them.

Once she’d told Harry just about everything that had transpired since the day she’d come home to find Draco talking to Ron in her living room, Harry had insisted she bring to Paris the box files Draco had given her and Ron, supposedly offering background information on The Jeroboam Foundation.
'You never know, we might find something useful. This feud between Saul Jeroboam and Ephraim Golowitz is rooted in the past.'

They decided that Rose and Hugo should come to Paris to visit their cousins for the weekend. Ginny was happy to mind them, whilst Hermione purportedly ‘assisted’ Harry, by analysing an intriguing collection of runes, which were proving crucial to one of his investigations.

It was the perfect cover story and allowed Hermione time to mull the contents of the box files, in quiet seclusion by the fountain. Meanwhile, Harry moved Draco from St. Gaspard’s to Auror HQ for questioning later that afternoon.

Hermione had been relieved to finally offload her experiences in Argentina to an Auror of Harry’s calibre – in particular her more recent suspicions of Gilgad Inc. She told him about her initial doubts, when Draco first divulged his sinister hypothesis that Jeroboam was harvesting Dark Flux to spawn a mass Muggle murder. Why had he approached Ron and not the Ministry of Magic? Harry agreed that this was very dubious behaviour, in light of the seriousness of Draco’s allegations.

She recounted how Los Rojos derailed Ron’s mission, meaning she became his reluctant substitute.

‘And it was definitely Jeroboam’s henchmen who shot Malfoy with Gimlott’s Disease?’

‘Yes. They then continued to menace us in Argentina,’ Hermione said. She didn’t spare Harry the sickening details.

‘But this Miguel Culebra – he claimed Jeroboam had no intention to actually kill you?’

‘That was the gist.’

‘And you say Miguel was murdered by the guy whose memory you saw, Senor Asusto?’

Hermione nodded.

‘But you didn’t see this Senor Asusto by Miguel’s boat, did you?’

‘No – Malfoy did.’

‘And you believe him?’

‘I’ve – I’ve no reason not to!’ Though it did seem odd, when she thought about it, that Draco had accused Asusto, when they were probably working for the same team…

Harry narrowed his eyes quizzically. ‘Tell me again, why do you now think this Asusto worked for Golowitz?’

‘I don’t know for certain. I first thought he must work for Jeroboam. But I now believe his modified memory was a ploy, to draw me in –’

‘- as an official witness to what Los Rojos were doing: to discredit Jeroboam.’

‘Yes. Ephraim Golowitz has made it pretty clear that’s what he wants from me; although I’m not sure how that would work,’ Hermione said.

‘So why did Senor Asusto kill Miguel?’ Harry asked, brow furrowed in confusion.

‘To silence him?’ Hermione replied, a little uncertainly.
'And where did this toy scanner come from?'

'Malfoy says it was stolen from one of Jeroboam’s warehouses.'

'My colleague at Auror HQ who contacted The Jeroboam Foundation earlier today, says they deny all knowledge of a Dark Flux scanner,’ Harry said. ‘What I don’t get, is why you didn’t realise the scanner was a fake.’

'We couldn’t open the case. It was enchanted so that it could only be used by Muggles.'

'That’s just weird,’ Harry said, clearly perplexed. ‘Blimey, Hermione! I’m surprised you of all people ever fell for this!’ he added, with a hollow laugh.

'Everything happened so fast, Harry!’

'So… we can assume Malfoy always knew it was a fake,’ Harry said flatly.

'Malfoy didn’t even know what the scanner looked like,’ Hermione said, glumly aware that this sounded like she was actually defending him… But it was true. There had been something genuinely artless about him.

'Well, we’ll see if we can jog Malfoy’s memory about the origins of this scanner, as it pre-dates your jaunt to Argentina. At the moment, he’s claiming complete memory loss, dating from the night he got shot in London,’ Harry said in scathing tones. ‘And it might be useful for you to contact this Muggle, Henrik. We need to see if he’s made any other startling discoveries about Gilgad that Malfoy conveniently forgot to tell you; anything to bolster our case.’

'I’ve already done some research of my own,’ Hermione said, producing a print-out, which she gave to Harry. ‘I used my Mum’s computer at the surgery to go on the Internet. It took me some time, but I eventually found Muggle news reports supporting all of Henrik’s allegations of unexplained sudden deaths close to Gilgad facilities.’

Harry studied the print-out. ‘But we still don’t know if these facilities actually exist. If they do, this is compelling evidence. We need Henrik – or Malfoy – to show us where they are. Can I keep this?’ he said.

'I made a copy,’ Hermione said.

'Good. Look through the files and see what you can find,’ Harry said.

He’d developed a very authoritative manner, Hermione thought, a little uneasily. Though it was hardly surprising, considering his status and reputation.

She spent a good couple of hours rooting through the box files but found nothing but dusty piles of company reports, some technical data pertaining to well-known Medi-magic products and a few well-worn newspaper clippings.

Was there anything useful in here at all? Any clues?

Finally, though, she got to see Saul Jeroboam himself.

There were just two photos. In one faded Daily Prophet shot from some years ago, which accompanied a gushing celebration of his philanthropic achievements, Jeroboam seemed a shrunken figure – barely conspicuous in an oversized armchair. His small pale face peeked timidly through a black, bushy beard.
The second photo was much more interesting, Hermione realised, as this depicted The Geneva Group – the last known bunch of scientists to legally research Dark Flux, some thirty years ago.

Here was a much younger, more upright version of Jeroboam. His beard was less voluminous, exposing a self-assured leer and deep-set jet-black eyes. Three of his four companions, leaning against a table behind them, were enjoying what appeared to be a rip-roaring joke.

There was no mistaking the youthful, handsome face of Ephraim Golowitz, throwing his head back to guffaw with laughter. His hair was long and unkempt, and, to Hermione’s surprise, he was wearing ripped jeans under his barely buttoned robe. Standing next to Ephraim was a slightly built man, grinning toothily at the camera. A slim, young woman in a smart black robe, with dark curly hair, was leaning against him, her hand draped across the back of his shoulders. Her head was tilted back, much like Ephraim’s. Unfortunately, her face had been scrubbed clean off the page, which instantly sparked Hermione’s curiosity.

There was something strangely telling, in how she held her body close to the grinning man, whilst gently craning her neck backwards to meet Ephraim’s twinkling gaze. Something intimate…

And who was the tall, spindly character lurking at the back of the room? The photo was faded, leaving only a vague impression of a thin, mournful face and a long, scraggy beard, which extended almost to the floor.

Hermione rifled again through the newspaper articles, scanning for names.

She soon found something promising.

The Swiss Ministry of Magic had credited The Geneva Group with an award for their ground-breaking investigations into ‘Magical Leptons.’ Leptons? But surely that was a Muggle term? Something to do with Quantum Theory…quarks, neutrinos…that sort of thing.

Saul Jeroboam had a particular mention for heading up the project, followed by Reynaldo and Anna Cornec, with Ephraim Golowitz named as a junior researcher.

The shadowy figure behind them was unnamed.

Reynaldo and Anna Cornec…and Ephraim. Was her imagination running riot? The married woman and the junior researcher…though it seemed incredible that a man of Ephraim’s stature and power had ever been anything ‘junior.’ How he must have hated it, Hermione thought.

‘Hermione?’ Ginny’s clear voice rang out. ‘I’m taking the kids to the park. Do you fancy coming along?’

Hermione had been so engrossed, she hadn’t noticed Ginny’s emergence onto the terrace. She checked her watch. Ginny had been watching the kids for over two hours. She deserved a break.

‘Yes – that would be nice,’ Hermione smiled, shoving the papers back into the box file. She’d exhausted their usefulness anyway, and a walk and some time with the children would hopefully take her mind off the fact that she had to face Draco later that afternoon.

XXX

Square de La Rue Burq was a quiet, leafy park, nestling in a corner of a narrow residential street, just a few minutes walk from the Potters’ home.

Rose squealed with excitement as her cousins, James and Albus, chased her around the playground,
whilst Hugo attempted to lure Lily, Ginny’s youngest, into the sandpit, to make castles. Hermione felt a little sorry for him. For all his efforts, Lily adamantly refused, preferring to stick close to her mother’s side.

She was a funny, solemn little thing, Hermione often thought. She was a pale child with ethereal blue eyes. She had her mother’s vivacious red hair, but her face lacked Ginny’s handsome warmth. Ginny’s boys were much more rugged and earthy in comparison. James was particularly good-looking, with a strong, tall physique. Hermione suspected he would prove to be a fine Quidditch player. Albus was more slightly-built, with darker, more brooding features, but blessed with a wonderful, winning smile, which never failed to charm. Rose was particularly fond of Albus.

‘This was a good idea,’ Ginny said, grinning at the children. She looked remarkably well, Hermione thought. Her hair glowed like molten copper in the sunlight. She was wearing a jade green gown, which perfectly complimented her colouring. ‘Maybe you should come and stay more often, now that Ron’s got his big case!’ she said in mocking tones.

‘Now that I’m not working—’

Ginny flushed a little. ‘That as well.’

‘It’s tricky during term-time,’ Hermione said.

‘We have a brilliant tutor. Arnaud. He comes to the apartment every weekday morning to teach the kids. I’m sure Rose and Hugo would fit in nicely.’

Hermione shook her head. ‘Thanks, but they enjoy school.’

They lapsed into slightly awkward silence; something that happened more often than she liked to admit when she was with Ginny.

‘Mind you,’ Hermione said, rushing to fill the void in their conversation, ‘this is a wonderful place to live.’ The trees were already greening in readiness for spring, and the air felt crisp and revitalising, despite their location at the heart of a grand, bustling metropolis.

‘We used to live on this street, actually,’ Ginny said, nodding towards a clean, white block of apartments, facing the park. ‘La Rue Burq is a bit of a wizarding enclave.’

Hermione pricked with sudden curiosity. She’d never visited the Potters during their first sojourn in Paris, as they’d only been here for a couple of months, and Harry was away for work during most of that time.

She gazed up at the white apartment block. This was where the 2008 Dark Flux outbreak had occurred.

‘But doesn’t this place hold bad memories for you?’ she said in hushed tones, hoping that Lily wasn’t listening in.

‘Not anymore; though it was tough at the time.’ A ripple of sadness passed momentarily across Ginny’s face. ‘I was so frightened, especially with Harry on assignment and Lily due any day. But everyone was so supportive.’

‘Harry said you knew Torquil Haast?’

Ginny beamed. ‘Ah yes, dear Torquil. He was so sweet. Always on hand to help me, which was brilliant, seeing as I was unwell for most of my third trimester.’ She lowered her voice. ‘It was poor
Torquil who found the first body.’

‘Who was that?’

Ginny indicated a lower floor window. ‘Marie-Louise Lefebvre. She was such a sweetheart.’

‘I once met a man who loved her,’ Hermione said sadly, recalling Jonas Arbuthnot.

‘Really?’ Ginny said. ‘I don’t remember a boyfriend.’ She pointed again at the building. ‘You see
the balcony with the geraniums? That was our flat. The Haasts were across the landing.’

‘Haasts?’

‘Yes. Torquil has a twin brother. Selwyn. He was very shy. A workaholic. We rarely saw him. He
was always working in his lab. He’s the guy who found a cure for Type B Vanishing Sickness and
he also pioneered hangover-free sleeping draughts – so a good egg all-round,’ Ginny said
enthusiastically. She pointed to the apartment above. ‘That’s the Sezignacs. They still live there. I
was fairly close to Chantal Sezignac; she was pregnant too.’

‘Did they lose anybody?’

‘Sadly, yes. They were badly hit. Chantal’s brother-in-law was a Muggle. He was visiting at the
time. And there was a Muggle workman, fixing tiles on their balcony. No one noticed he was dead
for some hours!’ she said, shaking her head. ‘Little Evander was born here a week before Lily…
literally around the time of the outbreak or gas leak, or whatever the hell it was that happened, so
you can imagine how hellish it was for them. A new baby and multiple deaths on their doorstep!
And if I remember correctly, Evander’s grandad, who lived with them, was sick too. He later died
of Gimlott’s, poor sod.’

‘Sounds awful...’

‘Yes, it was all very traumatic. Still is...’ Ginny leaned closer to Hermione, and whispered in her
ear, to ensure Lily didn’t catch what she was saying. ‘The little boy... He’s a bit strange.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He refuses to talk.’

XXX

Gaining entry to Auror HQ was a ludicrously complicated process. It involved walking clockwise
three times around Le Square du Vert Galant, a tiny teardrop-shaped park which jutted into the
River Seine close to Pont-Neuf, before sitting on a particular bench, crossing one’s arms and legs,
and reciting ‘La Belle Gabrielle’ – forwards and then backwards. Hermione wondered if such odd
behaviour might attract more undue Muggle attention than was strictly necessary.

Maybe it was a French thing? Hermione mused, as she underwent further security checks once
inside Auror HQ – which was effectively an underground bunker.

There was a famously over-complicated access system to the French Ministry of Magic at Place
Vendome. This required three glasses of claret, drunk in quick succession at the bar of the Hotel
Meurice on Rue de Rivoli, followed by a sprint down Rue Castiglione to Place Vendome, a hair-
raising zig zag march across the grand square, obviously avoiding any Muggle cars, taxis and
motorcycles in the process, then a dash to the ornate lobby of the Ritz-Carlton hotel, where an
entrance to the Ministry could be found behind a concealed mirror.
This entire sequence of events had to be achieved in just twelve minutes flat, otherwise the process had to be started all over again.

Hermione often wondered how French wizards ever managed to get any work done, considering so many of them were ferociously drunk by the time they arrived at the Ministry. One moment’s dillydallying or a tricky pedestrian crossing, could mean the difference between a fair day’s work and a hangover.

‘Okay,’ Harry said abruptly, ‘we’re in here.’ He ushered Hermione into an interrogation room.

It was a forbidding place: a small, claustrophobic box, comprising stark grey walls, no windows, and a solitary neon-strip light hovering above a long wooden trestle table. A single chair was positioned on one side of the table facing two others. A fourth chair, reserved for Hermione, was tucked into a corner. Her job, Harry told her, was not to question Draco this time - but to observe.

‘I suspect your being here will throw him off-kilter,’ Harry said confidently.

She instantly felt swamped by a cold, sickly dread.

She’d managed to suppress her nerves all day, but that wasn’t possible anymore.

In just a few minutes, she’d be face-to-face with Draco.

‘Does he know I’ll be here?’ she asked tremulously.

‘Yes, he does,’ Harry said. ‘I should warn you. He’s not a happy bunny.’

‘What – what did he say?’

‘You really want to know?’ Harry said, in cool, arch tones.

‘I don’t know. Maybe not.’

‘Look, he’s just being typical cocky Malfoy motor mouth. Nothing we can’t handle. I guess he didn’t like being accused of international terrorism…’

‘You did what?’ Hermione said, aghast. ‘I thought this was an information-gathering exercise, not a bloody inquisition!’

‘I decided to go in heavy; to scare him,’ Harry said in a blasé voice that set Hermione’s teeth on edge. ‘I pointed out that the maximum penalty for such a crime is the Dementor’s kiss and life in Azkaban!’ he added, with considerable relish.

‘But he’ll think I’ve accused him!’

‘You pretty much did, Hermione.’

‘No, Harry! I gave you information,’ she corrected in severe tones.

The door suddenly clunked open and an attractive, slim-waisted black woman, in a tight-fitting Muggle trouser-suit entered the room. She introduced herself to Hermione as Francoise Dupont, then took the seat next to Harry, pulling out a roll of parchment and a quill.

‘Today’s interview is just an ice-breaker,’ Harry said to both of them, straightening and then re-straightening the files on the table in front of him. ‘We want to see how Malfoy responds to some basic questions about his trip to Argentina.’ Then to Francoise, ‘If he’s being evasive, don’t hold
back.’ He grinned at Hermione. ‘Francoise is a highly skilled Legilimens.’

‘Isn’t this all a little…heavy-handed?’ Hermione fumed.

Her pulse was racing at breakneck speed. She desperately needed to compose herself, only to find her stomach lurching queasily, as the door swung open and Draco was escorted into the room by two burly guards, who then stood against the back wall.

Hermione had trained her face to be devoid of feeling when they met again, but when the moment finally came, she found she couldn’t look at him at all, preferring to focus on how her hands were clasped so tightly together in her lap, her knuckles had gone white.

She didn’t have to stare Draco in the face to know that he was mad at her. His voice alone, affirming his name was Draco Malfoy, and that his address was Malfoy Manor in Folborough, Wiltshire, England, reverberated through her.

She felt clammy and warm, as though the plain grey walls of the interrogation room were closing in on her like a coffin.

Harry had formally started the interview, explaining why he was investigating Gilgad Inc and Malfoy in particular. How certain information had come to light that implicated them in engineering deadly outbreaks of Dark Flux.

‘You’re wasting your time, Potter,’ Draco sneered.

‘I don’t think so, Malfoy. I want you to tell me about your recent trip to Argentina.’

‘I’ve nothing to say,’ Draco said, spitting out his words angrily. ‘You can’t make me tell you anything! I know my rights.’

Harry sniggered. ‘This isn’t a Muggle police station, Malfoy. You have no rights.’

'I'm sick,' Draco said. 'Got memory loss. Very bad case.'

‘That’s not what the mediwizards at St. Gaspard’s told me this morning. Your neurological faculties are safe and sound. All memories intact.’

This was news to Hermione.

She finally braved a sidelong glance at Draco, only to find that once she’d finally steeled herself to look, she could barely take her eyes off him.

He looked bewitchingly well for a man who’d almost died. Muggle blood must suit him, she thought. His skin glowed with health; his eyes were bright and alert. He’d lost the strained sharpness that seemed to afflict his features when he was particularly tired.

He was wearing the same Muggle clothes she’d last seen him wearing in Buenos Aires – basically jeans and a shirt – but they looked tatty. There was even a gaping rip in his shirt-sleeve. Hermione was surprised no one had bothered to fix this at the hospital during his stay - it would have been the work of a moment – as the clothes looked freshly laundered. Her hand itched to whip out her wand and do it herself.

Harry was certainly right about Draco’s ‘cocky’ routine. He was slunk back in his chair, arms folded, head tilted to one side, away from the corner where Hermione was seated, eyeing Harry and Francoise with pitying disdain.
However, the more she stared, the more she realised that his defiant posture, the icy gleam of his eyes, the petulant curl of his lips, wasn’t really cockiness at all.

More like sheer, cold-blooded fury.

Hermione resolutely focused her attention away from Draco to Francoise, who was sounding extremely exasperated.

‘You do realise, Mr Malfoy, that non-compliance with our investigation into this matter might be construed against you?’

‘She’s serious, Malfoy,’ Harry said in gentler tones. ‘We don’t like resorting to Veritaserum.’

‘How very sporting of you,’ Draco snarled.

‘But,’ Harry continued determinedly, ‘in view of the gravity of this situation, we might have to.’

Draco tightly pursed his lips, directing the full glare of his unflinching gaze on Harry.

‘Just go ahead, Potter.’

His eyes flashed momentarily in Hermione’s direction. She instantly looked away, heart racing. ‘I’ve got nothing to hide,’ he drawled.

‘I’d prefer a frank and voluntary exchange of information,’ Harry said calmly. ‘We just want to know why you visited Argentina – in particular, a town in Patagonia called Santa Maria. We want to know if your company, Gilgad Inc, which has a high security research facility very close to Santa Maria, was involved in any shape or form in the outbreak of Dark Flux which occurred there last November. We also want to know why you were transporting a plastic toy gun, which you claimed was a device designed to detect Dark Flux. And we would like to know if you recognised whoever it was who shot you with a deadly dose of Gimlott’s Disease.’

Draco was stony-faced, seemingly implacable. A supreme effort of concentrated stillness, Hermione thought to herself. Maybe he was aware Francoise was a Legilimens? Perhaps he was having to practice Occlumency, to prevent her probing his mind?

‘We particularly and most urgently need to know, Malfoy, if another Dark Flux attack is imminent – there, in Santa Maria, or elsewhere,’ Harry said.

Draco remained blank and inscrutable.

Nobody spoke for what seemed to Hermione like an eternity. She felt deafened by the swoosh and roar of blood in her ears, the shushing sound of her own breathing which seemed to fill the room.

‘Honestly, Potter,’ Draco suddenly said, his dark, sardonic tones piercing the silence. ‘I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.’

Francoise and Harry exchanged weary looks. Francoise shook her head.

Harry half-turned to face Hermione. ‘Is there anything you’d like to add, Hermione?’

She flushed crimson, hotly aware that the full force of Draco’s gaze was now pointed directly at her.

‘Yes, Mrs Weasley, is there anything you’d like to add?’ Draco said, with a taunting smirk.
Harry snapped his attention angrily back to Draco. ‘That’s enough, Malfoy,’ he said in clipped tones. ‘We’ll resume this discussion later.’ He gathered up his files and stood up, beckoning to the guards to come and reclaim their prisoner.

XXX

Hermione waited for Harry in the foyer. She was feeling a little faint. The interrogation room had been stuffy and confining and she craved fresh air.

Harry came bounding towards her. ‘Okay, that’s dealt with Malfoy.’

‘Are you keeping him here?’

‘No, I…’ he quickly scanned the hustle and bustle of the lobby, then leant in closer to Hermione. ‘I’ve had him removed from here to safe custody.’

‘Surely this is as safe as it gets, Harry?’ Hermione said, eyeing the granite grey walls of Auror HQ with distaste.

Harry raised his eyebrows sceptically.

‘Don’t trust anyone,’ he mouthed. ‘Now, Hermione,’ he said in a louder, breezier tone, pointing to another door she hadn’t noticed before, which led to a spiral staircase heading even further into the dark bowels of the earth. ‘I’ll need to take some memories from you.’

‘Memories? Why?’

Harry blinked rapidly in confusion. ‘As thorough and informative as your account of everything has been, there might still be something you’ve overlooked. You look green, Hermione. Are you feeling alright?’ Harry’s eyes clouded with concern.

‘I’m fine,’ Hermione smiled. She pressed her hand tightly against her lips and closed her eyes, aware of a swirling sensation swooping through her.

‘What - what memories in particular?’ she asked breathlessly.

XXX

Hermione and Harry exited Auror HQ via a small, inconspicuous doorway leading onto Quai des Orfevres, which ran alongside the wide, grey River Seine. From here it was a short walk to the Hotel Danemark, close to Place St Michel.

‘What did you say we’re doing at this hotel?’ Hermione asked Harry.

Harry flicked a quick glance over his shoulder. ‘You’ll see.’

‘You need to give me more than that, Harry,’ Hermione snapped. ‘I’m getting a bit pissed off at being bossed about like one of your bloody minions!’

Harry gave her a sharp look. ‘I’m just doing my job, Hermione.’ He hooked his arm through hers, drawing her closer. ‘I’ll explain everything later,’ he added in softer tones.

However, all Hermione’s peevishness swiftly dissipated as they crossed Le Pont de St Michel. To her left was a glorious view of Notre Dame’s genteel façade, basking in the winter sunshine, like a giant, magnificently plumed, golden owl, peeking through the trees at them. To her right, a series of bridges spanning the river arched into the distance. Bateaux Mouches gently cruised the
greenish-grey waters of the Seine, and the tree-lined quaysides, flanked by handsome cream buildings, were thronged with colourful crowds of Muggles, browsing a plethora of bookstalls. Hermione’s heart couldn’t help but beat a little quicker at the sight of it all.

They soon approached a vast fountain centrepiece; a dark bronze archangel astride a fallen man, which commandeered a junction. Two roads bifurcated here on either side of the fountain. They took the road to the right and within moments had arrived at a small square – little more than an oversized pavement - hosting a crop of souvenir shops and popular bistros, customers spilling onto outside tables despite the fresh, chill temperatures. They headed down a narrow street on their immediate right, which was lined with fast food joints, ice cream parlours and more cafes.

After just a hundred yards, Harry steered her right again into an even narrower street, barely able to fit the width of a modest-sized car. An Irish pub, decked out in green and Guinness signs sat squarely on the corner. Hermione glanced up at the name of the road – Rue Git-le-Coeur – noting that the Hotel Danemark was just next-door.

‘Here we are,’ Harry mumbled, leading the way inside.

The lobby was a feast of candy-striped antique chairs, dark lacquered furniture, and a resplendent Persian rug. A number of Medieval-looking heavy-browed portraits gawped down at them from the walls. For the briefest moment, Hermione felt convinced, that one of these portraits – a surly looking man sporting an ostentatious hat and a richly jewelled ermine cape – had actually winked at her.

She turned to Harry.

‘Yes… a lot of wizards come to stay here,’ he murmured, aware that a noisy pack of tourists was congregating by the reception desk.

Hermione sighed deeply. ‘Let me guess.’ They stepped into the lift, which surged upwards. ‘Is this where you're keeping Malfoy?’

‘It is,’ Harry said, with a cheery smile. ‘Now that we’ve satisfied officialdom with a formal interview, I thought it’d be easier getting information out of him in more salubrious - and secretive - surroundings.’

‘But surely this can’t be protocol?’

‘Well, I tend to make my own rules around here, to be honest. And like I said, I want to handle this affair quietly and safely.’

'I don't think a three star tourist hotel counts as secure custody, Harry.'

The lift shuddered to a halt and Harry clicked open the door. They stepped out into a long corridor leading to a single door.

‘This floor is private,’ Harry assured her, ‘and fitted up with more wards than Malfoy Manor.’

She gazed at the door ahead of them.

‘Is he alone?’

‘No. Francoise is babysitting him until we arrive. She’ll be our backup at HQ. Otherwise, from now on, it’s just us.’ He gave her a keen look of warning. ‘Hermione. It pains me to say this. But you can’t breathe a word of any of this to Ron.’
‘Of course, Harry.’ That suited her perfectly…but still… ‘Do - do you think he can’t be trusted, then?’

‘It’s not him I’m worried about,’ he said cryptically, through gritted teeth.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“STEREO” by ADALINE

"BLUE JEANS" by LANA DEL REY

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Draco makes a big decision…

21. Doubt Thou The Stars Are Fire

Draco’s hideout at the Hotel Danemark was a cramped, one-bedroom apartment with a small cream-tiled kitchenette abutting a narrow living area. A door opened from the kitchenette onto a bedroom. A ruffled burgundy bed-cover had half-tumbled from the bed to the floor, pooling in thick folds onto a pale salmon-pink carpet; the same colour-scheme had been applied throughout the apartment to remarkably drab effect.

Francoise was seated alone on a stiffly-upholstered, grey chaise longue. Compared to the upright, efficient functionary she had presented just a few hours ago, she seemed droopy and faded.

‘Where’s Malfoy?’ Harry asked.

She pointed with her wand at a closed door directly ahead.

‘He says the décor makes him feel sick.’

The sound of a toilet flush resounded throughout the apartment. Francoise leaped to her feet, grabbing her handbag and wand.

‘I’ll leave you with Mr Sunshine,’ she said in ironic tones, casting them a pitying glance as she left.

Harry sealed the door behind her and casually replaced Francoise on the chaise longue, stretching out and easing his feet onto a black lacquered coffee table in front of him.

The bathroom door swung open and Draco burst into the room with explosive force. ‘Even the fucking taps don’t work properly,’ he griped, drawing to an abrupt halt at the sight of a beaming Harry Potter.

Harry serenely gestured to an armchair facing him.

‘Listen, Potter, I’m not in the mood for any more of your crap!’ Draco snapped.

‘Please sit down, Malfoy.’ But Draco continued to bristle with hostility. ‘I won’t bite,’ Harry simpered sarcastically.

He nodded to Hermione, who stood frozen to the spot by the entrance door to the right of Draco.

‘And neither will she.’

Draco cast a glance in Hermione’s direction. A dark scowl clouded his features. He sank slowly into the armchair.

Hermione took a deep breath and advanced deeper into the room, aware that both men were
watching her. She sought out another chair in vain and finally plumped for the chaise longue alongside Harry. It was short and narrow and as she was immediately knocking elbows with Harry, she quickly enchanted it to a more commodious size.

‘That’s more like it,’ she tittered nervously.

‘Excellent. We wouldn’t you want to feel uncomfortable now, would we?’ Draco said in cutting tones.

Hermione braced herself to look him boldly in the face, instantly locking eyes with him in a way that made her insides lurch and her cheeks redden.

This was hopeless, she thought to herself. She was a grown woman, not some teenage chit with a crush.

‘This will be your home for the foreseeable future, Malfoy,’ Harry said smoothly, oblivious to Hermione’s emotional ruckus. ‘At least until Auror HQ is officially convinced you didn’t kill Svetlana Kerpin.’

Draco’s eyebrows shot up in amazement.

‘I thought YOU thought I was a fucking terrorist,’ he scoffed.

‘I very much doubt you’re anything of the sort, Malfoy,’ Harry drawled. ‘I doubt you’ve got the balls to kill anyone – not even a defenceless old lady like Svetlana Kerpin.’

‘So, what’s with this farce, then?’ Draco complained, gesticulating wildly at their surroundings. ‘Aren’t you the big gun at Auror HQ these days? If you think I’m innocent, just let me go and be done with it. I need to get home to my son.’

‘I can’t let you go. You have crucial information. I need to keep close tabs on you,’ Harry said, his lips set in a tight, hard line. Draco fisted his hands in his hair in frustration.

‘You should know, Malfoy, that this apartment is secured with wards so powerful, any attempt to slip the net and you’ll be splinched to a pulp. You can only leave this place in the company of Hermione or myself.’

‘Why Hermione?’ Draco sneered, looking her up and down, lip curled in distaste. ‘She’s not even an Auror. She was an unemployed do-gooding pen-pusher the last time I checked.’

‘She’s working with me,’ Harry said firmly.

‘Oh…and I thought she was working with me.’ Draco shook his head at her in mock disappointment. ‘Fickle little thing, isn’t she? You’d better watch your back, Potter!’

‘Shut up, Malfoy!’ Hermione shrilled, unable to contain the frustration boiling up inside of her.

‘Ah, she speaks!’ Draco jeered. ‘And there I was thinking you’d been Langlocked! Or were you just struck dumb in my presence?’

‘Don’t flatter yourself,’ Hermione said heatedly.

Harry stood up. ‘Where’s the minibar? I had it stocked with butterbeers.’

Draco looked askance at a line of empty bottles on the kitchenette worktop.
‘Those butterbeers?’

Harry frowned.

‘I was a little thirsty…I’d conjure one up for you, but I don’t seem to have a wand…’ Draco added.

‘For Merlin’s sake,’ Hermione growled, re-filling the bottles with a quick swish of her wand. ‘Pass me one too please, Harry.’

Harry distributed the butterbeers and re-settled himself on the chaise longue, facing Draco.

‘Here’s the thing, Malfoy, in return for having saved you from the delights of a Muggle prison, I’m going to need your help.’

‘Whatever you want, the answer’s NO.’

Harry visibly tensed but ploughed on regardless. ‘As we discussed earlier, we’re worried your father-in-law’s firm, Gilgad Inc., has found a way to weaponise and disseminate Dark Flux.’

‘I meant what I said, Potter. I KNOW NOTHING.’

‘Look, Malfoy,’ Harry persisted patiently. ‘You’ve nothing to fear here. You can speak to us in complete confidence.’

‘Then what was the point of the fucking hardball interrogation routine at Auror HQ?’ Draco barracked. ‘Showing off for the ladies, were you?’

A fleeting rush of irritation threatened to sink Harry’s mild-mannered demeanour, but he quickly recovered.

‘I had my reasons,’ he said in calm, measured tones. ‘And it’s probably not a bad thing that you protested so fiercely.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘If you’re to spy against your father-in-law, it’s important he still trusts you, that’s all.’

Draco blanched. ‘You WHAT? You want me to SPY for you?’ He erupted into loud, snorting laughter.

Harry nodded, a confident glint in his eye.

‘No way, Potter. You’ve got it all wrong! Ephraim’s no terrorist. He’s been trying to stop that kind of thing-’

‘To stop Jeroboam getting hold of Dark Flux and killing loads of Muggles? I already know that story,’ Harry said wearily.

Draco flashed Hermione a sickly grin. ‘Exactly. You don’t need me to tell you about it when you’ve got smarty-pants Granger on board.’

Harry rolled his eyes. ‘It’s thanks to Hermione that we might be closer to the real truth about this matter.’

‘And Henrik,’ Hermione interjected.
‘Henrik?’ Draco exclaimed. ‘That dodgy Danish guy?’

‘Yes, Malfoy. Henrik did some homework on Gilgad. Apparently, your company has top-secret research facilities close to just about every deadly Dark Flux outbreak in recent years.’ Hermione plucked her copy of Henrik’s list from her handbag and pushed it across the table towards him. To her embarrassment, her hand was trembling.

Alongside each site location mentioned by Henrik she’d neatly compiled a description of the place, date and death toll of each corresponding sudden mass death incident, based on her Internet research.

Draco cast a perfunctory glance at the list before him and then pushed the parchment back towards Hermione.

‘This isn’t proof of anything,’ he said. ‘I haven’t heard of any of these sites. I doubt they even exist.’

‘You’re absolutely positive, Malfoy, YOU personally know nothing about a Gilgad research lab at Puerto Bandera?’ Hermione aimed to sound as dispassionate as possible but was acutely conscious that her voice quavered a little as she spoke.

‘Where the hell is Puerto Bandera?’ Draco demanded. He seemed genuinely mystified.

‘About sixty kilometres from Santa Maria,’ she said, easing the parchment back to his side of the table. ‘Look again,’ she pleaded.

Draco slapped the parchment away. ‘For fuck’s sake, Hermione, can’t you see this is obviously something that little Danish twat has cobbled together to make me look bad? He never liked me.’

‘Draco. Please….’

Draco groaned dramatically, snatching at the parchment, which he then studied, a concentrated expression on his face.

‘Just imagine for one moment that this list is all true,’ Hermione said. ‘It’s too much of a coincidence, don’t you think?’ She leaned across the coffee table to point out the relevant parts of the document. ‘As you can see, this data tallies with what Henrik told us at Perito Moreno….’ Her hand accidentally touched his. A stinging jolt of awareness shot through her. She instantly retreated to the safety of the chaise longue. ‘All these deaths - as I’m sure you recall - resulted in blue corpses.’

Draco was curiously still, eyes fixed on the list before him.

‘As for the scanner,’ Hermione continued in earnest tones, fighting to ignore a tight, strangulated feeling in her chest as she spoke, ‘the scanner we were supposed to use to detect Dark Flux… Well, here’s the scanner.’ Draco looked up as she fished the toy Galinka she’d bought for Hugo, from out of her handbag.

‘It’s from a Muggle TV show. Space Force 7.’

Draco reluctantly picked up the toy gun and slowly examined it. He pressed the FIRE button a couple of times.

‘You’ve got to be kidding me. You see this as proof? Proof of what?’ He glared at Hermione, then flung the Galinka contemptuously aside. She automatically flinched as the Galinka skidded across
‘Is it truly beyond the realms of possibility that Jeroboam simply made his scanners to look like this? And for all we know, your beloved Henrik is one of Jeroboam’s spies,’ he added, his voice laced with spite.

‘Where’s the scanner now?’ Harry asked.

Draco shrugged. ‘I lost it.’

‘In Argentina?’

‘No.’ Draco flicked a glance at Hermione and seemed reluctant to continue.

‘Where, then?’ Harry pressed.

‘In America,’ he grunted, grudgingly.

‘What the hell were you doing there?’ Hermione asked.

‘I was in Hexmouth… Maine,’ he said, looking a little sheepish. ‘Visiting the Hexmouth Witches.’

‘The who?’ Harry asked Hermione.

‘Famous seers,’ she said scornfully, ‘or so they claim.’

‘They were recommended to me by our mutual friend, Dolores,’ Draco said pointedly. ‘And they were very useful. They’re why I’m here, in Paris.’

‘They said SHE was here?’

‘That there was a connection.’

‘Sorry,’ Harry interrupted, looking bewildered. ‘Have I missed something? WHO was here?’

‘Katya. Malfoy’s wife,’ Hermione said.

‘They used the pendant,’ Draco said, stroking the silver rose necklace around his neck. Hermione couldn’t help but notice that despite his rejuvenated composure his nails were bitten and ragged. ‘They cast a powerful spell to extract images from the rose charm; ‘visual resonation’, they called it. That’s what led me to Svetlana Kerpin. I saw a specific place she was looking at - *here* in Paris - and a glimpse of her in a mirror. I was then able to track her down.’ He paused. ‘It was remarkably easy, actually.’

Harry’s ears pricked up. He shifted forwards, an intense expression on his face. ‘You’re saying this poor lady was connected to your wife?’

‘By the time I got to speak to her, it was too late to find out. She was already dying.’

Harry checked his watch. ‘That reminds me. I’m actually waiting to hear from the Muggle gendarmerie. My inside man was securing a piece of evidence they’ve unearthed which might be important to this investigation.’

Draco’s eyes widened with interest.

Harry stood up, flipping a mobile phone from his pocket with an apologetic smile. ‘For Muggle business,’ he explained. ‘I’ll see if I can chase him up.’
The door slammed shut, leaving Hermione and Draco alone.

Hermione found she was suddenly unable to meet Draco’s eye. She gazed instead out of the window beside her, over the dark slate rooftops of the adjoining building and the mouse-grey sky spliced with streaks of desultory sunshine, rapidly darkening to dusk.

She could sense he was staring at her.

‘So, tell me,’ Draco said, finally breaking the silence between them. ‘Were you always intending to run to Potter the moment my back was turned?’

‘No. HE contacted ME.’ She dragged her eyes from the view outside to face him. ‘You must have mentioned my name…along with a whole lot of other stuff…when you were ill.’

It was Draco’s turn to look away.

‘This wasn’t a set-up, if that’s what you’re thinking.’

He smiled, returning his gaze to meet hers. ‘I bet you, Weasel and Potty have split your sides, laughing at my expense,’ he said in cold, laconic tones. His eyes were a hard, burnished silver.

‘Don’t be ridiculous. Why would we do that?’

‘Now you know what I am.’

‘What you … whatever do you mean?’ she asked, genuinely perplexed.

‘A fucking half-blood.’

Hermione laughed in relief. ‘Don’t be stupid. That's nothing to be ashamed of.’

‘Yes, it is. After everything… It's embarrassing.’

She sighed in vexation. ‘I’d have thought your current predicament would be much more taxing for you – but oh no, the purity of your blood is what bothers you most. How predictable.’

Draco crossed his arms peevishly and stared fixedly at the bottle of butterbeer on the table.

‘You do realise you were cured with MUGGLE BLOOD,’ Hermione added, suddenly seeking to rile him. ‘You’re probably as mudblooded as me now, Malfoy.’

He flung her a contemptuous look and then grabbed his beer. He didn’t drink, though, preferring to methodically scrape off the gold embossed Belton’s Butterbeer label.

‘Ron doesn’t know, actually,’ Hermione added, in more soothing tones.

‘That I have Gimlott’s?’

His frankness momentarily disarmed her. ‘You don’t have Gimlott’s, Draco.’

‘As good as.’

‘No – your father has Gimlott’s. It doesn’t mean you’ll get it too.’

Draco closed his eyes resignedly and rocked his head against the back of the armchair.

‘I was shot with the bloody stuff.’
‘And now you’re cured.’

He snapped his eyes open. ‘How does that make sense? Why would diluting the magic in my blood make me better?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I thought Gimlott’s weakened magic. The mediwizards told me that they now think it’s the other way round… Kind of like the tap’s been left on-’

‘An overdose?’

‘Exactly.’

They didn’t have time to ponder this any further, as Harry re-entered the room, a victorious look on his face. He was clutching an envelope, which he threw onto the table in front of Draco.

‘Open it, Malfoy,’ Harry ordered. ‘It’s addressed to you. The Muggles spotted Svetlana Kerpin on CCTV posting this, so my contact retrieved it for us.’

Draco gave Hermione an oddly stricken look. She guessed he already knew what he would find.

‘Go on,’ she urged.

He ripped into the envelope and tipped a silver rose onto the black, lacquered table. The rose sparkled in the waning light.

He stared at it, shiny-eyed, for what felt like an eternity.

Eventually he extended a single, long tapering finger and tentatively prodded the pendant. Then he scooped it up and cradled it in his palm.

‘It’s one of those, isn’t it?’ Harry said, pointing at the silver rose charm dangling from the chain around Draco’s neck.

‘Yes.’

‘Maybe that explains the connection to Paris,’ Hermione murmured.

‘Perhaps,’ Draco sighed. ‘In the past they’ve been posted from London, Rouen, Montreux - even Moscow.’ Hermione noticed a pulse was throbbing violently in his temple. ‘Please excuse me,’ he said in a quiet, husky voice. He slowly levered himself out of the armchair and moved unsteadily towards the bathroom. The door locked shut behind him, followed by the sound of rushing water.

‘What was all that about?’ whispered Harry.

‘Katya… Again,’ Hermione said, a little afraid of the mixture of emotions welling up inside her.

‘Oh. I see,’ Harry said blankly. Then, after a beat. ‘Actually, no – I don’t get it.’

Hermione took a deep breath. ‘Since she disappeared, he’s continued to receive these silver roses. They’re from a necklace she used to wear. He assumes it’s Katya who’s sending them.’

‘Not some old lady.’

‘Quite.’
Harry mulled this a moment. ‘Maybe she’s sending the roses on Katya’s behalf – like a courier?’

‘That’s – that’s possible.’

The water had stopped running in the bathroom. Hermione guessed Draco could hear their conversation.

The door clicked open and Draco stepped outside. He momentarily pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes screwed tightly shut, almost as though he was warding off a headache, then looked straight at Harry, his face hard and blazing.

‘Okay, Potter. You win. Here’s what we’ll do.’

Harry nodded.

‘As soon as this murder business is cleared up and I’m free to get out of this place…’ Draco eyed the apartment with unalloyed disgust, ‘I’ll covertly investigate my father-in-law. I’ll be your undercover spy… I’ll tell you anything you want to know about Ephraim, about Gilgad Inc., I’ll steal any information you want me to, I’ll visit any site, anywhere in the world. I’ll work with you every step of the way, until you feel satisfied we’ve arrived at the truth – whatever that may be.’

Harry looked jubilant.

‘But it’s on one condition.’

‘Go on.’

Draco cleared his throat. ‘On the condition – that you help me find my wife.’

Harry paused before speaking. ‘Okay, Malfoy. You’ve got yourself a deal. You help us and we’ll help you.’ He glanced anxiously at Hermione, and then continued, weighing his words carefully. ‘But you have to be aware… You might not like what we find. She’s been gone a long time. And these roses-’

‘Yes, I know,’ Draco said hastily. ‘She might be dead. But I need to know the truth. I need to know why the hell she walked away with our child, without any bloody explanation.’ There was a savage gleam in his eye as he spoke.

Draco looked at Harry, then Hermione. ‘And I can’t do this alone anymore.’

There was a long silence, eventually broken by Harry. ‘I’m so sorry, Malfoy. I didn’t know,’ he said in sober tones. He seemed genuinely shaken.

Draco gave a rueful, almost apologetic shrug. ‘That there was a child? Not many people did. Katya was pregnant when she left.’

Harry stared at the black, lacquered table, collecting his thoughts. ‘Right then, Malfoy,’ he said. ‘Starting tomorrow, we’ll go back to where we found you with Svetlana Kerpin and see if we can re-trace your steps. We’ll take it from there.’ He turned to Hermione. ‘How’s that sound to you?’

Hermione was unable to reply immediately.

Something had jarred inside of her - a strangely unwelcome flood of feeling.

It was only later, once she was lying sleepless in bed, that she realised, with a start, what had bothered her so greatly. The jarring emotion that had chimed through her when Draco had begged
for their help to find his wife had been jealousy.

XXX

‘So, this is the spot?’ Hermione asked, gazing disconsolately at the concrete quay where Svetlana Kerpin had died.

Draco nodded, a grim expression on his face.

He looked paler and washed-out, compared to yesterday. His eyes were a faded gouache grey reflecting the colour of the River Seine, which in turn reflected the sky above, thick with dank, grey clouds threatening rain.

Clearly Harry had taken advantage of Auror HQ’s generous expense account to get Draco properly kitted-out. He was wearing a vintage, Burberry trench coat in black leather, which accentuated his silvery-fair hair. The overall effect was both striking and a little menacing, Hermione thought uncomfortably.

Hermione surveyed their surroundings. They were standing at the tip of the Ile St. Louis, at the far end of a small, triangular park bordered by scrubby bushes. From the apex of this parkland they had perfect views of both opposite riverbanks, to their left and right. Both banks were trafficked and busy, the waterway glutted with pleasure-boats steaming merrily past.

‘Surely there were witnesses, Harry,’ Hermione said.

‘It was Christmas Day. Hardly anyone was about.’

‘Wouldn’t it be more efficient if we just WATCHED Malfoy’s memory?’ Hermione said. She shivered as a raw breeze whipped across them, stinging her cheeks.

‘We’ve tried that,’ Draco said drolly, an odd expression on his face. He seemed to be both smiling and frowning at the same time. ‘Didn’t work too well.’

‘Didn’t work at all,’ Harry added. ‘Malfoy needs to revisit his memories the old-fashioned way. We have to draw them out… The Muggle police have evidence that he flew into Paris from Boston on Christmas Eve. But after that, there’s no trace of him.’

‘It’s all a bit of a blur.’ Draco desperately scanned the parkland and the riverbanks beyond, as if searching for clues, then gazed sullenly at the patch of concrete where they were standing. ‘I remember the weight of her in my arms, though. I couldn’t hold her and fell to my knees.’

‘Did she say anything?’ Hermione said.

‘Don’t remember. Wish I did,’ Draco said, an impassioned look on his face. ‘I must have blacked out, because the next thing I know, there’s this scary-looking bloke with a bloody great scar on his face leering over me in the hospital.’ He shot a nervous glance at Harry. ‘And I don’t mean you, Potter. It was some healer chap.’

Harry bit back a smile. ‘That was the guy who saved your life, actually.’

Draco chewed his lower lip thoughtfully and then rubbed his forehead, soothing his temples.

‘Are you feeling alright?’ Hermione asked, concerned.

He gave her a wan smile. ‘Knackered,’ he said. ‘Didn’t sleep a wink last night.’
Me neither, she thought inwardly, although she imagined her reasons for chronic insomnia were pretty different to Draco’s.

‘Right, Malfoy. Let’s try and remember what happened before you got here,’ Harry said. His voice was calm, but his eyes were flint-hard and probing.

Draco looked behind them, back towards the entrance of the park. He pondered a moment and then made a decision. ‘Follow me,’ he said gruffly.

Harry and Hermione glanced warily at each other but did as he asked.

Draco walked purposefully towards Boulevard Henri IV, the main road that ran alongside the entrance to the park. He stopped to scrutinise a cream stone monument flanked by reclining statues. There was a green wooden bench next to the monument.

‘Here,’ he said definitively, pointing to the bench. ‘I was lying down here.’

Hermione looked back at where they’d just walked from. The precise site where Draco had been found with Svetlana dying in his arms was now hidden from view by dusty clumps of foliage.

‘Was Svetlana with you?’ she asked.

Draco vehemently shook his head. ‘No. Definitely not.’ He looked beyond the entrance gate to the park, towards the street.

He narrowed his eyes, trying to remember.

‘I must have been following her.’ He turned to Hermione, inspiration lighting up his eyes. ‘Yes. I vaguely remember it now. She was a small, shuffling sort of figure -’

‘Go on.’

‘But she wasn’t alone.’ He drew closer, holding Hermione’s gaze with his own. ‘There were two guys tailing her.’

‘Well, if they were our killers, they had to be wizards. Did you recognise them?’ Harry said.

Draco returned his gaze to the street beyond the gate. A bus ground to a loud, juddering halt to their left, enabling a woman with a pushchair to clamber aboard with some difficulty.

‘I don’t know. I was barely able to keep up with them, so I never got a proper look. But I must have felt a need to make myself as inconspicuous as possible, which is why I ducked down; tried to vanish myself.’ He paused again, staring at the park gate with such ferocity it was as though he was trying to blow it off its hinges.

‘Come with me,’ he mumbled, gently tugging Hermione’s coat-sleeve. They walked onto the bridge, Pont Sully, which spanned the Seine between the island and Paris’s Right Bank, which was actually on their left. Harry dawdled slightly behind. To Hermione’s surprise, he was taking photos of the site using his Muggle mobile phone.

Draco came to a halt by the stone balustrade that lined the bridge. He leant against the balustrade, peering into the churning grey water below. Hermione joined him. The loud chugga sound of a pleasure boat crammed with tourists rumbled beneath them.

‘Thinking about it,’ he said softly, almost to himself. ‘I’m sure I saw a boat.’
Hermione tipped forwards to look. ‘Where?’

‘Over there.’ Draco sidled closer, pressing his body against her. He placed his right hand on her back and extended his left arm to indicate the left-hand side of the island. This meant she was virtually encircled by him. She felt irradiated by the warmth of his body.

‘Listen, Hermione,’ he breathed in her ear.

Her heart jumped inside of her. Hot saliva swirled into her mouth.

His face was bent so close to hers, she could feel his breath curl against her cheek. Her skin felt wet and warm, in sharp contrast to the chill January air.

‘I really need to talk to you,’ Draco said, his eyes burning into her face. ‘It’s important.’

Hermione barely had time to compose herself to reply before Draco brusquely pulled away and continued to stare at the river. Harry’s footsteps were fast approaching.

‘What – what sort of boat was it?’ Hermione stammered, primarily for Harry’s benefit.

‘Not one of those,’ Draco said, pointing to the pleasure boat, which had veered leftwards to disgorge its occupants on the opposite bank. ‘Unless I was hallucinating.’

He glanced about, his eyes alighting on a small white house at the corner of Quai d’Anjou and Rue Saint-Louis En L’île. ‘Okay, so that rings a bell,’ he said under his breath.

They waited for a pause in the traffic and all three crossed the road.

Draco stared at the house.

The road stretching to their right at this junction comprised fine, stone buildings and a pleasant riverside walk, whilst another road, Rue Saint-Louis En L’île, which stretched to their left, was half cast in shadow, courtesy of the tall, hulking houses which faced off across its narrow width.

‘Right. I think I’ve got my bearings now,’ Draco muttered. He sped off down Rue Saint-Louis En L’île, Harry and Hermione close behind. Moments later, they crossed a road, then another, then continued, moving away from the fine, grand stone houses closer to the riverside towards a line of bijou restaurants and cafes and shops.

There was a church ranged to their left displaying a large white clock that jutted out into the street ahead of them. The faint strains of choral singing drifted ethereally towards them, caught on a breeze. Hermione registered that a church service must be underway; it was Sunday, after all.

‘That’s it,’ Draco said excitedly, jabbing his finger skywards at the clock looming over them. ‘That’s what I saw when the Hexmouth Witches cast the spell on Katya’s rose.’ The church was attached to a boy’s school. Next to a green iron gateway leading into the heart of the building there was a small yellow post-box affixed to the wall and a blue sign; ‘Bibliotheque Jeunesse: Ile Saint-Louis.’

‘This was what brought me to Paris,’ Draco continued.

‘Well, I’m glad you recognise it,’ Harry said. ‘Because this is the post-box where Svetlana posted Katya’s rose.’

‘Didn’t you say the Muggle police have CCTV footage?’ Hermione said to Harry.
‘Yes. From a security camera.’ Harry looked around and then pointed to a camera peeking out from under the awning of a busy restaurant with gleaming red shutters that faced the school and the post-box. ‘Probably that one. Unfortunately, the camera didn’t catch where Svetlana headed next.’

Draco studied the restaurant with interest.

‘That place means something to me… I wonder if the view Svetlana had of here,’ he indicated the church, ‘came from there?’

‘Maybe you thought that on Christmas Day too? Let’s see if anyone remembers you – or even better - her,’ Harry suggested.

However, no sooner had they walked through the restaurant door than a harried-looking waitress, wearing ostentatious, peacock feather earrings, blocked their path.

‘No way!’ she said, in a broad Australian accent. ‘There’s no way I’m letting YOU in here.’

She was glaring furiously at Draco.

Draco looked dumbfounded. ‘You – you remember me?’

‘How could I forget?’ she shrieked. ‘You pretty much ruined our Christmas Lunch sitting!’ She furtively looked around. ‘Don’t let the manager see you. He’ll have your guts for garters - literally.’

‘What did I do?’ Draco said helplessly.

‘You don’t remember?’ She eyed him quizzically. ‘Well, maybe that’s not surprising, the state you were in.’ She then looked him up and down, her expression softening. ‘You look tonnes better, though, I must say.’

Harry intervened. ‘Look, we’re trying to track down someone who might have been a customer on Christmas Day. Someone our ‘friend’ here might have met.’

The waitress pursed her lips suspiciously. ‘You police?’

‘No, we’re investigating a will,’ Harry said hastily. ‘We’re looking for a Svetlana Kerpin. We believe she’s come into some money.’

The waitress’s face brightened. ‘Wow. A lot of money?’

‘A fair bit,’ Harry said. ‘Do you know her?’

‘Elderly? Speaks foreign?’

‘She’s probably Russian,’ Harry said.

‘Ah, yes. She’s a regular,’ the waitress said. ‘Comes in for coffee most mornings.’ She pulled a face. ‘Not lately, though…’ She turned on Draco. ‘Not since you were bugging her big time…’

Draco looked nonplussed. ‘I was?’

‘Yup. You practically chased her outta here! Just moments before my manager had YOU chucked out.’ The waitress shook her head in wonder. ‘You really can’t remember?’

‘No,’ Draco said sadly. ‘Sorry.’
‘Did she live round here?’ Hermione asked.

The waitress rolled her eyes in thought. ‘Probably. Not entirely sure where, though…. ’ There was a commotion as a bunch of diners exiting the restaurant pushed past them, forcing them onto the street. The waitress glanced nervously back inside. ‘Hey, I’ve got to get back to work.’

‘Sure,’ Harry said. ‘Just one more thing. Have you worked here long?’

‘Yeah, about eighteen months or so. The never-ending road-trip!’

‘And did Svetlana always come here alone?’

‘Hey, you said one more question!’ The waitress admonished in mock exasperation. ‘Okay, let’s see. There was this girl – early twenties or thereabouts – that sometimes came in with Svetlana. They seemed pretty close, so I figured she was a niece or a granddaughter or something. Hasn’t been in lately, though.’

‘What did she look like?’ Draco asked urgently.

The waitress thought for a moment. ‘Can’t remember exactly…but she was nice-looking. Had lush, reddish hair; really made her stand out.’

‘Thanks. You’ve been very helpful,’ Harry said politely.

‘Yeah…and there was another woman,’ the waitress blithely continued. ‘That was when I first worked here, but she hasn’t been in for a long while. Sweet little thing. Fit to pop.’

‘Fit to pop?’ Draco repeated, a confused look on his face.

‘Yeah, she was getting pretty big,’ the waitress said, curving her hand over her stomach in crude explanation.

Draco’s eyes darted from side to side as he processed this information.

‘You mean – she was pregnant,’ he rasped. The colour momentarily faded from his face.

‘You okay?’ the waitress fretted. ‘You’re not going to have a funny turn on me again, are you?’

‘No, he’s fine,’ Hermione said, spontaneously slipping her hand into Draco’s. He gripped her hand hard in return.

‘Carrie!’ yelled a voice from inside the restaurant. ‘Vite!’

Carrie glanced behind her. ‘When you find Svetlana, give her my best, will you?’

‘Of course,’ Hermione said, as they turned away.

‘Hey, you know what?’ Carrie said, stopping them with a wide, toothy smile. ‘Svetlana might be on one of those boat trips she loved to go on?’

‘What sort of boat trips?’

‘She sometimes took the boat from Quai Bethune, here on the island…it only passes through once every couple of weeks or so. It’s one of those cruisers - you know - heads out of the city and up the Seine somewhere.’
‘Do you have a leaflet or an advert we could look at?’ Harry said, a keen look in his eye.

The waitress pulled a sour face. ‘Not anymore, sorry. But I can remember the boat’s name if that’s any help?’

‘Please,’ Draco said.

‘La Lena.’

Walking down Rue Saint-Louis En L’île as they headed purposefully back to the quayside park, Hermione realised she was still holding hands with Draco.

She blushed furiously and swiftly disentangled her hand from his warm grasp, though Draco’s hand continued to bounce against hers as they walked.

‘Sorry, wasn’t thinking,’ she said in hushed tones, fearing he’d think she was coming on to him.

‘About what?’ he replied in a low whisper, which somehow made her feel even more self-conscious than before. His mouth twitched in amusement.

They both glanced at Harry. Thankfully, he didn’t seem to have noticed.

XXX

‘See,’ Draco said in triumphant tones to Hermione, ‘I told you there was a boat!’

Ahead of them was a mooring and a board advertising ‘La Lena.’ A tall, Rastafarian man wearing a Paris St. Germain football strip was nailing an orange notice to a wooden post.

‘Go on then, Potter,’ Draco urged in sardonic tones. ‘Time to dazzle us with your fluent French skills.’

Harry gave him a resentful look and scuttled over to the Rastafarian, engaging him in stilted conversation.

Hermione and Draco watched Harry’s efforts in silence.

Draco eventually gave up, choosing instead to stare at the murky river waters lapping the quayside.

‘You okay?’ Hermione asked nervously.

‘I think so.’ He turned to face her. ‘Kind of… apprehensive, I guess.’ They locked eyes. Hermione’s stomach instantly flip-flopped and her chest felt tight. His eyes were too bright, too intense. Almost as though they were penetrating her mind.

‘I – I guess you assumed Svetlana’s pregnant friend was Katya.’

‘I bet you did too.’

She nodded, peeling her eyes away from his.

‘I can’t help wondering why Katya – if it was her - never visited Svetlana, once she’d given birth?’ Draco mused.

‘Maybe she did? After all, there had to be some kind of continuing connection between them because Svetlana’s posted one of Katya’s roses.’
‘Unless she STOLE it – maybe even ALL of them?’ There was a dark look in Draco’s eye which was slightly frightening.

‘I suppose that’s a possibility,’ Hermione said in slow, deliberate tones. ‘But really, Draco, we just don’t know.’

Harry bounded over, a grin pasted on his face.

‘That chap was very helpful.’ He ushered them away from the riverside, back to the park. ‘He says ‘La Lena’ hasn’t been in operation since Christmas and is currently being renovated at a place called Port-Mort.’

‘Is that in Paris?’ Hermione asked.

‘No, Normandy.’

‘We should go,’ Draco said, buttoning up his trench coat purposefully.

‘Most definitely,’ Harry said, a twinkle in his eye. ‘La Lena is operated by a woman – a redhead, apparently – called Rozella Gagnon.’ He gave them a meaningful look. ‘If Svetlana’s been regularly travelling on her boat, then she’s bound to know her quite well.’

‘Looks like she’s the woman who was visiting Svetlana here in Paris,’ Hermione suggested.

Harry glanced at his watch. ‘Okay, it’s going to be quicker and easier to fly. I’ll need to requisition some broomsticks from Auror HQ and a wand for Malfoy.’

‘Broomsticks?’ Hermione gasped. She gawked miserably at the rain-sodden clouds and shuddered at the tangible dampness permeating the air.

‘Yes, Hermione, broomsticks,’ Harry said coolly. ‘You can share mine, if you don’t think your flying skills are up to scratch.’

Hermione flinched at Harry’s unexpectedly acerbic tone.

‘Come ride with me, Hermione,’ Draco said kindly. ‘Make sure I don’t make a break for it.’ He gave Harry a stern look. ‘If that’s alright by you, Potter?’

Harry frowned. ‘No, it’s not, Malfoy. I’m tethering your broomstick to mine. And Hermione sticks with me.’

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“A PAIN THAT I’M USED TO” by DEPECHE MODE

&

“I KNOW” by PLACEBO

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Hermione hated broomstick travel at the best of times and tethering two broomsticks together had made this a particularly choppy and uncomfortable journey all-round.

To make matters worse, she was convinced three large crow-like objects - just about discernible through the thin drizzle and gauzy, grey cloud-cover - had tailed them from the moment they left Paris.

The crows had felt oddly comforting at Wisteria Cottage, but she wasn’t sure she wanted Jeroboam to know their every move; he certainly hadn’t shown himself to be fond of Draco, and she knew the evil Los Rojos were capable of.

However, as they approached Port-Mort, the teasing red at the corner of her eyes flickered and faded as the crows swooped out of view.

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‘La Lena’ was a ramshackle pleasure boat moored next to a solitary wooden cabin and a cluster of bare-looking willow trees which bordered the mud-stained waters of the River Seine.

They hid their broomsticks in thicket a hundred metres or so from the riverbank. A dirt track, churned into muddy ruts by a black Land Rover parked close by, led to the river.

‘You alright?’ Harry said to Draco.

Draco nodded, though the pale, pinched look on his face spoke otherwise.

They cautiously approached the boat. A woman laden with a towering pile of linens in her arms tottered down a wooden gangway and headed straight towards them.

She only spotted them once she’d arrived at the Land Rover and flipped the boot open to stow the linens.

‘Oh,’ she said, eyes round in surprise. Clearly this particular tract of river was unaccustomed to strangers. ‘Est-ce-que je peux vous aider?’ she asked.

She wasn’t Katya, Hermione instantly thought. But she might well be the ‘redhead’ mentioned by Carrie the waitress. She was tall and slender with lustrous auburn hair.

Harry stepped forwards and introduced himself in French.

‘Etes-vous Rozella Gagnon?’ he asked.
‘Mais, oui.’

Harry embarked, in faltering French, on an explanation for their visit. He seemed a little unnerved by her.

Hermione caught the name ‘Svetlana Kerpin,’ at which point the redheaded girl raised a hand to stop him mid-flow.

‘Sorry, I cannot help you. I know not of whom you speak,’ she said in heavily accented English.

‘Are you quite sure about that?’ Harry pressed.

‘Absolument. Now, if you would excuse me.’ She smiled politely and swiftly beat a retreat, moving with a subtle, feline grace towards the cabin.

Harry shrugged helplessly at Hermione and Draco.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ Draco muttered under his breath. He strode purposefully after the redhead’s receding figure.

‘Hey, Madame!’ he shouted.

She instantly halted, swinging round to face him. She had clear, glossy hazel eyes, which perceptibly widened as she properly studied Draco.

She pursed her lips haughtily. ‘It’s Mademoiselle.’

‘Can we just ask a few questions?’ Draco pleaded. He looked a forlorn figure. His hair was dank and limp, his eyes a faded smoky grey, matching the dense, rain-soaked clouds in the sky above them.

Rozella heaved a baleful sigh. ‘You have three minutes. I have an appointment elsewhere,’ she said in terse tones.

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The cabin was filthy, crammed full of maintenance tools and sloping shelves heaped with haphazardly arranged paperwork. There was a strong odour of petrol emanating from three large plastic containers crouched in the corner. A table was slumped against a wall strewn with even more paperwork, a dead spider plant in a cracked terracotta pot and a discarded paper coffee cup. Dusty cobwebs splayed across a window.

‘Why do you ask about this Svetlana Kerpin?’ Rozella asked impatiently. She leaned against the makeshift table as she spoke and removed a pair of mud-encrusted Hunter wellies. She then proceeded to rummage in a bag that was under the table and pulled out a pair of smart, high-heeled leather boots.

‘Unfortunately, Madam Kerpin has died,’ Harry said in respectful tones, ‘and the circumstances of her death require further investigation.’

Rozella blinked rapidly, absorbing this information. ‘I see,’ she said. She slipped on the smart boots and bent over to tie the laces. Her abundant red hair cascaded forwards; a thick veil between her and the three strangers. ‘Mais vraiment, monsieur. Like I said, I do not know of this woman.’

‘We believe she was a regular passenger on your boat,’ Harry said.
'And yet I still don’t recall the name,’ Rozella huffed, as she struggled to secure the laces on her boots.

She stood up and scooped her hair off her face in one slick movement, whipping it over her shoulder. ‘Of course, it is very sad that this poor woman is dead,’ she said, looking Harry directly in the eye.

‘She was murdered,’ Draco said bluntly. His voice resounded around the cabin. ‘Tortured to death…’

‘That - that is horrible.’ Rozella shivered, rubbing her arms as though she was cold. ‘But really, I cannot help you in this matter. I know nothing.’

She turned to Harry. ‘Who are you to come here telling me these things?’ she asked, a shrewd, suspicious look on her face. ‘Are you *gendarmes*?’

Harry slipped his hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out a business card for her. ‘Sorry, I should have said. We’re working with the police.’

She stared at the card. ‘*Renseignements Generaux?* The police think this is a matter of national security?’

‘Potentially.’

Rozella tried to return the card to Harry, but he gestured to her to keep it instead.

‘How often does 'La Lena' make the trip from Paris?” Hermione asked, her fingers skating over the dishevelled piles of paperwork precariously perched on the table. She started thumbing through a pile of orange pamphlets. They were timetables.

‘About once every ten days,’ Rozella said.

‘Can I take one of these?’ Hermione said, brandishing an orange timetable. She quickly skimmed the names of the towns the timetable listed. ‘There’s no mention of Port-Mort.’

‘This is where we fix up the boat when it has a problem or needs refurbishment. The passenger service is Paris to Rouen.’

‘In which case, Svetlana Kerpín would have got off in Rouen?’ Harry asked.

‘It is possible.’ Rozella paused. ‘As I don’t know of whom you speak, it is difficult to answer correctly. There are other stops to choose from. Not all passengers go as far as Rouen.’

‘What’s the most popular stop?’ Hermione asked.

‘St Andeleys is very pretty, but…Vernon… that is probably our most popular destination. It is but a short journey from there to Giverny.’

‘Monet’s house.’

‘*Exactement. It’s what the tourists like to see. Maybe your Svetlana Kerpín was an art lover?’*

‘I imagine she probably travelled too often on 'La Lena' to be classified as a typical tourist,’ Hermione mused. ‘Maybe you remember an older lady who frequently got off at one town in particular, say…’ she trailed her finger down the list of towns… ‘Conflas or Caudebec-en-Caux or Honfleur?’
She quickly glanced at Draco and Harry, hoping they were watching Rozella for any reaction she might have shown to any of these names.

‘Where do you live?’ Draco asked abruptly.

Rozella blushed hotly. ‘I – I don’t see what that has to do with anything.’

‘Okay – let me rephrase that,’ Draco said. ‘Where is…’ he took one of the orange timetables and scanned the masthead, ‘…the head office for La Lena River Cruises?’ He sneered at their current surroundings. ‘It can’t be here. There isn’t even a telephone or a computer.’

Rozella folded her arms, keeping her eyes averted from Draco.

‘Am I under suspicion here?’ she said to Harry, clearly assuming he was the man in charge.

‘Not at all,’ Harry said blithely. ‘But it would be useful to know…for the record…’

Rozella heaved a sigh of irritation. ‘Foret-la-Folie. It’s a village, up-river.’

She plucked a business card out of a slim leather wallet, which she handed to Harry. ‘If you need to speak to me further, I can be contacted on this number.’

She eased off the waxen green jacket she’d been wearing, revealing skin-tight jeans and a finely knit cream cashmere sweater that moulded flatteringly to her trim but curvy figure.

‘Now, if you’d please excuse me, I really have somewhere I need to go.’

She grabbed a brown suede jacket and a wad of keys, tossed her hair over her jacket collar, and then headed outside. She waited at the open door.

It was clearly an instruction for them to leave.

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‘Where’s your vehicle?’ she asked sharply.

‘We walked,’ Harry said.

Her eyes dropped to their shoes, which were remarkably clean for a walk along a muddy riverbank and shook her head in disbelief. She then hoisted herself into the black Land Rover and sped off, whisking the dirt track into a fresh slurry of mud in her wake.

Harry and Draco stared after her.

‘So - what did we make of her?’ Hermione asked brightly, even though she had a distinct feeling that they hadn’t handled that particularly well.

‘Athletic,’ Harry said, a little dreamily.

‘Gorgeous eyes,’ Draco agreed.

Hermione gaped at them in open-jawed horror. ‘You’re both disgusting! We’re meant to be trying to find Draco’s WIFE. And a poor old woman has been horribly murdered! It’s a bit tasteless, don’t you think, to be slavering over potential witnesses, like dogs on heat?’

‘I’m sorry, Hermione, I didn’t realise there was a special code of conduct for this investigation,’
Harry said, in dry, astringent tones.

‘Oh, so ogling’s the norm in all your other investigations, is it, Harry Potter? Does Ginny know about this?’ she retorted, wishing the moment she’d said it that she could bite her tongue off.

Harry screwed up his face in confusion. ‘What’s got into you? She was a pretty girl. We passed comment. It's not that unnatural a thing for guys to do, you know. Anyway, let’s move on. What have we learned from this?’

Draco was still staring down the empty track after the Land Rover.

‘She didn’t ask to see a picture,’ he murmured. ‘Bit odd that, don’t you think?’

‘Probably as well,’ Harry said. ‘The only one we have on file is from thirty years ago. And it’s magic – would’ve been hard to explain why she was constantly sneezing.’

‘Let’s see it,’ Hermione said eagerly.

Harry fished it out of his pocket and handed it to her. A smattering of light rain soon coated the photo, so Hermione took shelter under the cabin’s awning.

Draco peered over her shoulder to take a look too.

‘Svetlana was old and grey when I saw her,’ he said under his breath. ‘This looks like a completely different person.’

‘But look! Svetlana and Rozella are clearly related!’ Hermione exclaimed. ‘The hair – it’s exactly the same colour, it’s just the photo’s faded a bit with time – and they’ve got the same shaped face too.’

Harry craned his head round to see. ‘Svetlana’s nowhere near as good-looking,’ he muttered, playfully ducking the death-stare Hermione flung at him. ‘But yeah, I can see a resemblance actually.’

‘Well, this proves she lied,’ Draco said. ‘She’s obviously the redhead who visited Svetlana in Paris.’ He marched towards the hedgerow where they’d hidden the broomsticks. ‘Come on. We’d better go after her.’

‘Stop right there, Malfoy!’ Harry bellowed. ‘You can’t go accosting the girl on a broomstick! She’s a Muggle, remember?’

‘She might not be.’

‘Until we know otherwise, she IS. And what exactly would you say if you caught up with her?’

Draco reluctantly turned back. The rain had gathered strength and was now beating relentlessly down on him.

‘You can’t just accuse her of being related to someone – like that’s a crime!’ Harry continued.

‘She’s keeping something from us,’ Draco said miserably. He flicked his now-sodden fringe out of his eyes.

‘Which is why I took note of her vehicle’s number plates,’ Harry said. ‘I’ll get my Muggle contact to track her down.’
Draco chewed his lower lip, brow creased in concentration. 'Okay, here's a crazy theory. What if we’ve got this all wrong? For all we know, Svetlana Kerpin was a Metamorphmagus and was cunningly disguised every time she took a ride on that boat? This Mademoiselle Gagnon might not know Svetlana at all and it’s just a coincidence that they look alike. I mean, she didn’t seem that upset when she heard that Svetlana Kerpin was dead."

‘Or ‘tortured to death’, as you rather insensitively put it,’ Hermione said snippily. 'And yes, that IS a crazy theory.'

‘But he’s got a point,’ Harry said. ‘If they were close, I’d have thought she’d have shown more emotion – at least some shock.’

Hermione reflected a moment. ‘Maybe she was frightened? She seemed pretty defensive all-round actually. Though that might be because she thought Draco was hitting on her!’

‘When did I do that?’ Draco demanded furiously.

‘When you asked where she lived! It did seem to come out of nowhere.’

‘I was asking about the business.’

‘That’s not how it sounded.’

‘I made it perfectly clear!’

‘You were backtracking.’

‘Okay, then…’ Harry interjected, ‘so let’s assume, based on her resemblance to the deceased and her overall edginess, that Svetlana MIGHT be some sort of relation who was regularly travelling to this area on Rozella’s boat. Does this get us any closer to Katya?’

‘We should have just asked her outright if she knew her,’ Draco griped.

‘No, Malfoy,’ Harry said. ‘With all due respect, your wife hasn’t contacted you in – how long is it now? Two years?’

‘Nearly twenty-two months.’

‘So… a very long time. Katya clearly hasn’t wanted to be found, so if Rozella is hiding her, she’s hardly likely to own up the moment someone comes asking, is she now?’

‘But SVETLANA knew Katya. That we DO know,’ Draco said.

‘But that doesn’t mean Rozella does too,’ Hermione said evenly. 

Draco turned his attention back towards the dirt track.

Hermione studied the orange leaflet she’d picked up in the cabin. ‘Well, Foret-la-Folie isn’t listed as an official stop. But if Svetlana WAS family, that would be her likely destination.’

‘That’s why I asked Rozella where she lived,’ Draco said, casting Hermione a petulant look over his shoulder. ‘A little town in deepest, darkest Normandy might be the ideal spot to hide out.’

‘What’s the exact address on Rozella’s business card, Harry?’

Harry scrutinised it. ‘It’s a P.O. box and there’s a phone and fax number.’ He looked up at them.
‘I’ll call when we get back to Paris, say we’d like to come down for another little chat.’

‘We should go there now, before Rozella gets home,’ Draco said gruffly.

‘But we haven’t got an address. We’d be wondering around, hoping to catch sight of… well, what exactly?’ Hermione said, exasperated.

‘I’d know if they were there,’ Draco said.

‘Okay,’ Harry said. ‘We’ll give it a go.’ He frowned at the broomsticks. ‘Binding the broomsticks didn’t work very well on the way here,’ he admitted sourly. ‘This time, Malfoy, you can ride the broomstick yourself.’ He motioned to Hermione with a brief flip of his hand. ‘Go with him. Make sure he doesn’t play silly buggers.’

But suddenly Draco didn’t seem to be in any hurry. He rubbed his chin pensively.

‘What is it now?’ Harry asked brusquely.

‘It’s those eyes…’

‘For God’s sake, Draco,’ Hermione said tetchily. ‘Leave it alone.’

‘No… seriously. When I think about it, they reminded me of Katya – same colour, same kind of…’ Draco searched for the right word, ‘…expression.’

‘So now you’re saying Rozella looks like Katya?’ Harry said, clearly confused.

‘No, not at all,’ Draco said hastily. ‘If anything, Katya looks more like… well… like Hermione, I suppose. A less earthy version.’ He shot Hermione a nervous glance as he spoke. ‘I mean that nicely.’

In any other circumstances Hermione would have demanded more explanation, but clearly something was on Draco’s mind.

‘No, there was something else… I can't put my finger on it. Like a familiar echo. An emotion.’ Draco blinked rapidly, lost in memory.

His face hardened. ‘I think you were right, Hermione, when you said Rozella was frightened,’ he said, locking eyes with her. ‘That same look in their eyes… It was fear.’

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Harry used his Muggle mobile phone to quickly seek directions to Foret-La-Folie.

‘It’s not too far from here. Inland, about twenty miles or so.’

He swished his wand around the broomstick Draco and Hermione were set to board. A crimson glow fizzed around the broom handle.

‘Right, Malfoy,’ he said in a bullish voice, fixing his eyes with deep, dark intent on Draco’s face. ‘That’s a powerful tracking spell. Any off-piste tricks and I can find you in five minutes flat.’

He quickly transfigured a handkerchief into a parchment map, complete with directions and an image of Foret-La-Folie and handed it to Malfoy.

‘Make sure he follows the route,’ Harry said firmly to Hermione. ‘If we get a move on, we can
make this place in twenty minutes.’ He glanced at the sky above. Even with protective charms to
minimise the impact of the weather, these were far from ideal conditions to be flying. ‘Better make
it fifteen,’ he added.

Hermione climbed on board the broomstick behind Draco. She nestled close to him, her face
buried in the sweet-smelling black leather of his Burberry trench coat.

‘You okay?’ he said.

‘I’m fine. I’m not holding on too tight, am I?’ she asked, worried that her shameful glow of
anticipation might transmit itself to him.

‘Right,’ Harry shouted from the broom alongside them. ‘Stay close!’ He shot upwards with
impressive velocity; a dark figure spearing the rainclouds.

Hermione fastened her arms tighter around Draco’s chest. She could feel the steady thump-thump
of his heart beneath her fingers and the warmth of his body suffusing through his clothes into her
skin. A squibble of raw excitement pulsed through her as Draco kick-started the broom and they
soared into the sky.

She watched ‘La Lena' and the riverside cabin rapidly miniaturising as they climbed higher. A vast
panoply of patchwork fields and dense green forests, peppercorned with clusters of houses and
steely grey roads, stretched out beneath them, hemmed in by the bracken-brown expanse of the
river.

My god, but it was magnificent, she thought, barely able to breathe.

A fillip of unadulterated joy swept through her.

Most incredibly, she wasn’t frightened… even when they headed into a rolling bank of thick, grey
cloud.

‘Hold on!’ Draco said, tipping them sideways as he changed direction. She strengthened her grip
on him, interlocking her hands around his chest. She was acutely aware of how her body was
pressed hard against him, wondering if he could feel the shape of her breasts through his thick
leather coat.

She could barely see Harry’s dark shape motoring ahead, as he pierced bullet-like, through cloud
after cloud. Plumes of wispy grey moisture flowed behind him like contrails.

‘Are you ready?’ Draco yelled.

‘Ready for what?’ But no sooner had she spoken than he accelerated dramatically, veering
rightwards, then leftwards, weaving between the clouds. The broomstick dipped from dense, grey
froth into blinding Technicolor as the world beneath them suddenly splashed into view, before they
raced back into the clouds.

Hermione screamed in elation, her hair streaming behind her. She hugged Draco tighter, fearing
that she might slide away. His hand, large and surprisingly warm, encased hers, which meant he
was now flying single-handed. Normally, she would have been terrified, but not today… she didn’t
want to lose the feeling of his skin against hers.

‘This is amazing,’ she breathed, her mouth warm against Draco’s ear. Her chest felt swollen with
an unfathomable, bubbling glee.
She tightly closed her eyes, aware of a burning bright white light spooling through her, filling her mind. It felt glorious.

It had to be Draco. It had to be… She’d never felt like this before when she’d been flying. Usually, she was bottled up with chilly nerves. But this was pure, scintillating sensation.

He surged upwards, through the cloud, breaking into a world of pristine crystalline blue. Hot rays of sunshine dappled her eyelids. The wind gently tickled her cheeks. She moaned in pleasure, face buried in Draco’s neck, relishing the explosion of white, lapping the edges of her mind. She felt lost in a fantasy of feeling…

Suddenly, his hand grasped hers tightly and he plunged the broomstick into a hair-raising, steep descent. She snapped her eyes open, catching a brief glimpse of azure blue skies, before they dived full-pelt into thick, grey cloud.

Draco leant forwards and she automatically followed, ghosting his body with her own. Cool rain sprayed her cheeks then faded away.

The broomstick ducked and rolled, circling the upper summits of tall trees that suddenly crashed into view, before it pitched forwards at an awkward angle, hurling them into a precipitous, unstoppable fall.

Hermione yelped, clutching frantically at Draco’s arms and the lapels on his coat. A motley blend of browns and greens and greys was whirling into view, a helter-skelter kaleidoscope of colour dashing to meet them, getting ever larger and all encompassing. Unavoidable.

She closed her eyes, waiting for the inevitable collision. Draco swung round to face her, encircling her in his arms, and together, they tumbled heavily onto the ground, mere moments before the broomstick smashed heavily into a tree.

Hermione and Draco landed in a pile of damp leaves, softening their fall.

Legs entangled, bodies pressed together, they lay quietly - aware only of the sounds and smells of the forest and their own heaving breaths.

‘Hermione,’ came Draco’s voice, his breath hot on her cheek. He had a slightly stunned expression. His leather coat had been torn open, and there was a streak of mud on his forehead. ‘I’m so sorry. I was showing off.’

‘I loved it,’ she said, gently brushing away the dirt from his face.

A burst of wind rattled through the trees above them, shimmying raindrops in all directions, dripping onto their hair and faces. A single stream of cool rainwater trickled from her hairline, slowly down her nose, onto her lips.

Draco softly slid his mouth against hers, his tongue sweeping the raindrop away, gently nudging her lips open.

Now’s the time to stop, she told herself. It’s now or never.

But she couldn’t. She wanted this too much.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, sighing into his mouth, sinking into his warmth, tugging gently at his lower lip with her teeth.
She could feel his body tensing, the breath hitching in his chest.

‘You’re fucking killing me,’ he growled, flipping her forcefully onto her back into the sea of leaves, which squelched mushily under their weight.

His lips muscled hers into a heated, urgent kiss. God, she needed this so badly, she thought, drowning in the exquisite sensation of his tongue exploring her mouth and the crushing pressure of his body.

She was rudely jolted back into reality by the sharp crackle of breaking twigs in the undergrowth.

Harry! She thought, a tremor of alarm slicing through her. She sat bolt upright, shoving Draco off her in panic and twisted round to peer at the bushes, expecting Harry to come bounding through them.

‘We’ve got five minutes before the tracker spell kicks in, Hermione,’ Draco said huskily. He roughly grabbed her hips, dragging her onto his lap so that she was straddling him. She was acutely aware of his obvious arousal, stretched hard beneath his jeans.

‘Just give me five minutes,’ he breathed, his wet mouth nuzzling her neck.

She opened her mouth to protest, but the only sound she made was an unintended moan.

Five minutes, she thought, five minutes in an entire lifetime… was that really so terrible? But any further thought - beyond a raw visceral need to touch him, to writhe against him - was driven out by the feel of his hands on her body, and his tongue, delicately tracing patterns on her ear.

She slipped her hands inside his coat, revelling in his heat burning through his shirt. She sucked his neck, savouring his sweet yet salty taste and the feel of his chest pushing against hers, as his breathing grew ever more ragged. He was trembling with excitement, his nipples taut and sensitive. He inhaled sharply, flinching a little, as she trailed her fingertips across his chest and down his back.

‘Fucking hell, Hermione,’ he groaned through gritted teeth, his hands gripping her buttocks, to force her harder against him. Slowly and deliberately, she ground downwards, in an effort to ease the tightening coil of aching tension building inexorably inside her, fighting an urge to whimper.

He stared at her, his eyes hard and glistening.

‘Come here,’ he rasped, intertwining his fingers with her hair to force her face closer. His mouth crashed hard against hers, a fierce, bruising kiss that robbed her of the power to breathe or think straight.

The white-hot heat that she’d come to associate with Draco, swirled dizzily through her mind, slowly staining pink at the peripheries… The pink darkening to a rich rosy blush, almost as though a vivid scarlet, was bleeding into the white.

Scarlet… Red… intruding on her mind… She desperately tried to blank it out.

But then, there was another sharp crunch of twigs from the bushes beside them; an unmistakable presence…

‘Shit,’ she gasped, scrabbling clumsily to her feet. But standing was difficult. Her legs were shaking and she was panting, barely able to draw breath. She collapsed heavily against a gnarled, green tree trunk.
Draco stared at her, chest heaving and a look of bewilderment on his face.

‘Someone’s here,’ she managed to say, between breaths. She unleashed her wand and pointed it towards the bushes, although the redness blurring her vision was fading fast.

There was a rustling in the leaves, followed by silence.

Maybe she’d imagined it?

Draco hauled himself up, wincing a little, as if in pain. His movements were tense and jerky. He grappled for the standard issue Ministry wand Harry had provided.

‘I – I think they’re gone,’ Hermione said, her voice shaking.

‘You sure?’ He looked a little queasy. He stumbled over to the bushes, flicking at the leaves with his wand and then cast a ‘Homenum Revelio.’

‘No-one,’ he muttered.

‘Harry will be along any minute.’

Draco pulled a face. ‘Can’t we just run away and hide?’ he said grumpily. ‘Or better still. Find a bed.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ she chuckled, even though her heart was still hammering at full-pelt inside of her.

A brooding sense of guilt was gradually taking over.

‘How’s that silly?’ Draco asked. ‘We’d happily ravage each other senseless; you know we would.’

‘No, we wouldn’t,’ Hermione spluttered, indignant. ‘We’re married, remember?’

Draco gave her an odd look.

‘You’re in total fucking denial about what’s going on here, aren’t you?’

‘There’s nothing going on.’

‘Not today… obviously. Not with ‘Mein fucking Fuhrer’ about to descend on us,’ he said caustically.

‘That’s not nice,’ she remonstrated, although she was struggling not to smile. ‘He’s saved your life, Draco. Twice. You should be grateful.’

‘Yeah, but that was a long time ago, and I’m THIS close to smashing his teeth out!’ Draco indicated a wafer-thin gap between his thumb and forefinger.

‘And he’s helping you find your wife,’ Hermione said, crossing her arms and primly puckering her lips.

‘And I’m helping him too, remember? Except in MY case, if I get caught, I’m a dead man.’

‘Whatever do you mean?’

‘You don’t know the people we’re dealing with here… I do, unfortunately.’ He peered at her through his fringe, which was clinging damply to his forehead, a sad, crooked smile on his face.
‘Ruthless fuckers, the whole damn lot of them,’ he muttered darkly.

Draco quickly scanned their immediate surroundings, then, to her surprise, he fell to his knees in front of her.

‘I guess now’s as good as ever,’ he said, almost to himself.

There was an earnest look on his face that chilled her.

‘I need to tell you something; but you’re not going to like it.’

He licked his lower lip, marshalling his thoughts, and went for it.

‘I’ve been lying to you,’ he said candidly.

Her heart stilled.

‘How so?’

‘When – when I recruited you and Ron, our mission wasn’t to investigate Dark Flux… Gilgad had already been doing that for a very long time. We knew, for example, that Jeroboam’s followers had been acting heavy-handed around Dark Flux sites; although I had no idea, just how fucking scary those Rojos bastards actually were. My mission was solely to expose you to what Jeroboam and his followers were doing –’

‘I already know this, Draco,’ Hermione interrupted crankily. ‘Your delightful father-in-law and the lovely Sylvestra paid me a visit.’

Draco’s eyes perceptibly darkened as she spoke.

‘Ephraim made it perfectly clear that he expected me to do his dirty work and formally accuse Jeroboam of all sorts of nasty stuff - and in return, I could get my old job back,’ she said peevishly. ‘Naturally, I refused.’

‘You REFUSED?’

‘Of course!’ she scoffed. ‘For the life of me, I couldn’t see - I still DON’T see - why Ephraim didn’t just accuse Jeroboam himself.’

‘Because Ephraim doesn’t want to look like a plotter. He thinks that would look bad for him politically.’

‘Why should that matter?’

‘He intends to become the next Minister for Magic.’

‘But that’s not possible!’ Hermione laughed, outraged. ‘He’s American.’

‘Doesn’t matter anymore,’ Draco said with a shrug. ‘One of Witchell’s less well-publicised changes to the statute book… Once a foreigner has lived and worked in Britain for three years - or if they marry a native – they can run for office.’

If Ephraim was the dark, murderous wizard they now feared him to be, this was truly terrifying.

Still, Draco’s ‘lie’ hadn’t been as awful as she’d feared.
‘That’s not all,’ Draco said flatly. He took a deep breath, staring so hard at her face she felt she was getting a headache.

‘Senor Asusto. The Dark Flux memory at Senor Canaro’s. It was one big set-up; to get you on board, gunning for Jeroboam.’

The colour drained from Hermione’s face. ‘I guessed as much,’ she said in low tones. ‘But I didn’t think YOU were in on it… At least that was what I hoped.’

‘It was all very last minute. When you arrived at the airport, instead of Ron, we had to come up with something, fast. Ron had already fallen for it all – hook, line and sinker. But you - you were a trickier proposition,’ he gabbled nervously in explanation. ‘So - I called Torquil from the airport -’

‘Are you telling me that it was you, who thought of the dead baby?’ she asked, eyes narrowed.

‘No. That was Sylvestra, apparently.’

‘SYLVESTRA?’ Hermione shrilled. ‘For the love of Merlin, Draco, how can you let a woman like THAT look after Scorpius? You should be ashamed of yourself!’

Draco’s eyes flicked away from her, towards the thick bushy undergrowth.

‘I regretted the whole thing, the moment we entered that memory,’ he said in a small, quiet voice. ‘I don’t think I was meant to go in with you, actually. But I wasn’t sure what you’d find in there and I couldn’t bear the idea of you experiencing it alone…’

Hermione hardly heard him. Her mind was reeling. She had to get away.

She scrambled to her feet and charged through the bushes, which clawed and scratched at her, into a wooded copse. The trees here were tall and straight, their branches interwoven, blocking out much of the natural light.

She could hear Draco stampeding noisily through the undergrowth behind her.

Hermione continued to walk away from him, deeper into the thick, treacly darkness. The trees creaked and groaned in the wind, but beyond that, the forest was impenetrably silent.

Draco chased after her, seizing her arm, forcing her to face him.

‘Leave me alone!’ she shrieked, tearing her arm from his grasp. ‘I don’t want you near me.’

‘Please. Let me explain.’ His eyes were wide and staring, his nostrils flaring.

‘You made a fool of me!’ She blinked back tears of fury.

‘I was doing my job,’ he argued. ‘It was a means to an end… an end I actually believed in. I genuinely thought taking Jeroboam down _legally_, before he killed loads of innocent people, was a pretty good idea.’

‘Except that involved manipulating ME,’ Hermione pouted.

‘Yes. Yes, it did,’ he said plainly.

‘I take it you knew all along that Senor Asusto worked for Gilgad?’

A regretful look shadowed his face.
‘And you didn’t think it suspicious, that your man on the ground, just happened to be hanging around Santa Maria at the same time as a Dark Flux outbreak?’

‘Of course I fucking did!’ he fumed, his eyes glowing silver. ’And it was freaking me out... I almost wanted YOU to put the pieces together, just to confirm my worst fears. That's why I all but told you that Asusto's memory was modified.’

‘I could see that for myself without your little performance,’ Hermione spat angrily. ‘And I suppose the scanner was just another 'prop' in this farce of yours?’

‘I had no idea it was fake… And I meant it when I said I'd never heard of a Gilgad plant in Argentina or any of the other places you showed me on that list either!’

He leant back against one of the tall trees. ‘Truth is, I'm beginning to think I’ve been kept in the dark about a lot of things myself… Makes me feel like a right twat.’

A brisk, rushing sound high above heralded a sudden urgent downpour of rain. A steady stream of rainwater was wheedling its way through the canopy of branches overhead, threatening to soak Hermione if she didn’t take cover.

Draco transfigured a random twig into an umbrella and pulled her under the tree. He hooked his arm around her waist, determined to draw her close.

‘Look, Hermione. I've been a lying, fucking bastard. I know that. But I didn't know how I would feel now… Everything's changed.’

The rain was getting heavier, pummelling the umbrella furiously, almost drowning out his words.

‘Once you had doubts you should have told me,’ Hermione said bitterly. ‘We could have done things differently. Worked it out together.’

‘I know. But I was scared what you'd think.’ He laughed sardonically. ‘Turns out you thought I was a fucking terrorist anyway... And now I've come clean, you'll probably hate me even more.’

Hermione dragged her eyes away from him, surveying their dark, menacing surroundings. She shuddered. In contrast - and in spite of everything - Draco seemed safe and soothing.

‘I don’t hate you, Draco,’ she said, her voice swallowed up by an odd, thickening sensation in her throat. ‘I hate that you lied to me; but I guess I can see why you did.’

Draco visibly relaxed.

‘I’m sorry for laying all this on you. I’m not very good at this type of thing.’

‘Honesty?’

‘Yes… and feelings. Thinking I’m dying all the time has obviously fucked with my head.’

Hermione gave him an awkward half-smile. ‘Then maybe that’s a good thing.’

‘It’s since we went to Argentina… I feel different. Like - like something’s been switched on inside of me. Like I’ve been super-sensitised.’ He sighed deeply. ‘It’s the strangest thing… All this time I’ve been dying, I’ve never felt so alive.’

He tenderly stroked her face, pushing a stray ringlet of hair behind her ear.
She pulled away from him, suddenly overwhelmed by the intensity of feeling welling up inside of her and a sense of rising dread. She felt vulnerable to the darkness closing in on them.

And there was a strange green colour, seeping insistently closer...

‘Harry should be here by now! We have to look for him.’

‘Must we?’

‘The only reason we’re stuck here in this god forsaken forest is to help you find your wife, remember?’ Hermione said in a tone of sharp rebuke. ‘Sometimes I wonder if that’s what you really want,’ she added… particularly when you kiss me, she thought inwardly. He kissed her like she was the only woman in the world.

‘I want to see my child,’ he said ardently. ‘But it’s true... I don’t know what I want anymore. I’m all mixed up.’

His eyes were hot and searching, making her cheeks glow with self-consciousness.

‘Why – why’s that?’

‘You know why.’

Her heart beat a little faster.

‘You can’t say stuff like that, Draco,’ she said, breathlessly.

‘Yes, I can,’ he groused. ‘I’ve stopped caring about the niceties.’

‘Being married isn’t just a nicety. For either of us.’

The strange green was growing progressively brighter… a blinding shard of colour distorting her vision. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples, trying to soothe it away.

‘Hermione?’ Draco cupped her cheek with his hand. ‘Are you alright?’

‘It’s Harry!’ she cried, in abrupt realisation. ‘He’s here!’

‘How do you know?’ Draco asked quizzically, but even as he spoke Harry was blundering stormily through the bushes towards them, dragging his broomstick behind him. His hair and clothes were saturated and he was holding Draco’s broken broomstick.

He threw the splintered wood at Draco’s feet.

‘Don’t ever pull that fucking stunt again, Malfoy,’ he snarled, puce with rage. ‘You’re still a suspect in a murder case. And you’re under MY protection.’

‘We got lost.’

Harry stepped closer, jabbing his finger at Draco’s chest. ‘Bullshit. You veered off-course deliberately.’

‘He’s telling the truth, Harry. We got lost and had an accident,’ Hermione said plaintively.

‘That was no accident,’ Harry said, continuing to glower at Draco who stared disdainfully in return. ‘I don’t know what your game is, Malfoy. But I don’t like it.’
‘Please… Harry…’

Harry cast Hermione a sidelong glance. Was that suspicion or remorse that glinted in his eye? She couldn’t be sure.

‘We need to find Foret-la-Folie,’ Hermione continued, adopting a calm, business-like manner.

‘I’ve already been there. It’s a five-minute walk.’

Draco picked up the broken pieces of his broomstick.

Harry gave him a pitying look. ‘Give it up as a bad job, Malfoy. It’s beyond repair,’ he said, striding back towards the bushes.

Draco threw the broken broomstick to the floor with more venom than necessary, Hermione thought. A muscle in his cheek twitched furiously.

XXX

The main and only thoroughfare of any distinction in Foret-la-Folie comprised a stooped, medieval church and a straggling collection of wood-timbered houses in varying states of decay. Despite the rain, there was a dusty, desiccated air to the place. A couple of buildings were boarded-up for the winter.

‘Whilst you two were having your cosy heart-to-heart in the forest,’ Harry sniffed, ‘I had a good old root around this place.’

What the hell did he mean by that? Hermione thought, prickling with alarm.

Harry continued, unfazed. ‘I knocked on a few doors, asked a few questions, and checked out where La Lena’s office usually is.’ He gestured towards a squat house next-door to the church.

The place was clearly deserted.

‘The company went out of business last year,’ he grimaced.

‘So why did 'La Lena' still operate boat trips from Paris?’ Draco asked warily.

‘Search me,’ Harry grunted. ‘There’s no sign of Rozella’s Land Rover here either, so I think we’re best reverting to Plan A. I’ll get my Muggle mate to check out her number plate and any company records and we’ll take it from there.’

Draco stared disconsolately at the eerily quiet village. ‘This place is dead. Completely dead.’

‘The next question is how we get back to Paris with only one broomstick,’ Harry said snidely.

‘We can always Side-Along-Apparate back to Hotel Drearsville,’ Draco suggested.

‘Ginny was taking the kids to The Burrow for lunch,’ Hermione said, the reality of her home life taking hold of her. ‘It’s best I head back to Ottery St Catchpole.’

‘In that case you’re better off getting yourself to Rouen. It’s much closer than Paris and there’s a Portkey terminal, right by the train station,’ Harry said.

‘Yes, I’ve been there; a quidditch match with Ron,’ she said with a long-suffering sigh.
Harry’s eyes lit up. ‘Of course! Rouen won the European Champions League two years ago. I’m pretty sure they beat the Chudley Cannons on the way to that victory, actually.’

‘Yes, they did.’ How could she ever forget? Ron had drunk a bottle of firewhisky that night, accused her of cursing the match to spite him, and wound up crying in the garden.

‘Didn’t they play your team in the final?’ Harry asked Draco in jovial tones.

‘The semis, actually,’ Draco said. ‘Our keeper, Judd McCorkindale – right fucking wanker - had an atrocious game. We had to sack him after that match.’

‘I remember that now!’ Harry said. ‘Where did he end up?’

Draco thought a moment. ‘The Dundalk Dragons, wasn’t it? Some menial side.’

‘That’s right! Pretty much what he deserved.’

‘Hell, yeah.’

Hermione smiled. Thank god for quidditch, she thought.

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CHAPTER TRACKS:

“ANYONE’S GHOST” by SILVER SWANS

“A FOREST” by THE CURE

“NOTHING THAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR HAS BEEN ANYTHING WE COULD CONTROL” by TAME IMPALA

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Hermione investigates Ephraim Golowitz and makes a startling discovery. Ephraim makes Hermione an offer... and Draco meets the family

23. Ephraim

‘This is why sending Rose and Hugo to Muggle school is a bad idea,’ Molly Weasley intoned. She eyed Hermione sorrowfully, lips pursed tight.

‘Mum’s right,’ Ginny said.

Hermione shot her a glare of fierce resentment. She’d hoped for more support.

‘It’s natural Rose should want a birthday party at home,’ Ginny continued, ‘but it’s clearly impossible. This is so obviously NOT a Muggle house.’ She scanned the kitchen of Wisteria Cottage as she spoke with a withering look. Her eyes rested on the soft bluebell flames flickering in the fireplace, the sturdy cauldron hanging on a large cast-iron hook from the ceiling, the shelves laden with jars of obscure potion ingredients, and the enchanted scouring pad scrubbing diligently at a stew-encrusted casserole pot. There were none of the electronic gadgets associated with Muggle households; not even a light bulb.

‘All she wants is a Marizel Fairyland tea party, with just a few girlfriends, nothing more,’ Hermione said sadly. ‘Marizel’s all the rage at the moment. Some kids’ TV show.’ But she knew it was a hopeless case. She’d already bought Rose a Marizel Fairy dressing up costume from a Muggle supermarket as a pre-emptive consolation prize.

‘What about having a joint birthday party with Arthur at The Burrow the weekend after?’ Molly suggested. ‘After all, their birthdays are so close.’

‘Makes sense,’ Ginny agreed.

‘All the family together!’ Molly chortled. She fixed a beady eye on Hermione, clearly perturbed by her daughter-in-law’s despondence. ‘Ron’s promised to be home by then,’ she added, in soothing tones. ‘Tana sent me an owl yesterday, saying they’d only be in Santa Fe for a few more days. And then they’ve got a big meeting in Savannah with the head of the North American Quidditch League. Ron will be heading home straight afterwards.’

Hermione smiled, feigning relief, although Ron’s absence was the last of her worries. She groaned inwardly, her mind zipping through recent events and all the secrets and confused emotions she felt burdened by. It felt like a ten-ton bomb in her brain, waiting to blow at any moment.

‘Hey, Mummy!’ Hugo shouted, bursting into the kitchen with all the power of a small tornado. ‘James cast a spell! Colloshoo!’
As if on cue, the remaining four children – Rose, James, Albus and Lily - dashed into the kitchen, shrilly announcing James’s awesome new skill.

‘Really?’ Hermione cried. ‘But he’s underage!’

‘It was brilliant!’ Albus enthused, his eyes round with wonder. ‘He stuck Rose to the floor with this nasty, sticky gloop, for AGES!’

‘Can I try? Can I try?’ Hugo yelped, attempting to prise his mother’s wand from her grasp.

‘Absolutely not,’ Hermione said in firm tones, then to Ginny. ‘Strictly speaking, isn’t this a HEX?’

Ginny nodded with an amused twinkle in her eye, clearly too enthralled by her son’s precocious ability to use wandless magic to care.

‘But where did he learn it from?’

‘Don’t be such a fusspot, Hermione,’ Molly said in clacking tones, a rapt smile on her face, as she gazed adoringly at her grandson. ‘There’s no real harm in it. He’s not hurting anybody.’

‘I’m not sure the Ministry will see it that way,’ Hermione muttered.

‘Hey, Granny!’ James bellowed, hands outstretched.

Molly didn’t have time to duck, finding herself glued to the floor for a good ten minutes.

‘Thank Merlin!’ Molly wheezed, once she was able to move again. ‘I didn’t want to miss Geraint Licklestipp on the wireless this evening. Now there’s a man who knows his horticulture!’ she said to Hermione. ‘Today’s programme is about cultivating Horkclumps so that they don’t run rampant in the garden – would mean we could finally get rid of the gnomes! They’re such a menace…’

‘And we need to get going too,’ Ginny said, signalling to her brood. ‘I promised Uncle George a visit.’

‘Have you heard George’s good news?’ Molly asked Hermione. ‘He’s opening a shop in America… at Greenleaf Plaza in Brookhaven!’

‘Puts Diagon Alley to shame, apparently,’ Ginny said proudly.

‘And there’s talk of another shop, in that fancy new ‘Mickey Mouse’ mall in Colorado, that everyone’s talking about!’ Molly said, positively effervescent.

‘MICKEY MOUSE?’ Hermione asked, incredulous. ‘Are you serious?’

Ginny rolled her eyes. ‘Really, Hermione, haven’t you seen “Fantasia”?’

‘It’s all thanks to his new investor,’ Molly said, in ebullient tones. ‘That American chap – Ephraim Golowitz – such a charmer!’

Hermione’s insides chilled. ‘Ephraim Golowitz? Are you sure?’

‘But of course I’m sure!’ Molly said tetchily. ‘He came to The Burrow, just last week, for dinner.’
She grinned, basking in the memory. ‘What a lovely man! Heaped praise on my Pumpkin Pottage! Such a shame he’s caught up with those ghastly Malfoy people. Still, business is business I suppose… And he was hugely impressed by George’s latest range of confectionery. He thought the candy whistles, that change colour according to your mood, were an absolute marvel, and could even be sold to Muggles!’

Hermione didn’t have a chance to delve deeper, as Molly and Ginny energetically corralled the young Potters out of the house, disappointing Rose and Hugo, who had school in the morning.

‘How’s Harry?’ Hermione managed to ask Ginny as a parting shot.

‘Hardly seen him,’ Ginny replied, with a weary shrug. She planted a farewell kiss on Hermione’s cheek.

Hermione had hardly heard from him either, even though she’d returned from France three days ago.

His sole communication had been by owl, cursorily informing her that progress tracing Rozella Gagnon had pretty much ground to a halt. Her Land Rover was registered in the name of her father, Bernard Gagnon, but he – like Rozella – had been officially ‘off the grid’ for some years.

She tried calling Harry’s mobile. There was a ringing tone, followed swiftly by a rude, monotonous burr, sounding ominously like he’d cut her off.

She had similar bad luck calling Henrik, hoping for an update on his investigation into Gilgad’s suspiciously sited installations. A polite, snooty recorded voice constantly described him as ‘Unavailable’.

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The next day, Hermione received an owl from Padma Patil. There was no mistaking her tone of quiet desperation. Work was difficult, and there’d been no word from Tony… something Hermione found rather disquieting.

Padma wanted to meet up. She suggested Golden Square in Central London. It was a place familiar to the both of them. Occasionally, when they’d wanted to discuss work issues far from the prying eyes and ears of the Ministry, they’d bought a sandwich and a drink at a nearby Muggle café and had their lunch there.

They arranged to meet that Friday.

Hermione knew of an Internet café close by, where she could hopefully charge her mobile phone and get down to some research, Muggle-style, of Ephraim Golowitz and Gilgad Inc.

She felt she had to be doing something… Ephraim’s latest venture with George Weasley and his ingratiating himself with the family had the distinct feel of an encircling manoeuvre. Any clues, any pointers, about his true personality and motives, might prove useful.

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Armed with a large cappuccino, her fingers tingling with anticipation as they skimmed the
computer’s keyboard, she ‘googled’ Ephraim Golowitz.

First up was Gilgad’s corporate website. An avuncular picture of Ephraim, blue eyes sparkling with steely confidence, graced the homepage. Ephraim was described as President, having resigned as CEO a year and a half ago – citing his decision to make his move to the UK a permanent one, and his increased involvement with Herb Healing Ltd.

Gilgad’s head office was based in Portland, Oregon, and they had a major manufacturing plant in Juneau, Alaska. Both towns, Hermione noted, were renowned for sizeable wizarding populations. The company’s research division was in Athens, Ohio. Ephraim, she noticed, had graduated from the University of Ohio and had clearly maintained strong links with his Alma Mater.

She browsed the financial pages of leading Muggle newspapers, mostly offering comment on how Gilgad was outstripping its competitors in most sectors. Ephraim was praised in universally glowing terms as a ‘colossus of the business world,’ ‘a corporate lionheart,’ ‘a man for our times.’

Little seemed to be known of his background, bar an incessant ‘humble beginnings’ mantra, which positively screamed corporate press release, Hermione thought wryly. Ephraim was commonly described as descended from immigrant stock. His ancestor, Bronislaw Golowitz, hailing originally from Volyhnia and of Polish-Russian extraction, arrived in America in 1909.

Most reports stated that Ephraim was born and raised in Chenooth, Minnesota. Hermione suspected Ephraim was actually from Asgard – a well-known Minnesotan wizarding town – but she doubted he’d been schooled there. He’d likely attended Ilvermorny in Massachusetts, which was considered the most prestigious wizarding school in the United States – on a par with Hogwarts – though there were other lesser-known schools for magic to hand, principally in Tennessee and Washington State and on the wilder shores of Lake Superior, across the border in Canada.

She was desperate to find more information on his personal life, but there was precious little available.

Eventually, she chanced on a site which demonstrated more interest in ‘Lifestyle’ than money matters. She greedily perused an archived article from the early 1990s, focusing on Ephraim’s wife, Iona Hart; described in cloying terms as the ‘power behind the throne.’ She was the well-connected daughter of a US Senator, and reportedly keen for her husband to follow in her father’s footsteps into politics.

The article chiefly comprised lovingly lit photos of their impressively large Palladian-styled house in Mendocino, situated on the Californian coast, and boasting ‘magnificent ocean views’.

There was an accompanying colour photo of Ephraim and his family, dating from some time earlier, likely taken around the same time as the photo Hermione had already seen of The Geneva Group, some thirty years ago. Ephraim looked fit, young and trim, and was arm in arm with Iona. She was a blonde, willowy woman, holding the hand of a small, golden-haired girl, no more than two or three years old. Hermione quickly realised this must be Sylvestra. Looking more closely at Iona’s strong-boned, striking features and statuesque poise, there was no mistaking the resemblance.

Her mind wandered to Katya. There was a hint of Ephraim about her, she supposed - something in the high cheekbones – but she was nothing like her mother. She squinted hard at the computer screen. She reckoned Sylvestra was the older child by about three years or so. So why wasn’t Iona pregnant? Or if Katya was already born, why wasn’t she included in the family photo?
She filed this thought away for later reflection, realising that she might have stumbled upon something either potentially significant or fanciful – she couldn’t decide which. What if Katya had discovered she had a different mother to Sylvestra? Might that be a reason for her to quit Malfoy Manor? Perhaps Svetlana Kerpin was a long-lost relative?

So where was Iona Hart now? Hermione wondered. She soon found a number of news articles reporting her death after a long, unnamed illness, in 2008. That had to be around the same time that Ephraim invested in Draco’s company, Hermione figured… when Draco was dating Sylvestra.

She glanced at her watch. She was running out of time. She was due to meet Padma in less than ten minutes.

However, one particular business article - ‘Gilgad Boss Quits to Focus on Family’ - pulled her attention back to the computer screen in front of her.

There was no mention of Ephraim’s move to the UK or Herb Healing. Instead, Ephraim attributed his decision to step down as primarily to ‘focus on the welfare of his youngest daughter.’

Hermione checked the date of the article. It was dated September 2011 – almost five months after Katya’s widely reported disappearance that April.

How could Ephraim focus on Katya’s welfare if she was still missing? Hermione thought furiously.

She hastily scrolled through document after document written about Ephraim at this time, and yes, the same story was repeated across the Muggle media. Ephraim had given an interview, asserting that after a tragic breakdown due to marital difficulties, his long-lost daughter had returned home safely, where she was recuperating with the support of her loving family.

Such blatant lies! How had he got away with it? So much for journalistic integrity…

Was there any mention of Katya’s husband, she wondered? But Draco’s sole name-check was a listing as Global Business Manager at Herb Healing.

The harsh buzzing of her mobile phone disturbed her ruminations.

It was Henrik.

‘Hermione?’ he said in his rich, Danish twang.

‘Hi, Henrik. It’s good to hear from you,’ she said, sounding a little distracted. Her head was still bursting with unanswered questions prompted by her latest discovery.

‘I can’t talk long. I’m in New Zealand! This call will cost me a fucking leg and arm.’

Hermione smiled indulgently.

‘I’ve found one of the Gilgad facilities I told you about.’

‘You have?’ Hermione asked, her heart beating rapidly.
'Yup. Slap bang next to the place where there was a sudden mass death incident last year. The whole thing’s very peculiar, actually.’ His voice faded momentarily, and then resumed, stronger. ‘If you can, I think you should come and see it. And there’s some folks out here you should talk to as well.’

Hermione racked her brain. How could she possibly do that? She couldn’t just jaunt off to New Zealand... Ron probably wasn’t home for another week.

But here, potentially, was the proof that Gilgad was engineering Dark Flux attacks.

Could she possibly make the trip there and back in a single day? She’d be exhausted, of course. Inter-continental Portkey travel might be super-fast, but it was hellishly bad for you. And a return ticket would cost a small fortune. She certainly wouldn’t have Gilgad’s expense account funding THIS particular expedition.

‘Are you still there?’ came Henrik’s voice.

‘Yes, I was just thinking… Maybe I could try to come out tomorrow?’

Henrik snorted with laughter. ‘Are you speaking from England?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, your flight will take at least twenty-four hours. And you’ll probably have a stopover on top of that. So … I was thinking of visiting a friend in Auckland over the next few days, which would give you plenty of time to fly down here at your leisure. The facility’s close to a town called Wanaka in the South Island. You’d be best flying into Christchurch, or even better, Queenstown.’

‘Okay, Henrik. I need to work out the logistics and get back to you.’

XXX

She was late to meet Padma, but when she arrived at their usual bench, there was no sign of her. She’d probably got held up at work, which was hardly surprising. There was always a huge backlog of stuff to get through, Hermione thought, as she delved into a brown paper bag to retrieve the sandwich she’d bought for lunch. There was no point politely waiting. She was starving.

‘It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it? You’d hardly think this was still January, would you?’ came a deep, burnished baritone in an American accent.

Her mind had been so full of Ephraim Golowitz for the last hour; she barely felt a jolt of surprise when he sat next to her.

Instead, she had to forcibly bite her tongue so that she didn’t accuse him outright, there and then, of masterminding terrorist attacks… and of doing something to his daughter, whether it was hiding her or killing her… because there had to be a damn good reason for him to feel confident enough to spout that crap to the press.

But one look at the two beefy guys in black overcoats, looking conspicuously like Ephraim’s security detail, seated on a bench close by, put paid to any outburst.
He’d have her killed in an instant if he thought she was onto him.

‘Have you been following me?’ she grimaced.

His face puckered, as though wounded by her insinuation. ‘It’s a pleasant, sunny afternoon. I fancied a stroll. And my London office is a minute’s walk away.’

‘Arcana?’ Hermione asked, perplexed.

‘No. Herb Healing. Our dear mutual friend Draco’s prolonged absence is presenting me with some difficulties, so I’m having to take a much more hands-on approach.’

Hermione had worked hard to suppress her thoughts and feelings about Draco since returning from France. But now, under Ephraim’s keen, blue-eyed scrutiny, she could feel an icy slither of panic and raw emotion churning through her gut at the mere mention of his name.

‘I’ve no doubt Draco will be home to help you out soon enough,’ she said in trite tones.

‘That would be useful - though highly unlikely, seeing as he’s stuck in Paris with your friend, Harry Potter.’

Hermione swiftly mastered her features into a cool mask of composure. ‘Really, Mr Golowitz, I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.’

She made a great show of wrapping up the remains of her half-eaten sandwich and smoothing any stray crumbs from her skirt. She’d completely lost her appetite and had a desperate urge to run as fast as her feet could carry her.

‘Now, if you would excuse me, I’m actually on my way to meet a friend…’

‘Oh, yes. Poor Padma Patil.’ Ephraim frowned. ‘She can’t make your little meeting. She’s been summoned to the Wizengamot for an emergency hearing into her professional conduct. I’m afraid some pretty nasty allegations have surfaced…’ He leant close, blue eyes sparkling dangerously, and whispered in deep, lugubrious tones in her ear. ‘Fraud, corruption, that sort of thing.’ She cast a sharp, sidelong glance at the man, smirking smarmily beside her. How could she have ever considered him attractive? There was something cold and reptilian about him, which repulsed her.

‘Frankly, Hermione,’ Ephraim continued in a tone of faux confidentiality, ‘you’re better off out of that place. You should come and work for me.’

‘Really? Then why did you think I would jump at the chance to get my old job back, when you suggested I spearhead a prosecution against Saul Jeroboam? What’s made you change your tune?’

Ephraim’s smirk froze. He clearly didn’t like being challenged.

A burst of frosted, glacial blue fogged her mind, as Hermione momentarily sensed the brutish violence of the man lurking beneath the polite, mannered surface.

‘I personally believe your talents are under-utilised in that measly department you’ve been toiling away in for so many years,’ Ephraim said, in calm, measured tones, having reined in his irritation. ‘I was recommending a superior position, more suited to your skills and experience.’
‘I’d never work for YOU.’

‘Well, if true, that’s a pity… But if a life spent plodding along in the higher echelons of the Ministry’s civil service is what you really want, Hermione, I can make that happen too.’

‘You don’t have the power to offer me any such thing,’ Hermione retorted, leaping up from the bench to make a quick getaway. ‘Thanks for the flattering offer. But I’ll make my own way in the world.’

‘Not so fast, young lady.’ Ephraim grasped her elbow and pulled her back down.

‘As it happens, I DO have that power. You might not like to hear such a thing; it rather flies in the face of Ministry protocol, doesn’t it? But such is life… I promise I’ll reward you handsomely, though, if you do what I ask… But the deal has changed.’

‘I’m not interested,’ Hermione said firmly, eyes flashing furiously. She rubbed her elbow, which was sore after being manhandled.

‘Forget grassing up Jeroboam,’ Ephraim sneered, with a blasé flick of his hand. ‘For now, at least. Let’s focus first on our little Paris problem…’

‘I’ve already told you! I don’t know what you’re talking about!’ She was increasingly conscious of Ephraim’s lackeys staring at her.

‘Then you have a very short memory,’ Ephraim said smoothly. ‘A little dicky bird told me that just this past weekend, your friend Potter was interviewing Draco at Auror HQ – and I was told that YOU were also present.’

Hermione crinkled her forehead in a direct pretence of outraged confusion – though her mind was working overtime. She had to at least claim half of this as true; obviously Ephraim had an inside mole, so outright denial would sound plain stupid.

‘Yes, I WAS at Auror HQ… but I didn’t see Draco! And I’m fairly certain Harry didn’t either, because he was working with ME.’

‘I’ve no idea what your Potter friend wants,’ Ephraim said, ignoring her protestations. ‘But I suspect Draco’s being framed for a crime he never committed.’ Ephraim shook his head regretfully. ‘It seems most unfair. Particularly as I hear Draco’s been extremely ill. Fatally, even.’

‘Now listen here, Mr Golowitz!’ Hermione said, brimming with indignation. ‘I’ve been helping Harry with an investigation – it’s supposed to be top secret, but as you have some very strange ideas going on here that need to be laid to rest, I’ll be open with you…’

Ephraim narrowed his eyes. ‘Go on.’

‘Harry is tracking a gang that is illegally trading in hellebore and asphodel,’ she said, recalling Ron’s excuse to the Ministry that he planned to use to explain his absence when he went to Argentina. ‘This gang communicates using a set of complex, archaic runes, which very few people can translate.’ She threw him her haughtiest look, chin tilted high. ‘Luckily, I’m an expert in this field, which is why I was in Paris… Sadly, I know nothing of Draco’s whereabouts, although I wish him well. If you think I know anything more, you have been grossly misinformed.’
Ephraim blinked hard in surprise. ‘My source is impeccable.’

‘Clearly not,’ she said in arch tones. She stood up to leave, aware that Ephraim’s goons also rose, in tandem.

Ephraim studied her intently, an admiring smile creeping across his face.

‘I really rather like you, Hermione,’ he said, ‘which is why, THIS time, I’m going to believe you. But I meant what I said. You’re a wasted woman. And I could advance your career immeasurably.’ He pronounced this with dramatic relish. ‘Just tell your Potter friend to leave my boy alone… I urgently need him back here.’

Hermione shrugged. ‘I can do that. But I suspect Harry won’t know what the hell I’m talking about.’

Ephraim levered himself off the bench, pulling himself up to his full height. He loomed over Hermione.

‘Well, I’m glad we had this illuminating little chat,’ he said. He grabbed her hand with his own. ‘I sincerely hope it’s not our last.’ He signalled to the two men in their dark overcoats, and then swept imperiously past her and out of Golden Square.

Hermione’s hand ached from the strength of his grip. She stood there for a moment, staring in stunned amazement at the statue of a Roman gladiator – or was it a god of some kind? - standing guard at the centre of the square.

She had to call Harry and Draco immediately.

‘Please pick up,’ she begged. There was a nasty, wringing sensation roiling through her gut. She didn’t presume, for one moment, that Ephraim had swallowed her story. And Harry had been right all along… If there was a mole at Auror HQ, then no one could be trusted.

Luckily, Ephraim didn’t seem to harbour any suspicion of Draco. That, at least, was a small mercy.

‘For Merlin’s sake,’ she grunted in exasperation, as Harry’s phone finally responded with a dead tone. ‘Just switch the bloody thing on, will you?’

There was nothing for it. She had to go home, plead with Molly to watch the kids, while she got herself to Paris.

She quickly found a conveniently sheltered spot to Apparate from.

A momentary throb of alarm rippled through her. Poor Padma… Really, she should be trying to help her… But she had to prioritise. And right now, Harry and Draco’s safety came first.

XXX

‘I’ve got to visit Uncle Harry tonight, I’m afraid,’ Hermione explained to Rose and Hugo as they walked home from school.

‘Can we come, Mummy?’ Hugo asked, swinging Hermione’s arm to and fro as he tripped along beside her.
‘Not tonight, darling,’ Hermione said, with a sorry smile.

‘I guess we’re going to Granny’s then,’ Rose said, clearly disappointed.

‘Well, I’m sure if we ask her nicely, she’ll make you some treacle tarts!’ Hermione said brightly. She gave Rose, who was holding her other hand, a reassuring squeeze, but it didn’t seem to do the trick. Rose continued to mope all the way back to Wisteria Cottage.

‘If I’d known you wouldn’t be here tonight,’ she sighed, ‘I could have asked Jenny Slater if I could go for a sleepover.’

‘Well, I don’t need to be away for you to do THAT, Rose.’

‘What I’d most like, though,’ Rose said, as they trundled up the garden path towards their front door, ‘is to invite Jenny to OUR house. I’ve sort of invited her already to come and make Cauldron Cakes…’ Her light, high-pitched voice continued in a singsong fashion, whilst Hermione was murmuring ‘Alohomora,’ bundling Rose and Hugo into the house, removing their shoes and coats, and frantically seeking a quill to dash off a begging note to Molly. ‘The thing is, Mummy, I never have anyone over for a play, which is why no one invites me to theirs … which is why it’s so nice that Jenny said that HER Mummy and Daddy said I could go to THEIR house for a sleepover. So, can Jenny come and play? Please, Mummy?’ Rose said in imploring tones.

‘Come HERE?’ Hermione asked, suddenly attuning herself to what Rose was saying. She continued rummaging through the drawers of her kitchen unit, pulling out extraneous bits of paper, an unwound ball of string which seemed to go on for an eternity, and an assorted array of Chudley Cannons player cards. ‘That would be difficult, Rose. You know it would.’

‘But Mummy… it’s not fair,’ Rose said plaintively, jutting out her bottom lip. ‘All my friends have parties at their houses, but I’m never allowed to, and Paula Ingram says there must be a monster in my house, because no one ever comes here, and Davina Bly says we’re too poor to have a car.’

‘Silly, spiteful nonsense, Rose! You should know better than to listen to that sort of thing – ah, here we are…,’ Hermione fretted, finally excavating a bedraggled-looking quill. ‘Careful, Hugo!’ she yelled, as her young son roughly pushed past her, heading straight to the backdoor, which was wide open … leading to the garden.

‘It’s Uncle Harry!’ he squealed excitedly.

‘Who’s that strange man, Mummy?’ Rose said.

Hermione’s head shot up, her eyes instantly locking with Draco, who was standing next to Harry, at the open door.

His hair was a little darker than usual, his eyes a rich brownish-green, the colour of sea-soaked seaweed, clearly the result of a fast-fading glamour.

‘Hey! How’s my little terrier?’ Harry chuckled as Hugo bounced heavily into his arms. He enthusiastically swooped Hugo upwards, so that his head almost crashed into the ceiling, much to Hugo’s huge excitement.

Rose held back, hand clinging to her mother’s skirt, as she so often did when a stranger was in the
vicinity.

‘Harry…’ Hermione said, a ghost of a smile on her face. She couldn’t bring herself to look at Draco again, barely believing he was standing here, in her kitchen, with her children. ‘I was planning to come and see you tonight.’

‘YOU WERE?’ Harry said quizzically, releasing Hugo. ‘Didn’t Molly meet you at the school gates? I sent her an owl. She said she’d look after the kids.’

Hermione blanched. ‘No, I – I didn’t see her.’

‘In which case, she’s probably coming HERE.’ Harry cast a worried glance at Draco.

‘I’ll just take a walk around the garden, shall I?’ Draco said, quickly latching on, stepping backwards towards the open door.

‘Do you play football?’ Hugo shouted enthusiastically. ‘I’m going to be Robin Van Persie when I grow up! Do you know who he plays for?’

Draco looked a little nonplussed. ‘Sorry… I’m not sure I do…’

He gave Hermione a desperate look. ‘Arsenal,’ she mouthed.

‘Hold on… it’s coming to me…’ he said, pretending he was dredging up some deeply hidden memory. ‘Chelsea, isn’t it?’

‘CHELSEA?’ Hugo scoffed. ‘They’re rubbish! Paul Tankerton supports them. And he eats bogies.’

Draco’s face cracked into a broad grin. ‘No, silly me. I meant Liverpool.’

‘LIVERPOOL? Yuk!’ Hugo pointed his finger at his mouth, stuck his tongue out, and made loud barfing sounds.

‘Okay then, maybe it’s Arsenal?’ Draco said, triumphantly.

‘What’s your name?’ Rose piped up from behind her mother, in a timorous voice.

Another wave of helpless confusion swept across Draco’s face.

‘Don’t be rude,’ Hermione hissed at her daughter, although she was secretly shocked at Rose’s uncharacteristic directness.

Harry instantly scooped Rose into his arms and tickled her furiously, making her squeak with pink-cheeked laughter.

‘You can be goalie and I’ll shoot penalties,’ Hugo said, tugging at Draco’s coat-sleeve. He wasn’t going to let this go…

‘I think we need to get you to Granny’s,’ Hermione said, but it was too late. Draco shrugged helplessly at Hermione, allowing Hugo to drag him by the hand.

The loud clank of the doorknocker resounded through the house.
Hermione froze. That had to be Molly. There was no way she could see Draco!

Clearly Harry had the exact same thought.

‘Right, children!’ Harry barked. ‘Last one to get their jim-jams and toothbrushes is a nincompoop!’

He looked at Draco and nodded brusquely towards the garden.

Hugo relinquished Draco’s hand, a look of disappointment on his face.

‘Next time,’ Draco said, patting the boy on the shoulder.

‘Are you a secret person?’ Rose chirruped, gazing shiny-eyed at Draco.

Draco solemnly raised his finger to his lips, eyes wide in warning.

Rose giggled.

A second, more urgent clattering at the door galvanised the children into action.

Draco slipped outside.

Molly didn’t take kindly to being left on the doorstep. For once, she chose Harry as the object of her ire, berating him for not telling Hermione his plans… And yes, she had been a little late for school pick-up, but that was because Audrey had popped round to borrow a spot of Dittany… though Merlin knows what she wanted it for… and then Molly hadn’t been able to get rid of her.

Five minutes of whirlwind activity later, and Molly and the children had been hustled out of the house, meaning Draco could come back in. The glamour had all but gone. Draco’s eyes had already returned to their customary cool, grey stare, and his hair was streaked with a silvery sheen.

‘I had to bring him with me.’ Harry gestured towards Draco, his buoyant mood seemingly evaporated from the moment Rose and Hugo left the house. ‘Francoise had a family matter to attend to.’

‘She probably just has a FAMILY, Harry,’ Hermione complained, crossing her arms tightly.

‘Says the avowed workaholic,’ Harry mumbled under his breath sarcastically.

‘Why were you coming to see Harry?’ Draco asked in curt tones.

‘I ran into Ephraim Golowitz today… Or, rather, he ran into me…’ Hermione explained. ‘Harry, you’re right to be paranoid about Auror HQ. Ephraim knows you were interviewing Malfoy the other day. He also knew I was there too, but I think I might have got around that.’

Harry shrugged. ‘I expected no less.’ He glanced at Draco. ‘As long as Malfoy’s cover isn’t blown.’

“And I spoke to Henrik,’ she said, somewhat put out that Harry wasn’t as bothered as she thought he should be about Ephraim’s insider at Auror HQ. ‘He’s in New Zealand. Says he’s found evidence of a Gilgad facility close to where there was a Dark Flux outbreak. He thinks I should visit.’
‘We all should,’ Draco said.

‘Most definitely,’ Harry agreed.

It occurred to Hermione that she should tell them what Ephraim had told the Muggle media about Katya…. She watched Harry ignite the stove with a deft flick of his wand, wondering how she could phrase it, fearing the fallout. ‘I’ll make us a cuppa while you pack a few things, Hermione,’ Harry said.

‘How long will I be in Paris?’

‘Pack an overnighter to be on the safe side. Those bureaucratic bastards at the French Ministry finally sobered up long enough to open the file on Svetlana Kerpin.’ He paused. ‘We’ve been granted first access rights to her property for tonight only, though her house has been plottable for some months now, apparently. Her licence expired last year.’

‘That’s great news,’ Hermione said, though everything about Harry’s demeanour spoke to the contrary.

‘Yeah, makes up for a pretty shitty week,’ he grumbled, grabbing three mugs from a high cupboard. ‘I didn’t want to bore you with our misery.’

‘What’s happened?’ she asked, alarmed.

‘NOTHING,’ Harry said bluntly. ‘That’s what made it so shitty. I’ve been trying to trace the untraceable… those Gagnons are slippery buggers, let me tell you… and Draco’s been at St Gaspard’s.’

‘Whatever for?’

‘Blood-replenishing treatments,’ Draco drawled. ‘Routine follow-up.’

‘I see.’ Though she didn’t entirely trust either of them at this juncture. There was a tense silence. ‘I’ll go and pack,’ she eventually said.

She grabbed a bag in her bedroom, stuffing it with a few overnight items. She wondered if she should add some extra clothes… this might be the perfect opportunity to make that trip to New Zealand. Harry had fortuitously paved the way.

‘Your tea,’ Draco said.

He was standing at the entrance to her bedroom, holding a hot, steaming mug.

‘Where shall I put it?’

‘Oh, just over there,’ she said, pointing to her bedside table. Draco stepped deeper into the bedroom, and tried to make space amidst her towering piles of bedtime reading books for the mug.

She stopped what she was doing, momentarily mesmerised by the sight of him facing her across the bed.
Even now, with Harry a matter of metres away, she felt intensely drawn to him – despite being in the same room, standing next to the same bed, where she had conceived her children. His mere physical presence made her stomach tighten and her heart race unhealthily.

‘You’ve got nice kids,’ he said, a little awkwardly. His eyes gleamed brightly in the dusky grey light which had fast fallen upon them.

‘Thanks.’

‘I didn’t realise they went to Muggle school.’

‘Yes,’ she said in a bolder voice, looking him in the eye. ‘I wanted them to have something…’ She grappled for a way to put it, but her mind had gone blank.

‘Something normal?’ he said, surprising her.

‘Sort of.’

‘Something of YOU, then.’

‘Yes.’

‘Must be tricky, though. Your daughter seemed a bit upset.’

‘It’ll blow over,’ Hermione said, trying to laugh it off. She could feel a warm, crimson blush staining her cheeks. She wasn’t sure it felt appropriate to be discussing her children with him.

‘Anyway. Sorry that they were a bit…forward.’

‘It was refreshing,’ he smiled wanly. ‘It’s refreshing, because… Scorpius hasn’t talked to me at all for almost two years; ever since Katya left,’ Draco said huskily. ‘Probably even before then, actually,’ he added, on reflection.

Draco had no idea that she already knew this, which didn’t feel right somehow.

‘Does he have any friends his own age?’ she asked tentatively.

‘None,’ Draco sighed. ‘And I’m never there…’

He looked away from her, seemingly torn between talking more and heading back to Harry. She briskly resumed her packing, thinking it best to make his mind up for him. Having him here, in her bedroom, was almost too much.

But the moment he left the room, she was struck by a sudden, awful realisation. He hadn’t been ‘torn’ between staying and going. He’d looked away because he felt ‘moved’.

And now she’d made herself look like a cold-hearted bitch...

If only she had a Time-Turner, she thought desperately, just so she could replay the last few minutes. Anything to dispel the weighty aching sensation in her chest that seemed to strengthen every time she replayed their conversation in her head.
Harry was supping his tea, deep in thought. ‘You need to get your wards sorted out, Hermione,’ he said in abrasive tones. ‘Took us three minutes flat to work out your key password to break and enter, didn’t it, Malfoy?’

‘That odd-looking kneazle-creature you had at Hogwarts…’ Draco explained.

‘Crookshanks?’

‘Not exactly testing stuff,’ Harry said cuttingly. ‘I’d have expected some kind of complicated Ancient Greek algorithm from you, at the very least.’

‘Or maybe that was the point?’ Draco suggested. ‘A sly double-bluff?’

Harry pondered a moment and then vehemently shook his head. ‘Nah… if that was the case, how did YOU guess it so easily?’

‘I thought we were going to Paris?’ Hermione said in terse tones.

‘Indeed we are,’ Harry said, plonking his empty mug in the sink. ‘Are you ready?’

Draco excused himself to use the bathroom.

‘Actually, Harry…’ Hermione said hesitantly. She waited for Draco to leave the room. ‘There’s something else I found out today.’

‘Go on,’ Harry said.

‘September last year, Ephraim told the Muggle media that Katya was alive and well… and at home… recovering from a nervous breakdown.’

‘Why would he do that, when he knew damn well she wasn’t?’ Harry said, a puzzled expression on his face.

‘Well, it might mean he knows where she is,’ Hermione intimated, her voice quavering as she spoke. ‘Maybe he’s holding her captive?’ She couldn’t bring herself to mention the more ‘lethal’ alternative.

‘What about the Roses?’ Harry asked. ‘They’ve been sent to Draco from all over Europe.’

‘Maybe Svetlana Kerpin was sending them on Ephraim’s instruction?’

‘I guess that’s possible…’ Harry mused. ‘Ephraim maybe wanted Draco to think Katya’s missing to keep him busy… and out of the way.’

Hermione thought of the note that Katya had left Draco – ‘Never Forget.’ What if she was in collusion with her father? But when she recalled the wide-eyed, serene young woman she’d seen in the portrait hanging at Malfoy Manor, somehow that didn’t seem likely.

‘Or maybe Ephraim said he knew where she was just to get the press off his back? It could be as simple as that,’ Hermione muttered.
‘Or it means he knows she’s dead already,’ Draco said, his voice ringing out from the doorway behind them. ‘Maybe he had her killed.’

‘That’s – that’s ridiculous. How could a man kill his own child?’ Hermione choked. Her cheeks glowed with embarrassment. How long had he been listening?

‘If she knew something that could destroy him, that’s how,’ Draco said bitterly. ‘So, when were you planning on telling me about this, Hermione? How long have you known?’

She swallowed hard, unable to meet his hollow-eyed, unwavering gaze.

‘Only since today.’

‘Who told you? I don’t imagine it was Ephraim,’ he said snidely.

She shook her head. ‘Muggle news reports on the Internet.’

‘And – and did any of these Muggle reports mention… a child?’ Draco asked.

‘No… I’m afraid not.’

She heaved a weary sigh. Of course he’d deserved to know about his own wife and child. What had she been thinking?

She chanced a glance at Draco. He was wearing his blank, bottled-up face – the one she now knew was capable of hiding his true feelings.

Something turned over inside of her and she suddenly understood her TRUE reluctance to report what Ephraim had told the press. Sure, it was partly out of misguided kindness, wanting to protect Draco’s feelings... She’d feared that he would assume the worst. And she’d been right.

But it was also because she feared everything might change between THEM.

She dug her fingernails into the palm of her hand, her head swimming with shame and confusion.

A dead Katya… a ‘murdered’ Katya, would have the potential to become a pure, sanctified figure in his eyes, tainting any feelings he had for herself.

For some unfathomable reason, this felt like an unbearable loss.

‘Right,’ Harry said, in resolute tones. ‘We’ve got lots to do. Let’s get to Paris, check out this Svetlana Kerpin’s house, see what we can find there, and then take a little trip to see this Henrik fellow Hermione’s always going on about…’ He looked at Draco. ‘And then the sooner we can re-integrate you to life at Malfoy Manor, the better.’

‘Okay, Potter. But the first thing we do, before any of that, is Floo-call Bill Weasley,’ Draco declared. ‘We want this place warded up to the fucking eyeballs… The Burrow, too.’

‘I’ve been meaning to work on the wards,’ Hermione said apologetically.

‘I told you to talk to Bill about this weeks ago,’ Draco said sourly, though there was a glint of
anxious concern in his eyes. ‘You can’t carry on risking your kids the way you have been, Hermione.’

‘He’ll want to know why.’

Draco looked thoughtful. ‘You trust him, right?’ he asked both Harry and Hermione.

‘Completely,’ Harry said.

‘Then we tell him… We tell him everything.’

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“VIOLIN CONCERTO – 1st” by PHILIP GLASS

“NEWBORN” by MUSE

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Chapter Summary

A visit to Svetlana’s house in Paris quickly spirals out of control…

24. **Hide Fox, And All After**

Bill Weasley was surprisingly calm, Hermione thought. Harry had told him everything that had happened and Bill had barely flinched. His sole expression of incredulity had been a single raised eyebrow when Draco Malfoy had Floo-ed into the kitchen at Shell Cottage, but he had treated Draco with polite courtesy and even some sympathy – most particularly when Draco detailed the events surrounding his wife's long disappearance.

Fleur was upstairs putting Louis to bed for the majority of their conversation, but when she eventually made an appearance she was open-mouthed at the sight of Draco Malfoy drinking tea in her kitchen. Bill shot her one quick look of warning and she visibly restrained herself from unleashing a torrent of questions, but her brow was knitted with frustrated curiosity as she silently withdrew, leaving them to continue their discussion undisturbed.

'Don't worry, she's good at keeping secrets,' Bill said, once the kitchen door had been firmly closed behind her. 'As for beefing up your security,' he continued, addressing Hermione in particular, 'leave that to me. I'll also shore up the wards at The Burrow – Dad's a bit lax about that sort of thing."

'You *really* think Ephraim might target my children?' Hermione asked, aghast. Draco had suggested as much, but hearing it from Bill – calm, sensible Bill, whose integrity and judgement she trusted implicitly – sent an involuntary cold shiver shuddering through her.

Bill fixed her with a steely gaze. 'You're meddling in the distinctly nefarious affairs of an extremely unpleasant and potentially dangerous wizard, Hermione.'

'We should warn Arthur and Molly,' Harry suggested.

Hermione instinctively bridled at this. 'Lord, no! Haven't they been through enough?' They’d never truly recovered from losing Fred at the battle of Hogwarts. Hermione wanted them to enjoy the illusion, for as long as possible, that for once the wizarding world wasn't besieged by dark forces that threatened to overwhelm them all.

Bill’s face darkened. The jagged scar inflicted on him by Greyback so many years ago stood out silver and livid against his weathered, tanned skin.

'Perhaps Hermione is right,' he said. 'Maybe we don't tell Mum and Dad, but George is another matter, most particularly if he is thinking of doing business with this guy.'

'You said Ephraim thought George's confectionery range could be sold to Muggles, didn't you, Hermione?' Draco piped up. Everyone swivelled to stare at him.

'That's what Molly told me,' Hermione replied.
'Well, George should definitely be stopped from getting in too deep with Ephraim,' Harry said hastily. 'But we don't want him to suddenly cut all contact. That would make Ephraim suspicious.'

Bill rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'You know, it might be useful if Hermione looked like she was cooperating with Ephraim too?'

Hermione snorted in derision. 'No way! I've no interest in doing anything that man wants! He's probably lost me my job – and Padma Patil's as well!'

'But it would be a classic double-cross,' Bill said smoothly. 'You could make out you're doing what Ephraim wants and try to launch a prosecution in the Wizengamot against Jeroboam, saying he plans to weaponise Dark Flux. And then summon Ephraim as a witness. Put him on the spot. Force him to spill the beans on what he knows to build the case against Jeroboam... Would save you guys a lot of legwork.'

'Truth is though, Bill, any investigation would be better coming from Auror HQ. Jeroboam's Swiss,' Harry said.

'And frankly, the best I could do - legally - is draw attention to the murders Los Rojos committed in Argentina... but strictly speaking, this is more an issue for the Argentine Ministry of Magic and they've been useless,' Hermione said sniffily.

'Argentina's hosting the Quidditch World Cup next year,' Draco pointed out. 'They won't want bad press.'

'It would also have to be proved, beyond doubt, that Los Rojos are following Jeroboam's instructions.'

'Obviously, that's what Ephraim wants you to do then - launch an official investigation and prove that connection,' Bill said.

'I reckon this is more that he wants to get Los Rojos off his back...' Draco muttered. 'If we're to believe what Canaro told us, Hermione, Los Rojos are also tracking these Dark Flux outbreaks - maybe they're getting too close for comfort?'

'And he's looking for scapegoats,' Hermione added. 'Distractions.'

'I still think it might be worth your while though, Hermione, pretending to Ephraim that you're doing what he wants,' Bill asserted. 'Could be the safer option.'

'Listen, Bill, I've no desire to piss off Los Rojos just to appease Ephraim! You haven't seen the nasty stuff they do to people they don't like!' Hermione snapped. 'Equally, if I steam in to the Wizengamot accusing Jeroboam of planning genocide without proof, I'll look a right idiot.'

Draco nodded in agreement. 'Looks like we've still got a lot of legwork to do...'

Bill gave Hermione a long, appraising look, then switched his focus to Draco. 'Well, it looks like you really need to get back on the inside as soon as possible then,' he said.

Draco shifted uncomfortably in his seat. 'That's the plan,' he murmured.

'And I'm obviously prepared to help you in your investigations in any way I can,' Bill said. 'Gringotts is well resourced and has strong global connections. I could be of use.'

'That's much appreciated, Bill,' Harry said.
'Maybe you could check out my wife's vault? There might be something useful there. Something she kept hidden … a message, perhaps?' Draco asked. 'I'm not allowed to access her vault myself,' he added in almost apologetic tones, 'as she hasn't been certified as officially dead.'

His words echoed solemnly around Bill's snug, homely kitchen.

'I met your wife, a couple of times,' Bill said, a hesitant tone in his voice. His fingers lightly circled the rim of his tea-mug as he spoke.

Draco's eyes darted from side to side. He looked awkward under Bill's weighty gaze.

'The first time I met her she was with her father and sister. They came to consult with me at Gringotts. Katya had received some anonymous gifts and Ephraim wanted to be sure they were safe.' Bill chuckled at the memory. 'I thought Ephraim was being a bit _paranoid_, to be honest, and your wife seemed embarrassed by the fuss he was making.'

'What were they?' Hermione asked.

'Harmless stuff. A Matryoshka and a box containing a pretty silver necklace … to tell the truth, I assumed Katya had a secret admirer. Or …' and he paused here, glancing quickly at Draco, '… a lover.'

'The necklace. Was it a string of silver roses?' Draco asked brusquely. Bill nodded.

'What the hell's a _Matryoshka_?' Harry asked.

'A _Russian_ doll,' Draco said, his voice laced with meaning. 'You think Svetlana Kerpin's Russian, don't you?'

'Her immigration file certainly thinks so,' Harry replied.

'When did this happen?' Draco asked Bill tersely.

'Must have been … let me think … It was just after Beltane, about two and a half years ago - thereabouts. And then Katya came to see me again, almost a year later. Last April I think it was.'

That would have been shortly before the time Katya disappeared, Hermione thought.

Draco's face stiffened. 'What did she want?'

'She wanted to open the Matryoshka. Was quite desperate about it! She'd tried all the standard spells but was having no luck. It was very simple in the end. A nifty piece of blood magic and she chanted something … I didn't catch the words and they were foreign … but that did the trick.'

'And what was inside?' Draco's eyes glowed with fevered curiosity.

Bill shrugged. 'A key and some parchments, some kind of trinket - a bit like your rose pendant, though I can't be sure to be honest … I didn't look too closely or ask any questions. It's our job to respect a client's confidentiality.'

'Of course,' Draco muttered forlornly.

'And I don't know what she did with them - or the Matryoshka.' Bill gave Draco a sympathetic look. 'Sorry not to be more helpful.'

'Do you remember Katya having this Russian doll?' Hermione asked Draco.
'Yes. She kept it in her room…it might still be there, though I don't remember seeing it lately…' His voice trailed off.

'Come on,' Harry said briskly. He stood up, clearly ready to go. 'We've only got a few hours left to go over Svetlana Kerpin's house before the French Ministry stakes its claim.'

XXX

It was a dark, wintry night. Large, wet flakes of snow were peppering their faces as they gazed at a narrow, blue door on Rue Saint-Louis En L’Ile opposite the Bibliotheque Jeunesse: Ile Saint-Louis.

‘We were here all along.’ Hermione said ruefully.

‘Well, come on then,’ Harry said gruffly, tightly winding a scarf around his neck. The snowflakes were settling on his glasses. He impatiently flicked his fingers and the snow vanished.

He covertly pointed his wand, which was tucked inside the sleeve of his robes, at the door, whispered the appropriate password and pushed the door open. They stepped from the street into a dark alleyway.

Hermione’s heart was racing in her chest as she tentatively stepped into thick blank darkness. Harry hoisted his arm into the air and led the way, his wand emitting a bright glowing light to illuminate their path.

Moments later and they had entered a small, paved courtyard, bordered by high stonewalls and laurel bushes whose dark glossy leaves were coated in a snowy white patina.

Svetlana Kerpin’s house was the solitary dwelling. It was a squat, grey hump of a house, Hermione thought, skulking like an overgrown mushroom amidst the bushes.

Draco scowled, a mixture of apprehension and disgust on his face. ‘Can’t for the life of me imagine Katya wanting to live HERE.’

‘After the luxuries of Malfoy Manor? Perish the thought!’ Hermione said snippily.

Harry ignored their hesitation and pressed forwards, his feet slipping a little on the icy ground. He cast a quick obliteration charm to conceal their footprints in the snow, then unlocked the front door with a quick swish of his wand. He plunged inside and was swallowed up into the darkness. Hermione and Draco followed the diminishing spark of light emitted by Harry’s wand. Harry’s heavy clumping footfalls ascended a narrow staircase and he disappeared from view. Draco instantly flicked his French Ministry-supplied wand and said ‘Lumos’ but merely produced a few sickly yellow sparks, which quickly fizzled.

‘Fucking stupid thing,’ he growled. ‘I think Harry’s had it deliberately disabled.’

‘He’ll have done no such thing,’ Hermione said tartly, illuminating the hallway with a fiercely shining Lumos, which only served to highlight their shabby, decaying surroundings.

Hermione and Draco ventured forwards, Hermione casting a stealth-sensing spell as they advanced. The hallway led to a compact living room. A cracked mirror was hanging perilously askew on the sludge-green wall, which was laced with cracks and holes. The wooden floor was strewn with hunks of plaster and thick with dust.

'Looks like someone got here first,' Draco said grudgingly. He prodded one of the holes in the wall. Plaster crumbled into his hand.
A sickly sensation churned through Hermione. ‘Harry said Svetlana’s licence expired last year,’ she stated, in a small, dull voice.

‘Meaning if there was anything of use to find here, it’s likely long gone.’ Draco poked his wand languidly through the rubble on the floor. They could hear Harry’s feet tramping upstairs above them. Floorboards creaked and trembled and a flurry of dust shimmied from the ceiling, dusting Draco’s face and hair.

They could hear Harry’s feet tramping upstairs above them. Floorboards creaked and trembled and a flurry of dust shimmied from the ceiling, dusting Draco’s face and hair.

There was a scruffy armchair parked in a corner of the living room. Draco approached it cautiously, wand aloft, muttering ‘Specialis Revelio’ in the hope that if there was anything concealed there, it would be forced to reveal itself. His wand puttered and sparked and hung limply in his hand.

‘See, what did I say?’ he snarled. ‘Useless!’

Hermione struggled to suppress a smile and cast the spell herself, revealing nothing.

A pile of books had been scattered on the floor at the foot of the armchair. Draco knelt down to study them. He thumbed through a few heavy, leather-bound volumes, eyes screwed up tight in an effort to see what was written on the pages.

‘Could do with a bit of light over here, Hermione,’ he groused. She dangled her wand over the books. The pages were covered in black Cyrillic print.

‘Definitely Russian,’ Draco said.

Hermione cast another ‘Specialis Revelio’ and then circled her wand slowly and methodically over the pages as Draco flicked through the books. ‘Aparecium,’ she said repeatedly, just in case an invisible note had been penned on these pages.

Harry trudged into the room, a disconsolate expression on his face. Instantaneously the room brightened and then the light dwindled again as he passed through the living room to a kitchen beyond.

‘Pokey little place,’ Harry said. He sniffed the air. ‘Musty…’

‘What’s upstairs?’ Draco asked.

‘A bedroom. Doesn’t look like anyone’s been in there for a very long time. There’s another bedroom as you come in the front door. Someone should go and check it out.’

Draco scrabbled to his feet. He paused at a larger hole in the wall. A metal door hung from its hinges.

‘Bring some light over here, would you?’ he demanded.

Hermione shone her wand inside the hole. It was a safe, built into the wall, and was completely empty.

Harry was looking closely at the safe door, a curious expression on his face.

‘Look at this,’ he said.
The front of the safe door was peppered with scorch marks and dents, but it wasn’t these that had attracted his attention. A picture of a rose, identical to the rose pendant dangling around Draco’s neck, was etched into the metal.

‘It’s the same as Katya’s roses, isn’t it?’ Harry said to Draco.

‘An exact copy,’ he murmured. Harry moved away from Hermione and Draco and headed back to the kitchen where he trailed his wand along the walls and the sink and the cupboards and then slipped out of view.

Hermione and Draco exchanged looks; clearly there was some greater significance here, which would have to be pondered later. As for now, they had an increasingly short time to investigate Svetlana Kerpin’s house.

Hermione gave Draco a wan smile and followed Harry into the kitchen, leaving Draco alone with his thoughts.

To the right of the kitchen was a narrow doorway leading to a cloakroom and another door that opened onto the courtyard. Thick drapes covered the door. Harry pulled the curtain aside to stare into a clump of laurel bushes that were dusted in snow.

‘That’s odd,’ he whispered to Hermione. ‘A door leading to nowhere.’

Hermione retreated back to the kitchen. She was suddenly feeling distinctly uncomfortable, prickling with a cold, creeping sensation.

There was a further door on the left-hand side of the kitchen, which led to a cramped bathroom complete with a toilet, a sink, and a white china bathtub, glowing faintly in the grey gloom. From here, a small window looked out onto more laurel bushes, although if she craned her head sideways and upwards she could also see the pale ghost of the moon riding high in the sky.

‘Not a lot here, is there?’ Harry said, clearly downcast.

‘Someone bring me some light in here, would they?’ yelled Draco from deeper inside the house.

Hermione whisked past Harry and headed to the bedroom, which led off the hallway.

Draco was lying on the floor, craning to see underneath a steel-framed bed.

Hermione knelt down and shone her wand in his direction. Draco’s eyes looked large and soulful in the strange, shadowy light. She dragged her eyes from his face and scanned the floorboards.

There WAS something. Hermione’s heart beat a little faster. ‘Look! Over there!’

She pointed the wand at what looked like a small piece of card. ‘Take this,’ she said, rolling the wand towards Draco, who then directed the light at the card, which was nestling amongst the dust and dead spiders.

Hermione was smaller-framed than Draco and able to squeeze under the steel mesh bed. She tugged the card free and inched herself backwards, clutching the card tightly to her chest and levering herself into a standing position.

Draco shone the wand onto the card and it was immediately apparent that this was a photograph. The light juddered because his hands were shaking so much.
It was a photo of Katya standing beside a stooped and diminutive old woman. Katya looked relaxed and happy. A light wind toyed with her curly, brown hair and her hazel eyes were lit up with laughter. The old woman had a fiercely proud and doting expression on her face. She was cradling a small baby, swaddled in a fluffy white blanket, barely visible except for a tufty strand of brown hair bobbing in the breeze.

‘That’s definitely Svetlana,’ Draco murmured.

Hermione could feel him trembling beside her. She cast him a sidelong glance.

His eyes narrowed as he closely studied the photograph. ‘I think I’ve seen this place before. The tower … I know it from somewhere …’

They were standing in a sun-soaked field. The sky was a clear cloudless blue. A brackish expanse of water, glistening in the sun and bordered by tall, brown reeds, was situated behind them, and clearly continued beyond the confines of the photograph. Abutting this water - Hermione couldn’t be sure if this was the edge of a lake or merely a sizeable pond – was a stout stone tower, wreathed in straggling skeins of foliage, capped by a grey, slate conical roof.

‘Have you been there?’ she asked tentatively.

Draco shook his head. ‘I don’t think so.’ He flipped the photograph over with a shaking hand.

‘Магда, Сентябрь2011’ was scrawled on the back.

‘Magda…’ he said in hushed tones.

A loud, insistent shriek sounded.

Hermione’s stomach somersaulted queasily as a jolt of alarm surged through her. Draco instantly snuffed out the light from her wand with a whispered ‘Nox’.

‘What the fuck was that?’ he asked. His breathing was suddenly hard and rasping.

‘Harry must have set up a caterwauling charm,’ Hermione replied in tremulous tones. Footsteps were scampering down the hallway towards them. Hermione instinctively clutched Draco’s arm. The glow from a wand was getting brighter and brighter, advancing towards the bedroom, and then they were plunged into darkness.

‘Looks like we have company,’ Harry whispered from the open doorway.

There was an audible shuffling of feet and voices outside the front door - two men talking in low, conspiratorial tones.

The silence inside the house was palpable. Hermione could hear her heart thumping inside of her. Draco instantly snuffed out the light from her wand with a whispered ‘Nox’.

‘We can use the back door!’ Harry hissed, but the moment he said this they could clearly hear one of the voices – a deep male voice – say, ‘you take the front, I’ll take the kitchen.’

‘That’s Joel,’ Draco growled in Hermione’s ear. ‘Works for Ephraim.’

‘Okay,’ another voice grunted in reply. This same voice then cast an Anti-Disapparition Jinx.

‘And Erwin…’ Draco muttered, more to himself than anyone else.

Harry silenced Draco with a stern look, and then on Harry’s signal, the three of them tiptoed away
from the bedroom back to the pitch-black living room.

They could hear Joel’s footsteps stamping across the snowy paving stones and then a rustle of bushes by the backdoor.

‘What do we do?’ Hermione whispered, unable to still the quaver in her voice. Draco pulled her close. She could feel his chest moving rapidly in and out and his breathing was hot against her hair. ‘You’ll be needing this,’ he said, thrusting her wand into her hand.

Oh god, HIS wand doesn’t work, Hermione thought with a dull thud that seemed to plummet into her stomach. A surge of bile seemed to be moving at inordinate speed in the opposite direction, scorching her gullet.

The man Hermione now knew to be Erwin tried to open the front door but seemed to be struggling. He cursed loudly in frustration. ‘It’s jammed,’ he yelled to someone – presumably Joel. He began kicking furiously at the door.

‘He’ll work it out in the minute,’ Harry said. ‘It’s not the most complicated spell, unfortunately.’

‘Did you do the back door?’ Draco asked.

Harry’s dark silence spoke volumes.

They heard the back door click open and a thin shard of light was directed into the kitchen. There was the sound of movement – someone crossing the threshold into the cloakroom – then silence. Hermione realised her chest was hurting from holding her breath.

Harry crept towards the wall that divided the living room from the kitchen and cloakroom and pressed his ear against the plaster. He pulled back to a safe distance, directed his wand at the wall and then yelled, with considerable venom, ‘Confringo!’ A blinding blue light shot from his wand and the wall exploded with mighty force, unleashing a choking veil of dust and plaster.

The man in the cloakroom, who Hermione guessed had to be Joel, screamed in shock and pain, as the wall collapsed onto him before his voice was swallowed up by rubble.

Moonlight was now streaming through the kitchen window, bathing the living room in an eerie, pale white glow. The air was glutted with swirling eddies of dust

They could hear Joel groaning, and his hand, which was protruding from the plaster and brickwork heaped on top of him, trembled… then stilled.

There was a clattering of footsteps across the courtyard as Erwin ran to the backdoor – but he didn’t enter the house. They could hear him panting, and then he fell silent.

Why wasn’t he coming in? Hermione strained to listen for footsteps moving away from the house, but there was nothing.

Instead, there was a scratching sound at the front door. That didn’t make sense, Hermione thought heatedly. How could Erwin be in two places at one time?

A crackling sound followed and there was a smell of molten metal.

Hermione’s stomach flip-flopped.

‘Leave this to me,’ Harry muttered. Harry stomped past them, wand outstretched, towards the front
door. Draco followed.

‘No, Draco!’ Hermione hissed after them. ‘Your wand doesn’t work!’ But at that moment she had
the distinct feeling that someone else was in the dark living room – behind her. And it couldn’t be
Harry or Draco. Nor could it be Joel, who was buried underneath a pile of rubble.

She stood stock-still, not daring to look. There was a slightly creaking floorboard and a faint rush
of wind stirring the darkness; the low sound of stifled breathing. She summoned up her courage
and whisked around to confront the ghostly intruder…. But there was no one there.

It has to be Erwin, she thought. He must be using a bedazzling hex or an invisibility cloak…
something that veiled him from view.

She shrank against the living room wall, cringing from the moonlight’s glare, in the hope that the
stranger hadn’t seen or heard her. She grappled for her wand and pointed it straight ahead, straining
her ears for the tiniest crack of sound or gust of breath. Her stomach was churning and rivulets of
sweat were streaming down her face.

She caught a shuffle in the hallway beyond the open living room door. Whoever had surreptitiously
entered the house had now passed through the living room and likely had his wand trained on
Draco’s back.

‘There’s someone behind you!’ she screeched in desperate warning, her voice ringing out shrill and
tremulous.

There was a sudden scuffle of movement in the hallway and a volley of whizzing blasts as curses
were traded in quick succession. Flashes of red and green and yellow fizzed and sparked and
Hermione could hear scampering and banging and the sound of something heavy colliding against
the bedroom door.

She dashed from the living room into the hallway just as the front door was blown with some force
off its hinges, almost flattening Harry and Erwin, who toppled heavily onto the floor. Draco was
nowhere in sight.

A tall man, his face cast in shadow, strode inside, rapidly firing red jets of light from his wand.
Hermione instantly sprang out of range, dodging into the bedroom, but was pursued by the
stranger. She threw herself onto the floor to dive for cover under the bed when she heard a loud
‘Incendio!’ A jet of flame shot from the stranger’s wand and the bed burst into flames.

Convulsed with terror, Hermione scrambled frantically to escape the inferno raging above her,
choking on noxious black fumes. She was ominously aware that the tall stranger was advancing
towards her, wand raised, and she had nowhere to hide.

Her limbs felt frozen and her hand was too slippery with sweat to keep hold of her wand, but as if
from nowhere, a piercing ‘Expelliarmus!’ ripped from her throat – a defensive reflex, which sent
her attacker’s wand clattering to the floor. At that same moment, a hand grabbed his throat from
behind and he was wrenched backwards with considerable force towards the open door. The man
furiously elbowed his assailant in the gut. The room was rapidly filling with hot, swirling smoke.
Hermione was struggling to breathe and her eyes were watering, but through the haze she could see
Draco’s bright, silvery hair. The stranger flung himself at Draco and hurled a fist into Draco’s face,
knocking him off-balance so that he crashed heavily into the doorframe. He then reached into his
robes and pulled out a knife. The gleaming silver streak of metal flashed as it scythed through the
dense, dark fog now billowing from the mattress.
Hermione hauled herself upwards, targeting the stranger with her wand, and screamed ‘Obscuro!’ He immediately stumbled as a blindfold wrapped itself around his face. Draco ducked and the knife floundered in mid-air, stabbing at empty space.

‘Stupefy!’ Hermione screeched. A red flash leapt from her wand slamming forcefully into the blinded stranger, who tottered and fell.

The fire from the mattress was roaring thunderously, the flames raging higher and higher. The wallpaper was bubbling and peeling and a lick of blue flame shimmied across the scorched ceiling, setting the curtains ablaze. They had to get out of here, and fast... but their escape from the burning room was now barred by a sudden crossfire of shooting colours and loud detonations in the hallway.

Hermione gawped at the man lying prone on the bedroom floor, just inches from the flames, which were creeping inexorably closer. ‘We can’t just leave him!’ she gasped. She desperately tried to recall a flame-freezing charm but her mind had gone blank.

Draco threw her a furious look and with a shrug of weary resignation he began to pull the stranger away from the encroaching fire.

Harry shot past the bedroom door, firing shots behind him, which were immediately returned with equal venom. Hermione could hear Harry’s footsteps sprinting into the living room. Hermione recognised the voice of the man Draco had called Erwin. He barked out a string of ‘Reductos,’ which Hermione feared he was targeting Harry with – and clearly missing, as the house was rocked with loud explosions and the sound of groaning timbers and plaster as the ceiling of the living room collapsed thunderously to the floor.

Hermione took her chance to dart out of the bedroom, her chest heaving in an effort to breathe through the toxic black smoke. Harry needed her help.

‘No, Hermione!’ Draco yelled from behind her, but she was already firing randomly into the dark living room and was then thrown backwards by a powerful curse, dropping her wand in the process. The force of the curse sent her sliding at breakneck speed across the hallway floor towards the front door, until she collided with a fallen beam. She lay still, blinking in the smoke, heavily winded. Her ribs ached, her mouth was dry and her eyes were stinging, but she peered through the choking haze and could see that Harry was lying prone on the living room floor and Erwin was skidding rapidly towards him. She had to do something … and fast. She concentrated hard amidst the noise and commotion as she desperately summoned magic from inside of her and shouted the first spell to enter her head. ‘Colloshoo!’ she screamed, pointing her finger at Erwin as he lunged towards Harry. Erwin was instantly glued to the floor, halting his momentum. He swayed uneasily, clearly baffled, and in that brief instant, Harry targeted him with his wand and unleashed an arrow, spitooning Erwin in the throat. Erwin lurched towards Harry, arms outstretched, and fell flat on his face.

Draco managed to drag the unconscious form of the intruder from the bedroom into the hallway, gruntin with the effort. Harry leaped up, vaulted over Erwin’s stricken form, and grabbed hold of Draco’s arm.

‘There’s no time for that! We’ve got to get out of here!’ Harry yelled. ‘Come on, Hermione! Get up!’ He gestured to the front door behind her, which was blocked by broken timbers and fallen plaster. ‘We can’t get out that way!’

There was a resounding crack from the bedroom and a clamorous thud. A flurry of dust and plaster and a charging burst of flames surged from the bedroom towards them, pinioning Harry and Draco...
against the wall. The wooden staircase above them began to creak and buckle. It swayed dangerously overhead and threatened to plunge into the hallway, effectively dividing Hermione from Draco and Harry.

‘Get over here!’ Draco shouted. He extended his arm in Hermione’s direction. She scrambled to her feet and ran towards Draco’s outstretched hand. The banister from the staircase cracked and keeled, teetering on the brink, then the wood split and splintered and crashed to the floor. Hermione managed to dodge the worst of it but was relieved to feel Draco’s hand catch hold of her wrist and pull her clear of the broken pile of wood with surprising strength.

They sprinted through the living room towards the kitchen, swerving fallen masonry as they ran. The black smoke was now so thick they could barely see the pile of plaster and brick smothering Joel by the open back door. Hermione could hear Harry clambering to get out and feel the cold air from outside hitting her heated cheeks. Suddenly she tripped, falling painfully to her knees, and her hand, which was greasy with sweat, slipped out of Draco’s grasp. He faltered and reached out for her in the smoky darkness.

‘Don’t stop! I’m right behind you,’ she gasped, pulling herself up.

She glanced over her shoulder and was horrified to see flames barrelling down the hallway towards the living room. Her wand! It was still lying on the hallway floor… She immediately backtracked, skipping over Erwin’s body, when a plume of fierce, orange flames shot forwards from the open doorway, almost catching her. She leaped backwards, stumbling against Erwin and tumbled to the floor, coughing painfully, as dense black smoke filled her lungs.

It was gone. Her wand was gone. Her eyes filled with tears and she let out a desperate, wrenching sob, momentarily lost in pain and confusion - but the distant cry of somebody calling her name seeped with increasing urgency into her consciousness. She tried to stand up but slipped in a pool of dark blood oozing from Erwin’s body, soaking her robes. She gagged in revulsion but the roar and crunch of the flames was edging ever closer – she had to move… fast.

She gritted her teeth and hauled herself up, not caring that she was trampling over Erwin’s corpse to get away from the fire as fast as was humanly possible and ran into the kitchen after Draco and Harry – but was thrown sideways, spinning through the air with an unexpected and monumental force, falling into a strange, granular darkness.

With a fierce force of effort, she blinked her eyes open. Stars sparked at the side of her vision. Moonlight was streaming through a window to her left, marred by a blinding blue flash, which fractured her vision. There were yells and shouts and the sound of running feet beyond the windowpane.

Her cheek was slammed against something cold and damp. It was china, she realised. And her head was banging with an excruciating pain. She felt vomit rising in her gorge and had to tilt her head to one side to expel the acidic flow that had filled her mouth. She was aching in every inch of her body and her head was now swirling with a painful kaleidoscope of colours. She felt nauseous. There was a pungent smell of her vomit combined with a musty dampness and the faint stench of urine.

She could see straight ahead, into the kitchen. A dark, bulky figure was lumbering determinedly towards her, holding a long, thin stick.

‘No…no, stay away from me,’ she whimpered, blind panic rising inside of her. She was trapped and wandless… her mind flashed to the morgue in Santa Maria… she’d had Draco, at least she’d had Draco.
Joel leered down at her, his face streaked with blood and dust. There was no way out and he was going to kill her, she knew he was... she wanted to scream, to cry, to run, but the scream caught inside her throat, as she felt powerless to move or speak. Her body was rigid with fear. But then an oddly peaceful sensation coursed through her. She screwed her eyes tightly shut, waiting for the blinding flash of green to bathe her eyelids. It would be her last sentient thought. But instead she felt a sharp and surprising pain in her shin.

Her eyes snapped open just at the very same moment that Joel targeted her other leg with a fierce kick, then with another, even more bruising than the one before. She recoiled in shock and an odd bubbling sense of outrage. There was a high-pitched screeching sound, shrill and desperate... repeated sharp jabs of pain ... and then a startling realisation that the screeching sound was her own voice, screaming in agony, followed by a long, drawn-out gasp for breath as his boot connected with her stomach. She shook with anger and pain, doubling over and falling sideways. Her field of vision shrank and darkened, a weighty presence loomed closer, grunting – its acrid breath hot and wet on her face. Her stomach churned and she vomited again; a hot stream of foul fluid dribbling down her chin.

Joel plunged his hand into her hair and wound it tightly around his knuckles, pulling her head back so hard she thought her neck might snap. Her eyes were wide and pleading and she could feel tears streaming down her face. ‘No, please, no...’ she croaked, trying to twist herself free from his grasp. She felt his hand tighten. She was seized by wild panic, realising what was about to happen. A ferocious force catapulted her head forwards, smashing her face into cold, hard china. She heard a distinct crack and felt a searing pain.

A flurry of stars flashed briefly across her mind – and then she was floating, rearing upwards and upwards; the moon was brighter, bathing her face in its luminescent glow, and then a flying force scooped her even higher, so hard the air was driven from her lungs. There was a loud, jolting thwack followed by intense, crunching pain as she found herself flat against a wall. She sunk to the floor, dazed and shivering uncontrollably.

There was a deafening rush in her ears but also a growing awareness of bangs and movement, voices, faint at first, but increasing in volume and proximity... and then a gut-wrenching cry. She gritted her teeth and summoned every last ounce of energy to wipe the streaming blood from her eyes and face her attacker, only to see instead that Joel had pinned Draco to the floor and had his wand pushed hard against Draco’s head. His other hand was clasped around Draco’s throat, throttling him. Draco was flailing furiously, foam frothing from his mouth. He made a desperate, gurgling sound and his hands clawed ineffectually at Joel, but his life force seemed to be ebbing away and his movements were weakening.

Hermione crawled across the floor, grimacing with the effort, and threw herself with all her might at Joel’s hefty bulk, pressing down on Draco. He swatted her away but in doing so he loosened his grip on Draco who immediately grabbed hold of Joel’s wand. Joel whispered a hasty ‘Flagrante’ and Draco squealed in pain, his palm burned by the wand. However, Joel’s curse had the opposite effect to what he had intended as Draco bucked upwards, forcing Joel to fall back.

Draco flung himself at Joel, his face contorted with rage, and elbowed Joel under the chin, catching him unawares. Joel fell backwards into the wall, half-crushing Hermione in the process. His head wobbled and he groaned. Hermione struggled to lever his cumbersome weight off her in an attempt to slide free.

Eyes wide with fury, Draco fumbled frantically in his pocket and pulled out his broken wand.

Hermione tried to call out. *It doesn’t work, Draco, it doesn’t work.* But nothing came out of her
mouth. She was panting so hard her chest hurt and she couldn’t speak.

But magic wasn’t Draco’s intention. He levered his knee into Joel’s stomach, trapping him, and grabbed Joel’s fringe with one hand to hold his head steady.

Joel had seen the broken wand in Draco’s hand and he knew what was coming. He whimpered and squirmed, but Draco raised his arm and then drove the wand hard into Joel’s face in a fierce stabbing motion. Hermione winced at Joel’s piercing, high-pitched scream. An explosion of blood splattered Draco’s face.

Joel’s body convulsed and then fell silent.

Draco relaxed his grip on the broken wand. Great, shuddering breaths rocked through his body.

‘Come on,’ Draco said in hoarse tones. He stood up and hoisted Hermione into a standing position in one swift movement. Her legs felt like a jelly-legged jinx had struck her. She was slipping and sliding like a newborn foal on the bloodied bathroom tiles. With a loud groan Draco scooped her into his arms and carried her out of the bathroom, over the pile of rubble in the kitchen, stumbling a little and panting hard, and then through the back door to the courtyard outside.

The fresh night air came as a shock after the choking, hot smoke inside the house. Draco collapsed to his knees and Hermione dropped onto the frozen paving stones.

To her horror, Harry was lying a few feet away from her. He looked lifeless and cold. ‘Oh God, Harry!’ she yelped. A loud roar of pain ripped from deep within her chest and hot tears flooded her cheeks.

She crawled on all fours through the snow towards him, and folded him into a tight embrace, cradling his head on her lap. Draco’s hand was warm on her shoulder. ‘It’s okay, Hermione. He’s stunned, that’s all.’

Harry’s wand dangled loosely from his outstretched palm, so she quickly grabbed it and whispered a quick ‘Rennervate’. Harry’s eyes blinked open and he grunted in pain, his hand momentarily shooting to his forehead in an action that reminded Hermione of times, long ago, when his scar had been hurting.

Harry sat bolt upright, his eyes suddenly wide in fear and alarm.

‘He got away,’ Draco explained.

‘Who – who got away?’ Hermione asked. Her teeth were chattering uncontrollably with a combination of cold and exhaustion.

‘There was a fourth man. Didn’t catch a good look at him … he ran off, but not without firing at us first. Luckily, he missed, but unfortunately, the rebound…’

‘That wasn’t a NORMAL Stunner,’ Harry interjected, peevishly. ‘And he wasn’t firing at US because YOU definitely weren’t his target. I was.’

Draco looked a little sheepish. ‘It was a random shot, Harry.’

‘But if this ‘fourth man’ saw Draco, then surely this means his cover is blown?’ Hermione exclaimed, aghast. Draco couldn’t possibly return to Malfoy Manor and his working duties at Herb Healing – not now.
Harry and Draco exchanged worried looks. ‘We need a new plan,’ Harry grumbled. He hauled himself to his feet, rubbing snow from his robes. ‘Come on. Let’s get out of here.’

XXX

Hermione slumped on the sofa. She was listless and sore and bruised all over. Her face was coated in dry blood and her nose ached from a healing spell that Harry had cast on her the moment they arrived back at the hotel.

Instead, her mind was racing… a dark ferment of panic and, increasingly, fury. She cast a cursory glance at Harry and Draco in the kitchenette. They were engaged in a high-pitched, heated post-mortem as they relayed the events of the evening in inordinately excited tones, whilst cracking open bottles of butterbeer with exuberant swagger.

Stupid bloody men. They disgusted her. Didn’t they realise what was at stake here? Tonight, Draco’s cover had been blown wide open. Harry was right. They had no choice, they needed a new plan, and most likely one that pitched Draco – and likely Harry and herself - into even greater danger. Draco would have to ingratiate himself with his father-in-law, pretend he had been dragged reluctantly to Svetlana Kerpin’s house, and then do what Bill had suggested just a few hours ago - appease Ephraim by launching a full-scale prosecution against Jeroboam (most likely with her assistance), which would obviously provoke Los Rojos…

A hysterical whine was building to a crescendo inside of her… Merlin, weren’t they risking enough already? Her own family was likely endangered by her involvement in this disgusting mess. And now the Weasleys had been dragged in too…

She’d tried to discuss the implications of tonight’s ‘disaster’ with Harry and Draco. But when she’d posed what she thought was a blindingly obvious question – why did Ephraim’s henchmen try to KILL them and did they already know that they were there? - Harry had blithely said that it was just a ‘big, bloody mess,’ and offered her a butterbeer, followed by a trite-sounding, ‘Sorry you lost your wand, Hermione.’

Her wand! Her beloved wand! How could he dare to be so off-hand and darned casual about it? Her wand had been reduced to a pile of ashes, lost forever in the blackened wreckage of Svetlana Kerpin’s crummy little house. This wasn’t ANY old wand, it was the same wand that had served and protected her since she was a child. She felt naked and vulnerable without it.

It had been an extension of her - a fifth limb.

She heaved a deep sigh and closed her eyes, wishing she were anywhere but here … wishing that none of this damned business had ever happened.

Harry came and joined her on the sofa. He draped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. She could smell smoke and sweat on his robes.

He gazed at her, a pensive expression on his face. ‘I know tonight was pretty ghastly… but you were very brave… you should be proud of yourself,’ he said tenderly.

‘Proud of what, exactly?’ she retorted. ‘I was beaten up by a thuggish psychopath and nearly burned alive. And we found NOTHING! A fantastic evening’s work!’

Hermione suddenly felt her eyes welling up with tears, but she’d be damned if she’d let Harry and Draco see her cry. Maybe wand fights and scary wizards trying to kill you were normal for Harry, but in her case, she’d barely recovered from her trip to Argentina. She still felt a lingering pang of
sadness for young Miguel Culebra and woke up sometimes in the night, shaking and sweating, at
the memory of that terrible night in the morgue at Santa Maria. And now tonight … She felt sick to
the stomach. The acrid, tangy smell of Erwin’s blood, his heavy, lumpen body, and the distinct
sizzling sound of his comrade, engulfed in flames. And worse still, Draco’s contorted, snarling
face as he stabbed Joel. These images churned indelibly through her mind, over and over again.

She shrugged Harry’s arm from her shoulder and looked over to Draco, who was helping himself
to something to eat from the fridge in the kitchenette. There was ash smearing his face and blood
spatters on his coat. How could he EAT at a time like this? What kind of monster was he?

Draco bowled over to the sitting area carrying a heaped plate of cheese sandwiches. He flung
himself heavily onto the armchair.

‘Can’t believe how hungry I am,’ he muttered. He was still shaking with adrenaline.

‘Good idea,’ Harry said. He grabbed a sandwich and devoured it in a few quick, ravenous bites.

‘I don’t bloody believe it,’ Hermione said in harsh, rebuking tones.

Harry stopped chewing and stared at her. ‘Don’t believe what?’

She shook her head in disbelief. ‘How can you both be so calm? How can you EAT? It’s
disgusting!’

‘We’re hungry.’

‘But YOU KILLED PEOPLE!’ Hermione shrilled.

‘Look, Hermione. I’ve had to kill a lot of people in my line of work,’ Harry said. His eyes shone
brightly as he spoke. ‘The terrible truth is, bad things happen – and as long as they happen to bad
people, that’s fine by me.’

Hermione sighed in frustration. Why couldn’t he see what she was getting at? Why didn’t he
understand? He would NEVER have killed somebody … anybody … however heinous. ‘You
never used to be like this,’ she said in low, anguished tones.

‘I’m not a kid anymore, Hermione. You do realise that, don’t you?’ His voice was harsh and
grating, hoarsened by the smoke from the house fire. But Hermione wasn’t listening. Her attention
had switched to Draco.

‘And you’re even worse!’ She glared at Draco, accusingly. Draco gawped at her in surprise. The
colour faded from his face and he looked decidedly uncomfortable.

‘I had to kill him. I had no choice!’

‘But you didn’t have to enjoy it so much!’

‘Who said I enjoyed it?’ he countered, his voice rising in anger.

‘I saw it in your face,’ she sneered.

‘Don’t talk fucking rot,’ he hissed. He slapped the sandwich he was holding back onto the plate
and brusquely shoved the plate aside. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and in doing
so noticed the bloodstains on his coat sleeve.

‘You’re lying. I saw it all! What was it you said when we found Senor Canaro? That Muggles were
so damned filthy… that wizards were so fucking superior because they preferred a nice, clean kill! Well, there you were, fighting and killing like a Muggle! And loving every bloody second of it!’ Hermione could feel her face burning with righteous indignation.

Draco’s mouth tightened and his eyes glowed dangerously. ‘That guy was smashing you to a pulp! He deserved everything he got.’

‘Draco’s wand was broken,’ Harry stated calmly beside her.

‘You could have just knocked him out or something,’ she continued in piteous tones, ignoring Harry. ‘He was much bigger than me, if you hadn’t noticed!’ Draco argued.

‘I thought you weren’t a killer! I thought a lot about you was BAD, but - but…’ She could feel a hot rush of tears flooding her face and she had to swallow a choking sob that threatened to spill from her with terrifying force. She was trembling with a mixture of fury and… what was it exactly?

‘I thought you were better than that,’ she croaked. She furiously wiped tears from her cheeks. Draco looked implacable. His face had hardened, despite her tears.

‘Well, I’m sorry to have so fucking disappointed you, Hermione.’ His lip curled into a haughty sneer.

‘I guess I shouldn’t have expected anything different,’ she said in a small, quiet voice. She stared at him, matching his fury and displeasure with her own, but the intensity of his expression drove her to look away.

‘Why am I being held up to such a high standard, anyway?’ Draco asked, outraged. ‘What is it you expect from me?’ An imploring note crept into his voice despite the angry twitch in his cheek. ‘You could at least be grateful that I saved your life tonight.’

Hermione buried her face in her hands. She didn’t even want to look at him.

There was a weighty silence broken by Harry.

‘Look, it’s late and we’re very tired. And it’s been… traumatic. I think we all need to get some sleep.’ Harry placed his hand on Hermione’s arm. His touch was gentle, reassuring.

Hermione stared at her hands, at the table, the wall… anywhere but Draco…

‘Come on, Hermione,’ Harry said in commanding tones. ‘You can take my guest room. We’ll talk it over in the morning when we’re all feeling a bit calmer.’

‘I’m perfectly calm,’ Hermione lied. But she followed Harry all the same, quitting the apartment without even casting a single glance in Draco’s direction.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“MOTHER RUSSIA/DOMINION” by THE SISTERS OF MERCY

“WARRIOR’S DANCE” by THE PRODIGY
Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Draco was still sleeping when they arrived at the Hotel Danemark the following morning. This didn’t stop Harry from loudly barging into Draco’s bedroom, leaving Hermione to fidget around the kitchenette making coffee.

She was still feeling sore and subdued after the previous night’s events, despite Harry’s best attempts at healing spells on some of the worst of her bruises. It had felt like a covert operation, and she was feeling a little ashamed for it.

Ginny and the children had been in boisterous spirits over breakfast - although Ginny raised an eyebrow at Hermione’s exhausted, shuffling demeanour. Harry had then been forced to sneak into the guest bedroom and attend to Hermione, which had involved her stripping down to her underwear while he soothed the patchwork of bruises on her torso and thighs. It was only Harry… but there was an element of silent tension between them that Hermione could have well done without.

Draco had a raucous, barking cough – likely the after-effect of the fire. Harry closed the door of the bedroom; meaning Hermione could only hear a hushed burble of conversation. She presumed Harry was talking about her outburst last night. Their voices were momentarily magnified when Harry pushed open the door to collect their coffees from the kitchen and then drifted off again once he returned to the bedroom.

‘It’ll be bloody freezing!’ Draco suddenly yelped in outraged tones, followed by a string of forceful expletives. Clearly Draco wasn’t enjoying Harry’s suggestion that they head off to Moscow in the middle of January. Draco’s audible grunts of disapproval were countered, in turn, by Harry’s more measured tones as he outlined his plan.

By breakfast, Harry had already reported the fire at Svetlana Kerpin’s residence to both the French Ministry of Magic and the Muggle Gendarmerie and offered a reasonable – if fictitious – account of what had transpired there.

He had then applied to the Russian Ministry of Magic for permission to allow him and Draco to visit their archives for twenty-four hours. This was the stipulated period for international wizarding cooperation before a Muggle visa process was enforced. Harry had a Russian Ministry contact that he hoped would act as one of their guides. This was part of the problem when dealing with the Russians, Harry had told her. Their Ministry insisted that any visitors were ‘accompanied’ at all times. Now it was a question of waiting for an official permission to travel. It was rarely granted quickly, Harry warned, but the sooner they could get some background on Svetlana Kerpin, the better. ‘There has to be a damned good reason why Ephraim’s guys came rooting about her place last night,’ he griped.

‘There’s a great restaurant on Strastnoi Boulevard,’ Draco was now saying in ebullient tones. He’d
clearly begun to see the advantages of a trip to Moscow but was immediately thwarted by Harry. ‘This isn’t a jolly jape, Draco, it’s a fact-finding mission,’ he intoned, in the manner of a cantankerous parent curbing the enthusiasm of an over-excited infant.

‘Is Hermione coming?’

Hermione’s ears pricked up.

‘We’ve decided it’s best she head home and put in some hours at the Ministry library,’ Harry said smoothly.

No, WE bloody didn’t! Hermione bridled, that was YOU, Harry Potter!

‘Right … Okay,’ Draco said in a blasé manner that riled Hermione even further, followed by, ‘she’s not going off to see that Danish bloke, is she? I don’t think that’s such a good idea, you know – travelling on her own like that. New Zealand’s a long way.’

Oh lord, not Draco as well, Hermione thought sourly. She’d already suffered enough of Harry’s over-protective clucking today, and it was barely mid-morning.

‘Yes, she realises that. After all, she’s only met this chap, what is it? Twice?’ Harry said. ‘I’ll go with her once we’re back from Russia.’

Hermione groaned in quiet exasperation. The truth was she’d been dog-tired this morning - unable to marshal her defences against Harry’s cogent arguments. Her lack of steeliness at the time was now beginning to rankle.

‘I was just telling Draco that you’re going to look into these roses,’ Harry said. ‘The symbol you saw at Svetlana’s house,’ he added in more insistent tones, trying to catch her full attention.

She nodded wearily.

The bedroom door was wide open. Draco was lethargically pulling on a t-shirt over his jeans, mussing up his hair in the process. His bed looked like he had been fighting the sheets all night, rather than sleeping.

‘Morning, Hermione,’ he yawned, with a vague wave of his hand. There was no sign that he cared about what had happened last night … even remembered it.

He turned to rummage in a bag at the foot of a wardrobe, retrieving a pair of socks. He sat on the bed to put them on.

‘Yes…’ Hermione said, thinking she should take her cue from Harry. ‘That rose symbol is pretty unique. And it’s the connection between Svetlana and Katya.’

Draco nodded, struggling to stifle another yawn. ‘Good idea,’ he said. He looked up at Hermione, a keen look on his face. ‘Is there any more of that coffee?’

Hermione huffed off to the kitchen, wondering how and when she’d become their house-elf.

‘And go easy on the milk this time, will you?’ he called.

She deliberately ignored his request, allowing the milk to flow fast and free into his coffee mug until it was cresting at the rim, threatening to spill over.

Draco emerged from the bedroom fully dressed. He eyed the bland, beige coffee with unabashed
distaste but, after one quick look at the peevish glare Hermione was levelling at him, he chose not
to comment, gulping the coffee back in one quick swoop instead.

‘Remind me to get you a new wand,’ Harry said to Draco. ‘It’ll be Ministry issue – but it’s better
than nothing.’

Draco glanced uneasily at Hermione. He pushed his tousled hair back from his face with his hand.
‘I guess you’ll be visiting Ollivander’s?’ he asked tentatively.

Harry hadn’t even mentioned her lost wand at breakfast, so it was a relief to hear this from Draco,
and his nervousness in broaching the subject was oddly touching. She suddenly felt ashamed at her
crabbliness towards him, but somehow it seemed easier to vent her frustration and fear at HIM, than
Harry.

She blinked back tears - glad that neither man had seen them - and her hands shook involuntarily as
she scrubbed the coffee stains out of a mug with an abrasive wire scourer.

Her wand, her beloved wand … She felt vulnerable and lonely without it.

‘We should discuss last night,’ Harry said in brisk, businesslike tones.

He blithely flipped through the contents of the box file containing background on Jeroboam that
Draco had given Hermione. He paused and pulled out the photograph of The Geneva Group. He
sat down in the armchair and placed it on the coffee table in front of him.

Hermione looked around for a towel to dry her hands.

‘Well, they obviously knew the house was plottable and might even have known that we were
already there,’ Draco said, as he passed Hermione a towel. ‘Hermione was dead right to be worried
about Ephraim having a spy at Auror HQ.’ He gave her a lingering look as he spoke.

‘It wasn’t Auror HQ who sanctioned our visit – it was Vendome,’ remarked Harry.

‘Who’s Vendome?’ Hermione asked.

‘It’s Auror slang for the French Ministry’s Department of Magical Law Enforcement,’ Draco
explained. Hermione smiled. It was hardly a surprise that Draco knew that. He’d likely had
dealings with ‘Vendome’ himself at some point in his chequered past.

Harry removed his glasses to wipe them clean, then picked up the photo of The Geneva Group to
study it. ‘Do you think this might be Svetlana?’ he asked, pointing at the picture of Anna Cornec
with her face scrubbed out.

Draco perched himself on the sofa opposite Harry and took hold of the picture. He gazed at it, a
perplexed expression on his face. ‘I don’t remember this,’ he muttered. He turned to Hermione.
‘Was this in the box when I gave it to you?’

‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘but it’s not Svetlana Kerpin. It’s Anna Cornec – she worked with Ephraim and
Jeroboam.’

‘Well, SOMEONE really didn’t want to be reminded of her,’ Draco murmured. He chewed his
lower lip pensively, momentarily lost in thought.

‘We have to wonder, though,’ said Hermione, ‘exactly what is Ephraim’s connection to Svetlana?’
'This has to be about Katya… somehow. It’s all about Katya,’ Draco observed. ‘We know Katya and Svetlana were friends, or – or maybe even relatives?’

‘Do you still have the photo we found last night?’ Hermione asked.

He nodded and patted his jeans pocket.

‘Can I take a look at it?’ Harry asked, hand outstretched. Draco fished it out, rather reluctantly, and handed it to Harry.

‘Going back to what Draco said …. the thing I really don’t get, is why Ephraim’s men were at Svetlana’s house at all – what exactly did they want? What were they looking for?’ Hermione said, joining Draco on the chaise longue.

‘Well, obviously they wanted to find something and take it before the Ministry got their hands on it,’ Draco declared.

‘No, that’s not obvious at all…’ Harry said tersely. ‘The house had been ransacked from top to bottom. You saw the state the place was in! And they’ve had plenty of time already. Svetlana’s licence expired months ago and the place has been empty since Christmas.’

‘That’s true. Maybe we’re guilty of jumping to conclusions here?’ Hermione said. ‘ANYONE could have been in there. As you say, Harry – the house has been empty.’

‘It could have been Muggles?’ suggested Draco.

‘Or someone from Vendome? They’re corrupt enough,’ Harry said crankily.

‘Or someone else rich and powerful with friends in high places, who despises Ephraim… someone like Jeroboam…’ Hermione mused, earning herself a mystified look from Harry.

‘Now who’s jumping to conclusions? That’s most unlike you, Hermione. There’s zero evidence connecting Jeroboam to Svetlana Kerpin… or Katya, for that matter.’

‘I realise that, but sometimes I feel we’re just… pawns, stuck in the middle of a bigger game –’ her mind instantly flitted to Miguel Culebra and his final warning – ‘this cold war between Ephraim and Jeroboam, that’s being going on since… well, since THEN,’ she explained, pointing at the photo of The Geneva Group.

Harry narrowed his eyes, a bemused expression on his face.

‘Okay, forget I said it. It was just a hunch,’ Hermione muttered, wondering why Harry was being so pig-headed.

‘It’s worth thinking about,’ contended Draco. He gave Hermione a brief, sympathetic smile.

‘Nope. It’s not,’ Harry stated. He carefully placed the photo of Svetlana, Katya and the baby on the table, next to the photo of The Geneva Group. ‘But if we’re speaking hypothetically then let’s imagine that last night was the first chance Ephraim had to get inside Svetlana’s house. Logically, his guys were sent there to take something – something Svetlana had that Ephraim wanted…’

‘They’d have been sorely disappointed,’ Draco drawled.

‘Or, maybe they were trying to find something to help YOU, Draco?’ Harry said, ‘… a new lead to help exonerate you from Svetlana Kerpin’s murder? And we were just in the way…’
‘But surely they’d leave that sort of thing to the Ministry?’ Hermione remonstrated, ‘seeing as they’re supposed to be in charge of the case.’

Harry shrugged. ‘Ephraim likely knows just how slack those bastards at Vendome can be.’

‘There’s another possibility,’ Draco said with a deep sigh. ‘Last night was a golden opportunity for them to get hold of ME.’

Hermione spun round to face him. ‘You mean, to take you away?’

A regretful, almost guilty look scuttled across Draco’s face. ‘Well, based on your little chat with my father-in-law – he desperately wants me back home.’

‘When you got permission to access the property, Harry, did you say you were taking Draco with you?’ Hermione asked urgently.

‘Not in so many words, but…’ Harry trailed off, then, ‘Vendome knows that Draco is under my protection - at least until this murder enquiry is resolved. Our ‘access’ last night, however, wasn’t strictly official.’

‘Even so, last night was possibly the one time since leaving St. Gaspard’s that my likely whereabouts – in an unsecured location - was known by more people than just … us,’ Draco speculated. ‘They cast an Anti-Disapparition jinx, remember? We were pretty much trapped there.’

Harry peered at Draco hawkishly over the top of his glasses. ‘I told you that guy who ran off wasn’t aiming at YOU… He was only interested in taking ME down.’

Hermione didn’t like the turn this conversation was taking.

‘Are you sure you didn’t recognise him?’ Harry asked Draco, in sharp, demanding tones.

‘Positive. It was dark and he was running,’ Draco replied coolly. ‘I know most of Ephraim’s security team. Joel and Erwin are no more… obviously. Same as the other one, whom I didn’t recognise. But there’s also Karl and Troy – they stick closely to Ephraim.’ Hermione instantly thought of the security detail in Golden Square. ‘And there’s Josep, who works with Selwyn – he’s a hunchback - and Grimm, who’s ridiculously tall…’

Harry shook his head.

‘Which leaves Hulda – she’s one very scary chick.’

‘It definitely wasn’t a woman.’

‘Well, whoever it was, Ephraim now knows, for sure, that Draco was at Svetlana Kerpin’s house… with all that entailed,’ Hermione interjected. The memory of Draco stabbing Joel in the face flashed, unbidden, into her mind. ‘This is very dangerous for him. Like you said last night, Harry - we need a new plan.’

‘Do we? I’m not so sure we do now.’ Harry’s eyes glinted strangely as he spoke. ‘I can use official channels to inform Ephraim that Draco is informally ‘assisting’ me with the Kerpin case – that provides him with some cover. And continue to press my contacts at Vendome to review Draco’s custody status as quickly as possible – and hopefully get him out of here and back to Malfoy Manor. He’ll be much more useful THERE than here.’

Draco eyed the pokey apartment with disdain. ‘The sooner the better, please.’ He switched his
attention to Hermione. ‘You should visit Malfoy Manor,’ he said in a tone of forced brightness.

‘Why ever should I do that?’ she asked, aghast. The last thing she wanted was to come across Ephraim…

‘My roses … the jewel box in Katya’s room. If these rose charms are in any way significant – and seeing as Svetlana has been sending them to me, we can assume they are – then we should secure them as soon as possible,’ he said.

‘He’s right,’ agreed Harry. ‘And see if you can track down the Matryoskha that Bill was telling us about too. I reckon Katya read something in those parchments that drove her away.’

‘You do?’ Draco arched an eyebrow quizzically.

‘So, how exactly do you propose I get in?’ Hermione asked Draco in sardonic tones. ‘Just breeze in through the front gates?’

‘Easy. Ask my mother if you can come for tea!’ Draco grinned. ‘If you visited during the day, it’s unlikely Ephraim would be there. And remember, nobody saw YOU last night. That guy only saw Harry and me,’ he added in reassuring tones.

‘And if you do come across Ephraim,’ Harry said crisply. ‘Play nice. For now.’

XXX

Ron was already home by the time Hermione got back to Wisteria Cottage. He was tired but excited, regaling Hermione with a blow-by-blow account of his trip to America. She tried hard to appear interested but was wondering throughout how the hell she could dispatch Grumio with a message to Narcissa Malfoy without Ron noticing and demanding an explanation.

Her only hope was to send Narcissa an owl from the Ministry instead, as she planned to use the library there on Monday morning. She also wanted to meet up with Padma. She’d Floo-called her a few times to offer some friendly reassurance, but Padma wasn’t responding, so Hermione’s best bet was to try and catch her at work instead. It was very troubling, Hermione thought. What exactly were these supposed ‘allegations’ into Padma’s working practices? She had no doubt that this was all Ephraim’s doing. He’d been far too gloating. He was using Padma to get at HER, she felt sure of it. It scared her to think of what he might do next.

Maybe Bill was right? Maybe she should promise to launch that investigation into Los Rojos after all? Except … she feared them too … feared for her children and the people she cared about.

It was a no-win situation.

XXX

The next day, she grabbed a chance to sneak a call to Henrik on her mobile phone. She was walking home from Sunday lunch at the Burrow with Ron and the children when Ron offered to take the kids for a quick play in the park – ‘to burn off Granny’s Yorkshire puddings.’

Hermione noted with some irritation that her phone’s battery was running low – she had to think about getting it charged at some point.

Henrik’s voice sounded fuzzy and the line was distorted. Hermione made a quick calculation and realised that she’d probably woken him up. ‘I’m so sorry!’ she gasped. ‘I didn’t think.’
‘Hey, relax. I hadn’t got to bed yet!’ Henrik bellowed in jovial tones. Hermione could hear glasses clinking and loud chatter and the deep growls of an electric guitar being tuned up in the background. ‘Hold on,’ Henrik said. Voices surged and then receded and a door creaked open, followed by the clump of feet tramping on gravel.

Henrik’s voice returned at a normal pitch. He was panting slightly. ‘You still there?’

‘I can’t talk long, I -’

‘No, me neither. Look, I’ve had a money job come up. Shark attack in New Plymouth. I’m popping up there for a few days. I was going to call you tomorrow to say … in case you were thinking of still coming out here. I’ve taken some shots of that Gilgad facility I was telling you about. It’s completely trashed but I’ll email some pics to you if you like – you got an address you can text me?’

Hermione panicked momentarily and then remembered she had an old account set up on her parents’ computer.

‘Sure.’

‘There’s not much to look at,’ Henrik said, almost apologetically. ‘I spoke to a few folks about what was going on up there. They’re kind of … cagey, I guess. But I managed to get a few names. Hold on …’ Hermione could hear a rustling, scrabbling sort of sound, as he rummaged through his pockets. He was taking an awfully long time about it and her battery was going to expire at any moment. ‘Goddamn,’ he muttered vehemently, ‘I haven’t got ’em with me but I’ll mail them to you - one of the guys was called Hart or Harris, something like that. And there was a Turkish chap too.’

‘That’s fine, Henrik, just email me,’ Hermione said, anxious now to break off the conversation before the phone went flat.

‘Will do,’ Henrik promised. ‘Hey, if you do still want to come out, I can set up an interview with one of the workers from the plant if you like?’

‘That’d be great. I’ve – I’ve also got this friend, Harry Potter, who really wants to meet you too! He’s following your investigation with great interest … he could be very useful.’

Henrik was silent at the end of the line. Hermione remembered how paranoid Henrik was. Someone new popping up out of nowhere and muscling in on his work was bound to make him suspicious. ‘Harry’s in … law enforcement … well, not in the NORMAL sense … more kind of freelance, I guess …’ She blushed, aware that she was babbling nonsensically.

Henrik cut her off. ‘You trust him? Really, truly trust him?’

‘With my life!’ she blurted, with a little more emphasis than she’d intended. She cringed in embarrassment. She could sense that Henrik was grinning at the other end of the phone.

‘Okay, Hermione, that’s cool by me. Just drop me a line when you’re all set.’

Before heading home, Hermione texted Henrik her old email address and then texted Henrik’s contact details to Harry. She quickly jabbed the ‘send’ button and the phone went blank.

XXX

Hermione’s first port of call the following morning was Ollivanders in Diagon Alley.
The former proprietor, Garrick Ollivander, had passed away five years ago. His nephew, Aloysius Ollivander, had inherited the family business and the famous shop had undergone a major facelift—much to Hermione’s chagrin. She’d rather loved its formerly dark and dusty incarnation, crackling with chaotic magical energies. Instead, a pristine white counter and rows of neat boxes arranged alphabetically on gleaming shelves greeted her.

Aloysius Ollivander was an avuncular chap: slightly stooped and balding, wearing immaculate robes and sporting a broad, toothy grin. He welcomed Hermione most cordially, registered polite sympathy that she had lost her wand, and asked her to place her ‘wand’ hand on a glass sphere, which was resting on a mahogany pedestal.

This was clearly the ‘modern’ way to match a person to a wand, Hermione thought wryly, but she did as he asked. A surprisingly forceful surge of magic jolted through her.

‘That’ll do!’ Aloysius Ollivander chortled.

Hermione quickly withdrew her hand, shaking it slightly to offset the strange tickling sensation that surged from her palm to her fingernails.

The glass ball pulsed with a whirling kaleidoscope of colours—blues, greens and purples, but a swirling cloud of ashen grey soon swallowed these up.

‘Hmmm, interesting …’ Aloysius said, furrowing his brow. He leant closer to the ball and squinted into its depths. He shot Hermione a cursory, sidelong glance, then stared back at the swooshing grey, which was fast fading. ‘Looks like you’ve changed somewhat since your last wand, Mrs Weasley,’ he commented. ‘Vine wood with a dragon heartstring core, wasn’t it?’

Hermione nodded mutely, her insides squirming nervously. She didn’t want a DIFFERENT wand. She wanted what she knew and trusted.

‘Don’t worry. Change is completely normal. It happens more often than you’d expect. Now then, let me see,’ Aloysius clucked, his fingers trailing the neat line of boxes. He paused, alighting on a brown cardboard box marked ‘Sortilége’—was that a ‘brand’ name? Hermione thought. She pursed her lips tightly in disapproval.

‘Try this one,’ Aloysius said, slamming the box onto the smooth white counter. He continued to study the boxes on view; standing on his toes to reach for a white box perched on the highest shelf, before shaking his head and moving on to its neighbour. This wand was wrapped in a diaphanous, shimmering silver material.

Hermione plucked the first wand from its brown box and swished it, pleasantly surprised at the soft thrum of magic that tingled through her.

She smiled. ‘This feels nice.’

Aloysius nodded effusively. ‘Thought you’d like it,’ he said in cheery tones. ‘A delicate piece of handicraft. Delightfully Gallic. The wand-maker is based in Carcassonne and he always fashions such beautifully honed wands … note the delicate carvings he has etched into the wood here.’ Aloysius sighed, seemingly captivated by its demure beauty. ‘Such refinement is rarely seen.’

Hermione caressed the slim, pale wand with her fingertips. A luminous shimmer of magic cushioned her touch. ‘Is it powerful?’

‘It’s eleven inches, rosewood, with a kneazle whisker core. More than sufficient.’
Aloysius was watching her beadily. ‘Well… perhaps this one might suit you better,’ he said, uncurling the silver package. The material flowed away from the wand like molten silver. This wand was more roughly hewn and a darker wood.

Hermione grasped it and gasped, surprised at the intensity of magic that coursed through her. She felt electrified and a little frightened.

‘Sometimes we have to make a choice,’ Aloysius said, a perspicacious twinkle in his eye.

Hermione tittered nervously. ‘What is this?’

‘Twelve and three-quarters in length, walnut with a dragon’s heartstring core – a particularly potent combination I find, and only useful in the hands of those with the determination and inner grit to truly master it.’

Hermione gave Aloysius a sharp look. This was the same type of wand that Bellatrix Lestrange had owned, she felt sure; the wand she’d been forced to use all those years ago when her own beloved wand had been confiscated by snatchers working for Voldemort. Mercifully, her old wand had been found amongst a collection of similarly stolen booty in an old chest at Malfoy Manor, once Voldemort had fallen. She’d rarely felt so relieved as when her hand clasped that wand again. It had felt powerful and invigorating. It had felt part of her. How she craved that familiar surge of affection and surety...

‘It was one of my uncle’s last wands,’ Aloysius said, sorrowfully. ‘Not as finished a product as the first wand I showed you … but sadly, he ran out of time.’

She caressed the wand, marvelling at the way her heart raced ever so slightly as the magic thrummed hotly through her. A rich, velvety purple flooded her mind. A purple fading to grey then to white...

It was an ugly old thing; that was for sure. And did she really want this flood of energy at her disposal when she was simply doing a quick Scourgify? Or, indeed, the fluttering anxiety that seemed to accompany it. And for some unaccountable reason that was sending her stomach into somersaults, she felt like Draco was standing in the room with them; she could feel that odd, prickly, vibrating sensation that so often set the hairs on her arms on end when he was close by. Except he wasn’t. He was far away in Paris. Or maybe even Moscow.

‘Think carefully,’ Aloysius said in a low, breathy voice, seemingly pitched close to her ear, even though he was still positioned on the other side of the counter.

Most peculiar, Hermione thought, both excited and repelled by the harsh-grained wand throbbing in her hand. Aloysius’s words echoed inside of her head. ‘Sometimes we have to make a choice.’ For some unfathomable reason, that simple little phrase seemed to encompass so much more than which wand to choose.

‘I’ll take it,’ she said breathily to Aloysius. There was something dark and ripe with meaning in the way his eyes met hers.

‘Then I wish you the best of your new wand, Mrs Weasley,’ he said in a high-fluting, courteous voice that didn’t quite match the moment.

XXX

Padma wasn’t at the Ministry. The receptionist at the Department for Magical Law Enforcement informed Hermione - in a somewhat misguided attempt at jocularity - that Padma ‘was on the same
broomstick’ as herself; meaning she had also been ‘temporarily suspended, pending further investigation’. The receptionist suspected she was already gallivanting somewhere hot and tropical with that boffin boyfriend of hers.

Hermione wished this was the case but thought it unlikely. She had worrying mental images of Anthony Goldstein squirreled away in a dark, underground laboratory, working on a top-secret Dark Flux project for Ephraim and Torquil. As for Padma. All she could do was badger her with incessant owls and Floo-calls and hope she responded.

XXX

The Ministry Library, situated on the same level as the Wizengamot courtrooms, was a capacious vault with high Gothic ceilings, manned by an army of officious-looking elves.

Hermione whiled away many a peaceful hour here perusing its well-stocked shelves, so she was on friendly terms with Albert, the rickety old elf who guarded the library entrance. But this morning he frowned deeply as she approached.

‘My most humble apologies, Mrs Weasley.’ The elf twitched nervously and paused to clear his throat. ‘I’m afraid you cannot enter the library today.’

‘Why ever not?’ Hermione asked, stunned. Other witches and wizards were sauntering nonchalantly in and out of the library behind him.

Albert shrugged helplessly. His long ears quivered uneasily. ‘Those are my instructions.’

‘But everyone else-’ she stuttered plaintively.

Albert shook his head regretfully. He shuffled awkwardly, unable to hold her outraged gaze.

‘You mean it’s just ME who cannot enter.’

Albert nodded vociferously in return. ‘Sorry, Mrs Weasley.’

Hermione stepped forward. She could feel her new wand, tucked into the sleeve of her robes, smouldering against her arm.

Albert flinched a little and turned large, soulful eyes on her. ‘Orders. From them above.’ He cast a quick, furtive glance at the ceiling.

This was infuriating! She hadn’t actually been disbarred from the Ministry. She’d Apparated into the main atrium unhindered; free to avail herself of the Ministry’s public facilities.

‘Thank you, Albert,’ she said abruptly. She turned about heel and strode towards the service lifts. Maybe HE could provide an explanation.

In the lift, her hand hovered momentarily over the button for Level 2, and then passed it, pressing -1 instead – where the Ministry Owlery was located.

A rich vein of hatred bubbled up inside of her. He’d warned her that he had the ‘power’ to make things happen at the Ministry. ‘This is YOUR doing!’ she spluttered, arguing with an imaginary Ephraim inside her head.

She glanced at her fellow passenger in the lift; a thin streak of a lad, laden down with a heaped armful of parchments, who quailed a little at being trapped, alone, with a crazy woman. She threw
him a simpering smile as he shuffled out of the lift at its next stop as fast as the teetering pile of papers in his arms allowed him.

The Owlery was a shady nook nestled on the infrequently visited uppermost level of the Ministry. The sounds and smells of London echoed above them and the shadowy gloom was punctuated by streaks of natural light, afforded by grilles in the ceiling. A line of well-groomed barn owls with eyes like round, luminous orbs were perched in a line.

Luckily, they were the only other living creatures in the room - apart from Hermione herself. She grabbed a quill and a sheet of Ministry supply parchment provided for employees’ use – and dashed a note off to Ephraim Golowitz. Sod Harry and his stupid exhortation to ‘Play nice!’

‘I have been banned from the Ministry library. Is this YOUR doing? Leave me alone!’ she seethed.

She quickly attached the parchment to a waiting owl and rapidly dispatched it up the shoot that connected the Owlery to the outside world before she could change her mind.

But she’d forgotten to sign it!

She sat down at a writing desk, panting with excitement. Gradually her fierce anger began to dissipate. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and allowed her dark surroundings to close in on her. Her pulse was slowing and the heated fog that had descended on her was clearing.

It was a good thing she hadn’t signed that letter, she decided. How foolishly impulsive she’d been! It was most unlike her. Her life, her sense of self… Everything was coming apart at the seams.

She could feel her new wand thrumming against her skin. She pulled it out and laid it flat on her palms and squinted at it through the murky gloom. It emanated a faint, unearthly violet glow. A whiff of purple magic … Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but she felt sure it was there and that only she could see it. It belonged to her, and her alone. A secret little bond between her and the wand.

Feeling stronger and much revived, Hermione composed a new note – in much neater and less scrawled handwriting than her note to Ephraim – politely asking after Narcissa Malfoy’s health and wondering if they could perhaps meet up sometime? She didn’t specifically mention tea at Malfoy Manor, but seeing as Narcissa rarely stepped out of her home …

The owl scooted up the shoot, half-colliding with another owl heading in the opposite direction.

The advancing owl butted rudely into her. A note was dangling from its feet. Hermione instantly recognised the parchment as the one she had just sent to Ephraim.

She cursed silently as she unfastened the parchment and quickly scanned the note. It was short and to the point.

‘Mrs Weasley.

You continue to fail to do what I have kindly requested of you – a small vial of your memories would suffice, for starters. And, crucially, our dear mutual friend is still beleaguered in an alien land. If you wish to discuss the matter further, then I am at Arcana for the next hour. You can floo directly from Zoltan Guldstern’s office located on Level Three, opposite the portrait of Grogan Stump.
Yours,

Ephraim Golowitz

Hermione impetuously scrunched the note up and hurled it to the floor.

XXX

Hermione rarely visited Level Three, which was where the Department for Magical Accidents and Catastrophes was located. Even so, her appearance there had attracted a high degree of interest from a couple of witches who were sitting close to the swinging double doors that accessed the department.

‘I’m looking for a portrait,’ Hermione said in halting tones to the elder of the two, who was gawking at her curiously through large, horn-rimmed spectacles. There was something familiar in her features, Hermione thought, but she couldn’t place the face.

‘A portrait, you say?’ squawked the be-spectacled lady.

‘Yes. Of Grogan Stump. He was a veteran logician, I believe. Worked in the Department of Mysteries for sixty-seven years … something like that.’ The two witches gazed at her with blank, lifeless expressions. ‘I understand his portrait is located opposite Zoltan Guldstern’s office.’

The witch with the glasses screwed up her face in confusion. ‘Never heard of him!’ she declared. ‘I think you must be in the wrong department, Mrs Weasley.’

Hermione sighed. Here was a prime example of one of the chief drawbacks of being so well-renowned in the wizarding world. This little ‘adventure’ – or, more correctly, series of ‘misadventures’ – would be common gossip throughout the Ministry by the end of the working day. Worse still, Ron might catch wind of it.

‘Oh, come on, Muriel,’ the younger witch said. ‘Zoltan Guldstern? He’s the good-looking one. Heading up that new Muggle Transactions office, or whatever its name is.’

Muriel looked suitably admonished. ‘Of course. Muggle Transactions.’ She pointed to the double doors Hermione had just passed through.

‘Go back that way, walk about fifty steps …’

‘More like thirty,’ the younger witch interrupted.

‘… And there should be a door to your left. It’s easily missed. Behind that door there’s a corridor. Take a left, then a right, then another right–’

‘Another LEFT,’ her companion said emphatically.

Muriel shot her a contemptuous look and continued. ‘Go left and at the end of that corridor you’ll find what you’re looking for.’

Hermione thanked them and re-traced her steps. She followed their instructions, although Muriel had been absolutely right when she said the door leading to this particular section of the Ministry was easily missed. It was a white door set into a chalky-white wall and would have been easily missed without prior instruction.

This part of the Ministry was wholly new to her, comprising a labyrinthine network of dark, narrow
passageways. The corridor leading to Mr Guldstern’s office was the longest and narrowest of all. The sole source of light was a weakly glowing candle in a holder perched above the sober-faced portrait of Grogan Stump. He was a stern man with grizzled features and small, diamond-shaped eyes almost swallowed up by thickly creased, wrinkly skin. She was sure he was sneering at her and she was tempted to say something suitably barbed and witty, but nothing sprang to mind.

To her surprise, the door opposite was swung open with some force and a small, timorous-looking man in a faded tweed suit was ushering her inside.

Hermione ogled the sign above the door announcing that this was the Office for Muggle Business Relations – not ‘Transactions’. It sounded rather important, Hermione thought, in view of the increasing cooperation between the two economies. So why was it stuck out here?

‘I’ve never heard of you,’ she said bluntly to the little man in the tweed suit.

‘We haven’t been here long,’ he replied, in a tight, nasal whine.

Hermione gawped at the disordered state of the office. There was a desk piled high with a medley of parchments and pamphlets and an empty, rusty birdcage. There were a couple of hard-backed wooden chairs ranged on either side of this desk and an imposing marble fireplace that occupied almost the entire length and breadth of one wall.

‘Are you Mr Guldstern?’ Hermione asked the little man, who was busily shuffling papers on the desk.

He emitted a high, whinnying laugh, which quickly petered into a stuttering wheeze. ‘Oh no, Mrs Weasley. I’m Mr Guldstern’s secretary. He just stepped out. But as you’re not here to actually meet HIM, that’s neither here nor there, really, is it?’ He grinned at her and pointed to the dark, gaping mouth of the fireplace.

‘Step inside. There’s some Floo powder on the mantelpiece.’

‘Where do I say I’m going?’ she asked, clutching a handful of green Floo powder.

‘Executam Arcanorum should do the trick,’ he squeaked.

‘Not Arcana?’ Hermione asked. A sliver of icy apprehension was creeping up her gullet.

The little man’s eyes popped angrily. ‘Hurry along now, Mrs Weasley! He’s waiting!’ Mr Guldstern’s secretary made a dismissive gesture with his hand and continued to rifle through the mounds of paperwork on the desk.

XXX

The prim receptionist at Arcana was similarly supercilious.

‘Mr Golowitz is unavailable. He’s tied up in meetings for the rest of the day,’ she trilled.

Hermione gazed around the lobby in growing vexation.

‘But he’s expecting me!’

The receptionist shook her head, implacable. ‘He’s not here.’

Hermione jabbed her finger irritably at the receptionist’s computer. ‘Maybe he left a message for me?’ she fumed.
The receptionist sighed. Her carefully polished fingernails tip-tapped at a keyboard as she studied her computer screen.

‘Mrs Weasley, you say …’ So, he had left a message, Hermione thought. ‘Nope. Nothing.’ She tossed Hermione a disdainful look.

‘Are you quite sure about that?’

‘Absolutely,’ she said, stony-faced. She briskly beckoned over a man who had been waiting in line behind Hermione.

Hermione grudgingly forsook further argument. She crossed the lobby and headed out into the chill London air. She turned to look at Arcana’s impressive plate glass and chrome headquarters. Its windows stared back at her, blank and faceless. She fancied Ephraim, sporting an amused, malicious smirk, was gazing down at her.

XXX

To Hermione’s surprise, Ron was already home, even though it was only mid-afternoon. He was sitting at the kitchen table ploughing through a voluminous pile of papers.

‘What’s all that?’ she asked.

‘Betting slips, mainly,’ he grunted in reply. ‘A note came for you,’ he added testily. ‘Just a few minutes ago.’ He poked at a piece of screwed-up parchment lying next to his pile of papers. He watched, eyes narrowed, as she picked it up and proceeded to smooth out the creases.

It was from Narcissa Malfoy.

Hermione chanced a glance at Ron. His expression was guarded, his eyes hard.

‘Didn’t realize you were such good pals,’ he said in acid tones.

‘It’s not like that,’ Hermione mumbled, but she could feel heat rising to her cheeks as she spoke. She turned away to read the note.

It was merely a thank you for her kind enquiry and an invitation to afternoon tea, tomorrow.

‘Oh, and an owl came from Harry, too,’ Ron said.

‘For me?’ Hermione asked, her heart beating a little faster. She was desperate for news.

‘I opened it. Hope you don’t mind. But seeing as he’s my best friend–’

‘What did he say?’

‘Just that he’s going away for a couple of days and will get in touch when he gets back. He wishes us well - BOTH of us - the usual stuff…’

So, they’d received the due permissions to go to Moscow – and in record time by the sound of it. Strange, she thought, that Harry had applied for Draco to go too, particularly when, yet again, he would be ‘exposed’ in an unsecured environment.

She recalled Ron once saying that if Harry was working with Draco on this Dark Flux case, he would be ‘sticking close to the bastard to see exactly what he was up to.’ Maybe that was it? Harry didn’t want to let Draco out of his sight.
Harry clearly didn’t trust Draco, she thought soberly. Perhaps, he never would?

She envied them, though. At least they were together. With Harry and Draco so very far away, she felt very alone and unprotected … and tomorrow she would be marching headfirst into the lion’s den.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“WELCOME TO MYSTERY” by PLAIN WHITE T's

“ELEPHANT” by TAME IMPALA

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Chapter Summary

Hermione’s mission to Malfoy Manor takes an unexpected turn

26. Burd Ellen

‘How lovely to see you, Hermione,’ Narcissa Malfoy chirruped, extending her arms to reel Hermione into a stiff embrace. Hermione coloured slightly at such close physical proximity and was relieved when Narcissa abruptly pulled away again, although her pale, bony hands still held Hermione captive by the wrists.

She cocked her head to one side and frowned. ‘But, my dear girl, you look shattered. What have you been doing to yourself?’ She led Hermione away from the fireplace in the grandiose lobby where she had floo-ed in, towards her sitting room. ‘I think a strong cup of tea is in order, don’t you?’

She ushered Hermione into her sitting room and motioned towards the large white sofa close to the roaring fireplace. Hermione sat down and Narcissa demurely positioned herself on the opposite sofa. Hermione instantly recognized the samovar of tea and the fine Meissen china tea set on the table between them. Her keen eyes hunted for the little china pot containing the peculiar green powder that had so intrigued her on her first visit for tea at Malfoy Manor, but this time it hadn’t made an appearance.

‘If I remember correctly,’ Narcissa said, narrowing her gaze, ‘you take tea white, with no sugar?’

Hermione nodded her assent. ‘Yes. Thank you.’

Narcissa poured their tea and handed Hermione her teacup. Hermione took a sip, quickly followed by a bolder gulp, as a lick of velvety warmth exploded onto her tongue. This really was the most delicious tea she had ever tasted!

‘This is marvellous,’ she enthused.

Narcissa shrugged with a well-practiced air of indifference. ‘Draco gets it for me from a glorious little tea shop in Oxford.’ She took a small sip of her own tea, then said: ‘He’s really rather good at things like that.’

Hermione sighed. The one subject she wished to avoid discussing with Draco’s mother was Draco himself. Her main aim was to get into Katya’s room to procure Draco’s roses and hunt down that Matryoshka, though how exactly she could engineer a move upstairs remained a vexing issue.

There was a stilted silence as both supped their tea.

It was hard not to admire Narcissa Malfoy. Hermione thought. She was extraordinarily well preserved and impeccably dressed, positively gleaming with an unmistakable air of slick wealth. One could be forgiven for thinking that here was a woman without a care in the world. And yet her husband had been seriously ill for many years, her son (as far as Narcissa likely knew) was under
suspicion for murder in a foreign land, and her house, indeed her life, had been usurped by outsiders, which reminded her …

‘Will Sylvestra be joining us?’ Hermione piped up.

‘Not today, no. Sylvestra is out with her father, so we are quite alone.’ Narcissa smiled sweetly and was about to drink her tea but then seemed to think better of it. ‘Actually, no! What am I saying? We’re not alone.’ She leant forwards, a smile of almost childlike glee on her face. ‘Scorpius is here.’

For some unfathomable reason, Hermione felt her heartbeat accelerate and a flutter of nerves trembled through her. But how could she possibly be nervous at meeting a child?

She was almost relieved when Narcissa then went on to say: ‘Unfortunately, Scorpius is having his riding lesson.’ Although her relief was short-lived, as Narcissa glanced at the ornate, fat clock perched on the grand marble fireplace and added, ‘he’ll be back inside within the next half hour, I should think.’ Narcissa sighed indulgently. ‘Yes … He’s my little treasure.’ The joy suddenly seemed to drain from her face. A sense of melancholy lingered beneath her elegant, poised veneer. ‘Really, Hermione, I don’t know what I’d do without him.’ This was followed by a sharp intake of breath. ‘Dear me! I forgot how much you love music! How very rude.’ Narcissa promptly snapped her fingers and the bombastic opening bars of Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony exploded into the room – from precisely where, Hermione was still to determine, but it was a very neat trick.

Narcissa giggled girlishly. ‘There we are, that’s better, isn’t it? Or is it not to your liking? It’s a bit booming, isn’t it?’ And there it was again! A flash of insecurity shaded her pristine features.

‘No, no, that’s lovely,’ Hermione assured her.

Narcissa visibly relaxed. She smiled graciously and placed her now-empty teacup on the table before her, then neatly folded her hands on her lap. ‘It’ll quieten down in a moment, ah yes … there we have it …’ She closed her eyes in momentary rhapsody, only to have her peace shattered by a chorus of resounding brasses. ‘No, no, that simply won’t do,’ she fussed. She clicked her fingers again and the room soon echoed with the haunting refrains of a lonely, soulful clarinet, its lilting melody taken up by a muted horn. A plaintive oboe, careening and swooping amidst a sea of shimmering strings, ushered in a soaring flute, which burst into song, spiralling joyously, the ensemble combining into a glorious flood of molten, velvety sound. Hermione listened to the instruments skipping and chatting as though caught in a whirling musical conversation. She closed her eyes and envisaged a vast golden ballroom and a hundred pairs of swirling dancers, gliding round and round.

‘Debussy …’ Narcissa sighed. ‘Such polite perfection.’ She gave Hermione a look of such sadness and yearning, Hermione instantly knew why Narcissa had responded so swiftly to Hermione’s owl and invited her to tea.

The two women stared at each other, the soft music hanging suspended in the air between them.

‘I want to know how my son is,’ Narcissa said in a voice so quiet, it was barely above a whisper. Hermione wondered if she should feign ignorance but her better instincts overcame her. As much as Narcissa Malfoy was a silly, vain sort of woman, she was also a mother.

‘How do you know?’ Hermione said. She realised it was an odd sort of reply, but she had to establish first that this wasn’t a trap of some kind.
Narcissa gave her a rueful, lopsided smile. ‘Everyone thinks I’m a fool, Hermione. Of course, I am, a little, sometimes, but when it comes to Draco … Well, I’m often right. And I’ve been thinking that as Draco’s in Paris …’ her face darkened here, ‘and that Potter boy’s involved in this – this,’ she searched for the right word, ‘this MESS Draco’s got himself into, then you, Hermione, probably know a lot more about what’s happening than I do – than most people, I suspect!’ she added with a nervous titter.

Hermione could feel a strange clutching sensation inside her chest. She really, really didn’t want to talk about Draco. She was trying so desperately to ignore the feelings that even the mere mention of his name conjured up inside of her.

She heaved a sigh. ‘He’s been very ill,’ she said. She had to pick her words carefully. ‘But he’s much better now. He’s had the very best medical attention.’

‘St. Gaspard’s?’

‘Yes. Harry made sure of it.’

Narcissa blinked rapidly, absorbing this information. ‘What was wrong with him?’

Hermione faltered here. She couldn’t possibly tell Narcissa that her son had been shot with a hybridic form of Gimlott’s. But Narcissa was well aware that Draco had been ‘Muggle’ shot before venturing to South America. ‘He – he’s been struggling to recover from that dreadful shooting incident, and then with all his dashing about and business meetings and so forth, he really exhausted himself.’

Narcissa nodded in agreement. ‘Yes, he’s always on the go, that boy,’ she said affectionately. ‘Too many fingers in too many pies. Just like his father!’

Her eyes flew heavenwards. Her bravura suddenly seemed to fail her and her face crumpled. ‘It’s very important he comes home soon, Hermione. As soon as possible.’ She blinked back tears. ‘Do you think you could tell him that?’

‘I can certainly tell Harry. But really, it’s up to the Ministry in France …’

‘Please, Hermione,’ Narcissa said in beseeching tones. ‘Please do all you can to get my son released. Otherwise … otherwise,’ her voice dropped an octave, ‘it will be too late.’ She took a deep breath. ‘I think my boy deserves to see his father again, don’t you?’

‘Of course,’ Hermione muttered. She took a deep sip of her tea, which had cooled rapidly. She had the good sense to look chagrined at this news, even though she had nothing but loathing for Lucius Malfoy.

The sounds of doors banging and a clattering commotion shook them from their sombre reverie. The noise was emanating from the corridor leading right from the sitting room, which led, if Hermione recalled correctly, to the kitchens.

A beaming smile lit up Narcissa’s face and she rose from the sofa in one fluid movement. ‘That’ll be young Scorpius! Have you ever met my grandson, Hermione? No, I don’t believe you have,’ she said, answering her own question. ‘Milton!’ she shrilled.

A mud-spattered, rather bedraggled-looking house-elf appeared at the entrance to the sitting room. ‘Yes, Ma’am,’ he said sheepishly.

‘Is Scorpius with you?’
‘Yes, Ma’am,’ Milton replied. A small, pale boy with a shock of white-blonde hair peered into the room from behind Milton and at his grandmother’s prompting shuffled forwards almost as far as the threshold.

‘Darling!’ Narcissa gushed, hastening over to Scorpius and grasping him firmly by the elbow. She levered him into the room where he stood, wide-eyed and knock-kneed, blinking at his grandmother and the strange woman in her company from under unfeasibly long blond eyelashes.

‘Did you have a fun pony ride?’ Narcissa chortled. This surprised Hermione. She’d assumed a ‘riding’ lesson had meant he was learning to fly a broomstick.

The boy nodded, his eyes flicking briefly towards Hermione. She smiled warmly, hoping to put the child at his ease, but the situation felt so forced and unnatural she rather feared that her fixed grin would terrify him further.

‘And did you ride your favourite pony? The white one?’ Narcissa said in soft, wheedling tones.

Again, Scorpius nodded. He half-turned towards Milton, almost as though he was hoping the elf would confirm his story and finish this conversation on his behalf. Luckily, Milton was a perceptive elf.

‘Young Master trotted a full three times around the oak grove,’ the elf declared proudly. ‘He showed himself to have a very fine seat, Ma’am. A very fine seat, indeed.’

Narcissa clapped her hands in delight. ‘That’s remarkable, Scorpius! Very well done.’ Her squeaky enthusiasm was notably more childlike than the child’s own behaviour. She flapped her hands in Hermione’s direction. ‘This is my dear, dear friend, Hermione,’ she announced.

Hermione stepped forwards and held out her hand. Scorpius screwed up his nose in confusion. He turned large, blue eyes towards his grandmother. She nodded effusively. Scorpius extended his own hand and lightly brushed it against Hermione’s. It was small and cold, more like the glancing touch of a ghost than a flesh-and-blood child.

Milton coughed politely, drawing his mistress’s attention. ‘Is there anything else I can do for you, Ma’am?’

‘Yes, indeed there is, Milton,’ Narcissa said, in assertive tones. ‘The Herschensteins are dining here tonight and Mr Golowitz has impressed upon me the most particular importance of the occasion. I need to review the menus.’

‘Yes, Ma’am,’ Milton said, all but clicking his heels and saluting his mistress as he momentarily vanished with a loud pop, re-appearing a few seconds later with a roll of golden parchment. ‘I have the menu here, Ma’am, for your perusal.’

Narcissa snatched the parchment from Milton’s hand. ‘Could you please excuse me for five minutes, Hermione?’ she said, brandishing the menu with impatient intent. ‘I really must go through this.’

Hermione swiftly realised that this was actually her cue to take her leave. Narcissa had achieved her primary aim of this little get-together and Hermione’s further presence had become unnecessary. But Hermione hadn’t achieved her primary aim, so she couldn’t simply oblige and go. She still had to find an excuse to get into Katya’s room!

She grinned at Scorpius, hoping against hope to elicit some kind of reaction – preferably a warm one. He was her only hope.
To her astonishment, Scorpius almost smiled back! It was quite an effort, but his pointed, pallid features definitely brightened and his lips parted.

‘Maybe Scorpius could show me his room?’ Hermione asked in high, fluting tones.

Scorpius looked nonplussed at this suggestion and stepped backwards, almost colliding with Milton. The child furrowed his brow, seemingly deep in concentrated thought. Narcissa glanced between the two of them and made a decision.

‘That’s a wonderful idea! Show Hermione your new playroom, Scorpius. The blue one.’ She threw Hermione an appreciative smile, although it was perfectly clear that her patronising froideur had returned in tandem with her poised composure.

The blue playroom was across the landing from the yellow playroom. Both rooms were larger than Hermione’s kitchen/diner and living room combined and decorated in dazzling shades of blue and yellow. Scorpius hesitated at the open doorway to the blue room. Hermione had never seen so many toys and games. She felt as daunted as Scorpius looked. The ends of his mouth pointed downwards and his eyes drooped at the resplendent array of amusements at his disposal.

‘Have you got a favourite toy, Scorpius?’ Hermione said in hushed tones. She crouched down so that her head was level with his. He smelt of lavender soap and warm pony; a most peculiar combination. He turned to face her. Unlike Draco, he had large, pale blue eyes, but in most other respects they were remarkably similar - although Scorpius didn’t have the petulant scowl that had marred his father’s face when she had first clapped eyes on him at Hogwarts.

Scorpius firmly shook his head. He glanced reproachfully at the blue room, which struck Hermione as a trifle ungenerous – how Hugo would love this room! But maybe she was being unfair? How many long, lonely hours did Scorpius have to spend in here? Or indeed, in the gaudy yellow room behind them?

‘We don’t have to go in here,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘Not if you don’t want to. Maybe you could show me your bedroom?’

Scorpius bristled at this suggestion so she quickly moved on. ‘Or is there anywhere else you’d like to go?’ she said cheerily.

Scorpius’ eyes rolled upwards then round as he thought this through. He was a very contemplative, cautious little thing, Hermione thought. Hardly a child at all.

To her surprise, she felt his small, cool hand slip into hers. He gently tugged.

‘Oh!’ she exclaimed. ‘Okay!’ She allowed him to pull her away from the blue room. The doll-like child tripped along beside her, coaxing her down a plush, carpeted hallway and past a series of firmly closed doors towards a landing.

He pointed to a door.

Hermione’s pulse quickened. It was Katya’s room. She felt a stab of affection and gratitude for Scorpius and would have dearly loved to plant a kiss on his neatly combed hair

‘What’s in here?’ she asked, breathily. Scorpius pushed open the door and beckoned her inside.

The room was exactly as she remembered; the sweetly smiling portrait of Katya by the door, the
gleaming piano and the rosewood desk. The pretty, painted box, which she knew contained the roses, was likely in one of the desk drawers. All she had to do was find the key, unlock the appropriate drawer, and smuggle the jewel box into the folds of her robes - all without Scorpius noticing.

Scorpius was quietly efficient and confident in this room. He all but ignored Hermione as he settled immediately into what was clearly a routine. He straightened the objects on top of the desk – there was no sign of a Matryoshka, Hermione noted sourly – then went to the window and shook imaginary dust from the rich, velveteen drapes. He then pushed an upholstered, wooden chair from the corner of the room towards the centre, positioning it in front of the desk, and settled himself comfortably so that he could gaze at the wall and the pictures that adorned it.

‘You have some beautiful paintings in here, Scorpius,’ Hermione said. ‘You must like art very much.’

Scorpius didn’t reply but continued to stare at the wall, his face rapt and expectant, his body stiff in anticipation.

His behaviour was making Hermione a little uneasy. Really, she needn’t have been there with him. He was lost in his own little world.

She sidled towards the desk and gently eased upon the drawers, one at a time, with a whispered ‘Alohomora’. One drawer, however, refused to open. The other drawers were almost bare, bar a few pieces of parchment, a chewed-up quill and, nestling in a dark corner of the bottom drawer, a small, silver key which closely resembled the key Draco had used to open the painted box. She tried to unlock the reluctant drawer but the drawer was firmly stuck. She impatiently rattled the key in the lock and the rosewood desk shuddered loudly with the effort. Scorpius cast a fleeting, curious glance over his shoulder and beckoned her to come and join him in his vigil in front of the paintings.

Hermione threw him a swift, disarming smile, her hands furtively working at the key. She muttered a string of spells, increasingly desperate to break into the drawer and was on the point of giving up when there was a sharp click and the drawer slid open. The small box containing the rose charms was skulking in a corner. She quickly pocketed it and silently closed the drawer. She then manoeuvred the solid wooden chair that was normally situated behind the desk next to Scorpius, so that she could sit beside him.

‘So, Scorpius,’ she said with forced enthusiasm - now she had the box ensconced in the folds of her robe, her primary instinct was to flee Malfoy Manor as fast as she could. ‘Which picture is your favourite?’

She cast a quick glance at the five paintings ranged rather haphazardly on the wall before her. They all portrayed bucolic pastoral scenes of varying degrees of romanticism – Katya clearly didn’t have adventurous tastes when it came to art. Scorpius immediately pointed at the largest picture. He looked at her intently and for a moment Hermione thought his grave, blue eyes were trying to communicate something important to her. There was a soft, clucking sound at the back of his throat.

‘What is it?’ she whispered, leaning towards him conspiratorially. ‘Tell me, Scorpius. I won’t breathe a word, I promise.’

For some unaccountable reason her palms had started to sweat and a vague sense of dread had descended on her.
He returned his gaze to the picture and she followed his eyes with her own.

An icy sensation ran down her spine as she realized, with a jolt of recognition that robbed her of the power to breathe, what she was looking at. The painting was a startlingly accurate rendition of the tower in the photograph she and Draco had found at Svetlana Kerpin’s house in Paris.

It WAS the same tower, there was no doubt about that, except the viewpoint was set further away, meaning the expanse of water they had seen in that photograph was depicted here in its fuller glory. It wasn’t a lake or a riverbank but a large pond, fringed with bulrushes, its bracken-brown waters thick with moss-green weed. The tower rose up immediately behind the pond; thick, dark grey stone walls and a conical, blue slate roof, like a witch’s hat perched on the top. There was a single, narrow slit of a window close to the top of the tower, but no other visible openings; just like fairy-tale images of Rapunzel’s tower, Hermione thought. The tower was garlanded in dense green foliage; a mixture of sinuous creepers and what looked like thick tresses of vine.

It was a damp, miserable day. Grey skies and a sheet of fine drizzle cloaked the tower and dappled the pond. She leaped from her chair to study the picture. Katya had been here. Katya knew this place. She could almost feel her presence urging her to look closer … Her eyes traced the shape and form of the tower’s stonework, amidst the smothering crisscrossed lattice of leaves and stems and curling tendrils. There was a line of buds, barely discernible; waiting to burst into flower once the sun came out.

‘Rosebuds, pink rosebuds’ she breathed, her breath warm and damp against the canvas.

She hadn’t realized she was standing so close … so close she’d felt for one inexplicably giddy moment that she was falling through a swirling sea of deep rosy pink, straight into the picture itself. She could almost feel the light drizzle caressing her cheeks and hear the rhythmic pitter-patter of rain on water.

‘Mrs Weasley,’ came a stern voice from the open door to her right. Hermione gasped. She immediately pulled away from the picture and turned to see who was staring at her. Her eyes were blurred, struggling to re-focus. A tall, straight woman with a profusion of gold hair irradiating from her head like a halo was repeating her name.

Hermione jumped guiltily, acutely aware that she wasn’t supposed to be in this room. She shook her head, clearing the foggy miasma that blurred her vision and fixed her eyes on the lady at the door expecting to see Narcissa, but to her horror she found herself gazing at the erect, handsome figure of Sylvestra instead.

‘I didn’t expect to see you here, Mrs Weasley,’ Sylvestra said silkily. She lavished a radiant smile in Scorpius’s direction. Scorpius shuffled uncomfortably in his chair, resentful that his peace had been disturbed. Hermione suspected he spent a lot of time in this room and that Sylvestra only barely tolerated it. She extended her hand towards the small boy, who jumped from the chair with dutiful alacrity and hurried to her side.

‘I was visiting Mrs. Malfoy,’ Hermione said.

Sylvestra gave her a cursory glance. ‘I know. She was just telling us.’

US? Hermione’s insides chilled. That could only mean one thing. Ephraim was here.

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Ephraim Golowitz was standing by the fireplace in the lobby talking to Milton the house-elf.
Beside Milton’s small, scrawny frame, he looked even taller and more imposing than ever. He looked up as Hermione descended the stairs, a snarling smile curling his lip. He exuded twinkle and menace in equal measure.

‘Hermione!’ he boomed. ‘What a pleasant surprise!’

Hermione summoned a polite smile in return. ‘Mr Golowitz. How very nice to see you.’

‘I must apologise for yesterday,’ Ephraim said in contrite tones. ‘I was delayed by unavoidable business. I hope I didn’t inconvenience you?’

He was so tall and all-encompassing, Hermione felt she had to tilt her head back at an awkward angle simply to comprehend his presence, let alone talk with him on equal terms.

‘There was a serious matter I wished to discuss with you,’ she said tartly.

Ephraim beamed and a spider’s web of laughter lines instantly creased his richly, tanned face. If he wasn’t what she feared him to be, Hermione thought, she would have to admit he was one of the handsomest devils she’d ever met.

‘It would appear that my Ministry privileges have been revoked,’ she said in querulous tones, telling herself not to flinch from his flinty gaze.

‘Oh my,’ he said in pitying tones and puckered his lips in mock sympathy. ‘How terribly inconvenient for you, Mrs Weasley. But what is this to me?’

Hermione opened her mouth to speak but the sound of Narcissa scampering along the hallway towards them instantly pulled Ephraim’s attention away from her.

‘Ephraim, darling!’ Narcissa trilled. Her face radiated warmth and excitement. ‘You’re home very early, but no matter, you can assist me with the plans for this evening. I’ve a couple of question marks over placings – oh! Hermione! You remember Mr Golowitz?’

‘Hermione and I are well-acquainted, aren’t we?’ Ephraim said, bowing his head slightly in Hermione’s direction.

Hermione heard a shushing, plodding sort of sound heading down the stairs behind her. She could sense somebody standing directly behind her, but Narcissa and Ephraim didn’t seem to have noticed. It was as though this newcomer was invisible. A small, cool hand slotted into hers …

‘Mrs Weasley,’ Ephraim said, returning his attention to her. ‘If you wish to discuss your current difficulties in more detail, it might be best you make another appointment to see me. You’ll have to excuse me now, I have pressing matters to attend to – and I never talk business at home,’ he added, with a sly grin directed at Narcissa.

‘Thank you for coming to see me today,’ Narcissa simpered.

Hermione gave Scorpius’s hand a brief squeeze in farewell and stepped towards the fireplace.

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CHAPTER TRACKS:

"PRELUDE A L'APRES-MIDI D'UN FAUNE" by CLAUDE DEBUSSY
"SNOW WHITE" by JAMES NEWTON HOWARD (from the Soundtrack to 'Snow White & The Huntsman')

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
The Zametsky Roses

Chapter Summary

Hermione's search for answers takes her somewhere familiar with surprising results…

27. The Zametsky Roses

Hermione wished she could contact Draco to tell him that she had secured Katya's roses; they were now secreted away in the furthest reaches of her underwear drawer, tucked behind the nursing bras that she still kept – just in case. But Draco was somewhere in Russia with Harry…

Hermione also wanted to talk to Draco about his son. What was going on with Scorpius and the painting in Katya's room? Hermione suspected he spent long hours staring at it, alone – hardly healthy behaviour.

Admittedly, there was something oddly captivating about that painting. The strange, goose-bumped sensation she herself had felt when gazing at it seemed to linger long after leaving Malfoy Manor… Indeed, for the following two nights, she even dreamt about that odd little tower and the brackenish water and the fine drizzle dusting her cheeks.

However, Hermione was more concerned about Scorpius. Selective Mutism and the fearful timidity Scorpius exhibited was usually prompted by extreme anxiety.

She knew Draco loved Scorpius and she sensed a deep well of worry within him regarding his son – but she could see he was at a loss to know what to do. It struck her that the wizarding world hadn't really bothered to evolve a support system for mental health issues. In the Muggle world, Scorpius would have been subjected to extensive psychological enquiry and his home life would have been rigorously examined. Obviously, there was no chance of that… She half-wished she could steal him away from Malfoy Manor, because something there was inflicting major damage on that child and no number of toys and fancy playrooms and sweet white ponies could make up for it.

She wondered, with fresh frustration, if the Ministry Library stocked any Medi-Magic Journals on the psychology of magical children… but it then occurred to her that there was another amazing library to hand – Hogwarts. It was unlikely to stock the latest Medi-Magic research – sadly, that would have to wait - but she might find information on Katya's intriguing rose charms.

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The weather had been mild for January, but once Hermione ventured north to Hogsmeade, she quickly learned that it had been snowing persistently for the past week and a half and had to buy a woollen hat and mittens before quitting the bustling village and heading into the countryside.

The rutted track, which stretched between Hogsmeade and Hogwarts, was flanked by fields coated in snow, like hardened egg whites. A flock of sheep, huddled beneath a snow-covered tree, were barely distinguishable in this blank, white landscape, making their presence heard by a barrage of piteous bleating as Hermione briskly trudged past. Her cheeks were stinging with cold and her breath rasped from her chest in thick, steamy plumes, which hovered momentarily before
dissipating in the chill, wintry air.

The proud, dark turrets of Hogwarts peeked above a line of stately, pine trees and a broad smile lit up Hermione's face. It felt like going home.

Hermione glanced left, down a rolling valley, towards a vast expanse of thick blue, creaking ice, dusted with fresh snow. The solitary cry of an eagle, circling over the lake before swooping skywards, sent a chill of anticipation surging through her.

She switched right, heading onto a narrow lane bordered by tall, dark trees. Thick clumps of snow intermittently pounded the ground, soft thuds echoing in the silence. Hermione's hand felt for her wand, which was tucked into the back of her jeans. She half-smiled, remembering how Mad-Eye Moody had always warned against the combustible perils of stowing wands around your person. Her wand thrummed pleasantly, emitting a heartening, warm glow.

Hogwarts Castle moved into view. Its romantic confection of spindling spires and towers spearing the sky combined uneasily with the dark fortitude and brooding stillness of its grey stone parapets. She blinked at its vastness, awed by its power and presence.

She was so busy staring ahead she missed her footing and stumbled. She felt herself falling backwards in what felt like suspended slow motion as the skies and treetops loomed past her in a high arc overhead. But instead of crashing to the ground, she fell against something solid and warm.

Large male hands gripped her arms and steadied her into an upright position.

She flushed crimson, but any embarrassment was short-lived.

'I've been trying to catch up with you for the last five minutes,' said Neville, a beaming smile on his face, 'but you've been speeding along this path like your life depended on it!'

Hermione's laughter echoed into the wintry silence. 'It's bloody cold out here,' she said, with an exaggerated shiver.

Neville nodded towards the towers of Hogwarts and offered Hermione his arm for support. 'A hot cup of tea by the fireside will work wonders.'

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'Of course you can use the library,' Neville murmured reassuringly, as he stirred a heavily loaded teaspoon of sugar into his tea. He sat himself down on a revolving chair that squeaked dismally every time he moved, and eyed Hermione, curled into a corner of a capacious red leather armchair, with unabashed curiosity over the rim of his teacup.

'I only need an hour,' Hermione said.

'You can take as long as you like. Our new librarian's an easy-going sort.'

'Do I need to sign in or anything?'

'Theoretically, yes,' Neville said. 'But seeing as it's you, I don't think anyone will mind.'

Hermione chewed her lip nervously. She didn't know much about the current headmaster – a Professor Goertner – but Ron had met him on numerous occasions and said he was a 'good egg'.

"Hermione"
They fell into silence. The only sound in Neville's study was the comforting crackle of burning logs and the intermittent fizz and splutter of flames. Gradually, the icy coldness that had seeped into Hermione's bones thawed and a warm dullness flooded her senses. She cast her eyes around Neville's study. It was small, dusty and sparsely furnished. A desk thrust into a dark, cobwebbed corner was piled high with papers and books. The wooden floorboards were smeared with mud and a damp mound of galoshes and filth-encrusted wellington boots half-blocked the doorway. Hermione fancied that Neville spent as little time in here as possible.

As Professor of Herbology, he probably spent most of his time in the greenhouses or gardens. He hated being cooped up indoors, which was why he'd resigned from his former post as a Section C Auror at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, complaining about too much 'desk work'.

'What is it you're looking for?' Neville asked, a little shyly, Hermione thought. He was much more perceptive than most people imagined. She'd have to tread carefully here. Not because she didn't trust Neville - far from it. More because she didn't want to burden him with any knowledge that might prove dangerous to his well-being.

'Just a little bit of research into an old case of mine,' she said, with a non-committal shrug. 'Nothing exciting!'

'Is there anything I can maybe help you with?'

Hermione gave him a considering look. 'Actually, Neville, yes, maybe there is.'

They were soon ensconced in a corner of the ancient library, hidden from the view of any nosy children or staff by a tall bookshelf, crammed with musty parchments and crumbling books. Hermione leaned against a cold, stone wall, cradling a large leather-bound volume called 'Magical Botanics'. Neville was flipping the yellowed powdery pages and pointing to various diagrams, which he explained in excitable tones. Hermione smiled indulgently. He really loved his subject.

She'd asked him to help her research 'roses' – with particular reference to any pertinent symbology or myth or historical associations. She figured that considering Neville was an expert Herbologist and keen botanist, he might have some useful insights. Neville had been all too eager to whisk her to the Herbology section of the library, shooing away the thin straggle of students who had gawped open-jawed at the 'famous' Hermione Weasley alongside him. Hermione pitied them as they scrabbled to gather their books together and swiftly vacated the study desks. She would have been positively furious to be ousted from her favourite nook here!

She eased herself into a well-worn wooden chair, its seat slippery from the thousands of students who had sat here through the years. She stretched her hands over the cold wooden table and closed her eyes. She luxuriated in the library's familiar gloom, the quiet buzz of low conversation, the occasional thunk of a heavy volume landing on a table and the soft brush and brusque flick of turning pages. The air was heavy with years of accumulated dust and memories.

Half an hour later, Hermione had slightly glazed over at yet another complicated description of the internal workings of roses and was relieved when Neville briskly replaced 'Magical Botanics' with a similarly weighty tome. He bent back the thick green cover, which gently creaked in protest, and rapidly thumbed through the pages before alighting on a chapter entitled 'The Symbology of Roses' – exactly what she was looking for.

Hermione's eyes lit up and Neville grinned in satisfaction.

'Glitz's accounts here of the traditional usage of Roses in love alchemy are particularly interesting,' he said cheekily, 'but I suspect you might be more interested in this …' He skipped a few pages
ahead to a set of sub-headings: 'The Mystic Rose,' 'Barachiel, Angelic Energy and the Symbolic Rose,' 'The Isis Rose,' 'Sub-Rosa Roman Practices', 'Marian Apparitions,' 'The Rosary,' 'Symbols of Nationhood,' and 'The Rose of Political Resistance.'

Hermione felt a surge of girlish gusto. She wanted to read them all, to devour the pages greedily. But she needed to know about one rose; Katya's rose.

'Are there any pictures?' she said. Realising this was a most 'un-Hermione-like' question, her voice fell to a faint whisper as she spoke.

Neville raised a brow. 'Which particular type of rose are you interested in?'

Hermione grabbed a quill and a spare piece of parchment that a student had left behind. It was covered in inkblots and scrawls, including a rather amusing doodle of Professor Goertner sporting a pair of horns and a forked tail. She turned it over and tried to draw the rose she had seen in Svetlana Kerpin's apartment and on the pendant Draco wore around his neck. The quill scratched uneasily - she'd never excelled at artistic endeavours – but she eventually managed a vague semblance of the divided rose bud. At first glance it more closely resembled a tulip, but Neville nodded approvingly.

'What colour is it?' he asked.

This stumped her. 'Silver,' she stammered. 'But not necessarily.'

'I see,' Neville said. He thoughtfully nibbled the tips of his fingers, brow furrowed. 'Colours are imbued with significance. A white rose would indicate purity, holiness - or, if it was German, political subversion – the white rose holds political significance there, dating from the Second World War. Red obviously means passion. Yellow is associated with wisdom. Pink has – has multiple meanings, but gratitude is foremost, I think. Purple means hope …'

'Thinking about it, I'm not sure the colour is entirely relevant, actually,' Hermione said tersely, cutting him off. 'Is there a place, perhaps, where this type of rose is particularly significant?'

Neville screwed up his eyes and he gazed blankly into the distance as though trying to recall something, a faint whiff of memory.

'There are states in America which use the Rose as an emblem and, of course, there's the English rose – which is more of a wild rose really, a briar rose. Then there's the Tudor Rose …' He began to sketch this on the parchment, but quickly desisted when Hermione vehemently shook her head.

'No, it has to be THIS rose.' She stabbed at the split rosebud with her finger. She was beginning to wonder if she'd be better off researching this herself.

Neville stared so hard at the drawing Hermione had made, she thought the parchment might burn under the intensity of his gaze.

'Hold there one moment,' he muttered. His chair skidded backwards, and he disappeared behind the tall bookshelf.

Hermione returned her attention to the book in front of her. Her eyes quickly scanned the chapter - spiritual hokum in abundance, she thought witheringly, chiefly along the lines of roses being used again and again as lucky amulets to ward off evil. It was the historical significances that intrigued her more.
There was the belief, of course, that a posy of roses could ward off the plague – as consecrated by the age-old nursery rhyme, 'Ring a Ring o' Roses' – illogical and irrational, but not altogether unexpected at a time when medical ignorance prevailed and the wonders of microbiology were yet to be discovered.

She skim-read the section on the political meaning of roses through the ages – her eyes were repeatedly drawn to the Roman use of a wild rose to indicate a secret meeting, a conspiracy, perhaps – hence the notion of something being 'Sub-Rosa.' This piqued her interest. Was this particular rose a symbol of 'resistance' of some kind? Perhaps it was the emblem for a secret order?

Neville returned with a large brown book, which he plonked heavily in front of Hermione.

'It occurs to me,' he said, 'that this rosebud might be two rosebuds - split apart then joined together to form a whole.'

'Okay…'

'Well, that might be symbolic of a union of two parts. A coming together, if you will.'

She gazed at the double page-spread he had flicked to. That was it. The rose! Svetlana and Katya's rose!

'A symbol such as this often signifies a future wedding or engagement - two parties sealing their union with a banner or a totem.'

Neville's voice droned on, an insistent buzz in her ear, but Hermione's eyes were fixed on the image before her and the label that accompanied it.

'The Zametsky Rose.'

'This …' she said in hushed tones. She pointed to the dual rosebud symbol, rendered in pen and ink on the vellum before her.

'Oh,' Neville said, 'that's the Zametsky Rose. There was a terrible scourge of sickness that afflicted Zametsky, repeatedly, I believe. It's a tragic tale.'

'Dark Flux … It was Dark Flux.'

'Yes. That was it. The Zametsky Effect. Zametsky is a small town in Russia. Or it might be Poland - I can't remember which.'

'Russia. It was Russia. But it's now The Ukraine.'

'The inhabitants adopted the rose as a symbol for the town sometime in the eighteenth century I think – maybe earlier. Some scholars seem to think this was a direct reference to the nursery rhyme about the Black Death – a sort of expression of the town's affinity with constant suffering and pestilence.'

'Ring a Ring o' Roses…'

'Exactly. But that's highly unlikely. Zametsky was very remote. I doubt they'd even heard the rhyme. And there's pretty compelling evidence that the rhyme was actually invented in late Victorian times – long after Zametsky adopted this rose as its emblem.'

Hermione nodded, lost in thought. 'Would there be any more information here about Zametsky? It's
a wizarding town, I believe.'

'It WAS. And famous for producing wizards of considerable power. But the population eventually became much more mixed and after the events of The Zametsky Effect - which was about 1904, if I recall correctly - the magical community was pretty much expelled or exterminated. Tragic story … Though some argue that the wizards decided to exile themselves for the sake of the Muggle population.'

'Where did they go?'

'Scattered far and wide, though I suspect most of them stayed in Russia. There might be something in the archives about it.'

Hermione buried her face in her hands and took a deep breath. Somewhere, deep inside her mind, a glimmer of a thought was sparking into life.

Neville's voice cut into her musing.

'Yes, it's sad that the Zametsky magical community was broken up like that. It's kind of odd really, because despite Zametsky being such a small, remote little outpost in the back of beyond, it produced so many amazing wizards. Some truly great learned scholars amongst them too, many of whom are still studied today. There's Boris Jurowski, for example. He was a brilliant potioneer in the seventeenth century, and his sister, Galina, was a specialist in my field – she perfected the art of mandrake breeding. And then there was Tatiana Yablovskaya – she invented the Terrabilis Charm; Masha Dimenevic; Fedor Koblonsky; and in the last century, Igor Koldun and his son Alexei, who were famously forced to work on the Soviet nuclear weapons programme.'

'Was Zametsky famous for wandless magic?'

'Lord knows!' Neville cackled. 'Though its reputation might indicate that, I suppose …' he added. 'Might be worth investigating if you're really interested?' Neville suddenly paused. 'Exactly WHY are you interested?' He eyed her strangely. 'Hermione. Are you researching Dark Flux?'

'Yes - Yes, I am,' she admitted in quavering tones. She met Neville's gaze with her own. 'That and … well, I'm interested in blood types, too.'

Neville's face clouded. An unmistakable look of uncertainty, even mistrust, shaded his features.

'Connected to Dark Flux?'

The Epsilon allele. Commonly associated with powerful wizards and wandless magic. This was the key! Hermione felt sure. Exactly HOW she didn't know, but she could almost feel her neural pathways springing into life, a tantalizing, inter-connected web of glittering skeins of thought, crisscrossing her mind in a dazzling frenzy of intellectual activity. It was all there, but she couldn't quite see it – not yet. Some things were obscured from view. Gaps in her understanding.

Tony Goldstein. She needed Tony Goldstein. His disappearance was a deep, dark loss; a foil to the random threads coalescing into something remotely resembling an intelligible pattern. There was the Epsilon allele, his work on Gimlott's, Dark Flux, Zametsky … they were all connected.

Goldstein had all but admitted that Dark Flux was related to Gimlott's - which only affected Epsilon half-bloods. But when Draco was stricken with Gimlott's, he had needed his Epsilon blood to be rapidly diluted - to have the magic leached out - to keep him alive.

That explained it … Dark Flux was TOO MUCH magic! No wonder it slayed Muggles - and
possibly even Muggle-borns, who didn't have any of the protective qualities of non-Gamma magic in their blood – although she couldn't be sure of this...

Maybe Dark Flux naturally occurred amongst Epsilon populations? But what triggered it? Someone with Gimlott's? But it wasn't the Gimlott's sufferer who died from Dark Flux – it was innocent bystanders, defenceless in the face of a sudden surge in magic. How was this magic even dispersed? What was its essence?

I'm beginning to think like Jeroboam and The Geneva Group, she thought breathlessly. No wonder they were so enraptured … What was it Jeroboam had been studying? She racked her memory.

'Magical Leptons!' she gasped.

'I beg your pardon?' Neville said.

'The essence of Magic. Of Dark Flux.'

Neville shook his head in bewilderment. 'I'm sorry, Hermione. You've lost me.'

She took a deep breath. 'In 2007, Tony Goldstein isolated the Epsilon allele,' she said to Neville.

He blinked in surprise. 'You see a connection?' he asked, uncertainly.

She shrugged uncomfortably. 'I don't know. Would there be any documentation kept here relating to that sort of thing? I know the Ministry would have it. All major, medical findings have to be recorded.'

'And you can't ask at the Ministry Library?'

She shook her head disconsolately.

Neville grinned. 'I won't ask why.' News of her surprising 'suspension' had spread fast.

'Probably best.'

'I can get it for you if you like. Inter-library loan.'

'Thank you, Neville. Thank you so much.' She squeezed his hand in gratitude.

'Well … that's a long way from roses,' he said, a lopsided grin on his face.

The Zametsky Roses … Svetlana Kerpin … Katya … her father Ephraim and his research into Dark Flux. If it could be proven that Svetlana originated from Zametsky, or, more likely, her family – these roses were hugely significant.

She screwed her eyes tightly shut. No … she was going around in circles. She needed more information. She had no proof. No real idea of what she was thinking – or, in truth, what she thought she was thinking – and yet it was there, SOMETHING was there - like a growling, dark shadow huddled at the base of her mind whose full face she was yet to see and understand in all its verifiable glory.

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Neville walked back to Hogsmeade with her. He didn't ask any further questions, though she could sense that he was desperate to – but instinct, or possibly the tight set of her jaw, made him think the better of it.
'I'll just pop into Honeydukes,' she said warmly. 'Get some exploding bonbons for the kids.'

Neville drew her into a close embrace. 'I'll send you an owl as soon as I get hold of Goldstein's research.'

Hermione summoned her best impression of a smile. The intellectual excitement she had been experiencing since that brief moment of revelation had fast evaporated. She had to develop this thinking, in peace and quiet – which would be difficult once she got home. She suddenly felt swamped by an unaccountable forlornness. She envied Neville's broad, happy grin as he sauntered back to his shabby study – surrounded by books and learning. Better that than the cut and thrust tedium of Ministry politics and the loud ruckus of family life which robbed you of a moment's private thought – or at least punished you with incessant guilt for any you seized for yourself.

She gazed wistfully at Neville's retreating form - but then the thought occurred to her that he cut a rather lonely figure – a dark, lumpen shape trudging into the whiteness of the fields. She thought of Hugo and Rose and a sharp anxiety twisted through her gut. Was it better to have no one to love and worry about? Or could the acute sensation of panicky fear, which gripped her insides when she thought about them sometimes and realized how dangerous and dreadful this world was, be compensated for by the almost choking happiness she often felt when she thought of their hopeful, happy faces?

She turned away from Neville's receding form and the lofty spires of Hogwarts peeking above the tree line and walked into Hogsmeade village. Wintry dusk was drawing in and the roads were lined with glowing yellow lanterns. The dank grey skies were heavy with snow. Hermione sniffed the air. The cold singed her nostrils.

Hogsmeade's main shopping street sliced through the village and was bordered by higgledy-piggledy buildings, sloping into each other in a conspiratorial fashion. Hermione felt watched by the glass frontages of the shops brightly illuminating the snowy pavement.

Honeyduces was chock full of young Hogwarts customers, a cluster of dark cloaks and loud, pealing laughter. She stopped to stare at the colourful window display before going in. In just a few years, her own children would be raiding these shelves for sweet goodies and giggling with their friends.

She remembered Draco telling her how he had visited Hogsmeade with Katya, the day before she disappeared. He had no notion, then, that he was soon to lose her – possibly forever. And Katya herself had been weighed down – not just with her burgeoning pregnancy, but also with the knowledge that she was leaving Draco for good.

How strange to have been so happy and ignorant and then to have all that you lived for, all that you loved, suddenly swept away. Draco had lost his wife and his child in one foul swoop… And now he was set to lose his father.

How strange to have been so happy and ignorant and then to have all that you lived for, all that you loved, suddenly swept away. Draco had lost his wife and his child in one foul swoop… And now he was set to lose his father.

That was the downside of love, she thought mournfully – grief was the price you paid for love. It was undeniable.

But anything else – a life without love - was unthinkable.

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That night, Hermione lay in bed beside Ron, watchful and awake. He had been caught up in a late Auror's meeting, which from the decibel level of his snoring had clearly concluded its business at The Leaky Cauldron.
Ideas began to creep into her head. Persistent, annoying, terrifying. She couldn't stop them. She was tired of nights broken by bad dreams. Now she couldn't stop the nightmares haunting her waking hours too.

Her mind drifted repeatedly to Draco and Harry in Russia. Where were they? What were they doing? She'd tried to text Harry, but she suspected he had been forced to relinquish any communication devices to the relevant authorities. And there was no point sending Grumio without killing the poor bird.

She groaned in frustration.

If only she had some kind of enchanted communication device – something like the galleons she'd used when they were at Hogwarts to call meetings of 'Dumbledore's Army'.

Maybe she could deploy a similar neat little trick and use the silver roses she'd retrieved from Malfoy Manor to communicate with Draco's silver rose pendant? After all, he was never without it.

A burst of adrenalin jolted through her. She was almost giddy with sudden mental exhilaration. It was a crazy thought, a hunch - but what if it was true? After all, what exactly was a hunch? Yes, it was illogical, irrational – but what if it was a cunning way for your brain to shortcut to the heart of the matter?

Hermione thought of the wizarding community of Zametsky. Despised and shunned by the local Muggles. Blamed for the sudden deaths that hit that community. Once those witches and wizards of Zametsky had been expelled, how did they stay in contact with each other? Might they have used secret communication devices, too? And what would be better, more appropriate, than the Zametsky Roses? Symbols of their community...

She would be shocked, even dismayed, if it turned out that Svetlana WASN'T from Zametsky. It needed Harry and Draco's mission to work – to find out for sure - but she felt certain Svetlana had used the silver Zametsky Roses to communicate with Katya.

She would owl Neville immediately. Ask him – implore him – to fish out anything he could find on Zametsky in the Hogwarts archives. There had to be some kind of historical record if this was commonly practiced by the Zametsky diaspora. She glanced at the clock ticking complacently next to her on the bedside table. It was still unsociably early to send an owl, but it was a long flight to Hogwarts and Grumio would enjoy the wide, open skies, she felt sure.

XXX

The weekend passed and there was still no word from Neville or Harry or Draco...

Ginny and her brood paid a flying visit for a slap-up 'Imbolc' tea at The Burrow – an ancient witching day that Molly, in particular, still liked to observe. Ginny explained away Harry's absence as simply 'away – as per bloody always' – and when pressed for more details by her ever-inquisitive mother, merely shrugged and said, 'oh, something top, top secret, apparently.'

Hermione busily baked a tray of cauldron cakes for the children in celebration of the event - ignoring Louis's loud complaints that 'they weren't a patch on Granny's'. She joined in the fun and games, always quick to snap a grin in place. No one would have suspected the tumult of anxiety buried deep inside of her. George did less well, she noted... He had the look of a haunted man.

'I've been spring-cleaning,' Molly announced, arriving at Wisteria Cottage on Sunday evening with Arthur, lugging a sizeable package. 'We always meant to give this to you as a wedding present, but
never got around to it. It's a family heirloom.'

'That's great, Mum,' Ron said, nodding enthusiastically. 'I remember this from when I was a kid. Was stuck up in the attic…'

Hermione could see why. It was a painting – very old, heavily lacquered – a dark, rustic landscape. Autumnal trees vanishing over the brow of a dark, sombre hillside. A lone, ramshackle hut was skulking in the heart of the woods, dilapidated and lifeless…

'I'm not sure where it can go,' she pointed out. 'It's rather large and our ceilings are low.'

'What about here?' Ron said ebulliently, pointing to a blank stretch of wall in the hallway, opposite a full-length mirror and the door to the living room.

'Perfect!' Molly chortled, clapping her hands in glee.

XXX

By Tuesday afternoon, Hermione was resorting to a stiff drink of Dr Ubbly's Oblivious Unction to maintain a veneer of calm and had even reverted to a long-defeated childhood habit of chewing her nails until the skin bled.

Finally, that evening, Neville Floo-called her.

'Is this a good time?' he asked, tentatively.

She pulled a face. 'Not really.'

Hugo was swooping around the living room with a model aeroplane he'd made at school, intermittently roaring and squealing as his plane spun into death-defying dives over the back of the sofa. Rose was loudly complaining that she couldn't concentrate on her reading. And Hermione had a pot of venison stew bubbling ferociously on the stove in the kitchen, in readiness for Ron's return from work – which was any minute.

'Okay, I can try later,' Neville said.

'No! Don't go!' Hermione cried. She cast a glance over her shoulder at the children and knelt-down to peer closer into the fire, her untamed hair flopping perilously close to the green flames. 'Just tell me quickly,' she said in a pronounced whisper.

'The Tony Goldstein file,' he said, in similarly hushed tones, 'it's been pulled.'

'Pulled? But that's not possible. Article 417b of the Medi-Magic Full Disclosure Act stipulates that all magical research findings have to be officially recorded in the Ministry archives. I helped draft that legislation myself.'

'Well, under the auspices of Minister Witchell's New Brooms Policy, any research with commercially sensitive implications can be withdrawn from public record,' Neville said crisply. He pursed his lips in disapproval. 'Which means any ole wizard could be working on dark magic … and we'd all be none the wiser.'

Hermione's heart beat a little faster. 'I take it you know WHO withdrew the filing.' It had to be Arcana, of course.

Neville's face momentarily dipped from view and there was an audible scrunch of paper. His face
'Well, it won't come as too much of a surprise, Hermione. It was our old chum, Draco Malfoy. It was his company at any rate, Herb Healing, which signed off on the final docket. The original research was conducted by a company called Arcana, but they were recently taken over by an American company…'

'Gilgad Inc.,' Hermione said.

'That's the one. Well, Herb Healing is part of Gilgad and they bought Arcana's debt – which was considerable, I might add – and all rights to their intellectual property last November.'

That was when Draco had recruited Ron and her to investigate Jeroboam, Hermione thought. By buying Arcana, using Herb Healing as his key vehicle, had Ephraim managed to buy the missing pieces of his 'Dark Flux' jigsaw – Anthony Goldstein and his intellectual property...? And now Goldstein was gone; her morbid fears for him might well be justified.

Hugo's aeroplane swooped dangerously close to the fire. She batted it away.

'Is that Uncle Neville?' he yelped, edging closer.

'Hi, Hugo,' Neville said, with a friendly wave.

'You can talk to him in the minute, Hugo,' Hermione fretted. 'I won't be long.' She waited until he had receded from earshot. 'And the other matter? Did you get a chance to look into it?'

Neville rolled his eyes. 'I've spent more hours than I care to mention trawling through memoirs, letters and diaries looking for anything about these silver rose charms you mentioned. Most of it was rubbishy tittle-tattle. I did find a few rather oblique references to the roses though, and I think you might be right, Hermione.'

'Go on.'

'… Mainly from Stalin's time … I guess there was even more need for secrecy than usual – but it looks like a number of old Zametsky families were involved in some kind of proto-resistance movement, which clearly failed if the history books are anything to go by! Anyway, there's some coded chatter - I think that's the best way to put it - about these roses, chiefly surrounding the number thirteen.'

'Thirteen?'

'Yes. The 'lucky' thirteen, to be more precise, which is unusual in itself. Anyway, reading between the million, zillion lines I had to wade through,' he sighed wearily, 'I definitely suspect the roses were used to communicate.'

'But only if there were thirteen,' Hermione said emphatically. This was important.

The image of Katya wearing the necklace instantly sprung into Hermione's mind. How many rose charms were attached to the chain? She concentrated hard, desperately trying to recall … She figured there was about seven or eight when viewed from the front but some of the roses might well have been out of shot, tucked under her hair. There might well have been thirteen...

Of course, if there were thirteen roses on Katya's necklace then that meant she might be using it to link-up with somebody – most likely Svetlana – which would mean that Svetlana Kerpin probably had a matching necklace. But if that was the case, where was Svetlana's necklace now?

'Having said that,' Neville resumed, 'I don't get the feeling there was constant communication going
on … Instead, I got the feeling from reading these letters and diaries, that the 'lucky' thirteen was an uncommon event.'

'More like a one-off message, you mean?'

'Exactly… You should come up to Hogwarts again, Hermione; take a look at this stuff yourself. There's too much to send through the Floo network.'

'Not to mention that it's Hogwarts property,' Hermione said tartly. 'The roses I've seen … they were strung together, like a necklace. I reckon you had to physically WEAR the necklace, with all thirteen roses …'

'To hear the message?'

'Yes,' she said breathlessly.

'A necklace would make sense,' Neville mused. 'Portable. Convenient. And that supports the argument that any secret passed on by the roses instantly expired after transmission, otherwise any old Tom, Dick or Harry could hear your secrets. All they had to do was put on the necklace.'

There was a loud clattering of pens and pencils being spilled from a pencil-case onto the wooden dining table. 'Has anyone seen my pencil-sharpener?' Rose squealed in dismay.

'I haven't got it!' Hugo yelled, clearly anticipating Rose's next move.

Hermione closed her eyes tightly to shut out the noise. She re-calibrated her concentration onto the image of Katya wearing her necklace. There had to be a reason why she removed the charms, breaking up the 'lucky thirteen'. If it wasn't then to render the necklace SAFE, why had she done that? And why were those charms being sent to Draco ONE at a time? …. Unless … a curious thread of thought was unfolding in her mind.

What if Katya wanted to send Draco a message, too? A message he would only hear once he had all thirteen roses. A message he would only receive once he was ready. After all, when Katya had left Malfoy Manor, Draco worked for her father … so maybe she didn't trust him? But when the time was right – although Hermione didn't have a clue as yet, how Katya would be able to judge this – only then would Draco receive the thirteenth rose.

It was imperative they find all thirteen roses! She had six roses stowed in Draco's safe box. There was also the charm he wore around his neck. That made seven. And the French police had intercepted the charm Svetlana had posted, on the day she died – that made eight in total. They needed five more.

'I can't thank you enough for this, Neville,' Hermione said excitedly.

Neville arched a quizzical brow. 'I'd rather you just told me what the hell is going on here. But you're not going to do that, are you?'

Hermione sighed deeply.

'Nope. Thought as much,' Neville said with a laconic smile.

'I will. I promise … just, not yet.'

'I'll hold you to that!'
CHAPTER TRACKS:

"WALK INTO THE SEA" by JOHNNY MARR

"RING-A-RING O' ROSES" by CHARLOTTE GAINSBOROUGH

"PARTIAL" by OLAFUR ARNALDS

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Chapter Summary

An explosive argument, heated emotions … and Draco makes his move

28. The Time is Out of Joint

Hermione dispatched Grumio the following morning to Padma with an urgent note, figuring that Padma might well know where to find Tony Goldstein. Grumio returned that afternoon, bedraggled and unhappy to have failed in his quest.

Repeated Floo-calls met with a similar lack of success. Clearly, Padma wasn't at home, or refusing to communicate. Who else might know how to contact her? Her best bet was Parvati, Padma's twin sister.

Hermione had a vague notion that Parvati worked in a shop … She now wished she'd listened more closely to Padma when she was chattering on about her day-to-day life – in fact, she was wishing she'd done a lot of things differently and shown Padma how much she appreciated her.

She remembered how Parvati had been in a pretty bad way after the Battle of Hogwarts - her closest friend, Lavender Brown, had been killed – and had hooked up with Seamus Finnigan after school. It hadn't been a successful relationship. Since then, Seamus had reportedly quit the wizarding world, joining the Irish Defence Forces as a bomb disposal expert. Did he even receive owls anymore? It was worth a shot.

To Hermione's surprise, Seamus replied the next day. He'd stayed in touch with Parvati – although contact had dropped off lately. The last he'd heard, she'd been working at Gladrags Wizardwear in Hogsmeade. Hermione had likely walked past her just last week…

Hermione duly dispatched trusty Grumio, yet again. He returned that evening even more disheveled, barely able to muster the energy to peck at the kitchen window, with a note from the shop proprietor. Parvati had apparently left her position there over two months ago.

In the midst of her fruitless search for Padma – and by extension, Tony – Hermione finally heard from Harry.

An extraordinarily large, mottled owl with tufty ears and a face resembling an eagle arrived at Wisteria Cottage.

'What a beauty you are!' Hermione enthused, gently patting its head and feeding it a choice treat. Her relief was palpable… She'd been having nightmare visions of Harry and Draco locked-up in a Russian Ministry prison, guarded by burly Cossacks with bristling moustaches and - as rumours suggested - giant sabre-toothed tigers.

Harry had sent her a package with an accompanying letter.

Hermione,

A present for Rose. Sorry. Won't make her birthday party on Saturday. Still stuck in Russia. Back
in Moscow from Siberia. Was bloody cold. Heading now to the Ukraine. Return to Paris by Sunday, maybe Saturday night. Draco has a blood treatment booked at St Gaspard's first thing Sunday (routine – don't panic) and we finally have a date for his court hearing. Sunday! Those bastards at Vendome have no respect for weekends. He has a lot of homework to get through with Berenice Poubelle, my Vendome contact. Very good at witness prep. Will contact you when home.

Harry

The Ukraine?! Surely, this meant his investigations into Svetlana showed she was from Zametsky?

Hermione unwrapped the package. Inside was a Matryoshka.

She studied the doll, checking each iteration, drilling down to the tiny doll at its core … there was nothing else concealed in here. No special messages. No enchantments. No astounding revelations hidden in plain sight.

It was exactly as it looked. A pretty Russian doll to give to her daughter.

XXX

'The Ukraine?' shrilled Ginny, eyes popping furiously. 'Wherever next?' She emitted a loud sigh of exasperation. 'Honestly, I can't keep track of him these days. Do you know when he'll be back? He somehow neglected to tell me - his own wife.'

'Tonight, I think, or tomorrow,' Hermione replied. She stolidly continued to plant firecracker candles on Rose and Arthur's joint birthday cake, readying it to be presented at the dining table.

'And do you also happen to know why he's in the Ukraine?'

'Some kind of smuggling case, I believe,' Hermione lied, a little too readily for her own liking.

Ginny tossed her mane of red hair over her shoulder, narrowed her eyes, and regarded Hermione with unconcealed suspicion. 'Is this the same case YOU were working on with him?'

'I – I think it's related.'

Ron entered the kitchen at The Burrow. 'What case is that, then?'

'This case Hermione's been working on with Harry,' Ginny said. 'Something to do with East European smugglers.'

Ron gave Hermione a sharp look. 'I'd have thought Harry would have had that wrapped up by now.'

'It's complicated,' Hermione muttered in reply.

'Obviously,' Ron said, dubiously.

'Harry mentioned something about you possibly going to New Zealand some time?' Ginny piped up, a quizzical expression on her face. 'That's a mighty long way from Eastern Europe…'

Hermione's cheeks glowed with confusion. She was saved by the loud arrival of Percy and Audrey and their lively young daughters, Molly and Lucy.

XXX

After tea, Hermione headed outside to get some fresh air. A wispy, early evening mist had
wreathed its way through the garden, sinuously wrapping itself around trees and bushes.

She wrapped a shawl around her shoulders to fend off the early spring chill and plunged deeper into the garden, reaching the furthest fence of the property. She stopped to gaze out at the landscape beyond the safe confines of The Burrow; it was a softly dappled blend of greys and blues.

'Merlin!' Percy Weasley gasped. He frantically stubbed out a cigarette in a flurry of red sparks against the gnarled old bark of an apple tree. 'You frightened the life out of me!'

'Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.'

'For a moment I thought you were Mum,' Percy replied, a sickly grin on his face. His pale cheeks glowed a fiery red that matched his hair. 'Please don't tell her!'

'Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me,' Hermione smiled, although Percy's smoking wasn't really a secret at all. Ron excused his brother's habit as work-related stress. Minister Witchell was notoriously draconian in his treatment of Ministerial 'underlings' and Percy's own department – Magical Transportation – was at the forefront of Witchell's New Brooms Revolution.

Hermione thought a moment… 'Percy. I know it's not the done thing to gossip about Ministry business, but have you heard anything about Padma Patil?'

Percy's face quickly transitioned to dark concern. 'Ah, yes, Padma. She's a work colleague of yours, isn't she?'

'And a good friend. She hasn't been returning my owls and no one seems to know where she is.'

Percy's lips perceptibly tightened. 'Yes, it's a worrying business. Always is, when someone goes missing like this.'

'Missing? Is that official?'

Percy brusquely nodded. 'Her sister, Parvati, raised the alarm when Padma failed to show up for their parents' wedding anniversary dinner - very out-of-character.'

'What's being done to trace her?' Hermione asked, urgently.

'All the usual protocols and procedures are in place,' Percy assured her. 'The rulebook dates all the way back to the Bertha Jorkins case in '94 … As you well know. These days, the Ministry doesn't like to jump to hasty conclusions. But an investigation has been launched – on the quiet. Auror McLaggen is heading up the operation.'

'Cormac McLaggen?' Cormac was renowned for being the laziest Auror in Section D.

'Yes, McLaggen. He has some expertise in this field. You may remember it was McLaggen who rumbled the truth behind Ivy Quarrel's disappearance a few years ago?' Percy said, reproachfully. 'You know, the lady who melded herself with a large copper kettle?'

'Padma is NO Ivy Quarrel!'

'Even the best witches and wizards sometimes make mistakes. Or simply choose not to be found. You may recall Rexella Haywood?'

'But she was fired for magical malpractice!'
'Well… there are similarities, unfortunately. Some people just can't handle criticism.'

'Padma is hardworking and conscientious. The Ministry had no right to suspend her!'

Percy's face hardened.

'Or maybe you believe I deserve my suspension too, Percy?' Hermione's eyes flashed furiously. Percy had the good grace to look away. 'You can at least tell me how I can contact her sister.'

'Well, I believe she's training to be a radio producer at WWN.'

'I'll contact them, then,' Hermione said in more diplomatic tones. 'If I learn anything new, I'll obviously pass it on to the Ministry.'

'That'd be very good of you, Hermione,' Percy rejoined, smiling meekly.

'One more thing… Do you know anything about a Zoltan Guldstern? He's heading up the new Muggle Business office.'

The expression on Percy's face switched to deep disapproval. 'Ghastly chap. Never attends Inter-Departmental meetings. Rarely in his office!'

'Have you met him?'

Percy impatiently flipped open his cigarette packet and extracted a cigarette, popping it between his lips. 'Our paths have crossed… To tell the truth, I haven't the foggiest what he's talking about half the time. He has a very thick foreign accent.' He lit his cigarette with a click of his fingers and inhaled. 'I also suspect he might be a bit of a womanizer.'

'Do you know what his new department actually does?' Hermione asked, disingenuously. 'I can't make it out at all!'

'Well, I must say, it's another terrifically good idea from Minister Witchell,' Percy explained. 'You see, there's an awful lot of wizarding businesses these days which operate in the Muggle community. Troobles, the confectioner's, for example. And Herb Healing, of course, owned by the Malfoys; though what they'll do now that Draco's vanished and Lucius is dead, Merlin knows!'

'DEAD?!!' Hermione yelped, her heart racing. 'Lucius Malfoy is DEAD?'

Percy gave a nonchalant shrug. 'The Daily Prophet is putting together a special Obituary edition. Comes out tomorrow morning. Beats me why a vile man like that deserves to be distinguished in such a way … but I guess there are a few good causes that have prospered from his benevolence. The Minister's New Brooms campaign, for example; largely funded by the Malfoy Foundation.'

Hermione had fully expected Lucius Malfoy would die soon, but this news still came as a shock. She felt a peculiar pang of panic, even sorrow. This meant Draco was now head of the Malfoy family and the President of Herb Healing. Would he be told that his father had died before his hearing at Vendome tomorrow?

'When did you hear about this?'

'Oh, Audrey told me this evening. She heard it from an old friend of hers, who works at the Daily Prophet.'

'So, it's not common knowledge?'
'Not yet. The family will issue a formal statement tomorrow.'

Hermione told Ginny she had a headache and Apparated straight home. Ron arrived soon after. Arthur would walk the kids home later, he told her.

'What happened?' he demanded. 'You just disappeared!'

'Did you know Lucius Malfoy was dead?' she asked.

'Is that why you rushed home?' he fired back. 'Your own daughter's birthday party and you're upset because one of the foulest men the wizarding world's ever known has popped his clogs!'

'So, you DID know …'

'We were told this afternoon,' Ron said. There was an odd boastfulness in his tone. 'Auror Carmichael warned us that his death might stir up some unpleasant sentiment.'

'And you didn't think to mention it?!' Hermione said, heatedly.

Ron headed into their bedroom and pulled a smart, freshly laundered, blue robe from their wardrobe. 'I didn't think you'd give a damn. I certainly don't. Good riddance to bad rubbish is what I say.'

'It's pretty big news, Ron!'

'Why's that, then, Hermione?' Ron studied her closely. 'Why should it matter to you?'

'I've – I've hated this man for most of my life,' Hermione spluttered in reply. 'And his death is obviously deemed to be important in the eyes of the Ministry,' she added, stoutly.

'For the reasons I already said. Now you don't work there, you don't need to know every tinsy piece of tittle tattle that goes on, you know, Hermione.'

'It's hardly tittle-tattle!' Hermione fumed.

Ron tugged off his clothes, trampling them onto the floor. Then, to her surprise, he maneuvered himself into the smart, blue robe.

'What are you doing?' Hermione shrilled.

'Going out.'

'And you dared berate me for leaving The Burrow? What's the occasion THIS time?'

'Someone from work's having birthday drinks at The Leaky Cauldron.'

'AGAIN?' He seemed to spend most evenings at The Leaky Cauldron these days, she thought, bitterly.

'It's a large department.'

'I'm pretty sure Harry didn't spend most nights boozing in the pub when he was Section A,' Hermione said, shrewishly.
'Well, I think you'll find he did, actually,' Ron groused, 'maybe you should ask him, seeing as you seem to spend more time working on imaginary cases with him these days than you spend at home with me?'

'I'm home far more than you are,' Hermione snorted, but she reddened as she spoke. What was he inferring?

'Oh, yeah? New Zealand?' He fixed her with a glassy glare. 'What's that all about?'

'Ginny's got mixed up.'

'Sure, she did…' Ron said, drolly. 'As for this smuggling case you say you're working on? It doesn't even exist. I've checked the files.'

Hermione shuffled awkwardly, wilting under his furious, cold-eyed stare.

'This better not be about Draco Malfoy and that damned Muggle woman,' Ron snarled.

'Don't be ridiculous!' Hermione's cheeks smarted. 'And anyway, she wasn't a Muggle.'

'I couldn't give a toss who she was,' he retorted. 'I don't want you involved.'

'You can't tell me what to do!'

'Yes, I can! I'm your bloody husband …' Ron then paused, as if suddenly aware how this sounded. 'Look - I'm just trying to protect you, Hermione.'

'YOU protect ME? You're delusional!' Hermione shrieked. 'And if you were truly serious about protecting me, you wouldn't spend every waking moment away from me, would you?'

'And who could blame me? You've been a right misery since I joined Section A.'

'No I haven't!'

Ron shrugged. 'Everybody's noticed.'

'And who's EVERYBODY?' Hermione sneered. 'Your Mum?'

Ron's face flushed with sudden anger. 'Look. Life's pretty good for me right now; I've got a great job. I work with a fun bunch of people. Everyone can see how much happier I am. Everyone except YOU. Because you don't give a shit!' He eyed her disdainfully. 'I think you're jealous.'

'Jealous?!' Hermione screeched. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

'Yeah, 'cos I have a life, and you don't. I mean, it's not like you've been deluged with sympathy since getting the chop from the Ministry, is it now?' Ron sniped. 'All those so-called workmates of yours…? They've moved on pretty quick if you ask me.' He turned his back to look for his wallet. He spotted it lying on the bed and quickly stuffed it into his pocket.

Hermione was genuinely taken aback. 'I'm not JEALOUS, Ron. I'm scared! Can't you see that?' She could feel tears pricking her eyes - but she'd be damned if she let him see that he'd seriously wounded her feelings. 'Padma, my friend, is MISSING, and – and-' She couldn't continue, not without saying too much.

Ron arched a sceptical eyebrow. 'Maybe she's just got sick of being Floo-called every five minutes?' He glanced at himself in the mirror and quickly smoothed his hands through his hair.
'But anyway - who needs friends when you've got creepy old Mrs Malfoy… eh?' He threw her a sardonic smile, '…mouldering away in that fucking mausoleum of hers - though I can't for the life of me understand why YOU – of all people - would WILLINGLY go there or give a bloody toss what happens to the Malfoys.' He studied her intently. 'Unless - unless this is all about Draco?'

'YOU were hoping to gallivant off to Argentina with him not so long ago!' Hermione retorted, hoping that attack was her best form of defence. 'You thought Draco was your ticket to fame and glory. You didn't care two hoots that he might actually be RIGHT about Dark Flux.'

'Of course I cared!' Ron railed. 'But apart from those scary Rojos fuckers, nothing came of it!'

'But it's all true, Ron! It's all true! There IS Dark Flux!'

'No there fucking isn't!' Ron stared at her, his face a dark livid-red. 'And you've lost your fucking mind if you think there is! I've spoken to other Aurors and they all agree – it doesn't exist. Never has.'

'It does. I've seen it,' she choked. 'I told you.'

'And I indulged you, I was being nice… but the sad truth is, you've gone off on one, Hermione! Dunno if it's because you got fired or – or – your fucking hormones or someat, I just – just don't know anymore…'

Hermione gawped at him, open-mouthed.

'Thing is, I'm investigating some pretty nasty stuff at the moment with this Quidditch thing,' Ron continued, eyes narrowed, 'and I could do with a bit more support round here… but instead, I've got a wife imagining all sorts of weird and wonderful crap, who spends more time with my best mate than at home! It's bloody embarrassing!'

Hermione couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so furious – at that moment, even Ephraim Golowitz seemed a more palatable foe than her own husband.

'Go to hell, Ronald Weasley!' she snapped. She stomped out of the room, her eyes brimming with unshed years. She snatched her handbag and wand from the kitchen table and grabbed a cape from the coat-rack by the back door.

'Where are you going?' Ron bellowed after her.

'OUT!' she spat. 'Don't wait up.'

'But, Hermione!' Ron yelled, his face puce with rage and frustration. 'I'M the one who's meant to be going out!'

'Tough shit!' she growled, and Disapparated.

XXX

Hermione stared up at the glowing neon sign - Hotel Danemark. A fine drizzle falling from the night sky smattered her cheeks.

Why had she come here? she wondered. It had been a kneejerk reaction. But if she was wanting to find Harry, then surely she'd have been better off heading to Rue de la Vieuville? Of course, she couldn't even be sure that Harry was back in Paris.
It must have been Draco … the thought of Draco … Stuck in the cramped, boxy apartment he so hated, unaware that his father – loathsome, as he was - had died. He deserved to know.

She quickly stepped into the lobby.

XXX

Hermione immediately spotted Harry sitting on a high-backed chair at the bar of the Hotel Le Meurice. He was nursing a glass of whisky, and a crystal decanter brimming with amber liquid, was at his elbow.

She imagined he'd be surprised to see her here – almost as much as she was to see him.

By a stroke of good fortune, the concierge at the Hotel Danemark had turned out to be an expert eavesdropper. He had informed her that Draco's Ministry hearing had been brought forward and was now being heard that same evening, and that Harry – freshly returned from travelling - had accompanied him to Place Vendome. Hermione had headed straight to the bar of Hotel Le Meurice to undertake the usual binge drinking ritual required to enter the French Ministry.

Looking at Harry's hangdog, slightly drunken demeanour, Hermione wondered if he had repeatedly tried and failed already – or decided to let Draco handle court on his own.

She navigated her way towards the bar through a maze of plush leather armchairs and gleaming, glass-top tables, occupied by loudly braying business types and elegantly-clad ladies. Harry had already spotted her and raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

'The concierge at Hotel Danemark …' Hermione mumbled by way of explanation. She tugged a neighbouring barstool towards Harry and sat down. 'You look shattered,' she said, her voice quavering with concern.

'I'm literally back from Lvov for five minutes and Francoise is screaming at me to get my arse down to Vendome because they've decided to kickstart Draco's hearing a day early. Why this sudden urgency after weeks of bloody useless delay and prevarication?' Harry's eyes were dark and lifeless and his face sagged with fatigue. 'Hermione? I'm exhausted,' he sighed.

'I take it the Ukraine was disappointing.'

'Deeply … Gilgad gone. Closed up. Half-demolished. Not a single fucker would speak to us… total waste… But let's not talk about that just now. First, we have to get through this tedious Ministry rubbish - and I fear it's going to be very tedious and very rubbish. And second… we're surrounded,' he mouthed, before gulping back his whisky in one quick swoop and pouring another.

Hermione glanced around the bar and quickly realised that the majority of drinkers were sporting a purple tassel pin-brooch – meaning they were employees at the French Ministry of Magic.

'Ministry legal business is more often than not a nocturnal affair,' Harry explained, wearily. 'It's just one long party.'

'Good grief. Are these LAWYERS?' Hermione asked, aghast.

'Judges, too.' Harry cast a quick sidelong glance at a tall, spindly woman with a shock of bright red hair coiled on top of her head like a giant, copper spring, who was draining a flute of champagne. 'SHE is presiding over Draco's hearing.'

Hermione stared at her, round-eyed with a mixture of disgust and concern. 'Why isn't she in court?'
'Recess. These past two hours or so …' Harry rolled his eyes and returned his attention to his whisky glass.

'But – but how can Draco expect a fair hearing if they're all-?'

'Pissed?' Harry suggested, with a vinegary smile. 'Believe it or not, Vendome has made sure they have their hotshot prosecution team on this case. I don't see them releasing Draco just yet - certainly not tonight, anyway; not until they get a better lead in the Svetlana Kerpin case.'

'You mean there's still a chance Draco will actually be tried for Svetlana's murder?' Hermione asked, incredulously. 'That he might even be convicted?' Somehow she'd convinced herself that Draco's continued detention was more a matter of waiting for sluggish French bureaucrats to crank into action and rubber-stamp his release.

Harry gave a weary, nonchalant shrug. 'SOMEONE has to be accountable for this poor woman's death – and Vendome doesn't like having NO-ONE in the frame. They get … twitchy.'

'But that's wrong, Harry. Plain wrong. That's no reason to keep somebody in custody.'

Under Muggle law – at least in Britain, and likely France too - without any further damning evidence and an official charge, Draco would have been free to go by now. The truth was, Wizarding society had less respect for basic human rights.

'Is there really nothing more you can do?' she asked, dolefully.

Harry shook his head. 'I'm doing more than I should already. Auror HQ deals with transnational threats to security – not domestic murder cases. It's a miracle Vendome agreed to cede Draco into my care in the first place.'

'But you got us access to Svetlana's house. You obviously have influence.'

'Sometimes, it helps being … Harry Potter,' Harry said with an embarrassed half-smile. 'Look, Hermione, I'd rather have Draco gone from here; back at Malfoy Manor as soon as possible … and hopefully feeding us juicy information, because what I want MOST OF ALL –' he gazed intently at her, an ardent look on his face, 'is to prevent any more outbreaks of Dark Flux. That is my primary objective here – nothing more.' He swirled the whisky in his glass and then quickly tipped his head back and drained the contents in one quick gulp. 'I'd better get back to the hearing,' he said, signalling to the barman. 'Francoise will be needing support.'

'Francoise is with Draco, then?'

Harry nodded.

'I wonder if anyone has bothered to tell her – and Draco, of course - that Lucius Malfoy is dead? The British Ministry was notified earlier today.' Hermione waited to see the effect of this news on Harry's face. Sure enough, the colour drained from his cheeks and he looked even more depleted than before.

'You're kidding me?'

'Nope. The Daily Prophet is running the story tomorrow morning, but official channels have known for hours. Ron – Ron was told this afternoon.'

Harry looked like someone had punched him repeatedly in the gut. 'Shit!... The fucking Feinsnapp Protocol!... I was sure I saw Torquil Haast hovering in the wings, but I thought I must be
hallucinating.'

'Feinsnapp? But they can't…'

The Feinsnapp Protocol was a rarely-invoked anomaly in the British Ministry's legal system; one, Hermione had long fought against. It stipulated that a defendant with elevated social status and connections could be quizzed in closed session by an elite band of Aurors, (hand-picked by the Minister for Magic), with special powers to use all necessary means - including Veritaserum – to hush up any potentially damaging allegations.

As President of Herb Healing, and a Malfoy to boot, Draco was most definitely eligible.

'Seriously, Harry… Under French Ministry law, Feinsnapp is invalid.'

But Harry didn't seem to hear her. 'The last thing we want is Draco blabbing to Witchell; that Witchell fucker's allied to Ephraim,' he moaned. 'This is a fucking disaster.'

'Harry! We're in France!' Hermione repeated, in rebuking tones. 'Feinsnapp doesn't apply.'

Harry gave her a despairing look. 'There's an Inter-Ministerial treaty between Britain and France. If Draco was being detained at Auror HQ, they couldn't touch him. But with Vendome? If Feinsnapp applies, he can be extradited and handed over to the British Ministry – with immediate effect.'

Hermione felt her throat tighten.

Harry fished a key-card out of his pocket. 'Look, the Ministry keep suites on tab for court business – I managed to snag one of the best. Go upstairs and wait. I'll go and find out what's happening and get news to you as soon as I know what the hell's going on.' He turned to the barman, who had lined up three glasses of claret in a neat row and started drinking.

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The suite was easy to find. It was the only room on the sixth floor with a stern-faced guard, sporting a large, flouncing, purple tasseled epaulette, standing attendance at the door. He smiled amiably at Hermione as she brandished the glittering silver coin Harry had given her, to show that she was on bona fide French Ministry business.

Once inside, Hermione gazed at the sumptuous splendor of the Grand Suite at Le Hotel Meurice and decided that the French Ministry's much-vaunted reputation for profligacy was certainly justified. Reflecting on the Alvear Palace Hotel in Buenos Aires, she wondered if hotel rooms opulently decorated in a Louis XVI style were the byword for luxury in the service industry. There was certainly an old-school charm to the vast rolling king-size bed and ornate furnishings.

She parked herself on a chocolate-brown velvet Chesterfield sofa, fighting for space with a feast of oversized plush cushions, most of which tumbled to the floor to accommodate her – and then tried to relax.

A series of gilt-framed, darkly austere portraits were ranged around the walls. She peered at them, thinking it would make sense for the Ministry to use these pictures as a spy network, but it was hard to tell if they were 'magical' in the soft golden lamplight. She was about to jump up from her cozy nook to switch on the main lights, when there was a click at the door.

'Oh … it's you,' said Draco. He came inside and closed the door behind him. 'I didn't think anyone would be here.'
His face was momentarily alive with surprised pleasure at seeing her, but there was a crumpled weariness about him, too. A pang of anxiety thrummed through her. Even so, Hermione could barely suppress the grin that had creased her face, but it was soon driven away by the thought that it might fall to her to tell Draco that his father had passed away.

'I came to see Harry,' she said. '… And you, of course.'

Draco gave her a strange, twisted smile. 'You've heard the news, then?' but before she could answer, his eyes darted around the room. 'Is there a minibar?'

'I – I don't know …' Hermione said. He obviously knew about Lucius … Had Torquil Haast invoked the Feinsnapp Protocol? She desperately wanted to bombard him with questions, to offer her sympathies, to find out what the hell happened now. But instead, she joined him in hunting for the minibar, which they eventually found, cunningly concealed as a mahogany cabinet inside the towering wardrobes that lined the dressing room en route to the marble-clad bathroom.

Draco heaped a pile of ice into a tumbler then cracked open a miniature bottle of whisky and poured it over the ice. He handed it to Hermione.

'You look like you need this more than me.'

'Do I?' She instantly flushed with self-consciousness. Her hand automatically went to her tousled hair.

Draco smiled. 'You look a bit … frazzled. That's all.' He turned to make his own drink and Hermione retreated to the sofa. The ice in her whisky clanked noisily against the side of the glass as she sat down.

She very deliberately placed the glass on a low wooden coffee table in front of the sofa and tried to arrange herself comfortably, re-distributing the plethora of supersized cushions to ensure that Draco would be able to sit down as well. She realized her heart was beating a little faster than usual and her head felt fogged and warm. Just being alone with him like this was making her unaccountably nervous. The room suddenly seemed dimmer, the furniture further away – her focus had narrowed to a few square feet of rich velvet fabric and the soft shoosh of Draco's highly polished shoes on the deep pile carpet as he advanced towards her.

She reached for her tumbler and swiftly gulped a drag of whisky. She was aware of Draco sitting down. His arm lolled against the back of the sofa behind her, a tumbler of whisky dangling from his hand.

Every nerve in her body seemed to be jangling. Her hand holding the whisky glass was greasy with perspiration. She took another deep swig, scorching her gullet, and placed it on the table. She turned towards him, surprised that his face was so close. He reached out and smoothed a strand of unruly hair away from her face and her heart leaped in surprise at his touch.

*I am completely crazy about this man,* she thought, with a sudden, sharp stab of realization that made her tremble. Everything that had happened between them, in what felt like a distant past – none of it mattered, not anymore – not in the here and now. There was barely a minute that passed when he wasn't somewhere in her thoughts - a warm, spectral presence.

She hated that she felt this way.

'Your father…' she said, haltingly. 'I'm so sorry.'

Draco's eyes dropped to his whisky glass. 'It wasn't unexpected,' he said. His voice grated a little.
'But, still-

'The real Lucius Malfoy died some time ago. All that was left was a shell of the man who used to be my father.' He looked up and his eyes were a bright glistening silver. 'Is it wrong for me to be… relieved that he's gone?' he added, in a low whisper.

It was Hermione's turn to look away, a little guiltily. Draco's father had the blackest of hearts and she'd loathed him, with every fibre of her being.

'I – I went to Malfoy Manor,' she said hesitantly. 'And I met Scorpius.'

'Ah, yes! How did you get on?'

'He's a lovely boy. He's been pony riding.'

Draco beamed, but there was a melancholic gleam in his eye.

'And he showed me his playroom.'

'Which one?'

'The blue room. I'm afraid he doesn't like it very much.'

Draco's face momentarily puckered in disappointment. He took a sip from his glass of whisky and placed it on the low, wooden coffee table.

'He also showed me Katya's room.'

'That was lucky … Did you get hold of the roses?'

'They're safe.' She thought of the pretty little charms nestling in her underwear drawer at home, protected by a string of complicated spells.

'Scorpius seems to like it in there. Bit odd, really. He - he's particularly fascinated with one particular painting. Have you ever noticed that?' Draco shook his head. 'You remember the tower in the photo we found at Svetlana Kerpin's house?'

He nodded brusquely, but then his eyes widened in recognition at what Hermione was saying.

'Yes - that painting,' she said, 'it's the exact same place, the same scene.'

'That's kind of creepy …' Draco's voice trailed off and, for a moment, he seemed to be lost in his own thoughts.

'Has Scorpius ever been there?' she asked.

Draco shook his head mournfully. 'Scorpius has never left Malfoy Manor.' He gave her a penetrating look - a weighty combination of guilt and grief and fiery determination. 'But that will change. Everything will change, once I get back to him,' he added, in fervent tones.

'So, it isn't a place he recognizes then?'

'No.'

Hermione sighed. She felt uncomfortable with what she was about to say. 'There's - there's something else. Something a bit weird about that picture.'
'What do you mean?' Draco's grey eyes glowed, burning with curiosity.

'You remember I see colours?' she said in a small, timid voice.

'Like with Los Rojos?'

'Well … I've begun to see – or at least recognize … it might have been for some time, actually …' She faltered. She didn't want to sound like a mad woman and this wasn't a good start … and really, there were other priorities! His father had died … And the Zametsky Roses … And why did he order the removal of Tony Goldstein's thesis on Gimlott's?

'Let me guess,' he said, his voice low and close. He gently tilted her head, so that she was forced to look at him. 'You now see colours for other people, too.'

She grinned, hopelessly. 'Yes, yes I do.'

He smirked. 'What colour's Harry?'

'Green.'

His eyes flicked to the door. 'That could come in handy.'

'Your father-in-law … I think he might be blue … and, this will sound mad … but the picture … it felt pink.'

He screwed his face up in bewilderment. 'The picture? But a picture's not a person.'

'No – that's why it was weird.'

She wondered if she should say more, although what could she say beyond her own darkest rambling thoughts which didn't even make much sense to her – thoughts that she'd barely put words to, even in her own head.

'Well, maybe it just felt weird because Scorpius was interested in it and then you recognised it?' he reasoned.

'Well, yes, that WAS weird, too. But it was more than that. The painting was so sad. So desolate.' She paused to take another quick sip of her whisky. 'And, I – I had such a strong sense of pink – it's – it's hard to explain, Draco, but it felt like I was falling into it.'

'Was Scorpius still with you?'

'Yes. Yes, he was. But … of course, that explains it!'

She almost panted with relief… The fearsome morass of dark, inchoate thought roiling at the back of her consciousness could be firmly tucked away. There was a much more rational explanation to hand… Why hadn't she thought of that before? The ‘pink’ feeling. It had to be Scorpius! Okay, so she hadn't consciously sensed a colour when physically close to him - more of a worrying blankness, when she actually thought about it - but it was the only explanation that made any kind of sense. Because deep down, she'd feared it was Katya - that Katya was somewhere in that room, that Katya was gazing out at her, somehow, from that picture. The accompanying sensation of shame and regret had been almost too much to bear.

Draco grinned. 'You're telling me that my son is PINK.'

'Yes, I suppose I am.'
'And me?' he asked. His hand, large and warm, cradled her cheek. He softly stroked her face, caressed her neck.

She closed her eyes and sighed. The tantalizing sensation of his fingers against her skin was sending shards of brilliant, bright white through her mind.

'What am I?' he repeated, his voice closer now.

'White,' she breathed. 'A glorious white.'

The air moved and she could feel he had closed the remaining space between them and his presence was large and commanding beside her; his mouth was on her neck, hot and wet, then her face.

'Does it get brighter with … feeling?' His voice tickled her ear.

The glaring white was almost blinding her.

His lips grazed against hers and he kissed her, tenderly at first, but then with a savagery that stole her breath away. She kissed him passionately in return; her hands grasped the back of his head, her fingers weaving into his hair. She was drowning in the succulent warmth of his mouth. The white light was dazzling her … She felt they were bathed in it … A brilliant white cocoon. She pulled him closer still and a hot bolt of excitement spiralled through her. She wanted to devour his mouth and feel his body tight against hers.

'So … if I was to do this …' He teased his hand across her breasts to the v-neckline of her shirt. 'And - this …' His breathing stuttered as he spoke and his hand dipped under the lacy edge of her bra and caressed her breast... His eyes burned into her face, daring her to return his gaze.

The blazing white flared up inside of her … and her heart was thumping so violently, she was amazed Draco couldn't hear it.

His other hand slid under her shirt; his fingers tracing a path from her waist to her breasts with maddening, feather-light softness that made her want to cry out.

A sudden blast of energy surged through him and his arm coiled tightly around her back while his other hand moved to the nape of her neck, urging her closer, drawing her into a deep, fervid kiss that left her gasping, because it was all too much … too much feeling … And she HAD to think about Harry... Harry could come in and catch them... And those fucking portraits. She was sure she'd seen one wink!

She pulled back, struggling to catch her breath, and held his face in her hands, subtly inching him away from her.

'Harry… Got to think about Harry.'

'Must we?' Draco groaned, but his arms released their hold on her.

'He might come through that door with half the bloody Ministry behind him.'

Draco had a look about him of the petulant teenager she'd once loved to hate. 'Fuck Harry,' he rasped, inflamed and trembling. 'You know what?' He tightly shut his eyes and shook his head in frustration. 'I'm thinking this is a devilish plot you've cooked up between you…'

'What's that then?' she asked, her mouth twitching in amusement.
'To prick-tease me to death.' He gazed at her, eyes sparkling. 'Evil, but ingenious.'

She kissed him hard on the mouth, unable to resist him. 'Well, if that's the case, the joke's on me,' she said with a rueful smile, before sharply pulling away.

'See? Evil,' he grinned, capturing her and entwining his arms around her waist.

She placed her hands on his shoulders and heaved a tremulous sigh. She studied his eyes, his mouth, the way his Adam's apple shifted in his throat and her heart turned over… 'You've no idea how much I wish things could be different.'

'You could tell me?' There was a glint of challenge in his expression that made her smile. She loved that about him…

'Not now. Not here. We need to talk about this damned hearing… because we have a bit of a situation.' She took a deep breath. 'Harry thinks he spotted Torquil Haast at Vendome. He's worried he might invoke – or get YOU to invoke - the Feinsnapp Protocol, to extradite you back to the Ministry in London.'

Draco's eyes hardened and his face stiffened. 'And that's a bad thing, because…?'

'Because when they question you, they'll probably use Veritaserum,' Hermione explained, 'here, in France, you can't be touched … and Harry's sure Vendome will, eventually, see sense and let you go… Of course, it might take a bit more time, but—'

Draco winced at this and his hands loosened their hold on her. 'But you see, that's the problem, right there,' he interjected. 'Time. MORE time.'

'But it's better this way, Harry's way … It's safer all-round. If Torquil tries to talk you into invoking the Feinsnapp Protocol, please - don't let him!' Draco stared back at her, blankly. 'Did you see him at the hearing?'

'Yes, I did. But it was too late.'

'Why? What do you mean?'

'Because I'd already invoked the Feinsnapp Protocol. The moment I heard the news.'

'YOU?!

'Yes, Hermione. ME. I'm now President of Herb Healing and Head of the Malfoy Foundation,' he snapped. 'And I want to go home.'

There was a moment of dead silence, that seemed to echo around the room.

'My mother will need me, obviously … there's a lot to be done … and – and I want to see Scorpius. My son is trapped in a house ruled by a madman, a madman potentially plotting mass murder, and my reputation … my freedom … my life is in tatters.' He pulled away from her and sighed deeply. 'Everything's a mess - and only I can sort it out.' He suddenly seemed overcome with exhaustion, but his eyes glittered feverishly. 'It's time for me to go. You do see that, don't you? You need me there, and I need to get back to being me. Draco Malfoy. Everything here?' He gestured wildly at their extravagant surroundings, 'it doesn't feel real.'

Hermione could feel heat rising in her cheeks. She was being ambushed by an unexpected and unwanted wave of emotion. 'That's – that's because you're stuck here, Draco – it's NOT real,' she
rallied, defensively. 'You're – you're out of place, so you've lost track of time. But it won't last forever.'

Draco gave a low, rumbling laugh. 'The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite, that ever I was born to set it right!'

'Did you just quote Shakespeare at me?' She tried to laugh, but it sounded more like a choked-up sob.

He creased his brow. 'Yeah… Hamlet,' he said with a wry smile. He stared at her with fierce intensity. 'The thing is, Hermione, I can't stay cooped up with Harry for the rest of my days,' he continued. 'We'd end up killing each other.'

'I realize that,' she said, soberly.

'We can still cooperate, obviously,' Draco added.

'Yes… But things will be different.' She wasn't just talking about Draco's legal status.

'Yes. Things will be different,' he repeated, in flat, staccato tones and the light in his eyes seemed to dim a little.

'But doing it this way, Draco – handing you over to Witchell and the Ministry – it's potentially dangerous,' she argued, horrified to realize that her eyes were swimming with unexpected tears. 'For all of us.'

'No, it won't be,' he said, emphatically, clapping his hand on hers. 'I promise. I've - I've cut a deal.'

'What sort of deal?'

He stared into the distance, an odd expression on his face. 'Financial stuff. Deeds. Shares… But one thing's for sure, Hermione. They can't ever use Veritaserum on me. I've already got that on record, bound into an unbreakable contract. Witchell sent his own proxy to formalize the offer. In fact, I've been given total immunity.'

'That's – that's incredible,' she stuttered.

'Ephraim wants me home, I guess – at any price, it seems. He needs me to rubber-stamp his business dealings and I suspect Mother has played her hand.'

But, given this latest development, Hermione's own deep-set misgivings about Draco were quickly bubbling to the fore. 'Why did you request Tony Goldstein's thesis on Gimlott's to be removed from the public record?' she blurted.

He frowned, a bemused expression on his face. 'I've no idea what you're talking about.'

'Tony Goldstein … He authored a study on Gimlott's Disease. You demanded it was removed from both the Ministry Library and Hogwarts.'

'When was this?' Draco reared backwards, looking nonplussed.

'When your company bought Arcana.'

'Gilgad bought Arcana. My company is Herb Healing. I mean – sure, Gilgad owns Herb Healing …'
Lock, stock and barrel, she thought, a mental echo of Miguel Culebra's words ringing through her head. 'But I heard YOU suppressed Tony Goldstein's thesis when Herb Healing bought Arcana.'

'Well, I don't personally remember buying Arcana, Hermione,' he said tetchily, 'and I think I would – buying a company isn't the sort of thing you do every day.'

'Your father must have signed it off, then.'

Draco shrugged. 'I guess so. Any big transaction like that would be managed by lawyers. All Ephraim would likely need is his signature.'

'But why, then, was Goldstein's thesis withdrawn from the public record?' Hermione pressed again.

'I don't know!' Draco was getting agitated. 'Maybe it was deemed commercially sensitive? There's probably something in his research Gilgad wants to patent.' His lips tightened in irritation. 'Might be a good thing. Maybe they've found a cure for Gimlott's … Would save the embarrassment of having more Muggle blood transfusions, that's for sure.'

She shook her head in furious disbelief. How could he not know?

'I don't remember doing it, Hermione, if that helps,' he said in a tight, clipped voice. 'Please, believe me.' There was a look of angry hurt and confusion on his face that took her breath away. 'I sign lots of stuff, all the bloody time … you've no idea how much rubbish gets shoved my way. Not just work related to my particular department, but blood-sensitive documents, too … documents my father should have been signing, if he'd been able.' A brief shadow of painful recollection passed across his features. 'Documents only a MALFOY can sign.'

That explained why Ephraim so desperately wanted him back … but Hermione found she was struggling to trust him. There was something a little too rehearsed and guarded in his manner. She feared he was acting a part for her benefit.

She was startled by a sudden, loud outburst of coughing from the corridor. She'd forgotten there was a guard standing outside the door - followed by the burbling sound of approaching voices.

Draco instantly jumped up and away from her, as though stung. 'That'll be Torquil,' he hissed. 'He can't know you're here. With me.'

But a vivid green, like a slick of chilled absinthe, was rapidly staining the fringes of Hermione's mind. 'It's Harry,' she said, relieved. Except, another voice was now talking to Harry. A voice that sounded remarkably like - No, it couldn't possibly be?! - she thought. A stabbing panic throbbed through her. It was Mr Jinks … She frantically looked for somewhere to hide, and was halfway to the bathroom, when she felt an odd, icy coldness trickling across her skin. She stopped, stock-still, in her tracks, and turned to Draco, who was targeting her with a wand, a triumphant look on his face.

'Sorted,' he whispered, conspiratorially.

Harry entered the room, looking furious, flanked by the dwarfish, stooped figure of Mr Jinks and a tall, sleek woman, who Hermione had never seen before.

'There you are!' Harry yelled at Draco, glowering belligerently. Mr Jinks seemed oblivious to Harry's obvious vexation. He settled himself on the sofa, clicked open his briefcase with a quick tap of his wand, and produced a roll of vellum parchment. He extended a quill to the tall lady.

'All I need is your signature,' he trilled, pointing to a space at the bottom of the parchment. He
beamed at Draco. 'And then Mr Malfoy is officially released into my care.'

The tall lady pursed her lips, grabbed the quill as though it was poisonous and she wanted to limit her exposure to it, and quickly signed.

Harry didn't take his eyes off Draco – and neither did he appear to notice she was standing just a few feet away. Hermione realized, with a flood of warm relief, that Draco had cast a Disillusionment Charm, disguising her presence.

The tall lady gave Harry and Draco a dark look and solemnly shook her head. 'I warn you, Harry Potter. Vendome won't like this!'

Harry swallowed hard. 'And neither do I, Berenice.' He continued to stare at Draco. He abruptly switched his attention to Mr Jinks, who was stolidly folding the parchment into his briefcase with smug satisfaction. 'When's Auror Bennet getting here?'

On cue, there was a terse rap on the door.

'That'll be him, right now,' Mr Jinks said, snapping the briefcase shut with a loud click. 'Come in, Tom,' he called, in a high, fluting voice. He flashed Draco an unctuous grin. 'Don't worry, Mr Malfoy, your ordeal is nearly over. We'll have you home in a jiffy.'

Auror Tom Bennet shuffled into the room, looking decidedly uncomfortable. Draco and Tom half-nodded to each other in greeting and Berenice gave Tom a wan smile.

'Good to see you, Potter,' Tom said in muffled tones. He studiously avoided catching his eye, which was as well, Hermione thought, as Harry looked thunderous.

'Ah, Tom!' Mr Jinks exclaimed brightly. He gestured towards Draco. 'Your charge is ready and waiting to leave. You didn't have any belongings, Mr Malfoy, did you?'

'One sec. My coat,' Draco mumbled awkwardly, retreating towards the dressing room. He brushed past Hermione, then did so again on his return, his hand lingering, momentarily, against hers. The black coat Harry had bought him using Auror HQ funds, dangled casually over his arm.

'That's *not* your property, Malfoy,' Harry sneered.

Draco opened his mouth to object, but Mr Jinks got in first. 'I've no doubt Mr. Malfoy will happily pay for any expenses you might have incurred on his behalf, Mr Potter. Won't you, Mr Malfoy?'

To Hermione's amazement, Draco blushed, but this was almost immediately succeeded by a cocky smile. 'Of course. It's not as though I can't afford it now, is it?' He winked at Tom Bennet. 'Come on, then, get me out of this hellhole.'

And with a cursory wave to Harry, Draco swept out of the room.

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CHAPTER TRACKS:

"Piano Concerto no. 23 in A Major K488: II. Adagio" by MOZART

"SLAVE" by THE YEAH YEAH YEAHS

"BREATHING UNDERWATER" by METRIC
Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
With Something of His True Complexion

Chapter Summary

ACT 4: 'WHERE LITTLE FEARS GROW GREAT...'

Ghosts of the past … And an overseas trip sows dark doubts…

29. With Something of His True Complexion

In the days that followed his return to Malfoy Manor, it was hard to avoid Draco Malfoy.

The Malfoys were the front-page focus of the *Daily Prophet*, and the news-pages were bursting with 'insider' coverage about the flamboyant and expensive plans for Lucius's funeral arrangements.

There was to be a small, private ceremony, to be followed at a later date by a larger, commemorative 'spectacle' - the grand opening of a Mausoleum at Malfoy Manor, where Lucius's remains would be finally laid to rest.

Hermione wondered who the hell was driving this tasteless fiasco… She couldn't imagine for one moment it was Draco.

Whenever Draco appeared in the *Daily Prophet*, he was flanked by Ephraim or Sylvestra (or both) - although Narcissa, her face shielded by a black, lace veil, was by his side, when he was spotted paying a visit to Gringotts Bank. The *Daily Prophet*'s roving rumour-monger, Agatha Thrussington, penned a three-thousand word analysis of Narcissa's tortured suffering, based on observations of her stately comportment, the finely-tailored cut of her black bombazine robes and the deep-set lines of grief etched on her face that Agatha had, somehow, detected under the thickly-woven lace of her veil.

Lucius's death had swept away any dark suspicions about Draco's past. Draco was instead portrayed as a sympathetic figure, more wronged against than wrong-doing. It helped that the Ministry published a statement exonerating him from the 'baseless rumours and scandals' of criminal activity he'd formerly been accused of.

The Malfoy brand and his social standing was further cemented by what Hermione dubbed 'The Golowitz Effect'.

Ephraim - an attractive, popular cheerleader for Silas Witchell's New Brooms reforms - was odds-on favourite to become Mayor of Hogsmeade in forthcoming elections.

Sylvestra, too, had become something of a celebrity. Her imperious blonde beauty regularly graced the front of *Witch Weekly*. The magazine's latest edition featured a gushing interview, where she expressed her 'heart-felt grief' at the passing of Lucius.

This media blitz felt suspiciously contrived to Hermione. She didn't want to jump to sordid conclusions, but sometimes it was hard not to… She was also struck by the lack of a single mention of the real Mrs Malfoy. Katya had been erased.
From Draco himself, there was silence.

It seemed unfair to Hermione that the media was obsessed by the Malfoy/Golowitz psychodrama, and yet REAL news stories, like the disappearance of Padma Patil and Anthony Goldstein, were ignored. Intelligent, resourceful witches and wizards didn't just vanish into thin air! It was about time the Ministry made a bigger deal out of this… Frustrated, Hermione wrote a letter to the Daily Prophet Editor, Angus McCrackle. She hoped to pique his interest, sparking a full-scale 'Missing Persons' media campaign - but he didn't reply.

Next, Hermione visited WWN's headquarters in Hogsmeade to ask about Parvati Patil. She was told that Parvati was 'somewhere in Papua New Guinea' – as she was producing a new travelogue series, 'What Witches Wear' – a guide to the differing 'costume' habits of the world's wizarding population. Parvati was due to arrive at The Kilimanjaro Hotel in Dar Es Salaam within the next week: Maybe Hermione should send a message there?

Hermione also arranged a meeting with Ernie Macmillan, Anthony's ex-flatmate and former friend from Hogwarts, to see if he could cast any light on the situation; but he cancelled on her at the last minute.

No one seemed to give a damn.

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Harry was still upset with Draco for triggering the Feinsnapp Protocol. He was now convinced that the British Ministry and certain figures at Vendome had conspired to secure Draco's release.

'Mind you, if Draco gets us some inside track on Golowitz, it'll all be worth it. Have you heard from him?' Harry asked, stopping by Hermione's kitchen for a crisis meeting once the copious Vendome paperwork wrapping up Draco's transfer had been finalised.

'No, I haven't,' Hermione admitted, sombrely. 'Have you?'

'Not a word.'

To make matters worse, Harry's role throughout The Kerpin Affair, (as it was now described in the media), was being subjected to some unwanted scrutiny by Auror HQ.

'I'm getting a bit too much heat on this,' Harry complained. He'd decided to flee to America for a quick snoop around Gilgad's bases … Alaska, in particular.

'Isn't their research centre somewhere in Ohio?'

'It's moved to Juneau… Did Rose like that Russian doll?'

'She hasn't seen it yet,' Hermione said, as she set to making them both a cup of tea. 'Her actual birthday's this Friday. We'll be at my parents' house.'

'That'll be nice for your Mum and Dad.'

'Yes, it will.' Hermione couldn't help but compare Harry's reaction to Ron's when she'd told him that Rose wouldn't be spending her 'actual' birthday at The Burrow. He'd accused her of deliberately upsetting his Mum and not appreciating everything she did for them.

'I'm hoping your trip to the Ukraine proved a theory about Svetlana and those Roses, Harry,' Hermione said, buoyantly, quickly trying to banish her sharp differences with Ron from her mind.
They'd become a constantly chiming refrain these past few days. She brought their cups of tea to the kitchen table, where Harry was slumped wearily on a chair. 'In fact, I learned a lot last week… despite being banned from the Ministry Library.'

'You what?'

'Yes. Ridiculous, isn't it? So, I went to Hogwarts.'

'Why've you been banned?'

'Ephraim … I'm sure of it. Playing silly buggers because I didn't fall in line with his stupid plan. His influence at the Ministry is growing, Harry.' She told him about the new department for Muggle Business Relations and the fireplace in Zoltan Guldstern's office connecting directly to Arcana. 'And Padma Patil's gone missing. I suspect she's with Tony… who's also still missing.' She stopped short here. She didn't want to reveal too much about Tony Goldstein's thesis; not while Harry was still sore with Draco.

'None of this is good,' Harry said, stroppily. 'It's fast feeling like everything's going to shit, actually.'

'Not everything.' Hermione told him all she had learned from the Hogwarts Library and Neville; that the necklace charms were Zametsky Roses and likely worked as communication devices.

For the first time since arriving, Harry gave her a genuine smile. 'Well, Hermione, our research in Russia definitely supports the theory that Svetlana Kerpin's family came from Zametsky. Her parents were Alexei and Olga Koldun.'

'Neville mentioned the Kolduns.'

'Officially, Alexei was the Soviet Union's leading expert in ballistics technology,' Harry said, 'but unofficially, Koldun was the most famous wizard in Siberia – a grand master at transfiguration.'

'So, Svetlana never lived in Zametsky herself?'

'I don't think so. She lived in a Siberian town called Yakutsk – by a river - The Lena.'

'As in Rozella's boat.'

'Exactly,' Harry agreed. 'Svetlana was a Muggle school teacher – possibly a Squib, actually. And a revolutionary type - wound up in jail.'

'Really? What did she do?'

'Dunno… But while she was locked-up her husband – a diamond miner called Nikolai Kerpin – sued for divorce, and when she came out she moved to Moscow, where her younger sister, Anna Koldun, was making a great name for herself at Moscow State University.'

'All very interesting, Harry,' Hermione said drily, 'but did you actually find any connection between Svetlana Kerpin and Katya Malfoy?'

Harry smirked, clearly sensing her impatience.

'Svetlana's sister was considered something of a prodigy; an acclaimed sociologist but also working in the 'Magical Matter' department. And in 1980, she was awarded a special dispensation from the Soviet President – Brezhnev – to present a paper at a conference in Zurich.'
'Magical Matter’… Was that what she thought it was?

'Anyway, somehow – and I honestly have no idea HOW - Svetlana accompanied her sister on this trip to Zurich, where they defected.'

Hermione's ears perked up.

'Svetlana's sister, Anna, was then offered a job in Geneva and she married a Frenchman.'

Hermione took a sharp intake of breath. 'So, THIS Anna is the same Anna who was part of The Geneva Group?'

Harry nodded. 'Anna Koldun married Reynaldo Cornec and became Anna Cornec of The Geneva Group. And I'm afraid, that's as far as we got.'

Hermione's mind flitted to the photograph of Anna Cornec - her face scrubbed clean away - alongside a much younger Ephraim Golowitz. There had been that lingering sense of intimacy ... And then there was Svetlana's relationship with Katya and little Magda.

Hermione was feeling stunned and a little annoyed with herself. She'd known it … deep down she'd known it all along. She recalled the newspaper article with the photo of Iona Golowitz and her strained smile, standing tall and erect alongside her towering, handsome husband, glowing with rude health and youthful energy, at their mansion in Mendocino. She remembered Sylvestra's blonde curls and wide-eyed prettiness. There had been no sign or mention of Katya.

Iona Golowitz had brought up another woman's child, of that Hermione now felt sure. Katya had been the love-child of Anna Cornec and Ephraim Golowitz – meaning Svetlana was Katya's aunt.

She could feel Harry's eyes boring into her from behind his glasses.

'It all makes sense,' she muttered. 'Wow, Harry. You've put it all together.'

'Well, we tried,' he sniffed. His mouth twitched irritably. 'Couldn't bloody move for minders.' He drained his cup of tea and stood up.

'Leaving so soon?'

'Unfortunately, yes… I've booked a Portkey out of Paris to Portland. You heard anything from your Danish mate, Henrik?'

'We exchanged texts yesterday. He's researching the Auckland Volcanic Field for some reason… nothing to do with Gilgad… he's one of life's catastrophists; but I think you'd like him, Harry.'

Harry nodded. 'How's Ron?' he asked, as he headed out of the door.

Hermione shrugged, trying to appear casual. 'Haven't seen much of him to be honest. Rose's birthday party was at The Burrow on Saturday because Ron's away all this week – he's in Moldova with Tana McLaughlin and Tom Bennet, interviewing disgruntled bookmakers…'

'Not quite Section A stuff, is it?' Harry snorted. 'More like Section B. That's Bennet's territory.'

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In truth, Hermione was relieved that Ron was out of the country.

Neither had mentioned their fierce argument, but Hermione was starkly aware that there had been a
subtle yet distinctive shift in the tectonic plates that underpinned their marriage. She wondered how long this had been going on and realised the strain might have been showing more than she thought when Molly and Ginny turned up at her house one morning, purportedly to bring some 'extra' birthday presents for Rose, before she absconded on her treacherous trip to London.

Molly fussed around Wisteria Cottage in her usual manner, suggesting 'improvements' and offering 'advice' - but her conversation was peppered with random observations: 'Did Ron really have to work so hard?'; 'Was there a need for all this constant travel?'; 'Maybe she (Hermione) could try out some new recipes? A well-fed man wouldn't feel the need to spend so much time at the office.'

Over afternoon tea in the garden, (they'd been blessed with a decent day's sunshine), Ginny was quick to point out that Hermione's own absences from home had compromised Ron's ability to do his job properly – and now he was having to make up for lost time. She claimed to speak from 'bitter personal experience' that Section A was a tough and competitive working environment and Ron needed even more support than usual if he was to survive and thrive.

Hermione quietly smouldered, offering yet more tea and confounding Molly with a plate of buttered scones - bought from a Muggle supermarket…

'Your baking has shown marked signs of improvement,' Molly clucked in appreciative tones. 'Confirms my view that you should be the one who hosts Gabrielle and Briek this year.'

'Here?' Hermione almost screeched. 'But our house is tiny.'

'I just thought, with you at home now, it might make for a nice change.'

Molly always accorded Fleur's sister, Gabrielle, and her dashing husband, Briek Bertel, 'Royal Visit' status. Hermione assumed this was largely on account of Briek because Molly had never warmed to Gabrielle, insisting she had secret 'designs' on Harry. Gabrielle's marriage to an ex-rock star, twenty years her senior, had thrown Molly into a tumult of disapproving confusion, (loudly voiced, after three glasses of prosecco, at Gabrielle's wedding reception), but Briek was suave charm personified and soon won Molly over.

Hermione liked him enormously and was equally fond of Gabrielle, feeling she was subjected to unfair criticism. For reasons never divulged, Gabrielle was unable to bear children. This entirely private matter was a persistent topic of hot debate amongst the Weasleys.

Despite this, Hermione had no desire to play Happy Hostess. She protested, justly, she felt, that Gabrielle would rather stay with Fleur at Shell Cottage.

'Stuff and nonsense!' Molly exclaimed. 'They were delighted to stay at The Burrow last year! Gabrielle said it was her best visit yet.'

Gabrielle had clearly calculated that courteous flattery was her best survival tactic.

'And you know how much they like you and Ron and the children… it could make this year's visit all the more special,' Molly cooed.

The next day, Hermione was all too happy to get away from Ottery St Catchpole and head to the comparative calm of her parents' house in London. Her father, Robert, had planned a jam-packed roster of activities for Rose and Hugo.

Jean, however, had her own plan – a night at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden with her daughter.
It was Valentine's Day. Hermione expected the place to be half-empty, but she soon realized that the opera was a popular place for a spot of romancing, based on the high proportion of dolled-up dates and nervous chatter in the Stalls. The opera house itself was a feast of rich crimson furnishings, ornate, gilded architraves and a glorious cornflower-blue domed ceiling. Old-fashioned lamps lined the tiered balconies and dimmed to a soft rose-gold hue when the opera was about to begin.

It was her mother's favourite, Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. Browsing the programme, Hermione wasn't entirely sure it was optimum fare for a night bloated with such high romantic expectations: *Missed opportunities; Loving those we shouldn't, when we shouldn't; Succumbing to a loveless fate…* She suddenly felt rather glum. However, within ten minutes of curtain-up, she realized she was wrong. It was impossible not to be moved by the lush music and the passionate singing. And this production featured an oddly effective motif – a pair of young, beautiful dancers enacting the inner lives of the main characters, as they sang and acted their roles… She could almost hear Ron's voice in her head moaning that it was 'too bloody poncey.' But as the opera progressed, Hermione began to find it rather moving, even disturbing.

The younger, artless selves twirled and danced, reveling in the simple beauty of their youth and freedom. They indulged their instincts, their passions, and railed at their misfortunes and mistakes. Their older selves grew increasingly jaded, world-weary, worn down by the rigours of social conformity and stultifying routine, unable to grasp any opportunities to change course.

She was lost in thought as she followed her mother out of the auditorium during the interval. There was a long, curving banquette between the entrance to the auditorium and the doorways leading to the main lobby. Hermione sat down to read her programme, while her mother went to buy them ice creams and chat to a friend she had spotted in the lobby.

'I think this must be one of my favourite operas,' a familiar voice said beside her.

Hermione spun round in surprise. 'What are YOU doing here?' she asked Ephraim Golowitz. He was the last person she expected to see in a place like this. She was immediately adrenalized, prepared to run if necessary. Her hand instinctively clasped the wand pendant dangling around her neck.

Ephraim was immaculately dressed in a smart, Muggle suit. He grinned at her, baring perfect, gleaming white teeth. 'I love opera. Probably more than anything in the world.'

Hermione quickly scanned the area. There was a bunch of well-dressed people hooting with laughter directly in front of her, and a string of dewy-eyed couples parked at various intervals along the banquette. A solitary man unearthed a sandwich from his lunch-box, and a large lady a few feet further along, was pouring herself a cup of tea from a Thermos flask.

'Where's your usual entourage?' she asked, suspiciously.

'I've come alone,' Ephraim replied. His eyes glittered with unalloyed glee when he looked at her. 'I haven't been stalking you, if that's what you're thinking, Hermione. This is one of life's truly glorious coincidences…'

She stared at him uncertainly.

'Having said that,' he demurred a little, 'I spotted you in the Stalls earlier. You were most distracting.'
'Well, that's ruined the rest of the show for me,' she snapped. 'Where are you sitting?'

'To the side - Stalls Circle, front row – facing you.'

She'd have to change seats… except, it was a full house.

'I'm surprised you've found time to get away from your media whirlwind,' Hermione said sarcastically. 'Your profile has benefited enormously from Mr Malfoy's death.'

'Oh, it's a bit of a bore, to be honest, Hermione,' he said breezily. 'I'm glad to catch a break.' His robust American voice was a little softer, more subdued than usual. His brash swagger toned down… Maybe it was being in a Muggle-heavy environment?

'You strike me as a man who thrives on attention,' she said snidely.

She was fighting an urge to ask after Draco…

He laughed. 'We all need our private space.' He gestured at the crowds milling between the lobby and the auditorium. 'And this is mine.'

'Hardly private. And so many Muggles!'

He shrugged. 'And why would that bother ME?'

'I doubt you much like the company of Muggles. And opera's very much a Muggle artform.'

'I love and value beauty wherever I see it,' he murmured softly. He furrowed his brow in consternation and eyed her quizzically. 'You appear to be struggling under a serious misapprehension, Hermione. I have no reason to hate Muggles. I'm not one of THOSE wizards. On the contrary, I want to be equal with them; to share their world and for them to share ours, without any fear or misgivings or discrimination.'

Hermione cocked her head to one side and studied him, eyes narrowed. 'You've become very influential in recent months, Mr Golowitz, and the tone of our society is changing rapidly. There's an increasing number of so-called anti-discrimination measures targeting Muggle-borns, for example. I can't help but draw my own conclusions.'

'The Minister is his own man.'

'Are you sure about that?'

Ephraim pursed his lips petulantly. 'My wife, Iona, was a Muggle-born. Awful woman as it turned out, but that was nothing to do with her heritage. Although her family was ghastly… They were Muggle Politicians. Her father was a Senator; desperate for me to follow in the hallowed family footsteps.'

'And now you're doing just that,' Hermione said pertly.

'I don't think a measly mayorality of a diddly squat township in Scotland was quite the political future my father-in-law envisaged for me. It certainly wouldn't have been enough to please my wife…'

'And yet, here you are,' Hermione sighed regretfully. Where had her mother got to? She was beginning to worry. 'Why didn't you enter politics in the US? Why come here?'

Ephraim pondered this. 'Oh, I tried…but the media. They asked too many tricky questions. That's
the downside of being a wizard, I suppose. We always have so much to hide. It's impossible to weave a credible narrative – the type voters can buy into… It's much easier here, as an outsider. Especially in wizarding circles.' He beamed at her. 'In that respect, you Muggle-borns are enviable, you know. You have a viable childhood. You can bat for both teams.'

Hermione had never really thought of it as an advantage. But there was an undoubted logic to what he was saying.

'But surely you could just lie?'

'Perhaps? But how many lies can you hold in your head at one time? I was already pretending I had a happy marriage. That was stressful enough.'

Hermione blinked rapidly, shocked that he was being so open with her. Either that or he was playing a part. Probably, the latter.

She couldn't help but think, though, about what she'd learned from Harry.

'Is that why you had an affair with Anna Cornec?' she asked, surprised at her own boldness. Although, in truth, the words had slipped out before she had a chance to stop them.

His eyes twinkled. 'You're a very smart woman… and I'm flattered you've taken such an interest in me.'

She felt a surge of blue flash through her as he spoke… for some reason, this made her bolder still…

'I take it Katya wasn't Iona's daughter, then.'

'No. A love-child. And a very LOVED child, too… and her mother - well –' he trailed off a little, momentarily lost in thought. 'Well, let's just say this opera captures the spirit of what happened between us. Missed opportunities. Lost love.'

'I don't see you as a man who craves love, Ephraim,' Hermione mused. 'Craves ATTENTION, maybe? But not love.'

'Interesting. And you might be right. I don't NEED love. But I want it... But isn't that the same for all of us, Hermione?' He stared hard at her face and his eyes were a blistering blue. She felt strangely scalded.

'I don't know.' She could feel her cheeks glowing pink. It wasn't because of HIM. But she had feared, for a brief moment, that he'd seen something inside of her that she didn't want to face up to.

The bell was ringing, announcing the end of the interval, and her mother still hadn't returned. 'I'm going to go and find my mother,' she said, standing up. Ephraim stood up too; transitioning back to his usual towering, formidable presence. Passersby immediately seemed to unconsciously cower in his wake.

'There you are!' Jean gasped, clutching her daughter's arm. 'It's the strangest thing… I went to the bathroom and got completely lost! I've been to this place countless times. I don't know what came over me. And I seem to have mislaid our ice-creams.'

Hermione bristled with indignation and shot Ephraim a furious look. He smirked smugly in return.

'Mrs Granger,' he said, in his most charming, avuncular tones. He shook her hand cordially. 'What
a pleasure it is to meet you. I'm Ephraim Golowitz.'

'Oh?' Jean replied, staring at him in unabashed admiration. 'Hello….' She glanced at Hermione.

'I was just chatting with your lovely daughter about the opera… Glorious singing and the chorus is in particularly splendid form tonight, don't you think?'

'Yes – yes. Very much,' Jean said eagerly.

'I love the sound of Russian singing,' Ephraim sighed. 'It has such a melancholy sweetness to it.'

Jean smiled appreciatively. 'I completely agree with you,' she said in warm tones. 'Even when happy, it sounds so terribly sad.'

Ephraim's face twitched a little at this. Maybe it was her mother's genuine earnestness that had unnerved him? Hermione thought.

The bells were clanging louder, more emphatically.

'We have to go,' Hermione said, ushering her mother away from the undeniable allure of Ephraim Golowitz and his penetrating gaze.

Ephraim abruptly switched attention to Hermione. To her surprise, he took her hand and kissed it with pompous chivalry. She instantly retracted it, outraged.

'Happy Valentine's Day, Hermione,' he purred, and withdrew into the thick of the crowd pushing their way back to their seats.

'Gosh,' Jean said, round-eyed. 'What a handsome, charming man!'

Hermione threw Ephraim's retreating back a look of pure venom. 'No, Mum. He's evil. Pure evil.' But in her haste to get back to their seats before the lights went down, Jean wasn't listening.

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Rose's birthday tea-party was a cozy affair. She happily feasted on chocolate cake and fizzy drinks and Jean and Robert gave her a delightful silver pendant necklace, which bore an uncanny resemblance to one of Katya's roses.

Hermione's Aunt Rita was there, loud and rumbustious as ever. She gave Rose a garish pink dress. To Hermione's disappointment, Rose instantly whipped off the Marizel dressing-up costume that Hermione had given her and donned Aunt Rita's gift instead. Sadly, Hermione's uncle was absent. He had suffered 'one of his funny turns' just as they were leaving the house, Aunt Rita announced in exasperated tones.

Gwen pulled a face. 'Hardly a turn,' she said disparagingly. 'I think the chemo drugs are killing Dad quicker than the cancer.' She smiled listlessly. Hermione felt an acute surge of affection for her cousin, but all she could do was pat Gwen's arm in what she feared was an ineffectual show of solidarity.

After tea, Alfred and Hugo were instantly engrossed in the latest Space Force 7 comic and Rose was being happily fussed over. Hermione snuck out of the living room and ventured into her parents' study, where a gleaming white computer – her father's pride and joy - hummed smugly on the desk. She swiftly logged into her email, glancing fretfully at the door to ensure she wasn't interrupted. A message from Henrik was winking at her in the inbox. She clicked the attached file
and quickly scrolled through the photos of the Gilgad installation in New Zealand he had emailed.

She could barely suppress the disappointment that settled dismally on her. The site was deserted - a few, ramshackle breezeblock sheds and a gaping, empty hangar set amidst a scrubby wasteland. There were a few interior photos - collapsed shelves and ripped black bin bags strewn across a concrete floor – signs perhaps of a quick getaway, but nothing else.

There was a fuzzy-looking photo of a pudgy-looking woman with a floppy perm, her dimpled arm draped over a young girl's shoulders. The girl was thin and sallow with stringy black hair and a vacant expression on her face. The picture was labelled 'Shona and Kai, 2011.'

And that was it.

Shona and Kai were standing in what looked like an office. There were papers and pictures pinned to a cork wall behind them and, sprouting from behind Shona, a framed photo. Hermione clicked on the photo to enlarge it. Even though the photograph was blurred and indistinct she could still make out two figures. One she immediately recognized – the sleek black hair and pinched features of Torquil Haast. The other man beside him was shorter and sporting a crisp, cream suit. Unfortunately, his face was swallowed up by wisps of Shona's frizzy hair so she couldn't identify him.

Her eyes scanned Henrik's latest email. He would be back in Wanaka today.

'The two guys who were running the place,' Henrik wrote, 'were Torquil Haast and Zoltan Guldstern.'

Hermione's eyes darted to the picture of the short man in the cream suit. The mysterious Zoltan Guldstern! Ephraim's plant at the Ministry.

'I've got someone lined up to talk to us. Sooner the better.'

Harry was gallivanting God-knows-where in America; this left, her. Hermione.

Except, Ron had sent a vague message yesterday to say he was now heading to Romania. Maybe she could ask her parents to keep Rose and Hugo over the weekend?

Hermione emailed Henrik back, shut the computer down, and hastened into the living room.

The officious-looking chap at the International Portkey Terminal had been right. Sana'a was most certainly not a place to get stuck in. She arrived to the sound of gunfire and the pungent smell of cordite in the air… There was a nerve-wracking charge for the Portkey heading straight to Cochin, but Hermione was jostled aside and forced to wait an hour in the suddenly still and forbidding, pitch-black Yemeni desert, for the next Portkey out – which wasn't to Pagan, as the officious-looking terminal attendant had assured her would be a quick route to New Zealand - but to Masirah, an island off the coast of Oman.

Fortunately, there was a Portkey at Masirah that took her onto Galle in Sri Lanka, and from there to Makassar in Sulawesi. This wasn't ideal and the constant Portkey changes were driving her to the point of sickly exhaustion, but at Makassar she lucked into a private Portkey transit with a group of avid whale-watchers heading to Kaikoura, a small township on the East Coast of New Zealand's South Island.

It was a glorious summer's morning in New Zealand, although the strong sun hurt her eyes. Her
fellow travellers side-Apparated her to a shed on the outskirts of town so that she could Portkey onto Wanaka.

It had taken just under seven hours to journey across the world and she was now about as far from Ottery St Catchpole as she could imagine. She was weary and emotionally drained; nerves jangling. And she never relished the unpleasant, after-effects of Portkey travel.

All such feelings were washed away in an instant by the glorious vista that presented itself when she stepped out of the busy motel car park, which served as the local magical transport hub, onto a lightly trafficked promenade running alongside the shoreline of Lake Wanaka. Gently undulating hills and mountains framed the lake at its farthest side. The barren, burnt sienna rocks bathed in bright, white sunshine and tipped with gleaming white snow, contrasted with the clear, cerulean waters below. Feathery plane trees fringed the shore and a neat line of wood-panelled buildings lined the roadside to her right, facing the lake.

She breathed in deeply, revelling in the cool, fresh air that filled her lungs. There was a gentle serenity, a gauzy, dreamy quality to this place that invigorated her. For a moment, she could forget that she was heavy-limbed with exhaustion and that her taupe linen blouse was soaked with sweat and sticking uncomfortably to her armpits.

'Welcome to Wanaka!' came a deep, friendly voice behind her.

She swung around to meet the sparkling blue eyes, tanned features and large, outstretched hand of Henrik Thyssen. She clasped his hand eagerly and he led her towards an awaiting Jeep.

To her surprise, Harry was at the wheel, looking remarkably relaxed and even a little supercilious, Hermione thought sourly.

'What the hell are YOU doing here?' she demanded, as Henrik deftly manoeuvred her into the backseat of the Jeep. 'I thought you were in Alaska!' Her voice was almost drowned out by the harsh grinding of gears and gritty roar of the Jeep's tyres as Harry flung the vehicle into an about-turn and surged away from town in a flurry of thick, sandy dust.

'We've been waiting here for over two hours,' Harry retorted.

'I missed the connection to Pagan,' she said, grumpily.

The Jeep clunked and groaned as he moved through the gears with sharp, jagged movements. 'Why? What happened?'

'I got stuck in the Yemen. That's what happened.' Hermione launched into a furious explanation about her wait at Sana'a in the middle of an insurrection and her complicated journey afterwards, before realising with a queasy thud that she had been rattling on about Portkeys and Side-Apparition… 'Shit,' she said, under her breath. Henrik…

Harry and Henrik exchanged knowing glances. She was sure Harry was smiling.

'You've told him, haven't you?' she said in outraged tones to Harry.

'I was halfway to working it out already, Hermione,' chortled Henrik. 'You wouldn't be the first magical folk I've come across, you know.'

He threw her a wink over his shoulder and then leant forwards and rummaged in a bag at his feet from which he plucked a can of coke.
'Hey, take this, it's a bit warm, but you must be thirsty.'

Hermione drank the coke, a little dazed. Henrik was right. She was parched. It was a hot day and the sun was blindingly bright overhead.

Would they have to Obliviate him? she wondered, hazily. He seemed remarkably unfazed; more preoccupied with fighting to open a large map in a small, confined space than by sharing that same space with two people capable of hexing him into oblivion. His finger traced a long, sinuous line which curved away from the lake to their right and up into a mottled green and brown stretch of land, which led into a range of mountains stretched across the landscape before them.

Hermione momentarily found herself transfixed by Harry driving. She hadn't even realized Harry could drive! She'd never had the time, inclination, or indeed, the need.

Her head flopped and bounced against the window as the Jeep headed into less well-manicured terrain. Her eyes slid slowly shut, a languorous warmth easing through her … That was the problem, she thought, the longer she lived in the wizarding world, the less-equipped she was to handle life beyond it. Being magical was a gift beyond a Muggle's wildest dreams, but in other ways, it was a form of lifelong dependency. Not that it mattered, of course. A life without magic was unthinkable … This train of thought idled its way through her head as she basked in the welcome warmth of a Southern summer; sunshine dappled her face and a gentle breeze wafted from Harry's open window…

The Jeep crunched to a halt, sending up a spray of gravel that loudly peppered the windscreen. Hermione woke with a start, her heart racing. The coke can she'd been holding when she fell asleep had slipped from her grasp and her sandals were splattered with brown, sticky liquid.

She inched open her eyes and peered out at a dusty, rock-strewn wasteland scooped out of the side of a mountain. She looked behind her. The road they had been travelling veered precariously downwards, weaving its way between scrubby boulders towards a narrow valley and a fast-flowing river.

Her eyes drifted upwards. Above them was a high, craggy peak. To her left was a disused ski lift.

Harry was already out of the Jeep. He opened Hermione's door and offered his hand to help steady her as she climbed out, blinking into the sunlight.

'You look beat,' he murmured, pulling her into a close embrace. A flood of velvety sage green engulfed her.

'Hey! You guys! The abandoned buildings are around here,' Henrik called, marching purposefully towards a triangular passageway cleft into the rock. 'They didn't leave much.' They surveyed a huddle of deserted Portacabins with broken windows. 'Thought you should see the site anyway, but we should get to Shona's. She's expecting us.'

'Who's Shona?' Hermione whispered to Harry.

'Used to work here.'

Hermione gazed at her bleak surroundings. 'Doing what?'

'She claims this was once a manufacturing plant,' Henrik said, with a nonplussed shrug of the shoulders. 'There was an old hangar building – it's been dismantled - about there …' He pointed to a sizeable area – the size of two tennis courts side-by-side – where the ground was level and less stony.
'What did they make here?'

'Thin, plastic tubing, mainly. She's no idea what it was going to be used for.'

'And no one thought to ask?' Hermione asked, perplexed.

'There's no fathoming some folks, is there?' Henrik said gruffly.

Harry was scooting his foot though the dust. He stopped, bent over, and picked up a small, white tube, no more than a couple of centimetres long and a millimetre thick, and promptly pocketed it.

Hermione studied the high grey rocks surrounding the site. Their faces were rough and misshapen, except for one flat area, about four metres in diameter.

'Hold on,' she muttered. She unleashed her wand, pointed it at the rock face, and muttered an 'Alohomora.' Nothing happened, but she felt certain that this even surface had in fact been a door.

Harry quickly followed her line of thought and ran his hands along the rock.

'Stand back!' he yelled.

Hermione guessed what he was about to do and pulled Henrik towards the Portacabins. Harry unleashed a fierce 'Expulso!' and a loud explosion ripped through the stone, sending up a choking cloud of dust.

Henrik looked startled, but his eyes were round with wonder.

Harry clambered over the fallen rocks and headed into the darkness beyond. Hermione and Henrik were close behind, following the glowing tip of Harry's wand.

The ground crunched underfoot. Hermione muttered a quick 'Lumos'. There were thousands of thin plastic filaments identical to the one in Harry's pocket.

She caught sight of a scrunched-up piece of paper buried under a pile of stones. She dashed to retrieve it, half-stumbling. The paper was torn and faded. She ran her wand over it, muttering 'Aparecium', then illuminated the paper from behind with the wand light … There was a faint chunky typeface at the top - a letterhead, perhaps?

Her heart sank. It didn't say Gilgad Inc. as she had hoped, indeed expected, but Herb Healing.

Precisely when had this site been in operation? And when had Henrik said there was a sudden death event in the area? It had been a couple of years ago… As one of the company's top executives, surely Draco knew about this production plant? But when she'd shown him the list of Gilgad facilities close to Dark Flux sites, he'd denied it. A cold, ball of doubt sank into her stomach.

She screwed the paper up and stuffed it into the pocket of her jeans.

She stared ahead at Harry and Henrik, retreating deeper into the murky gloom.

They disappeared behind a jutting rock, but Hermione could still see the light from Harry's wand dancing in the distance. She jogged towards it, took a sharp left, and almost collided with Harry and Henrik, who were standing at the entrance to a long thin room.

'What the fuck?' Henrik mouthed.
Hermione could hardly believe what she was seeing. Two rows of empty cots, some broken or overturned, were lined up against the walls facing each other. The floor was a sea of smashed-up wooden and glass debris. Hermione spotted a plastic rattle, shaped like a rabbit, buried in the ankle-deep dust.

The dark room echoed with the sounds of their breathing and the scrape and shove of furniture being moved as they explored. Their footsteps rang out, loud and ringing, filling the eerie gloom closing in on them.

'Strange place for a crèche,' Hermione mused. She had a bad feeling about this.

Henrik ran his hands through his hair. His eyes bulged fearfully in the dim light radiating from Harry's wand. 'Gotta say, guys … this place is super, super creepy. I dread to think what was being done in here.'

Harry's eyes met Hermione's. 'Let's get out,' he said.

'Maybe we should go and talk to this Shona person?'

XXX

Shona lived in a white, wooden bungalow with bow windows framed by pink gingham curtains and a veranda facing the lake. Hanging baskets overflowing with pink geraniums framed the doorway and dripped water onto their faces as they impatiently waited for Shona to answer the door.

Hermione instantly recognized Shona from the photo Henrik had emailed. She bustled them indoors, effusively greeting Henrik as her 'dear friend', and led them into a small living room stuffed with plump, pink furniture. Every available inch of the walls was adorned with a colourful kaleidoscope of moving photographs.

General introductions were made and a pot of tea was presented with four china teacups. Shona apologized for the absence of her teenage daughter, Kai, indicating a large, framed photograph of a surly-looking girl with multiple nose-piercings and heavy black eye makeup.

Harry seated himself opposite Shona, who looked a little nervous. 'Come on, Snuffy,' she said, pulling a fluffy white Pomeranian dog with a spiteful face onto her lap.

Harry solemnly explained that he was an Auror from the European Auror Co-Operative Ventures bureau in Paris and that their investigations concerning the activities of Gilgad's site were of paramount importance to an ongoing investigation. Shona blanched and swallowed hard. Hermione was beginning to see that Harry had that effect on people, but it never failed to surprise her. However, Shona turned out to be a doughty sort, and she was soon smiling gamely and answering Harry's initial questions about Gilgad's operations with impressive vigour and recall.

Harry plucked the thin, plastic tube from his pocket and presented it to Shona.

'Do you recognize this?' he asked.

'Yup. That was one of the things they were making. There was a big ole building up there, full of machines and noise – I showed a photo to our friend here.'

'But do you have any idea what it actually is?'

Shona shrugged. 'Nope. Drinking straws for mice, one friend of mine said.' She let rip with a loud,
grating laugh. Snuffy woke up with a start and then his head slumped back to its resting place against Shona's well-padded stomach.

'We found the crèche,' Hermione said.

Shona's forehead wrinkled in confusion. 'Don't know about any crèche … But there was a Wellness Clinic, if that's what you mean? They did all sorts of tests on us – but good tests, nothing scary,' she hastened to add.

'But why were there so many cots?'

'An all-woman workforce,' Shona said. 'Some pregnant. Some had babies. The company was real good. They took special care of these ladies! Take my friend, Arlene… She fell pregnant and they bought her a fancy house, down by the island, and gave her loads of tests and wellness potions and daily check-ups … anything she wanted, she got it! She was treated real nice. But then there was that nasty outbreak … The bossman? He moved Arlene and her newborn baby, Joyana, to a fine new place, up by Gladstone Bay - though Arlene weren't EVER in any danger, if you ask me … was just Muggle-borns died that day. Anyway, Arlene's moved on now. They all have. Dunno where to…'

'One moment – did you say that they BOUGHT the pregnant women houses?' Hermione asked, dumbfounded.

'Those girls were treated like Queens!' Shona said with a broad grin.

'Were ALL the pregnant girls treated this way?' Harry asked. He was edging so far forward on his chair, Hermione feared he might topple off.

Shona thought about this for a moment. '… I think you were better treated if you'd shown that you worked hard,' then let out a loud guffaw that startled Snuffy from his sleep. 'Though I've gotta admit, Arlene was a great girl, but boy, she was darned lazy. Maybe the bossman had a thing for her? He was a bit of a smoothie - exotic-looking fella. All the girls thought he was the bee's knees.'

'And this was…?'

'The guy on the photo – up there! All dressed up like a real gent.'

She pointed to a framed photo on the wall. There was Shona, giggling maniacally, shaking hands with a dapper-looking fellow in a double-breasted pin-stripe suit.

At least it wasn't Draco, Hermione thought. That would have been a blow too far.

'So, you're saying these folks treated you well?' Henrik cried out.

'Sure did!' Shona said proudly. She shifted slightly in her seat to reach out for her cup of tea. Harry leaned forwards and passed it to her.

'Thank you,' she said sweetly.

Henrik's face was reddening. 'But you told me that Gilgad was the worst thing to happen to this place!'

Shona laughed. 'Oh, my dear boy, looks like you got the wrong end of the stick. There was nothing wrong with Gilgad – though that was only the Yank side of the business, you realise – it's just that before they came, we were such a close-knit community. But the money changed all of that.
Always does, I find.' She motioned with the hand holding the mug of tea towards a string of photos on her mantelpiece. Hermione had registered these photos when they first entered the room, but Quidditch team photos rarely held her interest for long.

'Yeah… we were close as can be. So much GLORY! You've no idea …' She trailed off, a wistful look in her eyes. 'That was me a few years back.' She pointed to a younger, thinner Shona, leering at the camera. 'I was a beater for the West Wanaka Witches. Okay, not the most original name – but that was the point… We were all WITCHES – an all-girl team!' She gave Hermione an exaggerated wink. 'We topped the New Zealand Quidditch League three years on the trot! And we weren't just a Quidditch team - we were an almighty coven! The most powerful witches in the Southern Hemisphere I'd warrant!' She nodded bullishly, daring them to contradict her…

Powerful witches … Dark Flux. 'Did you have a Gimlott's problem here?' Hermione asked.

Hermione caught a glimpse of Henrik's face and realized Harry hadn't explained THAT much to him about the wizarding world. He was clearly baffled by the direction this conversation was going in.

'We prided ourselves on the purity of our blood!' Shona sneered, eyes flashing angrily. 'Sure. There might have been a few Gimlott's cases over the years – but you never saw sight nor sound of them. We weren't the sorts to go washing our dirty linen in public.'

'But there were SOME cases, you say,' Hermione persisted, ignoring her brazen bigotry. Gimlott's meant Epsilons... What if West Wanaka – like Zametsky before it, and possibly other communities who had suffered Dark Flux outbreaks – had a particularly high concentration of Epsilon blood types?

Shona was looking increasingly uncomfortable. 'Arlene's father had Gimlott's,' she confided. 'Never known a nicer man. Was a shock to find out he was a HALF-BLOOD! Arlene was mortified, poor girl.'

Hermione turned away, feigning interest in the photograph of the suited 'Bossman' on the wall instead. She didn't want to risk catching Harry's eye – even by accident.

'You said earlier that Gilgad was only the YANK side of the business,' Harry asked.

'Yeah - there was the two brothers, Torquil and Selwyn – they worked for the Americans. But they weren't here much. Selwyn was such a sweetheart,' she said dreamily. 'He managed the Wellness Programme.'

'What was the OTHER side?'

'That was Mr Guldstern.' Shona pointed again to the man in the photo. 'He oversaw day-to-day operations for the BRITISH company.'

'Yes. But what was the name of this company?'

'Oh, that was Herb Healing. At least that was the name on my payslip…'

Hermione could almost hear the whirring of Harry's brain as he digested all of this.

XXX

Harry was quiet as they drove back towards Wanaka. Henrik was firing questions at Hermione – 'What's Quidditch? What's Gimlott's? What's a Half-blood?' She was happy to explain – anything
to ignore the unsettling morosity that had descended on Harry.

'I think we should head back to Paris,' Harry said abruptly. He turned to Henrik. 'Come and have a look at our centre of operations.' He glanced at Hermione in the rear-view mirror. 'We can drop you home first.'

Henrik could barely conceal his excitement. His tanned face cracked into a gigantic grin. 'Would we be taking one of those Porkies you were talking about?'

'PORTkeys,' Hermione corrected.

'It'd be great if you had a chat with one of my colleagues, Francoise, if that's okay?' Harry said to Henrik. 'She's the official record-keeper for this investigation.'

'You guys might be interested in another batch of sudden mysterious deaths I've started looking into?' Henrik volunteered. 'A Hmong village up by Doi Nang Non in Chiang Rai, Thailand. Gilgad has a facility there, too.'

'Sure... could take a look,' Harry agreed.

'Harry, you can't possibly attempt to prosecute a case against Ephraim solely based on geographical coincidences,' Hermione said tartly, raising her voice from the back of the car. 'You need something to prove Ephraim's intent to weaponise Dark Flux, and more importantly, someone to TESTIFY against Ephraim in the Wizengamot.'

Harry met Hermione's eyes in the mirror. There was a cocky gleam in his eye. 'Zoltan Guldstern. That's our man. We want him to explain this weird obsession his company had with the pregnant ladies... Try and meet him,' he said crisply.

'I can't just waltz into his office,' Hermione said petulantly. 'Wouldn't it be better to try and shortcut this process and approach Saul Jeroboam again? He's been keeping tabs on Ephraim for much longer than we have.'

Harry vehemently shook his head. 'Historically, he's been Ephraim's biggest commercial rival. No one would take him seriously. That was Ephraim's problem, too... It's why he involved YOU.'

'What we need is Katya Malfoy,' Hermione sighed. 'She'd be the most compelling witness of all.' Dead or alive.

'No fresh leads. But I've got a Muggle friend working on it.'

XXX

Hermione was exhausted when she finally got back to her parents' house at Parsons Green. The children were already asleep. They were heading back to school in the morning, meaning there was no chance for a lie-in. She'd have to get up early to Apparate home. But before she collapsed into bed, she had to do something...

XXX

From: Crook Shanks Cots Cribs & Co, Parsons Green, London

Dear Mr Draco Malfoy,

Further to our inspection of the Wanaka facility, we are happy to certify that the plant has ceased
operations and the site has been cleared. However, a number of our outstanding items remain, notably in the baby wellness centre. Gratitude was expressed by those staff who used these facilities and the company's extremely generous house-buying scheme for mothers-to-be. Such corporate kindness is rarely bestowed - even extending to the relocation of a newborn during a time of crisis!

Yours faithfully,

C Shanks

Hermione cast a concealing spell, dressing it up as a letter from a New Zealand land agent regarding Mr Malfoy's purchase of a vineyard in Otago. The fact that this letter would be sent to Draco at Herb Healing in the Muggle Post with a London postmark would hopefully alert him to the fact that a revealing spell was needed… This was potentially vital information and she hoped Draco would work it out, because despite everything, despite Harry's misgivings, she still trusted him.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"DARK NECESSITIES" by RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS

"EUGENE ONEGIN" by TCHAIKOVSKY

"BUZZCUT SEASON" by LORDE

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
To The Manner Born

Chapter Summary

The trouble with Ginny… and a fraught encounter with Draco

30. To The Manner Born

Hermione had so much to worry about, but all she could think about was Draco. Or rather the LACK of Draco.

She just wished he'd contact her... An owl. A text. Just a few words. ANYTHING.

Hermione had never felt so alone. She needed someone to confide in, to talk things through with. But aside from Draco, the only real options were Harry and Henrik, who were somewhere in Thailand.

There was Bill; but she sensed he would be too quick to cast suspicion on Draco.

Obviously, she couldn't talk to her Muggle family. And Padma had disappeared.

Maybe Ron was right? She didn't really have any friends.

There was one other person, however, she might be able to talk to… with a few minor edits.

XXX

'You can't go big on any of this until you have proper proof,' Neville said, scratching his chin thoughtfully. 'Ephraim's a very fat fish these days. Mind you, I know a few folks who don't like him… particularly here.' He indicated Hogwarts. They were walking in the grounds.

'You do?' Hermione trilled.

Neville nodded emphatically. 'And lots of people worry about the direction the Ministry's going in... Watch out for the New Family Act, Hermione - lots of rumours flying around. Nothing good. As for your more immediate problems… I'll help you with the book-work. If I understand you correctly, Dark Flux is basically Magic, isn't it? A kind of super-turbo-charged magic – but to understand it you first need to know exactly what magic is.'

'I also fear there's a connection with those babies.' Hermione felt uneasy even saying it out loud.

'Maybe they're testing for carriers?'

'Or incubating it?' Hermione shuddered. She couldn't believe she'd played so nice with Ephraim at the opera. She should have laid him out while she had the chance.

'As for Draco...' Neville furrowed his brow. 'Sometimes you've got to trust your instincts. And he's your only inside man.'

'But he hasn't contacted either me or Harry. It's been almost two weeks!'
'He's had a lot to deal with,' Neville countered. 'And, to do his job, he's got to look and act the part. He'd be a pretty crap spy if he didn't, wouldn't he?'

Neville was right, of course.

'You can't take it personally,' he added, a curious glint in his eye.

'I know. It just feels like everything depends on him.'

They started walking back towards the school buildings. 'If you ever need a go-between, I could maybe help?'

Hermione stopped in her tracks. 'But you haven't spoken to Draco in years.'

'Not quite true, actually. He used to go to The Leaky Cauldron a fair bit. And, this might surprise you, I'm quite friendly with his MOTHER.'

'Narcissa?'

'She happens to be a keen gardener… well, not the actual digging and scrabbling about in the dirt... she leaves that to her army of under-paid lackeys. But she's always taken an enormous interest in the gardens at Malfoy Manor – and, I have to say, they're very, very fine indeed.' An envious yet admiring sigh squeezed from him. 'She's asked my opinion many times over the years – a few months ago, she was worried about her Wiggen Tree grove. A rogue pack of Bowtruckles had moved in–'

'I've considered contacting her myself, but it's … complicated.'

'Leave her to me,' Neville said. 'I'll re-open lines of communication; gardener-to-gardener.'

Hermione set to researching The Geneva Group at Hogwarts Library.

The sole reference she found was a caustic review of a French novel, *L'Escamoteur*, by Reynaldo Cornec, published over thirty years ago - around the time The Geneva Group formed. *L'Escamoteur* was the story of a powerful 'soulless' conjuror who devises a way to radically change the nature of Magical Matter to borrow the souls of others - stealing a piece each time for himself.

'Magical Matter'… Now THAT was interesting, Hermione thought. Reynaldo had met Anna Koldun by then.

'Still… creepy and stupid,' she said out loud, as she flicked through the plot precis, alarming a couple of third year students who were watching her in silent awe.

'Check out the bibliography,' Neville advised.

There was nothing related to The Geneva Group - but one reference caught Hermione's eye; an article in an American journal about 'Visual Resonation.' She instantly thought of Draco's encounter with the Hexmouth Witches and how they tracked down Svetlana Kerpin using Katya's rose pendant.

This article, in turn, referenced a paper from Otzoa-Azarola, Salvedra, the self-claimed architect of Visual Resonation and a staunch proponent of *'Proyección Forzada: Chthonic & Empyreal'* -
whatever, that was… The guy sounded like a total kook, Hermione thought, but then again, Draco had found Svetlana Kerpin…

'Take these,' Neville said, bundling a few books that mentioned Visual Resonation into her arms, 'and this.' He slapped Molecular Magic by Swiss academic, Gaston Jeuzjeune, on top. 'He's one of those incredibly difficult Arithmancy guys you tend to like.'

'But I can't take these off the premises!' Hermione said, shocked.

Neville raised an eyebrow. 'Well, I won't tell if you don't.'

XXX

The day of Lucius Malfoy's funeral at Malfoy Manor arrived. His remains had been placed in storage in a private family crypt, but were now being 'officially' cremated, amidst much elaborate ceremony.

Arthur Weasley spent most of a family brunch at The Burrow, voicing his fury at the Minister's decision to install a memorial plaque in Lucius's honour at the Ministry. This had prompted raging dispute about precisely where it should be hung. Some suggested the Atrium – joining the likes of Albus Dumbledore. Others felt the Minister for Magic's office would be a more fitting destination.

'It shouldn't be hung at all!' Arthur fumed. 'That man doesn't deserve any such honour!'

'Oh dear, Daddy,' Ginny sighed, as she glanced through the pages of the Daily Prophet, 'you won't like the sound of this.' She paused, ensuring everyone at the table was listening as she read aloud. "'Plans are afoot to build a grand mausoleum called 'The Fall of Hyperion' in honour of Mr. Lucius Malfoy Esquire, in the grounds of Malfoy Manor. Any interested and appropriate parties wishing to celebrate Mr Malfoy's most excellent life in service to the wizarding community will be welcome to pay their respects, subject to advance application.' Now isn't that just the sweetest thing? Fancy inviting us mere mortals to Malfoy Manor?"

Arthur's face turned a ghastly puce and he slammed his fork with a resounding thunk onto his china plate, splatting egg yolk across Molly's freshly laundered tablecloth. 'The damned cheek of it!'

Charlie, who was paying his family a brief visit, agreed. 'Can't see anyone actually bothering to turn up, though.'

Bill looked pensive. 'I wouldn't be so sure. A lot of people want to curry favour with Golowitz.'

Arthur grunted his disapproval, spitooning a sausage with his fork with particularly vicious verve.

'Bumped into Malfoy at the Ministry yesterday,' Ron mumbled. He was dark-browed and taciturn, sluggishly chasing Molly's fry-up around his plate with his cutlery - suffering the effects of last night's lock-in at The Hog's Head Inn in Hogsmeade.

Hermione's ears pricked up and she slunk a sidelong glance at her husband.

'Bet he's loving all this attention,' sneered Charlie.

'Didn't have much to say for himself, actually.' Ron yawned sleepily. 'His father-in-law did the talking.' He shoved his heaped fork of bacon and congealed fried egg to one side of his plate and turned to Hermione. 'He asked after you, actually.'

'ME?' Hermione squeaked. She fought to hide the flustered flush that suffused her cheeks. 'Draco
Ron frowned. 'No. Golowitz.'

'But I hardly know him,' she stuttered, acutely aware that the eyes of the Weasley family were fixed firmly on her.

'Well, you've clearly made an impression.'

Hermione could feel Bill's curious gaze scanning her face.

'What did you say?' she asked Ron.

Ron shrugged his shoulders lethargically. 'Not a lot. Was in a bit of a rush.'

Hermione was itching to ask more so was almost relieved when Ginny butted in.

'I'm meeting an old friend for tea tomorrow. Agatha Thrussington. Do you fancy coming along?'

'The reporter?'

'She'll have all the hot gossip!' Ginny's eyes sparkled brightly in anticipation.

'Who'd want to waste their time talking about the bloody Malfoys?' Arthur snarled. 'Really, Ginny! Haven't you got better things to do?'

Arthur had lived with his hatred of Lucius Malfoy for so long; time had sharpened it, rather than weakened it, Hermione thought.

'Stop ranting, Dad, you'll do yourself a mischief,' Ginny retorted coolly. 'So, Hermione, we're meeting in Diagon Alley – I'm having a fitting at Twilfit and Tatting's about two and meeting Agatha after that. We're trying out that new coffee shop, Jabberwock's.'

'But the kids…' Hermione started to say … Ginny, however, was one step ahead of her.

'George is taking our lot to Appleby tomorrow to watch the Arrows play the Ballycastle Bats – Rose and Hugo can go, too.'

Ron's head shot up. 'No-one told me!'

'We thought you'd be too busy, Ron,' Ginny smirked. 'You're always at work these days.'

'But Quidditch IS my work,' Ron whined.

Ginny looked sceptical. 'Hmm. I don't remember either the Appleby Arrows or – though I hate to admit it – the Ballycastle Bats being under investigation.' Ginny was well-known for despising the Ballycastle Bats since they'd thrashed her old team, the Holyhead Harpies, nine hundred and fifty-six to eleven in last year's Britannica Cup Final.

Unfortunately, on the back of the Bats' outstanding season, James Potter had saved enough galleons for a Ballycastle Bats replica robe, although Hermione suspected he had a sneaking preference for the dark and dangerous and was mostly attracted to the team's sinister Gothic logo.

'The Bats will SLAUGHTER the Arrows,' Ron said morosely. 'James will like them even more!'

Ginny frowned. 'At least it's not the Wasps.'
'Yeah. We'd have to exile him from the family,' chortled Charlie.

Agatha Thrussington was nothing like the loud, blowsy blonde Hermione had envisaged. She was a tall, lean, platinum-blonde, with sharp, angular features and heavily-kohled, hooded eyes that gave her a hawkish expression. She was glamorously attired in a slinky, black trouser-suit with a ruby-red silk scarf wound artfully around her neck.

She was already waiting at a table outside Jabberwock's, enjoying the spring sunshine. She gave Hermione a piercing look and extended a cool handshake in greeting.

'It's lovely to meet you,' she said in a surprisingly small, pinched voice. 'I obviously know so much about you.'

Hermione smiled weakly in return, inwardly chafing at the perpetual burden of being Hermione Granger-Weasley. Everyone knew of her, but hardly anyone actually knew her. Her entire life seemed to be about matching, defying or disappointing pre-conceived expectations.

Ginny was robustly affectionate in her greetings, instantly summoning the waiter.

'What are you drinking?' She gestured towards the long glass of pink liquid Agatha was genteelly sipping.

'Pink gin and grapefruit juice.'

'We'll have a flagon,' Ginny told the waiter.

'Not for me,' Hermione remonstrated, but Ginny batted away her objections.

'Oh, don't be such a boring nincompoop,' she said tersely.

Hermione couldn't be bothered to argue. If it wasn't for the prospect of checking out Draco's cast-off - Agatha was one of Draco's ex-girlfriends, overthrown in favour of Sylvestra Golowitz - and hearing about his father's funeral, she would much rather have spent the afternoon immersed in Gaston Jeuzjeune's philosophical abstractions.

Ginny was straight into the gossip.

'Is it true that Astoria Greengrass turned up at the funeral?' she asked eagerly.

Agatha peered at her owlishly over the top of her glass of Pink Gin. 'Indeed, she did. And then I saw her being ejected from the premises - with my own eyes!'

'But surely she had a right – as Scorpius's mother - to be there?' Hermione asked.

'She also claimed she had Scorpius's birthday present. I've heard that a circus is being hired to celebrate that kid's birthday. Imagine that! A circus for one little boy -- Anyway. She was still barred.' Agatha grimaced. 'I actually felt a bit sorry for her.' This was clearly a rare emotion for Agatha Thrussington. 'She's staying in Folborough – that's the town closest to Malfoy Manor - and absolutely insists on seeing her son. She refuses to leave until she does.'

'Well, Agatha, maybe you should pop along to Folborough and get an exclusive interview?' Ginny suggested.

'Problem is, when Astoria eloped with that Brazilian chap, the Daily Prophet wasn't
exactly kind about her conduct.' Agatha's painted nails tapped irritably against her glass. 'Some claim she's changed dramatically since then - I'm not so sure. She was always a sly little minx, even at school.'

'She wasn't SO bad,' Ginny proffered in weak defence, 'I still think you should try to talk to her.'

Agatha quaffed a sizeable slug of her pink gin. 'I'm trying … I've already sent her three owls today and one of the office clerks hand-delivered a message to the front desk at The Folborough Hotel, where she's staying. We've even made her a rather handsome offer, although – between us - we'd only pay out if we got the full story about that poor midwife.'

Hermione's ears pricked up. 'What story's that?'

Agatha blinked in feigned surprise. 'Dear me, but it was SUCH a scandal. Surely you remember it, Ginny?'

Ginny gleefully topped up Agatha's glass of gin. 'Can't say I do. Blimey, Agatha, you're just the antidote for my drab little life.'

Agatha looked suitably appreciative and lowered her voice. 'When Scorpius Malfoy was born, the midwife who delivered him, suddenly dropped down dead!'

'You're kidding! What did she die of?'

Agatha shrugged. 'Strangest thing. No one ever found out. The poor girl – can't remember her name; foreign, Muggle-born – was buried in the grounds at Malfoy Manor.'

Hermione felt a little queasy.

'Naturally, there were all sorts of scurrilous rumours. Some said Lucius Malfoy murdered her and went mad with remorse … It was around that time he became a recluse.'

… When Gimlott's struck, Hermione thought. Had this midwife died from Dark Flux?

'You should have asked Draco what happened when you were dating him,' Hermione said pointedly.

Agatha's cheeks flushed scarlet. 'It wasn't the sort of thing he liked to talk about.'

'I didn't know you dated MALFOY!' Ginny recoiled from Agatha as though she was suddenly contaminated.

'We all make mistakes,' Agatha said bitterly.

'Well, that's a HUGE mistake!' Ginny shook her head in disbelief. 'That calls for more gin.' She emptied the remains of the flagon into her glass. 'So yesterday wasn't your first visit to Malfoy Manor, then?'

'Oh, it was, actually,' Agatha said breezily. 'I think Draco was a bit sensitive about the whole Lucius-being-barmy thing.'

Ginny wrinkled her nose in distaste. 'What the hell did you see in him?'

'Oh… he could be very charming when he wanted to be.'

'And you're absolutely certain this midwife was buried at Malfoy Manor?' Hermione asked.
'It's impossible to verify but seeing as she didn't have any family to speak of, the Malfoys did the decent thing I suppose.'

'So how was the funeral? It sounded like half the Ministry was going,' Ginny asked.

'ALL the Ministry I'd say.'

'Not all,' Ginny corrected her. 'My father and brothers boycotted it.'

'I don't think Ron was invited, actually,' Hermione said.

'Hmmm. You lot and the Malfoys … never really saw eye to eye, did you?'

'Hardly surprising,' Hermione said with a brittle smile.

'No, I don't suppose it is,' Agatha agreed. 'Well, MOST of the Ministry were there, believe me. Including the Department for Magical Law Enforcement.'

'The Malfoys are very familiar with THAT department,' Ginny said icily.

'It was a peculiar affair,' Agatha mused. 'A friend of the family, Selwyn Haast – he had been Lucius's private Mediwizard for many years – gave a very touching speech. And then Mr Golowitz said a few words. All very rousing …. And Theo Nott lit the pyre, which surprised me. I thought Draco would do it, but he stayed indoors with his son, and watched from a top floor window. He came downstairs for a few minutes to pose for photos at the start of the funeral feast. He looked dreadfully cut up.'

'You sound like you care,' Ginny remarked dryly.

'Well, he's been through an awful lot … And it was such a miserable day. The pyre burned for AGES, felt like forever … the sky was clouded with ash, like a thick smog. Even the poor peacocks – they have albino white peacocks at the Manor – were turned grey …' Agatha drained the remains of her Pink Gin and eyed the empty flagon. 'I say, shall we have another?' She cocked her head towards Hermione, eyes glistening greedily. Her platinum-blonde hair glinted in the sunshine. 'Hermione, I was thrilled when Ginny said how you might come along today. Your suspension from the Ministry was an absolute shocker! So many falsehoods flying about these days.' She heaved a weary sigh. 'It's sometimes hard to tell fact from fiction, isn't it? Rest assured, though, if you feel like setting the record straight, I'm all ears.'

Hermione tossed Ginny a brief, accusatory grimace, clenching her teeth so hard, she momentarily feared she had chipped the enamel. Ginny looked suitably abashed, her eyes dropping to her empty glass.

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'How could you do that to me?' Hermione screeched at Ginny. They had Apparated straight to Wisteria Cottage. 'You're one of my oldest friends … you set me up!'

Ginny shuffled awkwardly. 'You've been treated abominably. I felt it was only fair you had a chance to tell your side of the story. I thought letting it all out might make you feel better.'

Hermione turned away from Ginny, barely able to look at her.

'Thing is, you're kind of hard to be around these days; you're so wound up and fragile. Everyone's been saying it.'
Hermione swung around, eyes blazing. 'You mean RON has!'

Ginny gave Hermione a pained, despairing look. 'You're driving him away! Don't you see that?' She jutted her lip out defiantly. 'And we're not fools you know – me and Ron,' she added by way of explanation. 'This case you and Harry are supposedly working on – it doesn't even exist! Ron told me. Which makes me wonder … what the hell have you been doing with my husband?'

'What – Whatever do you mean?!' Hermione spluttered, indignantly. 'There IS a case, GINNY! I promise you.'

Ginny pursed her lips tightly. 'But it's not the case you've been pretending to work on.'

'You've got this all wrong,' Hermione said in quavering tones. But she didn't get to explain any further. There was a loud, angry 'crack' that seemed to echo around the kitchen; and Ginny was gone.

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'I've discovered there was a trace on Katya Malfoy's money at Gringotts, triggering an alarm when she opened her vault in September 2011,' Bill said, coming straight to the point once Hermione had poured them both a glass of wine and they'd moved to the living room. He'd come over 'on urgent business.'

Hermione sat down heavily on the worn-out sofa. The scrubbed wooden floorboards creaked under the weight of Bill's large hobnailed boots as he paced up and down.

'So, you know where she is then?'

'No idea,' Bill replied in curt tones.

'But if there was a trace, then surely she can be tracked?'

'Not unless sanctioned by Gringotts – which it wasn't. The Ministry was alerted, of course. Standard protocol. An Auror would have been dispatched to Gringotts to look into it all.'

'Do you know who?'

'I don't have that authority. It's a Ministry matter.'

Hermione was thinking fast. 'But surely Katya was detained at Gringotts until the Auror arrived?'

Bill shook his head, a grim, tight expression on his face. 'Doesn't work that way. As soon as a trace is triggered, whoever cast the tracing spell is immediately alerted - then the Ministry. It's an automated response. There's actually a specialist Ministry unit that handles this stuff.'

'Really? So … who was it? Who placed the trace?'

Was it her imagination or was Bill squirming a little? 'Well, all I can say is I hope you didn't place too much trust in Draco Malfoy…'

Hermione hadn't expected to hear that. She opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out.

'Yeah, surprised me too,' Bill said, with an injured sniff. 'He was very convincing.'

'But he's spent the last year searching for her!'
'...Which doesn't make sense, because he should have known where she was at any given moment … if she was with the money.'

'Could somebody else have placed this trace and blamed Draco?'

'Doubt it. Typically, when someone casts a money trace they have to be interviewed by an Auror – it's to do with privacy rights.'

'Which Auror was it?'

Bill shrugged. 'Classified… Hopefully, Harry can find out.'

'Harry knows about this?'

'Yeah. He'll get on to it when he gets back from abroad.'

Hermione smoothed her palms, sticky with sweat, down her jeans. She was feeling shaken and wished Bill would leave now.

She didn't want to believe this. She wanted to trust Draco. For fuck's sake, she had feelings for him… more than feelings. Feelings didn't sum up half of what was raging through her most of the time; more like a full-scale Niagara Falls of emotion.

'Are you okay?' Bill asked.

She came to. 'Yes. Yes, I'm fine.'

'So you heard that Briek's playing a gig at the Quidditch League dinner? Ginny really wants you to come. She was quite adamant about it, seeing as Ron will be away.'

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'Wear this!' Ginny demanded, holding out the red dress Hermione had worn once to Le Bonheur. The dress didn't hold the best memories for her…

Hermione gazed at her reflection in the mirror in the hallway. Better luck this time, she murmured to herself.

The moment she Floo-ed into the living room at Shell Cottage, Fleur gasped out loud.

'Hermione!' she hissed, frantically beckoning her upstairs. 'This is important!'

Hermione's heart sank, suspecting some dastardly, new revelation about Draco.

'In here,' Fleur said urgently. Bill was sitting by their bedroom window, delicately carving patterns into a long, thin piece of applewood. He looked up in surprise when his wife and Hermione entered the room.

'Is that a wand you're making, Bill?' Hermione asked, admiring the finesse of his handiwork.

His eyes glowed appreciatively. 'It's become something of a hobby,' he admitted.

'Bill, darling,' Fleur said tartly, 'leave the room. Hermione has to take off this dress.'

'I do? But you gave it to me as a present!'
'It's jinxed,' Fleur said with her characteristic bluntness.

'JINXED?!' Hermione felt hot rage rise inside of her.

'Yes, I'm afraid so – please take it off right now or you might get very angry and say something you regret later.'

'Why would you jinx my dress?' Hermione spluttered.

Bill was looking a little abashed. 'Oh. I think I did, actually.' He looked her up and down in the dress. 'It looks pretty on you, though.'

For some reason, his lackadaisical attitude seemed to rile Hermione even more. 'Am I just one big, bloody joke to you? Is that it?'

'It was a joke, yes!' Bill reasoned. 'I cast a spell to wind Fleur up. It - it exaggerates moods.'

'But why do I have it?' Hermione said reproachfully.

Fleur bit down on her lip, whether in amusement or concern, Hermione couldn't be sure… but this explained, perhaps, that bizarre night at Le Bonheur? She KNEW she hadn't drunk that much!

'I sort of forgot about the jinx when I gave it to you; But take it off now, please,' Fleur begged, once Bill had scampered from the room.

'What will I wear instead?'

Fleur swished her wand and a panoply of dresses of all sorts of styles and colours flew out of her wardrobe. Each garment twizzled, displaying itself to best advantage. 'You have so many!' Hermione breathed. Fleur always seemed to wear the same things these days – jeans and a top. Yet, her wardrobe was a secret repository for a wealth of unlived worlds.

Fleur tapped two dresses that floated onto her bed. The others dived back into the wardrobe, where they jostled noisily for hanging space.

'Simple little black dress or the gold leaf?'

Hermione pulled off the red dress and kicked it aside. 'I honestly don't care.' She glanced at the gold dress – a long, figure-hugging number with a dangerously low cleavage and an intricate lacy back.

'The black will do.' It was a simple, sheath dress.

'Try the gold,' Fleur said eagerly.

GOLD! Hermione couldn't think of anything less like her. But when she tried it on, the soft silky material flowed over her like cool, refreshing water. After the red-hot heat of the jinxed dress it felt like a balm for the soul.

'Hair down.'

'But it's a mess!' Hermione said sharply. It had been pinned into submission by Ginny, but Hermione did as Fleur asked.

'Perfect,' Fleur grinned.
'You are a vision!' Briek exclaimed chivalrously when she came downstairs. He was decked out in full dress-robes, complete with a psychedelic, multi-colour waistcoat. He wore his silver-streaked hair long and with his guitar slung over his shoulder, he had the air of a dashing, raffish gipsy. Briek was possibly the most talented conjuror Hermione had ever met. His live concerts were the stuff of legend in the wizarding world, famous for their exciting effects and shimmering tableaux – although he rarely performed these days.

Bill followed Hermione downstairs in a plush, green velvet dress robe that complemented his hair.

'Aren't you coming?' Hermione asked Fleur.

'I don't much like parties these days,' Fleur said. 'I gave Gabby my ticket.' Gabrielle, looking pink-cheeked and pretty in a peacock blue cocktail dress, blew her sister a kiss.

This year's British and Irish Quidditch League Annual Dinner was being hosted by Wigtown Wanderers. The venue was a huge hall with high, vaulted ceilings at a deserted castle. There was constant traffic overhead; golden snitches conveying messages between the tables - a cute party trick, but thoroughly irritating after the first five minutes when a golden snitch landed on Hermione's dinner plate, containing a welcome message from Ephraim Golowitz and a request to speak to her.

Ephraim, she noted, was seated at the Wimborne Wasps table - next to Draco - at the far side of the hall. Hermione had her back to them throughout the elaborate eight-course dinner, but Agatha Thrussington, who was sat opposite her, provided constant running commentary.

'Gracious, that ghastly Portia Witchell woman is there – she's the Minister's daughter, you know… No sign of Silas…'

'Oh, Sylvestra is wearing the most delightful outfit! But I'm not sure green's her colour…'

'… appropriate, though. I think just about everyone on that table was in Slytherin – or should have been.'

'And there's Zoltan Guldstern! Always looks like a happy crocodile, I think - far too many teeth for one mouth!' 

'I never knew he was friends with Draco. Won't leave the man alone…'

'Draco looks kind of sad, don't you think?' (Hermione was itching to turn around at this point and had to pour herself another large glass of wine to distract herself).

'…or maybe he's just drunk? That must be the sixth, no, seventh glass of wine he's had since the starters!'

'Isn't Ephraim dashing? And so jolly! You can hear his laughter from here, and there's a good thirty-three people between us and them!'

'Draco isn't wearing dress-robes. He's the only man wearing a Muggle suit! Looks good on him, though,' Agatha added, dreamily.

Bill threw his cutlery down with a clatter. 'For fuck's sake, Agatha, why don't you just go and sit with them? You clearly want to!'
Agatha swallowed her words with an audible gulp, looking like a surprised stork. But the moment Bill had wandered off to chat to some friends from work at the Tutshill Tornadoes table, she was off again… 'I was merely voicing my surprise, that was all! Muggle clothes are so very DRAB. But Draco carries them off rather well.'

'Except for the problem that Malfoy's IN them,' Ginny said in laconic tones. She rolled her eyes at Hermione.

'You don't think he's handsome then?' Agatha said, shocked to the roots of her painstakingly-styled hair.

Ginny pulled a face in disgust. 'Beauty is about what's on the INSIDE, Agatha.'

'Bollocks!' Briek shouted, cracking open another bottle of wine with practiced ease. 'Humans are entirely superficial creatures, Ginny. We're lying if we say we don't judge people by their appearances.'

'But surely we should strive NOT to?' Hermione piped up, worrying that she had been silent for too long and this might seem suspicious. She feared he was right, though.

'Exactly, we STRIVE,' Briek said, 'because it goes against our nature.'

'How very depressing,' Gabrielle said with a playful smirk at her husband. Gabrielle was one woman who would never have anybody 'striving' to see the beautiful in her – both inside and out – Hermione thought.

'Oh, Ginny,' Agatha said in admonishing tones. 'How can you possibly think Draco isn't fit? You must be blind.'

'Well, I don't,' Ginny said, lips tightly pursed.

'Say that again with a straight face,' her annoying friend commanded. 'Come on, Hermione,' Agatha cajoled, seeking support, 'you're a rational woman… Despite being a total fucking bastard, Draco's good-looking, isn't he?'

This was turning into a rotten night, Hermione thought, marveling at the grievous misfortune of having to sit at a table with the one other woman who was probably even more obsessed with Draco than herself.

'If you say so, yes,' Hermione muttered peevishly, pushing her pear tarte tatin around her plate in a desultory fashion. There was no point lying.

'Sylvestra's draped herself over him AGAIN…' Agatha observed, failing to suppress a wistful sigh. 'They make a handsome couple, don't they?'

Hermione couldn't resist turning around now. Yes, Sylvestra was whispering in Draco's ear and looking very pleased with herself.

'Who is this Draco you keep talking about?' Gabrielle said, twisting round to look. 'Ah, I see. Yes. A good-looking pair.'

Draco was laughing at whatever it was Sylvestra was confiding to him but broke away to seek the attention of a waiter brandishing a tray of Exultantes. For a split-second, Hermione felt sure his eyes had wandered over to their table… And then the moment passed, and Sylvestra was busy picking imaginary lint off his lapels.
'Oops. We were spotted,' Gabrielle chuckled.

'Poor chap,' Briek said, shaking his head. 'His ears must be burning.'

'There's no POOR CHAP about Draco Malfoy,' Ginny said vociferously. 'He's evil.'

'That's a tad unkind … Didn't his father just die?'

'Good job an' all,' Ginny grunted. Briek looked a little taken aback by her vehemence.

The Exultantes were circulating rapidly ahead of an opening toast for the awards ceremony. A plump, pointy-faced woman in a black and white striped dress, looking like an overfed polecat, sidled onto the stage overlooking the diners.

'Who's that?' Briek asked Ginny, who he (rightly) assumed was the fount of all knowledge on Quidditch matters. Hermione had never seen her before – but then, she barely recognised anyone here. The Quidditch world was an entirely different social circle to what she was accustomed. It was rural, regional – the feudal world of the shires beyond the febrile Metropolitanism of the Ministry in London.

'Oh, that's Meredith Hants. President of Wigtown Wanderers. Total bore – very loud! Won't need a Sonorous, believe me…'

And she was right. Meredith Hants silenced the room with a high-pitched squealing call to order and the awards ceremony was underway. The owner of the Ballycastle Bats and the team manager were already smartening themselves up in readiness to take to the stage. 'Bastards,' Ginny cursed, watching them through narrowed eyes.

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An hour later and music was playing, tables were cleared, some rather drunken dancing was underway and The Bats' table was heaving with silverware.

Ginny and Agatha had slipped off to have a chat with Angus McCrackle, Editor of the Daily Prophet. Hermione was sorely tempted to ask him why he hadn't bothered replying to her letter about Padma and Anthony, but Ginny was talking to him about a potential return to the paper's Sports Desk next year, in time for the Quidditch World Cup.

She returned, grinning from ear to ear, with a bottle of blueberry wine that Agatha and her had snaffled from McCrackle's table. They broke into the wine with gusto and were soon cackling like school-girls.

Briek asked Hermione if she'd like to help him prepare his set. His backing band had arrived.

Hermione agreed although she didn't really want to go on stage, even if it gave her a better vantage point to spot Draco, who she'd lost track of. She'd seen him at the bar and chatting at various tables, but aside from that brief moment during dinner, he'd barely raised his eyes to her side of the room.

Hermione drained the blueberry wine Agatha had pressed on her and followed Briek through the throng towards the stage. She dodged behind a large wizard wrapped in a Montrose Magpies flag to avoid Sylvestra, who was gliding majestically towards the exit. Why was she leaving so early?

She appeared to be meeting someone; a slight, pale-faced man with greased-back hair. Hermione squinted at his face. He resembled Senor Asusto – the man who had provided the memory from
Santa Maria, the man who had murdered Miguel Culebra. But she couldn't be sure…

She backtracked to look closer, colliding with Oliver Woods, Chudley Cannons manager and a former school-mate. She engaged in small talk for as long as her patience could withstand, before breaking away. But Sylvestra had gone.

She growled with frustration.

Her mood worsened when a familiar voice called out to her.

'Ah! Mrs Weasley!... Hermione!' Ephraim stayed her with a large hand grasping her arm. She feared the strength of his fingers might leave a mark. 'I'd very much appreciate a few moments of your time.'

She could see Briek, on stage, looking out onto the milling hubbub, seeking her out. 'I was just on my way to-

'Yes, yes, no doubt you're very much in demand, so I won't detain you for longer than necessary,' Ephraim said in firm tones. 'But I have a proposition for you.'

'Can it wait?'

'I'd rather it didn't. I want to offer you a job.'

Hermione rolled her eyes. 'I believe you've already tried that on me; didn't work, last time. Won't work now.' She could see that Ginny had stepped onto the stage and was helping Briek re-arrange furniture with a few brisk flicks of her wand.

'But this is an extremely generous offer… One you'll find hard to refuse.'

Hermione was instantly on guard.

'It's the perfect role for you, Hermione… Deputy to Mr Guldstern at the Office for Muggle Business Relations.'

'And why would that interest me?' Hermione asked archly.

'Because it's an important endeavour - reflecting the growing need for cooperation between our worlds – and you like important endeavours,' Ephraim said smoothly. 'And it would challenge you! You'd have full autonomy. An enormous budget… and pretty much total control of the department.'

He fixed his blue-eyed gaze on her face as he spoke. 'It would be extremely well-remunerated, I can assure you.'

Money wouldn't go amiss, Hermione thought guiltily. Household finances were increasingly strained, savings being swallowed up - and Portkey tickets to New Zealand didn't come cheap. Ron kept complaining that he was having to defraud his Ministry expenses, just to pay his way at the pub.

Plus, it would give her a golden opportunity to work on this Zoltan Guldstern.

Hermione's hesitation was seized on by Ephraim. He bent his head close to hers. 'As an added inducement, my dear, I strongly suspect you would be heading up the department within a few months.'
'How so?' Now THIS was interesting… What fate awaited Mr Guldstern?

Ephraim gave her a sly wink. 'I know who I'd rather be working with…'

'Except you DON'T work at the Ministry, Ephraim,' Hermione pointed out, 'you head up a transnational corporation and are likely to be Mayor of Hogsmeade in a few weeks. How would I be working with YOU?'

For a moment, Ephraim looked flustered. He knew he'd made a mistake, but he swiftly recovered himself. 'I don't expect an answer immediately.'

'That's as well… I don't have one to give… not yet,' Hermione parried. She had to think through how she could exploit this situation… There was zero chance she'd accept, of course. Her integrity would be shot. She would be HIS creature. Beholden… And - she didn't want to melodramatise this in her own head for fear of making it too real - she detected the inklings of a slightly unhealthy interest in her. This view was cemented by his next comment…

'A gilded rose amongst thorns… Though I'd like to see you in Red. I think that colour would work well on you, Hermione.'

She looked askance at him. 'I'm not the sort to be won over by cheap flattery.'

'Shame,' he puckered. 'It would make my task a lot easier. Ah! We have incoming… Is that one of your multitudinous brothers-in-law?'

Hermione could see Bill, weaving his way through the crowded dancefloor. He appeared to be looking for someone.

'Though it looks like he might get pipped at the post by my son-in-law… He's dispensing with these bores at a very rapid rate. He has quite the talent for rudeness, does Draco... I rather admire that about him.' Hermione could indeed see that Draco was drawing nearer, ruthlessly scything through the huddled groups on the dancefloor, throwing out the odd remark or jovial slap on the back before pressing on – and yet he hadn't even acknowledged their presence, so why Ephraim was convinced he had them in his sights, she really didn't know.

She was stuck now - caught between wanting to walk away and waiting for the hope of a snatched conversation with Draco.

'Oh, that's very clever. I like that,' Ephraim observed, a small smile on his face. 'He's bringing someone over to talk to ME.' He gave her a sidelong glance. 'Leaving YOU quite unattended.'

'I doubt that's his motive,' Hermione said, her voice dripping with disdain.

'Your coyness is quite delicious,' Ephraim said with relish, his blue eyes sparkling with mordant wit. 'Draco! Who is this lovely young lady?'

'This is Mrs FitzCuthbert. She's newly joined the board at the Kenmare Kestrels and has some exciting ideas for closer Anglo-Irish cooperation,' Draco said with agreeable ersatz.

Mrs FitzCuthbert, who was far from young, immediately launched into a spate of nervous, Exultante-fuelled fawning.

Having barely acknowledged Hermione's presence with a fleeting smile, Draco now stood in stiff attendance; so close she could feel the white warmth radiating off him.
She spotted Bill gazing inquisitively in their direction and wondered if she should peel off from this group – anything but the stinging humiliation of waiting for Draco's attention.

Draco ever so slightly inclined his head and briefly caught her eye, sending her stomach into somersaults and a hot flush staining her cheeks.

There was so much she wanted to say to him, to ask…

'Are you well?' he murmured; eyes pinned to the back of Mrs FitzCuthbert's expansive back.

'Middling... You?'

He closed his eyes for a few moments and there was a stillness to him that made her uneasy. 'How's Scorpius?' she asked, relieved that Briek and his backing band had broken into loud, raucous song. Scorpius was suitably neutral ground, she thought. But Draco covertly shook his head, a tiny, almost indiscernible movement … What did that mean?

'Draco,' Ephraim interjected, jerking his son-in-law closer with a rough tug of his suit-sleeve. 'You should hear this. Mrs FitzCuthbert has some ingenious ideas for how we can target the Irish market…'

Draco feigned fascination very well, Hermione thought. His back had become a dark-suited implacable wall.

That was probably it for the evening, she thought glumly; the best she could hope for. She slunk away, almost relieved when Agatha Thrussington bounded up to her.

'Hmmm… have you tried this Lavender Gin? It's divine,' Agatha exclaimed, slurping from a large glass stuffed with lavender sprigs and curls of lemon peel.

Hermione promptly took hold of Agatha's glass and drained it, before wordlessly returning the glass to Agatha and stalking off.

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Back at the table, (and a few gins later), the party had descended into Bacchanalian chaos. Everyone seemed to be louder, more raucous, dancing with frenetic glee. Briek's ramped-up rock music and grinding, gritty vocals electrified the room. He conjured a scintillating pyromagical display: a flock of dazzling swans, woven from beams of bright white light, sailed through the rafters. Briek waved his arms and everyone was suddenly holding a bouquet of roses that trembled and fluttered into butterflies, flying up and away, dissolving into soft, golden dust. The dancefloor was drenched in a burst of golden light and the crowd roared and stamped its approval.

This was a much more uninhibited, disorderly affair than any of the Ministry-sponsored social events Hermione had attended over the years… a genuine carnival atmosphere. It sent her heart racing and she felt hot-cheeked, even though there was also a powerfully, melancholic feeling inside of her that made her want to cry out loud.

Bill was in close attendance. She could sense he was worrying about her so she kept smiling and chatting and agreed to Agatha's offer of another gin.

Having previously scoured the room to catch sight of Draco, he had become unmissable this past hour. He was very much 'partying' drunkenly with some of his old Slytherin pals, most of whom Hermione had rather hoped to never see again. Theo Nott was at his side and she was sure that was Blaise Zabini, looking much fatter than when they were at school. Ginny was quick to find this
hilarious, declaring, with an unkind wink, that Blaise was something 'BIG in quidditch' in Europe these days.

Draco was now THE Mr Malfoy - and it looked like one giggling witch after another was vying for his attention.

Hermione occasionally sensed his eyes move in her direction, peering into the shadows. Did he even know she was still here? If he DID, she could almost suspect him of performing for her benefit. A cruel performance, though.

She sighed. As much as she hated having to agree with any of Agatha Thrussington's inanities, he looked so fucking handsome. His jacket was off, hair tousled, sleeves rolled-up, and his shirt was half-tucked out of his trousers. He came close to their table and she could hear him laughing throatily at something the girl who was hanging off him was saying.

She couldn't help but watch him from behind her over-stuffed gin glass; sharply aware of every movement he made, the slightest inflection of his voice as it carried through the music, the way his mouth moved. He had an amazing mouth – god, she loved that mouth, she thought. And his eyes … his fucking eyes. She stifled a groan into her gin-glass. For a brief moment, she felt sure those eyes had roved their table, alighting on her – if only for a split second – before continuing to scan the room.

This is ridiculous, she thought. She didn't need Fleur's jinxed dress to feel 'heightened' - she was already consumed by a heart-thumping, anxiety-inducing agony of thwarted desire, churning relentlessly through her like a vibrating drum.

'Hermione?' Bill asked, a concerned look on his face. 'You alright?'

'I'm great,' she said, slapping a lazy smile onto her face.

'Shall we get going soon?'

'Don't we have to wait for Briek?'

'Ginny's not leaving yet.'

She glanced over at Ginny. She was surrounded by a coterie of acquaintances and admirers. She regaled the group with a rambling, drunken anecdote, which had them screeching with laughter.

Hermione tracked back to the dancefloor. Where was Draco? she thought, prickling with alarm.

'I'd rather like to dance?' Hermione said to Bill, standing up with fresh urgency. Bill wasn't the dancing type. His face scrunched a little under her pleading gaze.

'Okay, then,' he grunted, extending his hand.

Moments later and they were moving and swaying amidst the mass of dancers. Briek's swans were trailing a line of fireworks that squealed and whooped and whirled, sending the crowd into paroxysms of delight. Hermione suddenly felt heady with excitement; she realized she was actually quite drunk, and she could feel her sense of purple pulsing at every pore.

There was a further explosion of fireworks – incandescent reds and sparkling emerald greens and she was jumping, one arm in the air, and whooping joyously with the rest of the dancers, as though trying to catch a star before it skipped away forever.
Bill smiled indulgently. 'You sure you're alright?' he shouted over the music, but his eyes were twinkling.

Contrary to what he claimed, Bill was actually a fantastic dancer, Hermione decided. He moved with a rhythmical, predatory grace. He was powerful, too; physical.

She momentarily lost sight of him in the melée – but then he found her again and grabbed her by the waist and swung her around and they were laughing hard. The pounding beat of the music was irresistible, taking her over, and she was enjoying the simple sensation of moving her body, of allowing the music to flow through her. She knew she was dancing in a way that Fleur probably wouldn't appreciate, but everyone was doing it… And Bill made her feel safe.

A huge golden rabbit had reared up from nowhere and was bounding around the dance-floor in time to the music. Everyone was clapping and cheering as it leaped high into the air. Hermione craned backwards to watch as it seemed to corkscrew at rapier-speed, spinning uncontrollably into a dizzy blur, myriad colours flying, disorienting … She looked around for Bill but had lost him as she had been jockeyed into the thick of the crowd.

Starting to feel a little claustrophobic, she fought her way out of the scrummage, but suddenly lost her footing and fell backwards - falling into a pillow of brilliant white… Draco spun her around to face him, wrapping his arms tightly around her. She automatically flung her arms around his neck and allowed their bodies to meld together for just a few heart-stopping moments, before abruptly pulling apart. His face was gleaming with sweat and his eyes were wild.

'Evening, Beautiful,' he said, a wolfish look in his eyes. 'Finally come out to play?'

'Don't be a dick,' she grinned. He entangled his hand with hers and he wasn't letting go… constantly tugging her towards him every time she tried to step back.

'You're pissed,' she laughed.

'So are you.' His eyes were bright and teasing. He roughly pulled her flush against him and his mouth was dangerously close to hers. 'And no one's looking; we're lost in a sea of pissed-up people…'

She learnt into him and closed her eyes, and for a brief, ecstatic moment, his warm mouth was on hers, his breath damp on her face.

But the temptation to succumb further was too great. She instantly pulled away, but her hand remained clasped in his.

Voldemort be damned, she thought, that was probably the most dangerous moment in her entire life.

Draco's eyes quickly scanned the room and he ducked his mouth to her ear. 'Thanks for your letter, by the way… Ms Shanks.'

'You understood?'

He nodded vehemently and for a moment his eyes seemed to glisten. 'It – It made some things clearer to me… But we can't talk about it now; not here…' He glanced furtively at the dancers closest to them.

'Ephraim tells me he offered you a job.'
She had to bend her ear even closer to his mouth to hear him above the noise. His voice tickled and she shivered involuntarily, and his hand was hot on her back. She felt filled with a vibrant whiteness, a sonic blast of white.

'Yes,' she grimaced. 'Very generous of him.'

He seemed to sober up suddenly. 'He wants to buy you, Hermione. He's talking monster money…'

'And a quick promotion.'

He raised his eyebrows at this. 'Is that so?' His eyes flicked to Zoltan Guldstern who was gyrating with embarrassing zeal closer to the stage. 'Don't take it, don't take the job,' Draco urged.

'Don't worry. I won't; though the money's tempting…'

'I'll give you money.'

'No, Draco, don't be silly. I was joking. I'll always choose heart over head.' She had to raise her voice as the music seemed to crank up even louder.

Draco's eyes seemed to lighten a little. 'I'm hoping one day you make a habit of that…' He held her gaze with his own and she felt her soul sing.

He then bowed his face close - his mouth hovered within a hair's breadth from hers and she could hear his breathing, loud in her ear.

'Hermione...' His voice was suddenly unsteady. 'You need to get away from this place.'

'Well, we were thinking of leaving quite soon, actually; as soon as Briek's finished his set.'

He shook his head. 'No. Leave. Leave the country, even. Take your children and get far away.' His face was stern as he spoke and his grip on her hand tightened to the point where she knew she'd have the indents of his nails marked into her skin.

Her heart was hammering inside of her.

'This is worse, much worse than we thought, do you understand?' He placed his hands on her shoulders and forced her to look at him. 'I want you - I need you to stop everything you've been doing. Stop looking into this, before you become a target. Can you please do that?'

For a moment they were lost in each other's eyes.

'You know I can't.'

His eyes darkened and he looked crestfallen.

'Harry, too,' she added. 'How can you expect us to stop investigating when there's so much at stake?'

He gave her a bleak look.

'But it's fucking dangerous.' His hand moved to her neck and his thumb stroked a tendril of her unruly hair away from her face. Her cheeks burned at the sudden flush of intimacy that enveloped them. 'At least stay away from Ephraim.'

Hermione was beginning to feel they had already been speaking too long; that the entire room
might turn as one, in concert, and catch them. She inched backwards.

'And do I stay away from you, too?' she asked in a tremulous voice. 'Because I can't. I won't. This is too important.'

He seemed lost for words.

For a brief moment she wondered if she should tell him that Bill, possibly Harry, thought he'd lied about his wife. But his eyes widened in warning. Someone behind her was advancing towards them.

A hand clapped onto her shoulder and they were wrenched apart as Ephraim twisted her round to face him. 'Pray, excuse me for breaking up this little tête-à-tête, Draco, but Mrs Weasley and I still have some unfinished business to discuss.'

Draco visibly tensed, but he quickly schooled his features into a beaming smile. 'Hermione here was asking me for a character reference,' he said in loose tones.

'But surely she needs no recommendation?' Ephraim said, puzzled.

'NO, he means for Zoltan Guldstern,' Hermione said primly. 'If I'm going to consider working for him, I'd like to know a little more about him first.'

'But Draco barely knows the man,' Ephraim sneered. This was music to Hermione's ears. It was unlikely, then, that Draco had been involved with the Otago facility.

Bill had found them and was asking Draco if he could have a quick word. Draco turned to Hermione, an enquiring look on his face, but Bill swiftly steered him away from the dance-floor.

'Let's hear ourselves think,' Ephraim groused, pushing her in the opposite direction. A blazing blue surged through her, as it so often did whenever she was with Ephraim.

'I was thinking, seeing as Mr Guldstern is here tonight, why don't you come with me to talk things over? He'd love to meet you.' Ephraim smiled courteously and offered her his arm.

'I don't want to look pushy,' Hermione said, buying time. Briek looked to be winding up with a bombastic encore and was taking a bow with typical flamboyance. 'And he's busy.' Guldstern was laughing so uproariously at something a pretty, blonde witch was saying to him, his mouth was agape and his teeth were snapping at the air with carnivorous menace, like a deep-sea shark trying and failing to bite a wave.

Briek left the stage and the compère of the evening – Meredith Hants – returned, clapping Briek with such maniacal glee her hands were little more than a beige blur.

'Darn. Looks like I'm up…' Ephraim groaned. 'Do the right thing, Hermione. Take this job. I can assure you, if you apply, you will get it.

'Strictly speaking, I need Mr Witchell to invite me in for an interview.' Hermione flashed him a sanctimonious smile. 'My recollection of the Ministry Employment Guidelines Protocol isn't as sharp as it once was, but I know for sure that hiring Ministry employees isn't your remit.'

'Oh, don't be such a damned stickler, woman,' Ephraim said irritably. 'You know it is really!' He blinked hard. 'I'm trying to help you, Hermione… Avail yourself of my protection. You might come to regret it if you don't.' He stared at her earnestly. 'I speak sincerely.'
A creeping sensation crawled up Hermione's spine.

Meredith Hants was chuntering squeakily in the background and the room had faded to a blur of lights and noise and chatter. A wave of tipsy tiredness washed over Hermione. She couldn't see Bill and Draco anymore, and the room was laughing politely at Meredith's attempt to crack a joke.

'Let me welcome to the stage next season's Quidditch League sponsor – Mr Ephraim Golowitz!' Meredith hailed, 'a warm round of applause, everybody!' Little inducement was required – the room erupted into boisterous appreciation.

Gracious, Hermione thought, whatever they had doctored the Exultante with at this party was remarkably potent.

Ephraim demurred from making a speech, but was soon making his way to the stage and she returned to her seat beside Ginny.

'Have you seen Bill?' she asked.

'Not for a bit. He was dancing with you, wasn't he?'

'He slipped away,' Hermione said uneasily… she then spotted him, by the exit. He was with Draco and they were engaged in a heated discussion. A drunken-looking Agatha Thrussington lurched towards them, but Bill batted her away. Draco was then accosted by a smart, dark-haired wizard who Hermione vaguely recognized as one of Draco's former classmates, Adrian Pucey. At this point, Bill gave up.

Hermione's attention was briefly drawn by Ephraim's speech, which was being met by approving grunts and the occasional smattering of fresh applause. He appeared to have drifted from praising the triumphant endeavours of this season's quidditch stars, to equating their magical community with the idea of a 'team', a single 'family' sharing a common heritage, traditions and values - to be safeguarded against the corrosive powers of moral degeneracy. Much as a quidditch team needed to be kept strong and healthy, cohesion and unity were society's watchwords for success…

This was a political speech, Hermione realized. Babbling nonsense, but very effective - and going down well with his audience, most of whom were grinning and nodding - priding in their tribal identity, indulging the common cause of 'themselves.'

She suddenly felt sick of the whole damn thing… the whole damn lot of them. She glanced towards the exit. Draco and Bill had disappeared.

Agatha Thrussington was tottering towards the table. Hermione had no intention of being entrapped by her.

'Agatha?' she said. 'Can you tell Ginny and the others I had to go home? Headache...'

Agatha nodded blearily and opened her mouth to reply, but Hermione had already walked away.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"THAT JOKE ISN'T FUNNY ANYMORE" by THE SMITHS

"LIES" by MARINA AND THE DIAMONDS
"PARTY GIRL (LIVE)" by U2

"LOVE IS DARKNESS" by SANDER VAN DOORN (feat. CAROL LEE)

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Chapter Summary

Dark Flux hits home, a Golden tryst, and the mysterious man in the photo

31. **This Quintessence of Dust**

'Draco denied placing the trace on Katya's money,' Bill said. He arched a sceptical eyebrow.

'Because he DIDN'T.' Hermione crossed her arms and glared at her brother-in-law. 'Someone else did. They either cast an Imperio on a Ministry employee to fix the files or Ephraim's got an inside man.'

'You two?' Fleur called from the kitchen door. 'We're heading to The Burrow. Molly won't like it if you're late for Briek and Gabby's farewell dinner.'

'Won't be long,' Hermione assured her; although she'd much rather stay in the garden at Shell Cottage, with the scent of sea-spray in the air and the roar of the waves crashing onto the rocks at the foot of the cliff.

And she still had something important to tell Bill.

'Ephraim's bugging me to take a job at the Ministry,' she groused.

'Quite sure.'

'You're too trusting. Draco hasn't bothered to contact you or Harry since returning to Malfoy Manor. Bumping into you on a night out doesn't count.'

Hermione pulled her phone from her pocket and slapped it into Bill's hand. 'He's called me five times since then, always from a random Muggle's phone…'

'Oh. That's quite smart, actually.'

Hermione heaved a baleful sigh. 'Sadly, I've missed every single call… only noticed I had them when I visited my parents. She'd called three complete strangers before she worked out what was going on. 'Anyway – and this is the BIG news, Bill.' She glanced at the kitchen door. Fleur had gone. 'He left a message to say there was a Dark Flux attack in Scotland; the same night we were at the Quidditch Dinner. Thing is, there's been nothing in the *Daily Prophet* about any strange deaths … or the Muggle newspapers, as far as I can tell.'

Bill gave her a piercing look. 'Well, if he's telling the truth, someone's hushed it up.'

'My guess is the Muggle authorities.'

'Blue bodies would freak people out; I can see that.' Bill scratched his head, a bemused expression on his face. 'Hopefully Harry has contacts in the UK Police. Is there a Gilgad site in Scotland?'
Hermione shook her head. 'Not to my knowledge.' She heaved another pent-up sigh... indeed, she felt she’d done nothing but sigh this past week. Since hearing Draco's voice – abrupt, harried, intense – on her phone, she’d been in a quiet state of panic and longing. 'This feels different, Bill. We haven't heard about any Muggle-borns dying in strange circumstances. Which means-

'...This was a direct attack on Muggles.' Bill looked stony-faced.

Hermione felt sick thinking about it. Draco had said he wanted her to leave the country, if necessary... Did he know that there was going to be an attack? It felt like a silent starter-gun for... for what, exactly? What was coming?

XXX

An owl arrived from Neville, proclaiming he had good news and inviting her for lunch - so Hermione was crestfallen to find Neville sitting with Dennis Creevey in The Three Broomsticks. She'd at least hoped Neville had Tony's thesis...

'Hi there,' Dennis chirruped. He was still 'a little chip of a guy' as Ron had called him when he was offered the post of Professor for Muggle Studies at Hogwarts some years back. Ron thought Dennis's puny stature would undermine his authority with Year Six and Seven students, but Hermione was quick to point out that diminutive Professor Flitwick hadn't faced any difficulties on that front.

Dennis had lost his brother, Colin, during the Battle of Hogwarts. Hermione wouldn't have blamed him if he'd chosen to turn away from the wizarding world, but instead he'd decided to devote his life to improving Muggle-Wizard relations through his role as a teacher at Hogwarts.

Hermione shook off her cloak, sprinkling rainwater onto her seat and the table. She'd been caught in a shower when she'd Apparated into the village. The recent spate of sunny, pleasant spring days had well and truly come to an end.

Neville embraced her warmly and they moved to the bar to order drinks.

'Have you managed to make contact?' she whispered.

'I'm inspecting Narcissa's Plangentine trees this weekend... a perplexing fungal problem, apparently.' Neville's mouth twitched in amusement. 'If I see him, do you want me to convey a message?'

She lowered her voice. 'He left a voicemail on my phone; said there'd been a Dark Flux attack in Scotland.'

Neville blanched. 'But THIS is Scotland!... Bloody hell. Are the Ministry looking into it?'

Hermione shrugged. 'I don't know and I can't ask Ron. He's god-knows-where. And Harry's away.'

XXX

Neville and Dennis were both nursing pints of Simison's Steaming Stout.

'Haven't you got classes to teach this afternoon?' Hermione asked, casting a disapproving look at their drinks.

'Year Seven Slytherins,' Dennis sighed. His small narrow face was dominated by large, beseeching eyes. 'I find a couple of drinks often helps to get through it.'
Maybe Ron had been right after all...

Neville quickly glanced around the pub. They were tucked away from view, even though the bar was busy with a braying pack of traders. There was a street market in Hogsmeade. To get to The Three Broomsticks, Hermione had been forced to pick her path along the High Street, clogged with stalls selling cut-price cauldrons, various ironmongery items and a wide array of potion ingredients that she wasn't entirely sure were legal.

'I hope you don't mind, but I extended our enquiry into – you-know-what – to Dennis, here,' Neville said.

'Well, if you think it helps.'

'I made some very discreet enquiries, Hermione, and I landed on a solution. The Bodleian Library in Oxford!' Dennis announced, with lip-smacking triumph. 'It's been the Bodleian's determination since … well, forever, I guess … to hold a copy of every single British publication.'

'Brilliant,' Hermione beamed with satisfaction. She took a long sip of her Butterbeer and eyed him thoughtfully. He didn't seem to know anything about the thesis itself. He might feel less inclined to help her if he knew that Gimlott's likely provided the key to developing Dark Flux. 'Can you get hold of it for me?'

Dennis gave her a sly wink. He dived into a knapsack and plucked out an emerald-green satin package, which he presented with smug solemnity.

'I can't thank you enough, Dennis. Have you looked inside?'

'Of course not!'

Hermione was now desperate to hurry home, rip off the green satin covering and get reading. It was a slimmer thesis than she'd expected. Goldstein obviously wrote with precision, but then he'd always been a boy of few words.

Her thinking was interrupted by a hail of loud voices entering the bar, calling for refreshments. Amidst the raucous laughter was a deep, booming American accent – Ephraim: the last person she wanted to see.

She chanced a swift glance over her shoulder. Ephraim was standing in the midst of what looked like a small, impromptu rally. A heavyset man in a swirling crimson cloak was brandishing a placard, which read – *New Brooms, New Faces*.

'Oh no, not them again,' Neville groaned.

'What do you mean?' Hermione asked in some trepidation.

'Bloody Electioneering…' Neville replied, sinking lower into his chair. He looked like he'd found something unsavoury in his mouth and in less polite circumstances would have happily spat it onto the table.

'There's nothing wrong with democratic representation,' Dennis said pedantically. 'It's common practice in the Muggle political sphere, isn't it, Hermione?'

'He's American,' Neville countered.

Dennis visibly bridled. 'Really, Neville, I never had you pegged as a racist.'
'But it's unconstitutional ... or at least it was. Rules change so fast these days; I can't keep up. Last Thursday, Venomous Tentacula was a proscribed plant and could only be cultivated in secured conditions by experts ... less than a week later and they're selling it on market stalls in Hogsmeade, alongside Fluxweed and Bitterroot!'

Dennis rolled his eyes dramatically at Hermione, but she was more concerned with how to get out of this place without Ephraim seeing her. She figured she had a clear path to the toilets if she slunk along the back wall.

A scorching sensation on the back of her neck was warning her that she'd been spotted. She could almost feel the power of a penetrating gaze turned in her direction and suddenly wished that she didn't have such a readily identifiable crown of brown, bushy hair. She had to move fast because a trace of bright, cerulean blue was seeping into her peripheral vision.

She mumbled a hasty apology - ignoring Neville's alarmed expression – and crept along the back wall, in the opposite direction to the bar. Once she was out of direct sight, she galloped towards the toilet, clutching Anthony Goldstein's thesis tightly against her bosom. Once she was locked into a cubicle, she Apparated.

Back home, she collapsed onto Ron's favourite armchair in her living room. She scrabbled in her cloak pockets for the green satin package. The thesis had survived Apparition, intact. It would have been disastrous if it had been cursed to dematerialise.

However, what if the package had been cursed in some other way? Maybe Bill should take a quick look at it?

She immediately dispatched Grumio.

XXX

Hermione's cousin, Gwen, was sitting by her father's bedside. She looked wretched. Her face was stained with tears, but she mustered a smile when Hermione entered the room, brandishing a bunch of yellow tulips and a box of Maltesers – her Uncle's favourites.

'Wow, you must have driven like a madwoman!' Gwen gasped. 'Aunty Jean said she only contacted you this morning!'

'It sounded urgent,' Hermione replied. She gazed at her uncle, who was fast asleep, a thin, line of drool seeping from his open mouth. He was a pitiable sight, even frailer than the last time she'd seen him, with a purplish tinge to his lips. Thankfully, the room was pleasant – if a little warm – with a window looking out onto a scruffy courtyard.

Gwen's red-rimmed eyes dropped to the Maltesers in Hermione's hand. 'I'm not sure he'll be needing those. He's completely lost his appetite.'

Hermione sat on the other side of her Uncle, facing Gwen. She was desperate to ask if this turn for the worse meant a turn towards the end but didn't know how to frame the words in a sufficiently tactful manner.

'He's on Morphine.' Gwen nodded towards the long, plastic drip and a softly plushing contraption that Uncle Derek was hooked up to. 'He's remarkably stable, all considered.'

Hermione looked at his grey, lined face and his long, lean hands. His skin was almost transparent; every knot and string of vein was clearly visible.
'It's all about keeping him comfortable now,' Gwen said. 'Next stop – if he gets that far - will be a hospice.'

'How's your Mum doing?'

Gwen pulled a face. 'At home. Has half the neighbourhood fussing over her. Says she can't bear being here because it gives her heart palpitations. She's thinking of visiting her sister in Bristol.'

'Is Alfred with her?'

'No. He's with Jeff.' Jeff was Gwen's infamously horrid ex-boyfriend and Alfred's father. 'He's been really cool with it all, actually.'

'That's good,' Hermione said, thinking how appalling it would be if this pushed Gwen back into Jeff's clutches.

They sank into glum silence, eventually broken by Gwen grabbing the box of Maltesers and tearing off the plastic wrapper with a loud crackle. 'Waste not, want not,' she boldly declared. 'Your phone's buzzing, by the way.'

'Oh!' Hermione fished it out, her heart racing a little when she noticed that she'd missed another call. There was also a text.

It wasn't Draco…. It was Henrik, back in the UK and wanting to meet up. Harry was in Geneva.

RedStar had its headquarters in Geneva... Did this mean Harry was finally meeting Saul Jeroboam?

'Important?' Gwen asked, curious at the bemused expression on her cousin's face.

'No – well, yes, but it can wait,' Hermione said, then; 'Actually, if you'd excuse me one moment, I'd better call back.' She headed outside.

XXX

'I can't believe you got here so fast,' Hermione said, impressed.

'Got to St. Pancras just as the train was rolling out,' Henrik boasted. He was still looking a little pink-cheeked and winded.

'You didn't need to come all this way.' Hermione cast a mournful glance at the low-slung redbrick hospital wing where Uncle Derek was staying.

'Harry wanted me to give you these,' Henrik said.

It was a small paper pouch containing a batch of slightly fuzzy photos.

'His gendarme friend finally tracked down this rather fetching young lady.'

It was Rozella Gagnon - tall and willowy with a haughty expression, sporting chunky, dark sunglasses and exquisitely cut jodhpurs. She was getting out of a white Renault Clio, clutching a bunch of violets. She had a grim expression on her face.

'Harry's contact traced her to a village in Normandy.'

'Foret-la-Folie?'
'Nope. Some place called Saint-Clair.' Henrik jabbed the next photo with a rough, tanned finger, pointing out a lych-gate to a churchyard. 'She was visiting a grave. Harry's contact waited for her to come out, but after an hour he gave up and went to find her.'

'Let me guess … She'd gone?'

Henrik frowned. 'He combed the village looking for her ... But he found the violets - on a grave for a 'Fayana LeBerre' - died 2010.'

'Maybe she dumped the flowers on the first empty grave to hand?'

'Possibly … Needless to say, the gendarme has looked up this Fayana LeBerre, but - nothing.'

'But surely the gendarme followed Rozella from somewhere else before she got to Saint-Clair? He can't have just stumbled on her by chance?'

'He found her former vehicle – a Land Rover - abandoned in a field. Had it searched and tested, but there was no police match for the DNA. However, there was a cash receipt for a florist in this Saint-Clair. So, he described Rozella to the shop owner and asked the owner to call when she next came in. I think there was a substantial sum of money involved at this point.' Henrik raised his eyes skywards. 'Our French friend stayed close by, so he was able to follow Rozella Gagnon the next time she visited.'

'What happened to her Renault Clio?'

'Impounded. She hasn't claimed it. This living-*incognito* business must be very expensive! Two good cars, abandoned.'

'Yes,' Hermione chewed her lip thoughtfully, 'I wonder how she affords it.' La Lena hadn't appeared to be a thriving business. Hermione pocketed the photos. 'How was Thailand?' She felt sure it hadn't gone as hoped or Henrik would have regaled her with breathless revelations confirming his long-held suspicions of Gilgad.

'Disappointing,' Henrik said. 'Gilgad's plant is kaput.'

'And the Hmong tribe … Was it Dark Flux?'

'No one talked to us. Guess it looked odd; two strange white men wandering around, asking all these questions,' Henrik said dejectedly. 'I'm not even sure it happened anymore.'

'Which is a good thing, Henrik,' Hermione pointed out, waspishly.

Henrik peered over her shoulder. 'Hermione. There's a very prettyish young lady walking towards us. She has a very determined look on her face. Should you be getting out that wand-stick of yours?'

Hermione swung around to see Gwen.

'Oh, Hi,' Gwen said shyly, once Henrik stepped into view. 'I hope I'm not disturbing you.' She looked from Hermione to Henrik and then back again, a quizzical expression on her face.

Hermione smiled. 'Not at all, Gwen. This is Henrik, a friend of mine. He was in the area and thought he'd drop by. Henrik, this is my cousin.'

Henrik beamed, flashing his improbably white teeth, and eagerly stepped forward. He clasped
Gwen's hand and raised it to his lips, eyes fixed on her face, and brushed an air-kiss across her knuckles. Gwen stifled a snort of laughter and swiftly withdrew her hand. 'Yeah ... nice to meet you too, I guess.'

'I'm Danish,' Henrik said, as though this was sufficient explanation.

'That's ... smashing,' Gwen said. She promptly stepped backwards and resolutely held her hands behind her back. 'I came to say Dad's woken up. I said you were here, Hermione. He wants to see you -- something about playing Backgammon?'

Hermione felt a pang of sadness chime through her. Uncle Derek had taught her Backgammon when she was six and they'd often played it when she was a child; it had been a perfect excuse to hide away from Aunt Rita's overbearing attentions at family get-togethers.

'I'd best go in,' she said apologetically to Henrik, 'thanks for coming.' But Henrik was too busy grinning toothily at Gwen to reply and continued to do so as they walked away.

XXX

By the end of the weekend, Hermione was almost delirious with impatience to hear from Neville.

To her annoyance, she received an owl from Ephraim instead...

'It was most gratifying to catch a glimpse of you at The Three Broomsticks -- such a fine hostelry! -- although sadly, this glimpse extended only to the back of your head. Next time, I'd rather you didn't run away like a silly little girl when I'm in the vicinity.

My generous offer deserves some kind of response, Hermione,' Ephraim wrote. 'You have a very impolite way of conducting your business affairs.'

Hermione immediately dispatched a reply. 'I guess that rules me out, then.'

What do you REALLY want from me, Ephraim? she caught herself thinking. Surely he was intelligent enough (and he WAS) to realise the hare-brained scheme to discredit Jeroboam was a bit of a dud, and this job wasn't in his gift to give -- not really... No. There was something else...

And then, finally, Neville Floo-called.

XXX

'Draco wants to see you.'

Hermione melted with relief... Their snatched tryst in the middle of a crowded dance-floor had left her with a peculiar feeling of mournful elation. She'd felt tortured by it ever since.

'When?'

'He says he's watched like a hawk these days, so it's tricky. But he has a meeting tomorrow, close to the Herb Healing office in London, so if you're free around three o'clock he'll be passing through Golden Square.'

It was better than nothing.

'How did you get to speak to him?'

'I was in the garden with his mother. Draco was teaching his son to use a broomstick. It was
wretched to watch… I thought I was bad."

'It doesn't suit everybody,' Hermione said defensively.

'Of course! And the poor boy looked rather pasty, seemed a bit under-the-weather,' Neville said, a note of apology in his voice. 'Anyway, I got the feeling Draco already knew I was visiting – and why - because the moment we had a minute to ourselves he asked me to speak to you… He's changed. He wasn't his usual cocky self.'

'I don't think he's been that for some time... Not really.'

'I have to send a note to Narcissa tonight about her Plangentine trees. If I send a brown owl that means you can meet him; any other colour and you can't.'

'Brown,' Hermione said hastily.

'Okay.' Neville paused. 'This isn't some kind of lovers' assignation I've arranged here, is it?'

Hermione laughed, a little louder and longer than usual… 'Don't be ridiculous!' 

XXX

Ironically, this bench was the same one she'd been sitting on when Ephraim found her a few months ago.

It had been a bright, sunny day in January. Here she was, deep into March, and the rain was relentless.

Hermione shivered at the chill, sloshing sound of the rain pounding her umbrella.

'You're soaking!' she grinned, when Draco arrived. 'Why didn't you use an umbrella or cast a spell?'

He shook his head. 'Because I'm a fucking idiot. And then I got so wet, I gave up caring.' He sat next to her and ducked his head under her umbrella.

His hair was matted and clung to his forehead. Rainwater streaked from his hair down his cheeks to his neck in thick clear rivulets. He blinked raindrops from his eyelashes and his eyes were wide and staring and his lips were a vivid pink.

Her breath caught in her throat. He looked beautiful.

'I'm so fucking happy to see you, you've no idea,' Draco said with a deep sigh, that spoke of long pent-up frustration. 'I can finally be normal.'

'Me too.'

They stared at each other and smiled.

She leant forwards and gently brushed her lips against his, alive to the dazzling white that burst through her. Now that he was here, in person, and not just the object of a constantly-replayed fantasy, it was impossible not to touch him. She felt slightly ashamed of the girlish excitement pulsating through her, but as she moved away, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her tight against him and kissed her greedily, entrapping her in his arms. His mouth was hot and wet, a liquid furnace.

She wound her hand into his wet hair, while her other hand, holding the umbrella, shook, and
kissed him back with such fierce passion, she felt her heart might explode at the feeling of it all. It felt like she was stifling a scream.

They reluctantly pulled apart, gasping for air, and he leant his forehead against hers.

'I should warn you,' he said, throatily. 'I've become a right miserable fucker.'

'I'm not exactly brimming over with the joys of life, myself.' Except for now, in this single moment, she thought to herself.

The rain was drumming hard on the umbrella. A constant carousel of raindrops dripped from its rim.

He gave her a sharp, shrewd look. 'Is everything alright? Obviously, everything ISN'T alright… but I mean, with you.'

Hermione felt at a loss for words, strangely exposed. 'Why do you ask?'

'Dunno. Something feels different about you… maybe the way you kissed me.'

She could feel herself blushing and didn't know why. 'I – what do you mean?' she asked, breathless.

'Like – like you really meant it.'

'But of course I did!'

'Sure… but REALLY meant it. And you're sad,' he continued, holding her gaze in such a way, she felt he could see inside her.

'Well… I suppose I am, really… My uncle... one of the best people I've ever known. He's dying.' Her throat suddenly felt thick with emotion she hadn't fully realized was being held, tight inside of her.

'I'm sorry to hear that.' Draco's hand was large and warm on hers. Hermione kept her eyes fixed on his hand, so that she could keep her face as still as possible; to smother an urge to cry. He was a still, patient presence – which somehow made it worse.

'What else?' he asked.

There was only so much she could or should say to Draco, to explain the weighty sadness that she was desperately trying to ignore inside of her.

She couldn't tell him how the stark contrast between what she was feeling with him here, right now, and her life at home, which had become drained and empty, felt shocking to her. She'd experienced more emotions in the past five minutes than she'd felt in over three weeks – apart from that night at the Quidditch Dinner.

Nor could she tell him that she was almost suffocating from loneliness; to the point where she was – quite clearly - in danger of making a fool of herself.

A sudden swirl of wind lashed rain into their faces and threatened to whip the umbrella from her grasp.

'Let me – let me sort that out,' Draco murmured, prising the umbrella from her and affixing it to the back of the bench. He covertly widened its shade.
'Anyway, I'm not here to offload my silly little problems onto you,' Hermione said, in firm tones, now she felt in command of herself. 'We've so much to talk about. And you've had loads of crap to deal with."

'And so have you… you still do from the sounds of it.'

'Yes… but it's mainly FEELINGS stuff. It doesn't matter…'

The expanded umbrella cast a shaded arc over them; it seemed to carve out a private space – dividing them from the washed-out grey London skies and the gleaming flagstones that surrounded a rain-sodden flower bed and a pale statue at the centre of the square.

Draco's grey eyes gleamed out of the dim light, studying her in silence.

'I just feel a bit alone. That's all.' Hermione sighed so deeply it felt like all the air was being squeezed from her lungs.

'Well, you're not…' Draco blew out his cheeks and shook his head. 'I can't believe I'm going to say this - but I really miss that horrible skanky little flat in Paris.'

'You did nothing but complain the whole time you were there!'

'I even miss Harry bossing me about and constantly giving me the evil eye when he thought I wasn't looking…'

'He didn't do that,' she chuckled softly.

'Yes, he did,' Draco said in matter-of-fact tones, but he was smiling. 'That man has MAJOR trust issues, believe me. I couldn't go to the loo without him making me leave my wand on that stupid little coffee table. And he'd sit there, watching the bathroom door, like an angry hawk. The man's paranoid to the point of hilarious… I don't think I ever saw the back of his head. Not once.'

'Oh, Draco…' Hermione smiled, heaving a sigh. She hadn't realized she missed him this much.

'Anyway, compared to being surrounded by a bunch of psychopathic weirdos, it was a blissful paradise. Happy days…'

'Is it that bad?'

'Fucking terrible.' His face clouded.

'We need to talk about the Dark Flux attack… How did you find out about it?'

'Ephraim. He was very ponderous about it all, but he didn't want anyone telling the Ministry.'

'When was this?'

'After the dance. There was a confuffle going on in Ephraim's study – well… my father's study-as-was. Ephraim wasn't happy; made me wonder if someone had got a bit trigger-happy… But I couldn't hear everything that was being said because fucking Zoltan Guldstern was boring the tits off me about some girl he'd tried to cop off with, who hexed his hand into a pig's trotter… it was a pretty neat trick, actually. I'd like to congratulate her.'

'How many died?'

Draco's face sank back into seriousness. Hermione could sense his whiteness spinning maniacally.
'Three blokes. Researchers exploring a cave system; the campsite was at St Ninian's, not far from the castle where we had dinner. The campsite owner noticed smoke coming from the caravan - these guys were cooking sausages, apparently, when they died - and he called the Police.'

'How do you know it was sausages?'

'Oh. Zoltan told me. It stuck in my head because he can't pronounce sausages to save his life - but then I thought about it and realized the full fucking horror of it all; because whatever killed them was delivered in one single dose and was sufficiently big to take down all three at one go.' Draco pinched the bridge of his nose. 'The nightmare scenario is an aerosol. It can't have been something they ate or touched… because at least one of the guys had to have been frying the fucking sausages.'

'And whoever killed them didn't bother turning the cooker off.'

Draco nodded. 'Yeah. They wanted those sausages to burn and the bodies to be found…fairly quickly.'

'Draco, I saw Asusto - the guy who killed Miguel - at the dance. He was talking to Sylvestra.'

'Really?' Draco's eyes darted from side to side, processing this. 'Okay… that's interesting. But… somehow not surprising.'

'He's definitely Gilgad, isn't he?'

'Oh yeah, one of Ephraim's little fixers.'

'Maybe he did it?'

'I'd put money on it. It's curious that he was talking to Sylvestra; I'm more and more convinced she's up to her eyeballs in all of this… Half of Ephraim's stooges now report to her and that cold-fish bastard, Selwyn; he's her main patsy.'

'Is she going against her father?'

Draco's lips tightened as he considered this. 'Not exactly, but … I'm sensing divided loyalties. She's in thrall to someone or something else. He doesn't like it.'

'Well, she's very much promoting Daddy's cause in the media.' Hermione thought of the multiple pictures of Ephraim in the Daily Prophet with his poised, perfect daughter smiling sweetly at his side.

'He's OBSESSED with becoming Minister,' Draco grimaced.

'Which I don't get, because he already controls the Ministry.'

Draco gave her a sharp look. 'Odd, isn't it? I mean, Witchell is his total bitch.'

'Is it just the title he wants?... I ran into him recently. I was with my mother at the opera.' Hermione suddenly found herself wishing she hadn't started telling Draco this. A surly, suspicious look had crept over his face. '…He just came and sat next to me…'

'For fuck's sake, Hermione,' Draco scowled. 'When was this?'

'Oh … Valentine's Day?'
Draco shook his head in frustration.

'He told me his wife's family wanted him to go into politics – but he couldn't make it in the Muggle world because he was a wizard, basically. So the way I see it, this whole Minister thing is some kind of vain compensation.'

Draco glowered at her furiously. 'Don't fucking fall for it… He's trying to reel you in! Seeing him with you the other night … it made my blood boil.'

'I'm not stupid. I can see through his bullshit.'

'Can you? VAIN COMPENSATION? What the fuck…? You don't spend fucking millions trying to develop an evil weapon because of vain compensation! What we should be asking is what would he get out of being Minister for Magic?'

'Control. The ability to change legislation. The means to privilege certain sectors of society over others…'

'And?'

'That's a fair bit to be getting on with, Draco.'

'Still doesn't justify this enormous project Gilgad's had going on for umpteen years now. That's what fucking terrifies me… You're brilliant, Hermione, but you're far too nice. Try and think like a psychopathic megalomaniac…'

'Well. Dark Flux could be used to keep Muggle-borns under control-

'Think bigger. Think about the indiscriminate slaughter of three Muggles for no obvious reason! And not a word of it in the wizarding press - because that's the wrong audience.'

'I see that, but I doubt Ephraim wants to drag us into a war with the Muggles,' Hermione declared. 'We'd lose.'

'Even with Dark Flux?'

'Yes.'

Draco looked less certain. 'Depends on what you do with it…' He closed his eyes tightly and rubbed his forehead, as though trying to soothe away a sudden stab of pain. 'Sometimes, I feel so cheated… Like, just when you see how you could live your life, how you SHOULD have lived your life, it's all going to be ripped away. I hate to say this, Hermione… but the bad guys are going to win this time - there's too many of them and they're too popular. It's not like Voldemort. He inspired fear. Ephraim inspires adulation. He can get away with anything he wants.'

Hermione thought of Ephraim's appreciative audience at the Quidditch Dinner and his adored celebrity status and realized Draco was right.

'The problem is there's too few of us,' she said.

'I'm not sure I count as part of your US. I'm never going to be a happy-clappy Gryffindor; your friends and family detest me. Harry, too,' Draco griped.

'He just doesn't know you.'

'Oh, he knows me alright…' Draco looked into the distance. 'He knows I'm half the man he is…
which is fine. Because it's true.'

Hermione didn't know how to respond to that.

'I doubt Harry would be such a wuss and allow his house to become a fucking mobsters' hideout,' Draco continued in acid tones. 'I've got Ephraim and the creepy Haast brothers, bloody Zoltan, and Ruddy Krenzel, who's dodgy as fuck, all camping out at Malfoy Manor. I'm a fucking stranger in my own home.'

'Not forgetting Sylvestra…'

'I wish I could... She's always THERE. Like this great, big fuck-off wall… Scorpius hasn't been very well, lately, and yet I have to make an appointment through HER to see him. My own fucking son!' Hermione could sense wave after wave of white – a stark, blazing incandescent white – washing through him. 'And my mother… my lovely, stupid mother - who I love very much,' Draco bit his lip hard, 'she's in complete thrall to Ephraim. It's disgusting… And I'm pretty fucking certain Ephraim had my father finished off, by the way… I mean - I suppose I could just end this all and murder Ephraim in his sleep? I think about it all the bloody time... But what would happen to Scorpius? Because I'd be dead meat.'

Hermione felt her chest tighten in anxiety. 'Don't do that. Please don't do that.'

'No, of course I won't…' he gave her a weary, sardonic smile, but he had fire in his eyes. 'I'm just that guy who's doomed to have their life and their home taken over by fucking psychopaths and never do anything about it.'

Hermione realized he wasn't just talking about Ephraim here. This was also about Voldemort…

'This happened to your father, too, remember?'

'Yeah, but he was on their side... He was a complete cunt, as well.'

He took her hand in his and held it so tightly his knuckles turned white.

'Listen. I meant it when I said I'd rather you weren't anything to do with this anymore. I'm scared shitless you're going to get hurt.' He swallowed hard and his eyes were suddenly tired, like soft powdered ash.

'Don't worry about me, I'll be fine.'

'Thing is, though… Ephraim will think you're a threat. It's why he wants to control you.' Draco gave her a despondent look. 'I'm safe. I'm just the useless tool who signs the cheques.'

'Then please stay useless,' she begged. She impulsively kissed him on the forehead and then his cheeks and his lips, but as she pulled away, he captured her mouth with his own and wrapped his arms around her and then they were lost in each other and she felt like her heart would burst from her chest.

'Shit. I've got to go…' he panted. He took a deep breath, steeling himself. 'Just - just promise me you'll avoid Ephraim? Because on top of everything - I think he's a bit infatuated with you.'

Hermione could feel herself blushing. 'He makes my skin crawl,' she asserted.

'And Sylvestra, too. Steer clear. You know she's a Legilimens, right? She's very interested in you. Like the other day, she asked me if you can see colours…'
'She what?' Hermione bristled with alarm.

Draco nodded slowly. 'Yeah… I know…'

'What did you say?'

'That I didn't think so. My mother was there so she couldn't push it.'

'But why did she even think it? I've only really spoken to her a couple of times.'

'More to the point, Hermione, this ability must mean something.'

His words chilled her.

'It's – it's nothing, I'm sure.'

He looked as though he was going to say more but thought better of it.

'Sylvestra was very attentive to you at the Quidditch Dinner,' Hermione said, trying to sound casual.

Draco sneered. 'She's trying to rekindle what we had before.'

'I thought as much… Hermione's insides swirled uneasily. She masked her panic with a bright, brittle smile.

Draco looked at her from beneath his eyelashes and a flicker of satisfaction lit up his face. 'I hate her, Hermione.'

'Yes, of course… Although… that might be a good way to get more information… you know, take your spying to another level?' She could feel heat rising in her cheeks as she babbled. 'Sorry. I'll shut up. It's none of my business.'

'Yes, it is.'

'No… no, it isn't. I want you to know that,' she said in deliberately calm, measured tones. 'Just because we've occasionally been close – there's nothing beholden here. We're neither of us in a position to have a relationship with each other, anyway,' Hermione said in brisk, businesslike tones. 'I mean, strictly speaking, EVERYONE has a relationship to each other, of course, but I don't want you thinking I'm pursuing you or anything, because I've come to value our friendship.'

'You really are fucking adorable, you know that?' Draco's eyes danced merrily as he spoke.

'Well… I noticed you were flirting with lots of girls at the Quidditch Dinner, for example, which is fine,' Hermione said, leaden-tongued, instantly wishing she didn't sound like a jumped-up, jealous twit.

'Hermione! I was just playing the part… Look at me… I'm BURSTING with you! Nothing, no one, even existed in that room the other night. Everything was YOU… Everything's always you. It's like I've been fucking body-snatched or something.'

Hermione felt warm excitement coursing through her. He was describing exactly how she felt about him.

'Anyway… You and your brother-in-law were looking rather cosy…' Draco added with a vinegary smile. 'I felt like punching him.'
Hermione laughed. 'Oh good god … he's just BILL!'

'Hmmm… well, JUST Bill accused me of killing my wife. Which I didn't. Though it feels like I'm being fitted up to be the fall guy for something…'

'I know.'

'Problem is, I can't ask Ephraim outright if HE knows about this trace, because it would expose Bill.'

'Do - do you think she's dead, Draco?'

'I don't know,' he said wearily.

'You've stopped looking for her,' Hermione said bluntly.

Draco shifted uncomfortably.

'Harry's friend tracked down Rozella - for about an hour before he lost her again. She left some flowers on a grave belonging to a Fayana LeBerre, who died in 2010.'

'Before Katya disappeared. It could be anyone... Rozella's friend, a neighbour, her former school-teacher...' His eyes flashed a warning. He didn't want to talk about this...

'The churchyard was in Normandy, some place called Saint-Clair... could be worth taking a look?'

'Hermione...' Draco said, tight-lipped. 'Please stop.'

'Why?'

'Because if Katya IS alive, she doesn't want to be found - and, frankly, if she knew what she was running away from, the fucking least she could have done is warn me.'

'And if she's dead? Don't you want to know what happened to her - and her child?'

Draco gazed at her, a wide-eyed, frank expression on his face. 'I'm being a bastard - I know that - but things change, and the way things are, I want to focus on the living - while I can.'

There was a logic - however selfish - to what he was saying, Hermione thought, although Ron was very much alive... HER behaviour was probably murkiest of all. She wasn't proud of herself, but she couldn't help what she was feeling, either.

A flash of panic scuttled across his face. 'Shit. The minders will be getting twitchy.' He reached inside his black leather trench-coat and pulled out a brown paper bag. 'Look, I nicked this from my father's stuff… it's a framed photo of the guy from The Geneva Group.'

'Jeroboam?'

'No – the other one. The one loitering in the background… Could you try and find out who it is? It was hanging on the wall opposite my father's bed, which I thought was strange, seeing as every other picture in his apartment was covered up. But what makes it really creepy is Ephraim has one too.'

'The same?'

'Not the same picture, but the same guy. I've glimpsed it on his bedroom wall – not that he's in
there much these days,' he said, caustically.

Hermione tucked it into her handbag. 'When can I see you again?'

'I don't know… they've all sorts of wonderful plans to send me off on corporate trips being all *Presidential* … could be useful, I suppose.' He looked miserable at the prospect. 'I'm angling for an excuse to get to New Zealand… I mentioned the old Wanaka plant to Torquil, and he looked stunned I even knew about it… which clearly means I was never meant to. I've wondered if they were running a breeding programme of some sort.'

'Breeding what?'

Draco pulled a face. 'That's what I'd like to find out… Oh, and I'm – I'm also going to be the guinea pig for Gilgad's spanking new Gimlott's cure…' he said, almost as a random after-thought.

'But you don't have Gimlott's!' Hermione didn't like the sound of this.

'Tell Harry to check out the attack in Scotland,' he added.

'I will.' Her heart suddenly thudded in her throat, unaccountably panicked.

She felt swamped by a combination of acute anxiety and unfulfilled need. She suddenly didn't know what to do with herself; it was an uncomfortable sensation, like being untethered and forced out into choppy seas, alone.

'Draco. Don't go,' she said, urgently. 'Not yet.' She couldn't bear the idea of watching him walk away, back to his world of psychopaths and untold dangers; not knowing when she'd next see him.

'But I have to,' he sighed. 'I don't fucking want to. But I have to. I'm Ephraim's fucking hostage here... They've got my son.'

'Of course. I - I didn't think.' She took a deep breath. 'That's the problem: When I'm around you, I can't think straight anymore... And if I'm being honest, I can't think straight when I'm not around you, either.'

He stared at her. 'Do you really mean that?'

She snaked her arms around his neck and then moulded herself tightly against him. 'Yes,' she said.

She watched, her heart racing, as his breathing hitched in his chest and the blood rose in his face. She could feel his arousal, hard and insistent beneath his clothes, pushed against her. It made her want to bite down, to grit her teeth, to rock violently against him.

'Christ, I'm so ridiculously attracted to you. It's unreal,' he said hoarsely, wrapping his arms tightly around her in a bone-crushing embrace.

They fell into each other and kissed with such heart-pounding, visceral force, she feared she'd forget how to breathe. She felt consumed by a white-hot swell of emotion, as the busy world of central London faded away; and all she was aware of was the metronomic hammering of the rain on the umbrella, the soft shuddering sighs coursing through her, and the heady feeling of his mouth and tongue sliding luxuriantly against hers.

She could happily stay like this for an eternity, she thought; warm yet chill, shielded by rain; goosebumped, yet burning up from the inside.
'Jesus,' he groaned, his eyes hooded. His hand was on her neck and he stroked her throat with his thumb. 'No more, Beautiful, no more. I can't cope... and I have to go back to the office... and I'm so fucking hard it hurts.'

'Just promise me I'll see you again,' she said in a small voice.

He stared at her; eyes gleaming feverishly. 'Why don't we just ditch this fucking shit, sod the consequences, and fuck off together?'

Hermione's laughter rang out, shrill and bright. 'That's crazy.'

'No, it's not,' he murmured to himself, quietly triumphant, 'Maybe not today, but one day... you wait and see.'

She could feel his whiteness bubbling and swooping... a strange blend of euphoria and angst. It made her feel giddy.

She pushed him backwards, playfully. 'Right, you Slytherin bastard. You better go then... She smoothed damp hair from his forehead; making him presentable. She instinctively moved to kiss him goodbye, but he gently eased her back.

'No, no. Don't... Because if you do, I WON'T go back. Not ever.'

XXX

The weather cheered up considerably the next day prompting Hermione to sit in her garden, studying the framed photo Draco had given her, in natural light.

It was the same spindly, spidery man with the long, straggly beard who had been lurking behind Ephraim, Anna and their colleagues in the old photo she'd seen of The Geneva Group. That photo was now squirreled away in Francoise's collection of potential Prosecution material.

The man in the picture was shaking his head at her, in seeming disapproval... His eyes gazed out, unflinching. Fathomless, dark pits which sent a chill through her.

She prickled with anxiety. It felt like the sun had suddenly dived behind the clouds, shrouding the garden in cool darkness. But when she looked up, the sun was still riding high and the spring colours seeping into her flower-beds and the vibrant greening of the trees remained undimmed...

She brusquely removed the photo from the frame and turned it over to see if there was anything written on the back. There were two single words – in Latin: 'Quis Es?'

Her grasp of Latin was rudimentary, but she knew enough to know that this said: 'Who are you?'

'Who are you?' she repeated to the dark-eyed man scowling at her in the photo.

The mystery man's eyes narrowed into amused slits as she stared at the photo, a bewildered look on her face.

A thought occurred to her... all she had was this photo – an OBJECT. Would 'Visual Resonation' give any clues? She recalled that Draco had seen Svetlana in a room in Paris; even the view from her window... The environment around Katya's rose pendant had been captured and transmitted to him.

Could Visual Resonation see further back than the last time an object was handled?
She pondered this a moment. It might be worth a shot – even if, the only scene she could capture was Draco removing it from his father's bedroom wall and placing it in a bag...

She hastened indoors, straight to her living room, and closed the door. Thank god Neville had given her a couple of books on 'Visual Resonation'…

She urgently scanned the relevant chapter on the Hexmouth Witches and their usage of Visual Resonation to detect the last persons and places connected to any given object, frantically seeking instructions…. Except, there was barely any explanation at all, beyond an 'opening of the mind and heart' – and a belief that the object would transmit a sense of its own resonating self.

As a magical practice it all seemed a little hokey, in all the wrong ways, and she even worried there might be hidden dangers, too... But it was all she had.

She closed the curtains and did as the Hexmouth Witches recommended, lighting a series of candles and arranging them in a circle around herself. She stifled a giggle. How she loathed this kind of showy, arcane nonsense…

'Right,' she said to herself. She had to stop up the fireplace – either physically or with magic; that was the other pre-requisite. A burst of bluebell flames was soon flickering and dancing, casting ghostly shadows across the hearth rug.

She cast a quick eye over the incantation she was instructed to use. It was more free-form than she usually liked, barely an incantation at all – more a heartfelt plea. Oh well, she thought. It's worth a bash.

She closed her eyes tightly and held the photo in her hands, trying to ignore the strange, prickling sensation that the dark, hollow eyes in the photo were actually looking back at her, regarding her with equal curiosity.

'Quis es?' she murmured. She took a deep breath. 'I offer myself unto you,' she recanted, copying the words of the Hexmouth Witches. 'I offer myself unto you. Open to me the secrets within…'

She paused. Her voice tapered off into the blue shadows.

A still silence enveloped her… and then a dark, clutching fear. Insidious…

She should open her eyes she thought. Because for a brief moment, she had an uncanny sense that someone was standing in the room behind her. But if she opened her eyes then the spell was – literally – broken. This was what the Hexmouth Witches warned of.

The figure was still there. If anything, it felt closer. Except she knew it couldn't be. Because it wasn't real. It was her mind playing tricks on her…

'I offer myself unto you. Open to me the secrets within,' she repeated in a soft, sighing voice. No, nothing… But then… there was. The photo shuddered in her hands and she felt a warm glow seeping into her. A powerful surge of white… It was Draco. She felt sure of it. She could almost see him in her mind's eye; a perplexed frown on his face as he studied the photograph. Eyes, hard and grey.

Where was he? A darkened room, a stripped bed behind him. A drawer was open, its contents spilled onto the floor. Draco was looking at the photo; it was as though the mysterious wizard with the long beard was now staring back at her. She could almost feel Draco's warmth, his breathing … and she longed to reach out and touch him…but the scene jolted and changed, amidst a burst of dirty sepia-brown that momentarily fogged her mind, and it was someone else who was holding the
photo. Similar white-blonde hair, longer, straggly. And the hand holding the photo was older and crabbed-looking… more a claw, than a hand. He was in a different room. Green velvet curtains. An ebony desk. The picture was being placed into a frame with extreme care, even tenderness.

She knew, beyond any doubt, that this was Draco's father, Lucius. A more distant 'resonation' - many months, possibly years before his son found this photo.

Maybe her mind was playing tricks on her and this was just the power of supposition? She knew Draco had found the photo in Lucius's room - therefore her mind had moved to him, automatically.

Except, to her horror-struck surprise, she could hear a voice ringing in her head: Lucius Malfoy's! His arch, patrician tones were less smooth, less refined than how she remembered him. He sounded weak, tremulous; his voice was a dried-out husk.

'Salvedra… Salvedra… I offer myself unto you.'

SALVEDRA? But he was the wizard who had devised Visual Resonation! Was she using this wizard's own brand of magic to investigate his own photo? And this same Salvedra had been involved, in some capacity, with The Geneva Group, too.

It seemed a fiendishly, weird coincidence. And yet that was precisely what it was…

I should stop now, she thought… But she was driven by an overweening curiosity. It had the better of her. It wouldn't be denied.

'I offer myself unto you. Open to me the secrets within,' she repeated, wondering if she could prompt this photo to offer up more.

There was nothing. A blankness.

She scrunched her eyes even more tightly shut, resisting an urge to snap them open – to admit the light and vanquish this darkness. To beat back the powerful presence that she somehow felt she had drawn into the room alongside her.

There was nothing but a static, grey blankness in her head now… although… this blankness felt oddly sentient. A creeping sensation shuddered through her. And there was a jarring jag of blue at its fringes… She knew that colour… She'd seen it before. And then a deepening of the blankness.

A flash of a face, turning quickly, a sharp peal of laughter. Throaty. Nasty.

Sylvestra… why did she think of Sylvestra? She wasn't witnessing some past moment here! No, it was a sense of her. A momentary inflection. A glancing glint that she had only just managed to grasp hold of.

Her hand was shaking uncontrollably… She was eerily aware that she might have made a grave mistake.

'HERMIONE?'

It was a voice she recognized.

'HERMIONE?'

'Ron?'

Ron curled his lip in confusion at the candles and the curtains being closed in the middle of the day
and stared at Hermione, open-mouthed.

Hermione dropped the photo and struggled to her feet. 'Sorry, I didn't hear you come in.'

'I've been calling your name this past five minutes!' Ron's travel bag was on the floor at his feet.

Hermione swished her wand and the curtains swung open, bathing the room in brilliant sunlight. The candles were next to go, petering out in a low, sizzling hush – embarrassed, like her…

'Well, that was creepy,' Ron said, looking at her as though she was certifiable.

'I was just trying out a new spell,' Hermione said, smiling weakly. 'Candles. Darkness. Helps me concentrate.'

'Okay. Whatever rocks your boat I guess,' Ron sniffed. 'Is there anything for tea?'

'No – I – I wasn't expecting you. And the kids are having tea at your mum's tonight.'

'Blimey. It's a right mess in here, Hermione!' Ron complained… surveying the circle of sadly smouldering candles.

But where was the photo? She'd dropped it on the floor when Ron came in… But it had vanished.

Hermione sent Grumio to Hogwarts the next day with a message for Neville, asking him if he could find any reference to this mysterious wizard, Salvedra Otzoa-Azarola.

She wondered why Lucius had been using the Visual Resonation incantation as he framed Salvedra's picture?… Surely he already knew where the photo came from? And who it portrayed…

Hermione felt ashamed that she had practiced Visual Resonation at all. It was the type of Magic she usually avoided. There was something too emotive, too personal, too much about expressing one's self that she naturally recoiled at. She preferred something logical that invited rational explanation.

And it had been too easy – which made her feel oddly tainted. She'd always been a prosaic sort of girl, but something new and different had been happening to her lately. A small chink of 'otherness' had opened up inside of her – a window left flapping in the wind.

As if to prove her point, the following day she was nursing a coffee in her back garden, tutting at the latest New Brooms rubbish being propagated in the Daily Prophet, when she felt the familiar tug of a scarlet flash hovering at the edge of her consciousness. She quickly scanned the trees bordering her property… they were out there, somewhere. Los Rojos… She was surprised, all over again, how little fear she felt these days; more, exasperation.

'Come and talk to me!' she yelled to the trees. 'Tell me what you know!'

For a brief moment there was complete stillness… the red fluttering at the edge of her mind had taken on a heavy, studied air. They were considering her offer, she felt sure of it. And then there was a rustling from the branches overhead and the red had gone.

Maybe they'd been shied away by the arrival of an owl?

It was a note from Neville. He'd been busy in the library until past midnight and found a few references to Salvedra. He was listed in Clavis est ad Omnes Mythologiis – a well-known
Neville listed three entries for Salvedra – the first was Otzoa-Azarola, Salvedra, born in Borox of Toledo, date unknown but circa 1775. The next entry was a simple Salvedra: Cicera, Cantabria, 1849; followed by another Salvedra in Alzika, 1904. The current status of all three Salvedras, it seemed, was singly listed as 'Deceased, date unknown.'

Hermione pondered this for a moment. The Geneva Group's Salvedra was presumably the final entry – born in Alzika in 1904. Sounded distinctly Spanish. It was very likely they were all related – although, oddly, Salvedra was a Christian name…

Only the FIRST Salvedra was Otzoa-Azarola – but then again, it was common practice for fathers to name their sons after themselves for successive generations. Thirty years ago, the 'Alzika' Salvedra would have been about seventy years old. The figure in the photo had been very shadowy, indistinct; he could have been about that age… it was hard to tell.

Draco would want to know about this.

Hermione immediately dashed a note back to Neville, wondering if he had any plans to check up on Narcissa's problematic Plangentines…

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"THE POWER" by SUEDE

"SONNET" by THE VERVE

"NIOBE" by THEA MUSGRAVE

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
The Fretful Porpentine

Chapter Summary

Goldstein's thesis poses new and horrific possibilities… Hermione hatches a plan

32. The Fretful Porpentine

Hermione looked out across the bay, scanning the beach below for Harry. It was dank and grey and the air was thick with moisture and tangy with sea spray. Thunderous waves crashed against the cliffs below. A solitary seagull squawked overhead; a shrill, raucous cry momentarily piercing the whoosh and sigh of the grey, swirling sea. Harry finally came into view, moving away from a clump of granite rocks, stretching like a distended limb from the cliff face. He was picking his way through the sand dunes as he retreated from the frothing seashore back towards Shell Cottage.

From this distance, he was a stooped, shadowy figure; occasionally pausing to pick up a stone or pebble, which he turned over in his hand, before spinning it out to sea with a single fluid throw. Eventually, he looked up and caught sight of her. He lazily raised a hand in greeting.

He wasn't going to come to her, she realized, gazing forlornly at his stern, straight-backed profile as he paused to stare out to sea. So, Hermione reluctantly trudged towards him. Her legs felt heavy and her eyes were watering in the bitter wind, which danced through her hair, tossing it into her face.

Up close, Hermione could see that Harry looked thoughtful and worried and dog-tired. His eyes were red-rimmed, their vivid green irises faded to a dull, muddy sludge; the scar over his brow was white and livid.

Hermione felt unaccountably nervous of him. It was a discomforting and alien sensation.

She'd popped to Shell Cottage hoping that Bill had managed to sign off Goldstein's thesis, but Bill had suddenly been called into work on urgent business, despite it being a weekend.

Luckily, Harry had been visiting Bill and was taking a walk to clear his head.

'I was coming to see you later,' Harry said.

'I'm saving you a trip,' Hermione smiled. 'You look tired, Harry,' she observed, an anxious note in her voice.

Harry grimaced. 'That's what being busy doing nothing does to you… or nothing particularly useful, at any rate.'

'But Henrik told me you paid a visit to RedStar in Geneva?'

'Well, I tried to. I applied and was then forced to negotiate for a few days as multiple weird and wonderful conditions were imposed on me…' he said.

'But did you succeed?'
Harry gave her a wan smile. 'Incredibly, the official address RedStar has supplied to the Swiss Muggle Authorities is a P.O. Box in Geneva...' He examined a smooth, flat pebble in his hand. 'I badgered the Swiss Ministry for Magic to tell me the company's physical location and they eventually gave me an address – behind a haberdashery shop!'

He took aim with the pebble and flung it far out to sea where it skimmed and bounced and was swallowed by the waves. 'Not exactly the high-tech research organisation I was expecting...' he said. 'I guess Jeroboam is as paranoid and reclusive as the legends suggest…'

'That's taking it a bit far, though,' Hermione scoffed.

'After days of waiting for news, I was finally granted a meeting with one of Jeroboam's representatives – a strange guy called Gunter, probably one of Los Rojos,' Harry said, hooking his arm around Hermione and steering her away from the sea-shore towards the cliff path she'd descended, just moments before. 'We met in a Genevan coffee shop. He didn't give anything away other than to point out that they know what we're doing, that we underestimate the danger posed by Golowitz, and for our own safety, he thought it's best we stop now.'

'Was he threatening you?'

'No... I don't think Los Rojos actually want to hurt us,' Harry said in an offhand manner. 'But I also doubt they want anyone queering their pitch. When I suggested cooperating, Gunter wasn't interested.'

'Shame. We could do with all the help we can get.'

'I also suspect Jeroboam's quest is more of a personal vendetta. I'm not even sure they'll involve the Swiss Ministry or Auror HQ if and when they find evidence that condemns Golowitz.' Harry's shoes scuffed to an abrupt halt on the footpath. 'There's something peculiar about it all, though… but I can't quite put my finger on it.'

He pushed back his hair, which had flopped over his glasses, momentarily obscuring his vision. 'Thanks for the texts about the Scottish Dark Flux attack. I spoke to a friend of a friend who has been in touch with the Muggle Police in that neck of the woods, and they're mystified.'

'Stil no mention in the Daily Prophet…' Hermione said, pointedly.

Harry shrugged and continued walking back uphill towards the house. 'Why would there be? Muggle problem…'

'Even so. Section A should have been informed, yet Ron knows nothing about it.'

'He won't… the Muggle Police have the bodies on lockdown. The deaths are being treated as suspicious, but not murder. The current thinking is that they contracted some kind of disease from aquatic molluscs.' Harry rolled his eyes. 'At some point that will be ruled out – that and any other natural causes… not sure what happens then…'

Hermione shivered in the chill wind, which was currently bullying her unruly mop of hair into an even bushier state than usual.

'It's all very worrying, Harry,' she murmured. 'I think the assassin Gilgad used in Argentina carried out these killings. He was at the Quidditch Dinner.'

'Yes… Bill told me.' Harry gave her a shrewd look. 'I take it Bill's told you about the trace on Katya Malfoy's money?'
'Yes.' Her voice was swallowed up into sea spray and the piercing chorus of seagulls flying overhead and out to sea.

'Do you ever get the feeling you've been played?' Harry didn't wait for an answer. 'All that time and resources – it wasn't cheap persuading my mate from the Gendarmerie to go chasing after shadows...' The waves crashing onto the beach below them were gaining in ferocity and the wind was whistling through the dunes, throwing up swirls of sand.

Hermione felt strangely frozen. Surely Bill had told Harry that Draco had denied placing the trace?

'It'd be useful if you found out which Auror approved the trace in the first place and who actually ordered it.'

Harry was tight-lipped.

'I know you don't trust him, Harry, but it wasn't Draco... and he definitely didn't do away with his wife, if that's what you're thinking!' Hermione asserted.

'I don't trust him, because he isn't trustworthy,' Harry retorted. 'I WANT to trust him, believe me. But evidence to the contrary is mounting... the fact Herb Healing operated that plant in New Zealand – a plant he claims he knew nothing about – and Neville told me that Draco asked for this thesis you've given Bill to be removed from the Ministry Library.'

'When did you speak to NEVILLE?' Hermione cried.

'As soon as Bill told me you used him as your little gopher to make contact with Draco.'

'He volunteered to do that.'

'I know.' Harry gave her a quizzical look. 'It was a good plan. Why are you reacting like this?'

'Because – because this isn't the time to turn on the one person who's got their bloody neck on the line!' Her frustration at Harry's unjust suspicions made her head hurt ... made her want to scream out to sea, to the waves and the wind and the soaring, rain-sodden clifftops.

'I'm not TURNING on anybody, Hermione,' Harry argued. 'I've ALWAYS had my reservations about Draco. But, equally, I'm more than happy to be proved wrong and am hoping to meet up with him sometime – annoyingly, I just missed him this morning at the Portkey Terminal; he was headed to Spain.'

Spain, now, Hermione thought glumly. He'd only recently returned from a trip to a Big Pharma conference in Australia – something she'd gleaned from the Daily Prophet gossip pages and from Neville's latest outing to Malfoy Manor to inspect Narcissa's Plangentine grove.

Harry looked at Hermione, an intense expression on his face. 'Believe me, I'm still open to working with him... Bill, on the other hand, would rather we cut him out completely. But I've made it clear that until we know for sure he's double-crossing us, that'd be stupid.'

'How very gracious of you, Harry Potter,' Hermione said in cutting tones. 'It's thanks to Draco we now know who the fifth member of The Geneva Group was. No doubt Bill's told you about that, too?' She was still smarting from Bill's fury when he'd discovered she'd used Visual Resonation, which he described as a form of Dark Magic.

'But it's hardly relevant when this Salvedra character is dead...' Harry said pointedly. 'You're a wee bit too engrossed in the history of The Geneva Group, Hermione. I know that kind of research is
Bill dispatched Demosthenes a few days later to tell Hermione that he had *finally* checked the package and it was 'clean'. He said he'd fly over later to give it to her in person but was being held up by an important meeting with Ministry representatives at Gringotts Bank.

Hermione made herself a cup of tea and sat down at the kitchen table with her well-thumbed copy of Gaston Jeuzjeune's 'Molecular Magic', but her thoughts kept wandering... always to the same place, the same man. Before long, she was staring out at the windless, grey day beyond her kitchen window. The lawn was slick and shiny from an earlier downpour and the elm trees, which encircled the garden like tall, dark guardsmen, were limp and lifeless.

Her daydreaming was interrupted by a loud thwack from the living room. She was surprised that Bill had decided to arrive by Floo without sending a message ahead to warn her.

She was even more surprised when a tall, blonde figure emerged from her hallway.

'Hi!' hailed Agatha Thrussington, 'hope you don't mind my dropping by like this?' She sashayed across the kitchen to the table where Hermione was sitting. 'I was in the neighbourhood,' she said by way of explanation, brusquely sweeping breadcrumbs from this morning's breakfast off a dining chair and sitting down opposite Hermione. 'I was a tad disappointed that we didn't get much of a chance to connect at the Quidditch Dinner and Ginny said you'd be in.'

She pursed her lips into a demure smile and faced Hermione with a disarmingly frank and open gaze.

'You can't just come waltzing in here without an invitation!' Hermione yelped. She glowered at Agatha, who was busily pulling a notepad and a quill from her handbag. 'And I thought I'd made it perfectly clear before that I don't have anything to say about my dismissal from the Ministry.'

'You've been DISMISSED?!!' Agatha gasped in triumphant tones.

'No – SUSPENDED! I meant suspended! It was a slip of the tongue.'

Agatha twiddled her quill expectantly; hovering above her open notepad.

'But you said DISMISSED. Have you been given any idea when you'll be allowed to return?'
'I meant SUSPENDED!'

'You may well have meant that, Hermione, but a suspension until further notice is as good as a dismissal, isn't it?' Agatha said coolly.

'Just – give me that!' Hermione exclaimed heatedly, wrestling the quill out of Agatha's hand and slamming the notepad shut. She skimmed the notepad across the table away from Agatha's reach, with such force, it shimmied into the air and slammed into the French Windows. Hermione flicked her wrist and it vanished.

'Get that back!' Agatha shrieked. 'I have some very important material in there!'

Hermione bristled with fury. 'I couldn't care less! You've no right to be here and absolutely no right whatsoever to report on anything I say.'

'You don't get it, do you? I want to help you,' Agatha cajoled in winsome tones. She turned large, sombre eyes on Hermione. 'Ginny - who has the highest regard for your welfare - has told me how unhappy you are, how unjustly the Ministry has treated you.'

'I doubt that very much!'

'No, it's true. Ginny was telling me, just this morning, about the problems you had with that oddball chap, Mr Jinks.'

'That's not what I meant … I very much doubt YOU want to HELP me. And Ginny can't have spoken to you this morning, because she returned to France!'

'Yes, she did return to France. After seeing ME.'

'Even so,' Hermione parried, trying to suppress her rising irritation at her meddling sister-in-law... 'Ginny doesn't have the right to authorise strangers to intrude on my privacy. Now if you would kindly pick up your things' – Hermione clicked her fingers and Agatha's notepad re-appeared on the table between them – 'and leave me alone, we will forget this little mishap ever happened.'

'Misunderstanding,' Agatha retorted prissily. 'I was very much under the impression that you could do with a friendly ear.' She stuffed her notepad and quill back into her handbag and stood up. 'And I was also hoping for a small favour.'

Hermione snorted in derision. 'A favour?'

'Yes,' Agatha said pertly, undeterred by Hermione's withering tones. 'I'm rather put out not to be covering this big meeting with Astoria Greengrass. I rather hoped you might be able to help me out.'

Hermione burst into raucous laughter. 'ME help YOU? How? I barely know the woman.'

'Well, I thought you might ask Draco … I mean, I'd even give up exclusive rights to the story if he changed his mind and allowed the Daily Prophet to cover the meeting as well.' Her eyes were wide and imploring.

'I don't see what you think I can do about this! Draco and I aren't exactly bosom pals. I'm sure there's scores of people who would be better-placed to ask such a thing than ME.'

What the hell was she talking about? What BIG meeting?
'Oh, but didn't you come across Draco when he was in Paris? I heard you were spending rather a lot of time together these days. And from what I could see when we were at the Quidditch Dinner, you're really rather close.'

Hermione struggled to hide her sudden fluster. 'Whatever do you mean?'

'Not to mention your friendship with Harry Potter, who was very involved in The Kerpin Case.'

Hermione scanned outside, hoping to see Bill Weasley speeding full-pelt into her garden on his broomstick…

'I don't think Harry was THAT involved, Agatha,' she said, weighing her words carefully. 'I think it was more a case for the Muggle Police and Vendome. It was certainly Vendome who released Draco; not Auror HQ.'

'Oh. I heard differently. I heard that Harry was holding Draco in private custody and that you were freelancing for Harry and working to secure Draco's release.'

Hermione surmised that Agatha's cool, knowledgeable tone was likely due to loose talk from Ginny; but how did Ginny know she'd been involved with Draco's case?

'Well, I like to keep my hand in … And Harry's been working on a particularly fascinating smuggling case. Nothing to do with Draco.'

'Yes. Ginny told me all about that.' Agatha slumped back onto the dining chair with a heavy, defeated sigh. Hermione stood her ground, although her curiosity was sufficiently aroused not to chase Agatha away – not just yet.

'Ginny and I had an awfully long talk about how much time you spend with Harry – in Paris and elsewhere,' Agatha explained.

'I've already told Ginny what we've been working on. It's not my fault if she doesn't believe me. Really, Agatha, this is no big deal, and if you're trying to…'

Agatha threw her hands up in horror. 'Gracious me, no! I'm not insinuating anything. And – mercifully - Ginny believes you; which probably explains her reaction this morning, when I suggested you'd been working with Harry on Draco's case. Ginny was so horrified, she almost fell off her broomstick! Which would have been a tad disastrous at the time, seeing as she'd have landed straight on top of Narcissa Malfoy's rose garden – well, at least, bits of her would have… I presume the wards would have mulched her into tiny little pieces by the time she actually hit the ground.'

Hermione could hardly believe what she was hearing. 'Why the blazes were you and Ginny flying above Malfoy Manor?'

Agatha emitted a soft, almost apologetic giggle. 'Oh, it wasn't THAT risky. It was so ridiculously early, I bet even the Malfoys' usual army of gardeners hadn't stirred out of bed. No one spotted us.'

'Sure. But, what were you DOING?' Hermione repeated, exasperated.

'Well, I live in Budleigh Babberton, which is just a few miles away from Malfoy Manor... And Ginny popped over to – to say goodbye, you know, before she left for France, and we decided to embark on a fun little fly-past … to see how this dratted Mausoleum is shaping up! It looks GHASTLY, by the way. A sort of – misshapen lumpen thing, all smoking blue ice, with this incongruously huge crystal fountain spurting what looked like molten silver … very expensive, I
imagine!

Against her own better judgement, Hermione found herself sinking back down onto the dining chair opposite Agatha. 'But Ginny can't stand the Malfoys. Why would she want to see this Mausoleum monstrosity?'

'Oh, it happened to be on our way…'

'Where were you going?'

'The Folborough Hotel … in Folborough.'

'Where Astoria Greengrass is staying.'

'Exactly. We were very cunningly disguised. Ginny had green hair and my glamour was male.'

'You were trying to meet Astoria?'

Agatha shrugged nonchalantly. 'Well, we had high hopes. All dashed, of course. Although, to our amusement, we weren't the only ones there in disguise! There was a glamorous-looking lady - a Muggle - wearing ridiculously huge sunglasses and an outsized summer hat – in THIS weather! She had a letter for Malfoy Manor and asked the receptionist to deliver it for her - although, for the life of me, I couldn't see why she didn't just put it in one of those letter-up boxes or walk it round. It only takes seven and a half minutes to get from the hotel to the gates of Malfoy Manor! Luckily for her, the receptionist said her brother worked as a groundsman there, so she took the letter, and the strange lady left very quickly after that. She drove off in a swanky Aston Martin but we didn't get back onto our broomsticks in time; so we lost track of her.'

'A Muggle, you say?'

'And foreign.' Agatha leaned forward with a conspiratorial air. 'Could tell from her accent.'

Rozella, thought Hermione.

'Anyway, by then we were starving, so we never did get to see if Astoria would change her mind.'

'Change her mind about what?' Hermione snapped, irritably.

'This stupid meeting! Scoop of the bloody year …' Agatha's face contorted with freshly-renewed angst. 'The silly woman obviously harbours grudges, which will do NOTHING for her bank balance. We've offered her a substantial sum of galleons to cover this meeting with Scorpius! But she – like her dumb ex-husband - still insists on WWN. Madness!'

'Hold on – did you say she's meeting Scorpius?' Hermione asked, the full horror of the situation dawning on her.

'Ephraim feels it's healthy for Scorpius to meet his natural mother. So, that Torquil lawyer-chap set it up.'

'But – please bear with me here – I'm just trying to get my head around this. You say Astoria is allowing reporters to cover her first ever meeting with her son?'

This beggared belief. What kind of woman was this?

'Oh, it was a key condition for both parties. In the interests of full and open disclosure,' Agatha said primly.
'DRACO agreed to this?' Hermione asked, aghast.

'Of course.'

'You – you do realise that Scorpius is a *mute*, don't you?' Hermione said fiercely.

'He won't be alone! There'll be lawyers and family representatives and journalists and his father.'

Poor, defenceless little thing, Hermione thought, suddenly overwhelmed by sorrowful tenderness. How could Draco do something this abysmal to his own son? What the hell was he thinking?

'Obviously, I'm still hoping that Astoria relents and asks the *Daily Prophet* to cover the meeting instead – the idea of being scooped by a shabby little outfit like WWN is, frankly, abhorrent …' Agatha literally shuddered at the prospect. 'Worse still, though, Draco didn't just agree with Astoria, but he also *insisted* that WWN use Parvati Patil – a complete *rookie* in this business - as their show producer. I don't remember Draco ever having a 'thing' for Parvati, do you?'

'I've no idea,' Hermione sighed.

Agatha wasn't listening. 'I rather hoped my former little *dalliance* with Draco might have softened him up a little, you know … but I guess I've written some slightly harsh-ish things about him in the past - but I have a professional duty, too. You could even call it *integrity*.'

You could, Hermione thought bitterly, but you'd be wrong.

'Maybe I've offended Draco somewhere along the line?' Agatha said, eyes darting from side to side in a supreme effort to remember how and when. 'If so, it was entirely unintentional, although I doubt he's appreciated some of the fuss my paper has made of him over the years … He's not as showy as people think, you know. Maybe that's where it went wrong … I was a bit too boisterous, perhaps? Although, Merlin knows how he ever stomached that horrid American…'

'You're talking about Sylvestra, I take it?'

Agatha nodded vehemently. 'Isn't she just the WORST?'

Hermione smiled in reply. 'Did you meet her sister? Draco's wife?'

Agatha seemed momentarily perplexed … 'You kind of look like her, do you know that?'

'I've never met her.'

'Oh. Well you didn't miss much. Mousy, boring little thing. I think she went cuckoo and ran off and Draco divorced her. He never talks about it. … Still, she was better than Sylvestra. Now, she's TERRIFYING. So *rude*. I'm sure she thinks there's still some kind of … chemistry … between me and Draco and she doesn't like it.' A dreamy look had taken hostage of Agatha's face.

There was a roaring swoosh above the treetops and Bill Weasley, flame-red hair fanning out behind him, zoomed into the garden on his broomstick.

'Oh, I say!' Agatha marvelled, a single finger pressed against her chin as she watched Bill leap athleticism from his broomstick. 'Such a fine figure of a man.'

She stood up, a little dazed, and dutifully followed Hermione from the kitchen, back towards the living room fireplace. 'Shame about his cut-up face, although it gives him a sort of dashing, piratical look, don't you think?' Agatha continued.
'Indeed, it does,' Hermione said firmly, shoving Agatha's handbag into her arms and scooping up a handful of Floo powder in readiness for Agatha's departure. 'I'd say thanks for dropping by, but that would be a lie... Goodbye Agatha!' Hermione trilled. She pushed Agatha into the fireplace and threw the Floo powder over her.

Agatha garbled something incomprehensible and was gone.

XXX

'Who was that?' Bill asked.

'Bloody Agatha Thrussington – she invited herself,' Hermione muttered. She turned away to make them a pot of tea.

'That woman's a complete nightmare,' Bill said sympathetically. He tugged Tony Goldstein's thesis out of his robe pocket and slapped it onto the dining table. He eased himself into a chair with a heavy sigh.

'Sorry I'm late and I can't stay long ... Having a bloody hectic day at work,' he griped, 'overrun by mutton-headed fuckers from the Ministry, blathering on about Witchell's New Brooms policies. Utter bullshit if you ask me!

Hermione poured some milk into a jug and brought two mugs and the teapot to the table, where it sat quietly steaming between them.

'What's the latest?' she asked, half in dread.

Bill rubbed his forehead as though his head was hurting from it all. 'The Ministry has banned the removal of British Galleons from the country without its express permission. And a new department has been set up to oversee any foreign transactions.'

'Another new department?'

'Worse still, the Ministry plans to limit international travel – both to and from the country. Everyone will need special permits. They've had the decency, at least, to forewarn Gringotts. We'll get exceptions because, let's face it, the wizarding economy would grind to a halt if we didn't.'

Hermione paled. 'But, that's dreadful, Bill.' She suddenly felt horribly confined; claustrophobic, even. Would she be able to visit Harry in Paris? And WHY were they doing this?

'Yes, it's bad news for Ron,' Bill muttered.

'But how will they monitor it?'

'They'll expand the trace to cover long-distance Apparition. To be honest, that won't affect too many people. Tracking Portkey usage will, though.'

'Hopefully, it'll be easy enough to process travel permits at official Portkey terminals,' Hermione muttered. She didn't like the idea that she'd lost her life in the Muggle world, only to lose her freedom.

She poured them a cup of tea each.

'Anyway, I also bring gladder tidings,' Bill said. He pushed Tony's thesis towards her. The green satin cover had flipped open to reveal a slim parchment booklet inside.
'Not only did I get into this without any trouble, but I also read it – well, most of it. There's a chapter written in ancient runes that I don't recognise – and there's another couple of chapters written in gobbledygook. Lucky for you, I'm one of the few wizards who's fluent.'

Hermione grinned. In spite of their recent tensions over Draco, Hermione admired her clever brother-in-law. He was probably her favourite in-law, the one she was closest to.

'Brilliant, Bill. Thanks.' She randomly flicked through the pages and felt the excitement only engendered by the pursuit of academic discovery surging through her. 'Am I allowed an executive summary before I get to grips with this?'

A broad smile lit up Bill's features. 'I can try. I can definitely summarise the gobbledygook, if you like. As you know, the paper mainly focuses on how to find a cure for Gimlott's Disease.'

She nodded.

'But I'm presuming you're also trying to find out what Gimlott's has to do with Dark Flux?'

'There's definitely a link. *Turning blue*, for starters…'

Bill supped his tea, thoughtfully. 'Well, Goldstein never once mentions Dark Flux, Hermione – unless it's discussed in the ancient runes chapter.'

Hermione immediately grabbed the document and flicked to the chapter written in runes. No, she didn't recognise them either, although she had a vague inkling that she'd seen them somewhere before; were they used in primitive cave painting? … Very few modern scholars would use this type of symbology. Maybe Goldstein's former colleague at Arcana – Binta Koranteng - would know how to read them?

'Having said that,' Bill continued, 'Goldstein goes to greater lengths to explain what Magic *is* than his thesis actually warrants, so I suspect there's buried treasure – if you know what kind of thing you're looking for.'

Hermione was rapidly skim-reading. 'Magical Leptons…' she mused. 'That was what The Geneva Group was studying.'

'Yes. Goldstein has tapped into Muggle science – Particle Physics, mainly - to break down the essence of magic itself into elementary sub-atomic particles. He explains how Magical Leptons are comprised of Hadrons and Baryons, which are themselves made up of Quarks and Anti-Quarks. Are you following this?'

'Oh, yes. I read around the subject when researching The Geneva Group.'

'Well, Goldstein calls the tiniest-tiniest sub-atomic particles, "Quarkons", and shows how they are transmitted as Magical Leptons and do all the usual stuff you'd expect magic to do, once they interact with organic or inorganic matter or states of space or time.'

This was pretty much what Hermione assumed from her own understanding of the topic.

'Basically, when we cast a spell, there's an intrinsic relationship - an interaction, I suppose - between the incantation we use and these Magical Leptons,' Bill continued. 'The power of *meaning* – as used in incantations - has an entire chapter to itself, Hermione; brilliant stuff. Anyway, a 'spell' is effectively a *controlled* interaction, because it is being channelled through our wands or some other device. A Portkey, for example, is able to store the *energy* of the Magical Leptons, until an interaction commands the release of that energy…'
Hermione struggled to conceal her disappointment. There was nothing new or especially insightful here…

'I've had a theory, for some time now, that Dark Flux is effectively a super-surge of Magic,' Hermione said, cutting to the chase. 'And for some reason, that I'm yet to understand, this is more prevalent amongst Epsilons. Does the thesis say anything about that?'

Bill's eyes opened wider. 'It absolutely does! Goldstein is massively focused on Anteractive Quarkons - they're at the heart of understanding Gimlott's Disease, you see. And he goes to great pains to point out that when Anteractivity goes wrong, it can lead to a massive build-up of magical energy – and an uncontrolled dispersal of highly potent Magical Leptons.'

Hermione's heart beat a little faster. 'What's ANTERACTIVE?'

'Well, it's one of Goldstein's golden concepts…'

Hermione excitedly began ripping through the pages of the thesis to find the precise reference. She could see that Goldstein's thesis was a very complicated collection of abstract theories and Arithmantic equations that would require intensive study.

'He discusses Anteraction about ten pages in,' Bill said, helpfully, 'but, in essence, Anteraction is a variation of Interaction – kind of a subversive version…'

'I'm going to need more than that,' Hermione urged. She glanced at his cup of tea. He'd barely drank any, so she figured she had a little more time to press him.

Bill took a deep breath. 'Okay, so all Magical Leptons WANT to interact, they want to follow commands and do magic – it's kind of like a law of nature… And this still holds true when those Magical Leptons are made up of Anteractive Quarkons – as opposed to bog-standard quarkons. So, an 'Expelliarmus' will always be an 'Expelliarmus', for example… BUT, Anteractive Quarkons take a slightly different – though possibly quicker - route to get to their destination. Anteractive Quarkons deliver fluent, fast-flowing magic – something that can make wandless magic easier.'

'But what determines an Anteractive Quarkon? Where do they come from?'

'Well, this is really important, Hermione – only EPSILON and GAMMA blood-types have Anteractive Quarkons as the basis for their magic - and this super-surge of magic only ever happens because Epsilon and Gamma Quarkons have Anteracted,' Bill said. 'It's probably why only Epsilon+ half-bloods develop Gimlott's Disease.'

Hermione's head shot up from her perusal of the thesis on the table between them. 'Did you say GAMMA?' she asked. She'd fully expected to hear that Epsilons had these super-duper Anteractive Quarkons… but Gamma Muggle-borns, too?

'Most definitely! Goldstein talks a lot about the difference between blood-types – or alleles, as he calls them - in Chapter Two. Basically, different blood-types favour different Quarkons – which means some forms of magic come easier to certain blood-types than others… Alpha blood-types, for example, are least likely to perform wandless magic but have astounding stamina – there's a high number of herbologists and healers who are Alphas. And take Beta blood-types – they're relatively rare – Goldstein claims Betas are brilliant innovators; often quirky, creative types.'

Hermione could sense herself instinctively bridling at this, but glancing through Goldstein's thesis, she could see there was a stack of empirical research - a cold, science-based logic - supporting his argument.
Bill grabbed the thesis and began frantically thumbing through the pages. 'I reckon you might find this section particularly interesting, Hermione. Goldstein points out that Gamma Quarkons are very powerful and transmissible, easily matching Epsilons – there's an impressive raw purity to Muggle-born magic. But Gamma magic is the leakiest,' he continued. 'It's why Muggle-born children have far more magical 'accidents' than most – and not just because they don't understand their own powers and have no one to mentor them.'

'I didn't,' Hermione stated flatly.

'Because YOUR special skill was an incredible ability to control your magic, from an earlier age than usual.'

Hermione's cheeks glowed with pride. He was right. Even as a child, when she'd experienced that special 'feeling' that she later knew to be her magical powers, she'd been able to control herself, to keep her emotions in check.

Oddly, that innate self-control seemed to be deserting her now that she was a mature woman. She was angrier, unhappier, but more capable than ever before of feeling pure, unadulterated joy. And she was more passionate, too. She blushed thinking about the way her insides tightened at the mere thought of Draco; how she unabashedly fantasised about him, in ways that had somehow passed her by when she was younger.

'So, is this why Gimlott's only happens to Epsilon+ half-bloods? … Their magical powers flow more freely because they're a mix of Epsilon and Gamma?' Hermione asked.

'That's right,' Bill replied. 'It's an Anteractive double-whammy affecting only Epsilon+ half-bloods born from the combination of an Epsilon pure-blood and a Gamma Muggle-born - and then THEIR children and so on, if the same pattern persists.'

Hermione hazily recalled Tony Goldstein talking about this during that fateful night at Le Bonheur. He'd described Harry as likely being an Epsilon+ blood-type. Presumably, this had to be because his father, James Potter, came from a strongly Epsilon bloodline, while his mother, Lily Evans, was a Muggle-born – a Gamma, just like herself.

A chilling thought occurred to her. 'Are the Weasleys Epsilon?'

Bill squirmed a little. He knew where Hermione was going with this… 'Theoretically, yes, we are... But I strongly suspect our much-fabled Epsilon heritage is a chequered one. Please don't torment yourself worrying about it!'

'So, you don't think Rose and Hugo are at risk from Gimlott's?' Hermione asked more forcefully.

'Don't forget, Gimlott's is only sparked from misuse – or over-use - of magic,' Bill replied, with a reassuring smile. 'It's a suitably cautionary tale to tell your children, Hermione, to stay away from the Dark Arts!'

'And the same applies to James, Albus and Lily, I guess,' Hermione muttered, soberly. 'But Harry… Harry is Epsilon+ and he uses very strong magic in his work… He's in serious danger, isn't he?'

'It's possible,' Bill said, contemplatively.

'And Draco, of course,' she added, more to herself. 'His father was Epsilon+ and the Blacks were Epsilon.'

'Again, he'd be well-advised to steer clear of the Dark Arts,' Bill sniffed, in admonishing tones.
'Well, he's already been shot with some kind of hybridic Gimlott's,' Hermione sighed, 'the healers at St. Gaspard's were treating him with Muggle blood transfusions, to dilute the Magical Quarkons in his blood.'

'Although Draco hasn't ever had REAL Gimlott's, Hermione … not yet at any rate. He was shot with something derived from Gimlott's that replicates its symptoms, but to have true Gimlott's someone has to undergo what Goldstein calls a Latent Zygotic Twist.'

'Okay… explain,' Hermione demanded.

'According to Goldstein, ALL magical folk experience a Zygotic Twist – usually when they're in utero, during the third trimester, or when they're born – this is the moment when their magic switches on for the first time. If the child's magic surges before birth, it's contained by the mother… However, the same sort of thing happens with Epsilon+ witches and wizards who develop Gimlott's. First, they become exhausted through repeated over-use of magic and this can then kickstart their magical powers… almost as though they become a baby or a small child again! …And this keeps happening, over and over… countless exhausting and uncontrolled Anteractions,' Bill said. 'It must be terrifying… Particularly because they never learn to tame these powerful surges, and as time goes on, their bodies and minds simply can't cope.'

Hermione pondered this. 'It sounds terrible…' She thought of Draco and Harry and her heart clenched in fear for them. 'Let's hope Gilgad's cure works,' she mumbled.

Bill arched a quizzical brow. 'Have they found one then?'

'I believe so. I hope so.' She thought about Draco as their real live test-bunny and felt sick with worry.

'There's A LOT on curing Gimlott's in here, as you'd expect.' Bill flicked through the remainder of the thesis and thrust it towards Hermione. 'Goldstein outlines all the various theories and methodologies that have been used to date... there's stacks more information here, in the appendices…' He flicked to the back-end of the thesis. 'The healers at St Gaspard's were absolutely right to use Muggle blood transfusions to help Draco to dilute magical properties in the blood – but it's a very temporary fix. Most traditional treatments have been disastrous – one even involves taking Magi-me-More pills, which is possibly the worst thing a Gimlott's sufferer can do. In the past, leeches were used, and, interestingly, Pompion Potion has been known to halt the progression of Gimlott's - but the obvious side-effect is having a pumpkin head.'

Hermione burst out laughing at this. 'I can't see how a potion would help, actually…'

'Goldstein agrees. He thinks the key is to fundamentally alter the Anteractivity of Epsilon+ Quarkons – but I'm not sure how he plans to do this.'

'I bet there are more clues in that ancient runes chapter,' Hermione said mulishly.

Bill chuckled. 'Probably… Goldstein discusses the importance of analysing Epsilon+ Quarkons in depth and points out that the best way to do this is to extract them straight from the source – the blood, or even better, spinal fluid or bone marrow of an Epsilon+. He's even detected these quarkons in placenta blood and amniotic fluid, and of course, these quarkons are particularly potent in new-born babies.'

Hermione suddenly went cold. 'Oh my god! Bill… do you think that's why there were so many cots at the site in Wanaka?'
Bill gave her a frosty glare. 'Merlin, Hermione! Are you actually suggesting that Gilgad has been taking bone-marrow from new-born Epsilon+ babies? That's repulsive! In any case, harvesting from newborns wouldn't actually be necessary,' Bill pointed out, 'an Epsilon+ kid retains extremely strong Anteractive Epsilon+ Quarkons for some years after birth… though they wane as they get older.'

But Hermione's brain was suddenly alive with a range of horrifying possibilities… 'Row back a moment, Bill,' she gasped. 'You said that this Zygotic Twist – the moment we switch our magic on – it can happen when a baby is BORN, right?'

Bill blinked hard. 'For sure … There can be a brief surge of magic; I can't remember if it's when the baby takes their first breath or when the umbilical cord is cut.'

A heavy feeling settled on Hermione's heart but her mind was racing. 'I - I think I see now how this thesis might be key to Dark Flux,' she reflected. 'Agatha Thrussington told me a disturbing story about a Muggle-born midwife who suddenly collapsed and died when Scorpius Malfoy was born. I couldn't help but wonder if the poor girl died from Dark Flux, but… no - no, that would be-' She trailed off, barely able to bring herself to think it – the thought was unbearable.

Was Scorpius an Epsilon+? Draco was, for sure, and she recalled the Greengrass family being famously boastful of their pure-blood status; but was Astoria an Epsilon pure-blood? She needed to know…

'If Scorpius is Epsilon+ there might have been a sudden surge of this Anteractive Magic during his birth – his Zygotic Twist, as Goldstein calls it? Perhaps that surge would have been enough to kill the midwife?' she suggested to Bill. She felt uncomfortable even saying this out loud, but she had to…

'Don't jump to conclusions, Hermione,' Bill warned. 'If the birth of every single Epsilon+ child caused Dark Flux, it'd be a lot more common and I think Epsilons and Gammas getting together would have been outlawed by now! Far too dangerous a combination!'

Hermione rubbed her eyes, suddenly feeling weary. 'No, you're right, Bill. It's tempting to fit the facts to a theory, but not logical.' She sighed deeply. 'There have to be other factors in play.' She weighed this a moment… Could it be the type of birth? A caesarean, for example? Or multiple births – twins or triplets, for example? Or – or - was it actually Gimlott's itself? What if it was proximity to a Gimlott's sufferer experiencing a Zygotic Twist at exactly the same time as an Epsilon+ birth? That would be a VERY powerful joint event… and a rare occurrence…

'I guess all the ducks have to be in a row…' Hermione murmured to herself. Bill gave her a curious look. 'It's a Muggle saying… anyway, you're right, we need more information.'

Bill nodded. 'And hopefully Tony will turn up soon.' But Hermione didn't share his optimism.

Hermione felt loathe to broach her next area of concern, although it was one close to her heart… 'I can see why Dark Flux would kill Muggles,' she said to Bill, 'a massive surge of Anteractive Epsilon+ magic would simply overwhelm them.'

Bill nodded. 'It would be traumatic and quick.'

'But why Muggle-borns, too?'

He slowly swirled his now-tepid tea in his tea-cup, momentarily lost in thought.

'I don't know … ' he said. 'If faced with an overwhelming super-surge of Epsilon+ magic, a
Muggle-born's own Gamma Quarkons would automatically *Anteract* – remember, that's what Gamma Quarkons are programmed to do. It would be an explosive, devastating process - and it'd take longer to die.' He gave Hermione a regretful look.

'Well, that would explain why other blood-types aren't affected I suspect,' Hermione said, gathering herself. 'They don't *Anteract*.'

Shortly after, Bill headed back to work - leaving Hermione lost in thought.

She knew two things for certain; she had to find out if Astoria Greengrass was an Epsilon – and, by extension, if Scorpius was Epsilon+. And she desperately wanted to discuss all of this with Draco… there was a nagging worry at the back of her mind, that this was somehow critical - for Scorpius's sake…

XXX

Parvati Patil sent a note to say she was finally back in the country - and there was still no news on her sister, Padma. Sadly, Hermione knew this. Percy had kept her informed of the Ministry's 'investigation'… though Hermione was convinced, with McClaggen at the helm, that nothing had happened to trace her.

Hermione, however, had additional reasons to make contact with Parvati as soon as possible.

'You can't be serious! Oh, Hermione…' Parvati spluttered, but her large, brown eyes were soft and pitying. 'I know you've been through a lot lately with all this – this Ministry rubbish, but – you do realise how this sounds, don't you?'

'Yes, you think I've lost the plot.'

And maybe she had? But desperate times called for desperate measures.

She needed to find a way to see Draco, and his travel schedule – the 'Presidential Tour' as the *Daily Prophet* now termed it – was jam-packed. He was hardly ever in the country. But, she knew from Agatha, that there was one day when he would DEFINITELY be here. The day when Astoria was due to meet Scorpius for the very first time…

Parvati was flabbergasted when Hermione asked to join her as an assistant producer – but in disguise…

'I think this calls for a drink,' Parvati announced, casually pouring the best part of a bottle of white wine into two chunky pint glasses and passing one to Hermione, who felt unable to refuse. 'And an explanation.'

Hermione took a small sip of the sharp white wine Parvati had given her. 'Do you mind if I don't give you one?'

Parvati gave her a piercing look. 'Some kind of undercover investigation? Is your suspension from the Ministry an elaborate subterfuge?'

Hermione shook her head. 'No. This is … *Freelance*. I can't say any more than that at the moment.'

'It's not something that's going to blow up in the middle of my interview, is it? Draco being frog-marched off to Azkaban might make for an exciting twist, but I'm new to this business – I'd rather things went smoothly.'
'No, no! Nothing like that!'

'It's the *disguise* bit that worries me…' Parvati said, narrowing her eyes, suspiciously. 'You're obviously hiding from somebody! I'm presuming Draco… you two aren't exactly *friends*, are you?'

Hermione blushed hotly and looked away, glancing around Parvati's home: a bijou, boxy studio-apartment - very messy – and nothing like what Hermione would have expected. 'Do you miss living in Hogsmeade?' Hermione asked. Parvati had been living above the Gladrags shop in Hogsmeade until her departure for WWN, but commuted to work from Widford; a pleasant, leafy market town in Oxfordshire.

Parvati vehemently shook her head. 'I was finding Hogsmeade a bit … oppressive.'

'Really? How?'

'Oh, I dunno. I felt like everybody knew my business; that there was nowhere to hide.'

'Maybe you just needed a change?' Hermione suggested, although she couldn't help but wonder what it was Parvati was wanting to hide from.

Parvati gave a non-committal shrug and heaved a sigh into her brimming pint-glass. Something else was afoot, Hermione thought.

'How long have you been here?'

'Oh, since late last year.' Pre-dating Padma's disappearance…

'Hermione… I'm so grateful to you for taking this interest in my sister. I wish others would, too,' Parvati said with a deep sigh. 'The bastards at the Ministry – they just don't care, do they?' Her eyes suddenly brimmed with unshed tears. 'That OAF – Cormac McClaggen – he told me there's growing evidence that my sister was taking bribes! He says she's probably overcome with remorse and has run away.' The tears were flowing down her cheeks now. 'But Padma wouldn't do something like that.'

'No, she wouldn't,' Hermione agreed. 'Padma's one of the most well-balanced and honest people I know!' She gave Parvati's hand a reassuring squeeze. But why would McClaggen even suggest such a thing? Dark concern bubbled up inside of her.

Parvati squeezed Hermione's hand in return. 'You've always been a good friend to her, Hermione.' She loosened her hand from Hermione's grip and brushed the tears from her face. 'I guess we just wait now? And hope.'

For a moment, Hermione wondered if she should tell Parvati everything… But she seemed too fragile.

'Tell me, then. Who will be at this meeting tomorrow?' she asked instead, in jovial tones. 'And where is it?'

'The Folborough Hotel. It's not a live broadcast – thankfully. It'll be aired the day after,' Parvati explained. 'Astoria and Draco will be there. Lawyers, obviously.'

'Why, OBVIOUSLY?'

'Oh, Astoria wants money – compensation for forgoing her custody rights… something along those lines.' A shadowy look stole over Parvati's face. 'Personally, I hope she takes Draco for everything
he's got! She was given a rotten drubbing when she left him.'

Hermione gulped in alarm, wondering why Draco insisted that Parvati – who clearly wasn't a fan - was the sole interviewer?

'This is all… very irregular, you realise that, don't you?' Hermione said. Not to mention tasteless… Hermione was still bewildered that Draco had agreed to this at all.

'Merlin, yes! It's completely nuts! But our listeners will lap it up. Malfoy melodrama always boosts ratings…'

'Please be gentle with Scorpius,' Hermione begged in a quiet voice. She took another sip of wine, wincing at its warm, acidic tang. 'He doesn't speak.'

'Oh, I'm good with kids. I'm sure I can coax a few words out of him. Have you met him then?'

'Once.' She felt a little tug on her heart as she spoke, remembering his wide-eyed vulnerability.

'Do you think Ephraim will be there?' Parvati asked suddenly.

'I shouldn't think so.' Surely what happened between Draco and his first wife was none of his business … 'I hope, for your sake, that he isn't. He's a bit formidable. Do you know him?'

'A little.' Parvati's eyes darkened as she spoke, before breaking into a smile. 'Okay then, if you really want to be a nosey parker and come along, you can be my Nimbometer technician for the day.'

'What's a Nimbometer?' Hermione asked, just about suppressing a whoop of glee.

'It's a contraption that captures the sound cloud. We then feed what it records into a Sanascope and the interview is stored on Sound Spheres. We then edit the Spheres before broadcast,' Parvati said, her eyes twinkling enthusiastically.

'Well, this is kind you,' Hermione said politely.

Parvati grinned. 'So, what will I say your name is?'

Hermione was stumped. 'Does it matter? Most people don't take any notice of servants – I'll fade into the background.'

'I don't want to accidentally call you Hermione.'

'But there's lots of Hermiones!' 'But you're the most famous.' Parvati tilted her head to one side and scrutinised Hermione. 'Let me think. How about … Jemima? No, Calamandra!' 'Too flashy,' Hermione grunted. 'You're right. Let's call you Flora.'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"VERIDIS QUO" by DAFT PUNK
"THINK I NEED IT TOO" by ECHO & THE BUNNYMEN

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
A Little More Than Kin

Chapter Summary

Draco springs a surprise…

33. A Little More Than Kin

'Come on, Flora! Keep up!' Parvati barked as she strode ahead into the lobby of The Folborough Hotel.

Hermione trotted behind carting an incongruous wooden box adorned with various dials, sprouting an outsized copper dish. It was inordinately heavy.

She tottered precariously in high heels into the terracotta-tiled hallway, through a comfortable-looking lounge into a narrow passageway that led to a small outside garden and patio. A cluster of folded tables and chairs were heaped haphazardly against a high wall.

A light drizzle and a low rolling mist veiled the hillocks and fields that stretched behind the hotel.

'Where exactly are we going?' Hermione called to Parvati's rapidly receding figure marching ahead of her. She had taken a Volubilis Potion to mask her voice and sounded like a deeper, more resonating version of herself. She had aimed for a professional yet casual look – worthy of a technical assistant – and was wearing smart black jeans and a black jumper. She had scrunched her bountiful, brown hair under a floppy, purple cap.

She had hoped to use Polyjuice potion, but couldn't find one at such short notice, so had then considered Fungiface Potion, but worried that she would be so hideously ugly that she would draw too much attention to herself.

In the end, she had raided a box of goodies from Weasley's Wizard Wheezes and found a Dazzle-Me-Down Lotion. Once applied, this face cream didn't change one's appearance, but had the perplexing effect of forcing an observer to lose 'focus' when looking at someone wearing it.

Hermione assumed Torquil Haast would be at this meeting and she didn't want him to recognise her.

But with Draco, she had the opposite problem. She wanted to find a way to speak to him, but this could prove tricky if he wasn't able to focus on her face for more than five milliseconds and she was speaking in a weird, booming voice.

'Over here, Flora!' Parvati shrilled. She was holding a door ajar, leading into an older part of the hotel. Hermione was dripping with sweat by the time she had lugged the Nimbometer to the door.

For a moment, she feared her Dazzle-Me-Down Lotion might have sweated off, but whenever she tried to look at her reflection in a window, she found her eyes constantly being drawn away to stare at the cracked plaster wall, the grained ancient beams criss-crossing the vaulted ceiling, the heavy wooden floorboards and the two large chintz sofas facing each other – adversarial - across a low glass table.
Parvati gestured to a wooden bench positioned against the back wall. 'Set up the nimbometer there, would you?' She nervously smoothed down her long, flyaway hair and dusted down her smart robes in muted, unassuming colours. She put on a pair of large-framed, stylish tortoise-shell glasses, giving her a distinctive air of discreet inscrutability, and fiddled with a parchment covered in thick, black scrawl, which Hermione assumed must be her questions.

Hermione set to positioning the nimbometer's receiver dish in such a way that any voices in the room would be picked up. The function of the numerous dials remained a bit of a mystery to her – despite reviewing the functionality of nimbometers in one of Ron's many 'How to be a Better Auror' guides that were piled high on his bedside table. However, she knew just enough to adjust the sound balance and volume. She was busily doing this, when approaching footfalls and a loud creak at the door signified the arrival of Parvati's interviewees.

Torquil Haast strode into the room, looking sleek and polished. He instantly approached Parvati and took her to one side for a low, whispered conversation. He appeared to be demanding a preview of her questions but, to Hermione's relief, Parvati was made of tougher stuff than she had feared and was politely refusing.

Astoria Greengrass followed soon after, accompanied, to Hermione's horror, by Sylvestra Golowitz.

It was a persistent mystery to Hermione how the Golowitz family always managed to overshadow everyone else in their presence. Sylvestra was her habitual stately self and was evidently handsome, but objectively-speaking, she should have been no more striking than the petite, pretty woman walking beside her. And yet she effortlessly out-shone Astoria, who seemed almost miserable-looking and dowdy in comparison, despite her rich, elegant apparel and brassy, blonde curls.

Parvati seemed a little cowed by Sylvestra's magnificence and visibly quailed on seeing her. She slunk onto one of the sofas and cowered into the corner.

Scorpius, looking pitifully small and uncomfortable trussed into a peacock blue velveteen suit, traipsed behind Sylvestra and his mother. Astoria turned and beamed down at him, then beckoned him to sit beside her on one of the sofas – facing Hermione and the nimbometer.

Sylvestra scowled with displeasure at this. She glided to Parvati's sofa and sat down without even giving Parvati a cursory glance or even an acknowledgement of her presence. Instead, her eyes were fixed firmly on Scorpius, who kept his head bowed, preferring to fiddle with the cuff on his jacket.

Torquil seemed unaccountably nervous and was striding back and forth. They were obviously waiting for Draco and Astoria's legal representative.

Astoria clucked irritably and glanced at a chunky, diamante-encrusted watch, which tightly encircled her slim wrist. 'He said he'd be here a good ten minutes ago,' she sighed. 'What could possibly be keeping him?'

Hermione assumed she must be referring to Draco, but seconds later, a stubby, little man with a balding pate and a plump, porcine face framed by luxuriant, bushy side-burns, scampered into the room, holding aloft a tatty, brown leather briefcase.

'There you are,' Astoria said snidely. 'Did you stop off for a second lunch, somewhere?'

The stubby little man swept his hand across his forehead, scooping away great globules of sweat,
and tried to frame a response.

'I – I was rounding off the final figures with Mr Malfoy,' he gasped, once he had sufficiently caught his breath to speak. He had a heavy, foreign accent, which sounded to Hermione's ears like his words were being smothered with a thick flannel. 'It took longer than I expected.'

Astoria turned sharp, inquisitive eyes towards Sylvestra and Torquil. 'I thought we had an agreement.'

Torquil smiled smoothly and gestured towards Parvati, with a slight movement of his head.

'Nothing is settled, remember?' he cooed. 'There's still everything to play for.'

Parvati threw a knowing glance in Hermione's direction. Together, they'd conjectured that this meeting was nothing but a façade – a PR scam designed to elevate both parties' profiles. Although why Ephraim, or even Draco, felt any need to do this, when their family affairs already dominated most pages of the *Daily Prophet*, had completely baffled them.

'Of course, Mr Haast,' Astoria simpered, 'and may the best man – or woman – win!' She prettily pursed her pert, little mouth into an unassuming smile, but Hermione could sense that she was seriously rattled by her lawyer's revelation.

'We're just waiting for Draco, then?' Sylvestra asked Torquil.

He nodded. 'It would seem so … although,' and here he turned to Parvati, who was poised with her parchment beside him, 'I see no need for Miss Patil to be delayed any longer.' He scanned the rest of the company, seeking approval, and as no one said otherwise – Sylvestra was too busy inspecting her nails with studied nonchalance to even bother looking up - he signalled to Parvati to begin.

Parvati perched on the sofa, tilted away from Sylvestra. To Hermione's dismay, she was looking nervous; the parchment juddered in her hand.

'I just wanted to say that I'm very grateful that you have selected WWN to report on this – this most famous and heartfelt reunion,' she said. Her voice quavered a little but then strengthened. 'It's a great honour.'

Everyone nodded in polite agreement.

'I'll start with a few introductory words, if I may, for the nimbometer,' Parvati explained.

Reading from her script at a galloping pace, Parvati rattled off a brief outline of the events leading up to today's 'momentous negotiation'. Her shaking hand was more pronounced now that everybody's eyes were fixed on her.

Once finished, she asked Astoria some questions about her life in Brazil, how she felt about Lucius Malfoy dying, how long she was intending to stay …

'Well, that depends,' Astoria said demurely, 'on the generosity and hospitality of my family.'

'YOUR family?' Parvati asked, nonplussed. Hermione was similarly confused; as far she knew, Astoria's sister, Daphne, had married an Australian sheep-farmer and now lived somewhere with a funny name in The Outback, and both their parents were dead.

'My family,' Astoria repeated rather robotically, 'the Malfoys.'
'Oh! I see,' Parvati replied, clearly not seeing at all.

Astoria's stubby lawyer was fidgeting with the buttons on his waistcoat in a most distracting manner. His obvious anxiety seemed to infect his client. 'I must say,' Astoria said, with a soft, tinkling laugh, which somehow seemed to betray her true agitation, 'I thought my husband would at least grace us with his presence!'

'Your EX-husband,' Sylvestra said tersely.

'He'll be here soon, Mrs Malfoy, I've no doubt,' Torquil said, stepping forwards and proffering his most obsequious smile.

Hermione was briefly confused by this. The words, 'Mrs Malfoy,' had instantly conjured up an image of Narcissa in her mind. But of course, Astoria had never remarried.

Torquil urgently spun his finger at Parvati, prompting her to continue. She took a deep breath and focused intently on Astoria.

'When you say generosity and hospitality, Mrs Malfoy, does that mean you intend to stay at Malfoy Manor?' Parvati asked – rather bravely, Hermione thought.

'Well, it all depends …' Astoria began, but Hermione didn't catch the end of her sentence because the nimbometer was making an odd, clicking sound. She gently eased one of the dials a couple of notches to the left and the sound died down.

The conversation had swiftly moved on. '… Of course, once I'm settled, Scorpius would be most welcome to come and stay with me,' Astoria stated flatly, 'but really, it would be better for the child to remain in his own home I should think, and I would stay with him.'

'No, no, that won't do,' Sylvestra said in loud, declamatory tones that rang around the room. 'We agreed that Scorpius could visit you - but for a very limited period – and only while you were in the country.'

Torquil danced into view. 'May I say, Mrs Malfoy, that I believe Miss Golowitz is entirely correct on this particular point?' He looked small and spindly and there was something repellently insectoid about him, Hermione thought, rather wickedly.

'I think you should see the matter from Mrs Malfoy's point of view,' grunted Astoria's stubby lawyer. 'Mrs Malfoy has travelled very far to see her son.'

'Mrs Malfoy came to pay her respects to her sadly-deceased father-in-law,' Torquil said pointedly. 'Or at least that's what she told us.'

'Oh, but I did, Torquil,' Astoria said plaintively, looking for a brief moment, like she had been suddenly plunged into the darkest, most impenetrable abyss of dark depression. 'That man! That wonderful, marvellous man! He meant such a lot to me!'

Parvati let out an involuntary snort of barely-contained laughter, which she managed to smother into the sleeve of her robe. Astoria shot her a venomous, sidelong glance and Scorpius now turned his large, sad eyes towards Parvati, too. His face cracked into a bright grin that lit up his face. It was a miracle of a smile, Hermione thought, completely transforming his pinched, sallow features into a picture of unalloyed joy. It was as though he was welcoming a long-lost friend.

Maybe Parvati had been right when she said she had a way with children? The rapt, contented expression on Scorpius's face was really quite extraordinary.
His quietly delirious reaction prompted Sylvestra to study Parvati more closely as well, and her examination appeared to reap equally surprising results. Her jaw dropped open and a mixture of shock and bafflement crept across her face - but she quickly reined it in.

'Would you mind if I continued the interview?' Parvati asked hesitantly.

'No - yes, carry on.' Sylvestra replied, tripping over her words.

'Now, Astoria, I realise this might be quite painful for you …' Parvati said, adopting an unctuous tone that Hermione hadn't believed was possible of her. Maybe she had a bright future in this business, after all.

'But I want you to reflect a little on when you left England, all those years ago,' Parvati continued.

Astoria was clearly well-primed for this line of questioning and even seemed to welcome it. She heaved a well-practiced sigh and clutched her hands tightly in her lap.

'Merlin … such painful memories,' she croaked – although it was an oddly sweet-sounding croak, almost a 'mew' – 'I'll never forget that final, fateful moment.'

Hermione tensed. Was she going talk about what happened when Scorpius was born?

But, no. Astoria embarked on a long, tearful tale of her gazing serenely at England's fair and bounteous landscape, the pleasant green hills fading from her view … her arrival in a steamy, foreign land, friendless and alone.

'Well, that's not entirely true, is it?' sniped Draco, who came bounding into the room, briefly flanked by Milton, Narcissa's trusty house-elf, resplendent in full braided livery, who then ducked out of the room and closed the door. 'You were neither friendless OR alone, if I remember correctly.'

Hermione felt her stomach turn over and couldn't help but break into a broad grin. She sunk back against the wall, hoping she was sufficiently obscured by the shadows and the ridiculously bulky nimbometer.

The soft, dreamy look on Astoria's face was instantly extinguished and her mouth twitched irritably. 'Finally bother to show up, do you?' she crowed.

Draco shuffled onto the sofa next to his son and stretched out his long legs in front of him, almost kicking over the low glass table. He had a healthy-looking tan and his eyes were clear and bright. Hermione wondered if he had already trialled the Gimlott's treatment. He was wearing the black trench coat Harry had procured for him in Paris over black jeans and a cream silk shirt, which was open at the neck, exposing his silver roses pendant.

Except … there were now two roses …

He smiled warmly at Parvati and she, in turn, seemed genuinely pleased to see him, despite her tirade just the night before.

'How are you keeping?' he asked. Hermione wondered if there was a stab of tenderness in the way he looked at her – had she imagined it? He obviously knew her sister was missing.

'I'm good,' Parvati said. 'Thank you,' she added in a small, quiet voice. She rustled her parchment distractedly.
'It feels like forever since I last saw you,' Draco said; almost wistfully, Hermione thought. It was then that Draco clocked Scorpius's dazed adoration of Parvati, with obvious bewilderment. 'Have you two met before?' he asked archly.

'No, I've never had the pleasure,' Parvati replied, more to Scorpius than his father. Her smile dimpled her cheeks as she spoke. Scorpius looked momentarily perplexed.

Sylvestra sighed impatiently. 'Really, Draco ... Can we just get on with this?'

Click – Click – Click - Click …

Hermione's attention was swiftly drawn back to the nimbometer; clicking at an alarmingly noisier level than before.

Click – Click – Click – Click – Click …

She had to stop it before it hit the sort of decibel level that intruded on the meeting – and pulled unwanted eyes in her direction.

She tussled impatiently with the dials, praying it would stop.

The burble of conversation in the room continued beyond the clicking, which only seemed to get louder and louder … This is not a healthy machine, Hermione thought, groaning with frustration. She desperately wanted to hear what was being said.

The clicking finally eased.

'… I think you'll find everything's in order,' Torquil was saying, flapping a long scroll of parchment into view. He placed it, with considerable aplomb, onto the low glass coffee table and all parties – bar Scorpius – tipped forwards to read it. Sylvestra shot Parvati a warning look and Parvati swiftly retreated, backing away from the contract. She glanced over at Hermione, firing a quick thumbs up in her direction.

Hermione nodded and smiled wanly. She could feel Draco was looking over at her … but his eyes quickly slipped away again.

'This is a very generous offer,' Torquil said buoyantly, to no one in particular.

'It's reasonable,' Astoria sniffed.

'But not enough,' her lawyer said pithily.

'It's what we agreed,' retorted Draco, in cutting tones. He slumped against the arm of the sofa and tightly crossed his arms. 'I'm not made of money, you know!'

'But my dear, sweet client has endured great torments. These past years have been a very trying time. She needs compensation.'

'For what?' sneered Draco. 'For services rendered? Because if so, I think you're talking to the wrong guy.'

'For the terrible trauma she has suffered,' Astoria's lawyer said. He rolled his eyes melodramatically.

'It's okay, Gordano,' Astoria said sweetly. She delicately brushed her hand against his arm, a light warning to desist. 'I can handle this.'
'But, no!' proclaimed her chivalrous, Latin protector. 'You have been sinned against by these people. They would rather rip your heart from your chest and feed it to the dogs than give you all that you deserve!'

'It would be cheaper,' Draco scoffed.

'Gordano! Please keep calm!' Astoria's eyes flashed a warning. 'This is the best way … for everybody!'

'I'm sorry, but I'm a bit lost,' interjected Parvati, 'and I think the listeners of WWN will be, too,'

'The blessed listeners of WWN won't ever hear THIS part of the conversation, Miss Patil,' Torquil said curtly. 'You'll be editing it out.'

'Oh, no. That's not in our contract.'

'I'll think you'll find it is, actually,' Torquil sneered.

'Ah … I see your devilish little game. I see it clearly in mine own eye!' Gordano declared, moving into the centre of the room. He tapped his nose with a pudgy finger and winked. 'You don't want the people of the public to know that Mrs Malfoy was witness to a most dastardly murder!'

'That's enough now!' barked Sylvestra, instantly rising up from the sofa. Her statuesque presence suddenly seemed to cast a vast shadow, encompassing the whole of the room and everybody in it.

'No, my lady!' Gordano said defiantly. He tossed his nose into the air, nostrils quivering in outrage, and stared up at Sylvestra. 'It is time the truth was known!'

'Gordano! Stop it! I'm commanding you!' Astoria shrilled, jumping up from the sofa with such force, poor Scorpius was bounced onto the floor. He quickly scrambled under the glass table and curled up at Parvati's feet, tugging the hem of her robe over his head.

'No, no, my love! This is for the best!' Gordano bellowed. His face was puce with self-righteous passion and there was a frenzied gleam in his eyes - a look of unadulterated exultation that came from recognising a supremely valuable blackmailing opportunity. 'That poor young midwife – a defenceless Muggle – cruelly murdered by this man's father!' he thundered, swivelling to point a trembling finger at Draco on the sofa. '… And my poor, sweet, innocent client, freshly blooded from the birthing bed, forced to witness such a terrible thing!'

Astoria gasped and her hand shot to her mouth as though she was trying to stop her teeth from exploding out of their gums.

'Enough!' yelled Torquil. He bid Sylvestra to sit down again with a wild flap of his hands. She slowly obeyed, eyeing him with unconcealed contempt and dismay. 'None of this is relevant – or necessarily even true – to the matter in hand!' Torquil argued forcefully. He grabbed the parchment and brandished it in the air. 'THIS is what counts. This contract which all parties have AGREED upon. Can we please regroup and focus our efforts on signing the bloody thing?'

Draco suddenly burst into a prolonged fit of uncontrollable giggles. Everyone turned and stared at him in steely, disapproving silence.

'To hell with it! Give her the whole bloody lot,' he drawled, wiping tears from his eyes.

'DRACO!' Sylvestra hissed. 'Don't be such a fool!'
Draco’s mirth gradually wilted in the face of her white-faced fury. He shrugged, helplessly ... 'It's not being a fool. It's being honest. What happened must have been totally traumatising to Astoria. Why deny it?'

He closed his eyes and sank back into the sofa, head lolling on the cushions behind him. He flicked his eyes open and stared at the ceiling then brusquely switched attention to Gordano, who was growing increasingly pink and angry with puffed-up outrage. 'And the poor girl was a Muggle-born, Gordano. Get your bloody facts right,' he said in cold, laconic tones. 'And my father did NOT kill her. That's an outrageous slander.'

'So how did she die?' Parvati asked, in a small, tremulous voice.

Draco snapped his eyes away from Gordano and levelled a stern gaze at her. Parvati seemed to shrivel a little, but she held her ground.

Torquil suddenly surged forwards. 'I'm sorry, Miss Patil, but we have to end this interview.'

'No, we don't,' Draco said peevishly.

'No. We do.' Torquil glared at Draco then looked over at Hermione and snapped his fingers. 'Miss ... erm ... Turn off that nimbometer. Right now.'

Parvati jumped up from the sofa. She looked furious.

'You can't order my staff about! We had a deal!'

'Not any more we don't!' Torquil fired back.

'She's not even trying!' screeched Sylvestra, who had been watching, out of the corner of her eye, Hermione's befuddled attempts to control the machine. 'Turn that bloody thing off!'

To Hermione's horror, everyone's heads suddenly swivelled in her direction. She frantically set to switching the dials, but in her panic, one of the knobs came off in her hand and the nimbometer began clicking furiously, louder and louder, before graduating into a strange, sonic whine that screeched higher and higher through the octaves.

'Shit,' she muttered under her breath, grabbing the broken dial and forcing it onto the machine, but it wouldn't stick.

'Oh, for fuck's sake,' Sylvestra snarled. Hermione dared to look up, just in time to see Sylvestra marching across the room towards her, wand outstretched, but she was halted in her tracks by a loud, crunching crash.

Shards of glass scattered across the floor prompting Astoria to leap away from the sofa with a frightened whimper, while Parvati scooped Scorpius up from the floor and retreated to the relative safety of the back wall. The child threw his arms tightly around her neck and glared at his father with a mixture of pity and resentment.

Draco was standing amidst the ruins of the glass table, a livid look on his face ... 'You're over-reacting - all of you!' he growled, seemingly unaware of the comic yet terrifying irony of the situation.

'You i-d-ii-ot!' Gordano yelped, hoisting his wand from his robes with enraged intent and targeting it at Draco.
There was an immediate cry of 'Expelliarmus!' and Gordano's wand was flung high into the air with ferocious force … falling with a satisfying smack into Torquil's outstretched palm.

'But he's right,' Torquil said, in cooler tones to Draco, 'there's no need for thuggish behaviour. Get a grip on yourself!' He addressed the room in a tone of calm civility. 'Let's all dial down the emotions, please. This is a professional negotiation - and Sylvestra, just turn that bloody machine off … the girl's clearly an incompetent.'

Sylvestra rounded on the nimbometer and swiped at it viciously with her wand, slapping the receiver with a resounding thwack and toppling the nimbometer onto the floor. Hermione gasped in surprise. She hadn't expected Sylvestra to unleash physical force when she had a wand in her hand!

But the nimbometer was still whirring and clicking and whining – a little limply, but still very much alive. Hermione knelt beside it and frantically jammed the broken dial back onto the machine in a desperate attempt to re-attach it - and to avoid facing Sylvestra.

'Get out of my way, you fool!' snarled Sylvestra. She barged heavily into Hermione, knocking her backwards against the wall, and finally silenced the nimbometer with a brisk and explosive swish of her wand.

Hermione barely had time to react. She was too shocked by the sudden 'blackness' that swamped her, the moment Sylvestra shoved her body against hers.

At first, she thought she had been knocked out, but quickly realised she was fully conscious and that this strangely terrifying sensation was something entirely different. It wasn't a normal synaesthesia reaction, because Sylvestra wasn't a normal kind of black. This was a depth of black beyond anything she had ever experienced; a complete hollowing out of colour, of life, of light.

She couldn't help but gasp.

Parvati, with Scorpius in tow, was quickly by her side. 'Are you okay?'

'Yes,' she replied, still reeling a little from the shock of what had just happened. 'Sorry, I don't know what came over me. Everything just went … black … I'm okay now … Should have eaten breakfast!'

Sylvestra was looming over her, a strange look in her eye. Hermione immediately registered the terrible danger she was in and desperately tried to blank her mind.

Sylvestra was smiling sweetly – even considerately - but her look was piercing, seemingly in defiance of the illusory effects of Hermione's Dazzle-Me-Down Lotion. Hermione could sense her mental defences being probed with sudden brutal and cataclysmic efficiency. The attack was horrifying in its sudden violence.

Hermione gritted her teeth and held on, all the while straightening her hat which had become dislodged when she fell, allowing her voluminous, bushy hair to flood out over her shoulders.

Draco had arrived. He pushed himself between her and Sylvestra and knelt down, gripping her firmly by the arms to hoist her up. Until that moment, Hermione hadn't even realised she was lying flat on the floor … All she wanted to do was to flop against Draco and bury her face against him, but there was no chance of that. Parvati immediately steered her into a sitting position on the bench and Draco's long, black coat was fast retreating back to the centre of the room.

'Right, let's get this over with,' he said in a firm, clear voice. 'I can't have this stupid business
hanging over me. I've other things to do, other people to see … important things.' He leered menacingly at Gordano.

'So, darling, what's the deal?' Astoria said. She suddenly seemed poised and unperturbed by the ruckus that had erupted around her; business-like.

Draco stared at her, then rubbed his eyes, as though a wave of weariness had taken him by surprise.

'I'm going to write you a cheque. A nice big fat cheque,' he said. He raised a finger at Torquil, who had already opened his mouth to protest. 'It'll be a better deal than you asked for and will mean you never feel the need to ask me for as much as a single sickle, ever again.'

He fished a chequebook out of his pocket and grabbed a quill from Gordano and moved to a side-table to sit down and write the cheque. 'I suggest, Astoria, that you take a break, maybe a road trip? But avoid America for a wee bit. I'm off there myself in a couple of hours. Or … what about somewhere nice and warm? … Again, though, as I suspect I'm the last person you'll want to be running into, I'd advise against Israel. I have an important work trip coming up there. Or, what about Egypt?' Draco continued. 'Nice and hot. Some good beaches, I believe. Lots of ruins, although culture's not your thing, really, is it?' He tore out the cheque he'd just written, shook his head, scrunched it up and threw it into a wastepaper bin.

He started to write another.

Sylvestra glared at Hermione and Parvati. 'Get that stupid machine packed up, pronto, and get out of here,' she snapped. 'You do realise you can't use ANY of this for your silly little radio show,' she said to Parvati, a smug smile on her face.

Torquil tried to calm matters. 'I don't think that's strictly true, Sylvestra,' he reasoned. 'A little bit of judicious editing, excising …'

'A little bit of Obliviating would be much more logical,' Sylvestra said in scolding tones, staring down at Hermione, Parvati and Scorpius, who was cowering in the folds of Parvati's skirt. 'Not you, my love,' Sylvestra added, gazing at him with fond adoration.

Torquil hurried towards them. 'Your father was very determined about this. He wants a radio show – a happy clappy radio show, and that's what he'll get,' he said through gritted teeth. 'Miss Patil,' he said in placatory tones, 'I apologise for this … commotion. I'll run through the Sound Spheres with you tomorrow, and we can put something together that satisfies - ALL parties.'

'But, Mr Haast, It's WWN policy that…'

'I wouldn't even bother if I were you, Parvati,' Draco piped up from his side of the room. 'Better to just do as he says.'

Parvati looked close to tears.

'It's okay,' Hermione said, soothingly. 'We'll see what we can make of it.'

'I'm still Astoria MALFOY,' Astoria said firmly to Draco. Her gaze had never once left Draco's face and she had edged closer to the table where he was sitting.

Draco gave her a sanctimonious smile. 'Don't you worry your pretty little head, Astoria, darling. I've written the cheque correctly.' He folded it into a paper aeroplane and blew it, with a little bit of magical assistance, straight at her.
She scurried to check the amount and her hand flew to her mouth involuntarily. 'Oh, Draco, that's very kind of you. So generous!'

Draco had pulled out another cheque and was now writing on the back with fast, furious strokes of Gordano's quill.

'Well, like I said, you could do with a nice break. Although, thinking about it, I wouldn't bother with Egypt, either. I've heard there's some serious trouble brewing out there... If I was there and magical, I'd think about getting out - bit of a crackdown coming – only way in or out will be Gringotts, so you might be best talking to Bill Weasley – he handles Egypt.'

Hermione stopped packing up the nimbometer and stared straight at Draco. He knew she was here, she felt sure of it! Somehow, he'd seen her …

At that same moment, Draco looked over to her. His silver eyes lingered on her face for a few moments longer than she felt the Dazzle-Me-Down Lotion warranted. First, Sylvestra … perhaps. Now, Draco. But it was too soon for the effects to be wearing off …

'Or, Astoria, if I recall correctly, you enjoy city breaks … how about Paris?' Draco said, switching his attention back to his ex-wife. 'City of Romance. You lived there for a while, didn't you, Torquil? Still got a place, I believe – maybe you could stay there, Astoria, if Torquil lets you? Nice neck of the woods … Where was it again?'

Torquil had been quietly signing the long parchment contract with Gordano, who was much more contented with the situation since Astoria had flashed him the cheque, so he didn't catch what Draco was saying.

Sylvestra, however, was sat stock-still on the sofa, and was watching Draco, in studied silence.

'You know where,' she muttered darkly.

'Ah, yes. Montmartre, that was it,' Draco continued. 'Milton!' he called, clicking his fingers.

Milton Apparated straight to his side and bowed. 'Yes, Master?'

'Cut me,' Draco said, rapidly rolling up a sleeve.

'Yes, Master,' Milton said, slashing Draco with a tiny, silver knife. A thick droplet of blood spooled from a thin red line on Draco's arm and slopped onto the cheque, followed by a brief fizz and a whiff of white smoke.

'What are you doing?' Astoria gasped.

Draco presented the cheque to Milton. 'Hand it over,' he said. 'And then head straight home and look after Mother.'

Astoria grabbed the second cheque eagerly, but her face fell.

'It's blank!' she moaned.

'No. I've written a letter. It's legally binding. Irrefutable blood-bond, I believe, likely to withstand any court of law … look on the back.'

'What's going on? Hand me that straight away!' Torquil cried.

'What's the meaning of this, Draco?' Astoria screeched. 'I CAN'T!'
'Yes, you can. And you will!' Draco fired back. Hermione could see that he was trembling. She instantly jumped up from the bench, adrenalin surging through her.

Something was wrong, terribly wrong.

'You can't expect me to do this,' Astoria remonstrated, tearfully.

'He's your son. OUR son!' Draco bellowed. Scorpius, who had been sitting in sullen silence throughout, now looked up at his father - a pleading look in his large, blue eyes.

'No …' Hermione breathed. 'No, you can't.' She stood up, compelled to try and stop what was unfolding, and would have dashed, unthinking, towards him, if it hadn't been for Parvati's hand grabbing hold of her jumper and jerking her backwards.

Gordano snatched the letter Draco had written and quickly read it.

'It's for the best,' Draco said meekly.

Gordano turned to Astoria, who was suddenly grey with anguish. 'Full custody. It's what you said you wanted.'

Astoria was shaking her head. 'I didn't mean it,' she whimpered.

Draco placidly rolled down his shirt-sleeve and fastened his coat as though preparing to leave. Hermione could see that his hands were shaking so badly, he could barely do up the buttons. She desperately wanted to step in and help.

Sylvestra had suddenly clocked what was happening … a look of utter bewilderment contorted her lovely features. 'What - what the hell? You can't do this, Draco …' she gasped. 'You've gone crazy.'

'Stay out of it, Sylvestra,' Draco growled, pocketing his cheque-book. He threw an anxious glance in Scorpius's direction.

'NO!' Sylvestra screeched. She threw herself at Draco, scratching and kicking, but he pushed her off with surprising ease and turned his back on her, swiftly moving away from her grasp.

'Shit, Hermione,' Parvati whispered, as realisation dawned. 'He's giving his son away.'

Hermione nodded, furious that her eyes were welling up with hot tears – tears that could betray both her identity and her feelings.

'And I bet I'm not allowed to write a thing about it …' Parvati added, with a pained sigh.

The situation was just too much for Scorpius. He launched himself at his father, in a fervour of wild-eyed panic, grabbing onto his coat. Draco fell to his knees and scooped him into a tight embrace, trying to calm the child with soft kisses on his hair and face, gentle whispers. The harsh, pealing sound of Scorpius's sobbing cut through the over-excited babble and confusion, throwing everyone into stunned silence.

'You cruel, CRUEL man!' Sylvestra shrieked, half-hysterical. 'Wait till my father hears about this! AND YOUR MOTHER!'

'This is what I want,' Draco said fiercely to Sylvestra, cradling Scorpius against his chest. 'The boy has a right to be with his mother.' But as he spoke, his face crumpled and he hugged the child tighter, so that both father and son were clutching each other as though their lives depended on it,
visibly shaking with emotion.

'I think we should head home and talk about this in a calm, sober manner,' Torquil said with icy froideur.

'You're my fucking lawyer, you do what I say,' Draco snarled. 'And this is my will. My legally-binding will … This is what I want. It's what I want for Scorpius. Astoria! …' he called out, ' … cash the cheque today at Gringotts. And get away from here … get lost somewhere beautiful …'

'I'LL NEVER FORGIVE YOU FOR THIS!' Sylvestra screamed. Her face was dark and wild. She suddenly grabbed Scorpius, desperately trying and failing to extricate him from Draco's tight grasp; in her frustration, she was throwing punches at Draco's face and back, before pulling her wand out and stabbing it against his chin, pinning him backwards onto the floor. Scorpius wriggled out of his father's grasp, a harsh, guttural rattling sounded in his throat and Hermione dashed forwards and scooped him into her arms.

'No, Missy, NO,' Gordano said firmly, stepping forwards and pinioning Sylvestra's arms to her sides.

'He's right,' Torquil muttered. 'Leave him. Leave it for now. We've other ways of dealing with this…'

Sylvestra slowly lowered her wand, threw her head back and roared …

Torquil looked pale and scared. 'I do apologise for this – this disturbance,’ he said to Parvati, desperately adopting a business-like manner. 'Mr Malfoy hasn't been himself, lately. He's been through a lot of stress … We've – We've all been very upset – by events.'

'He's an IDIOT,' Sylvestra sneered. She shook her head at Draco, teeth bared, eyes blazing. But it was all too clear that the stormy maelstrom was quickly passing … she suddenly seemed exhausted. 'We'll talk later,' she spat. Her voice was scratchy and indistinct so it wasn't clear if she was addressing Torquil or Draco. Then she tightly shut her eyes and took a single, great gasping breath and Apparated.

A momentary wave of relief rippled around the room.

Torquil turned to Gordano. 'Thank you for your help there, sir … that could have got rather nasty.' His sleeked black hair had flopped onto his face and a fierce twitch had taken possession of his right eye. He turned to Hermione. 'And – thanks to you, too, Miss …?'' Torquil tried to fix his eyes on her but ended up staring at the floor, at the wall, at the small child shaking with fright in her arms.

'Flora …' Hermione said in a loud, clear voice that resonated through the room. She could sense that Draco was staring at her.

He stumbled to his feet, looking like a broken man.

Astoria flew towards him, and hung on his arm, a desperate look on her face.

'Sylvestra was right,' she said softly. 'You don't have to do this, Draco, darling. Truly, you don't.'

'Oh, but I do. I really do,' he said, grimacing, holding Hermione's gaze in his own.

*He can see me,* she thought. *He can see me.*
He tried to move away from Astoria but she shadowed him, trying to block him as he tried to escape her. Torquil interceded, gently pulling Astoria away. 'Let the man go,' he said, and he steered Astoria back to Gordano.

Draco approached Hermione, pulling Katya's necklace over his head. His eyes were fixed on Scorpius. 'It's for the best, buddy,' he said softly, with a cheery smile on his face that didn't match the glistening grey of his eyes. 'You're going to have a great time and I'll see you soon enough … I love you.'

He thrust the necklace into Hermione's hand and for a brief moment, his hand closed over hers and his thumb gently stroked her wrist.

'Keep them safe, Beautiful,' he whispered, and his lips lightly brushed against her ear as he spoke. He fondly ruffled Scorpius's hair and then Apparated.

Hermione was almost shocked to see Torquil hurtling towards her, but the moment Draco had gone, he braked hard. 'Where did he go?' he asked, nonplussed. Then, looking rather desperate, Torquil heaved a huge sigh and Apparated as well.

'Now what?' Astoria cried, all poise and refinement swept away. She looked at Scorpius as though he was something to be feared, not loved.

'We get out of this place,' Gordano said cheerily. He was holding Draco's cheque.

'But I can't leave the boy,' Astoria said plaintively. 'He's my son.'

Parvati stepped forward. 'No, you can't! You have to look after him.'

'You know, Astoria, kids … they don't like me so much,' Gordano shrugged. 'I'll go to Gringotts and you can meet me there when you're finished up here. What do you say to that?'

Astoria's face darkened. 'What do you take me for? An imbecile?' she shrilled. She strode up to him, hand outstretched. 'Give me my money … I'll go to Gringotts, later.'

Gordano reluctantly handed her the cheque and with a parting sigh, he too, Apparated.

Astoria swung around and gazed at Scorpius in Hermione's arms. 'What a mess,' she sighed. 'I haven't actually got anywhere to go, and until I get this cheque cashed, I can't even pay for my bill here,' her eyes slid towards the shattered glass table.

To Hermione's surprise, Parvati was ferreting through the wastepaper bin.

'Parvati, do you know anywhere I could stay? Temporarily, obviously,' Astoria said in melancholic tones. 'I wouldn't be any trouble.'

'Somehow, I doubt that,' Parvati sniggered. She was uncrumpling a piece of paper that Hermione now realised was the first cheque Draco had written and then discarded. She read what he had written and looked directly at Hermione, her brow creased in confusion.

'How weird … Who the hell is EVANDER SEZIGNAC?'

The name was familiar, Hermione thought; where had she heard it before?

'Never heard of him,' Astoria declared. 'Draco always was a bit eccentric,' she said by way of explanation.
But Hermione was too busy racking her brain to pay much attention to Astoria.

'Seems an odd thing for him to do, though, doesn't it?' Parvati said. She knelt down beside Hermione and grinned at Scorpius, who looked shell-shocked.

'Yes, it IS an odd thing to do,' Astoria sighed, 'I mean, fancy deserting his own son … the Malfoy heir, no less!'

'YOU deserted him,' Hermione said, pointedly. Scorpius squirmed uncomfortably in her arms. She instantly regretted her brutal tone. 'Although, you clearly had your reasons,' she hastened to add. 'What matters now is the fun you and Scorpius are going to have together!'

At first, Astoria looked as though she had swallowed a wasp, but her eyes darted to the bewildered child and she bravely attempted a semblance of a smile.

'Yes, Scorpius, a nice holiday. Somewhere warm … just as your father wanted,' Astoria said in cloying tones. 'That'll be nice, won't it?'

Scorpius turned large, blue eyes towards Parvati. His lower lip trembled slightly but he was clearly making a bold effort to bottle in any tears that threatened to follow.

Parvati reached out and stroked Scorpius's hand. 'I think we should get out of this place,' she murmured.

'I agree,' Hermione said … Evander Sezignac. Evander Sezignac. The name kept rolling round and round in her head … 'I'd suggest Apparating back to mine but could be tricky with the kids.' A massive understatement, Hermione thought … Not only were Rose and Hugo going to be at home, but Molly was going to be with them.

'What about me?' Astoria cried. 'You can't just leave me here – with him.' She eyed Scorpius dubiously.

'We don't intend to,' Hermione said crossly.

Astoria suddenly gasped and she leapt backwards, almost tripping in the process. 'Oh, Merlin!' she said shakily, 'I can't believe I didn't notice it before … but the resemblance is startling!'

Hermione's heart sank. The Dazzle-Me-Down lotion was clearly wearing off.

'HERMIONE GRANGER!' Astoria yelped. 'But, it can't be? Why would YOU be working for … HER?' she continued, looking at Parvati with a befuddled look on her face.

'She doesn't,' Parvati said crisply. 'She was helping me out.'

'Unless – unless …' Astoria's eyes were round with horror. 'Puta que cariu! You're police, aren't you? You're working UNDERCOVER …'

'It's not what it seems, Astoria,' Hermione reasoned.

'No – it's WORSE. We have this kind of thing all the time in Brazil … famous children with rich parents being kidnapped!' She paced up and down as she spoke, her blonde curls bouncing furiously. 'Draco took fright and has shoved the problem on to me! Fucking typical, useless man!'

'No, Astoria!' Hermione yelled, desperate to calm the situation quickly. 'That's not it at all!'

Astoria stopped pacing and stood, stock-still, wringing her hands in despair. 'Am I in DANGER?'
she gasped.

You soon will be if you carry on like this, Hermione thought to herself, grinding her teeth in silent fury. She could feel her wand thrumming ominously in her back pocket.

'We can't go to my place,' Parvati said, clearly wanting to inject some practicality into proceedings. Hermione silently agreed. Parvati's quarters were far too small to accommodate both Astoria and Scorpius – even as a stopgap solution.

'When does Gringotts close?' Astoria was fondling the cheque Draco had given her, a dangerous glint in her eye. No … that wouldn't do, Hermione thought. Scorpius couldn't have two parents bail on him in one day!

'I – I might have an idea where we could go,' she said hesitantly. 'I need to find a phone.'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"KEYBOARD SONATA in F MINOR; KK239"

by Domenico Scarlatti

"SOMETHING TO REMEMBER ME BY" by THE HORRORS

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Chapter Summary

Astoria spills the beans and Hermione and Harry make a disturbing discovery…

34. A Sterile Promontory

'I can't thank you enough for this, Gwen. It'll only be for a few days,' Hermione said.

'It's fine; I could do with the company,' although the way Gwen looked at Astoria, huddled on Uncle Derek's armchair in a semi-catatonic state, was not wholly promising. 'It gets a bit lonely coming back to an empty house after sitting with Dad. Mum's gone to Bristol to stay with her sister and Alfred's off camping with his Dad.'

'How is he?' Hermione asked. They both knew she was referring to Uncle Derek.

Gwen puckered her lips and her eyes welled up as she spoke. 'There's talk of moving him to a hospice once a place comes available. I'm meant to go back to work next week, but I think I might have to jack it in; my boss says my leave has run out. I just don't want to miss being with Dad when he – you know…'

Hermione nodded emphatically. 'Is there anything I can do to help? I only seem to be adding to your problems here…' Her eyes trailed through the open kitchen door to the living room. Parvati and Scorpius were sitting at a small, round dining table, trying to choose a jigsaw puzzle.

Gwen gave Hermione's arm a friendly squeeze. 'Help me fix some tea for that sweet, little boy in there … he looks half-starved, poor thing.' Gwen regarded him with a kindly eye, then turned to Hermione. 'You know something, your life has always been one big mystery to me. I know there's something very different about you - even from when we played together as kids.' She picked her words carefully. 'And then you got sent away to that special school that no-one ever liked to talk about … you can't believe how aggravating that was for me as a child!' she chuckled. 'You don't ever have to tell me what it is that you really do or who you really are … or what kind of deep crap you've got yourself into - I can tell there's SOMETHING going on, I'm no fool. But I promise you, if you ever did, I would always stand by you.'

Hermione felt a hot wave of emotion enveloping her. 'Thank you, Gwen,' she said, folding her cousin into a close embrace. After a few moments, they both pulled apart and wiped tears from their faces.

'Well, this won't get that boy fed, will it?' Gwen laughed. She briskly started pulling tins of food from a cupboard. 'Beans on toast?'

XXX

Hermione decided to stay the night at Gwen's to help Scorpius settle in. Gwen gave Astoria and Scorpius her bedroom and took her parents' room. Parvati and Hermione squeezed into the tiny box room where Alfred usually slept. Parvati took the camp bed and Hermione tried to make herself comfortable on an array of sofa cushions raided from the living room. They worked late into the
night, listening to the Sound Spheres from the ill-fated interview at the Folborough Hotel; choosing which ones could be used and which ones – most of them - had to be discarded.

'Blimey, that Sylvestra woman's a real piece of work, isn't she?' Parvati said, replaying what they had so far. 'UNHINGED.'

Hermione agreed. Her swift and cataclysmic mood-change had been seriously disturbing.

'I think we've done enough,' Parvati decided. 'No rants, no weirdness, no dramatic unscheduled plot developments. It's short, sweet and to the point!'

'Exactly what Ephraim wanted,' Hermione said under her breath.

Parvati shot her an enquiring look. 'You don't like him much, do you?'

'No, I don't,' Hermione said brusquely, then quickly added, 'didn't Torquil Haast say he was going to check your report before broadcast?'

Parvati shrugged and yawned. 'I fully expect he'll be loitering creepily in the offices of WWN tomorrow morning … ready to pounce, the moment I Apparate.'

Hermione was about to turn off the lights when there was a soft yet insistent rap on the door. Astoria, her pristine curls mushed into a frizzy nest and her face drawn and tired, begged to come into the room.

'I've got a few things on my mind,' she said in winsome, bleating tones.

Hermione was clearly her target.

'I was wanting some advice,' she said, curling up at the bottom of Hermione's make-shift bed and giving her a kittenish stare. She looked crumpled and sad and very sorry for herself.

'Sure, as long as it's quick,' Hermione mumbled, exhausted from the day's events.

'I was wondering where you think I should go with Scorpius - you see, it's very difficult to be with a child who can't tell you what he wants or what he thinks – and I'm not convinced that your being at The Folborough Hotel today wasn't some kind of covert spy-ops, truth be told. I'm thinking I need to find somewhere SAFE. And, Draco was very alarming, earlier … I'm wondering if you were there to investigate HIM. I mean, it wouldn't surprise me one jot, and…'

'Astoria,' Hermione said in a firm voice, 'I wasn't there because of Draco.' She hoped Astoria wasn't good at telling when somebody outright lied to their face. Her main objective – to speak to Draco – had clearly failed; events had somewhat overtaken them all…

She felt a creeping unease at Astoria's subsequent silence.

'I'm not convinced,' Astoria eventually said, narrowing her eyes, 'you see, I know lots of things about the Malfoys. I know there are MASSIVE stashes of dark magic artefacts hidden all over the place! They had a cottage – well, more a chateau, really - in France, and, boy, there were some very unsavoury goings-on down there, I can assure you. It was sold some years ago. I think that's how Lucius first met Mr Golowitz – he recommended a buyer,' she paused, 'or maybe it was later when they met? In Spain? Sylvestra lived in a house there with her mother - a charming woman – it was called 'El Sol y Ter'. Such a beautiful place.'

'You've known Sylvestra for many years then?' Hermione asked, enthralled, despite her fatigue.
'Oh, no! She was off somewhere, studying potions with some great grand-master – a teacher from
the charms school she'd been to. Now, where was that? Girona, I think. Very select! I got the
feeling that Sylvestra was a rather brilliant witch; I got bored to death hearing about her. "Sylvestra
this - Sylvestra that" – always Sylvestra … Draco hated it too!' Astoria said.

Well, that didn't last long, Hermione thought ruefully.

'I met the other girl, of course. The one who came after me …' Astoria said in an offhand manner.
Hermione's ears pricked up. 'She came over for Christmas from America; her first visit to Europe.
She seemed ever so young, had only left school the year before and was at a bit of a loose end –
worked in a kindergarten if I recall. She was barely tolerated by her mother… She spent half the
time locked away in her room reading. Very dull – and I can honestly say, I wouldn't have had the
slightest inkling that she would become the next Mrs Malfoy. Draco barely noticed her! Mind you,
I was pregnant with Scorpius at that point and – believe it or not – there was still some affection
between Draco and I.'

Hermione was beginning to feel a little chronologically challenged. She was sure Draco had told
her he first met Katya just a couple of months before they married.

'Yes…' Astoria continued, her voice tinged with sadness. 'We truly loved each other, once upon a
time… Flush of youth and so on. I saw him as a sad, romantic figure and so desperately lonely after
- after everything that happened, while we were at school. I can't believe how much he's changed!
He's such a MAN now…' Astoria heaved a poignant sigh. 'It was a terrible time, though. The
Malfoy fortune was in freefall – outside the family, nobody knew the full disaster that was
unfolding. And poor Draco. He worked his fingers to the bone trying to keep it all together. But
then his father would ruin it all – he made a lot of rather stupid business decisions - overturning all
his good work! Draco was so angry half the time. They had huge, thundering rows and the house
seemed to shake with it all. Narcissa had days when she didn't stop crying. And sometimes Draco
would just disappear for weeks at a time, to let off steam…. I have a sneaking suspicion he began
spending more and more time in the Muggle world.'

'DRACO?' Parvati interjected. She was also listening eagerly. Hermione had half-forgotten she was
there.

'Yes. He got quite obsessed with Muggle machines and technology – there was a shed at Malfoy
Manor where he kept all sorts of strange and wonderful things and he spent hours upon hours
trying to devise magical ways to make them work. He claimed we were becoming… how did he
put it?... Obsolete. It was VERY stressful to live with I can tell you! And then
Lucius's lapses started to get more serious… Up to then, everyone had assumed he was suffering
from stress or remorse or incipient madness. No one thought it was … well… you know. Not at
first…'

Hermione tried to piece together the order of play in her head. 'So, your visit to Spain was shortly
before Scorpius was born?'

'That's right, December – he was born in March,' Astoria said. 'But we had to cut the visit short
because of Lucius.'

'Because he was ill?'

Astoria nodded emphatically. 'Gracious me, yes! He dramatically worsened - was all over the
place! Actually, his illness was why we were there – I remember now. Ephraim introduced us to a
young healer who'd been trying out new treatments for Gimlott's…' she paused here, looking a
little guilty. 'You do know Lucius had Gimlott's, don't you?"
'Yes, yes – it's been all over the papers,' Hermione said quickly, even though there hadn't actually been a single mention of his cause of death. 'And this healer; was this Selwyn Haast?'

Astoria cocked her head quizzically at Hermione. 'Oh, you know him?'

'I believe he's still a friend at Malfoy Manor.'

'Very much so! He's always been Ephraim's personal physician. And from then on, he worked for Lucius, too.'

'He sometimes works at St. Mungo's,' Parvati chirped up from her side of the room.

'Well, he was there that dreadful night …' Astoria fell silent for a moment. A dark cloud briefly transited her pert, pretty features. 'He was terribly supportive. That poor girl... can't remember her name, she was French – well, she was assisting him. He'd picked her specially for the job; even dismissed my dear, old nursemaid – but it was a bad night all round. Lucius suffered some terrible apoplexy … so Selwyn was taken up with him, and this poor girl – she was useless! She was telling me to push when I was barely halfway dilated … and then fell into a complete panic when I was, and by then, the baby was almost crowning! Narcissa had the wherewithal to get Selwyn, thank Merlin, and he sorted me out in a few seconds flat – a few quick flicks of his wand and Scorpius was born. Caesarean.'

'And the midwife?'

'Well, she collapsed and died a few moments later. I didn't notice at first. I was just so grateful that it was all over.'

'What was it? Did her heart give out?' Parvati asked, agog.

Astoria shook her head. 'I've no idea. It was very strange. She'd turned blue … I thought she might have suffocated – you know, maybe swallowed her tongue in all the excitement?'

'Where was Draco?' Hermione asked. Astoria's narrative had been marked by his absence.

'Away on a business trip,' Astoria said huffily. 'Selwyn was horribly cut up by the whole thing and Apparated straight home to Paris – taking the poor girl's body with him.'

'PARIS!' Hermione yelped. But of course! EVANDER SEZIGNAC – he was the child born a week earlier than Lily Potter at their apartment block on Square de La Rue Burq.

Parvati was eyeing her with some concern. 'Are you okay there, Hermione?'

'Yes, of course,' Hermione said, but she was remembering how Ginny had said she was still friendly with Evander's mother … Chantal, that was it.

'When are you going back to Brazil?' Parvati asked Astoria.

'Never! Perish the thought! I've outgrown the place,' Astoria scoffed, and she launched into a fresh diatribe on how her life as a tele-novella star had become too pressured, too 'phony' – Hermione didn't believe a word of it, but by now her mind had drifted elsewhere.

She recalled Ginny's conversation at the park opposite the white, modernist apartment block where the Potters had lived during the Dark Flux outbreak, telling her about Evander Sezignac. Notably – similar to Scorpius - there'd been a Gimlott's sufferer in that family. The grandfather.
She thought about Scorpius... Was he Epsilon+? She had to know for sure.

'Astoria,' she said bluntly, butting into her conversation with Parvati. 'What blood-group are you?'

Astoria looked astounded. 'What's that got to do with anything?' She assumed an offended air. 'Are you accusing me of something?'

Hermione's insides shrivelled a little at Astoria's hauteur. 'I know you're a pure-blood…'

'Not just ANY pure-blood, we Greengrasses are Epsilon!'

Hermione had expected to hear this… because she now felt certain that Selwyn Haast had brought that poor Muggle-born midwife to Malfoy Manor as part of a deadly experiment...

With Lucius's illness entering a critical stage – a possible *Zygotic Twist*, as Tony Goldstein would later describe it in his thesis - and the Malfoy child likely to be Epsilon+, Selwyn Haast had been presented with an ideal opportunity to test out a theory… Luckily for him, both Lucius and Scorpius had a *Zygotic Twist* at the exact same time and from that moment on, Selwyn would have known, for certain, exactly what Dark Flux was - a turbo-charged super-burst of Anteractive Epsilon+ Quarkons… enough to kill that poor Muggle-born midwife within moments of Scorpius's birth.

And now there was Evander Sezignac, too… Hermione assumed that Draco had leaked his name because he had learned that Evander's birth, coinciding with the Dark Flux outbreak at the Potters' apartment block in Paris two years after Scorpius was born, had provided Gilgad with critical proof, yet again, how Dark Flux occurred as a natural phenomenon.

But was there more to it than that? Hermione now recalled Harry mentioning that the Haast brothers had lived in the same apartment block in MONTMARTRE… and Draco had mentioned Montmartre, too…

And what about the gloomy, abandoned crèche at the Herb Healing facility in Wanaka? Such a powerful magical community was an ideal test-bed for Gilgad to refine their observational research. Shona's friend, Arlene – her father had also been suffering from Gimlott's – was moved away from Wanaka after her daughter, Joyana, was born. Why was that? What made Joyana special? What did Gilgad want of her?

She wondered, mournfully, if Joyana was another Evander or Scorpius… a child whose birth possibly sparked a Dark Flux event.

She remembered Ginny telling her that poor Evander Sezignac didn't speak; another disturbing similarity to Scorpius... Would Joyana – and other children like her - also become mute? And if so, why?

Hermione looked at Astoria and Parvati, chatting amiably and she suddenly felt consumed by the tumult of half-formed ideas and fears churning through her mind.

Scorpius, Evander… possibly, Joyana, too. These were natural occurring instances of Dark Flux. A tragic confluence of circumstances…. But the Dark Flux attack in Scotland patently wasn’t. Gilgad had made the leap from *observing* how Dark Flux happened to concocting and deploying Dark Flux itself. But was that the first time Dark Flux had been deployed as a weapon of terror?

What about Santa Maria… Had that been a naturally-occurring Dark Flux outbreak? Or was it, too, a deliberate attack?
She closed her eyes and recalled the sound of Paco's cries – yet another newborn baby - and a frisson of fear flickered inside of her. Senor Asusto, Gilgad's lackey, had curried favour with Dolores, who might well have been bearing an Epsilon+ child. She was clearly adept at wandless magic and there had been a Gimlott's case in Paco's family. Maybe Paco's birth had triggered the Dark Flux that slaughtered Ana and the other Muggle-borns in that town?

Except. NO, no… that didn't fit the pattern, Hermione thought... Paco was ALREADY BORN when Dark Flux struck and Dolores's Gimlott's-suffering mother-in-law was already DEAD. These events were therefore completely unconnected to what happened.

Hermione's blood ran cold thinking about it as she realized that this had likely been yet another intentional strike.

An icy chill then trembled through her as she recalled catching a glimpse of Dolores's face reflected in the kitchen window of her little house in Santa Maria. Those eyes: her deep, dark eyes, bottomless voids of depthless black... Hermione was momentarily reminded of the blank darkness she had experienced when Sylvestra had touched her...

'You alright, Hermione?' Parvati asked, concern shining from her face. 'You look like someone just walked on your grave.'

Hermione shivered involuntarily. 'I think someone did, Parvati. I think someone did,' she murmured to herself.

XXX

Harry responded promptly the next day to Hermione's emergency Patronus. He'd just arrived back from Egypt but travelled direct to her uncle and aunt's house, arriving that afternoon. Hermione immediately hustled him into the pocket-handkerchief sized back garden – a patch of scrubby lawn with unkempt verges, dominated by a rusting rotary clothes dryer – and summarised all that had happened.

'You can't keep hold of Scorpius Malfoy!' Harry said scathingly. 'Golowitz will do his nut – he'll have Draco declared mentally unfit and claim you kidnapped him!'

'He gave him to Astoria!'

'No, Hermione, he dumped him on YOU! The fucking spineless git.'

'Maybe he genuinely intended Scorpius to spend time with his mother?' she said, defensively.

'I doubt it. Astoria's the kind of woman best kept away from children.'

'She's not cruel, Harry. Just weak.'

'Where's she now then?' he demanded. His green eyes flashed furiously and he repeatedly scuffed his heel into Uncle Derek's scrappy-looking lawn as he spoke.

'She went to Gringotts this morning,' Hermione sighed. Truth be told, she was getting a little concerned. In the time since Astoria had left, Parvati had already delivered her Sound Spheres to WWN – mercifully, with no sign of Torquil Haast to bother her – and scooted back again, claiming a migraine. And Gwen had run a score of errands, gone shopping, prepared a lasagne for dinner that night, rooted out all of Alfred's magazines, toys and PlayStation – much to Scorpius's hapless bemusement - and left for the hospital just ten minutes before Harry arrived.
'How long's she been gone?'

'Three, maybe four hours…' Hermione sighed.

'It shouldn't take THAT long to Apparate to Diagon Alley and get back again,' Harry snarled. 'She's done a runner with Draco's money and you've been landed with the kid.'

Hermione could feel tears pricking her eyes as he spoke. She stared down at the divots Harry had kicked up, avoiding his burning gaze.

'Actually, when I think about it,' Harry said, 'Draco might be a bit brighter than I thought.'

'I never realised you thought he was so STUPID,' Hermione said sardonically. She looked up, deciding to brave his accusing stare.

'Oh, I always knew he was sly, but I've never had him pegged as a tactician,' Harry said. 'He'd make a dreadful Auror – far too impulsive.'

Hermione didn't agree with Harry's analysis. Even as a teenager, Draco's long-honed plan to sneak Voldemort's Death Eaters into Hogwarts had actually WORKED. And in recent months, she'd often been struck by his intelligence.

'Draco obviously insisted Parvati was the interviewer for this little radio charade because he worked out that YOU would be in contact with HER – looking for Padma,' Harry continued. 'He figured you'd try to come along, too – which you did.'

'And if that's the case, can you also see that Draco isn't the fraud and liar that you believe him to be?' Hermione argued. 'Why else would he want his son out of Malfoy Manor unless he didn't trust Ephraim and Sylvestra?'

'Or… he's setting us up! This Evander Sezignac, for example … what's he referring to?'

Hermione took a deep breath and explained. Harry clearly didn't enjoy being reminded about the Paris Dark Flux attack in 2008 and he didn't remember the Sezignacs, even once Hermione told him Ginny knew Evander's mother.

'I was hardly there,' Harry said, regretfully. 'It was tough on Ginny.'

Parvati came out to check on them. 'Is everything alright out here?' She jutted her chin towards the house, prompting them to pipe down.

'Yeah… Minor professional dispute,' Harry explained.

'Is Scorpius okay?' Hermione asked.

'Parvati shrugged. 'Seems to be … He's doing a jigsaw. Looks rather spookily like Hogwarts. I didn't think Muggles could see it like we can? I swear I can make out my old dorm window in the Gryffindor tower.'

She smiled and ducked back into the kitchen.

Harry and Hermione stood in silence for a few moments.

'The problem with us BOTH going to Paris,' Harry eventually said, 'is what do we do with Malfoy Junior in there? I'd as soon deliver him back to Malfoy Manor if his mother fails to show … but I doubt you'd ever forgive me.'
Hermione twisted her hands anxiously and heaved a deep sigh. 'You probably don't need me, Harry. And I'd need to give Ron a bloody good excuse. I asked Molly to watch the kids last night and then ended up stopping over. I had a rather unimpressed owl from the Ministry this morning; Ron was a bit miffed.'

Harry gave her a twisted, laconic smile. 'Okay, why don't we pick Rose and Hugo up from school and tell Ron we've got urgent business and can he bother to stay at home tonight? This Chantal Sezignac is more likely to open up to a friendly female than a grizzled cop like me.'

'Hardly grizzled, Harry!' Hermione laughed, breaking the tension between them.

XXX

Harry's presence helped defuse Ron's frustration, (he'd only popped home for tea and planned to head straight out again), with some robust matey banter – but Hermione could sense Ron's inward irritation - and it clearly wasn't aimed solely at herself.

Before heading to Paris, she grabbed Goldstein's thesis – if only to point out the relevant passages to Harry… he wasn't always the best at reading through research properly.

It was early evening when they arrived in Square de la Rue Burq in Montmartre. Hermione hoped Chantal Sezignac was at home, but it didn't look promising. Large wooden shutters on the windows leading onto the balcony outside were closed and looked forbidding.

'Feels odd being back here after all this time,' Harry said, as they mounted the stairs to the apartment on the second floor. The interiors were a smooth pristine white with a small window on each landing looking out to the street below. The staircase was curved, the steps gleaming marble, the wooden flooring on the landing was stained dark – the entire block had an expensive sheen.

Harry pointed out the door to the apartment where he had lived in 2008.

'And the Haasts lived there?' Hermione asked, pointing to a yellow door opposite. And maybe they still did, she thought, recalling how Draco had suggested Astoria stay at Torquil's place in Paris. The thought made her shudder and hastened her stride up the next flight of stairs to the Sezignacs' residence.

The front door was grey and chipped and there was an air of melancholy exuding from the property. Somehow, this landing seemed less sunny and welcoming – despite being on a higher floor.

Harry rang the doorbell and pulled out his Auror ID in one hand and gripped his wand, secreted up his jacket sleeve, in the other. He was on the point of casting a disillusionment charm and an Alohomora when a stooped, shuffling figure finally opened the door. Chantal Sezignac looked unkempt and grubby, with greasy dark hair and a grey lined face. She turned sad, red-rimmed eyes on Harry and a flicker of interest momentarily sparked, then quickly died.

'I wondered if we'd ever see you again,' she said in thickly accented English, speaking to them through a narrow gap in the door.

Harry looked perplexed - he'd never actually met Madame Sezignac, despite having lived directly beneath her apartment - but smiled gamely and asked to come in for a few words. Chantal Sezignac gave a sceptical sniff. She craned a long, stringy neck around the door to peer at Hermione, who gave her most winning smile in return.

'What is it you want?' she asked her.
'I'm from St Mungo's in London,' Hermione lied. 'I'm conducting a survey of – of vocally challenged children.'

Chantal staggered against the doorjamb in an attempt to better view Hermione. Her eyes darted between Harry and herself.

'Thought you were an Auror?' she rasped to Harry. 'You were always rushing off here, there and everywhere.'

'And I still am. But I'm not here on official business,' Harry said in jocular tones, taking his cue from Hermione. 'More as a research assistant … You see, my friend here, Her–'

'FLORA – Flora Benneteau,' Hermione cut in curtly.

'Flora … here,' Harry continued, 'was hoping to meet Evander. I took the liberty of bringing her – by way of introduction. I believe you're friendly with my wife, Ginny?'

Chantal snorted in derision. 'A card at Beltane … Not these past two years, though.' She looked over her shoulder as though concerned that someone might be eavesdropping; it was a slight, furtive move that set Hermione's nerves jangling. Her trepidation increased when Chantal invited them indoors 'for five minutes only!' – and presented her son: Evander Sezignac.

Hermione quickly realised she had no need for fear; at least not for herself. Evander Sezignac was a small, stunted child, sitting on a beanbag in the centre of a shaded room.

He was still, silent, his face turned towards the closed shutters at the window. His eyes were wide and staring and coated in an opaque creamy film. It was obvious he was blind.

There was a weighty feeling in this room. The little boy seemed to absorb any scintilla of light and life into his small, pale body and cast out a looming darkness in return.

'As you see, Madame Benneteau,' Chantal said in hushed tones. 'My son is blind and mute and falls into wild convulsions if he leaves this room.' She pointed to the beanbag on which the boy was perched. 'I let him be. He likes sitting … preferably, alone. There's no point opening up the shutters to let in the light.'

Hermione felt touched by such a sad, little speech. The furrowed lines on Chantal's face were deep and enduring, but she could see she had once been a pretty woman who liked to smile – but had forgotten how to.

'My family has fallen apart,' Chantal continued, 'my husband couldn't live with the fear and humiliation … The – the incident, it left a mark … a stain on us. Indelible, he thinks. I can now see that is true. He's gone, my friends, my family – all gone - and I am forced to live on handouts, the charity of others.'

'Who from?' Harry asked, in as breezy a tone as possible.

'We still have SOME friends,' Chantal admonished, arching her eyebrows haughtily. She dismissed Harry with a sneering glance and focused her lean, tired face on Hermione instead. 'The kindness of strangers… I am sunk to such depraved depths; not that he's a stranger anymore, of course.' Chantal shuffled awkwardly as though she now regretted allowing these particular strangers into her home.

'How long has Evander been like this?' Hermione asked.
Chantal closed her eyes, lost in recall. 'He was always small for his age; a little sickly… But we
didn't think there was anything SERIOUSLY wrong, not at first … except he was slow to talk and
then his language faltered badly – almost as though he lost the ability to use words he'd only just
learned … This past year, I think, he's suddenly aged...' She sighed wearily. 'His eyes … that's been
the past six months. Bit by bit, they've glazed over – like they're made of porcelain.'

'But haven't you seen a healer?' Hermione asked, alarmed. The little boy's face was blank, but he
was listening, she felt sure.

'Oh, we've always had a healer, but he says there's nothing much we can do. He's looking for a cure
and says Evander can help us find it.'

Instinctively, Hermione knew she was talking about Selwyn, so she wasn't surprised when Chantal
went on to say, 'yes, that nice young man from downstairs. He's very clever. He tests Evander. Uses
a special wand to take blood and fluids. There's no pain and Evander's face is still and calm
throughout.'

Hermione felt a squibble of nausea flutter in her belly. 'And Selwyn Haast pays you for this?'

'He sustains us both; pays for the roof over our heads.' But little else, Hermione noted. There was
barely any furniture to be seen in the entire house and there was an all-pervasive musty smell of old
food and damp clothes. 'And he gives Evander a potion to keep him nice and strong when he visits
every month,' Chantal continued. 'Dear Selwyn. He says the end of our woes – it will come soon
enough. And I trust him. One day he will find what it is that we need and Evander's suffering will
be no more.'

Hermione swallowed hard yet tried to smile brightly.

Chantal eyed her beadily. 'You seem upset,' she said in reproving tones.

'No, I need some air…' Hermione said apologetically as she backed up towards the open door.
Harry subtly guided her outside, thanking Chantal in French and mashing a wad of cash into her
outstretched hand through a gap in the front door as she swung it closed. They then clattered down
the marble staircase as fast as they could, past the Haasts' door, and out into the street.

'I meant what I said, Harry,' Hermione explained. 'I need air.' She felt light-headed and clammy.

Her eyes alighted on the bench in the small park where she had sat with Ginny back in January.
The park looked green and inviting and a gaggle of small children were clamouring to be pushed
on the swings by their laughing mothers.

Harry led her to the bench and sat her down beside her.

'What's happened?' Harry asked, his face dark with concern. 'I mean, I know it was pretty creepy in
there – poor kid; and that woman looked desperate – but was there something else?’

'Yes,' Hermione gasped. 'Oh hell, Harry, I think I've worked something out.'

'What?'

'Something truly HORRIBLE …' She couldn't think of a better way to describe it and barely wanted
to talk about it, because of the sensations this line of thought provoked in her. She pulled out
Goldstein's thesis as a possible prop to try and explain to Harry what was wrong, what would keep
going wrong; why Draco had wanted Scorpius out of Malfoy Manor…
'I – I think that for some years now Gilgad has been deliberately seeking out and grooming children who have a very strong concentration of Anteractive Epsilon+ Quarkons – children, I think, like young Evander here - and have been extracting these Quarkons from them.'

Harry's face coloured in confusion. 'What the hell are Anteractive Epsilon+ Quarkons?'

'Dark Flux, Harry… Dark Flux.'

'Sorry, Hermione, but I'm still lost.'

Hermione explained how Dark Flux naturally occurred when an Epsilon+ child was born at the same time as a Gimlott's sufferer experienced a Zygotic Twist. She summed up Anteractivity as best she could, describing how certain Magical Quarkons – Epsilon+ and Gamma - behaved differently to normal non-Anteractive Quarkons… they were faster and more fluent but when they collided, they potentially sparked a major reaction. '… I didn't make any sense, did I?' she said, in response to Harry's taut expression.

'It's okay, I kind of get it,' Harry said, looking like he hadn't understood a single word but wanted her to press on regardless. 'Is it important?'

'What's important to understand right now is THIS…' She brandished Tony's thesis and urgently rustled through the pages before stabbing the relevant passage with her finger. 'Look: *Epsilon+ Quarkons remain potent for some years, often deep into childhood, but the virulence of their Anteractive potential eventually wanes…*

Harry's face darkened. 'Oh. Shit…'

'Quite.'

They both fell silent for a moment, staring sightlessly at the park around them, as they digested the substance of this.

'Chantal said that Selwyn takes blood and fluids from Evander,' Harry stated, solemnly. 'I guess if you wanted to run tests on Dark Flux or – or make it, you'd want to get hold of these Dark Flux Quarkons in their *purest, strongest* form, wouldn't you?'

'Most definitely. This Selwyn Haast - he's found a way to leech out Dark Flux and distill it to use in their research – and god knows what they do then…' Hermione felt sick. Her mind flitted to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom at her uncle's house, choc-full of Herb Healing products … Herb Healing had a worldwide distribution system extending to multiple countries and multiple Muggles.

'Okay, so, if I'm understanding this correctly, Dark Flux is the extra powerful surge of magic that sort of … *splushes out*, uncontrolled, when an Epsilon+ kid is born.' Harry's face was fraught with concern. 'Does that mean every child who's Epsilon+ is a potential Dark Flux carrier?' Hermione was sharply aware that Harry himself was Epsilon+ - meaning, crucially, his children were, too – as were Rose and Hugo.

'I don't think so,' Hermione replied in soothing tones. 'I suspect there's something *enhanced* about those kids who've unwittingly contributed to triggering Dark Flux… Something super-potent; a residue, even… Don't forget, this only happens when someone close by with Gimlott's has the same *splushing* thing going on at the same time as those kids are being born. It's a one-off. Although that can't be said for Gimlott's victims, sadly, as this happens to them again and again. The doctors at St. Gaspard's told Draco it was like leaving the tap on–'
Harry listened intently. He looked ashen grey.

'They keep having these strange surges and, eventually, they die of exhaustion,' Hermione continued. 'But Draco says Gilgad has hopefully manufactured a cure.'

'I bloody well hope so. It could be me one of these days!' Harry laughed, but it sounded more like a coughing bark. 'Anyway, I get it now, Hermione. The Dark Flux attack that happened here was because that Evander kid had a grandfather with Gimlott's…'

'As did Scorpius Malfoy …'

Harry's face suddenly fell. 'Bugger. A fucking terrifying thought just occurred to me.' His eyes lifted towards the apartment block where he'd once lived and the closed shutters of the Sezignac apartment. 'That could easily have been Lily! Sezignac senior only lived a few feet away from us.'

There was no point denying it to him. 'She – you – got lucky,' Hermione said in a firm, kindly voice.

'Do you think the attack was deliberately engineered by Gilgad? By this Selwyn Haast character?'

'Not exactly… the outbreak was hoped-for, I think - and keenly observed. But Evander has been horribly exploited ever since. Maybe they wanted to see if what happened when Scorpius was born was a one-off?' Hermione told Harry about the Muggle-born midwife who died when Scorpius was born.

'Don't forget, both Scorpius and Evander are mutes, Hermione,' Harry said pensively. 'And Evander's going blind, too.'

'I suspect that's a side-effect of whatever treatments and tests they have to go through.'

Harry turned to her, a grim set to his mouth. 'Explains why Draco wanted Scorpius out of Malfoy Manor. He must have realised what was going on,' he said miserably. 'You told him about the cots and the babies in Wanaka, didn't you?'

'Yes. But I don't think he knew what might be happening to Scorpius the last time I properly spoke to him, so – so something's happened since…' Hermione said, her eyes flashing brightly. 'I have to warn Shona in New Zealand that her friend's child might be in danger.'

Harry removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes wearily. 'I hate to say this, Hermione, but there might well be other kids, too, in a similar position.'

'Then we have to find them.' To her frustration, Hermione had to look away to gulp back an unbidden surge of tears. She recalled the desperate look on Draco's face. How had he coped when he worked this out? How had he managed to carry on afterwards, living and working with these people?

But at least he'd managed to find a way to save the person who mattered most.

'I'll see what I can do to help the Sezignacs. I promise. Luckily, it looks like Draco got Scorpius out in the nick of time. His eyesight's fine, isn't it? And he's older than Evander.'

'Thankfully, yes… though thinking about it, Draco said Scorpius hadn't spoken since Katya left, almost two years ago…that presumably means he was relatively okay before.'

'Maybe Katya protected him?' Harry suggested. 'Maybe Katya was Epsilon, too? And then, when
she fell pregnant – with another Epsilon+ child and with Lucius dying of Gimlott's close by, able to have one of his splushing-out episodes at any given moment – she had to make a choice.’

'And she chose Magda,' Hermione said in a tight, constricted voice.

'Magda?'

'That – that's Draco's daughter.' As a mother, she understood Katya for doing that … but she'd deserted Scorpius! She'd consigned him to a terrible fate and not even warned his father...

For a brief moment, Hermione actually hated her.

Harry peered at Hermione over the rim of his glasses. He looked tense and owlish. 'If Katya was protecting Scorpius, that means she definitely knew what her father was doing and even what he planned.'

'Does this mean you finally agree that it is imperative we find her?' Hermione said in acid tones.

'I guess so,' Harry conceded. 'But I'm mainly thinking that a man wouldn't give up his child unless he felt that child was in danger.'

'And don't forget, Draco also used that interview to warn about Gilgad facilities in Israel and Egypt. He was deliberately corroborating Henrik's "hit list', Hermione added.

'He's wrong about Egypt – we found nothing. And we can't go back and check. The authorities have cracked down on anything remotely magical. Fucking scary, actually.'

'But whatever way you look at it, Harry, he was urging us to act fast - and he used the most dramatic and terrible means at his disposal to do so.'

'Okay. You win,' Harry said, resignedly. 'I'll continue to look for Katya Malfoy. Hopefully she's still alive… But, Hermione, leave ME to do this. Alone. Draco can't get involved. He needs to continue being our spy on the inside and mustn't do anything that raises suspicions. This isn't the time for anything HASTY. Is that clear? These sorts of investigations take time and care … Sometimes you have to take the long road round to attack from behind.'

'Not too long a road, Harry,' Hermione pursed her lips tightly. 'Not too long.'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"ELEGIA" by NEW ORDER

"MERCY" by THE HURTS

"PRECIOUS" by DEPECHE MODE

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
35. **Sub Rosa**

"Can't you just do the right thing and get the kid out?" Hermione argued, raising her voice to be heard above the full-throated noise of the jam-packed bistro on Place des Abbesses, where Hermione and Harry had decided to have a quick beer before Hermione headed home. A quick beer had already become three…

"It'll look suspicious if we just whisk him away," Harry insisted. Instead, he planned to appoint Francoise as 'secret watchdog' to the Sezignacs. "The last thing I want is to alert the Haasts. I'm thinking this Selwyn might have some kind of laboratory in their flat. I need to get in there and snoop around. I'll dig out my Dad's invisibility cloak if needs be."

"We must also find a way to discredit Ephraim before he becomes Minster for Magic, Harry!"

Harry shook his head. "Won't happen… he's a foreigner."

"Yes, it will. He's lived in Britain for three years – and, now Lucius is dead, he might marry Narcissa."


"She's very fond of Ephraim," Draco had inferred as much…

"Narcissa understands the form rulebook better than anyone. She wouldn't dare jeopardize her social standing," Harry asserted, signalling for yet another round of beers.

This would be her last, Hermione thought. She quickly checked her mobile. Still no news about Astoria from Gwen…

"But if we're talking about reputation, that's one way we could hit Ephraim," Harry mused. "A man like that's bound to have loads of seedy skeletons rattling in his cupboard."

Hermione's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You mean a Witch Weekly sort of scandal?"

"Standard procedure in Black Ops. And shit like that sticks."

"But the wizarding press dotes on Ephraim." A thought occurred to her. "Of course, Gilgad is a Muggle company, too." She gave Harry a shrewish look.

Hermione took a deep swig of her beer; it was tasting better by the minute and was slipping down a little too easily. Her face was getting warm and she rather fancied her eyes were as bright and glistening as Harry's. They hadn't eaten. In fact, she couldn't remember her last proper meal…

She recalled the glowing press reports about Ephraim she'd found on the Internet. And what about
the financial pages of the broadsheets? Specialist journals targeting shareholders, potential investors?

'If Gilgad was in financial trouble,' she wondered out loud, 'that'd be a major headache for Ephraim, wouldn't it?'

Harry nodded vigorously.

'There's all sorts of social media forums and chat groups on the Internet these days,' she added, a wicked grin on her face. 'I might ask Henrik to look into whipping up some rumours. I'll ask him to look into RedStar, too … It's always baffled me why Jeroboam flogged Arcana to his worst enemy.'

'There's always WWN?' Harry smirked, clearly warming most to the idea of a scandalous exposé. 'They sometimes run gossipy tidbits. Isn't that where Parvati works?'

The lights dimmed and a ramped-up music system burst into life. A cacophony of excited chatter exploded from a table of revellers behind them. The bar felt warm and buzzy and for a moment Hermione wished she could stay in this world – the Muggle world – loud, chaotic, unassuming. Free.

'Of course none of this is very principled, Harry Potter,' Hermione said with a faux demure smile. 'Thing is, I'm not very principled. Not anymore. Bet you've not really clocked that, have you?'

She was beginning to … There was another side to Harry that had grown up and walked off in a slightly different direction to the one she thought she knew so well.

She gave him a crooked smile.

It was dark outside. Hermione wondered if she should Apparate home sooner rather than later – she didn't much like Apparition after a few drinks. It posed a greater risk of Splinching.

'You can portkey from my place. Ginny will be asleep,' Harry said blithely.

'I'm fine seeing Ginny.'

'I got the feeling that you'd had a bit of a tiff.'

'… I've seen her since and we're okay,' Hermione declared stoutly.

'What was it about?' Harry asked, 'your tiff…'

'Oh. Spending too much time with you and too little with Ron.' She pulled a face. 'Ron told her the smuggling case we're working on doesn't exist…'

'Looks like we need a new story.'

'Why can't we just tell her everything?'

Harry sighed into his beer glass. 'I don't want her involved – could be dangerous. And this Sezignac business… the idea that it could have been Lily; it would upset her.'

'She has to know sometime, Harry. And it would stop her trying to get me to open up about my supposed grief at losing my job at the Ministry – something I really don't give a crap about anymore. Everyone thinks I'm losing the plot over that stuff, when I'm actually freaking out
over this stuff.'

Harry squinted at her. 'But you ARE devastated to be ousted from the Ministry, aren't you? It's what everyone thinks…'

Hermione shrugged. 'There's more to life.'

'But there isn't more to YOUR life.'

Hermione gazed at him, slack-jawed. 'Do you really see me as that one-dimensional?' She felt aggrieved in a way she hadn't believed possible.

'Well… I guess I did. I suppose you've changed a bit lately.'

'I haven't changed at all, actually,' Hermione spat. 'Everything else has.'

'No… no, you have changed,' Harry persisted. 'For one, I feel you talk WITH me a bit more these days rather than just AT me.'

'If you've brought me to this… rather lovely bar, actually… just to be rude, then you can fuck off!' A broad smile lit up Harry's face. 'I like this new Hermione… but,' and his face fell, 'I'm not sure I like what's caused this new Hermione.'

'There's no NEW Hermione!' She angrily stared at her suddenly empty beer-glass, desperately wishing she didn't want another, but knowing deep down that she did – and probably would.

'I'll go to the bar,' Harry said.

'Are you trying to get me pissed?' she spluttered, realising, with a start, that she was already slurring a little.

Harry beamed, his face shining. Lights from the bar reflected in his glasses. Two dazzling orbs … sparkling. Almost blinding.

She watched him push his way through the crowd. She gathered up her phone to check again for messages. Still nothing from Gwen; she sent her a text asking if everything was okay… She then texted Henrik suggesting he wage a dirty rumour campaign on the Internet against Gilgad and requesting info on RedStar – or even Astrum, their supposed South American moniker.

'The other bastards, too. We should lay into them as well,' Harry piped up, plonking two more glasses of beer onto the table between them. 'Like that squinty-eyed, oddball Jinks.'

'God, I hate him,' Hermione growled.

'And Silas Witchell... He can't be long for this world, not if Ephraim wants his job,' Harry added darkly.

That struck Hermione as a very interesting insight … one that deserved further mulling.

They continued to plot and plan, getting steadily drunker…

'Need the loo,' Hermione muttered, but when she returned to their table, Harry was cradling his head in his arms – looking a little lost. She could feel waves of dark sage green surging off him, flooding her mind.
'Hermione …?' he said in faltering tones.

'What is it, Harry?' She felt strangely nervous of him.

'Do you think we married the right people?' he asked. He instantly looked like he regretted saying it, but now that he had, he made a bold effort to maintain eye contact with her, as best he could.

Hermione felt her cheeks glow pink under his watchful gaze.

She couldn't answer for herself. She even knew she shouldn't. Ron was his best friend.

She took a deep breath. 'Well, I doubt you've ever met anyone who means as much to you as Ginny.'

'There's you,' he said bluntly. 'You do. Now.'

'But that's like – like brother and sister.'

'True. I never fancied you. And you were SO intense. It was exhausting. And you always loved Ron best.'

She laughed. 'No! Just differently…. And I didn't fancy you, either.'

'I'm not saying you were ugly,' Harry said, suddenly looking a bit appalled with himself.

'Well, that's very generous of you, Harry, thank you for that,' Hermione said tartly.

'And, actually… I'd say you've grown into your looks as you've got older.'

'I wasn't offended, Harry. You don't need to over-compensate!' Hermione trilled, although she was feeling a little bit sorry for her obviously much less attractive younger self… But where was Harry going with this?

'You've changed in other ways… whether you agree or not. You're still Hermione Granger, but you're less … I dunno how to put it … less _hopeful_ …'

'That's hardly surprising,' Hermione laughed – a sad, hollow laugh – 'we've spent half the night talking about evil and how we're well and truly fucked in the face of it.'

'No – no. Before. Before all this crap happened.' He seemed to drift off for a moment, caught on a winsome line of thought. 'What about Malfoy?' he asked abruptly.

His sudden change of tack and stern expression was alarming.

_Ah. This was it_, Hermione thought. Rather typically, Harry had gone three times round the block and back again to get to the point he really wanted to be making.

'What about him?'

'I don't think he's changed that much. Not really,' Harry asserted.

'He has, Harry. Don't make yourself look stupid and pretend otherwise,' she said, acerbically.

'You trust him too much. And you've allowed him to get under your skin. I'm not blind. I can see what he's doing. There's a bit of … _flirting_ between you.'
Hermione sighed, torn between frustration and amusement.

'I think he's manipulating you. Flattering you. I'm a bit confused why... I wonder if he sees it as a way to drive a wedge between us all?'

Hermione's face reddened. 'Maybe he actually LIKES me?'

Harry furrowed his brow. 'Don't take this the wrong way…'

Hermione instantly bristled; pretty much everything Harry was saying to her could be 'taken the wrong way'.

'But I can definitely say, you're NOT his type.'

'You've discussed me with him?'

'No, of course not! I'm talking more generally. Stuff I've picked up over the years, when I've had to have other dealings with him.'

'Recently?'

Harry's eyes glittered peculiarly and he tightly pursed his lips. 'No. Would that matter?'

Hermione's head was suddenly swimming with drunken peevishness. 'Is there something you PARTICULARLY want to ask me, Harry? Because if there is, can you just get to the fucking point?'

'I'm just - just pointing out that he's the kind of guy who goes with women who are real head-turners. Stunners! You're pretty enough, but not in that way, if you know what I mean?'

'No, Harry, I don't know what you mean,' Hermione said, deliberately baiting him, 'unless what you're saying is I'm okay-ish to look at but not the sort of woman anyone would actually want to have sex with… actually, that IS what you're saying, isn't it? I'm a sexless woman with an okay face.'

'For fuck's sake, Hermione, I didn't mean what I said in a RUDE way at all!'

'What other kind of way is there?'

'An honest one. I was merely pointing out that Draco's a very… sexual kind of guy, I reckon… Not one for… for being deep and meaningful and reading too much into everything. He'd want more – you know…'

'Are you asking me, in the most cack-handed, insulting way you possibly can, if I'm fucking Draco?' Hermione said bluntly, 'because the answer is no. CLEARLY, no. He's gallivanting halfway around the world if you hadn't noticed.'

Harry studied his beer with peculiar concentration, reluctant to meet her eye, but Hermione could see the tension in his face and shoulders had eased a little.

'Satisfied?' she asked, in her loftiest tones.

'I didn't think you were doing that, Hermione,' Harry said to his beer. 'It just struck me that a little bit of attention – from let's face it, a dubious source with an axe to grind against you, me and Ron - was going to your head…'
'Ah, I see now,' Hermione said caustically. 'You're protecting me. You'd rather I was more like what you've always thought of me?… Your plain, bookish, bluestocking friend who annoys you by talking too much and bosses you around all the time. You know what? I love you very much. I'd walk over hot coals for you. But go to hell, Harry!'

'That's not what I meant… Everything just – just came out stupid!' Harry threw her an anguished, frustrated look. 'I'm just worried that Draco's toying with you. That's all. Forget I said it.'

'Look. I know how you feel about Draco – and he does too, by the way, even though he actually respects you quite a lot. You don't think he can be trusted,' Hermione said defensively – 'and yet you're trusting him … entirely.'

Harry shook his head. 'Oh no, I'll never do that, never truly trust him … he's still a stuck-up git. Don't get me wrong. I don't think he's a big fan of Ephraim Golowitz. And I don't think he wants to kill all the mudbloods or whatever fucking asinine brand of shitfucking evil he used to believe in … But I think that what matters most to Draco is being a MALFOY. It's all about his family pride. That never leaves him…. That's his essential-ness. Everything he's done or said or continues to do or say is about maintaining Malfoy pride – made even worse, I suspect, by the fact that he's not actually a Malfoy at all!'

Reluctantly, she could see his point. Draco was ashamed. That never left him.

'But he thinks differently to us, Hermione – well, YOU, because I've become a prideful, egotistical wanker, too – comes with being Auror HQ; nest of fucking vipers … But you've always wanted to change the world for the better. You've always wanted a fairer world; a world where social justice is paramount.'

Hermione smiled. 'Wow. I can almost forgive you for being such a bastard, Harry.'

'I didn't mean to upset you. And if I'm being really, truly honest with myself,' he put his hand on his heart, 'I think you've become a very beautiful woman, Hermione, and it shocks me a bit to see that YES, you do turn heads, and I feel protective of you, because you weren't meant to… Whenever I look at this super-smart, stunning woman that you've become, I can still see the buck-toothed, know-it-all who just wants everyone to get on and hides when she's hurt. And I'm scared someone like Draco's going to take advantage of your kindness and your life gets badly blown up for all the wrong reasons… Because I don't think you get what Draco really is… He'll never become the better man you believe is hidden deep within him, Hermione. You're too good for him.'

Hermione's cheeks flamed red with acute self-consciousness and she could feel her heart thudding deeply inside her chest.

'Time does change us, Harry. I'm not saying Draco's become some newborn bloody Jesus here … I just think we should continue to give him a chance.'

'To prove himself?' Harry's keen-eyed stare was dark with meaning. 'Truth is, I struggle, deep-down, to forgive those who've hurt me or those I love - which very much includes Draco, by the way… it's not nice, I know that, but it's how it is…'

Something in his manner – offhand, loose-lipped, abrasive – felt dangerous to Hermione. She didn't dare argue with him.

'And sometimes I feel so fucking angry that I was ever forced to care,' Harry burst out, '… even for those who never deserved it. But I had to. Back then, I had to. It was my responsibility… And that
never really goes away. It means I'm still forced to have to care about what happens to someone like Draco - who I'm worried sick about, actually - when what I really want to do is punch his fucking lights out.'

'You're a good person, Harry,' Hermione said, weighing her words carefully. Witnessing the effect that being Harry Potter had had on Harry Potter – that continued to do so – was oddly sobering. His head was all over the place… 'You always were. You were prepared to face death when you still had a whole life ahead of you; to save us all. You could have run away…'

As she spoke, she couldn't help but remember that Draco and his family did just that, at the Battle of Hogwarts. Yes, Draco was the lesser man – something he had freely admitted himself. But Harry was unique. It was unfair to compare them. It was unfair to compare Harry to anyone – her own husband included; and she winced inwardly, knowing that she'd done just that far too many times to be healthy in the course of her marriage.

But growing up had made Harry harder and less flexible. He seemed to find it easier to inflict cruelty and even death on those he despised now. Maybe he did still want to save people. But not everybody. Not even anybody … She felt certain he would be prepared to inflict losses, if it was a means to an end.

'Actually, you were always more able to see the good in people, Hermione,' Harry said. 'Listen.' He clamped his hand down hard on hers. A fierce surge of intense green sprung to life in her mind. 'Ron's a good man ... He's probably not the right man for you…. But he's fundamentally kind. And that matters. It lasts beyond the passion.'

Hermione gave him a rueful smile. 'Well, we can't all be quite as lucky as you, Harry.'

Harry's eyes dropped and he stared down at their intertwined hands.

'You found the perfect soulmate,' Hermione said in jovial tones. 'I thought that before and – and I still do.'

'Well. We have the same sense of humour,' Harry acknowledged. 'That helps.'

'And she's still a beauty,' Hermione continued, brightly.

Harry gave her a penetrating look – he knew exactly what she was doing. Even so, she felt she'd done the right thing by bringing Ginny into their conversation. Her spectral presence had sufficiently punctured the strange tension that had suddenly arisen between them.

'Oh, I brought these to give you,' Harry said, swiftly changing the subject and pulling a vial of Memories from his jacket pocket. 'I got Draco to piece together both sets of your Argentine memories, to make them look as damning of Los Rojos as possible - just in case you ever need to appease Ephraim.'

'Considering how terrible these Memories are, they're really rather beautiful, aren't they?' Hermione murmured, momentarily mesmerised by the silken silvery solution in the vial before slipping it into her handbag.

'Think of them as insurance,' said Harry.

XXX

Hermione had been too tipsy last night to trust that her tiptoeing to the bedroom wouldn't wake up Ron, so she had slumped onto their shabby brown sofa instead and sunk into a deep alcohol-
induced sleep.

Unfortunately, the thin grey morning light streaking through the living room curtains had woken her earlier than usual. The sofa was old, saggy and uncomfortable and she had a disconcerting queasiness in the pit of her stomach and the faint ding of an incipient hangover nagging at her temples.

She buried her head under a cushion to try to smother the strengthening shard of sunshine streaming through the window, which seemed to have singled her out with the unerring accuracy of an Exocet missile.

No, this wouldn't do. She had too much to think about. Too much to be getting on with.

She got up, took a shower, pulled on a pair of jeans and a top, made herself a coffee and headed into the sun-washed garden. A few dark grey clouds were clumping ominously on the furthest outskirts of Ottery St Catchpole. Hermione reckoned they would be drenching her lawn before the hour was out.

'What you doing up so early?' Ron called from the open kitchen door.

She turned to face him. 'I couldn't sleep.'

He eyed her strangely. 'Didn't hear you come to bed last night.'

'Oh – I fell asleep on the sofa.'

Ron nodded, digesting this. 'Harry alright?'

'Yeah. He's good.' She shuddered as a chill breeze whipped across her face. 'Do you fancy a coffee?' she said, hastening indoors.

'No. I'm – I've got a breakfast meeting. Tom Bennet and the boss.'

'What's that about then?' Hermione busied herself making a second strong cup of coffee, hoping to ward off her hangover for as long as it took Ron to get out of the house so that she could concoct a quick Pepperup Lotion without having to explain why.

'Well, there's this South African geezer – Ruddy Krenzel. He's been flagged up on Auror HQ's radar as someone with possible connections to this match-rigging stuff me and Tana have been looking into.'

One of Ephraim's buddies, Hermione remembered. *Dodgy as fuck.* 'Are you bringing him in?'

'Nah…' Ron said sourly. 'Carmichael says he's got conflicting evidence showing this Krenzel wasn't where Auror HQ are saying he was and doing what they think he was doing … it's only fair I look into it I suppose.' He buttoned up his robe and grimaced at his reflection in the kitchen window. 'He used to work with Malfoy at the Wasps.'

'That doesn't automatically mean–'

'Course not,' Ron cut in. 'But there's been a load of weird stuff going on.' Hermione silently sipped her coffee, her mood rapidly darkening, as Ron rolled out a long litany of accusations against Draco's Quidditch club – ranging from money laundering to illegal employment contracts to unpaid debt and, more recently, an abnormally high level of currency exchange...
'Currency exchange?' she asked, her interest piqued. 'You mean between the Muggle economy and ours?'

'Yeah… you know there's this cap on how much Muggle money you can move through companies?'

'Of course,' Hermione retorted, 'and you get clobbered with a big fine if you breach it.'

'Well, this past couple of months the Wasps have breached that cap over twenty-eight times!' Ron said emphatically. 'Makes absolutely no sense if you ask me.'

Hermione nodded in agreement.

'And this Krenzel's still one of the club directors,' Ron said fervently. 'So, I'm going to have to tell Carmichael I want to continue my investigations.'

'Yes…' Hermione said, chewing her lip thoughtfully. 'Sounds like you should, Ron.'

XXX

Hermione pressed through the morning gaggle of parents dropping off their children at school, fending off the shy side-smiles of some of the more curious mothers and the disapproving looks of others. Rose gaily skipped through the school-gates, her long plaited ponytail bouncing off her school coat as she ran. Hugo, however, clung to her with merciless tenacity.

'But Granny says it might be mange!' he moaned, pulling up his sleeve to show her a rough, red patch of skin on his wrist.

'No, Hugo. It's eczema. Completely harmless.'

Hugo pulled a face. 'But Granny said…'

'Granny was wrong,' Hermione snapped, then instantly regretted it. She knelt down to face Hugo at his level. 'Honestly, my love, it's just dry skin. We'll rub balm on it this evening.'

'But it's itchy…and Granny has some super-special unguent. Couldn't we just pop to hers and get some?'

Hermione was instantly suspicious. 'Have you got a maths test today, Hugo?'

He vehemently shook his head. 'But I don't think I'll be able to do my work properly, Mummy – not with all this horrible itching.'

Hermione stifled a grin. 'Come on then,' she relented. 'But we're coming straight back! Mummy's got a lot to do today.'

And she did. She had to check up on Scorpius. And she needed to get to Hogsmeade to send an owl – one that could cross oceans - to Shona in New Zealand, asking her to warn her friend, Arlene, about poor Evander Sezignac.

XXX

As they approached The Burrow, Hermione could see the front door was wide open. Hails of laughter rang out to greet them. Hermione could pick out Molly's shrieking cackle and the jolly boom of Hugo's favourite uncle – Charlie.
However, a few steps from the house, another figure hoved into view. Someone she'd never seen before.

A hunched, stringy stranger in a khaki sports jacket was lolling by the open doorway, almost blending in with the dark wooden walls and dusty foliage that straggled up the outside of the building. He unabashedly stared at Hermione with deep-set eyes, peering out from a lean, cadaverous face. He slowly winked at her.

'I don't think we've met,' Hermione said, nervously. She let loose of Hugo's hand, releasing him into the house.

The tall man merely shrugged in response.

'He's with me,' said a familiar, clipped voice. Torquil Haast eyed her beadily. He turned to the stringy man whose suddenly upright posture spoke volumes about the nature of their relationship. 'It's alright, Igor. This is Hermione – Mrs Weasley's daughter-in-law.'

Igor nodded dutifully and slumped back against the wall, although he kept his eyes firmly trained on Hermione's face as she hastened past him into the house. Did he know her? He definitely wasn't one of Ephraim's bodyguards. He had the kind of face and penetrating stare it was hard to forget.

Hermione was immediately besieged by Hugo showing off a lurid green salve that Molly was ladling onto what appeared to be the entire length of his arm, while Charlie pecked her fondly on the cheek and explained that this was a pit-stop en route to a conference in Mexico. Torquil had followed her inside and was loudly proclaiming that Mrs Weasley's cobnut cookies were the best he'd ever tasted.

'Oh, you are a charmer,' Molly simpered, pink-cheeked. 'And there's my ungrateful son letting you down!'

Hermione spotted a very glum-looking George Weasley, sat dumpily on the ramshackle armchair usually occupied by his father. He shot Hermione a swift, warning glance.

'Mummy says it isn't mange and I'm to go back to school,' Hugo complained.

Molly scrutinised his arm with an admonishing shake of her head. 'Well, I've seen more cases of mange than I've had hot dinners, and this looks like it might – just might - be in the early stages .... No offence, Hermione,' she said apologetically, 'but when you've brought up a house load of these wee folks you get to see the warning signs.'

'It's eczema,' Hermione grunted in reply.

Molly clasped Hugo tight to her checked pinny – it was smothered in flour and Hugo's navy hoodie was instantly ruined. 'Meany Mummy,' she chortled. Hugo giggled uncontrollably. She brushed Charlie's arm affectionately, drawing him closer. 'And it's not every day your Uncle Charlie comes to call, is it?'

Hugo looked ecstatic but his smile fell away at the sight of Hermione's glowering face. 'I think Mummy wants me to go to school, Granny. I've – I've got a maths test.'

'I knew it!' Hermione frowned.

'He can catch up,' Molly asserted, airily. Hermione shrugged, knowing she'd been defeated. 'Mr Haast?' Molly said, finally releasing her grandson. 'Can I tempt you to try a cauldron cake?'
'No, no. No thank you,' Torquil said, stepping backwards and almost colliding with Charlie, whose hand was already snaking its way into the cake tin on the dining table. Torquil shuffled awkwardly and fixed Molly with an unctuous smile.

'Shame. You look like you could do with a bit of feeding up,' Molly sniffed. Torquil's pallid features were instantly suffused with red-hot embarrassment.

'Well, it's the least I can do seeing as you've come all this way for nothing.' Molly threw a look of furious disdain in her son's direction. George seemed to shrink into his father's armchair, cowering under the weight of her withering stare. 'Honestly, George,' she seethed, 'I don't know what's got into you, I really don't.' She cocked her head towards Hermione. 'That amazing deal he was offered by Mr Golowitz in America? The cooperative venture with Troobles?'

'What's Troobles?' Charlie asked.

'They make sweets - hundreds of thousands of them - and sell them to Muggles. Thriving little business…' Molly explained. 'But George here's only gone and turned down working with them!'

'I've got enough on my plate as it is, Mum,' George countered.

Molly swung round to face him, hands on hips. 'But it's AMERICA, George. AMERICA.'

'And a marvellous new mall facility!' Torquil chipped in.

'Maybe George wants to focus on growing his business here?' Charlie suggested.

'He already owns half of Diagon Alley!' Molly guffawed. 'How much more growing can he do?'

George didn't look like a man who owned half of Diagon Alley, Hermione thought.

'Molly – I have to go,' Hermione said, butting in. 'Lovely to see you, Charlie.' She reached out to embrace her brother-in-law. 'And you, George.' She gave Hugo a firm hug. 'Be good for Granny, darling.'

'You could at least stay for a cup of tea,' Molly huffed at Hermione's retreat. She pulled a sad face and whispered to Torquil: 'Poor Hermione. She's lost her job at the Ministry.'

'She's still here, mum,' Charlie hissed.

'Oh, don't worry about me,' Hermione sighed. 'I was due a change, anyway.'

'Well, that's a relief,' Torquil grinned, 'because the Minister's daughter's just been promoted to your old job!'

'Portia Witchell?' George exclaimed, wrinkling his nose in disgust. 'Isn't she a bit young?'

'I think you might be a tinsy bit mistaken. I hear she's rather an adept at the old Glamours…' Torquil chortled, with conspiratorial glee.

'Ugh, horrible things,' Molly shuddered. 'Don't see why a girl can't just be getting along with the face she's been born to. Look at my Ginny! Never cast a Glamour in her life.'

'Not everyone can be blessed with your daughter's natural beauty,' Torquil said, obsequiously.

Charlie was thumbing through the pages of that morning's *Daily Prophet*. 'Here, Mum, take a look at her,' he said, thrusting the paper into her hands.
Molly shook her head in disapproval. 'Oh dear. It's all VERY obvious, isn't it? Not a day under forty I'd say!'

Torquil coughed in sudden confusion and snatched the newspaper out of her grasp. 'I wouldn't say she was quite THAT old – more Hermione's age.'

Hermione, however, was transfixed by the robustly handsome image of Ephraim Golowitz plastered across the front page under the glaring headline: 'SHE SAYS YES!' Tucked into the bottom right hand corner was a smaller snap of Narcissa Malfoy, gazing up at him, a look of twinkly-eyed bliss on her face.

Torquil quickly glanced at the front page. 'Ah, yes,' he sighed with dramatic relish. 'Looks like Draco will be the last person to find out. Poor chap's overseas.'

XXX

Hermione sped down the pathway leading towards the village. 'SHIT!' she shouted to nobody in particular apart from a few startled sheep in a neighbouring field.

Bloody Portia Witchell and her stupid glamours. Toadying Torquil and his smarmy delight in unsettling her. Poor bloody George, looking like his world was quietly caving in…resignedly putting up with his IDIOT of a mother. Molly clutching Hugo to her chest like he was a goddamned prize.

As for Narcissa… Lucius was barely cold in his monstrous mausoleum and she was tying herself – her son – to this BEAST of a man and his deranged daughter.

Poor Draco...

A further thought leapt into her head, unbidden, as though it had a life and energy all of its own.

And her marriage… It was an empty shell. There was nothing left between them. And she didn't know what to do about it. Or even if she wanted to do anything at all…

She stopped to nurse a stitch that was tearing its way with painful rapidity through her abdomen.

*What am I going to do?* She thought helplessly. *What CAN I do?* Her eyes drifted back towards The Burrow in the distance. Its tall, gangly chimneys peeked jauntily over a long line of plump conifers. 'I'm trapped.'

XXX

As she was heading to Hogsmeade, she needed to change into a more traditional robe. It was a bit of a conservative backwater these days.

However, she'd finally managed to speak to Gwen on the way home. The news wasn't great. Parvati had been summoned into work because a man called 'Turtle' was meeting her boss… and Astoria hadn't come back. However, Scorpius was with Gwen at the hospital, contentedly playing Backgammon with Uncle Derek, who was a lot brighter today. Hermione smiled. At least that was one good thing in this unholy mess.

She texted Harry, reminding him to break into the Haast's apartment – just in case he'd been too bladdered to remember.

And then texted Henrik, prompting him to read her message from last night.
Henrik texted straight back. 'ON IT.' Followed by a flashing skull and crossbones emoji.

XXX

It was raining hard when Hermione arrived in Hogsmeade. She fought her way through a barrage of umbrellas and sodden robes as a noisy clamour of grumbling witches and wizards thronged into The Three Broomsticks to escape the weather. Hermione didn't fancy hanging around and running into anyone she knew and she hoped that the queues at the Post Office would have eased now that half of Hogsmeade was taking an early lunch.

However, the rain was falling with such torrential force she could barely see across the street and the hems of her robe were instantly soaked by fast-flowing water swirling around her ankles. She held her umbrella aloft, but powerful gusts threatened to whip it from her grasp and flung the rain, in cold, sharp eddies, into her face, as she inched her way up Main Street towards the Post Office.

She'd badly miscalculated on the queue. Every establishment lining the street was teeming with drenched refugees from the rainstorm and the Post Office was no different.

Half an hour later, Hermione eventually managed to dispatch a Great Grey owl, carrying a friendly greeting and a gently-worded warning to Shona in Wanaka. She felt a huge burden had been lifted, hoping Shona would warn her friend Arlene about the dangers posed to her child.

The rain had eased to a stubborn trickle. Main Street was eerily empty. She presumed most shoppers had decided to head home and was about to do the same; her sodden robe was uncomfortable and heavy, despite a string of frantic drying spells. However, the faint yellow candlelight emanating from Tomes and Scrolls beckoned her. She waded through puddles, gleefully stamping the torn political leaflets from the 'Golowitz for Mayor' campaign which littered the street, into a pulpy mush.

No sooner had she found an interesting book to browse – a beautifully-bound first edition of the French grimoire, *Petit Albert* – than she spotted Parvati, looking flushed and unkempt, racing past the window. Hermione slotted the grimoire back into its rightful place on the bookshelf and sprinted after her.

'Parvati!' she called, but Parvati strode on, head down, lost in thought. She hurried past the WWN building, heading instead up a steep hill towards the Hogs Head Inn. 'Parvati!' Hermione bellowed, deploying a Sonorous charm. Parvati spun around. For a moment, Hermione felt sure she'd dabbed her eyes - wiping away tears or raindrops.

'You okay?' Hermione asked breathlessly.

Parvati nodded effusively. 'Yeah, yeah, fine….' She was smiling, but her eyes were bloodshot from weeping.

'But you're not going back to work?' Hermione asked, a quizzical expression on her face, gesturing to the corner of Main Street where WWN was located.

'I was getting some air - now the rain's stopped…'

'Gwen told me Torquil was coming to see your boss.'

Padma shrugged. 'Yes he did. The show's going out tomorrow by the way.' She flashed Hermione a brittle smile.

'Was he kind to you?' It occurred to Hermione that Parvati wasn't going back to work, because she
didn't have a job to go back to anymore.

Parvati nodded. 'He suggested a new radio series that he – or should I say, his client – believes would go down a storm with WWN listeners… even thought I should host it'–

'That's great,' Hermione enthused, 'well done.'

'But he was over-ruled,' Parvati said flatly. 'HE – I mean, Ephraim – intends to host the show instead. I guess he hopes it'll raise his public profile ahead of the Mayoral elections.'

Hermione surveyed the streets around them. Billboards featuring Ephraim's handsome, radiant features, cocking a friendly wink to passers-by, were plastered on every available wall space. 'I wouldn't have thought that was much of a problem, would you? What's the series about?'

'Great Leaders in History.' Parvati burst out laughing but her merriment soon morphed into tears. Hermione patted her arm, worrying that Parvati wasn't the most stable person. Mind you, a short while ago, she herself had yelled at a random flock of sheep…

'Is Scorpius okay? I felt terrible leaving him, but with this Torquil business…'

'He's with Gwen and her father,' Hermione assured her.

'But – Gwen's Dad's really ill, isn't he? And Scorpius – well, you can't get a word out of him!'

'Oh, I think my Uncle Derek will cope just fine. He's one of the kindest people I know.' Hermione glanced up the road towards the Hogs Head Inn. 'Look, I need to run a quick errand – I've got to get Ron's brother a birthday present – but do you fancy meeting for lunch? In say, half an hour?'

XXX

Hermione left Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop laden with an abundance of paper packages. She hadn't been able to resist getting new Quills; not just for George, but also for herself and Ron and Molly. She hoped a gift might defuse the ill-will that had flared up between them.

Hermione was still pondering this as she headed back towards the hill leading out of town when she collided with Melissa Osgood. Her packages flew from her arms and were only prevented from falling into a puddle by Melissa's quick reflexes and a hasty 'Arresto Momentum'.

'Oh lord! I'm so sorry!' Melissa babbled, 'I'm such a klutz!'

So much for hoping she wouldn't bump into anyone she knew today…

'No worries! Everything's safe,' Hermione declared as Melissa heaped the packages back into her arms. Hermione quickly conjured a shopping bag and stowed them inside.

'How are you?' Melissa asked eagerly. 'I haven't seen you for ages. Not since we were sat together at that dinner-dance at - where was it?'

'Le Bonheur.' It felt like a lifetime ago.

'That's it,' Melissa said, clapping her hands excitedly. 'That was a great night. Happy times!'

'Yes, it was fun,' Hermione lied; beset by unwelcome flashbacks of her drunken morosity. 'How's life at the Ministry?'

Melissa's face puckered. 'I sort of got caught in the crosshairs of one of Minister Witchell's New
Brooms. Got fired three weeks ago.'

Hermione was genuinely aghast to hear this. As an ambitious and occasionally rather preening lawyer, (she could admit this to herself now), she'd always taken a keen interest in rising 'talent' from the lower echelons of the Administration – although, somehow, she'd missed the supposedly stellar career of her replacement, Portia Witchell. But she'd learned enough about Melissa to know that she was exceptionally bright and an industrious worker. 'What happened?'

'The place is in chaos!' Melissa said. 'And your departure hasn't helped matters. But it's more than that...' Melissa drew closer. 'There's a new Ministry workforce review. They've sent out these complicated questionnaires... All employees have to fill them in to demonstrate their loyalty to the New Brooms policy platform.'

Ron hadn't breathed a word about this!

'And you refused?'

Melissa shook her head. 'No, it wasn't that. I was reluctant to sign up to the scheme…'

'What scheme?'

'When you submit your questionnaire you also have to sign up to a Loyalty Bond.'

'And what the hell is that?'

'Money, basically. A binding contract. When you sign up to it you make an obligatory donation to the Magical Heritage Preservation Fund. It's a percentage of your annual salary and decided for you, so you can't get away with a few sickles and hope for the best.'

'That's disgusting!' Hermione cried, genuinely alarmed by this latest development. What the hell was the Magical Heritage Preservation Fund?

'It's a total abomination!' Melissa agreed, rolling her eyes. 'There I was, working all hours and being paid a pittance - and they wanted to deduct 7.5% - can you believe it? I kicked up a fuss and – that was that.' Melissa glanced sheepishly over the road to an old-fashioned apothecary – J Pippin's. 'I work for my Dad now…'

'I damn well hope you get back into the Law, Melissa. You're too good to lose.' Hermione was outraged.

Melissa shook her head regretfully. 'I'm blacklisted now. And really, working at the apothecary isn't so bad! You – you get to know a lot about people… stuff they don't want anyone else to know.' Her voice dropped an octave. 'The Minister for Magic, for example, has a very serious – and expensive - addiction to Dr Ubbly's Oblivious Unction. I know that because I have to package up his orders.'

'Not a happy man, then,' Hermione remarked.

'I doubt he is. I mean, Hilary – my husband; works in the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office – has heard from impeccable senior sources that Witchell has completely blown the Ministry budget and Gringotts refuses to fork out a single sickle to save him!'

'Are you saying the Ministry's in debt?'

'Witchell's been forced to borrow from overseas investors – even Muggles! Just to stay afloat.'
'That's TERRIBLE!' Hermione exclaimed, utterly flabbergasted. She knew for a fact that just a year ago the Ministry had been flush with cash. 'Does anyone else know about this?'

'I doubt it.' Melissa gave a dismissive shrug. 'Let's face it, the *Daily Prophet* only reports what the Ministry wants them to. And WWN isn't much better… Do you remember Lee Jordan's pirate radio show when we were at Hogwarts? Maybe we should track him down and see if he'd do it again?'

'I think Lee shipped out some years ago, Melissa. Last I heard he was a TV producer in Canada.' Melissa's face fell. 'That's a shame.'

'Maybe YOU could do it?'

'Merlin, what a thought!' Melissa tittered. 'I wouldn't dare; that would feel kind of … dangerous.'

'You could use Volubilis potion! No-one would know it was you.'

Melissa laughed. 'Oh, Hermione, you are funny! You've cheered me up no end.'

 XXX

Hermione was late to meet Parvati. She scampered up the hill towards the Hog Head's Inn, hoisting up her robes as she ran.

To her surprise, Parvati was seated at a table in the darkest, dingiest corner – which was really saying something in this place – with Neville and Dennis Creevey. It looked like she was crying again. Neville had his arm draped around her heaving shoulders and Dennis was pouring her a very large glass of what looked suspiciously like redcurrant rum.

'Sorry I'm late,' Hermione said, 'I got caught up.'

Parvati pulled away from Neville as Hermione approached and furiously dabbed at her eyes with a napkin. 'I just got here myself… Rescued by my knights in shining armour.'

'We found her wandering; out by the Shrieking Shack.' Neville eyed Parvati anxiously.

'I told them I lost my job,' Parvati gulped, 'and – well, it's just been a really, really bad day.' For a moment she looked like she might collapse into tears again. Hermione and Neville exchanged worried glances.

'Shall we order some lunch?' Neville said breezily. 'A bit of good food always helps.'

'Well, if it's GOOD food you want, then we've come to the wrong establishment,' Dennis pouted. 'Although – I once had a rather delicious tongue and gherkin sandwich here. An experience, I should hasten to add, that has sadly never been repeated.'

Parvati erupted into a snorting fit of giggles. 'I think I'll give that a miss…'

Hermione eyed the stained menu with undisguised distaste. The only options appeared to be Stewed Calf's liver and Turnip Soup. 'I'd rather have your tongue sandwich I think,' she muttered drolly to Dennis.

'This won't do,' Neville agreed. He marched up to the bar and embarked on what appeared to be a fairly lengthy negotiation with the rather surly-looking barman. Eventually the barman nodded and pocketed the handful of coins Neville slapped on to the counter. 'Pumpkin Pies coming up and a
flagon of butterbeer for starters,' Neville exclaimed, returning to the table with a brimming jug. 'And while we're waiting,' – the barman grabbed his cape and headed out of the bar, leaving them alone – ‘well, it's a damn fine coincidence we ran into you today, Hermione, because Dennis and I have been PLOTTING.'

'Have you now?' Hermione said in jocular tones.

'We're not kidding.' Dennis had a deeply earnest expression on his face. He tugged a scrunched-up parchment from his backpack and slammed it onto the table.

Hermione narrowed her eyes inquisitively. 'SUB ROSA,' she read. She glanced at Neville, then read on. 'What an absolutely brilliant idea!' She quickly told them how she'd literally just been discussing the need for an alternative news source with Melissa Osgood. 'Melissa even suggested a Pirate radio station – like Potterwatch.' She felt a strange rush of emotion. Sitting in this dank old pub brought back a host of poignant memories. It was here that the 'resistance' to the Ministry regime had been truly kickstarted. She told them about Melissa's dismissal from the Ministry and the Minister's twin problems: the drugs and the debt.

'I've heard about these Loyalty Bonds … they're deeply sinister,' said Neville.

'I bet that horrid Ephraim Golowitz is feeding Silas the money, buying influence,' Dennis said pensively. He plucked a quill from his bag and started scratching notes on the parchment. 'But I reckon Sub Rosa should first go for the Minister himself. These drug issues pose a real danger.'

'Yeah, but he's controlled by Golowitz, that's the even bigger problem,' Neville said.

Hermione agreed. 'And Ephraim will have a position of political power once he's Mayor. I'm assuming he's going to win…'

Neville nodded vigorously. 'His rival is Claefidius Cunk – a goat-herd from Portree. Poor guy doesn't stand a chance.'

'A goat-herd?' Parvati piped up. 'Do you still get that type of thing?'

'Apparently so,' Neville said. He cast his eyes around the grouping. 'Dennis and I are more than happy to coordinate this little project – but we'd appreciate your input, Hermione.'

'I'd like to help, too,' Parvati said wistfully. 'But my journalism skills clearly aren't as good as I'd hoped.'

'You know perfectly well that's not why you lost your job, Parvati,' Hermione said crossly. 'This blasted mayorship, of course, is just a prelude to Ephraim trying to snag the top job: Minister for Magic.'

Neville slapped the Daily Prophet onto the table and pointed to the news-story covering Ephraim's engagement to Narcissa. 'In light of this, you mean? Makes him legally eligible.'

'Exactly. And it can't be allowed to happen.'

Parvati stared fixedly at the front-page photo of Ephraim; resplendently handsome and dapper, oozing his unique brand of confident charm. Her eyes were wet with unshed tears.

'You should read this, Hermione,' Neville said determinedly. He flipped open the newspaper to a full-double page centre-spread. It was an interview with Ephraim, but in reality, it was a dressed-up version of his campaign manifesto.
Hermione's insides chilled at what she read.

Ephraim was calling for a complete pushback on the Muggle-born and Magical Folk Equality Laws – most of which she had drawn up herself - and sought to overturn the 'corrosive culture of Positive Discrimination within the purview of Hogsmeade and its environs.'

It went on. 'In the light of increased terrorism in the Muggle world, all Muggle-borns seeking employment or right of residence in Hogsmeade or Hogwarts must present Ministry-approved certification – an assurance they don't pose a danger to the population.'

He argued more widely for what he termed the 'Right to Exist' to be enshrined in newly drafted 'Impunity Laws'. These would entail securing safe tracts of land, (including population centres), across the United Kingdom – and the passing of Primary Legislation to imbue these sites with special revenue raising powers – 'such monies as might be needed to defend these lands, and in exceptional circumstances to overturn the International Statute of Secrecy.'

'Madness. Utter madness,' she breathed. 'He wants us to break cover… to tell the Muggles we exist.'

'…to exercise our "Right" to exist,' Neville said sardonically, fixing Hermione with a meaningful stare.

And he controlled the supreme weapon to help achieve his aims.

Hermione realised Draco was right. 'Think bigger,' he'd said…

This explained why Ephraim wanted Dark Flux and why there'd been an attack in Scotland… Dark Flux was a direct message – a warning, a threat – to the Muggles. Ephraim didn't just want to control the Wizarding World … He wanted the world as well.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"ALORS ON DANSE" by STROMAE

"WASTING MY YOUNG YEARS" by LONDON GRAMMAR

"WHY DOES IT ALWAYS RAIN ON ME?" by TRAVIS

"SAY NOW" by THE RIVAL

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters
It was almost midnight when Percy arrived to pick up Molly and Lucy. His girls had been having a 'sleepover' at Wisteria Cottage, while their parents attended a social event at the Ministry.

Lucy had started to complain of a tummy-ache shortly after dinner - one of Ron's fry-up feasts washed down with lashings of creamed butterbeer – and felt steadily worse as the night went on. All she wanted was to go home.

Percy was in a cantankerous mood. The dinner had been a disaster. 'We were literally invaded by a battalion of paper aeroplanes! More of those DISGUSTING pamphlets!' he said, crabily. 'Not even Mr Golowitz – who was halfway through a highly entertaining after-dinner address - could lift the mood!'

'What did it say this time?' Ron asked. Hermione was glad to note that her husband was quietly enjoying the sudden slew of Sub Rosa tracts that were circulating.

'Oh, it's hardly worth repeating! Utterly foul and baseless accusations of a very personal nature!' Percy exclaimed vituperatively.

'I'm sure we can stomach it…' Ron said, shooting an amused glance at Hermione.

Percy tugged the leaflet from his robe pocket and thrust it into his brother's hands. 'Take it,' he sniffed. 'I won't keep such filth in my house.'

Hermione leaned over her husband's shoulder to read the latest Sub Rosa 'scoop'. Clearly Neville had approached Melissa Osgood. The pamphlet featured a long list of the various potions and pills being popped on a minute-by-minute basis by "Silas Witchell, our highly esteemed Minster for Magic … too addled to pay heed to the eye-watering debt the Ministry has racked up under his watch."

Hermione couldn't help but marvel at Dennis and Neville's speedy handiwork. The Ministry's debt problem had been the primary focus of Sub Rosa's special 'launch' edition a week ago – a cunning ruse whereby the 'napkins' in the Ministry canteen and at The Leaky Cauldron and The Three Broomsticks simultaneously transfigured into issues of Sub Rosa instead…

This was followed a couple of days later by a special edition made available via 'Beer Mat' at all essential hostelries, offering verification from an unnamed Gringotts insider that the bank was now refusing to lend the Ministry any more money without a properly costed budget.

Who'd spilt the beans? Had Neville been in touch with Bill Weasley… or the other way around?

'It was a hideous embarrassment,' Percy yawned, gathering up his daughters and marching them towards the fireplace to Floo home. 'Most particularly because Silas's own daughter, Portia - with
her latest beau, Selwyn, that spiffing chap who's been working miracles at St Mungo's - were guests of honour! Just imagine!

'The horror of it!' Ron intoned breathlessly. Hermione's lips twitched in amusement and for a brief moment she remembered with almost fond nostalgia the reason she'd fallen in love with him in the first place.

'No need to be flippant, Ron,' Percy said in cutting tones. 'You'll soon be up to your neck in this stuff. Mr Golowitz was crystal clear that all Aurors should be placed on high alert to root out these dangerous provocateurs!'

XXX

A couple of days later brought a fresh scandal, courtesy of a convenient hijacking of the labels on everybody's milk cartons and cereal packets. This made for a particularly feisty family breakfast gathering at The Burrow.

'I hope you chaps get to the bottom of this Sub Rosa piffle,' Percy spat, directing his ire at Ron. 'It's a recipe for outright anarchy!'

'Got my hands full enough already,' Ron grouched. 'Sounds like something for Section D.'

'Overtime is double pay!' Molly nodded to him meaningfully, with a quick glance at Hermione. 'You could book that nice holiday you've been thinking about.'

Ron looked a little flustered. 'Now's not the time to think about that, Mum.'

Arthur was scrutinising the milk carton. 'Can't say I like these Loyalty Bonds they're talking about – slippery slope…' he frowned, 'and if it's true that money from this Magical Heritage Preservation Fund is going to be used in the way this Sub Rosa says it will be, then the Minister's a damned fool.'

'What does it say, dear?' Molly asked, muscling a thick slab of butter onto a piece of hot toast.

'It says there are Ministerial Statutes in the works which will push for a "Newborn Reward Scheme, part of a broader New Family Act" – basically bribes for babies…'

'Well, that doesn't seem so bad, Arthur. We'd have been rich as Croesus,' Molly quipped, casting an affectionate eye over her over-crowded breakfast table – and this was with just half of her progeny present.

'There's a graded scheme being planned – more money for more babies and even MORE money for certain GRADES of baby… the Ministry call it a "bold effort to rebalance the demographics of the wizarding population," – yes, we'd have been richer, Molly,' Arthur continued, 'but at what cost?'

Molly's smile faltered and fell.

Bill was now studying the milk carton. 'There's also talk of financial incentives for graded marriages, too…'

'I feel it's only fair to point out that these schemes are very tentative at the moment and any talk of 'grades' and the like is more scurrilous fearmongering than fact,' Percy declared. He took a deep gulp of his tea and emphatically slammed his teacup onto his saucer.
Arthur fixed him with a wintry stare. 'You're being naive, son.'

'I agree with your father,' said Molly, tightening her lips.

Fleur heaved a huge sigh. 'But everybody, don't you see?' All eyes were drawn to her. 'It's happening all over again... and before you know it, we'll be killing each other, too.'

XXX

'Do you think she was right?' Ron asked, 'Fleur, I mean.'

His walking pace picked up as they walked through the village, heading home to Wisteria Cottage. He'd been deep in thought since they'd left The Burrow. Rose and Hugo had gone with Fleur and Bill to spend the weekend at Shell Cottage. Ron - as predicted by Percy – had received an urgent Ministry Owl, calling him (and all Aurors from all Sections) into work – even though it was a Saturday - for a special emergency session at the Department for Magical Law Enforcement.

Hermione measured her response carefully. 'Yes. I think I do. These Loyalty Bonds, for example: I've heard that if you don't agree to them, you can lose your job – and struggle to get a new one. That can't be right.'

'No, it's shite,' Ron grunted. 'And there's so many questions to fill in... really nosy ones, too. All about your opinions and your family - that kind of thing.'

'Have you submitted yours?'

'Well... yeah,' he ruffled his hand through his hair as he spoke and looked away, 'felt I had to really... I'm the only earner these days, aren't I? But then your payment came through from Auror HQ and now I feel a right berk. In more ways than one, actually...'

'My payment?'

'Yeah. Bloody massive! I feel stupid not believing you when you said you had that top-secret case going on, because you must have really, really impressed with those runes translations. I'll send an owl to Harry when I get into work to thank him.'

'Oh, don't worry about that, Ron... I need to send him an owl later, myself,' Hermione said quickly.

WHAT MONEY?

'I mean, I know Auror HQ have the readies and pay well, but – Hermione,' Ron's eyes were shining, 'this was off the scale! I don't want Mum to know, though. She wants us to buy that farmhouse just down the lane from The Burrow – the garden backs onto their fields. I mean, we could easily afford it now. We could buy three! But that place always gives me the creeps... looks kind of mouldy and sad.'

Hermione could barely focus on putting one foot ahead of the other. 'When did the payment go in?'

'Must have been at least a week or so ago... I only went into the bank yesterday and saw it then. Didn't they say they were paying you? I was wondering why you kept so quiet about it.'

Hermione's phone was jangling in her pocket. She could feel it vibrating insistently against her leg; but there was no way she could answer it in front of Ron.

'No, they didn't.' She affixed a bright smile onto her face. 'That's great, then. Glad they were
happy.’ It had to be Draco… even though she'd told him not to give her any money! But he'd wanted to stop her accepting Ephraim's job offer; although, since her latest pithy owl, Ephraim hadn't bothered her, thankfully.

The phone started buzzing again. Hermione was grateful for a couple of cars whooshing by, deadening the sound. And then it stopped.

’Look, I've got a bit of shopping to do,’ Hermione said weakly. ’I'll see you later.’

Ron threw her a puzzled look, like he was going to say something, but then thought better of it. He shrugged and walked off.

As soon as he moved away she backtracked and hid behind a bus shelter. The phone was already ringing again… Please be Draco, she begged silently.

But it was Gwen.

XXX

Hermione squeezed into the backseat of Gwen's wine-red Nissan Micra next to Alfred. Scorpius was jammed against the door on Alfred's other side, but didn't look too bothered. In fact, he didn't look at anything beyond the beeping, buzzing gaming console in Alfred's hand. He made an impressed gurgling sound when Alfred – playing a character called 'Warrior aZarth’ - managed to navigate his spacecraft through a steep and jagged gully, fired at by a series of increasingly grim-looking and heavily-armed aliens.

’It's so lucky you were already in Oxford!' Gwen chortled from the driver's seat, glancing at Hermione in her rear-view mirror. ’With Mum coming home today, we've no choice but to move Scorpius in with Parvati for now.’

’I was at a work meeting,’ Hermione lied, although obviously not a very smart or important one, in view of her jeans and t-shirt.

Parvati shot her a quick, anxious smile from the passenger seat. 'It's good you could come. The more the merrier to settle Scorpius in.'

This all felt rather farcical, Hermione thought with an inward sigh. She'd already visited Parvati's boxy little flat and could have Apparated there in no time at all – but she hadn't been able to think up a plausible excuse why she'd be in a drab, little market town like Widford - and Oxford was reasonably close.

Whoops of excitement erupted from Alfred when Scorpius took to the controls and zapped a baddie, followed by side-splitting howls of laughter when one of the dreaded 'Morph Men' – as Alfred called them - snatched Warrior aZarth's spacecraft and dropped it down a volcano. Scorpius chewed his lower lip – much like Draco did when concentrating – as he delicately retrieved the spacecraft from the volcano, before dispatching it on a further challenging cannonball-run through the gully. An exotic-looking, scantily-clad alien stood astride a monster multi-bore blaster waiting, with ominous intent, for Warrior aZarth in his plucky, little spacecraft…

A sign leading off the dual carriageway for Widford was approaching. Parvati was already looking a little nervous. Hermione suspected she'd never actually travelled by road to her own home and therefore wouldn't be able to direct Gwen.

’Parvati took Scorpius and Alfred shopping in London yesterday,’ Gwen said chirpily. ’I was trying to get the house clean before Mum comes home – needed the kids out from under my feet.'
Hermione was incredulous to hear this; she couldn't imagine Parvati – who was very rooted in the Wizarding world - coping with a trip to Muggle London! 'Where did you go?'

'Oxford Street,' Parvati grinned.

'Yeah, they had a great time, until they lost Scorpius on a bus!' said Gwen.

Hermione tried to conceal her alarm at hearing this. How could that have ever been explained to Draco? Poor Scorpius! It must have been terrifying.

'What did you do?' she asked Parvati.

'Oh, it was fine. Scorpius just got off at the next stop and waited outside John Lewis. He thought it was brilliant fun.'

'You were in a right state when you got home though!' Gwen said to Parvati, laughing. 'But all's well that end's well.'

'It's over there!' Parvati yelped, pointing with relief to a small-scale shopping mall with flats above the shops. A multi-storey car park was attached.

'Have you got allocated resident parking?'

Parvati looked nonplussed.

'I'm sure she has…' Hermione said hastily.

Gwen parked on the third level close to a door leading to the residential area. Parvati hopped out and the boys followed, still bent over their game.

'You can at least help carry the bedding!' Gwen shouted to the boys' rapidly retreating figures as they headed after Parvati, out of sight.

'They get on like a house on fire,' Gwen said with a beaming smile.

'Isn't Alfred bothered that Scorpius doesn't talk?' Hermione asked, helping her cousin to unload a roll of duvet and pillows from the cramped boot-space.

Gwen shrugged. 'Doesn't seem to. Scorpius is a bit of a techno-whizz kid on the *Space Force 7* video games, so Alfred's a bit in awe of him. I take it the skills come from his father?' Her pursed lips signalled implied disapproval of the mother…

Hermione was a little flabbergasted to hear this. Scorpius wouldn't have ever seen, let alone played with a computer or games console in his entire life.

The car park was remarkably empty for the middle of a Saturday. Their voices echoed back to them as they spoke.

The door to the flats swung open and an inordinately tall man with a pale, gaunt face stepped out and walked rapidly away. His footsteps resounded across the smooth black tarmac and then there was silence… A gentle crack of wind seemed to brush up against Hermione's senses.

She swung around, suddenly bristling with anxiety. Where'd he gone?
'You okay?' Gwen asked, struggling to load a shopping bag stuffed with clothes on top of the duvet in her arms. 'You look like you've seen a ghost!'

'No… I… One moment…' Hermione hastened towards the spot where the tall man's footsteps had ceased, instinctively clasping her wand pendant in her hand.

Her heart was thumping loudly in her chest.

Gwen slammed the boot shut.

'Shit!' Hermione cried and she ran through the door to the flats and pounded up the staircase leading to the corridor where Parvati's home was located.

Halfway up the stairs, a shrill, piercing siren, like a screeching jet engine, exploded into her ear-drums. She instantly dropped to her knees and her hands flew to her ears… The sound ripped through her; a violent, vibrating, caterwauling force. It seemed to attack her from every direction; bouncing off the pale cream plastered walls of the staircase. She felt immobilised, light-headed, as though her brain might bleed out through her ears.

She rolled around helplessly, catching sight of Gwen, who had also collapsed onto the stairs, a few feet behind her. Her face was contorted, eyes screwed tightly shut. She was gyrating, convulsing, as though trying to shake off the high-pitched ringing and escape.

And then it stopped… And they were pitched into a silence that felt deep and impenetrable, even though a faint echo of the siren seemed to continue to ring inside their heads.

Hermione clawed her way up the stairs, reaching the heavy fire doors that led to Parvati's corridor. She was about to push the door open, but was rooted to the spot, transfixed at the sight that greeted her.

Through the thick glass windows she could see a faint, nebulous powdery blue; a slick, shifting swirl. It seemed to hover directly on the other side of the fire door, but was stretching, extending, reaching out like thin blue slivers of light, faint fingers of dissipating colour, towards the far end of the corridor. A shrunken, lonely figure was standing stock-still against the back wall, his silvery hair gleaming. He stared at her with huge, round eyes and his mouth was open wide - a dark oval - screaming in shock.

The door to Parvati's apartment was closed and as soon as the siren screeched to a halt, Scorpius turned and put his hand against the door, as though he would push it open.

'NO!' Hermione yelled, high and blood-curdling. 'Don't open the door!'

She desperately banged the glass window of the fire door with her fist to get his attention… If Scorpius opened that door, Alfred might die.

Gwen had caught up and her hand instantly seized the door handle.

'Get off!' Hermione shrieked, beating her cousin's arm down with such force Gwen fell backwards and crashed into the wall at the top of the stairs... She blinked at Hermione in pained surprise.

'What the bloody hell was that for?' Gwen bellowed, pulling herself up from the floor in sharp, furious movements. She fired a ferocious look at her cousin.

'You – you can't go in there! It's too dangerous – you mustn't open this door!' Hermione cried, the words tumbling from her mouth in a frantic stream.
She returned her focus to the corridor. The glowing blue haze had faded away and Scorpius was
gazing down the length of the corridor at Hermione, a look of puzzled surprise on his face.

Parvati suddenly came spinning through the door of the apartment and grabbed hold of him,
ducking back inside. She slammed the door shut and sped down the corridor towards them.

'Get back downstairs!' Hermione screeched to Gwen.

'But it's only Parvati,' countered Gwen.

Hermione didn't have the time or desire to argue. She roughly strong-armed Gwen back to the
relative sanctity of the car park.

'What the bloody hell's wrong with you?' Gwen cried shirtily, throwing Hermione off with spitting
vitriol.

'If we go into that corridor, we might die,' Hermione explained; she tried to keep her voice down…
there were cars pulling up and curious onlookers pulling out their phones to call emergency
services.

'Where's Alfred?' Hermione immediately asked Parvati when she joined them, a panic-stricken
look on her face.

'In the toilet. I don't think he heard a thing. He had headphones on.'

'But is he alright?' Hermionne asked, urgently.

'Why are you asking?' Gwen said, her face puckering in panic.

'Parvati – you need to check on Alfred, and then all three of you return to the car,' Hermione said,
her voice shaking.

It was now Parvati's turn to look frightened. 'All I did was put the kettle on!'

'What did you say?'

'Incendio. Nothing… nothing unusual…'

'INCENDIO? Sounds pretty bloody unusual to me!' Gwen yelped. She gazed between the two of
them, mouth open, panting. 'What's going on here?'

But Hermione ignored her, suddenly desperate to understand exactly what had triggered this burst
of Dark Flux – and from where… She fancied there'd been something positioned close to the
entrance to Parvati's corridor, something that detonated when Parvati cast a spell…

'And how did you get inside the flat? Did you use a key or an Alohomora?'

'A WHAT?' Gwen screeched.

'A key! I used a key. Alfred was with me,' Parvati snapped back. 'I couldn't very well use magic!'
She stopped short, shooting a terrified look at Gwen, whose face was crumpling in horror.

The door to the car park opened and Scorpius tumbled through, falling into Parvati's arms.

'BLUE!' he said, in a strange, low, robotic voice. 'BLUE!'
Hermione's heart missed a beat. 'WHO'S blue? Please, not Alfred…

A tousled-haired, confused-looking Alfred followed Scorpius through the door and Hermione almost choked at the rushing release of pent-up breath that she'd been holding tight inside of her. Alfred looked to be on the point of tears… 'There's a man lying on the floor upstairs!' he whimpered, his lower lip trembling. 'He's gone blue!

Hermione wanted to clutch him tightly to her chest, but his mother beat her to it.

'Come on, Alfred! We're getting out of here!' Gwen scowled. She turned to Hermione. 'Do you mind driving?'

Hermione opened her mouth to reply but nothing came out.

There was the sound of sirens as police cars, possibly an ambulance, rapidly approached. The 'blue' body upstairs had obviously been discovered, meaning the Dark Flux burst had finally dissipated.

'I can't drive,' Hermione confessed.

Gwen scrunched up her nose in bewilderment. 'Yes you can!' she retorted.

Hermione vehemently shook her head. 'No, Gwen! I can't!'

Gwen took a deep breath. She pinched the roof of her nose and tightly closed her eyes. 'Bloody hell… This is going to be some right freaky shit, isn't it?' She gave Hermione a pitying look. 'Okay, everyone, back in the car!'

XXX

Gwen drove them out of town as fast as she could, even though the centre was already gridlocked with competing swarms of emergency vehicles heading to the shopping mall. They then headed due south through villages - clusters of cream stone cottages abutting fields and hedgerows – weaving through country roads glutted with weekend traffic, until they hit the open road.

Dark clouds hung low in grey, humid skies and the occasional spat of rain streaked in sharp diagonals across the windscreen, threatening a downpour.

'I've no fucking idea where we're going,' Gwen said, between gritted teeth, not caring anymore that Alfred and Scorpius could hear her. She looked like she was blinking back tears. 'Back to bloody Borehamwood, I guess.'

'Alfred's not feeling too good,' Parvati called from the back of the car about an hour into their flight. Hermione craned around to see him and it was true. Alfred had turned a dull shade of green and his eyes were bloodshot and bulbous.

'We need to pull over,' Hermione told Gwen. There was a lay-by up ahead.

Alfred was hurriedly ushered out of the car, spraying vomit onto his trainers and a desultory patch of dusty weeds.

'Do you feel okay?' Hermione asked Scorpius, anxiously.

He nodded but his cornflower-blue eyes were round and staring.

BLUE… He'd actually *spoken*… BLUE.
Was he referring to the Dark Flux itself or had he witnessed the demise of an unwitting Muggle opening their door to interrogate the cause of the alarm?

Hermione couldn't remember a body … but then she'd been in too much of a fug of sickly panic to absorb anything meaningful. The details of the scene were hazy, uncertain. Simply recalling those fateful few moments gave her a blinding headache…

None of this was what Draco would have hoped for his son when he handed her over to his safekeeping, she thought, with a stab of painful guilt. He deserved to be here; but she had no way of contacting him.

'I'm going to call Harry,' she said to Parvati, getting out of the car.

'Pick up, Harry!' she urged…'Pick up.'

'Hermione? To her shock, it was Draco. Her insides instantly turned to water.

'Yes… Hi…' she said, almost shyly, her mind racing. 'I thought you were away?'

'I am. But we're passing through Paris, so I absconded.'

'For good?'

'… couple of hours grace. If that…'

She could hear Harry's gruff voice in the background; 'Give me the bloody phone, Draco…'

But Draco wasn't playing ball. 'Is everything okay?' Had he detected the note of anxiety in her voice?

'Yes… well, no… something happened…' She could feel herself well up as she spoke. 'I need you.'

'Where are you?' Draco asked urgently.

XXX

'Okay, so your Daddy's going to be with us very soon… and my friend, Harry Potter,' she said to Scorpius with a comforting smile.

'Where are they now?' Parvati enquired.

'Paris.'

'PARIS?' Gwen screeched. 'But…' She rolled her eyes and exhaled deeply, bearing a look of worn-out resignation – the look of someone who knew their life was about to change in ways she'd never deemed possible just a few short hours ago. Like a stuttering of the dial on the face of time itself.

They were pulled up outside a rambling old country hotel at the head of a long drive. The main building looked mildewed and dank, but there was a small annex shunted off to one side that Hermione hoped would afford them all some privacy.

She punched in the hotel name - 'Fallow View Lodge' - and directions onto her phone and sent them to Harry.

XXX
The annex comprised two bedrooms leading off a living room and kitchenette. There was a lingering smell of musty damp and the furnishings were chipped and worn. A single glaring strip-light illuminated the living room.

'Well. It's for one night,' Parvati said in a tone of forced brightness.

They'd paused at a village shop and bought tea, milk, a packet of cereal, bread and eggs. Gwen immediately set to preparing a quick meal; anything, Hermione mused, to keep herself busy and avoid the inevitable round of explanations. She rather hoped to leave that task to Parvati or even Draco… she wasn't in the mood to give her cousin a potted history of her life of lies and deceit.

Halfway through their sullen meal of scrambled eggs on toast, there was a sharp rap on the door. It had to be Draco…

She jumped up to answer the door, but Scorpius got there first.

'Hey!' Draco said, scooping Scorpius into his arms. Scorpius was pink-cheeked with joy and the look on Draco's face sent Hermione's heart spinning. He caught her eye and her stomach flip-flopped and a hot scarlet blush stained her cheeks. She had to look away, frightened to betray how she felt in front of everybody – her cousin, in particular.

Harry came in after. He looked sullen and angry.

Hermione introduced Gwen to Harry and Draco – her voice quavering as she spoke - and then stepped aside.

'You should never have been put in this position!' Harry shouted in what he clearly thought was an apology to Gwen and Parvati. He tossed Draco a furious look.

'It's not Draco's fault that Astoria did a runner,' Parvati pointed out.

'Tell us what happened,' Harry said in brisk, businesslike tones. Everyone settled around the greasy kitchen table, still crowded with half-eaten remains and dirty crockery.

Luckily, Alfred and Scorpius slipped off to one of the bedrooms to continue Warrior aZarth's adventures…

It fell to Parvati to fully explain what had happened, with the occasional interjection from Gwen and Hermione.

'So it was Dark Flux?' Harry asked sharply.

'Yes,' Hermione said, her mouth suddenly dry. 'It looked like it had somehow been formulated as - as a fine powder.'

'You sure about that?'

She nodded mutely, suddenly aware that tears were pricking her eyelids. It hit her with considerable power that Gwen and herself had likely only been saved from death by a few inches of fortified glass and metal – and by the fact that she had dallied downstairs when the tall, forbidding stranger had alerted her curiosity.

As for Alfred… she suspected his shutting himself up in a toilet with his console and a pair of headphones might have been an unexpected stroke of luck, too.
'Fuck,' Draco said; the full horror of what Hermione had just realised herself, was clearly etched on his face. He stared at Hermione, aghast, and she could sense his whiteness throbbing in thick, flashing beats. 'You can't be involved in ANY of this anymore. You have to get out of the fucking country!'

'That's – that's just stupid,' Hermione said in a small, choked voice. It was tempting though… For Gwen and Alfred, too.

'It's not that dumb an idea, actually,' Harry said, peevishly.

'What the HELL is Dark Flux?' Gwen shrilled. 'You make it sound like it's something that could have killed us?'

'Only you, me and Alfred…' Hermione said bluntly. It was time to break the news.

'What – what do you mean?'

Hermione felt tears slide slowly down her cheeks as she explained.

'You're a WITCH?' Gwen shrieked. Her eyes panned the rest of them… she gulped hard. 'Oh my fucking giddy aunt… you ALL are!' She was hyperventilating.

Hermione tried to pat her arm, to calm her down… but Gwen shrugged her off and jumped away from the table. The chair she'd been sitting on clattered to the floor.

'I told you I knew there was something weird about you!' she said, rounding on Hermione.

'DIFFERENT,' Hermione said, swallowing back tears… 'You said different.' It seemed a much happier moment when Gwen had embraced her a week ago, when she'd first met Scorpius.

Gwen's hand shot to her mouth and she squealed in anguish. 'Oh heck… Alfred didn't die in this – this Dark Attack! Is he a wizard?'

Hermione shook her head. 'No. I doubt it… I think he was far enough away from the explosion, from the cloud, to avoid being directly hit. And I don't think it was that powerful, either. Other people clearly found the body up there and lived to tell the tale.'

'I'm sorry not to have told you, Gwen,' Parvati said, a pleading look on her face. 'We have strict laws of secrecy you see!'

'Are we in danger?'

'Not from us,' Draco said, looking Gwen directly in the eye. 'But we'd be lying to you if we didn't say that there are some pretty evilfuckers out there who are trying to hurt Muggles – by that I mean non-magical people – and those who ARE magical, like Hermione here, who happen to be born into Muggle families.'

'We're trying to stop them,' Harry said.

'Hermione, too. She's – she's a bit of a heroine in our world, actually,' Draco said in fierce tones. He tried to give Gwen a reassuring smile, but the manic look on her face killed it stone-dead.

'I think Alfred and I should just leave,' Gwen said to Hermione.

'That's your prerogative,' Hermione said. 'I shouldn't have dragged you into this mess, I-' Her voice was thick with tears and she couldn't continue…
'It's my fault!' Draco said. 'They were hurting my son ... they being some particularly evil people who have inveigled their way into my life, my family... He – Scorpius, that is - carries this Dark Flux, you see, and they were doing things to him...terrible things...'

Gwen blinked hard. 'To Scorpius?'

'Hermione was trying to help me out. To help him...' Draco continued. 'I didn't know what to do, who else to turn to...'

Gwen seemed to absorb this... She briefly closed her eyes, then slowly sat herself back down again, holding herself stiffly, hands tightly clamped together on the table before her. She looked between Hermione and Draco and seemed to come to a decision. 'It's okay... I'm okay. But from now on, you tell me everything. Don't ever sugarcoat it; I want the plain, unvarnished truth.'

'I'm so sorry, Gwen,' Hermione said. 'Truly I am.'

Gwen gave her a strange, half-smile and shrugged. 'And I don't want anything to happen to Alfred... or you, for that matter, even though you've lied to me since FOREVER.'

'Well we none of us want anything bad to happen – to anybody. That's what this is all about,' Hermione sniffed.

'This must be very shocking for you, Gwen,' Harry said in soothing tones. He gave her a warm smile and he reached across the table, his hand almost touching hers. 'I remember being a bit overwhelmed myself when I found out about the wizarding world... obviously I came at it from a different angle. I'm not what we call Muggle-born, like Hermione, here... but I was brought up by Muggles.'

'Oh? How's that?' Gwen asked, her curiosity piqued. 'Where were your parents?'

'They'd been murdered, unfortunately, by an incredibly evil, psychopathic wizard. Sadly, it looks like we're dealing with someone like that all over again...'

'Blimey,' Gwen said, her eyes round with fascination. 'So this is really rather personal for you?'

'Just a bit,' Harry said, with a wry smile.

'And where's that wizard now?'

'Dead,' Draco said tersely. 'Mainly thanks to Harry, actually... and Hermione, here. Parvati, too... And no thanks to me,' he added in a low voice. He stood up, abruptly. 'I can't stay long, so I'm going to check on Scorpius, if that's alright?' He looked at Parvati and Gwen. 'I hugely appreciate what you've done for him. Thank you isn't enough,' and then more directly to Parvati: 'This attack was clearly aimed at frightening you. I suspect it was Sylvestra acting out; because of what happened with Scorpius. She's a spiteful bitch...'

'There was a very tall man who passed us in the car park, moments before the incident,' Hermione pointed out.

'Very tall?'

She nodded.

'Sounds like Grimm. One of Sylvestra's creatures... Parvati, you need to find somewhere safe. I completely understand if you feel the risks are too great to keep Scorpius.'
'Don't be silly, Draco. Scorpius stays with me,' Parvati said in definitive tones.

'And me,' Gwen added.

'You left him in Astoria's care, and the silly woman then left him with us... so we're responsible for him now,' Parvati said.

'But I'd rather not return to Borehamwood,' Gwen said. 'My mother's there and I REALLY don't want to drag her into this.'

'That's understandable,' Harry said. 'I can look out a safe house for you.'

'No!' Gwen said turning to Parvati, suddenly enthused. 'I have an idea! What if—'

'Stop there!' Draco exclaimed. 'Please! Don't tell me where you might go... one of Sylvestra's nastier skills is an ability to read minds... I still have to spend time around her...'

Gwen looked dumbstruck. 'That must be tricky.'

Draco laughed. 'You could say that again! I've got a constant migraine trying to block her.'

He dodged out of sight and into the bedroom. A few moments later, Alfred came out to the living room asking for more food.

'Hermione... I'm not sure you should know where Scorpius is, either,' Harry said.

'But Gwen's my cousin!' Hermione argued.

Harry gave her a penetrating stare. 'You might give it away to Draco…'

'I wouldn't dream of it!'

'You might not be able to help yourself.'

'We can still speak by phone,' Gwen said. 'And meet up - at the hospital, for example, or your mum's house.'

'I'm not going to tell Draco! Why would I?' Hermione remonstrated, bridling at their mistrust.

She heaved an exasperated sigh. Harry was somewhat stirring the pot, she felt, with that type of comment. She couldn't have Gwen suspecting anything... Gwen wasn't exactly bosom pals with Ron, but they'd always been cordial. And she didn't want to lose her cousin's good opinion.

'At least tell Harry!' she demanded, moving away from the living room to head outside for some air. She glimpsed Draco and Scorpius through a gap in the bedroom door, sitting on one of the beds. They were sharing a quiet moment, their blonde heads, like silvery swans, bowed closely together.

Scorpius looked up and smiled. She smiled back and then slipped outside.

XXX

There was a shallow verandah directly outside the door, with wooden stairs leading down to the garden and driveway below. She sat on the top step, staring out into the dusk that was rapidly descending. The hotel grounds were thronged with trees, dark grey clumps of foliage, with acres of unlit countryside stretching beyond.
She was filled with a deep-set melancholy; vivid violet in flavour and composition. An odd purplish pulse that seemed to ebb and flow within her…

She wasn't sure how long she was sat here, staring into the dreary void of an English nightscape, but the door behind her clicked open and she sensed Draco – a glowing white presence – advancing towards her.

He sat beside her on the top step. A security light at the far end of the yard below illuminated his face; he gleamed out of the darkness, alabaster white, and his eyes were deep, liquid pools.

'Thank god for those fucking fire doors,' he said. His voice cut clean into the cool evening air. She thrilled to the sound of it and her heart jumped at the feel of his warm, dry skin when his hand found hers and he clutched it tightly. 'The idea that you could have walked into that corridor…'

'Well, I didn't!' she said. A bubbling whorl of excitement coursed through her. 'I'm still here. We're all still here.'

'But it's a very real and frightening possibility, Hermione…' He turned to her, an impassioned look on his face. 'I'm tempted to lock you up in a fucking cave or something…'

She laughed, but her voice stuttered into silence at the look on his face - a curious blend of exhilaration and torment - and her heart turned over. 'Speaking of risks... I really, really want to kiss you.'

He pulled her close and leant his forehead against hers. She could sense his eyes on her mouth; could feel his hot breath billowing onto her cheeks. 'I worry about you all the time.'

She shot a furtive glance at the closed-door looming behind them. 'NOT a good idea. Harry…'

'Yes… but if it was a sort of celebration of your still-being-alive - surely even Harry would understand THAT?' he grinned, naughtily.

'No, Draco. I really don't think he would,' Hermione smiled fondly.

Draco heaved a weary sigh. 'Obviously, you're right. … I mean, I went to see Harry for my super-spy debrief – but, frankly, it was more like a lecture on the sanctity of marriage - well, the sanctity of YOUR marriage. Not mine or his, of course…'

'I've had pretty much the same treatment,' she laughed, although she wondered if Draco's stray comment about HARRY'S marriage was a touch of freelancing or reflecting something he knew?

Draco's eyes lingered on her face. 'Nope… sorry,' he groaned, and he wrapped his arms so tightly around her, her ribs felt crushed, and drew her into a deep, tender kiss that sent her pulse soaring. His hands, strong and commanding, trawled purposefully down her body. She felt dizzy with excitement and her heart was bounding manically inside her chest.

'Oh god,' she breathed, instinctively throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him back like her life depended on it.

It felt so fucking wonderful to be alive, she thought, and have Draco jammed up hard against her. They clung to each other, momentarily lost in their own world.

There was a sound from the darkness beyond them; a clunking thud and a crunch of twigs, that for
a moment sounded like a footfall… Hermione pulled back with a start and stared hard at the trees… 'What was that?' she gasped.

Draco's eyes shifted from side to side and they both listened intently to the sounds of the garden, the wind in the trees, the buzz and rush of insects attacking the glaring light in the yard… 'Nothing,' he breathed, breaking the heavy silence that had enveloped them, 'a fox or a squirrel, something like that.'

Hermione pulled away from him, although her hands remained tightly entwined with his. She directed a look at the door behind them...

'Damn. We really shouldn't have done that,' she said tremulously, flushed with sudden self-consciousness.

'But it's hard not to.' Draco's eyes glittered feverishly.

Hermione laughed but at the same time she almost wanted to cry. 'The thing is, it's not just Harry to worry about… there's also your son, my cousin…'

'Are you close?'

'More so now – not so much when we were kids. I was a fairly obnoxious know-it-all… as you well know.'

He chuckled. 'Oh, we can give ourselves a bit of latitude for past misdemeanours, Hermione, don't you think?' He flashed her a warm grin. 'Well… you can. I cringe at how hilariously awful I was.' His face fell, and with it, his mood … she could sense the burgeoning grey bleeding into his whiteness. 'I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am for the shit I put you through.'

Hermione stared at him, speechless; a hot rush of emotion flooding through her.

'…Don't do that nice thing people do when they're a bit embarrassed and say it's alright,' he said with a strange, half-smile. 'Because it never will be. It doesn't deserve to be.'

'No, it doesn't…. But, that's the pain of growing up I guess – we're forced to endure the embarrassment of our awfulness, because we can't change the past.'

'Just change the future…'

'Exactly.' She took a deep breath. 'Actually, Draco… this will sound horribly ungrateful. But you shouldn't have sent money… Ron was a bit suspicious.'

'I just thought-

'I know… but it's just that it's – it's rather a lot!'

'Is it?'

'I have to return it.'

'No, no – please don't do that… Use it for Scorpius! Give some to Gwen. She deserves it … She's sharp as a needle, your cousin, you know that, don't you?'

Hermione nodded. 'I'll be getting the full inquisition about you later.'

'What will you say?' Draco asked, almost nervously.
'What would you like me to say?'

'What I'd LIKE you to say and what you feel you CAN say are probably very different things, unfortunately.'

'Something else you should know,' Hermione said, 'Scorpius spoke earlier…'

'He did?'

'Just the one word – BLUE.'

'Describing the Dark Flux?'

'I – I hope so…'

'Jesus. Let's hope he didn't really notice anything other than a scarily loud noise… He's damaged enough as it is.' Draco smiled ruefully. 'I've been such a shitty parent.'

Hermione didn't really know what to say… in part, because she agreed with him, even though she had no doubt he loved Scorpius very much. 'Well, when all this is over, you can truly make it up to him.'

'WHEN…' he sighed. 'When fucking never's what it feels like. We're shooting into the unknown…'

'How did you work out what they were doing to him?'

A curving loop of dark grey sliced through his brilliant whiteness… Suppressed rage.

'The Astoria business got me thinking about the midwife. I asked my mother about it and she said she knew nothing because my father was having one of his Gimlott's fits at the time. Then I found the Sezignac file and pieced it together…'

'I had to read Goldstein's thesis to get all of that!'

'I realise this means Scorpius is a Dark Flux carrier.'

'Not forever… it fades. That's why they exploit them while they're young,' she said sorrowfully.

'These kids are fucking living blood-bags,' Draco seethed. 'I recruited Milton as my spy… I know what they do…'

'I take it Harry told you about our visit to Evander Sezignac.'

'He's going to die, I'm afraid… They've pushed it too far.'

Hermione felt unutterably sad.

'They're fucking sadist cunts, Hermione… pure evil. I want to kill them – fuck Harry's stupid little trial shit,' he said in a harsh whisper. Then, with a beseeching look on his face. 'I'm so sorry to have involved you in all of this.' He shook his head. 'I couldn't find another way to do what I did.'

'No. You did the right thing.'

'But look what's happened.'

'We're in this together now. For as long as it takes…'
She could feel his whiteness flaring up inside of him, bold and bright.

'I need you to look into something, if that's okay?' he asked. 'I've already explained this to Harry, but when I was in America, I got the Muggle tech guys to give me a quick run-through of how the Gilgad comms network operates. Zoltan got really pissed, so I knew I was on the right track… anyway, I won't bore you with the details but there's a private network, a stupidly simple password-protected intranet, actually, that I realised Ephraim and the others are using. It has a single password; ATALAYA.' He spelled it out for her.

'Is it a place? A person?'

'Dunno. It'd be good to find out. We could also do with asking Henrik if he knows any friendly hackers.'

'Right. I'll get onto it… I've already looked into the man in the photo you gave me. Did Harry tell you?'

'No, he didn't.'

'He doesn't think it's important, that's why… but I've got a feeling…'

Draco narrowed his eyes inquisitively. 'Who is he?'

'He's called Salvedra. Neville – who's been amazing – tracked down three Salvedras. All dead. But… here's the weird thing. I found him by using that Visual Resonation technique you tried in America… and that same spell was invented by the FIRST Salvedra – a guy called Salvedra Otzoa-Azarola, born in 1775.'

'Strictly speaking, Hermione, that was dark magic,' Draco said sourly. 'You shouldn't be getting mixed up with that kind of crap.'

'You did!'

'But I've got form… you're – you're unblemished!'

'Was it Dolores who recommended the Hexmouth Witches?'

'Yes… she was rather pushy about it, actually. Still. It worked.'

Hermione momentarily struggled with what she was about to say... 'I had a weird moment in the middle of it all. I – I kind of saw Sylvestra and had a strong sense of Ephraim, too. His colour.'

Draco's mouth tightened.

'And it kind of felt like there was someone in the room with me… it's hard to explain. I also saw your father. He sort of invoked this Salvedra… that's how I knew his name.'

Draco's face darkened.

'Aren't you going to say anything?'

'I'm processing…' he muttered. 'I don't agree with Harry about this. Anything where Ephraim and Sylvestra suddenly pop up is a red flag.' He directed an earnest look at her. 'Please, Hermione, NEVER do that magic again.'

'Did you have anything like that happen to you?'
'No. I just saw Svetlana Kerpin. But I don't have this crazy new superpower that you seem to have suddenly evolved, do I?'

Hermione burst out laughing. 'Hardly a superpower!'

But Draco was still looking at her, an inscrutable expression on his face. She knew he was having a host of unvoiced worries and thoughts and this made her feel uncomfortable.

'Please avoid Sylvestra and Ephraim – well, it'll be easy for you to avoid Ephraim, because he's coming to Israel with me. The anal fucker's probably wondering why my check-up at St. Gaspard's is taking so long...'

'But you've had that cure? Right?' she asked, alarmed.

'In America. Very straightforward. I never truly thought they wanted to kill me. They need me too much... ' He quickly checked his watch. 'Damn... I should get going. There's never enough time. '

'We're ALL running out of time from the looks of it,' she said miserably. 'Ephraim's going to win this silly Hogsmeade election and he's published a manifesto – goes on about our Right to Exist. '

'Harry told me... It'd be madness to break the International Statute of Secrecy. Not everyone's as level-headed as your cousin in there. '

'And he wants us to take over vast tracts of Muggle land. '

Draco's eyes lit up. 'And there you have it... THAT'S why he wants to be Minister! ... He wants access to the Muggle Prime Minister and the Muggle authorities. '

'To negotiate. '

'And blackmail. If necessary. '

'With Dark Flux... '

Draco shook his head, despondent. 'Fuck. So many ramifications... He'll kill us all. '

A cold chill shuddered down Hermione's spine. She leant against him, reassured by his warm solidity.

'I'm sick of saying goodbye... ' she sighed, unable to extinguish the plaintive tone in her voice. 'Why don't you just leave Malfoy Manor and Gilgad? Scorpius is safe now. '

'But you're not – not until those cunts have been completely destroyed... ' He tilted her face to look at him. Hermione's stomach tightened with a sharp twist of desire and her breath caught in her throat. His mouth was so close to hers, she had to exercise superhuman self-control not to kiss him hard and to hell with the consequences. 'So - I have to stick to my post, Hermione,' he said. 'For as long as I can be useful.' He studied her, quizzically. 'And anyway... let's be honest, where would I go?'

Hermione sensed there was a larger question looming behind this; for both of them. One that was impossible to answer in the current circumstances.

'I don't know,' she replied in a small, uncertain voice.

The door behind them swung open and they sprang apart. It was Parvati.
'Oh, sorry,' she said to Draco. 'I didn't know you were still here-'

'I was just going,' he said, jumping up. 'Just exchanging… information.'

'Harry spoke to someone in the Muggle police,' Parvati said. 'It was just the one guy who died. The same chap Alfred saw. Looks like he opened his door at the wrong moment.'

'He was meant to… that was the point of the siren,' Hermione said, bitterly.

'Nice old guy,' Parvati said sadly. 'Didn't see him much, but he always said Hello…'

'Did Harry's contact say what they think caused it?' Draco asked.

'Gas leak,' Parvati said, with a grimace. 'The Muggles are clearly covering up.'

'Scared shitless, I suspect,' Draco murmured. 'Right. I really do have to get going.' He gave Hermione a meaningful stare. 'Don't forget to look up Atalaya.'

She nodded. 'Stay safe.'

'You too,' he said with a frown, '-all of you,' he added for Parvati's benefit, and with that he Disapparated.

Hermione stared blankly at the empty space he'd left behind, almost as though it had retained his shape – a shimmering remainder; contrails of being. She was so lost in thought and feeling she wasn't aware at first that Parvati had taken his place on the step beside her and was talking to her.

'It's okay, Hermione. We all have our secrets,' Parvati said.

'It's not what you think.'

Parvati gently patted her arm and bent her mouth to Hermione's ear. 'Yes it is. It's blatantly obvious. And it's okay… You see, I also have a secret,' she added under her breath. 'So I completely understand and I'd never judge you.'

'What kind of secret?' Hermione asked, a little alarmed by this.

Parvati sighed. 'The wrong kind, I'm afraid… possibly the worst. It'll come out soon enough.' She gave Hermione a brief smile. '…Harry wondered if you told Draco about – you know - his mum getting married. He forgot.'

Hermione looked stricken. 'Bugger. I didn't even think about it!'

'Oh well. Maybe he already knows? Anyway, Harry says he'll stop over with us here tonight and help us relocate tomorrow, so you're free to go home.'

'Free?' Somehow it didn't feel like that.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"COMMUNICATION, PART 3" by ARMIN VAN BUUREN

"SHE SELLS SANCTUARY" by THE CULT
"L'AMOUR EN SOLITAIRE" by JULIETTE ARMANET

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Chapter Summary

Hermione revisits her time in Argentina and makes a surprising discovery…

37. The Memory Be Green

'Are you here to congratulate us on our latest edition or to use the library again?' Neville said. He wiped his muddy gloves on an old rag and embraced her warmly.

'A bit of both. Is it safe to talk in here?' Hermione asked. She gazed around the greenhouse, located furthest from the main school building at Hogwarts, where Neville hosted his own personal nursery of magical plants – destined to become live props in his Herbology classes.

Neville returned to busily potting shrubby herbs. 'This is my haven. Heavily warded. These plants deserve as much tranquillity as they can possibly get - before I unleash the ravenous hordes on them.'

'You remember that special Auror taskforce I told you about a few days ago to track you down? Ron tells me there's going to be two. One unit to investigate, the other to enforce law and order. The Ministry is extremely unhappy with what you're doing. Hunting you down has become their number one priority.'

Neville chortled. 'Well, they won't like our next edition…that's for sure.' He gave her a mischievous grin. 'We're following the money. An old friend of ours is set to spill the beans on some rather mysterious accounting practices.'

'Am I allowed to ask who?'

'You're allowed, but I have to swear you to secrecy.' Neville wielded his trowel with feigned menace. 'Ernie MacMillan.'

'Are you sure?' Hermione asked sceptically. Ernie had suddenly canceled a meeting with her when she'd asked about his former flat mate, Tony Goldstein…

'Ernie has personal reasons to worry about the direction the Ministry is taking these days… there's rumours that same-sex relationships might be outlawed.'

'Outlawed?'

'Well, not quite OUTLAWED, not yet - but discriminated against … stupid stuff like denying the right to sign up to a Loyalty Bond - pretty much career suicide - and forbidding anyone but married heterosexuals taking certain jobs,' Neville said as he tucked a plant comfortably into its pot with a satisfied slap and lined it up with a row of similarly snug-looking pots on a high shelf. 'Do you fancy a cup of tea?' he asked, pulling off his gloves.

'I'm beginning to think I need something a bit stronger,' Hermione sighed, sinking onto a garden bench bedecked with cushions, beside Neville's potting table. Neville grinned and grabbed a bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhisky from behind an imposing edition of Hortus Botanicus and poured
them both a drink.

'What sort of jobs?'

Neville blushed pink. 'Mine.'

'So, you'll have to get married to stay working here?'

'I'm working on it.' Neville said with a sly wink. 'But let's face it, it's a much more serious issue for someone like our astronomy teacher - Thelonious Drake? He's not the 'marrying' kind as my grandmother used to say… As well as being our 'technical adviser' he's put me in touch with a bunch of folks called KICKBACK - all fearing possible persecution…'

Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing. She felt sick to the stomach.

'Anyway, Ernie quit his job at the Ministry a couple of weeks ago. He now lives in Muggle London with his partner.'

'I briefly worked with Ernie some years back at Being Division,' Hermione said pensively. 'Can't say I ever considered the Magical Creatures Department to be a hotbed of financial scandal…'

Neville guffawed. 'Oh, you'd be surprised… Dennis is cultivating a particularly useful contact in the Goblin Liaison Office, actually. But Ernie switched to International Magical Cooperation a while ago and helped set up this Muggle Business Office - the one headed up by that Zoltan Guldstern.'

Hermione's ears pricked up. 'Does Ernie have anything to say about him?'

'Nothing good! … Rest assured, we're looking into him, too. Do you have anything on him we could use?'

'Only what I told you about the plant in Wanaka,' Hermione muttered. 'You could run that?'

'I'd like to, but we now have a full-blown Sub Rosa Executive Committee… All stories need prior authorization via a complicated system of democratic consent.' He looked a little peevish about this. 'I haven't unleashed the full horror-show of what's really going on yet. I thought I'd wait for your permission.'

Hermione pondered this a moment. 'Actually, I'd probably rather speak to my people first, if you know what I mean?'

Neville nodded. 'Absolutely. You need to protect Draco while he's still on the inside.'

Hermione smiled at him gratefully. He'd homed in with laser-like precision on their biggest problem.

'Anyway, Ernie believes the sole purpose of this new Muggle office is to put a legitimate face on a major Ministry-sponsored money-laundering exercise using Muggle-Wizard business ventures,' Neville continued. 'We want to find out why - and we will.' Neville had a determined gleam in his eye.

Hermione wondered if she should alert him to Ron's investigation of Quidditch clubs, but that might pose problems for Ron…

'There's a few companies Ernie thinks warrant particular inspection. Spinkes and Troobles are the
big names that keep cropping up,' Neville continued.

'Troobles? The candy manufacturer?' Hermione asked, alarmed.

Neville nodded. 'There's been official Ministry money siphoned through Guldstern's office to Troobles for god-knows-what reasons. And in return, Ernie reckons a bunch of major business leaders and Ministry officials - possibly, Witchell himself – are being paid hefty backhanders. Pretty much high-level corruption, eh?'

Hermione felt queasy. George had been working with Troobles...

'We have someone at the Ministry who's going to get hold of a stash of contracts being held by Guldstern's office. We want to print the lot … Name and shame!'

'Sounds great!' Hermione enthused, quickly draining her drink and standing up. 'When is it due out?'

'Hopefully in a few days. We're just waiting for Ernie's source to get hold of the papers.'

XXX

'How's Parvati doing by the way?' Neville whispered once they were ensconced in a shadowy corner of the Hogwarts Library.

'Much better,' Hermione lied. She hadn't dared tell Neville about Scorpius. She'd received a quick note - via Harry – telling her they were safe and well and that she wasn't to worry. 'Parvati's trustworthy if that's what you're worried about?'

'It didn't even cross my mind that she wasn't,' Neville said assuredly. He wrestled a giant dusty tome from its perch. 'Here we are… Good ole Clavis est ad Omnes Mythologiis. Lists just about every witch and wizard of any note who ever lived,' he grunted, straining under the weight of the book. 'If your Atalaya isn't in here, I'll eat my wand.'

They'd already spent a few hours ploughing through volume after volume of the library's collection of grimoires but there was no trace of a spell or formula or invocation named 'Atalaya'.

'I don't know why, but it doesn't feel like a person to me,' she sighed.

'Could it be a place?' Neville ventured.

'Possibly,' Hermione replied. She tried and failed to stifle a yawn.

'You look beat. Why don't you head home and have an early night?' Neville said, regarding her tenderly. He solemnly stared at the mighty unopened tome on the desk before him.

XXX

Hermione Apparated from Hogsmeade to Diagon Alley. She had to warn George about the Troobles story Sub Rosa planned to break. He had withdrawn from his business venture with Ephraim, but what if there were still contracts linking him to Troobles? His entire life's work and reputation could be ruined. She couldn't let that happen.

George often worked late at the brashly colourful and slightly psychedelic offices located above the 'Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes' Megastore that consumed an entire corner block of Diagon Alley.

'Mr Weasley has left for the day,' George's secretary said apologetically. She was brandishing a
clutch of over-sized multi-coloured keys and had the air of a desperate runaway whose escape had been narrowly foiled.

'That's a shame,' Hermione muttered. 'Do you know if he headed straight home?'

'I believe so.'

Hermione idled up Diagon Alley, which was eerily quiet and half-shrouded in darkness. The paving stones ahead were illuminated by the occasional spot of light cast by shop window displays. She had little desire to hasten home for an evening of awkward silence with her husband, but she didn't want to gate-crash George's evening, either. Her business would have to wait until tomorrow.

Hermione paused at the entrance to The Leaky Cauldron. Maybe she could pop in and see Hannah Abbott? She peered into the bar, not quite wanting to commit, but the bar was almost empty and there was no sign of Hannah at all.

XXX

An excitable, pocket-sized owl with a piece of parchment secured to its collar, was hovering around her doorway when she arrived at Wisteria Cottage, frantically hopping up and down to gain her attention. It head-butted her repeatedly as she tried to fish out her wand from her jacket pocket to open the front door.

'Calm down,' she said soothingly, 'I'm here now.' Once inside, she removed the message, and gave the diminutive owl a friendly pat before dispatching it into the night sky.

The house was still and cold and Hermione had an unsettling consciousness that she was completely and utterly alone; and yet, at the same time, she felt strangely exposed, standing in her hallway. It felt like she was being watched by unseen eyes – hardly likely, since Bill had beefed up her wards to 'Gringotts Level 3'.

Maybe she should Floo to Shell Cottage where the kids were staying with Louis? After all, she had no idea when Ron would get back from the Ministry - or whichever drinking establishment the Aurors had repaired to for the evening.

She swished her wand to light the series of candles, sconces and lanterns that were arrayed around the house, poured herself a pumpkin juice in the kitchen and sat down with a weary thud at the kitchen table that resounded around the room, to ponder the parchment.

The message was from Neville.

_Still got 2930 pages to go and got bored, so looked instead for PLACES called Atalaya._

_Found these:_

_Towns - in Peru, Guatemala, Panama._

_Mount Atalaya in New Mexico, USA._

_Mount Atalaya in Spain, between Cieza and Abaran._

Hermione stared hopelessly at the parchment in front of her. She hadn't heard of any of these places!

What kind of common 'connection' could the likes of Ephraim and his cohorts have to a PLACE?
A Gilgad facility? If so, then Peru was reasonably close to Argentina – well, same continent, at any rate... And Ecuador, too, if Senor Canaro had been correct about a Dark Flux outbreak there. But this was tenuous.

Mount Atalaya in the USA… Well, Ephraim hailed from the USA. He'd been raised in Minnesota and attended university in Ohio. Maybe this mountain in New Mexico had some kind of personal significance?

Of course, Jeroboam reputedly lived in the mountains, but Neville hadn't listed a Mount Atalaya in the Alps.

Spain… Now, there were definitely connections with Spain!

Ephraim's wife, Iona, had a Spanish house, 'El Sol y Ter,' and didn't Sylvestra study in Girona? And Salvedra from The Geneva Group. He'd been Spanish, too.

Hermione felt sure she'd come across somebody else who came from Spain. That small admission might have been a mistake, she thought – amongst others.

And where had she seen a mountain? She closed her eyes tightly … tried to recall an image locked away at the back of her mind.

A face. A chilling vision that still haunted her dreams swung vividly into view. She gasped and her eyes snapped open.

The Memories… She had to look at the Memories to be sure… but she now felt certain that she knew where Mt. Atalaya was and who it connected.

She needed a Pensieve. Urgently. But where could she find one? To Hermione's knowledge there were only three, possibly four Pensieves in the entire country.

There was a black granite Pensieve, bonded with an archaic system of Saxon runes, housed in a heavily protected antechamber at the Wizengamot. It was used when a judicial review of Memories was deemed essential in a trial. But there was no way Hermione could gain access to the Wizengamot.

A second Pensieve, a particularly venerated and spectacular example of runic magic, was located in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts, but Hermione had never even met the current headmaster…

There was a much-fabled lost Pensieve, dubbed 'The Skenfrith Bowl.' A powerful wizarding family, the Osberns, had dwelt centuries ago in Skenfrith Castle and been the proud owners of a particularly fine Celtic Pensieve. However, after centuries of decline, conflict and conquest, this acclaimed Pensieve vanished without a trace. There had been multiple supposed sightings of The Skenfrith Bowl; from Windsor Castle to a terraced house in Preston and an antiques fair in Swaffham – even, Malfoy Manor, which would have been a terrible irony, given the circumstances.

Of course, Auror HQ had a Pensieve, but she felt too tired to Apparate to Paris.

Only one viable option remained.

XXX

Bill arrived a little over an hour later, beating Grumio by a good ten minutes.
Hermione explained why she needed a Pensieve, while Bill listened impassively throughout, arms folded, a concerned look on his face.

'I'm struggling to see how these Memories, which are intended to prove the guilt of these crazy disciple dudes of Jeroboam, will ever help you find damning evidence against Ephraim,' Bill mused. 'And why do you think there's going to be a connection to this "Atalaya"? You say you've never heard of it.'

'It's just a feeling I have,' Hermione remonstrated, sharply aware she sounded like a neurotic weirdo.

Bill shook his head in disbelief. 'This is not like you, Hermione.'

'I realise that,' Hermione replied in a small, pleading voice.

'Why not get Ron to use Section A privilege to access the Pensieve at the Wizengamot?' Bill asked, a shrewd look on his face.

Hermione had already dismissed this. She couldn't be confident enough in Draco's 'editing' skills to allow her husband to roam freely through the joint memories of their Argentine adventure.

'Ron isn't happy with my involvement in ANY of this,' she sighed. 'You know that.'

'Your problem's Draco,' Bill said bluntly. 'Ron wouldn't understand why you've continued working alongside him - and you've repeatedly lied.'

Hermione wasn't in the mood for a lecture. 'Are you going to help me or not?'

'I'm not comfortable doing it,' Bill said tetchily. 'Obviously, anything I do here is strictly between us – *Sub Rosa*, even...' he added, with an unmistakeable twinkle in his eye.

XXX

The Pensieve at Gringotts's was a shallow basalt basin, richly veined with streaks of silvery crystal. It was stowed in a secure vault accessible only to privileged employees who enjoyed the highest levels of security clearance. Bill levitated the Pensieve, steering it towards a low table. Hermione and Bill knelt on the floor beside it.

Hermione tightly clutched the small glass vial containing the Argentine memories.

'Nervous?' Bill asked. He smiled reassuringly.

'I don't know why,' she admitted – although deep down she did. The idea of reliving those experiences was both frightening and exhilarating.

'Do you want me to join you?' He glanced at the sealed and bolted door. 'No-one will disturb us.'

Hermione couldn't quite look him in the eye. 'I'll be fine, Bill. Thanks.'

But Bill persisted. 'Hermione – it might help if you have another pair of eyes with you, in case you miss something.'

Strictly speaking he was right, but she worried that the growing intimacy between her and Draco would be plain to see, once viewed in full 3D technicolour. And she still had no idea what he had included.
She took a deep breath. It was time to trust Draco... 'I've nothing to fear,' she said in a loud, clear voice.

She unstoppered the vial and poured the silvery liquid into the Pensieve. It swirled into the dark basin and, together, they plunged in, headfirst.

XXX

The first memory they encountered was definitely Draco's. He was alone and shivering; stamping his feet impatiently to keep warm. It was night time and he was standing against a brick wall in an alley – the sole illumination was the weak glare from a lamp-post about fifty metres away. He looked pale and drawn. Just a short time ago, Hermione had been talking with him in Katya's room at Malfoy Manor where he had shown her the silver roses.

From the other side of the wall came the sound of voices, laughter, the occasional raucous cheer and whoop and a banging door, followed by a momentary burst of brash electronic dance music. A volley of curses and a glass smashed to the ground. Draco looked up curiously, but a scuffle of footsteps to his left drew his attention.

His eyes perceptibly widened.

A tall cloaked figure, cast in shadow, was blocking much of the light streaming into the alley.

'Hello?' Draco asked uncertainly.

There was no response. The figure moved towards him and Draco instinctively moved backwards. The distinctive shadow of a gun was cast against the wall and Draco blanched. There was a resounding thwack, that reverberated through Hermione as she watched the scene unfold and a distinct flash of red - followed by blank darkness and a dull thud.

'I guess that was one of Jeroboam's guys?' Bill murmured.

Hermione gave a start. She'd almost forgotten that Bill was inside this memory with her...

'Ron's turn next...' 

Sure enough. The scene switched to the living room at Wisteria Cottage. Ron was writhing in pain, sweat dripping from his forehead.

Hermione was in their bedroom packing her case. She had a look of sheer panic that Hermione hadn't realised she was feeling so intensely at the time. Ron shuffled slowly to the doorway.

'... I realised somebody was standing in the hallway, looking at me. And then there was blackness.'

'They stunned you?' Hermione had asked.

'No. It was different. More like Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder. And then I heard it. The curse. It was a man's voice. Kind of like a harsh whisper. Grating. And I just keeled over.'

'And before the darkness? What did you see?'

'Dunno, Hermione. Can't say. Just a flash really.'

'A flash of what?'

'It was red. A flash of red. Then there was nothing.'
The scene dissolved… 'Next stop Argentina,' Bill murmured.

Hermione wondered if Draco had included his memory in the airport; calling Torquil and Sylvestra to tell them that Ron was out of action and it was herself, instead, who was accompanying him to Argentina. She was curious about that exchange, but unsurprised when the scene skipped instead to her hotel bedroom in Buenos Aires. After all, these memories were focusing on the activities of Los Rojos.

She steeled herself to keep her eyes averted from Bill and to look as natural and calm as possible…

In the memory, she was wearing a bathrobe and her hair was lank and wet. Draco was standing in front of her, his chest exposed. She was studying his wound with concentrated care.

Draco winced. 'That fucking kills.'

'Hold tight.' And she was probing the wound while he cried out in agony, clasping her shoulder as if his life depended on it.

'You're a fucking sadist, you know that?'

'You look like you're enjoying that a bit too much, Hermione,' Bill chuckled, an amused smile on his face, but his face stiffened in surprise when Hermione was forced back by a powerful force emanating from Draco's wound. The shock on both Hermione and Draco's faces was palpable.

'What the hell was that all about?' both Draco and Bill, standing next to her, said at the same time.

'It's magic. Definitely magic,' Hermione gasped.

The scene clouded over and then cleared, presenting a residential street with fine houses and palatial gates. The sounds of their voices bickering and their feet clattering on the pavement echoed around them.

Hermione hadn't fully comprehended how deathly still it was on that road in Buenos Aires. The tall, thin house with the forbidding shutters where Senor Canaro lived seemed to watch them as they approached… Why had Draco included this memory, she wondered?

'Come on, you know I'm right,' Draco was jeering. 'Muggle society is much more liberal than ours, and I don't just mean in that sappy, bleeding heart kind of way that really pisses me off. But when it comes to sex, wizards are kind of… strait-laced. It's like living in the 1950s or something.'

'Maybe wizards have stronger moral values?' Good god, but she sounded such a prig!

'Now that's priceless ... Is that what you really think?' He'd been right, Hermione thought with an unbidden pang inside of her. He was telling her that terrible things had happened to him, to them both – that terrible things might happen again.

But at the time, he had then burst into loud, mocking laughter and – crows, yes, there were CROWS on the street ahead of them… Los Rojos. They'd been watching them… even then. She switched attention to the crows as they took flight and perched in the trees overhead.

'That was them; Los Rojos,' she said, pointing them out to Bill.

'The animagi?'

She nodded in reply. She continued to watch them, fluttering from branch to branch, from tree to
tree, as they approached Senor Canaro's house. Hermione and Draco were still arguing, barely noticing the long shadows of the trees crisscrossing their path and that house – drawing them forwards, eyes veiled behind its tightly closed black shutters, but watching them, all the same…

’When it comes to sex, of course, you make the perfect little witch.’

’What’s that supposed to mean?’

’Just that… you are possibly the most repressed person I have ever met in my entire life.’

’How dare you? You know nothing about my sex life!’

’And I bet poor Ron doesn’t either.’ Hermione had to stifle a laugh…

’All that repressed sexuality bubbling away inside. Maybe helps explain your spiky aggression…’

’What spiky aggression?’

’The type of behaviour you’re displaying right now, actually.’

’Oh, shut up, you prat!’

Bill gave her a sidelong glance.

’Well, he IS a prat,’ Hermione said breezily. ’He was being extremely rude.’ She could sense her cheeks were glowing with hot embarrassment and hoped that the washed-out colour palette of the Memory applied to her and Bill as well.

’Don’t forget, we have to ask about Los Rojos, too,’ Hermione said.

’Los Rojos... The Reds…’

Hermione couldn’t believe her visceral reaction to what Draco was saying – the stab of panic. And Draco had been frightened, too.

’What is it?’

’When you were shot. Did you see anything? Or… sense something, sense an image?’

Draco was casting his mind back.

’It was red, wasn’t it?’ … ’And Ron? The same?’

’And me too…)’

’How come?’ Bill seemed to address the Hermione he was watching rather than the Hermione standing next to him.

’You felt a colour?’ Draco had a look of profound surprise, almost glee, on his face.

’I – I can’t really explain it, Bill. It’s sort of crept up on me.’

She could sense Bill staring at her, curiously.

The scene was shifting to inside Canaro’s house and they were being led down a dark corridor to a Pensieve. Hermione and Draco were exchanging nervous glances.
'It's a very rare gift you have there,' Bill remarked. 'I've read about it… Do you identify people you know with colours, too?'

'Yes, I do. Harry's green, for example. And Ephraim Golowitz. He's blue.'

'And Ron?'

Hermione opened her mouth to reply but realised she couldn't answer because she didn't know. 'I'm – I'm not sure.'

Bill's eyes flicked to Draco who was closely studying the runes studded around the circumference of the Pensieve.

'What about him?'

Hermione briefly considered lying, but Bill was examining her face with such unabashed intensity she couldn't… 'White. Draco's white.' A blinding, bright white that stole her breath away.

An uneasy silence fell between them… but then Draco's total inattentiveness to the decrepit Canaro's lugubrious conversation caught her attention instead. Draco's finger was methodically tracing the runes on the Pensieve, a thoughtful expression on his face. Was he reading them?

Hermione stepped closer and squinted at the runes. She'd seen them somewhere before.

'Do you recognise these?' she asked Bill, pointing at Canaro's Pensieve. Bill narrowed his eyes.

'Goldstein's thesis,' he murmured.

There was a swirl of fog and Draco was standing alone with Canaro. The room was cluttered with filth and decay and the shrill din of the birds, swinging in cages hanging haphazardly from the ceiling, was overwhelming. She gazed at the birds - their eyes were staring; alert, afraid, beaks agape, emitting a high frequency screech that seemed entirely more piercing and terrifying than she'd ever felt first time round.

Alarm calls. They were sounding alarm calls. It felt like they were trying to escape and telling her and Draco to run too, while they had the chance.

Hermione was so caught up with the birds she failed, at first, to register the conversation between Draco and Canaro.

'I'd never heard about these Rojos …' Draco was complaining. He was straight-backed and confrontational with Canaro, but his shirt was open. He had clearly shown Canaro his gunshot wound.

And there was a bowed obsequiousness from Canaro that she hadn't seen before.

'The least I deserved was a bit more warning,' Draco said, lip curled in disgust.

'There was no time,' Canaro explained. His eyes flicked to a large, misshapen cylindrical rock – a dusty rose colour – perched on a high shelf, overseeing the carnage of Canaro's world. 'Everything is…. Muy Fluido. You come here with this strange woman…'

'Hardly strange,' Draco bit back. 'She's one of Britain's most brilliant lawyers, actually. She has a forensic mind and is highly respected.'

Canaro laughed, baring his twisted, yellow teeth. 'A panther, perhaps, in those fancy law courts
you have such misplaced faith in, but HERE - this is the jungle and she'll break apart soon enough. She's a WOMAN, soft and pretty,' he glanced skywards, 'she's up there now, crying her sweet, little heart out.'

Draco looked uneasy; a mixture of barely disguised fury and guilty fear, almost as though he should try and seek her out and save her from this wolfish man and the darkness that was fast enveloping them… but instead he turned to Canaro and resumed his questioning about the Dark Flux outbreaks in stiff, staccato tones.

Hermione's footsteps were fast approaching.

'It was one day after the Dark Flux outbreak that the six men arrived in Santa Maria,' Canaro was saying.

'All wearing bright red robes...?'

In the memory, Hermione instantly engaged with their conversation, but as she watched them, she noticed that there was an odd pulsing, pinkish light emanating from the large, crystalline rock. It was the briefest of illuminations, but it gave the rough-hewn brownish rock, striated with thin threads of crimson and blue and violet, a sense of vitality, of sentience.

'The rock… look,' Hermione said, nudging Bill, who had been engrossed in the conversation. She pointed to the pulsating crystal, shimmering faintly above them.

Bill's face darkened. 'Pegmatic Corundum – you often find it in old-fashioned nimbometers. Can be used as a cloaked transmission device – it's fiendishly difficult to do, but this particular type of Corundum can be enchanted to capture Sound Spheres.'

Hermione chilled at the thought.

'You mean someone was listening to us?'

Bill looked glum. 'Possibly... Every word you said could have been captured by the Corundum and relayed - in a matter of minutes - to a similarly enchanted chunk of Corundum; one capable of transcribing and broadcasting messages.'

Moments later and the Memory had shifted to the Bar in Santa Maria. Jonas Arbuthnot, large, bluff and hearty, was introducing himself… Hermione took the opportunity to scope out the bar. There'd been a cluster of locals playing dominoes; five elderly wizards huddled around a single table, eyeing the new arrivals with unalloyed suspicion. The moment Hermione brandished her British Ministry ID card, the domino-players raised their eyebrows and a couple even shook their heads in dismay.

Hermione switched her attention to Dolores, who was washing glasses behind the bar. Her eyes were mainly downcast but there was a fixedness to her expression that belied an alertness to their conversation. She momentarily flicked a glance towards Draco when he announced who he was and – crucially – her eyes moved for the briefest of moments to the TV, hanging from the wall above the bar area. Any moment now and Draco was going to notice that his ex-wife, Astoria, was starring in the show being broadcast.

Dolores already knew who Draco was, and come to think of it, wasn't it a tad peculiar to be broadcasting a Muggle soap opera in a wizarding village? Hermione remembered the telephone lines she'd seen from Dolores's kitchen... was there actually a phone these lines connected to? A public telephone in the bar? YES. Hidden in a small, narrow booth… a classic rotary dial
telephone. Would that even work these days?

Dolores looked up to watch them leave; Hermione briefly caught her eye. Hermione would have liked to have seen what Dolores did next… but the memory was hurtling in a cloud of silvery fog into Jonas's office and from there to the pitch-black darkness of the stairway leading to the morgue. The sole light was the dwindling flicker of Jonas's wand-tip as he plodded downwards into the cold, dark depths below them. Draco's silver hair, gleaming in the gathering gloom, was bent close to her.

'Are you sure it hasn't just … slipped down or something?'

There was a weighty pause, a stillness between them – his hand searching her neck and throat in the darkness for her necklace. Hermione could almost feel her hair stand on end, remembering how sensitized her skin felt, responding to his touch.

'Oh, God…' She sounded close to tears.

'What's happening?' Bill asked tersely.

'This was when I realised I'd lost my wand,' Hermione murmured. 'I – I think Draco is wanting to show that we were defenceless. He didn't carry a wand at all.'

Bill shook his head in disbelief. 'You were both f*cked-up crazy to be doing this, you realise that, don't you?'

He continued to shake his head, but this time in nauseated horror at the blue body of Ana, covered with her rash of ghastly purple welts. He stepped closer to the corpse and surveyed the contusions. 'Did all the Dark Flux victims have these … these ugly marks?'

'No … only Ana.' Hermione turned towards the staircase. Any moment now and Los Rojos would be with them. She shivered involuntarily at the thought.

She looked back to Jonas, half-wishing she could warn him.

She could sense their arrival … They were standing at the top of the stairs for a few moments longer than she had originally thought. Their scarlet robes fluttered in an unseen draught. The low, sinister hum of the blue, magic ball was already there… It was clasped in the outstretched palm of the leading figure of Los Rojos. It slowly rolled to the ends of his fingertips, vibrating with pent-up malice, and then he lightly flicked it away. Released, the ball surged with breath-taking ferocity towards Jonas, disorientating the wizard so that he was ducking and swerving and then cowering as the ball repeatedly dived and swooped, smashing into him with what must have been excruciating stinging blows. Jonas's skin scorched and sizzled; he was whimpering in pain and desperation.

It was difficult to watch.

Draco was pulling Hermione deeper into the darkness. He had his eyes firmly trained on the approaching figures of Los Rojos, descending the stairs with nonchalant yet deadly intent. Hermione could see that Draco was hugely exasperated at her pathetic attempt to be a heroine – a heroine without a wand.

She was amazed how Los Rojos ignored them as they frantically tried to escape; they were making such a commotion, screeching and shouting at each other, desperately trying to scale the back wall to find an escape route, like a pair of rats in a sack.

Jonas was being racked with huge shudders of pain and his eyes had rolled back, blood shot and
staring. He had bitten his tongue in half and blood and saliva frothed from his mouth as he contorted in agony, pinioned to the floor by a succession of darting red flares from the extended wand of Los Rojos.

Hermione let out a piercing cry; 'It won't open!' and Draco's face was momentarily bathed in the eerie green light of the fatal Aveda Kedavra that silenced Jonas's cries. Hermione toppled onto Draco and he tightly enfolded her in his arms, shielding her from the advancing blue ball – and then the wall exploded, with terrifying force… and a looming, dark figure - that Hermione assumed was Dolores - with arms extended like a giant, black bat, was standing erect on a bank of earth high above them. She was sheathed in a shimmering silvery aura that crackled with searing electric energy. Draco and Hermione were being levitated higher and higher and then they crumpled to the ground at Dolores's feet.

Draco recoiled as Dolores offered her hand to help him stand. He immediately scooped Hermione into his arms, holding her close, as he laboured after Dolores, who was quick-marching away from the scene of devastation.

The town was dead and still, swallowed into the surrounding darkness.

They arrived at a small, white boxy cottage. Draco hesitated before entering.

Once inside, Draco looked suddenly exhausted. He was clutching his shoulder, wracked with pain. He maintained a wary vigil at the front window, scanning the world outside. Was he looking to alert someone? Seeking a way out?

'He didn't want to go in,' Bill muttered. 'He didn't trust her.'

'What choice did we have?'

The tense stand-off with Dolores persisted; but before long, baby Paco was introduced and Draco was won over with Dolores's insights – her claim that he had a living daughter. Hermione felt as furious as the first time she'd heard this, except now she knew there WAS a daughter – Magda… Had Dolores chanced on the truth or did she already KNOW the truth?

Hermione looked around the living room – it was a humble dwelling, sparsely decorated. There was a glass jar over a shimmering lump of rose-colored crystal.

'Is this the same kind of rock we saw at Canaro's?' she asked Bill.

He studied it carefully. 'Yes, I think so… but I'm wondering if the glass jar acts as a sound block. Was it always covered?'

Hermione tried to recall. 'I don't know.'

'You seriously need to consider the possibility that this lady was forewarned of your arrival by Senor Canaro.'

'Oh, I've no doubt of that at all, Bill,' Hermione said somberly. 'Indeed, I now think both parties had their instructions direct from Ephraim and Torquil. The memory we saw at Canaro's was manipulated to ensure we headed to Santa Maria that same evening. Dolores must have been the eyes and ears of the operation in Santa Maria and was tasked with the job of saving us from Los Rojos – I guess Ephraim has some fondness for Draco, after all.'

'He needs him,' Bill remarked drily. 'And at the time, he also needed you. For THIS.' Bill gestured at their surroundings inside the Memory.
Hermione gazed around the room, her eyes quickly alighting on a painting.

This was what had prompted her to enter these Memories… This was the memory that she had been so desperate to see, the memory nagging at the back of her mind, that she had needed to confirm wasn't a sudden figment of her imagination.

A small, dark mountain wreathed in autumnal colours. There was a handwritten title in the bottom corner… 'Atalaya.'

'This is Mount Atalaya,' she breathed, examining it closely. 'Between Abaran and Cieza – somewhere in Spain.'

'And you think this is where Dolores comes from?'

Hermione nodded. 'Probably. Dolores told us she was from Europe.'

Dolores… Canaro… Sylvestra… even, Salvedra…

They were all connected..

'Draco said Canaro was a grandmaster potioneer…,' she said, almost to herself. 'I wonder if he had pupils?' Sylvestra had been studying potions in Girona…

Hermione and Draco were now standing together in the kitchen, discussing everything that had happened. Draco's face was bathed in the moonlight. Hermione found she was holding her breath. She suppressed a sigh of longing, a desire to reach out and touch him.

Dark shadows flitted beyond the window; multiple eyes watching their every move.

And a dark shadow moved behind them, too.

Hermione could now see the tall, angular form of Dolores, her face masked in darkness, distantly reflected in the kitchen window – a still, silent presence - watching them, listening.

And when Draco moved away, her face loomed further into view, far larger and closer than Hermione had ever remembered – somehow too large, too close… and her eyes were hollow pits of black despair.

'No – no more now,' Hermione begged. 'Bill, I want to stop.' An intense, icy wave of panic was threatening to overwhelm her.

In the memory, the line of crows … Los Rojos … were watching her. Or were they watching the witch lurking close behind?

'We thought they were waiting to kill us…' she trembled.

'No, Hermione,' Bill said. 'They were guarding you.'

XXX

It felt like many hours had passed by the time they surfaced from the Pensieve. Hermione was relieved to see the solidly prosaic limestone-painted walls of the cell at Gringotts.

Bill had made her finish Draco's 'show-reel'. Inwardly, Hermione was begging that Draco had been mindful enough to omit Henrik and Miguel… she didn't know if she could bear to watch Miguel Culebra take his last breath again.
Luckily, Draco leaped forwards in their narrative, but made sure to feature their discovery of Senor Canaro's corpse. Bill looked waxen and green at the sight of Canaro's drooping, bloodied entrails.

Hermione's attention, however, was focused instead on how Draco had strived to protect her, to hold her away from the blood-soaked chaos. She could now see that he had been a much more caring and considerate figure throughout this debacle… almost from the outset. That an easy, mutual interdependence had sprung up between them that was at odds with how they felt they SHOULD feel about each other. No wonder it had felt confusing and alien. She now observed the many moments when he had gazed at her, often guiltily and sometimes sorrowfully, but with growing tenderness. And the way their eyes continually locked, to the exclusion of everything else around them.

She'd been utterly engrossed by him, and he by her…

Part of her wanted to experience everything over again. Part of her wanted to see them dancing at Club Ofelia, to see how their bodies had slotted together so naturally, to see them intertwined on his bed, her body craving so much more than she was prepared to allow herself. She hadn't known then how she would feel now… and what she feared; a yearning, a regret, a sense that a chance for something unique and wonderful and wholly consuming in her life might pass her by.

A clamour of feelings was bubbling up inside of her. She felt winded and was faintly aware that her cheeks were wet and her nose was streaming.

Bill drew her close and hugged her tightly. 'It's okay,' he said in soothing tones. 'It can't have been fun to relive some of that.'

'Harry needs to know,' she said in a small voice, muffled by his shirt. '… Someone has to get out to Santa Maria and apprehend Dolores. Interrogate her.'

Ron still hadn't returned.

'I'll stay until he's back,' Bill said, settling himself onto the sofa in the living room. 'I'd rather you weren't on your own tonight.'

She assured him that wasn't necessary, but soon relented. She felt skittish and scared, churned up by the memories.

'I need to see George tomorrow!' Hermione called to him from the kitchen as she made them both a cup of hot chocolate. She explained to Bill about the Troobles contracts. 'I've heard there might be an exposé,' she said, joining him in the living room and closing the door. Somehow that felt safer.

Bill grinned. 'Our Sub Rosa friends…'

'I guessed you were the Gringotts's source.'

Bill nodded. 'Just doing my civic duty.'

In spite of their surface joviality, there was an anxious undercurrent to their conversation. Both were playing a part and knew it.

'We need to know more about this Corundum… how it's being used and who, specifically, is keyed into that communications network.'
Bill drained his mug of hot chocolate and placed it on a side table. 'Well, it doesn't usually present in its 'raw' form like that – we know it more commonly as sapphire or ruby.'

'RUBY?'

Bill's eyebrows shot up. 'What is it?'

'Ephraim. He wears a ruby ring. It's an enormous stone. Hard to miss! – one moment.'

Hermione scurried into the kitchen. She was sure there was a Daily Prophet hanging about… and wherever there was a copy of the Daily Prophet, Ephraim was almost certain to be featured. YES… the engagement edition. Ron had read it and tossed it aside disdainfully and it had never been cleared away.

Bill followed her into the kitchen.

'Look!' Hermione said, showing him the front-page photo of Ephraim, beaming with pride. His hand was clearly visible, and the large, ruby ring was glinting boldly.

Bill heaved a huge sigh. 'I guess it might be a coincidence.'

'It's not though, is it?' Hermione re-joined with a twisted smile.

Bill shook his head. He held her gaze, a worried frown on his face.

Hermione rubbed her arms, a sudden prickling of cold excitement shivered through her.

'Look… Bill,' she said, 'it's late. I'm pretty sure Ron will be back soon. Get yourself home. I'll be okay here. This house is a Gringotts Level 3, remember?'

But Bill wasn't convinced. 'I meant it when I said don't want you to be alone.' He pulled her into a warm, comforting embrace. 'I'm going to stay … And first thing tomorrow, I'm upgrading this place to Level 4.'

XXX

By eight o'clock the following morning, half of the entire Weasley family had visited Wisteria Cottage - or, to be more precise, had visited Ron.

Ron had fallen headfirst out of the fireplace at five o'clock that morning, amidst a great hullabaloo of clattering and shrieking cries of pain. He was blind drunk and his face and hands were streaked with blood from a deep gash on his forehead, his robes and trousers were torn, and his knees were grazed.

Fortunately, Bill was able to lever his brother into bed and force-feed him a Pepperup Potion, if only to try to get some sense out of him.

Hermione and Bill feared he'd got drunk and been attacked. The truth, however, was much more mundane. A bunch of Aurors had repaired to a remote country pub in the Yorkshire Moors, drunk their body weight in Muggle wine and cognac, and Ron had lost a dare to play 'Clifftopper' with Charlie Dowson, a Section C Auror with an infamous reputation for hard roistering. Dowson had been transported to St Mungo's by broomstick with a broken collar-bone.

Rather than regret his self-inflicted minor injuries, Ron seemed to see them as a badge of honour – he had won his inaugural round of Clifftopper and was now acclaimed as the current Departmental
Clifftopper Champion.

'But what the hell IS Clifftopper?' Hermione asked helplessly, but neither Bill or Ron deigned to answer and neither did the long line of Weasley family well-wishers who trooped through Wisteria Cottage over the next few hours. Molly had been alerted to Ron's condition by a 'troubling Patronus' in the wee hours and was soon at his bedside soothing his fevered brow with liberal doses of Motherwort Potion – in case of any 'grievous internal bruising.'

By half past six, Molly had brought in a dear friend, Healer Thera Hobday, who proceeded to criticise Hermione for a full fifteen minutes for applying Murtlap Essence on Ron's cuts and scratches without medical supervision, before insisting that Ron follow a strict regime of Butterfly Weed Balm alternating with her very own (and very expensive) Predictably Perfect Polypody Lotion.

Percy was extremely unimpressed that Ron had been 'Clifftopping'. His wife, Audrey, had brought a jar of Bitterroot Balm. Sadly, Ron had a vicious allergy to Bitterroot and poor Audrey was banned from the cottage on account of her having been 'tainted' by the stuff in transit.

Harry and Ginny arrived about half past eight. Ginny set to making a huge bubbling vat of her special hangover potion – which she diagnosed as most essential in the circumstances.

'What's Clifftopper?' Hermione asked Harry, when they had a spare moment to themselves. They were drinking tea in the garden, watching Bill 'do his thing' as Harry described Bill's intensive regime of warding spells.

'I've no idea,' Harry replied with a shrug. He smuggled his phone into Hermione's palm. 'Check out the photos I managed to take of Torquil's flat,' he murmured. 'Didn't get a chance to show you the other day.'

He sauntered back inside to greet Tana McLaughlin and Tom Bennet, who were bringing Ron a monster bag of Jelly Slugs to cheer him up. Tom popped into the garden a few minutes later to share a joke with Bill.

'He's gonna be alright,' Tom said, rolling his eyes in the cottage's direction, 'just trying to get out of Humpty Patrol this afternoon if you ask me…'

'What's HUMPTY Patrol?' Bill asked.

'One of these new Auror Teams,' Tom said glibly. 'There's Operation Knight Blast – or the "Blasters" as we're calling ourselves. And then there's Operation Humpty. They're more back office; looking into breaches of financial and administrative etiquette. That kind of thing.' Tom sniggered. 'Don't think Ron was best-pleased to be made a Humpty… the money's good, though.'

Tom ducked inside when a worried-looking George Weasley, clutching a newly brewed glass of Ginny's hangover cure, joined them in the garden.

'You got a bad head there, George?' Bill asked.

George was brimming with self-pity. 'Had a bit of a heavy night.'

'Where did you go?'

'Nowhere.'

Hermione backed out of this conversation to quickly browse the photos on Harry's phone. The
Haast's flat was immaculately tidy and really rather disappointing; no sign of a secret lab.

Selwyn seemed to be an over-grown teenager as far as she could tell. His quarters were stuffed full of model spaceships and his bedroom walls adorned with life-size static Muggle posters of giant men in spacesuits and strange-looking aliens, in particular an exotic-looking and scantily-clad female - the Morph girl from Space Force 7.

In contrast, Torquil's space was plainly-furnished and minimalist.

She was about to hand the phone back to Harry when she spotted something … on a shelf in the living-room. Was that a glass jar, similar to the one in Dolores's house? Hermione stretched the photo for a clearer shot… Yes. She was sure of it. It was a glass jar concealing a reddish blob. She felt a squibgle of excitement. This surely had to be another special slab of pegmatic corundum?

'Not the most exciting staged burglary I've had to commit,' Harry said, returning with a slab of lemon drizzle cake that Audrey had brought earlier.

'Well, actually it is,' Hermione confided. She edged closer and relayed to Harry everything she had learned about the corundum and her suspicions about Dolores's connection to Gilgad's Dark Flux operations.

She then told Harry how she'd looked into Atalaya and was sure it was a mountain in Spain.

'Wasn't Dolores the scary lady in Santa Maria who spouted off about Draco's missing kid?' Harry said a little too loudly. Hermione knitted her brows in irritation and an admonishing shake of the head.

'And you think she needs properly checking out?' Harry added, dropping his voice.

'As soon as possible.'

'Damn… I'm not sure how I can help. I've been asked to represent Auror HQ in talks with the International Magical Law Office about this loony decision to restrict travel between the UK and Europe. I'm going to be stuck at a working lunch in Hogsmeade most of today.'

'Have you any free time next week?' Hermione asked, frustrated. 'Because I also was hoping you could get out to Spain some time and look at this Mount Atalaya, too.'

'Strictly speaking I NEVER have free time,' Harry said sourly. He shovelled the slice of cake into his mouth and nodded appreciatively at Audrey's baking skills. 'As it happens though,' Harry continued, wiping crumbs from his mouth on the sleeve of his robe, 'this is the one week when I'm having a bit of a holiday. I've promised to take Ted on a fishing trip.'

This was really NOT the time for Harry to be jaunting off on bloody holiday, Hermione quietly fumed. Harry clearly sensed her vexation.

'I'll see what I can do,' he conceded, 'I could always get one of our overseas operatives to visit this Dolores and ask a few leading questions. And I'm sure the mountain can wait…'

It was better than nothing.

Ginny emerged with a fresh pot of tea to top up everyone's mugs. Her early morning brilliance felt particularly aggravating for Hermione, who had been struggling with Ron's incessant grumbling since before dawn and had then spent a good deal of that time hunting for her supply of Dittany – which she thought was by far the best treatment for Ron, rather than all these highly expensive
lotions and potions the healer had suggested instead.

Hermione was also desperate to send an owl to Neville to tell him their search for 'Atalaya' was over, but poor Grumio was looking a bit of a spent force having already been dispatched by Molly to summon Healer Hobday and having ventured twice to Slug and Jiggers in Diagon Alley, because that was the only apothecary which stocked Hobday's Polypody Lotion.

Maybe she could pop to the Ministry and send an owl from there? As it was the weekend, there'd be no one around to bother her.

Hermione glanced at George. He was staring blankly into his teacup, an expression of utter misery on his face.

'We need to talk about Troobles,' Hermione said to him in hushed tones.

George jolted from his dismal reverie; eyes wide in abject panic. He coaxed Hermione towards the safer peripheries of the hedgerow.

'What do you know?' he said urgently.

'I know that there's going to be a Sub Rosa published this week citing the names of everyone who worked on dodgy outsourcing contracts – and sadly, I think Troobles is a key player.'

George's head fell to his chest with a sigh. 'It's a living nightmare,' he groaned. 'I've got that nasty little Torqley man suggesting all sorts of consequences if I renege on our deal – and if I get formally investigated by Section B, I'm toast!'

'But surely you didn't actually do anything wrong, did you, George?' This unpleasant little possibility hadn't actually occurred to Hermione up to now.

George grimaced. 'I needed a quick injection of cash…'

Hermione blew out her cheeks in exasperation. 'Please tell me you didn't sign anything, that there's no paper trail.'

'I – I can't do that. My contract had already been filed at the Office for Muggle Business Relations.' Precisely where Neville's contact was set to hunt down any paperwork relating to Troobles… She had to get in there and retrieve the contract with George's signature before anyone else did.

'I'll come with you,' George asserted. 'It's only proper I clear up my own mess.'

'Come on then! We'd better hurry!'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"GHOSTS" by JAPAN

"RENIEGA" by ROSALIA

"BLACK ROSES" by IAN BROWN

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
With an Auspicious and a Dropping Eye

Chapter Summary

George's spot of bother takes a sinister turn, Hermione and Draco get lost in a maze, and Draco gets a nasty shock…

38. With an Auspicious and a Dropping Eye

Hermione felt like they were the only living souls in the entire Ministry complex. The place was eerily quiet, aside from the occasional fizz and splutter from the enchanted flame torches, which gently illuminated the main atrium. Even the fountain at the heart of the atrium had been turned off for the weekend.

'It's a bit creepy, isn't it?' George said. He warily scanned the shadowy vaulted ceilings and the gloomy passageways radiating away from the atrium. Their footsteps echoed across the barren hallway. 'I avoid coming here if I can. It's a Ghoul World… Give me the upside any day! Embrace the sunlight!' George threw his arms wide and spiralled around like a windmill. He continued in this vein while Hermione waited impatiently for a lift, but so far, she hadn't heard a single familiar whoosh and chug that signalled an impending arrival.

'When you think about it, it's a bit unnatural, isn't it? All these poor folks buried under the ground like moles…' George continued.

'Yes, George,' Hermione said, curtly. 'I think we might have a problem here.'

'Oh, really?' George blinked in surprised disappointment.

'The lifts aren't working,' Hermione said, frantically jabbing at the call-button.

'Sure, they are…' George sauntered from one lift to the next, trying each lift with similarly futile results.

'Look,' Hermione said, adopting a business-like manner. 'I need to send an owl, so I'll take the service stairs to Level Minus One.' George pulled a horrified face. It was nine floors up. 'I think there's a fireplace connected to the Floo Network in the Ludicrous Patents Office; that's just one flight up. You wait there and I'll see if I can find anything open near the Owlery and get back to you.'

'What floor's this Muggle office?'

'Three.'

'Oh, look!' George exclaimed. 'There's a lift working – over there!' Sure enough, there was an open lift with a single flashing green light. 'Strange. I didn't see anyone coming out. Did you?'

Hermione quickly looked around, but there was no sign that anyone had come into the atrium while they were standing there. George was already in the lift and beckoning her to hurry, but as she approached, the lift door swung shut. She caught a final glimpse of George pulling a face in exasperation.
Hermione waited, with rising impatience, for the lift to return. It was taking an age! Had George got out on the wrong floor or was he now bouncing from one level to the next?

A more pressing concern was the distant sound of voices – like a band of whooping quidditch fans. She peered into the depths of a long, shadowy corridor… yes, there was a group of darkly-clad wizards carrying torches. They appeared to be holding what looked like shields – the type of shields once used by medieval knights when they went into battle. But of course... they had to be Operation KNIGHT Blast – or the "Blasters" as Tom Bennet had called them earlier, charged with tracking down the Sub Rosa saboteurs. And they were heading in her direction.

Hermione instantly ducked out of view and tripped hastily towards the service stairs. If she – of all people – was found loitering suspiciously in the Ministry, it wouldn't go well for her.

She laboured up a series of tortuous, winding staircases, never daring to look down, for what felt like a lifetime. Sweating and almost delirious with exhaustion, she alighted at the Owlery. The stench of the place was overwhelming. She collapsed onto a nearby chair to catch her breath.

Multiple large golden spheres blinked at her from the grey gloom amid softly-cooed greetings. An elderly elf hobbled towards her. 'Can I help you?'

'Yes. I need to send an Owl.'

'Is it Ministry business?'

'Of course,' she lied.

The elf gave her a strip of parchment and a quill and politely turned away as she penned her note. It wasn't usual to have an elf on duty here; especially on a Sunday. She decided to make her message to Neville as short and cryptic as possible.

'SPANISH MOUNTAIN. INVESTIGATE FOR LINKS.'

'Is there a fireplace on this floor?' she asked the elf.

'Internal business only.'

'That's fine,' she smiled.

'This way, Mrs Weasley,' the elf said. Damn, Hermione thought; she'd been recognised!

Hermione was able to Floo to the offices of the Muggle-Worthy Excuses Committee, just a short walk from the white door which led via a winding corridor to the Office for Muggle Business Relations. She passed the white door and hastened to the lift station, expecting that George would be waiting for her – no doubt with growing impatience. But there was no sign of him. More disconcerting still was the fact that the lift was wide open and empty. This clearly meant that George had likely arrived and decided to move on without her. So, where was he?

She called out for him, but her voice echoed back to her. The majority of offices and cubicles on this floor were shuttered up for the weekend; the entire floor was deserted.

This was really rather rude, she thought irritably, but then remembered that George hadn't even known on which floor the Office for Muggle Business Relations was located. It was entirely possible that he'd never even been there! A frisson of fear rippled through her. Something was
wrong… Or, had she simply misunderstood George's earlier question and he DID know the whereabouts of the office, but had forgotten which level it was on?

Hermione trotted rapidly back towards the white door she'd passed a few moments ago. She tried the door. It wasn't locked. Indeed, it was slightly ajar and swung open easily. She entered the narrow corridor; it was empty and still. There was a line of flickering candles leading to the grizzled portrait of Grogan Stump, opposite the firmly closed door of Mr Guldstern's office – the one, she recalled, with its Floo-operational fireplace leading directly to Arcana.

She hastened to the Office for Muggle Business Relations and pressed her ear to the door. She couldn't hear anything to indicate that either Mr Guldstern or his annoying assistant were lurking inside - or George for that matter. Complete silence…

She concluded that George must have decided to hunt for her on the service stairs or wandered back to the atrium - hopefully avoiding the Blasters. But now that she was here, she decided she might as well search the office for any incriminating evidence that George had been working with Troobles and take it before anyone else did.

The room was as chaotic and dishevelled as before - possibly worse. Zoltan Guldstern's desk was barely visible beneath the burgeoning piles of parchment that coated every spare inch, some papers spilling to the floor.

She frantically looked around the room. Finding anything related to George would be a tough task.

And then she saw it! A piece of parchment poking out from beneath a thick leather-bound file, with a familiar name printed in large, bold capitals across the top – *Mr George Weasley, Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes* – followed by a string of illegible figures and dates in small print.

Hermione plunged her hands into the slew of parchments and documents and tugged the Troobles contract free. But in so doing, she inadvertently displaced a small telescopic tube. The tube rolled over and swivelled, one end pointing directly at her with what looked like a large, bulbous glass eye, winking ominously.

Hermione stood stock-still, paralysed in chill anticipation. 'Oh, shit,' she gasped, mere moments before a high-pitched, insistent shrieking rent the air. It was a latest edition Ministry issue - the very worst and most sophisticated kind of sneakoscope to be stuck in a room with.

She instinctively grabbed the sneakoscope and smashed it hard against the wall, sending a flurry of papers to the floor in its wake. The sneakoscope was momentarily silenced but then a thunderous whirring sound cranked up, and was gaining power and volume as each second passed…

Hermione froze – panicked, frightened and completely confused; but the sound of the white door at the end of the corridor swinging open, followed by a frantic stampede of footsteps heading towards her focused the mind. She immediately drew her wand and snapped the office door shut. The last thing she wanted was to be found snooping around and setting off sneakoscopes by the Blasters…

'They're in here!' someone shouted, scrabbling at the door-handle. Any second that door would be blown off its hinges.

Hermione looked to the door then to the fireplace leading to Arcana: it was her only means of escape… Surely no one would be there on a Sunday? She quickly stuffed George's contract into her pocket and grabbed a handful of Floo powder from a bowl on the mantlepiece and jumped into the fireplace.
Hermione emerged into the lobby at Arcana. The fireplace was situated in a hospitality zone, complete with a sofa and armchairs, screened off from the main atrium.

A howling siren suddenly blared throughout the building… And a troupe of security guards charged past, yelling instructions to each other.

'Hold the main doors!' one shouted. 'He's making a break for it!'

'We're onto him!' came a bellowed reply.

There was scuffling and the sound of boots squealing on the highly polished floor, followed by a volley of scarlet flashes, reflecting off the walls and ceiling.

Hermione was concealed by the large screen that enclosed the seating area, but if she craned her head as far as possible, she could see a broken-looking figure slumped between two security guards close to the main doors exiting the Arcana building.

Was that GEORGE? A surge of hot bile rushed into her throat… But it couldn't be. How could he possibly know the passcode to enter Arcana by Floo?

A further influx of security guards surged past her, amongst them a tall, imposing figure: Troy, one of Ephraim's chief bodyguards.

'Over here! We've got an intruder!' yelped a voice to Hermione's left.

A fierce-looking man, brandishing a wand, was advancing towards her with deadly menace. Panic-stricken, Hermione automatically tried to Disapparate but the siren had obviously triggered an anti-Disapparition jinx…

She scrambled to unsheathe her wand whilst running backwards, falling over an armchair and skidding across the floor in her haste. She hauled herself up, catching sight of Troy and two of the security guards, dark intent etched on their faces, marching purposefully towards her end of the atrium.

'Shit,' she hissed… torn between transfiguring herself into a bug or a flea, something small to the point of invisible - or making a run for it. However, her body had already decided for her and she was sprinting at breakneck speed away from the atrium towards the heavy wooden doors leading to Tony Goldstein's former laboratory, swerving to dodge a barrage of yellow and red stunners being fired at her by Troy and his colleagues.

She tried to gabble a Disillusionment Charm as she ran, but her mind had become a red-hot mess, fuelled by raw fear. She was unable to focus beyond anything but a tight pain in her chest and the frenetic movement of her legs, like steaming pistons, as she charged up a staircase on her right. She'd had enough stairs for an entire lifetime, but the adrenalin coursing through her body pushed her forwards with a speed and athleticism she’d never known she had in her.

*Think, Hermione!* She said to herself as she wound her way up the stairs, passing three, then four landings with doors heading into different sections of the Arcana building. But it was difficult to think beyond anything but a desire to escape this place and find George.

She took the next door and sped along a long, carpeted corridor – she had no idea where she was headed. But she could hear a burble of voices heading closer, about to round the corner and spot her.
Even from this distance she immediately recognised Troy's loud, stentorian tones.

And then came a second voice... accompanied by a thunderbolt of livid blue, exploding into her head. It was Ephraim...

Without a moment's thought, Hermione entered the first room she came across, on her left - it was pitch-black inside - and leant against the door, her heart jumping violently into her throat as she strained to control her breathing.

The voices seemed to fade and for a small moment she allowed herself to relax, to wipe away a sheet of sweat dripping from her forehead into her eyes.

There had to be another way, a rational way, to get out of this...

_Ephraim_, she thought... Ephraim was here. He was supposed to be in Israel. If Ephraim was back, did that mean Draco was here, too? Even though it seemed counter-intuitive, she wondered if her best bet was to actively find Ephraim... To surrender herself to him. To claim she was in Arcana looking for her brother-in-law and simply got lost and confused, immediately dispelling any suspicions about her reasons for being here.

A faint light to her left caught her attention... a small, rosy glow pulsating out of the darkness. As her eyes adjusted to the lack of light, she could make out a large, looming fireplace - an unusual feature in an upper floor room of a modern office-block... She felt for a light-switch but couldn't find one. This was a magical room, she realised - one not used by Arcana's multiple Muggle employees.

She whispered 'Lumos' and moved, hesitantly, deeper into the room, holding her wand aloft.

The room appeared to be part of a suite - there was clearly an adjoining room to her right - dominated by a vast, black rug with an assortment of black cushions arranged in a circle.

She turned to face the pink, glowing light.

Above the large, stone fireplace, was a rock - glinting ominously in the shadows. And above the rock was a tall, monochrome portrait - a slim man with a narrow face, deep-set, jet-black eyes and a long, winding beard that fell down the entire length of his torso and curled out of view.

It was Salvedra - and it felt like he was watching her every move. His eyes flickered when she advanced a few feet closer, driven by an intense curiosity to study both the portrait and the hunk of glowing corundum beneath him.

And then he smiled - a small, thin smile, the smile of someone who wasn't accustomed to smiling much at all... She could feel a thick, cloying blackness oozing into her, a smothering opaque gloom that muffled her senses.

Suddenly, the door to her right clicked open. Hermione whispered 'Nox' and swiftly retreated to a window cloaked in thick, velvet curtains. She slipped behind the drapes, positioning herself so that she was still able to peek out.

Sylvestra, clad in a long, crimson robe, her bountiful fair hair loose over her shoulders, stalked into the room and faced the portrait.

Maybe she'd sensed Sylvestra's approach? But Sylvestra's blackness had a cleaner quality to it... repellant and cataclysmic, rather than the lurching sense of dread that had prickled her skin.
Sylvestra took a deep shuddering breath and then, to Hermione's amazement, she flung her head and her arms over her shoulders until her hands touched the floor – bending herself into a backwards crab position. Her hair tumbled downwards and to Hermione's horrified fascination, Sylvestra's mouth morphed into a gaping, dark hollow and her eyes snapped wide to reveal nothing but black; a dense, pitiless black...

Hermione trembled with fear, praying that those black eyes were also sightless, unable to penetrate the thick gloom that hung heavily in the room.

Time seemed to stand still… Hermione had no idea how long she stood motionless behind the curtains, while Sylvestra stared into the darkness with her pitch-black eyes. However, an abrupt knock on the door instantly drew Sylvestra out of her trance. She quickly straightened herself, bobbed her head respectfully at the portrait, and quit the room - leaving Hermione alone.

Except… she didn't feel alone. She felt sure she could hear the deep, sighing breaths of someone close by, but there didn't seem to be another living soul in there, except herself and the rose-coloured stone, pulsing gently on the mantelpiece, illuminating the shadowy man in the portrait who seemed to stare relentlessly in her direction.

Hermione dashed from her hiding place and pressed her ear against the door. There was silence… She turned back to the room. It felt like the corundum was calling her. She couldn't leave without at least examining it.

She approached the fireplace with some trepidation, keenly aware of Salvedra's dark-eyed gaze, and extended a curious finger. The corundum was the size of a large man's fist; porous, grainy with a slightly sharp edge as she trailed her finger around its girth. It felt like any other roughly-hewn stone, except for a tiny, lingering trace of sensation, akin to microscopic pin-pricks, that rippled underneath her skin where she had made direct contact.

She picked it up, wondering how heavy it was… It was surprisingly dense and leaden in her hands. She stared at its luminous, throbbing glow: a delicate sparkling flutter of colour. She closed her eyes and felt a swirl of competing colours and energies raging through her… the sensation was so powerful it felt like an electric wind was gusting through her hair, crackling with an oddly delirious menace.

She took a deep breath and tried to open her eyes and return the corundum to the mantelpiece… any thoughts of casting a Doubling Charm and pocketing the original suddenly seemed far-fetched, perilous. But she found she couldn't open her eyes – her eyelids were jammed tight; they felt like they were made of the thickest, most impenetrable, immoveable metal. Her heart slowed and a dull ache was coursing through her arms, weighing down her shoulders and her neck, forcing her head to drop to her chest… She feared she might even be drooling… but there was nothing she could do. She felt helpless, trapped, rooted to the spot… imprisoned by a dark, insidious fear that made her cry out loud – except her mouth never moved and her voice remained silent.

'Quis es?' came a soft, sly voice in her ear. 'Quis es…?'

She gasped and her eyes sprung open. The manic swirl of colours had dissipated and the corundum in her hands had stopped flashing… It looked and felt like an ordinary chunk of grey rock. She quickly returned it to its spot on the mantelpiece.

Hermione glanced up at the portrait of Salvedra. His features were murkier now, less discernible - a long, streak of smudgy, dark shadow… And his eyes were tightly shut. A blank veil against the darkness.
A surging spear of acute anxiety shot through her. Her limbs felt jellied and her lips tingled. She had to get out of this place… She ran to the door and yanked it open – and gasped as a burst of bright white light surged inside of her.

XXX

Draco turned to her with a startled, grey-eyed stare.

'There you are! I've been looking for you everywhere!' he said, pulling her towards him. He quickly scanned the corridor to his left and right.

'I was hiding…'

'In there?' He nodded to the dark room behind her and for a moment looked like he was going to push her back inside.

'Yes. Don't go in!' She briskly pulled the door closed behind her. 'It's not safe…'

Draco knitted his brow in confusion.

'Sylvestra was here a few minutes ago. And there's a portrait of Salvedra in there and – and a special type of rock. They use them to communicate…'

'They WHAT?'

'It's complicated,' Hermione said flippantly, 'and a bit weird…' The image of Sylvestra's black eyes and gaping mouth instantly sprung to mind.

'Well, we've no time for weird… I've got to get you out of here,' Draco said brusquely. He clasped her hand in his own and dragged her down the corridor, past a set of lifts, to another landing at the head of a grander, wider staircase than the one she'd used to get here. 'Everyone's looking for you!'

'There's no point taking me back to the lobby!' Hermione said, as she tripped down the stairs after Draco. 'There's a load of security there…'

'Which is why we need to get to the delivery bay,' Draco called back to her.

They reached a wide corridor leading into the modern section of Arcana, but the corridor tapered to their right towards an ill-lit, grey stone landing and a thin, metal door.

'This way,' Draco said, prising the door open and pushing her through. He flinched when it clanked heavily behind them.

They emerged into what appeared to be a maintenance wing with rough breeze-blocks, low-level strip-lighting and strange gurgling and hissing sounds that emanated from a mess of cladded pipework lining the ceiling above.

Draco peered into the depths of a long, shadowy passageway. 'Right, I reckon we can get to the delivery bay in that direction.' A distant clomp of footsteps was emanating from a corridor above them. He looked up and listened as the footsteps faded. 'We'd better get a move on.'

He set off, Hermione trailing behind.

'Why the hell are you here anyway?' he asked.

'I was trying to help George out at the Ministry – covering up a dodgy business deal…'
'George Weasley?'

'Yes, it's a long story - and I was in that Muggle Business Office and the Blasters were coming…'

'The WHAT?' Draco ground to a halt.

'The Blasters – it's – it's a new sort of security force. Looking for saboteurs. Like *Sub Rosa.*' Draco's jaw dropped and he stared at her in bemused wonder.

'So, you came HERE? Of all places…'

Hermione heaved a weary sigh. 'I'm thinking George did too.'

They continued their trudge into the gathering gloom; the passageway seemed to be narrowing, dimming.

'Well, someone definitely came through the Floo before YOU did,' Draco said. 'I only got back to London an hour ago and was updating Troy on what went down in Israel, when all hell broke loose… When they said there was a woman here as well, I had a horrible feeling it was you…'

The passageway veered left, becoming even more constricted. An occasional bare-bulb light cast a flickering, sickly yellow glow and there was an unmistakeable thrumming sound which seemed to emanate from the blank, grey walls, damp with condensation - the walls looked like they were sweating.

Hermione could barely make out where they were. She stumbled blindly along the passageway, barely able to keep up with Draco's long, loping strides.

'Curious,' Draco grunted, from up ahead. The passageway had petered out into a dead end. 'This way's been blocked off.'

'So, where are we?' she gasped.

'Fuck knows… we could head back the way we came or – or there might be another door around here – something we've missed…'

He examined their gloomy surroundings, anxiously biting his lower lip.

It was oppressively hot and Hermione suddenly felt overwhelmed with a bone-aching weariness… 'I was thinking it might be best if I just surrender myself to Ephraim – say there's been a mix-up,' she sighed.

Draco vehemently shook his head. 'I wouldn't if I were you… He's mad as hell! A whole load of shit went down in Israel - Los Rojos attacked the Gilgad facility, totally fucked the place up. Ephraim came back early so he's only just found out about it – Hold on! Next to you, Hermione… is that a door?'

Hermione pushed a blank panel slotted into the wall beside her. It shuddered and slid jerkily aside. A rush of cool air bathed her face, wicking the sweat from her cheeks… She stepped through, followed by Draco.

They were at the bottom of a long, winding staircase that stretched out of view.

'Looks like we have to go back up,' Draco muttered, clearly unhappy at the prospect.

Before long, Hermione's thigh muscles were crying out in pain as she plodded after him up the
tight, precarious staircase.

Draco waited for her to catch up.

'Can we just stop a moment? Take a breather?' Hermione begged. Her clothes were drenched in sweat. She sank down onto a step and gazed up at him, a soulful look on her face. 'Seriously, Draco. It really might be easier to just hand me over.'

'It's really NOT good timing…'

'Sure, but none of that's got anything do with ME, has it? I mean, maybe I just pretend I came to see Ephraim? He's got no reason to be suspicious… He doesn't know that I know all that I know…' she reasoned. 'I could just say I wanted to speak to him about that stupid job he offered me? Or – or the indictment he wanted against Jeroboam?'

Draco burst out laughing in loud, mocking tones. 'You're kidding, right? … And anyway, there's no point indicting Jeroboam. Because he's dead.'

'Dead?' Hermione's eyes were round with shock. 'Since when?'

Draco pursed his lips tightly. 'Years, apparently. I made myself known to Los Rojos… the head chap, the one Harry met…'

'Gunter.'

Draco nodded brusquely. 'Yeah. HE told me.'

Hermione closed her eyes and shook her head in exasperation. 'Good god. That's bonkers…'

'Isn't it just?' Draco took another step and looked up. 'Right. I can see a landing – it's not far.' He offered her his hand to help pull her up and began marching purposefully up the stairs again, with Hermione traipsing close behind.

They arrived at a thin, metal door, similar to the one they'd first entered. Draco turned to Hermione, placed a finger on his lips, and inched the door open…

'Okay… the coast is clear. Quick!'

They crept into the corridor, back into the modern part of Arcana; offices lined their route.

'Where now?'

'I'm thinking…'

There was the unmistakable sound of running footfalls emanating from the stairwell they'd just left behind, getting closer… They fell silent, their faces stiff with bewildered tension.

'We've got to get a move on!' Draco said, with fresh urgency, grabbing Hermione by the elbow and steering her left. They rounded a corner and directly ahead of them were the main fire doors leading to the atrium. They could hear voices and running and Troy barking orders.

'That can't be right,' Draco said, confused.

They hurriedly retraced their steps until they found another staircase.

'So, are we still looking for the delivery bay?' Hermione asked as she slogged after him. She was
feeling crumpled and exhausted.

These stairs seemed to twist round and round from one landing to the next, finally arriving at a door.

'This has to be it!' Draco announced, pulling the door open to reveal a wall.

'They've fucking bricked it up!' he exclaimed, seething.

'Just now?'

'The security alert…' he groaned. 'It must have shut down all possible exit points.'

'Meaning we're trapped.' Hermione felt like crying.

Draco gave her a defiant look. 'There's a fire escape…' He started to jog back up the staircase, a firm set to his mouth.

'What's the bloody point?' Hermione called out peevishly after his retreating figure.

He was waiting, midway, which came as a relief - but this feeling was short-lived. The corridor they entered looked identical to the last and when they turned the corner, they were facing – yet again – the doors leading to the atrium.

Hermione's heart sank. 'This place is a maze,' she complained.

'We somehow missed a level…'

'No, we didn't,' Hermione said, her voice cracking. 'It's a spell! We're doomed to go round and round until we drop… Which is why it's better if you just give me up…' she said, in between deep, heaving pants. She was so tired it felt like her knees were buckling.

'Have you lost your fucking mind?'

Hermione leant against a wall. 'It'll be okay, Draco…'

He looked at her, a mournful expression on his face. 'But it's dangerous.'

'Do we have a choice?'

He knew they didn't, she could tell.

She took hold of his hands and drew him close. 'Listen to me… These enchanted rocks I was mentioning, like the one upstairs… Dolores and Canaro had them. Dolores worked for Gilgad…'

Draco shook his head and sighed. 'I never trusted her. Not really.'

'I know, but Ephraim has one too. It's his RING. The ruby. You need to bear that in mind, Draco, whenever you're around him. It's probably a listening device.'

'Okay.'

'And Atalaya? It's a mountain. In Spain. I think Dolores might be from there.'

Draco was staring down at her with earnest, heart-stopping intensity. Hermione tried to avoid meeting his heated gaze. 'Right,' she breathed. 'I think I can hear Troy on the other side of the
doors...'

'Don't do this.'

'I have to. I can't Disapparate and every exit is blocked. It's for the best. I'll – I'll just play Mrs Dopey who got herself lost – you never know, Ephraim might fall for it.'

They stared at each other, wild-eyed. 'What a fine fucking mess we've got ourselves into,' Draco said ruefully.

'In more ways than one...' she murmured.

He loomed closer, pushing her back against the cold, hard wall. She suddenly felt besieged by his physical proximity, the firm tautness of his body. He pressed his face against hers and she basked in the warm sensation of his breath gusting onto her cheeks. In spite of the fraught circumstances, he was triggering every sense in her body.

'I think you're literally going to be the death of me... you know that, don't you, Hermione?' Draco said.

'But not today, please, Draco...Not today,' she whispered, brushing her lips against his. She gently eased him away. 'Let's just get this over with.'

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Ephraim's personal office was rich with antiquities and much more cluttered with keepsakes and knick-knacks than Hermione would have ever supposed it to be.

Ephraim was seated on an expansive, chintz armchair.

'Come in! Sit down,' he said, beaming broadly. He beckoned Hermione to sit opposite him. 'Tea?'

He nodded to a pudgy man with small, round spectacles, who poured Hermione a cup of tea from a silver teapot and passed it to her.

'Well, I must say, this is a rather surprising turn of events,' Ephraim said. He studied Hermione with narrow, slitted eyes. 'Selwyn here,' he nodded to the pudgy man, 'tells me you were trespassing...'

Selwyn Haast - possibly the most fearsome of them all, Hermione thought - scrutinised her with pale, lashless eyes and smirked.

'Draco found her wandering by the labs,' Troy said. Draco nodded emphatically.

'Did he now?' Ephraim steepled his hands as he spoke and regarded Draco curiously. His ruby ring flashed in the light streaming through the window.

'This is all a major misunderstanding,' Hermione said, launching into a breathless account of how she'd followed her brother-in-law, George, to the Ministry, because earlier today he'd turned up at her house in a right funk, insisting he wanted to see Ephraim as soon as possible - and then he'd vanished.

'I presumed he used the Floo in the Muggle Business Relations office to come and see you. I wanted to find him and talk him out of badgering you on a weekend – it seemed grossly unfair to burden you in your free time,' she said, rolling her eyes. 'Except... I'm now told he never actually came here - so I'm none the wiser where he's got to and exceedingly embarrassed to have bothered
"you about any of this at all!" She threw Ephraim what she hoped was a winning smile.

'None of which explains why you ran away from the lobby!' Troy said, suspiciously.

Hermione turned large, appealing eyes to him. 'I panicked.' She could sense Ephraim's blue eyes boring into her as she spoke. 'And you appeared to be having a bit of a struggle with somebody. It all looked a bit… intense.'

'That was a Muggle… wandered in off the streets,' Troy said in an offhanded manner. 'Happens sometimes.'

'I feared it might be George. I got scared,' Hermione said, addressing Ephraim, who she realised was the only person in the room whose opinion actually counted.

'George WEASLEY?' Ephraim asked Draco.

Draco shrugged. 'Apparently. Except it wasn't…'

'Are we sure it wasn't?' Ephraim asked Troy.

'Quite, sir.' He stared straight ahead as he spoke.

'Is this intruder still in custody?'

'Karl and Ruddy were… are questioning him.'

Ephraim's eyes flicked from Hermione to Troy. He exchanged a furtive glance with Sylvestra, who was sprawled on an emerald green, velvet banquette, a few feet away, watching them from beneath hooded eyelids with an air of bored insouciance.

'Draco… you know what George Weasley looks like, don't you? Why don't you run along with Troy and check this chap out, eh?' Ephraim suggested.

Draco opened his mouth as if to say something but thought better of it. 'Sure,' he said, and he followed Troy out of the room.

Draco's departure sent an instant chill through Hermione. She shuffled uncomfortably and took a long sip of her tea to avoid any eye contact.

Ephraim pursed his lips and nodded slowly at her, as though he was weighing something up in his mind.

'I must apologise, Hermione, for Troy's over-zealous welcome, earlier… he's a bit on edge. You see we had a rather DRAMATIC incident in Israel last night. My annoying little problem with a former business rival has resurfaced.'

'Mr Jeroboam?' Hermione asked in cool tones.

'His followers dared to attack one of my research centres,' Ephraim replied caustically.

'Gracious!'

'They even tried to set the facility on fire!' Ephraim laughed uproariously at this, baring his teeth in a dazzling display of bleached perfection. 'Naturally, they failed – but, sadly, their botched endeavour was proof that Mr Jeroboam still harbours ill intent towards me.'
'Most certainly,' Hermione said, making sure she looked appreciably concerned.

Ephraim stared at her, unblinking. 'Selwyn. Fetch me that phone thing you found.'

Selwyn promptly rummaged through his robe pockets and plucked out a charred mobile phone.

'This was found at the scene,' Ephraim said. 'Thanks to a dollop of good fortune, it wasn't destroyed… though sadly, the Muggle who owned it wasn't so lucky… The strangest thing, though, rather than contact the emergency services, like any decent, self-respecting Muggle should do, he actually FILMED the attack instead! Can you believe that?'

'Selfish,' Selwyn snarled with relish.

Ephraim nodded in agreement. He held the phone aloft, furrowed his brow in concentration and pressed Play. 'You can see for yourself,' he said, passing the phone to Hermione.

Sure enough, six red-garbed men, wands extended, were marching through a smoke-filled field towards a low set of concrete buildings. And then they stopped and fired a powerful Fiendfyre curse in unison. The buildings erupted into ballooning orange flames, powered upwards in thick, rolling grey clouds. Not quite the 'failure' Ephraim had inferred, Hermione thought… Other wizards now ran at them, firing red and green shots from their wands, accompanied by the unnerving sound of a semi-automatic weapon… Los Rojos Disapparated and whoever was holding the phone clearly panicked, as the phone jolted and tumbled into darkness with a loud crunch.

'These are the same terrifying men you met in Argentina, aren't they?' Ephraim asked, unsmiling.

Hermione nodded; a stern look on her face.

'Deadlier and more organised than ever before,' Ephraim sighed. 'I'm going to let you in on a little secret, Hermione…' He leant closer and his eyes twinkled conspiratorially. 'Jeroboam's dangerous dabbling with Dark Flux has now struck closer to home!'

Hermione schooled her face into shocked fear. 'What do you mean?'

'There's been an attack in Scotland and another in a place called Widford… targeting Muggles.' Ephraim gazed beadily at her. 'An old school-friend of yours, Parvati Patil, has been implicated as an accomplice in the Widford attack.'

Hermione felt her cheeks flush crimson in hot fury. 'That's – that's preposterous!'

'It's often those we least suspect who turn out to be rotten eggs,' Ephraim said with a grimace.

'No, Ephraim,' Hermione said in a quavering voice, 'Parvati's a peaceful person. Kind. Good.'

A strange light flickered in Ephraim's eyes. 'Once, perhaps... But good people can become corrupted. I've seen it happen to the best of men… and women.' Ephraim studied her closely. 'I must say, you seem remarkably calm to hear that something as deadly to you and your kind as Dark Flux has been unleashed on our shores.'

'It's horrific,' she said bluntly. 'Were there many casualties?'

'Enough,' Ephraim said. 'Every one of them was somebody's father or brother or husband or son… murdered, through no fault of their own. Imagine that, Hermione… imagine the horror of someone you loved being… snuffed out - simply because they have the wrong blood!'
Hermione felt sick. HE and his lunatic daughter had orchestrated these deaths. The brazen, bloody cheek of his hypocrisy was mind-boggling, chilling...

Hermione curled her lip into a sneer. 'Whoever was behind these deaths is evil.'

'They deserve punishment, don't they? Justice!' Ephraim's eyes held hers.

'But of course they do!' she retorted, but as she spoke, she realised the trap that had been set for her.

A slow smile spread across his face. She sensed a peculiar surge of triumphalism within him. 'That's what I like about you, Hermione… You have principles. You're not like most rabble. You're not one to be cheaply bought by the tawdry promise of power or riches.' He heaved a regretful sigh. 'I've learned that about you… and I respect you all the more for it.'

Sylvestra levelled a withering stare at her father and then returned her attention to her perfectly-manicured nails.

'When I asked you before to launch proceedings against Jeroboam, you refused,' Ephraim said. 'But just think how many lives could have been saved if you hadn't?'

Hermione bristled with impatience. 'The law is the law… there was no evidence against Jeroboam. And as he's a Swiss national, it's difficult to prosecute him in a UK court.'

Ephraim eyed her thoughtfully. 'But what about Los Rojos?'

'We don't even know who Los Rojos are!'

'EXACTLY!' The cerulean blueness of his eyes was dazzling… 'Wouldn't you like to know?' His words seemed to hang in the air between them.

Hermione chanced a sidelong glance at Sylvestra, who was watching her with hawkish intensity. She had to be careful… she couldn't let anything slip into her mind.

'These murderers deserve to be punished… you know that, Hermione, don't you? I urge you to reconsider your former position.'

'You grossly over-estimate my capabilities,' she said snippily. 'Any legal moves would be extremely tricky…'

'Nothing that a bit of optimism and can-do spirit can't fix, I'm sure,' Ephraim countered, flicking his hand in a dismissive manner. 'Anything less and the consequences for those innocent parties who happen to walk into the wrong place at the wrong time is – frankly – unthinkable.'

It occurred to Hermione, with gut-churning certainty, that Ephraim was referring to more than Dark Flux victims here… but George, too.

He'd caught her.

'Surely it's in your interests – and your family's interests – that you cooperate, Mrs Weasley?' Selwyn Haast said, smiling smugly.

Hermione shuddered at the steely glint in his eye.

'Now, now, Selwyn,' Ephraim tutted, 'there's no need to rub it in… Hermione is all too aware, I've no doubt, about the risks posed to those she cares about… Ah! Here's Draco!'
The door swung open with ferocious force and Draco hurtled into the room, followed by a short man with an inordinately wide mouth, who Hermione instantly recognised as Zoltan Guldstern.

Hermione turned and locked eyes with Draco, then immediately looked away.

Yes. They had George…

'Well? Was it George Weasley?' Ephraim asked.

'Ruddy says they let him go…' Draco replied.

Ephraim gave Draco a piercing look. 'You didn't answer my question!'

Draco's eyes darted from side-to-side. 'I don't know… I didn't actually see him,' he said with a non-committal shrug. 'Possibly? Possibly not.'

Ephraim's mouth tightened. 'Fat lot of good that does us… Poor Hermione here is obviously concerned about her dear brother-in-law's welfare.' He switched focus to Hermione. 'Did he actually say WHY he wanted to see me?'

'Something about – some business deal?' she ventured in an unsteady voice. She could feel Sylvestra's eyes on her face as she spoke. 'But as it looks like he never came here after all, I'm sorry to have wasted everybody's time.'

'Weasley's the one who pulled out of the Troobles contract, isn't he?' Zoltan said, but was silenced by Ephraim's furious glare.

Ephraim fixed Hermione with his blue-eyed gaze. 'I never like it when you invest in somebody and they let you down,' he said. 'I trust you wouldn't do that to me, Hermione.'

'I'm unlikely to ever enter into a business venture with you, if that's what you mean?'

Ephraim chuckled. 'I meant with regards to my little proposal - concerning our common enemy? You'll consider that, won't you?'

Draco shot an inquisitive look in Hermione's direction, white-hot alarm irradiating from him.

'You see, I have this sneaky feeling that you are one of those women who is entirely formidable when she puts her mind to it,' Ephraim continued smoothly. He abruptly turned to Draco. 'I know Draco thinks so, even though he's remarkably reticent whenever the subject turns to you … but I'm a good judge of these things.' He tapped his nose with a knowing wink.

Draco snorted with laughter. 'Hermione knows I have the utmost respect for her.'

Ephraim guffawed loudly. 'As do I!' He swung around to face her. 'I think I've learned the error of my ways… I was too pushy with you before, for which I apologise. So, THIS time I'll give you a chance to think things through and we can get together to discuss the matter in a few days or so; How about at the wedding, next weekend?' Ephraim's face was shining with effervescent glee.
'You WILL come to the wedding, won't you, Hermione?' he chirruped, 'Narcissa would be bereft if you didn't.'

'It'd be… an honour,' Hermione said in low tones, directed at her hands, which were tightly clasped together in her lap. She was struggling to suppress a tumult of feeling inside of her and felt close to tears.

Draco visibly paled. 'WHAT WEDDING?' he spluttered, throwing Hermione a desperate, enquiring glance.

'Oh dear, Daddy… I think you forgot to tell him,' Sylvestra said in cold, sardonic tones.

'I forget... Draco's a bit behind on the news, seeing as he's been away so much lately,' Ephraim said breezily. 'Hermione? Why don't you update him? I've no doubt you know ALL about it.'

Hermione's heart was clattering at a million miles an hour and she didn't think she could blush any harder under the weight of Draco's stern scrutiny.

'Your mother and Ephraim… they're engaged,' she said in a small, tight voice.

Draco turned a sickly porridge colour. 'Since when?'

'Oh, a few weeks, that's all…' Ephraim said.

'And no one thought to tell me?' Draco said in cutting tones. He scanned the room with a scornful, grey glare.

'I - I only just learned this morning myself, Draco,' Zoltan said, a little tongue-tied. 'Ruddy told me.'

Selwyn didn't even bother to look up; he was flicking through the Muggle's burnt phone with blank-faced, metronomic fascination, dissecting its inner workings.

'Don't act surprised, Draco. Your mother's barely speaking to you, remember?' Sylvestra leered, 'after what you did to Scorpius.'

Ephraim jumped up with alacrity and pulled Draco into a hearty, back-slapping embrace. 'Yes, Draco. Your beautiful and most wondrous mother has agreed to marry me!'

'That's – that's great news,' Draco said in a slightly strangulated voice.

'It'll be a small, private ceremony modelled on your wedding to our sweetest, lovely Katya,' Ephraim chortled, his hand clapped firmly on Draco's shoulder. 'It was a delightful occasion, wasn't it, Draco?' He sighed dreamily. 'Under the old oak tree in the grounds at Malfoy Manor…'

Draco looked away; fists clenched.

'And we'll have a fine ball in the evening,' Ephraim continued. 'We're going to invite the entire Ministry!' He slapped Draco's back enthusiastically. 'Marvellous, isn't it? Just think, Draco… I'll be your step-father!'

Draco turned dark, sullen eyes on Hermione. She could sense his pent-up fury and unmistakeable pain.

'Why so soon?' Draco asked Ephraim in terse tones.

Ephraim's face fell. 'Oh. Well, neither of us wanted to wait, you see. We aren't getting any younger
and I loathe long engagements… It always saddens me when you see two people, who quite clearly love each other, forced to remain apart.' He smiled at Hermione. 'Wouldn't you agree, Mrs Weasley?'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"COMPLEX" by THE CHILLS

"TRIBULATIONS" by LCD SOUNDM SYSTEM

"TO LOSE MY LIFE" by WHITE LIES

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Chapter Summary

The wedding at Malfoy Manor…

ACT 5: "SOMETHING IS ROTTEN IN THE STATE OF DENMARK"

39. This Too Too Solid Flesh

'We have an absolutely, monumental crisis,' Hermione sobbed down the phone to Harry. 'Absolutely, fucking, enormously, monumental.'

'What's happened?' Harry asked, alarm ringing out in his voice.

'I've been trying to call you… everything's gone to shit. Did you get my texts?'

'I was in transit. Couldn't make heads or tails of what you were saying,' Harry said sheepishly, 'all those URGENTS in full caps... Didn't know if you were being serious or not.'

'That's the very definition of SERIOUS, Harry,' Hermione spluttered.

'Okay,' came Harry's voice over the line. 'Tell me everything.'

Hermione took a deep breath and did just that. The line was poor and their voices dipped in and out…

'Did you get all that?'

'Think so... are you sure George didn't just go home?'

Hermione growled in exasperation. 'Seriously, Harry! You need to send in Aurors. Right now!'

'We'd need a special Ministry-authorised warrant - which could be tricky.' Hermione's heart sank to hear this. 'Plus… I'm in Argentina.'

'ARGENTINA?'

'Well, I felt bad bailing on you over Dolores.'

'Thank you.' Her gratitude, however, was mingled with a queasy sense of isolation.

'You were right,' Harry said. 'There's more important things to be worrying about at the moment than holidays… I was being a jackass. But I'm stuck here now, till the weekend—'

'You deserve a break, Harry,' Hermione cut in. 'I'll be fine. We'll be fine.'

There was a long silence... 'Listen. They won't hurt George. He's too valuable. We've got time... But right now - I'm afraid you'll have to go along with whatever Ephraim wants.'

'But it's so STUPID!' Hermione fumed, 'legal action against Jeroboam was always nutty, but the
fact the man's dead takes it into a whole new realm of absurdity!'

'Begs the question, though, who the hell are Los Rojos?'

'They obviously don't work for Jeroboam.'

'Maybe they're activists? Thinking about it, meeting that Gunter chap in a café was a bit fishy.'

'Well, whoever they are, they're still bastards.' Hermione suddenly felt panicked… 'Oh lordy. What do I say to Angelina?'

'Who else saw you with George today?'

Hermione thought back to that morning in her garden. 'Bill.'

'See what he thinks.'

XXX

'How the hell did you let this happen? Fucking, fucking, fucking stupid!' Bill raged, punching a Hogwarts trophy awarded to Victoire, proudly positioned on the mantelpiece. It toppled into a line of similar trophies and statuettes, which crashed and fell like dominoes.

He wasn't taking it well.

'I'm so sorry.'

'Sorry?!!'

'I shouldn't have let George come to the Ministry and then left him.'

Bill upended the toppled ornaments on his mantelpiece, tight-lipped with fury, followed by a sharp, pitying look. 'I guess it's not ALL your fault,' he conceded testily. 'George is partly to blame.'

'I should tell Ron and your parents.'

'You'll do nothing of the sort!' Bill commanded.

'What about Angelina?'

'Angelina?' Bill almost spat her name. 'She won't care. She's been shagging Egbert Rosier for months now.'

Hermione was too shocked to reply.

Bill eyed her strangely, a peevish set to his mouth. 'Us Weasleys aren't doing so well in the romance department lately, are we?'

Hermione could feel herself blushing heatedly.

'Take Harry - sweet, lovely Harry – he treats my sister like the shit on his shoe!' Bill scoffed. 'Barely spends more than five minutes in her company from one week to the next!'

'But his job…'

'Yeah, yeah... his bloody job. Well, I'm sick of hearing this bullshit…' Bill strode around the room, hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets. 'A marriage is to be worked at, not thrown away like a
piece of used-up snot-rag!'  

Hermione didn't dare speak. She watched him with shrinking confidence, quashed by the ferocity of his glare.

He suddenly stopped pacing and studied her with piercing eyes. 'Can Draco help George escape?'

'I don't know.' How could she? 'It might be difficult.'

'And you say Ron's looking into this Ruddy Krenzel who was at Arcana?'

'As part of his quidditch investigation.'

'Good, let's hope he makes quick progress in that quarter,' Bill said thoughtfully, 'might be a good excuse to officially get Aurors into Arcana… I'll let it slip to Ron that Krenzel's working hand in glove with Ephraim and the Malfoys.'

'Ron's already looking into Draco's club.'

'Well, Draco will be up to his neck soon enough anyway – and you, too. You're both going to do exactly what Ephraim wants… even if it means building an imaginary case to discredit a wizard who doesn't appear to actually exist!'

'Although, we know Los Rojos definitely DO exist,' Hermione said bleakly. 'And as you've seen for yourself, Bill, they don't play nice.'

XXX

Bill broadcast it widely to family, friends and associates that George had decided to treat himself to a scouting trip to America, canvassing new business opportunities.

Molly was delighted, but Arthur worried that George hadn't mentioned his plans. Molly, however, pointed out that Angelina was really rather chuffed that George had done something exciting.

Ron was jealous as hell… 'I've half a mind to move us out to America,' he told Hermione, 'met some great people when I was out there. Top man at the Quidditch league in Savannah hinted I could get a plum job.'

Hermione had no intention of moving to America… She'd far too much to be thinking about.

She was talking and moving and smiling and doing all the usual things that social propriety required of her – but an iceberg of cold dread was pressing down on her.

She was also haunted by a whining tinnitus of guilty angst spooling constantly inside her head every time she remembered Draco's stricken face, the moment he'd learned about his mother's wedding.

Her fears soon mounted…

Sub Rosa was unusually active - even though Neville was busy preparing for the new school term.

First up was a controversial Op-ed accusing Silas Witchell of nepotism - citing Portia Witchell's stratospheric rise.

The following day, Sub Rosa released an emergency issue.
The *Daily Prophet* had reported - 'a minor conflagration in a scarcely-visited back-office at the Ministry' – warranting a single-paragraph. It fell to *Sub Rosa* to unveil the truth: The Office for Muggle Business Relations had been completely incinerated - followed the next day by the even more disturbing news that a charred body had been uncovered in the wreckage...

Bill was banging on Hermione's kitchen door within the hour.

'Have you heard anything?' he asked urgently.

'No… you think it's HIM, don't you?'

Bill didn't answer. He pushed past her into the kitchen, traipsing mud from the garden onto her floor and shaking raindrops from his hair. The sky had been thick with a soupy, drizzly haze since breakfast, but the clouds had ripped open in the past five minutes, forcing Rose and Hugo into an impromptu, screaming evacuation from the garden.

Bill slumped onto a chair at the kitchen table and buried his face in his hands. His shoulders quietly heaved with emotion.

Hermione immediately coaxed Rose from the kitchen.

'I can't lose another,' Bill said, turning wide, distraught eyes on Hermione. 'I just can't.' The clawed scars on his face glowed silver and his mouth was a harsh jagged line.

'I sent Grumio to Hogwarts first thing,' Hermione said, 'to get clarification.' Though she hadn't mentioned George's involvement...

'It's not NEVILLE we need answers from, it's – it's that blasted Slytherin!' Bill erupted.

'If he actually KNOWS anything, I'm sure he'll find a way to tell us.'

Bill plunged his fists into his rain-sodden hair, a despairing look on his face. 'They've killed him… the bastards have killed him. Then they set that room alight and dumped his body to hide the evidence.'

There was a horrifying plausibility to this scenario...

'Do you want a cup of tea, Bill? Or…?' Hermione's eyes trailed to Ron's bottle of firewhisky… there was barely any left… 'or something else?' She was feeling more than a little tempted by the *something else* …

Bill slapped his hands on the table and jumped up, fired with purpose. 'No! No time!' There was a reckless gleam in his eye.

Hermione had a sickly feeling in the pit of her stomach… 'Have you got to get back to work?'

'Of sorts…'

XXX

Hermione woke up sweat-soaked, heart thumping... She'd been dreaming about a fire that raged through her home, burning everyone and everything she loved… The fire mutated into a fearsome dragon with shiny, silver scales and a tail the size of six double-decker buses end-to-end, that swept through the village, scattering the houses and people, crushing the school into a thousand little pieces. She could still hear the screams and shouts of the children ringing in her ears…
Ron was finishing breakfast in the kitchen; the *Daily Prophet* had already arrived and was laid out on the kitchen table beside his cereal bowl.

'Any news?' Hermione asked airily.

Ron looked up with a thin smile. 'Bit of stuff on the chap who got caught up in that fire the other night... poor sod.' But then Ron chuckled. 'Cop a load of this!' he said, swishing the newspaper so that it switched edition mid-air; a neat little trick that *Sub Rosa* seemed to be perfecting these days. Ron rocked with laughter, tears in his eyes, as he read out loud *Sub Rosa*’s latest scoop: an in-depth analysis of Silas Witchell's severe flatulence problem, prompted by his addiction to Fennel Wine.

Hermione waited until he had left for work and reversed the spell.

The body, she read, was Zoltan Guldstern's tweed-suited assistant – Simsmith MacFusty. Much was made of his honourable life in service, although his greatest cited achievement appeared to be a long-distant period captaining Hufflepuff’s quiz team at Hogwarts.

'There's rumours that he fought off a pack of foreign intruders!' Molly intoned with wide, bulging eyes, when the family gathered to celebrate Roxanne's birthday at Percy and Audrey's house that evening. 'What a gallant soul!' Roxanne's twelfth birthday was actually next week, but she would be heading back to Hogwarts. Fleur had invited her to the Magical Mini Circus in Caerphilly followed by a sleepover that weekend. Victoire and Dominique had invited friends from Hogwarts, meaning Shell Cottage would be overrun by teenage girls.

Bill had calmed down since yesterday morning; comforted, no doubt by the *Daily Prophet* story. He pulled Hermione aside as she was leaving.

'Fleur and I have been invited to this dratted wedding on Saturday,' he mumbled. 'Feel I should go.' He gave her a meaningful look, which meant absolutely nothing to her at all. 'But with all these hordes descending on us…'

'Fine,' Hermione replied. There wasn't much more to be said, really… she hadn't expected anyone she knew or actually liked, except Draco, to be there.

'I presume it's formal robes?'

Hermione was a little taken aback. 'These things usually are.'

'I'll be over by three then.'

'Whatever for?'

'It's not nice for you to go alone and Ron can't go with you – for obvious reasons.'

Hermione was dumb-struck. 'That's very kind of you, Bill,' she said with a polite smile. 'But I'm sure Fleur could do with some support.'

'No... it's fine. She's fine,' he said hastily.

'Thing is, I'm not sure I can go, actually. With Ron away…' Ron had announced that evening that he was off to Armenia with Tana, chasing rumoured links between Ruddy Krenzel and – Hermione had struggled to keep a straight face - an Eastern European smuggling gang…
'I've sorted it all. Kids are coming here to keep Molly company,' Bill announced. 'And I've told Ron you're helping Fleur.'

'Oh.'

'You NEED to go...' Bill said, his face bearing down close to within a few centimetres of her own. 'I paid Arcana a visit and he's expecting you...your cooperation on this matter is, I believe, entirely NECESSARY.'

Hermione gave him a sharp look. 'Did you see Draco?'

'No,' Bill said curtly. 'He's away, though I guess he'll be back for his own mother's wedding.'

XXX

Hermione still hadn't decided what to wear when Bill arrived, securely stowing his broomstick by the kitchen door.

'I'll make us a brew if you like?' Bill called from the kitchen, but Hermione was in too much of a nervous lather to respond. She'd decided against a formal dress robe – too warm – and each dress pulled from her wardrobe was thrown disdainfully onto her bed.

Her hand glanced against a silky soft fabric stuffed onto the top shelf behind her winter jumpers. She carefully threaded it through the tangled mass of woollens and smoothed away the wrinkles.

_Cenizas de Rosas…_ She closed her eyes and held it close. The memory of that night still throbbed deep inside of her… She decided to match it with a gift from her mother: a shimmering, silver stole, made of a gauzy, silken material that flowed through her fingers like water.

Bill's reaction was not unlike Draco's at the Hotel Alvear – a little stunned, even a bit annoyed.

'You look like you're going to a Muggle nightclub,' he complained. 'And you're going to freeze.'

'No, I won't,' Hermione said primly, draping her mother's silvery shawl over her shoulders.

Bill handed her a cup of tea. He glanced down at her high-heeled sandals; the ones Draco had bought her in Buenos Aires. 'Or you might break your ankle?'

'Bill, it's a wedding. I'm dressing up.'

'That's NOT dressing up, Hermione.' He fidgeted, uncomfortably. 'Quite the opposite, actually.'

Hermione sipped her tea and glared at him.

XXX

They were amongst the late arrivals, sectioned off on a hillock to the right of a towering, wizened oak tree where Ephraim and Narcissa were exchanging vows before an enraptured, silent crowd of onlookers.

Narcissa was resplendent in a diamond-encrusted white robe; although she was squinting against the fierce white sunlight. Ephraim had a sober, dignified air, playing his part with almost excessive gravitas, his smile irradiating health and good fortune.

Hermione scanned the audience from their vantage point in the latecomers' enclosure.
It was easy to spot Sylvestra. She was wearing an identical frock to Narcissa's and her abundant hair was piled high on her head, adorned with two life-size diamante doves. It was heard to reconcile this upright citadel of gleaming purity with the same woman she'd seen prostrate herself before the portrait of Salvedra, face flushed, hair wild and flowing, her eyes black and dead.

Hermione dragged her eyes away... The great and good of the Ministry were seated – seemingly by rank – in their own section. Many of them were contemporaries from her Hogwarts days, or their parents. Silas Witchell, however, was notably absent. Was he too embarrassed by the recent *Sub Rosa* revelations?

Far from absent was his daughter, Portia, who'd earned herself a place in the first few rows reserved for family and close friends. She was a handsome woman, Hermione decided, with vivacious coral lips and a golden weave in the shape of a swan piled on top of her head. She looked plump and self-satisfied beside Selwyn Haast.

One elderly gentleman, scraggly and unkempt in a flea-bitten, old-fashioned robe caught her eye. He had gleaming, silver hair, hanging in coiled rat-tails over his frayed collar. He turned his eyes towards the hillock and appeared to be staring directly at her. The sun reflected off his eyes, rendering them luminous pools of pewter. For a moment, he reminded her of Draco. She smiled to herself, wondering if Draco had effectively cast an ageing glamour on himself, in protest.

Formalities over, the guests were ushered into Malfoy Manor for the wedding breakfast. To Hermione's horror, the old drawing room had been opened up for the occasion. However, what was already a vast, palatial space had been enchanted to accommodate a few hundred people. The ceilings had been raised and transformed into a series of soaring arches, studded with sparkling love hearts. Shooting stars burst at regular intervals, showering the guests seated at the tables below with a smattering of fine silvery dust. An enchanted array of glass instruments hovered in the rafters; tooting pan pipes, winsome flutes, shimmering aeolian harps.

Three paintings were lined up for guests to inspect as they entered. Hermione paused to look at them, secretly hoping that she could catch sight of 'aged' Draco as he passed.

One of the paintings was a nondescript, charmless piece of twaddle: 'Dog and Child.' There was also a Victorian oil painting, 'View from Folborough Hill' - an idealised pastoral landscape, depicting a remarkably unchanged Malfoy Manor nestling in a shallow valley.

Hermione, however, was drawn to the third painting, 'Cornfields and Sky,' painted by another Victorian artist, Samuel Palmer.

'Lovely colours,' said a lanky, thin-faced American peering closely at the picture alongside her.

'Glorious…' The painting was a feast of sumptuous, vivid hues. Her mind felt fogged and yet sun-kissed when she looked at it, as though she could reach out and run her fingers through the tall, tapering corn, tracing a path to… well, where exactly?

'Tempted to bid?' the American enquired.

'Is there to be an auction then?'

'Indeed. For charity. Most generous of Ephraim to submit paintings from his private collection for such a good cause.' The American studied her curiously and then shot out his hand in greeting. 'I'm Lothar Vilmark, by the way. An old friend of the family.'

Hermione coolly shook his hand in response. Any old friend of Ephraim's couldn't be a good one…
'Hermione Weasley,' she replied.

'And what's your connection?'

'Narcissa.'

'Splendid woman… This is the first time I've met her. I don't come to the UK much. Too busy holding the fort back home.'

'Where's home?'

'Juneau, Alaska.'

'Ah… You work with Ephraim then?'

Lothar nodded. 'Yup. I'm C.E.O at Gilgad.'

'Oh… I thought the headquarters was in Oregon?'

'Well, it was - but once Ephraim switched focus to Europe, HQ moved to me.'

'I see.' Hermione smiled sweetly. 'So, you're nothing to do with Herb Healing?'

'No, that's all Ephraim. He likes to be hands-on, growing businesses…' He smiled broadly, exposing large, waxen teeth. 'He's an inspiration, don't you think?'

'Oh, yes!' Hermione said with what she feared might be exaggerated zeal. She looked around the room.

The hobbling old man Hermione had spied in the garden wandered aimlessly past. He looked a bit lost until an elf ushered him to a table positioned close to the High Table.

That's strange, Hermione thought. Surely Draco would at least SIT with his mother?

Except he wasn't Draco, because Draco then entered the room in close conversation with Bill… They appeared to be whispering – arguing, even – in hushed tones.

Draco broke away and looked around the room, but was then swamped by Zoltan Guldstern and a robust-looking man bellowing in a strong South African accent. Ruddy Krenzel, Hermione assumed. They steered Draco towards the High Table and amidst loud guffaws were soon popping open champagne bottles.

'We're over there!' Bill said, pointing to a table in the distance. Hermione was relieved to be so far from Ephraim and only just managed to dodge him as he strode into the hall, his booming laughter filling the space with his uniquely distinctive ease.

Bill sat at the table picking silver dust off his immaculate robes. 'I hope we at least get a good dinner out of this,' he grumbled.

'What were you talking to Draco about?' she ventured.

'Oh, checking George's alive… that sort of thing…'

'How is he?'

'He didn't know much…' Bill trailed off to study the menu.
Hermione bridled with irritation. She felt sure they'd been talking about a lot more than that.

'Hermione, how lovely to see you,' purred Agatha Thrussington, sidling up to the empty seat beside her. 'And Bill…' She batted her eyelashes at Bill, who acknowledged her with a brief nod and then rose to hunt down the red wine.

'Isn't he a dish?' Agatha gasped. 'He has a sort of… rugged, animal magnetism, don't you think?'

'Yes, yes, very handsome,' Hermione said in clipped tones. 'Is this your seat?' She was hoping otherwise.

'Oh, no, I'm further up front. But I wanted to compliment you on your delectable frock…' Agatha puckered her lips and inspected Hermione with a professional air. 'It's very… different.'

'No, it's not. Most people dress like this. It's a very NORMAL dress,' Hermione said tetchily.

'Muggles, maybe.' Agatha eyed her beadily. 'Still, you look quite – sensational.' She flashed her a bright, brassy smile. Her eyes were now lingering on her hair, which Hermione had barely remembered to brush when leaving the house. 'Honestly, I don't know how you do it!' She edged closer. 'What's your secret?' Agatha proceeded to fan her face with the menu. 'And don't play coy with me, darling. Everybody's gossiping about you turning up with Bill… so SWOONY… but then look at you!… You don't make any effort!

'Effort at what?'

'Well, a girl's got to make the most of herself. And you hardly bother.'

'If wearing a giant swan on my head counts as effort, then count me out, thank you very much,' Hermione said tartly.

Agatha dissolved into giggles. She cast a look at Portia Witchell, now seated at the High Table. 'Isn't she a fright?'

'No. No, she isn't that,' Hermione stated firmly, backtracking. 'It's just not my style.'

Agatha placed a slim hand on Hermione's knee. 'Your style is adorable.' She trailed a finger along the soft, thin fabric of Hermione's dress.

'Oi, Thrussy, this is MY seat,' came a petulant voice from behind them.

Hermione instantly felt that any semblance of hope that this event might at least be bearable was fast draining away. Draco's former school sweetheart, Pansy Parkinson, jerked Agatha from her chair and plonked herself heavily down.

'There's no need to be so rude!' Agatha shrilled.

'Run along, gossip girl,' Pansy retorted, her eyes sparkling with malice. Hermione suspected that Pansy had fallen victim to Agatha's poisonous pen in the Daily Prophet… Agatha flounced away leaving Hermione to dine in stolid silence next to Pansy Parkinson, who kept harrumphing and sighing - presumably because she had been vanquished to a table with the likes of Hermione and Bill Weasley.

Conversation with Bill was a little stilted, too. He kept glancing at his watch.

'I very much doubt I'll be having my little chat with Ephraim before dinner's over,' Hermione
whispered.

He flicked a furious glance at the High Table. 'And then there'll be the speeches. That should be a right, fucking riot; they're formally announcing the result of the Hogsmeade Mayoral Elections after dinner. Cue lots of crowing, I imagine.'

Hermione surveyed the increasingly drunken crowd of gaudy well-wishers, braying into their wine glasses and stuffing their faces with roast suckling pig followed by Lemon Posset with thick lashings of cream. 'These people are ghastly,' she groaned to Bill.

Bill poured her a glass of red wine. 'You look like you could do with this.'

'I'm off to find a REAL drink,' Pansy griped to Hermione's left, slamming down a freshly-drained wine-glass. She tripped unsteadily away from the table on vertiginous heels that seemed far too narrow for her feet.

'Here we go. Speeches,' Bill muttered.

Sure enough, Ephraim had taken to the stage and amplified his voice with a sonorous charm, calling everyone to attention. There was a brief spasm of excited anticipation and then a reverent silence descended on the room.

Hermione tuned out Ephraim's profuse utterances of gratitude and tried to ignore the undignified way that Narcissa goggled him with large, dewy eyes.

Ephraim looked to be winding up, which meant she'd soon be negotiating George's release; trading her integrity for his safety... Her stomach roiled at the prospect and she was rather glad she'd skipped the Lemon Posset.

She'd misjudged Ephraim's stamina...

'I fear, dear friends, that there is something of a cloud hanging over this festive occasion...' Ephraim said, dropping his voice and holding the gaze of many of his guests, a tragic expression on his face. 'All of us here no doubt regret the recent emergence of … *Sub Rosa.*' There was an audible hiss... 'I can now tell you, my friends, that I have PROOF that this libellous, slandering, treacherous organ is the work of FOREIGN POWERS who seek to undermine us and to undermine our values... and has even, I hear, had a hand in attacking the very *seat* of our laws, the mainstay of our society – the Ministry.'

Did he actually say 'foreign powers'? Hermione thought. The bewildered looks on the faces of the wedding guests suggested this was indeed the case.

'Yes... there was an arson attack at the Ministry this week... and a very fine fellow, an upstanding wizard of some renown, a beloved, unassuming member of our community who never hurt a fly was cruelly *slain* by these monsters!'

A chorus of shocked gasps rang out and a couple of the more impressionable and/or inebriated members of the audience cried out in terror.

'We must never forget the noble sacrifice of Simsmith MacFusty! And I promise you, we will hunt down and find who killed him and justice will be served!' Ephraim said hoarsely, banging his chest with emotion. He paused, seemingly overcome, as the wedding party stood as one, in heartfelt applause.

'Draco just told me the guy was dead already – *before* the fire broke out,' Bill whispered to
Hermione behind his napkin. 'So this is total bollocks.'

'We are a great, great people, and yet we continue to allow alien interference – from all quarters, Muggle and Foreign wizard alike - to infiltrate our carefully preserved world, determined to destroy our cherished traditions, our hard-fought freedoms,' Ephraim continued. 'But we are proud. We are dutiful. We Serve!' he declaimed, 'which is why I'm glad to say these iniquitous acts of subterfuge, these dangerous provocations have promoted a patriotic response from our loyal band of Aurors – and other suitable volunteers...' He gestured to a table positioned close to his own. 'All power to The Blasters, I say! All power!' Ephraim bellowed, fist-pumping the air.

His audience cheered his words to the rafters accompanied by the loud thumping of spoons and empty coffee cups on the tables.

Once the room had calmed down, Ephraim continued in a quieter, wearier voice. 'It is terribly sad to see the fitness of our Minister for Magic questioned in such a way…' There was a discernible tension amongst the guests as he spoke.

'Indeed, it is a frightful shame that anyone should have their private affairs broadcast thus. An unseemly business, indeed.' But his face then brightened, and he skipped onto sunnier news – basking in the news of his glorious election to the Mayoralty of Hogsmeade.

'He didn't exactly back the guy, did he?' Bill said under his breath, refilling his glass of wine.

Hermione's eyes skimmed the room; grim-set faces had bloomed into celebratory delight, most particularly when Ephraim re-asserted the key points of his Hogsmeade manifesto, each time greeted with increasingly buoyant cheers and whoops.

He called for an end to Positive Discrimination, 'that has poisoned our workplace culture and thrown into disarray the natural balance that has preserved our glorious society for so many centuries.'

He justified his call for Muggle-borns - 'especially those new to our world' – to be cleared by the administration for safe accession to wizarding society. 'We must stand firm. We must take heed. We must preserve!'

But the loudest cheers of all were reserved for his rallying call for all witches and wizards to roam free, unsullied by unwanted interference and untold dangers, in their own lands – 'which are all the lands of this once-great Albion; our birthright, our destiny, our home… Honoured guests, friends, family,' he levelled a broad wink at his daughter, and then Draco, who was looking thoroughly miserable next to his mother. 'WE have a RIGHT TO EXIST!'

Hermione looked at Bill disconsolately. 'We shouldn't have come.'

Bill kept his eyes firmly down. 'Well, we're here now. You need to have that wee confab you promised Mr Golowitz and then we can get our boy home.'

Hermione dolefully stirred a teaspoon in her now-chilly cup of coffee and tried to blank out the raucous rally spirit. There were loud hooting bids for the paintings from Ephraim's collection that were being auctioned off for St Mungo's. Lothar Vilmark, she noticed, had just secured Palmer's 'Cornfields and Sky' and was smiling smugly.

Ephraim calmed the party down with a jocular flap of his hands and then announced with suitably stentorian bombast that all funds were going to the St Mungo's Gimlott's Fund.

'I can assure you all that this money will be very well-spent. At Gilgad, we have been working hard
for many years, developing Gimlott's treatments with a view to finding a cure… and I have news, dear friends, wonderful news.' He paused and trained his glistening blue eyes on the faces of his rapt audience. 'We've done it, we've found a cure! St Mungo's is going to be at the heart of this work under the leadership of its newly appointed Chief Mediwizard, my trusty, talented friend, Selwyn Haast.'

Selwyn Haast, resembling an overstuffed, pudgy penguin in his tightly-fitting black robes, sprung up from his seat and bowed repeatedly. He returned to his seat as Ephraim entered, full-throttle, into his final self-congratulatory peroration.

Hermione didn't hear a word he said because Pansy Parkinson staggered into view, collapsing onto her seat. She reeked of strong alcohol.

'Did I miss much?'

'A cure for Gimlott's,' Hermione replied, shuffling her chair away from Pansy, who was lolling dangerously close to Hermione's lap.

Pansy snorted with laughter. 'Gimlott's, Shimlott's…' She then tried to pour herself a glass of wine and only half-succeeded. 'No one HERE…' she waved her hand, 'has anything like that.' She swirled her wine glass with a vaguely nauseated sneer.

A cavalcade of elves trooped forwards and amidst much hilarity and squeals of laughter, the guests seated at the central tables were sent spinning to the furthest reaches of the room, tables were cleared and vanished and a swing band was unveiled in a puff of green smoke with a grand fanfare of bugles and trumpets followed by a tooting flute.

Ephraim stepped forward, arms outstretched. 'And let the dancing commence…! Have fun my friends!' Narcissa limped forwards, seemingly weighed down by her extravagantly bejewelled dress and he embraced her, patting her perfectly coiffed hair. The band kicked into a full-throated waltz.

On cue, the floor was crowded with dancing couples; a dazzling display of preening butterflies, sashaying and circling in a blur of colour.

Pansy Parkinson leant towards Hermione with a confidential air. 'Glad you got shot of Ron and hooked up with the brother instead,' she said in a gravelly drawl, 'Ron was always a bit wet.'

Hermione couldn't even be bothered to argue. She laid her head on the table and wished this would all go away. Bill looked similarly downcast and his face darkened further as a shadow fell across the table.

Pansy suddenly seemed to perk up.

'Drakie!' she squealed, clawing at Draco's arm.

Draco had the look of a man bursting with boredom from each and every pore.

'Come on,' he grunted, nodding towards the dance-floor.

Pansy jumped up with surprising alacrity and pounced on him. A bestial greed had enlivened her face. 'Oh, Drakie, you're my knight in shining armour!' she cooed. 'I was positively dying here.'

Draco gave her short shrift, barely even glancing in her direction, but extended his hand to Hermione with an insistent look. She clambered out of her seat, leaden-limbed with dread.
This had to be the moment, the reason they had come here – the meeting with Ephraim.

Draco gripped her arm and steered her firmly away from the table.

'Well, you're quite the ray of sunshine,' she said.

'My mother's bonded us to evil. How would you feel?'

'Not great... I'm so, so sorry, Draco, not to have told you about the wedding before – I-

But he cut her off. 'It's okay… we had more important things to do and discuss… much more important than this-' he seemed to struggle for the right word, '-this fucktastic megashit.'

Hermione couldn't help but smile; partly in relief that he wasn't furious with her – the thought had left her sleep-deprived and wretched - and partly because the feel of his hand on her arm and the fact he was here, beside her, with a wry smile and angry eyes, filled her with a luminous, breathless joy.

'So, do I slice open my wrist in readiness for my meeting with the Grand Wizard?' she asked. 'I expect he wants a contract sealed in blood.'

'Don't do anything like that, Hermione. It might ruin your frock.'

'Seriously, though. If I'm going to agree to something so utterly dumb as a fake prosecution against a fake enemy, I'd rather it wasn't a blood-bond.'

Draco pulled her close and whispered: 'This probably isn't the best place to discuss LEGAL matters at such high volume.'

He held out his hand.

She looked around. There was no sign of Ephraim or his cohorts. The High Table was bare, apart from Torquil making awkward conversation with Portia Witchell, who was studying her champagne flute with impressively unwarranted concentration.

Instead, they were standing in the middle of the dance-floor.

'What are you doing?'

Draco laughed. 'I asked you to dance, remember? Mooching on dance-floors in full public view is beginning to feel like our safest space.'

She shook her head. 'No, no, I don't think you did, actually.' She pursed her lips and firmly parked her hands behind her back.

He looked suitably abashed. 'Okay, Hermione, please help me salvage a tiny scintilla of happiness from this day of despair?' He bowed slightly, in a mocking fashion, and offered her his hand. 'Will you please dance with me?'

A burst of unbridled glee surged inside of her. 'I can't dance to this kind of music,' she demurred; which was true.

He leant forwards and unwrapped her arms from behind her back and held her hands in his. 'Well, lucky for us both, I can.'

He swept her into his arms. 'Just follow my lead.' He gave her a smouldering look and dipped his
mouth to her ear. 'Dancing with me is the least you can do, actually.'

'Why's that?'

'Because – in addition to the embarrassment of my mother skanking around Ephraim, you turn up wearing THAT dress…'

'Oh, of course, you don't like this dress – I'd forgotten. Well, forgive me for further ruining your day with my wayward dress sense,' she countered in sarcastic tones.

'No, Hermione, I LOVE the dress. That's the problem. I've had to cope with a constant raging hard-on and, frankly… it's beginning to wear me down.'

'Shh... People will hear you,' she admonished, pink-cheeked.

'When I think about it, that night I was so pissed at you in Buenos Aires,' Draco said, a distant, dreamy look in his eyes - she could feel the air easing slowly out of her lungs as he spoke - 'it was because I realised the full – and I mean this in the best possible way – the full horror of how much you were fucking with my head.' He gave her a rakish grin. 'And other parts of me, too, for that matter…'

'Stop it,' she breathed. She remembered kissing him in the hotel room. He was right. She'd yearned to kiss him. Yearned to be close.

'I didn't see you at the ceremony,' she said, quickly switching the subject to tame the scorching heat that had suffused her cheeks.

'Too fucking right,' he growled. 'Bunch of sycophants and weirdos. I'd better things to do.'

'And what was that?'

'I was watching you.'

'Okay, so that sounds creepy… where were you?'

He tapped his nose with a knowing wink. 'I have to warn you, it created quite a stir when you took your shawl off and revealed your ravishing, see-through dress... You completely stole the show.'

'Don't be ridiculous.' She couldn't stop smiling, though. A pleasant sense of phosphorescent whiteness thrummed through her. She couldn't resist. She clasped his hands tighter and pulled herself flush against him. 'You look so fucking handsome,' she whispered in his ear – and then instantly regretted her girlish forwardness.

He stopped dancing and placed an arm on her back to keep her tight against him for just a moment longer and whispered back. 'I've got an idea... why don't we just clear out of here? Go and do something fun…'

'But it's your mother's wedding!'

'In view of who she's marrying, it's hardly a celebration, is it now?' He pulled a face and shrugged. 'But you're probably right. She'd never forgive me... And judging by the vicious side-eye your brother-in-law's been giving me, I think my life would be ended before we were halfway out the fucking door.'

She laughed, not daring to cast her eyes in Bill's direction – or any other direction, for that matter.
For a few moments there she'd completely forgotten they were surrounded by a throng of other
dancers, onlookers, agendas, enemies…

She blinked hard and tried to focus on what her feet were supposed to be doing. Thank heaven, she
thought, that one of them had been raised a toff. But then the music stopped and couples shuffled
off the dance-floor and new partners were sought and found.

Hermione glanced around and experienced a momentary shock. They were effectively surrounded
by what looked like the entirety of Slytherin house from her time at Hogwarts – just older, taller,
sometimes broader, mostly much more tired-looking, hideously over-dressed – and almost all of
them were trying not to make it too obvious that they were more interested in watching Draco and
herself than conversing with their dancing partners.

It was absolute folly, she realised, to continue being with Draco in such a prominent manner…

'Let's get a drink,' she said, tugging Draco's sleeve.

But then the music started up again, with a loud, crashing bass drum and a chorus of trumpets,
followed by the unmistakeable falsetto scratch and swirl of violins, a wheezy accordion and a
plink-plonk piano.

Draco's eyes lit up. He grabbed her hand and pulled her with considerable force back towards the
centre of the room and then twirled her with admirable skill, wrapping her close before releasing
her. 'Do you recognise this?'

'Of course, I do!' she gasped, seized by uncontrollable, heady laughter. 'But I should warn you, I've
never danced a tango in my life, so don't…'

But it was too late; he twirled her again and this time held her tight. 'And neither have I,' he
murmured in her ear. 'But it's never too late to try!'

He spun her round again so fast, she was laughing so hard she thought she might faint.

'Aren't we meant to do some sort of stamping and clapping?' she called out over the brash boom
and swell of the music.

'That's FLAMENCO, Hermione. Wrong country!' Draco grinned.

Hermione tried to recall the tango dancers from Argentina. She was sure there'd been SOME
stamping and clapping…

They continued to dance and swirl and trip over each other's feet, bursting with hilarity every step
of the way. If they hadn't been the centre of attention before, they certainly were now, Hermione
thought, but this was the best fun she'd had in a very, very long time and she had no desire to stop.

Draco abruptly jerked her away from their commanding position at the heart of the dance-floor
towards the tables lined up on the periphery, almost tipping her over in his haste.

'Sylvestra…' he warned.

Sure enough, Sylvestra, striking in her gilded, imperial majesty, had strutted onto the dance-floor
and appeared to be seeking somebody out. That somebody, Draco clearly feared, was himself.

'Time we made ourselves scarce,' Draco added, as various members of the top table – including
Narcissa, Ruddy, Zoltan, Torquil and Selwyn, hand in hand with Portia Witchell, were rapidly
weaving their way through the dancers. Worse still, Ephraim was striding purposefully towards them.

Draco gave Hermione a hard, burning stare. 'Don't commit to anything – not yet.'

'But I have to,' she whispered, 'George…'

Draco shook his head. 'We'll find another way.'

Something in his face gave her pause for thought. 'Is there something you're not telling me?'

He opened his mouth to reply but thought better about it. 'Later…' he said in hushed tones.

'Where's Bill?' Hermione asked, gazing around the room. She felt she needed backup, or at the very least, a verifiable excuse for moving away before Ephraim had succeeded in batting away well-wishers and snagging her attention.

But it was too late. A large, warm hand descended on her shoulder and it felt as though a bucket of cold blue was trickling down her body.

'Just the lady I wanted to see,' Ephraim leered in loud, jolly tones. He grabbed her hand and kissed it, focusing his intense blue gaze on her face.

He turned to Draco. 'I think the correct thing to say to you, my dear fellow, is - mind if I cut in?'

Draco shook his head. 'I'm afraid I do, Ephraim.'

Ephraim's smile vanished. 'Your monopoly on Mrs Weasley's attention has not gone unnoticed, Draco,' he said in menacing tones, 'I suspect your behaviour has prompted an unusually high level of unseemly speculation… you really should think about what your poor mother might suffer from the wagging tongues of malicious gossip.'

'No more than what she's likely suffering already.' Draco's mouth twisted nastily and there was a cold hauteur in his expression that Hermione had once despised.

Ephraim, for once, seemed lost for words.

He was saved by the arrival of Narcissa herself. 'Oh, darling!' she drawled, in a luxuriant voice like rich, whipped cream, and she pawed at her son. 'How positively delicious you look…' she simpered, clearly tipsy. 'And, Hermione, so nice you could come – and such an accomplished dancer!' she added, 'you cut such a lovely figure in your -' she paused and looked Hermione up and down, a bemused look on her face, '- your Muggle costume.' Her over-enunciation of 'Muggle' set Hermione's teeth on edge and she had to look away.

Where was Bill? she thought desperately.

Narcissa snaked her arms tightly around Draco. 'How about a dance with your dear Mamma?'

Draco seemed to recoil a little, but patted her glittering, jewelled sleeve with affection. She tightened her hold. 'I'm danced out,' he protested, 'really… I'm very tired.'

She clung to him greedily. 'Please, Draco, be a good boy, dance with me.' Hermione was a little taken aback. There was an air of desperation to her.

Hermione snuck a glance at Ephraim. His face had clouded over. 'Narcissa,' he shushed, 'desist, woman. Desist.'
'Ahaa!' came a jovial greeting from a new addition to their party. Draco cast a look of dread in his direction. It was the stooped, angular, elderly gentleman with dry, papery skin and straggly silver hair that Hermione had noticed earlier.

'Mr Golowitz, you old serpent you, and Mrs Golowitz… I wanted to thank you from the bottom of my heart for inviting me to your scintillating celebration…' he said in a creaky voice. He laid a wizened hand on Narcissa's arm and nodded at both of them, blinking slowly.

His intervention should have come as a relief to Draco, Hermione thought, but he shuffled awkwardly and looked away.

'Oh, Voltimand, what a devil you are!' Narcissa chuckled in unctuous tones. 'You've been such an entertaining guest.'

'Hasn't he just,' Ephraim glowered. He didn't seem as happy to see the man he had himself invited.

'You've grown so tall since I last saw you,' Voltimand said to Draco, appraisingly.

'I was seven years old.'

'Of course,' Voltimand sighed, 'the passage of time… And how old are you now, young man?'

'He's thirty-two,' Narcissa said speaking slowly as though to a small child.

Draco indicated to Hermione with his eyes to step away. But Voltimand interceded, capturing Hermione's hand in his own. She instantly suppressed her disgust. His hand was brown and withered and his nails were long, curved talons. 'And this I presume is your beautiful wife?' Voltimand said. 'Enchanté.'

Hermione flushed scarlet. 'No. No, I'm – a friend.'

Narcissa instantly hooked her arm through Hermione's and nudged her with her hip. 'She's friends to ALL of us,' she said in a light, tinkly voice.

Not ALL, Hermione thought darkly. Sylvestra had sidled up to her father and was whispering something in his ear. He craned to listen above the music…and his face fell.

He glanced at Draco. 'Come with me,' he commanded, 'this is important.'

Draco regarded him sceptically, but Sylvestra was insistent.

Voltimand looked crestfallen to see him go.

'Oh, that's a shame,' he said to Narcissa and Hermione, 'I was rather looking forward to speaking to him.' Hermione began to think she'd literally fallen through the looking-glass. Who was this peculiar man? What did he want with Draco? Narcissa was twittering a host of platitudes at him and yet the old man was staring after Draco, his face crumpled with unutterable sorrow.

'Hermione…' hissed a voice behind her. She about-turned and came face to face with the perky features of Agatha Thrussington. She pulled Hermione away from Narcissa, only stopping when they'd ventured a suitably safe distance, close to the buffet.

'It's too late to say no-one will notice, but it's VERY obvious that you were lying to me. I knew you were, of course,' Agatha said archly, she tipped half a goblet of champagne down her throat.

'Lying about what?' Hermione asked, knowing full well what she was referring to.
'You and Draco!' Agatha shrieked, with an injured sniff.

'There's nothing with me and Draco,' Hermione declared in very deliberate tones. 'Even old enemies can make an effort to get along.'

Agatha cocked her head to one side and peered at Hermione. 'There was no effort involved at all. Absolutely none. You might as well come clean. You know I can make sure the tittle-tattle's told properly at least.'

Hermione sighed. Where had Bill got to? She really wanted to go home now. Sod Ephraim.

'I can keep secrets,' Agatha said pertly. 'It's my job.'

'It's your job to spread them,' Hermione said, acerbically, 'not that I have any!'

'Of course, you do,' Agatha retorted, 'everybody has secrets! And the art of true, honest, even helpful gossip is making sure that everyone's secrets are only revealed at a time of the secret-holder's choosing - when it's most advantageous.'

Hermione burst out laughing. 'You're babbling, Agatha.'

'Do you doubt me? Do you doubt that I know secrets?'

'I don't doubt you.'

Agatha gazed around the room. 'I know a little something about everybody in here I'd say... they're all pretty nasty people, actually.' She hiccupped and smacked her hand to her mouth, jolting a glob of champagne from her glass she was holding onto her forehead and nose. She giggled and wiped it away.

'Hold on,' Hermione said, snatching a napkin from the buffet table and locking eyes with Bill who was sat a few feet away, his chair slammed tight against the wall. She smiled and waved, but there was no smile in return. Instead, he furiously jabbed at his watch and gestured at the crowd – frustrated by the significant absence of Ephraim.

A glum feeling descended on her.

'Here,' she said to Agatha, pressing the napkin into her hand.

'Silly me, such a clumsy clot,' Agatha said, swaying a little as she spoke. 'That ghastly Sylvestra woman,' she choked, 'she tried to curse me earlier, do you know that?... Said I wasn't writing nice enough stories about her darling Daddy. What a pig!'

'That's politics for you,' Hermione said keeping her voice as neutral as possible.

'Well... I do know things about him actually. Things that could hurt his reputation. He's not the lovely, cuddly benefactor we all think he is,' Agatha said, lowering her voice. She tottered a little and a skein of unruly blonde hair had unfastened itself from her chignon and was bouncing against her forehead. 'Has had LOADS of women,' she pursed her lips in tight disapproval. 'One of those addicts you hear about.'

'Well, he's a good-looking man,' Hermione countered, rather hoping to draw Agatha out...

'And men have needs, blah-di-blah... the wee darlings,' Agatha flashed Hermione a brittle smile, but her eyes were droopy and sad, 'I mean, look at Draco…'
Hermione laughed nervously. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Well, he was with that Sylvestra while he was with me and then he was with his wife – the mousy one – while he was with her and there's been countless in between, and it's no wonder his wife has left him, frankly… and then he was even with me again for a little teensy bit...' she sighed, 'one of those last-orders-bottle-of-whisky-at-The-Leaky-Cauldron sorts of nights, you know…'

Hermione had absolutely no idea, but she nodded anyway. The thought was making her feel a little nauseous. Not that Draco's philandering was news to her, of course, but she suddenly felt she couldn't bear the thought of it... What if that was all he wanted from her? And this – this thing, this unmistakeable knot of feelings and desire and mutual understanding between them, might it be nothing more than a lengthy charade... a man chasing a conquest?

She was suddenly overwhelmed by an urge to cry; softly, silently to herself, in a darkened room. She couldn't bear the notion of Draco sharing what they had – or, more what they might have and, given the chance, would have - with anyone else; not even his wife.

She was so engrossed in her thoughts she realised she'd tuned out of Agatha's drunken bleatings… but a name kept repeating and she wasn't sure who or what it was in connection with.

'I'm sorry, Agatha, I didn't catch what you said there.' She held her hand to her ear and leant in closer. 'The music was a bit loud.'

'Oh? About Parvati?'

Hermione instantly recoiled. 'Parvati and Draco?'

'No, Parvati and Ephraim!'

Hermione took a sharp intake of breath; a moment of crystal clarity. Yes, that made sense of a lot of things.

'Not anymore.' Agatha pulled a face. 'He dumped her. And it was BRUTAL... Poor girl was in terrible shape.'

Hermione could see Draco beckoning to her through the crowd.

'Gosh!' Hermione said, 'it's been great to talk with you, Agatha. I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening, but I'm rather shattered.' There was a sense of urgency to Draco's movements, even though he was trying to be as unobtrusive as possible.

It was time to cut a deal with Ephraim…

'No, no, run away. I've seen him, too, you know.' Agatha grabbed another glass of champagne. 'Not – not blind.' She tapped her nose, missed it, and stabbed her cheek instead, just missing her eye. 'Your secret's safe with me.'

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'In here,' Draco said, ushering her into what looked to be his father's old study. It was a ground floor room looking out onto the manicured gardens of Malfoy Manor, with a vast ebony desk and a green leather upholstered seat. The desk was clear of any parchments or writing paraphernalia and sported a single brass, oil lamp, which was the room's sole source of illumination, and a rather beautiful photograph of Narcissa from many years ago.
'I've sent an elf to find Bill,' Draco said, distractedly. He looked nervous. 'You both need to get out of here.'

'Why? What have we done?'

'You've done nothing.' His mouth twitched angrily. 'But your husband has.'

'RON?'

'Yes. I do believe that IS your husband, Hermione,' Draco said sardonically. 'He's heading here right now to arrest Ruddy Krenzel on embezzlement and smuggling charges. And he wants to question Ephraim, too.'

'But, Ron's in Armenia!'

'Clearly not.'

The consequences of what he was saying were beginning to drip-feed into her consciousness.

'Is there any way we can stop him?'

'Not if it's a full-blown Auror operation… no.'

Hermione was feeling winded. 'I can't be here when Ron arrives…' Just thinking about it made her head spin and she felt clammy and sick, like she had vertigo.

'He won't come in HERE… Ephraim will meet him in my mother's drawing-room or even the Garden Room - to avoid being seen by the party. But it's probably still best I get you and Bill out… To be on the safe side.'

'Does Ephraim think I knew about this? Or Bill?' she asked in tremulous tones.

'He didn't say.' Draco stared at her in sober silence. His eyes glowed silver in the soft lamplight.

Hermione heaved a deep sigh and turned away, facing the far wall and a long line of paintings cloaked in black cloth - presumably for the same reason the portraits in Lucius Malfoy's wing of the house had been covered up, to quell rumours about his Gimlott's.

'The horrible irony here is Ron's doing the right thing,' Hermione said.

'God yeah,' Draco snorted. 'Krenzel's a complete crook and a total wanker.'

'But in the circumstances…' She shuddered at the possible implications… 'We need to get George out of Arcana as quickly as possible.'

Draco shook his head. 'He's not there anymore. He's been moved.'

Hermione spun around to face him. 'So where is he?'

Draco shrugged helplessly. 'I've no idea! I was shipped out of the country last week on yet another fucking futile business trip… Truth is, Ephraim knows not to trust me anymore.'

'He still needs you, though,' Hermione said pointedly.

'He needs my signature – if he could chop off my writing hand and kill the rest of me stone-dead, he'd do it in a heartbeat!' Draco leant against the ebony desk and his body seemed to sag with
sudden weariness. 'That nifty bit of blood-magic may be the one decent thing my father did… it has to be his living, breathing descendant who writes the cheques.'

Hermione could barely believe she would ever feel such heartfelt gratitude towards Lucius Malfoy… There was still a sense of him in this room, she thought, looking around. Even Draco's connection, his resemblance to his father, seemed more pronounced.

Just being with him, here in Malfoy Manor… it felt like the ghosts of their past were perched upon their shoulders; that they were actors, trapped in a shadow-play.

For a few brief moments, when they'd been having such fun dancing together in full public view in a room where she'd once been tortured and Draco had looked on and done nothing, it had felt like the light had been let in. That they had a fighting chance to break free.

'What do we do now?'

Draco gave her a quizzical smile. 'You'll have to narrow that down, Hermione. That question applies to so much in our lives at the moment.'

'About George.'

'I'll do what I can to find him, I promise…'

'Harry says Ephraim won't hurt George, because he's leverage.'

Draco bit his lip hard and his eyes fell to the floor.

His response worried her… 'But you don't agree with that, do you?' she asked in querulous tones.

'I don't know…' He folded his arms tightly as though suppressing a shiver that had trickled down his spine. 'What I DO know,' he said hesitantly, 'is you have to avoid ever being alone with Ephraim…or Sylvestra, or any goddamned fucking one of them. Is that clear?'

His voice had dropped an octave and she had to lean closer to catch what he was saying. The dark look on his face alarmed her. She looked around the study, half-expecting to see a slab of corundum or a face pressed to the glass of the French Windows leading out onto the thick blackness of the night outside.

'I'm not frightened for myself, Draco,' Hermione said in firm tones. 'Ephraim needs me for his bonkers court case. Although I don't get why it has to be ME who does this. There's plenty of able lawyers with half my scruples who could do it instead.'

'No, it has to be YOU,' Draco said, bitterly. 'He wants you on his side… AT his side, even. Which is good enough reason not to do it. This – this whole George business, it feels like one big set-up to ensnare you…'

'What do you mean?' She could feel the hairs on her arms suddenly prickling with cold.

'I don't know yet…' he said, 'but you should put some thought into how the hell you and George got into this pickle in the first place. What I DO know is there was talk at one time of casting an Imperious Curse on you.'

Hermione's jaw dropped open. 'As if holding George hostage wasn't enough, they also want to fuck with my head?'
Draco was dark-eyed with worry. 'Can you withstand an Imperio?'

She swallowed hard. 'I don't know.'

'Well, make sure you're never in a position where you have to…' Draco's eyes flicked to a large, silver clock on the wall above the desk. 'Where the fuck's Bill got to? He's taking his bloody time…' he said impatiently. 'At this rate he'll be running into Ron.' He took hold of Hermione's hands and drew her close. 'I might have to pop out for a minute to chase him up…'

'I'd rather you didn't,' Hermione said in low tones. She sounded calmer than she felt… because a sudden, unfathomable terror, an insidious, spidery malevolence felt like it was crawling up her spine.

Draco's eyes skitted from side to side, scanning the room. 'What is it?' he asked. 'What's frightened you?' His voice had dropped to a whisper - and she could sense he was now as frightened as she was.

'I don't know… just a feeling.' It felt like a thick, grey shroud had descended on them – a pall of evil - and she knew, with a gut-churning certainty, that she shouldn't be left alone in that room.

They stared at each other, their hearts clattering loudly in the still quietness. The faint strains of music and the ebb and flow of voices drifted down the corridor towards them, beyond the closed door. It certainly didn't sound like a pack of Aurors had descended on the party.

'You felt it too…' she said.

'Paranoia's infectious, I guess,' he breathed. Draco pulled her into his arms. 'Don't worry. I won't go anywhere.' She instantly felt more solid, more certain… the strange sense of dark terror that had seized her was dissipating.

'I was just feeling a bit spooked…'

'Well, this WAS my father's study…' Draco smiled, and he raised his eyebrows in mock-horror. He knitted his hands together behind her back, pulling her flush against him, and his eyes shone. She could feel his whiteness spinning, fuelled by feeling… and, increasingly, desire, too: acute, almost painful…'Maybe he's haunting us?'

'His son and the *Mudblood*…' she smirked. 'He wouldn't be happy.'

'Fuck him,' Draco hissed, 'fuck them all.'

Hermione nodded to the paintings that lined the walls… 'Why are they still covered?'

Draco gave her a strange, twisted smile. 'Custom, I guess. Come and look,' he said, leading her by the hand. One by one, he briefly flicked each cloth aside. 'These are my supposed ancestors: the Malfoys and the Carnousties!' he announced with mock solemnity.

'They're all very similar.'

'I take it that's a polite euphemism for *inbred*,' Draco grunted with a dour smile. 'Honestly. It's amazing I haven't got horns and a tail.'

There were plentiful sharp features, aquiline noses and tell-tale silver locks sporting various hairstyles through the ages. But there was something curious about the Malfoys.
Hermione looked at Draco. 'You really aren't a Malfoy, are you?'

They had hooded, glacial blue eyes, their lips were straight and thin – very unlike Draco's – and almost all of them had a prominent snaggle tooth.

Draco's eyes clouded with memory. 'Ironically, it was when Voldemort was at Malfoy Manor that I first suspected something was amiss… I often hid myself away in here - out of sight, out of mind – looking at these portraits.' He gave her a vinegary smile. 'And then, one evening, in a rare moment of father-son bonding …' he looked at the office with a weighty sadness, 'in here, actually, my father told me this wacky little rumour that he found hilarious, which said my true grandfather – his father – wasn't Abraxas Malfoy at all. And that my grandmother, Clorinda Carnoustie, had an affair with the Muggle-born riding instructor… And then he never mentioned it again, but a few years later he covered up the portraits and they've remained this way ever since.'

'Who was the riding instructor?' But she already knew…

'The old chap you met tonight. Voltimand…' He turned and grinned at her, but it was a topsy-turvy kind of grin, lacking conviction. 'Odd fish… He never knew, of course. He must have been completely baffled when Ephraim invited him to this wedding.'

Hermione thought back to Voltimand's dejected face as Draco hurried away at the party. 'Actually, Draco, I think he DOES know.'

Draco furrowed his brow. 'Really?... Oh.' He lapsed into silence.

She couldn't bear the sudden sadness that descended on him, like a thick, dark cloak muffling a scream.

'I was a bit … brusque, when I think about it.' Draco sucked his lower lip anxiously. 'More angry with Ephraim really, for putting me in that position.'

'I think if you ever wanted to get to know Voltimand, he'd be only too happy.'

'Thing is, I'm pretty rubbish at dealing with complex touchy-feely-kind-of-stuff at the best of times,' Draco sighed. 'And now definitely ISN'T the best of times.' He gazed around the office, a melancholic expression on his face. 'I know you hated my father, Hermione – deservedly. But he – his memory – it didn't deserve THIS…' He nodded to the door leading back to the wedding party. 'Not so soon, at any rate.'

She smiled at him tenderly. 'You're actually pretty good at the complex touchy-feely stuff,' she said, pulling him into a close embrace. 'Much better than you think you are.'

She could feel his whiteness; sad and discordant... and couldn't bear that he felt this way. She hesitantly glanced her lips over his, suddenly craving the taste of him. It was the softest touch, feather-light and fragile, but her lips instantly tingled and a chasing pack of violet stars tumbled and tripped across her vision.

Draco's eyes held hers. And she could barely breathe.

'I missed you this week,' she said.

'Did it feel like your soul had been hollowed out?' he muttered forlornly.

She smiled. 'Well... that's a more poetic way of putting it, perhaps. But, yes…'
'It was too long,' he groaned, folding her into his arms in a single, swift, crushing motion, 'far too fucking long to be without you.' And he kissed her with startling passion, deftly manoeuvring her backwards, until she was pinned hard against his father's ebony writing desk by the weight of his body. Her heart raced at the sweet warmth of his mouth and the rousing sensation of his tongue probing and pushing against hers. A fierce wildness had flared up inside of him that stole her breath away… and there was a new darkness in his eyes that both thrilled and slightly terrified her.

She gasped at the feel of his mouth plundering her face and neck, and shivered at the soft glide of his hands on her bare skin, when they slunk underneath her dusky pink shift and explored her body. A warm, fluid heat was humming through her, like a white glow in her mind…

She entwined her arms tightly around him and they kissed each other hungrily, as his hands continued to tease and caress, and he pushed himself hard against her until she was trembling uncontrollably, desperately wanting more. Everything else in the world was forgotten and at that moment, she wouldn't have given a damn if half of Malfoy Manor happened to troop past. The only thing that mattered was Draco and the feel of his warm, taut skin as she slipped her fingers inside his shirt and trailed her hands down his body, tracing the firm contours of his torso.

But his hand instinctively clamped down on hers when she started to unfasten his flies… 'No, no, we can't do that, Hermione … though god knows I really, really fucking want to,' he grimaced, breathing erratically, 'but not here, not now…' She could feel him quivering with frustration. 'Thing is… your bloody brother-in-law's going to come charging through that door any minute, and - I won't deny it - he kind of scares me.'

'He slightly scares me too,' she laughed.

He smiled, but it was a poignant, wistful smile, and his eyes were hot and intense on her face. 'Hermione…' he said, but his words seemed stuck in his throat… He blinked and tried again. 'There's things I think we should talk about sometime… things about us. Because… this situation, it's majorly, fucking, completely unsustainable… You know that, don't you?' He slipped soft fingers into her hair, gently scooping it off her face. 'We need a time and a place.'

'I know.' She wanted him so much, it was painful.

'Our world's literally teetering…' he mused, 'and yet all I can think about is being with you… I've never felt like this before.'

'Me neither,' she said… and she meant it. Not like this. Nothing like this.

And when he kissed her – with a slow, exquisite intensity that left them both reeling and fighting for breath - she clung to him, as if her life depended on it, which in some ways was true, because in that instant, she realised something that sent her world spinning on its axis, something that she knew she'd have to hide, something that had concretised into an unavoidable truth.

She was in love with him. Completely and hopelessly in love.

And for a brief, electrifying moment, a peculiar tension coiled deep inside of her, looped and swirled and spun maniacally: a shooting spiral of glistening white interwoven with a gleaming, lustrous purple… She felt dazed and joyous and blinded by the beauty of it.

Draco gasped and his eyes sprung wide open.

'What's the matter?'

He screwed his eyes up tightly and shook his head, as though trying to clear his vision.
'Nothing...it's okay,' he said in halting tones, then, gathering his thoughts, – 'actually, that's not quite true… there was something a tiny bit strange… Your colour thing? I think I felt it.'

'What did you see?'

'Just a weird flash, really; almost like a memory, or something from a dream. But I think it was you...' His eyes were glossy and his cheeks were glowing with excitement.

'And what was I?'

'Purple.'

Hermione was too surprised to speak.

'Am I going mad?' he asked, eyes round in wonder.

'Far from it.' She felt strangely giddy, a buoyant joy bubbling up inside of her. 'Well, if you could quickly find a colour for Big Bad Bill, Draco, that'd be particularly useful,' she laughed.

'Oh shit! I forgot about him… Where the hell's he got to?'

'Yes; Where is he?' came a cold, laconic voice from behind them.

They instantly jumped apart and stared at Bill Weasley, who was standing in the open doorway, directing a two-thousand-yard stare at Draco.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"TROUBLE" by COLDPLAY

"QUE NO SALGA LA LUNA" by ROSALIA

"DI MI NOMBRE" by ROSALIA

"MAD ABOUT YOU" by HOOVERPHONIC

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40.  

'About fucking time,' Draco said coolly.

'We'd better get out of here,' Bill said, flicking his eyes to Hermione. 'I've made your excuses to Ephraim. Migraine…'

Hermione's mouth was so dry she couldn't speak and her heart was hammering at such a fierce velocity inside her chest she could hardly hear herself think, either.

Bill turned to Draco. 'Your stepfather told me he'd received an alarming report from the Ministry, which turned out to be false.' He looked at them both with a disapproving sneer. 'Probably for the best, don't you think?'

Draco led them through a pair of warded French Windows into the gardens, far beyond the glittering lights of Malfoy Manor dancing in the shadows that criss-crossed perfectly-manicured lawns. The darkness was dense and still, with an almost viscous quality to it. Hermione felt like it was a living, breathing thing; a tangible presence.

Draco shared the necessary spells and incantations with Bill to break the wards as they walked. 'I'll get you close to the Mausoleum. You can Apparate from there. It's pretty much the only spot in the entire estate where that's possible.'

They followed him along a winding path, which wound its way through a leafy glade to a topiary-lined garden; the strange, convoluted shapes of the hedgerows loomed large and grey. They tripped quickly along a gravel path running around an ink-black lake, prompting harsh, squawking cries from two pale, fan-shaped smudges – Malfoy Manor's famous albino peacocks – parked on the opposite bank.

'Up here!' Draco commanded. They crested a steep rise and then sank from the view of the main house as they stumbled rapidly towards the edifice of Lucius Malfoy's hulking, metal mausoleum, glittering with menace in the darkness.

'Shit!' Bill called out, flailing to the ground. Hermione skittered across the hillside, desperately trying to keep her footing. Draco got to Bill first and was hauling him to his feet.

'There's something there – on the bank!' Bill wheezed. He pulled his wand out and pointed its tip at a long, bulky object. It looked like a log wrapped in rags, but his wand shone onto a web of matted silvery hair.

'It's Voltimand,' Draco said in low tones. He knelt down to look. 'He's dead…'

He heaved Voltimand onto his back and used his own wand to light up Voltimand's face… 'FUCK!' he cursed, falling back onto his haunches. Voltimand glowed – a lurid royal blue. His eyes
were wide and staring and his lips had curled back from his teeth as though in his last moment he had snarled in defiance at his fate.

'Hermione!' Draco yelped, standing and pointing his wand directly at her. 'Don't come any closer!' His hand was shaking.

'He can't hurt me,' she reasoned, although her heart was racing. Despite its uncanny blue glow, there was a distinctly bestial quality to Voltimand's contorted face that she feared would haunt her forever.

'HE can't hurt you, but what killed him can…' Draco staggered towards her, wild-eyed, wand outstretched before him… 'Move, dammit!' Bill was frantically scanning the surrounding area, his illuminated wand-tip bobbing and blurring in streaks of light, round and round… Hermione suddenly felt she might be sick. 'There's nothing here,' Bill said. There was an uncharacteristic note of panic in his voice.

'Come on now. Step away,' Draco insisted, pushing her forcefully… but she felt peculiarly rooted to the spot, caught in a daze, and the world around her had gone grey, a thick, dark grey. Draco suddenly caught her in his arms and she fell against him… His whiteness was whirling and swooping … tracing haphazard patterns in the dark. Streaks of light, like fireworks, frantically chasing each other's tails and circling back on themselves.

Draco's eyes shone down at her. 'You okay?' he asked. He was brimming with fear, a quivering pale aura shimmering and slurring his every move… he looked like he'd been set on fire from the inside.

'You're very shiny. Kind of … fuzzy round the edges.' Shit. I'm panicking, she thought to herself. Voltimand's terrified face and a heightened sense of danger - like a dank, grey weight pushing through her skull - it was almost too much. And Ron… Ron had been coming here and her world might have been swept away… and how long had Bill been standing at that door? How much had he seen and heard?

'Hermione?… Hermione, listen… please… look at me … Stay awake!' Draco's voice was both sharp and insistent yet drifting in and out, a burble of sound… it seemed to emanate from beneath her, deep under the ground, and then from within her, accompanied by a burning bright white, so bright it scalded her eyes – and yet her eyes were closed, she felt sure, shutting out the darkness… There was a piercing, sonic whine that seemed to amplify and balloon… and her heart was pounding and she was gasping for air…

'It's okay… you're okay, Beautiful,' Draco was saying in soft, soothing tones. She opened her eyes and realised she was sprawled across him on the cold, damp grass. Rain, she thought … while they were dancing and kissing and she was falling in love, it must have been raining. And now there was mud sprayed onto Draco's smart clothes… like he'd been hosed with slurry. How had that happened?

'Is she alright?' Bill asked. His voice sounded like broken glass. He came closer; a large, dark shadow blundering through the wet grass.

'I hope so,' Draco murmured, smoothing her hair from her face.

'It can't have been what killed him… she'd be…'

'I know,' Draco said in a low whisper. 'It wasn't that.' He was rubbing his hand on her back in slow,
wide circles.

She looked at him with wide, staring eyes. It seemed incredible that she'd ever hated him; although, once upon a time, there'd been good cause. But now? Now she felt she could barely cope with the swell of feeling she had inside of her...

'I don't know what came over me,' she whispered. 'What happened?'

'You weren't very well.'

Her teeth were chattering with sudden cold but Draco whispered a warming spell and wrapped her stole tightly around her.

She still felt fuggy-headed, but she was gradually aware of her surroundings. Her vision was sharpening: sounds, voices – they were all clearer. Her eyes were drawn to Voltimand's glowing blue body on the hill.

She turned back to Draco and realised, horrified, that it wasn't mud on his clothes – it was vomit.

'Oh god, I'm so sorry,' she said, recoiling.

Draco looked down at himself and immediately pulled his robe off. 'Oh! It's nothing… I – I can scourgify this off in no time,' he smiled, shivering in his shirt-sleeves.

From the revolted look on Bill's face he didn't quite agree.

'We should move the body,' Bill said.

'I can do that,' Draco said firmly. 'You should get her home.'

Both men helped her to stand.

'To Apparate out, you need to be closer to the Mausoleum,' Draco said.

Bill hooked his arm around Hermione's waist, urging her forwards. She momentarily closed her eyes, feeling exhausted…

'What are you doing?' Bill called out.

Hermione's eyes blinked open. Draco was kneeling by Voltimand's body.

'He was holding something…' Draco unfurled a silvery piece of paper. Even from a distance, Hermione could see it was embossed with the Malfoy crest. Draco's face was pooled in the light from his wand as he read what was written; he looked pale and disturbed. 'That's weird. It's from ME, even looks like my writing… says I asked to meet him here at the Mausoleum... but that's not possible.'

He rapidly approached holding the note, which Bill snatched and read for himself. 'Ten o'clock…' He quickly looked at Hermione and then at Draco. 'You both left the drawing room around half past nine. Maybe just a bit after…' He looked thoughtful. 'One of the house-elves came and spoke to me maybe five, possibly ten minutes later? I realised something was happening because Golowitz and his cronies had all scarpered but this poor chap –' Bill glanced down at Voltimand's glowing features – 'he was still talking to your Mum, Draco.'

'That didn't leave him much time to get here,' Draco remarked.
'No – he must have set off the moment after I sought out Ephraim.'

'And where *was* Ephraim?' Draco asked.

'In the hallway. Someone came through the fireplace – that Torquil chap I think – and they moved to another living room.'

'White sofas?' Draco asked.

'Yes, that's where I spoke to Ephraim. He – he offered me a drink, actually. Very cordial. I guess that must have been around the time Voltimand thought he was meeting you.' His voice dipped and his lips tightened… 'But I guess you were – otherwise *occupied*.'

Hermione remembered she hadn't wanted to be alone. An ominous creeping sensation shuddered through her. 'I've got a very bad feeling about this.'

Draco stared at her; his eyes gleaming like two sparkling gemstones out of the darkness. 'Me too.'

'Whoever did this obviously wanted you to carry the can, Draco,' Bill said. 'Maybe Ephraim wants it to look like you're working with these fictitious foreign interlopers he keeps going on about?'

'He told me that the latest Dark Flux attacks were carried out by Jeroboam and Los Rojos,' Hermione said, 'he even accused Parvati of collaborating with them.'

'Parvati?' Draco cried, screwing up his face in outrage. 'She wouldn't hurt a fly…'

Parvati… Ephraim…. But she said nothing.

'But this is obviously Ephraim's new, big spiel, isn't it?' Draco fumed. 'Nasty murderous foreigners *everywhere*… It's why he wants you to do this blasted, crackpot, phoney trial shit, Hermione… To scapegoat a dead man and make himself look better.'

'But she should still do what he's asked…' Bill bristled.

'It's fucking stupid. And dangerous… and you know it,' Draco spat, lip curled into a contemptuous sneer.

The tension between them was palpable.

'You say Ephraim won't hurt you, Draco,' Hermione said plaintively, partly to distract them both, 'but *this* - this says the opposite. It's an attempt to frame you. All along, they're setting you up as the fall guy for when it all goes belly-up. Think about the trace on Katya's money? And you're signing cheques and contracts for god-knows-what! It's time you left Malfoy Manor. For good.'

'He can't leave his mother!' Bill shot back, 'and we need him to keep tabs on what's happening with George… and everything else.' Bill gave Draco a surly look. 'And where would he go?'

Draco looked down at Voltimand's corpse and shook his head. 'I'm not sure *this* was Ephraim's doing, actually…. There's another game afoot, here. We just can't see it.'

'But we could feel it…' Hermione murmured, thinking back to the strange and yet familiar terror that had suddenly seized her when she was in the study with Draco. Just thinking about it made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. But even as she thought it, it felt like her mind had slipped, that the presence, the face, was wreathed and lost in a pall of thick, clagging smoke.

*Quis es?* she thought, *Quis es?*
'Strange…' she mused, 'when I think back to what scared me earlier, I can't quite… It makes me feel sort of… mixed up.' She shook her head in wonder.

Draco eyed her with concern. 'You need to rest. We'll talk tomorrow…' He reached out as though about to touch her but thought better of it, because Bill was glaring furiously at him.

Draco turned and cast a Mobilicorpus, levitating Voltimand's body into the air. Voltimand's moth-eaten robes flapped and fell open, exposing his emaciated form and the violent bluish hue of his skin.

'What are you going to do with him?' Bill asked.

Draco guided Voltimand away from them, down the bank towards the Mausoleum. 'I'm going to put him where he belongs… with his son.'

XXX

'Are you sure you're feeling okay?' Bill asked, easing Hermione onto a seat at the kitchen table in Wisteria Cottage.

'Just a little woozy, that's all. Maybe I wasn't quite ready to Apparate properly? You know that feeling when you feel you've left a bit of yourself behind?'

Bill examined her face and eyes. 'Were you hexed?'

'No. I just…fainted,' Hermione said sheepishly. 'Seeing that poor old guy… it was a bit of a shock.'

Bill seated himself opposite her and broodily gazed at his wand, which he turned over and over in his hands. 'I'll wait here until Ron gets back.'

'You really don't need to stay with me.' All she wanted to do was have a bath and fall into bed. 'I need to get these shoes off,' she grumbled. Her feet were sore from traipsing through the Malfoy estate in high-heeled sandals. They were clogged with mud. She bent down to try and unbuckle them, but she kept missing the strap.

Bill was kneeling on the floor beside her within moments and he gently eased each shoe off for her.

'We should talk about the other stuff,' Hermione said.

'I'd really rather not,' Bill said in acid tones, pulling himself up from the floor.

Hermione felt her cheeks glow in embarrassment.

'I don't mean…THAT,' she murmured, not daring to look at Bill. Luckily, he was pouring them both a glass of water, so she didn't have to.

Bill returned with their drinks and sat down again. 'We do need to talk about THAT, Hermione. And I'll be having words with Draco, you can bet your life on it… But you're not yourself tonight, so we'll talk another time.'

She hoped it would wait forever, but the earnest yet angry look on Bill's face told her that was a forlorn hope. 'I was thinking more about what happened with Ron, actually… or rather what didn't. He's meant to be in a different country altogether - Albania or Armenia?'

'Nope. He's here, alright. I knew what he planned to do tonight.'
Hermione felt the colour drain from her face. 'Did Ron know I was at the wedding?'

'He thinks you're at Shell Cottage helping Fleur.'

'I see.' Hermione was surprised to find she had tears pricking her eyelids. 'Why didn't you tell me what he planned to do?'

'In case you decided not to go ... and didn't agree to what Ephraim wants.' He gave her a piercing look. 'I love my brother...' His hand shook as he raised his glass of water to his lips and drained the lot. 'But then the timings got all screwed up... Ephraim was warned Ron was coming and Draco spirited you away - so my plan turned to crap, basically.'

Serves you right, Hermione thought bitterly.

'Though I'd really like to know why Ron didn't show up...' His fingers nervously drummed the table as he spoke. 'What did Draco mean when he said he was placing this chap's body with his SON?' Bill mused.

'Voltimand was Draco's natural grandfather.'

Bill looked a little stunned.

There was a clattering from the hallway as Ron Apparated home and skidded at full-tilt into the kitchen. He was in a state of puce-faced, frothing rage.

'Fucking Blasters!' he yelled at Bill. 'Barred me and Tana from leaving the Ministry. We were all set to go with the breach-codes to get into Malfoy Manor with young Jervis Scrimshaw and Toffit and Grieves following on as backup, when Carmichael shows up! You could tell he felt like a bag of shit about the whole thing, poor fellow, but he said Nesbit and Cairns had been doing the rounds and seen we'd booked an ILLEGAL connection into the Floo Network and that stretch required higher approvals. From fucking Silas Witchell himself!'

'He refused?'

'Said he was seeking advisement,' Ron said in a hoity-toity voice. He threw his wand onto the table and headed straight for the drinks cabinet. He grabbed Bill's empty water glass and upturned the remains of a bottle of Firewhisky into it. He looked even more thunderous than before when the contents quickly ran to the thinnest trickle. 'He claimed it was something to do with notifying the South African Ministry, because Ruddy's not a Brit.'

Hermione was perplexed. It was extremely irregular for the Minister for Magic to interfere with a live Auror investigation. 'If Krenzel lives here under UK law, it's got nothing to do with his home Ministry,' she explained, 'it's only a problem if he's out of the country.'

Ron shrugged helplessly. 'Well, maybe they've changed the rules?' He gulped his drink and wiped his mouth with his hand. 'I'm losing track these days of all the million billion changes they keep making. It's doing my head in.'

'What are you going to do?' Bill asked.

'Carmichael said he'll meet me tomorrow to discuss putting in a formal complaint,' Ron replied. 'I just have to hope that in the meantime, Krenzel doesn't fly the coop... what you doing here anyway? The teenies got too much, did they?'

'Tucked up asleep by now I should imagine,' Hermione said, wondering how Ron had failed to
notice that they were ridiculously over-dressed for a teenage sleepover.

XXX

After Bill had left, Hermione left Ron in the kitchen with a freshly opened bottle of firewhisky and ran herself a bath and for half an hour she tried to forget the petrified, blue face of Voltimand and the cold, grey blankness… Instead, she ran her stolen time with Draco in his father's office over and over in her head.

Obviously, she'd known she had feelings for him – BIG feelings – for some time now.

Lust, for certain - Draco was the star turn in a full-blown, technicolour fantasy constantly playing out in her head. And then there was their increasingly risky behaviour: dancing at the wedding, snogging like hormonal teenagers on a park bench in Central London, kissing at the Quidditch Dinner... Why was she being so reckless? Was it a case of being carried away by the teeming serotonin cocktail pumping full-blast through her neurological pathways? Or did she actually want to be caught out? To be spotted and shamed? And to what end?

Do I actually want to BE with Draco? she wondered. In an ideal world, a fantasy-land, yes... But in the real world, where they were both married to other people, where they had children and in her case, in-laws and friends who probably loved Ron most - the fallout was almost too immense to contemplate. Plus, these feelings - they were entirely selfish. There really was no one else to blame for falling in love with a man who wasn't her husband, but herself...

How long had this been building inside of her? Was it as far back as Argentina? She fancied it might have been - the moment she started to 'see' him, to have a sense of his feelings and moods, to care about how he felt; something new and alien and all-encompassing had been triggered deep inside of her, overwhelming her standard emotional mainframe.

It would have been better all-round if she'd kept her eyes closed...

She sunk beneath the warm, sudsy water, welcoming the stillness and calm.

It'd be simpler, she realised, if what she felt for Draco was nothing more than *Lust-on-Steroids*. A quick shag, to scratch the itch - and maybe life would carry on as before? A singular, sordid, guilt-stained blot on an otherwise pristine marriage – and she could turn the page and start again?

But the problem was, she wasn't just in love with how Draco looked, the sound of his voice and how he talked, the way he moved, the way he smiled and the way his eyes shifted in shade and meaning – no, it was *so much more*.

She was in love with the sense she had of an emotionally complex man with a textured, often fractured inner life, and she was in love with the way he thought, god… she loved the way he thought… They were a good match intellectually; she felt their minds travelled faster and more efficiently when they were together. And that felt glorious.

She rose out of the water, groaning in frustration.

The sound of Ron squealing from the kitchen jolted her back to the moment. His high-pitched voice carried through the stillness of the house… She leapt out of the bath, wrapped herself in a dressing-gown and hurried to the kitchen.

Ron was sat at the table; an emergency late edition of *Sub Rosa* laid out beside his glass of firewhisky. The bottle's contents had already diminished to a worrying degree.
'I think Neville Longbottom's behind Sub Rosa,' he giggled triumphantly. His eyes shone glassily.

'Why do you say that?' Hermione asked. Her hands shook as she removed the bottle from the table, tightly screwing the lid on.

Ron gave her a broad wink. 'I told him something … something private … and now it's all over one of these blasted pamphlets….' Hermione glanced down at the Sub Rosa flyer. There was a full exposé of a well-known wizarding company, Spinkes, accusing them of being up to their eyeballs in an illegal currency exchange scheme.

'I thought you were investigating Quidditch clubs?'

'Yeah… but I was told this by an Auror in Section B. He says that Witchell and two of his deputies, Archie Killick and Loubella Blythe, have been getting massive backhanders for turning a blind eye.'

'And you told Neville?'

'Bumped into him in the pub the other night… he's shacking up with Hannah Abbot these days so he's there LOADS…'

Hermione looked him directly in the eye. 'Honestly, Ron… I doubt you're the only person who knew about this. And Neville's a very busy person; not exactly your typical firebrand, is he?'

Ron slowly drank his whisky and stared into space. 'Yeah… I guess so. Between his pot plants and shagging Hannah, I doubt he's got time to start a revolution…'

XXX

'Where you off to?' Ron asked Hermione the next morning. He scowled at her from the kitchen as she tried to tame her hair in front of the mirror in the hallway.

'I've got to pick up the kids from Percy's and then we're visiting Uncle Derek at his new hospice, remember? We're having lunch at Mum's afterwards and Dad's taking the kids to the Natural History Museum tomorrow.'

Ron looked nonplussed.

She shot him a pained look. 'I told you this last week!'

He'd forgotten, she realised sourly, pulling out a tinted lip balm from her handbag and applying it in the mirror. She still looked dreadful from last night and didn't want to worry her mother.

Strange, even here, in her own house, she couldn't quite shake off the gloomy greyness that had assailed her last night – a tangible sense of evil. She gazed at herself in the mirror and an odd prickling sensation shuddered through her.

'Thing is…' Ron had started on his excuses… 'I've kind of arranged to meet up with Tana and Tom for a spot of lunch before a bunch of us go to Carmichael's. There's a sort of team-building thingy planned; might involve staying over…'

'That sounds nice.' She flashed Ron a sardonic smile, but he didn't notice.

'Anyway. Give your uncle my best, hope he's settled in.'

'Well… it's not like he's staying there for long, is it?' Hermione muttered under her breath. She
quickly looked away so that Ron couldn't see she had tears in her eyes.

Ron's footsteps steadily approached.

'Actually, Hermione…' he said, faltering. Something in his tone alarmed her. He had a serious look on his face. 'I'll come with you to Percy's, if that's okay. There's - there's something we need to talk about.'

XXX

'What do you think?' Ron announced.

They were standing in front of a large, beige house with an extensive garden stretching towards a field. The house was situated in a cul-de-sac occupied by similar large, modern houses on the edge of Ottery St Catchpole.

'Very nice,' she said a little uncertainly. 'Come on. I'm going to be late…'

'Not so fast,' he said, snaking his arms tightly around her waist.

He had a large-eyed, doleful expression, which instantly made her feel guilty for having cringed inwardly when he'd touched her. 'What's up?' he asked, his eyes crinkling in concern.

'A bit tired. That's all.'

He stared at her, looking like he was trying to carefully frame his words, but then his eagerness got the better of him and his face suddenly cracked into a broad grin. 'It's ours!' He gesticulated wildly at the big beige house. 'I've bought it!' Hermione's heart missed a beat and she automatically pulled away from his grasp.

'What do you mean?'

'This house! This beautiful, big, fuck-off house! It's brand new and everything!'

She stared at him, disbelieving, then her eyes ventured to the square, anodyne, featureless monstrosity, complacently skulking behind its low hedgerow.

'Aren't you going to say something?' he asked, his face drooping. 'I thought it'd be a nice surprise.' Tears sprang into Hermione's eyes and she had to turn away. How COULD he?

'You know me. I'm – I'm not very good with surprises,' she said croakily.

'Yeah, but I thought, as surprises go, this was pretty special.'

'How much was it?' she asked, swallowing back tears.

Ron told her and her head swam. The total sum was more than all the money Draco had given her – the money she intended to give to Gwen and Parvati to look after Scorpius.

'Who did you borrow from?' she asked, tremulously.

Ron scratched his neck, clearly wondering what he should say. 'Here and there… you know.'

'No, I don't… you're going to have to tell me!'
'A mate at work gave me a loan. No strings attached. Zero interest.'

'Who?'

'Nobody you know in particular,' he said evasively, scuffing his foot on the kerb.

'And what have you had to do in return?'

'Nothing. He's a mate. A good mate! Remember those?'

Her face crumpled... It was a lot of money. Too much money.

Ron's expression softened. 'I was just trying to make things a bit better. Things with us... they've stopped working. Like we're in different timelines or something. So, I thought maybe our cottage was too small now, everyone's on top of each other and.'

'It's not your fault, Ron. None of it's your fault. It's me. All me... I'm sorry…'

He seemed to brighten a little hearing this. 'I've put it in your name, so please say you want it.'

'Thing is, I don't really like shiny new houses … And I didn't think you did, either.'

Ron patted her forearm. 'I think you'll like this one. It'll be like starting over. You can even see The Burrow from the back garden!'

'But you should have asked me first… You used to. And then we'd talk about it.'

He squeezed her hand. 'Yeah, but you'd have talked me out of it.'

Hermione gave him a wan smile… but she knew, in that moment, that they wouldn't make it...

Even without her heart and her life having been stirred up by Draco, things had gone wrong between them.

But the ramifications of this, once she thought about it, were truly terrible. Life-shattering.

XXX

'Close the window, would you, Hugo darling?' Jean Granger said. She turned to Hermione. 'I can never abide the smell of roses. They're unusually strong for this time of year.'

There was a line of dusty, bedraggled rosebushes in the flowerbed just outside the window of Uncle Derek's new hospice bedroom, however, due to the recent unseasonably warm weather they'd sprouted rather early.

Hugo strained to close the window. 'It's too stiff,' he grunted, and was barged out of the way by Rose, who banged the window shut with a resounding thwack.

Hermione's mother raised her eyebrows. 'Reminds me of someone,' she said fondly to Uncle Derek, who tried to smile.

'Can we play cards?' Rose asked him. 'That Gin Rummy game.'

'No. Snap!' yelled Hugo.

'Boring…' Rose retorted.
'Noisy little critters,' Uncle Derek cackled, to everyone's surprise. He hadn't said a word since they arrived… 'Not like the sweet little angel,' he said to Hermione.

Jean shot Hermione an anxious look. 'The morphine?'

'Poor wee blighter,' Uncle Derek said, breathing heavily as he spoke, but his eyes were alert and shining, 'they tried to sap his soul, but he didn't let 'em, you see. Strong as steel, that one. Bright, shiny steel.'

Hermione smiled. Scorpius must have visited with Gwen last week when she helped move him to 'The Spires' from the hospital.

'Oh, darling, maybe we should let you get some rest?' Jean said, concerned.

But Uncle Derek was determined. 'Help me up, love,' he said to Rose, 'I've got to teach our Hugo here Rummy.'

Hugo squealed excitedly. 'Right,' Uncle Derek said, passing Hugo the cards, 'let's see your shuffling skills first, shall we?'

XXX

'These came for you while you were out, Jean,' Robert Granger said, indicating a large bouquet of lustrous, crimson roses. Robert had arranged the flowers in a crystal vase, placing it on a sideboard in the living room.

Jean wrinkled her nose in distaste. 'Lovely… but who sent them?'

Robert shrugged. 'A package came, too.' There was a large, fat manila envelope beside the vase.

Jean raised her eyebrows at Hermione. 'Maybe it's a happy patient? I did a splendid job of Mr Harrington's crown last week, even though I say it myself…' she added with a faint blush.

But Hermione was swamped with a dark dread.

'No! Don't open it!' she shouted to her mother as she was about to tear into the envelope.

Her mother's face shot up in alarm. 'Why not?'

Hermione held her breath… there was no way either she or her parents could open that package… the only people here who could and survive - if her worst fears were realised - were Rose and Hugo. Rose was already setting the table for lunch, something she liked to do at her grandparents' house because they had a beautiful silver Apostle cutlery set, while Hugo was blithely flicking through the TV channels – always his first port of call as soon as he entered the Muggle world.

No, asking one of them to do something like that would scare them… she couldn't possibly do that.

'Mum… do you mind if I take the package away with me? I – I think it's a good idea if someone else opens it instead,' Hermione said in quiet, hesitant tones. She tried to look as calm as possible, but her mother's face instantly twisted into panic and she dropped the envelope to the floor. She turned and eyed the roses in suspicion.

'They're fine,' Hermione said assuredly. If anything was lurking amongst their fine, damask petals, it would have already been released – and as she was alive to think this, that was unlikely.

Sunday lunch became a tense affair. Her father was very proud of his roast beef dinner, but
Hermione felt each morsel of food was choking her and had to excuse herself twice from the table because she felt like throwing up.

Afterwards, she helped her mother load the dishwasher, but Jean told her to sit down and have a glass of water. 'You look peaky,' she said, lips pursed in concern. 'What's going on?' She cast a sidelong glance towards the living room where the manila envelope waited, unopened.

'I don't want to burden you...'

Her mother's eyes darkened. 'It's obviously serious, though, isn't it?' She directed her eyes outside, through the kitchen window to the back garden where Hermione had spent a good half hour before lunch exhausting her arsenal of protection spells. 'You weren't doing all that hocus pocus stuff to ward off Mr Harrington now, were you?'

Hermione shook her head; mouth clamped shut.

Jean sighed heavily. 'I see.' Her face was very still. 'I know it's wrong of me, Hermione, and I've only ever wanted you to be happy and pursuing what you love best, but sometimes I wish you'd had a more NORMAL life.' She looked at her daughter with a sad smile. 'Is that wrong of me?'

'No. Sometimes I wish the same. Being ME. It's both a gift and a curse. And—' she had to say this because she could see her mother's heart was silently breaking with love and concern, 'and this latest... crisis, it's particularly dangerous for people like US.'

'Is it like the last time?' her mum asked.

'Not exactly,' Hermione said. 'What matters is you and Dad have to be very careful. Don't let strangers into the house... or accept deliveries.'

'Well, we'll be careful, obviously we will... but it's you I'm most worried about...'

'We'll deal with it. I promise.' Hermione summoned up her bravest smile. 'Just... don't take risks, okay?'

Her mother nodded, but she continued to study her. 'This isn't the only thing that's bothering you, is it?'

'What - what do you mean?'

'I asked you a while ago about Ron. We haven't seen him for ages...' Her mother didn't continue but she didn't need to. Both women held each other's gaze.

'It's nothing... ' Hermione said, but a huge sob ripped from her unawares and the next thing she knew she was being hugged tightly, and for a brief moment she felt comforted and safe.

'That's not nothing, my love,' Jean said. She plucked a tissue from her sleeve and gave it to Hermione to mop up her tears.

'I'm not happy,' Hermione said.

'I can see that.' Her mum closed the dishwasher door and flicked on the kettle.

'It's all my doing. Ron's done nothing wrong... He – he's even bought us a new house! It's just me being selfish.'

'It's never all one person's fault, Hermione...' Jean sighed. She watched her daughter carefully.
'Does Ron know?'

'Know what?'

'That there's somebody else?'

Hermione's heart missed a beat. 'No. I—'

'Is it someone I know?'

'No. Not – not really.' She gnawed at her fingernails as she spoke. Part of her wanted to come clean, to share the pent-up feeling she was harbouring deep inside before she fell apart. 'I can't tell you anything, Mum, I'm so sorry. This – He, who he is, would destroy my life…' She felt breathless with panic as she spoke.

'Okay, if you say so,' Jean said.

'It's - it's the absolute last person in the world I ever thought it could or should be.' This was so true, she thought, thinking back to their shared history.

'It's not Harry, is it?'

'NO… god, no.'

Jean blinked rapidly and reached for the teabags. 'I see.'

'You're not angry, are you?' Hermione asked, suddenly alarmed.

'No,' Jean said, affronted. 'I only ever want what's best for you and Rose and Hugo. I'm very fond of Ron, obviously. But you're my priority and always will be. And…' she paused and stared out of the kitchen window, 'you're far too young, Hermione, to be unhappy forever. Unhappiness is corrosive, you know. It can consume you.' She smiled at her daughter; a soft, sad smile. 'Don't let that happen, darling. You and Ron have to fix this - or – you have to be honest and brave and find another way.'

Hot tears swirled into Hermione's eyes, even though she was suddenly so very, very tired of crying… Something had to change. SHE had to change. She had to be bold.

XXX

Hannah Abbott was busily washing glasses behind the bar. She looked up when Hermione came in and grinned.

'You just missed him!' she said in jolly tones. 'He popped in about twenty minutes ago with two guys – Muggles, I think. Was giving them a quick tour of Diagon Alley.'

Hermione was a little taken aback. 'Sorry. Who have I missed?'

'Aren't you meeting Harry?'

'I actually came to see YOU,' Hermione said.

Hannah eyed her curiously and then towel-dried her hands. 'Everything's alright, isn't it?'

'I take it Neville's told you everything,' Hermione said, dropping her voice. She pulled the manila envelope out from her handbag and passed it over the counter. 'I need a favour. This was sent to my
mother… she's a Muggle. I'm frightened it might contain something potentially fatal to her.'

Hannah's pale blue eyes met her own. 'And you too, Hermione.' She looked down at the envelope. 'I can't very well open it here. I need somewhere less exposed…' She glanced at the staircase. 'Neville's frantically finishing off the latest instalment of you-know-what. Just give me a moment while I whizz this up to him.'

Left to her own devices, Hermione looked around the bar. There was a scrawny, old wizard tucked into a far corner, dozing over a ludicrously long glass of Berry Ocky Rot; nobody else.

She wondered if Harry was with Henrik… she guessed so. It'd be nice to see him again. She rather envied Henrik – and whoever his friend was. That first visit to Diagon Alley - just a few feet away from the chaotic drudge of Muggle London - it was exhilarating and a little bit overwhelming.

Hermione's elbow nudged against the charity box that permanently resided on the bar here at The Leaky Cauldron. It was in the form of a Russian Doll - not unlike the Matryoshka she'd once hunted for in Katya's room at Malfoy Manor. She picked it up and studied it… Its current function was collecting sickles for 'Victims of Dragonpox'. Last time she'd looked it had been The Romanian Longhorn Preservation Fund… What if? she wondered. She quickly cast a rudimentary Specialis Revelio... It remained a squat, gaudy-coloured Russian Doll money-box.

A wand jabbed her cheek… 'Thief! Caught in the act!' She twirled around and gave Neville a friendly hug. 'I was just looking…' she remonstrated in jocular tones, but her voice trailed off… 'You look awful,' she said, before she could stop herself.

Neville's complexion was grey-tinged and hollow-eyed. 'Thanks for that,' he said cheerlessly.

'NO – I'm sorry, I didn't mean it rudely.'

'It's okay… I'm not sleeping.'

Hermione wasn't surprised. The high-pitched, toxic vitriol being spouted in the *Daily Prophet against Sub Rosa* had to be terrifying.

Neville dipped his head to Hermione's ear. 'You remember I mentioned that organisation, *Kickback*? Well, three members have vanished… this past week.' He nodded at Hannah, who was pouring them both a Butterbeer. 'Hannah's keeping her ear to the ground for us…'

'Maybe they've just gone on holiday or something?' Hermione suggested, but she could see that Neville didn't believe that for one moment.

'The rest of *Kickback's* very nervous now,' Hannah said, under her breath.

'Understandably.'

'Also because of this special register the Ministry's publishing…'

'What kind of register?'

'For DEVIANTS,' Neville hissed.

'DEVIANTS?' Hermione had to fight to keep her voice down. Hannah had the wit to loudly clank some glasses she was washing at that same moment…

'We're running the story tomorrow,' Neville said. He stared into his pint, heavy-browed and
saturnine. 'I feel like emigrating...' He flicked a sidelong glance at Hannah. 'But that's a coward's way out.'

Hermione guessed that this line had come directly from Hannah herself.

'Anyway,' Neville said, squeezing an apologetic smile onto his face. 'I'm afraid I haven't had time to look into that Atalaya place... It's been a bit manic.'

'You've had plenty of other things to think about.'

Neville plonked a well-thumbed musical score onto the counter. 'Your package... An old opera score - nothing scary. And the letter addressed to you? A blank piece of paper! Bit weird, but I did the usual spells... And you've nothing to worry about...'

But this was EVERYTHING to worry about. The opera score was *Eugene Onegin* by Tchaikovsky. Why had Ephraim sent this to her MOTHER?

Hermione scooped both into her handbag. 'Thanks.'

'Listen, if you're not doing anything tonight, a few of us are headed to Ernie MacMillan's for a bit of an emergency *executive committee* meet-up. You're welcome to come along.'

'That'd be great, but I'm hoping to see Harry now I know he's around.'

'Well, why doesn't Harry come, too?'

'Come where?' Harry asked, strolling into the bar with Henrik, looking blonde and burly alongside him, and a pencil-thin, pale-faced young man with lank, black hair and a carefully-crafted goatee. The pale young man had black-button eyes and a look of surprised awe.

Harry swept Hermione into a warm embrace almost tipping her from the barstool she was perched on. 'Neville asked me – well, *us* – if we wanted to visit Ernie MacMillan this evening?' she said.

'What's the celebration?' Harry asked, turning to Neville expectantly.

'*Top secret,*' Neville grinned cryptically. Harry was momentarily nonplussed, but then his eyes widened...

'It's an excellent idea.' Hermione decided. 'It's time we pooled resources... and took these *fuckers* down.' Ephraim knew where her parents lived, she kept thinking... Was he in contact with her mother? Had she seen him since meeting him at the opera house?

Neville raised his eyebrows in surprise at Hermione's vehemence.

'Hey, Hermione!' Henrik guffawed. He greeted her with a distinctly more bearlike and suffocating hug than Harry's. 'Hermione meet Ziff. Ziff meet Hermione,' Henrik said. 'Ziff's what we call a *BOFFIN*.'

'I know what a boffin is,' Hermione said crisply.

'Yeah, takes one to know one,' Neville said. 'Hermione here's the cleverest witch you'll ever meet.'

'Well, I haven't met many witches,' Henrik pointed out, 'but I've no doubt that's true. Hey, it's Professor Malfoy!'

Hermione almost choked on a chocoball when Draco stalked through the main entrance of The
Leaky Cauldron, followed by Bill Weasley.

'I was meeting Bill; didn't know he'd bring Draco, too,' Harry said between gritted teeth.

Hermione shot an uncertain look at Neville. 'Maybe we should come to Ernie's another day?' she said in hushed tones. Ernie was no fan of Draco…

'Hermione's right,' Harry added swiftly, 'let's get together another time.'

'Couldn't agree LESS, Potter,' Draco interjected. 'Collige Virgo Rosas.'

Neville blanched. 'What's that mean?'

'Carpe Diem!' Ziff declared. 'Man, it's so cool that you dudes converse in Latin!'

'Not as a rule,' Draco said.

'But what did he mean?' Neville persisted.

'He meant we have a common enemy,' said Bill.

Ziff tugged at his goatee, a bemused frown on his face and said in a monotone staccato with a heavy foreign accent. 'Actually, I'd say that's more of an extrapolation than a true translation.'

'It'll do for now,' Bill snapped.

Draco was soon at Hermione's side. 'You okay?' he asked, his voice laced with concern.

She tried to tamp down the flush of excitement that glowed from her cheeks. Knowing now how much she felt for him, every look, every word between them seemed more heightened than ever before – but she couldn't possibly betray her feelings, to him or to anyone.

They peeled away from the group who were ordering another round of Butterbeers.

'I went to my Mum's and Ephraim sent her THIS,' Hermione said, showing him the battered opera score.

'Not good,' he frowned.

'He also sent me a blank piece of parchment – in the same package.' She fished the envelope addressed to her from her bag.

Draco opened the parchment and studied it. 'Strange…'

'I know… Neville examined it for surprises, but nothing.' She took the parchment and was about to squeeze it back into the envelope when Draco stopped her.

'When you touched it… there was writing…'

'There was?' she unfurled the parchment and sure enough, Ephraim's familiar scrawl wrote itself anew…

'My Dearest Hermione

Your premature departure from our celebrations last night was deeply disappointing. I regret missing the opportunity to dance with you but comfort myself with the thought that fresh
opportunities will arise in due course.

Therefore, on consideration, our agreed arrangement remains.

I enclose a ticket to see 'Tosca' at the Royal Opera House on Tuesday night. (Look inside the score). I would be overjoyed if you could join me in our private box. Wear something nice, but not too fancy… I advise you to come alone. Interfering friends never fare well.

On the subject of friends who turn up in places they shouldn't… I have a rather interesting conundrum – your brother-in-law's wand. We have run extensive tests and there can be no doubting the matter: his wand murdered Simsmith MacFusty in the Office for Muggle Business Relations.

The wand is already lodged at the Ministry as evidence for the investigation into MacFusty's death, but out of deference to your personal, family connection to the perpetrator, I have instructed my security team to stay silent on the wand-owner's identity. We can discuss this matter on Tuesday as it potentially bears very serious consequences for poor George. Recent adjustments to the Penal Code would mean certain death by execution if found guilty.

I look forward to seeing you.

Your great friend and admirer,
E.G.'

Hermione's hand shook as she pushed the letter back into the envelope.

'Total bollocks,' Draco said gutturally. 'They killed him.'

'No doubt. But he's cornering me…' she shot a glance at Draco's face close to her own, 'from all sides.'

'He's a sick fuck… you can't give into him.'

'But I can't let people I care about get hurt… and that includes you,' she added in a whisper.

Draco's eyes raised across the bar to Harry. He was looking for backup, she knew it. But she felt she had no choice… 'Trust me, Draco… I can handle Ephraim. I know what to do…'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"ASHES TO ASHES" by DAVID BOWIE

"CHURCH BELLS" by CARRIE UNDERWOOD

"SILK" by WOLF ALICE

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Chapter Summary

Feuds, fights, Ron gets mad and an edgy evening at Ernie's

41. **Thus Bad Begins**

'If they say no, maybe we should launch a rival *Sub Rosa*?' Draco suggested. 'We could call it *SUPER Rosa*.'

'They won't say no,' Harry said.

Hermione wasn't so sure… the Draco Factor was a major stumbling block. Both Ernie MacMillan and Terry Boot were members of the 'Sub Rosa Executive Steering Committee' and the bad blood between them and Draco during their time at Hogwarts had been of the thickest, blackest and most curdling variety.

The three of them were sitting on a bench in a park, looking up at Ernie MacMillan's swanky, glass-fronted apartment. Neville and Hannah had been inside for almost an hour, arguing that *Sub Rosa* work with them to expose Ephraim Golowitz.

'They're taking too long,' Hermione grumbled, itching with impatience. They needed *Sub Rosa*... Everybody was reading and talking about *Sub Rosa*. The entire Department for Magical Law Enforcement had even been put on an anti-*Sub Rosa* war footing. It was easily the best way to get their message out. 'Maybe you should have gone up with Neville, Harry? They'd listen to you.'

'I'm sure we'll get a chance to make our case.'

The park was thronged with people enjoying a warm, Sunday evening. Couples strolled past arm-in-arm, friends were chatting on nearby benches, a bunch of gangly youths whizzed past on skateboards and there were dog-walkers everywhere.

A small child was running from dog to dog giggling hysterically, while his mother chased after him, apologising to their owners.

Draco watched, a peculiar expression on his face. 'These people, happily getting on with their lives, they've no idea that magic really exists,' he murmured. 'And yet there’s a bunch of fucked-up wizards who hate them, obsessively, to the point of devoting their lives to devise ways to kill them… it's absurd when you think about it. Almost embarrassing.'

Harry smiled. 'Yeah. Sitting here… It's a different world, isn't it?'

'And yet we have to convince all those very nice wizards sitting in Ernie's flat, that someone wants to *end it*,' Draco said, shaking his head. 'It's bonkers.'

'The problem is we haven't actually got any PROOF that Ephraim's the malevolent, fuckwit wanker we're making out he is,' Hermione sighed, voicing her inner fear.

'But it'll be too late once we *do*… That's the problem,' Draco said. He turned to look at her and his
eyes sparkled in the evening sun; two silvery ovals. 'What we should be asking Sub Rosa to do is to report on the Dark Flux attacks – the ones in Scotland and at Parvati's. People deserve to know what's happening.'

'Except that would lead straight back to you and me as sources,' Hermione said archly.

'We're not the only people in the world who know about this, Hermione. And Henrik's mate, Ziff - he's a HACKER, isn't he? Why can't Sub Rosa source their news direct from the Muggle Police?'

Harry leant forwards, looking past Hermione to Draco. 'That works…' he said. 'And maybe Sub Rosa could embarrass Golowitz with all these dire business reports cropping up in the Muggle world? Ziff told me his CEO's going to be investigated for corruption…'

'The wizarding world won't give a crap about his Muggle business, Harry,' Draco said.

'But it changes the tone,' Hermione said. 'People love winners and, so far, Ephraim keeps winning…' She checked her watch. 'Where are the others? They're taking ages!'

'I asked Henrik to buy a load of phones,' Draco said. 'Thought it might make communications a bit easier… There they are!' He nodded to Ziff, Henrik and Bill striding through the park towards them. Ziff and Bill were carrying cardboard trays with coffee cups standing to attention, and Henrik was clutching a large, McDonalds bag to his chest.

Harry's face fell. 'Oh no, temptation beckons…'

But Draco's face fell for a different reason. It was obvious to Hermione that Bill and Draco had fallen out badly when they met up earlier. Bill was barely tolerating Draco's presence - and whenever she caught Bill's eye he looked away, his lips tight and hard.

'Are they still yakking?' Henrik asked, handing out a mixture of Big Macs and cheeseburgers.

'Looks like it,' Hermione said dismally.

'I reckon we ask this Sub Rosa lot to write about George,' Bill announced.

Draco almost choked on his cheeseburger. 'Are you fucking mad? George would be dead within minutes!'

'Sylvestra's too well-guarded… it'd be a suicide mission,' Draco said. 'And they'd still kill George.'

'I thought you didn't want the family to know about George yet?' Hermione said, unable to quell the panic in her voice. 'You've told everyone he's in America! You told me not to say anything!'

A flash of uncertainty scuttled across Bill's face. 'I'm just feeling very – frustrated!'

He looked at the half-eaten cheeseburger in his hand, shook his head, and tossed it into a wastepaper bin.

'It's your brother they've kidnapped, yeah?' Ziff said bluntly to Bill.

Bill nodded disconsolately. In normal circumstances – when Bill wasn't boiling with silent rage at
her – Hermione would have consoled him; but she feared his reaction.

'Why don't you ask these Sub Rosa people to declare him a Missing Person? No accusations… no pointing the finger at this Golowitz man,' Ziff continued.

'Actually, that's not a bad idea,' Harry said.

'No, Harry – it's a terrible idea… sorry, Ziff,' Hermione said. 'The thing is, George was up to his eyeballs in this money-laundering scandal and if it's true that George's wand killed this MacFusty chap at the Ministry, you'd have the Daily Prophet accusing George of all sorts and saying he'd done a runner.'

'But George hasn't killed anyone,' Bill remonstrated.

'Of course not. He's being framed.'

'No, Hermione. YOU are,' Harry said pointedly. 'All this pressure… Looks like Ephraim wants to fast-track your Wizengamot hearing... We should worry why.'

'I still reckon this whole George thing's a set-up,' Draco sighed.

'No, I've thought about that, Draco, and I don't see how… it was just a series of unlucky coincidences,' Hermione said. 'Nobody knew I was going to the Ministry with George that day! The first time I ever talked about it to George was in my garden, literally minutes before we went. I'd told Bill the night before what I planned to do, but neither of us actually expected George to come to the Ministry with me.'

Bill nodded in agreement.

'Sounds like someone was listening in when you spoke to this George,' Henrik said.

'No… definitely not.'

'I remember Hermione talking to him,' Bill said to Henrik, 'they were out of earshot.'

'Was Tom Bennet still in the garden?' Harry asked, a quizzical look on his face.

'No, he'd just left.'

'I wouldn't trust Tom too much, actually,' Draco said soberly. 'He's quite good buddies with Troy... and Troy's a hardcore racist nutjob.'

'I dunno,' Harry said contemplatively, turning his Big Mac over in his hands. 'Something doesn't smell right…'

'They always smell like that, Harry, it's normal,' Henrik said.

'Not the burger, this George business!' Harry said. 'I agree with Draco.'

Draco twisted round on the bench to face Hermione. 'The thing I've never quite got, Hermione, is why YOU came into Arcana – because if it was a set-up, that's what Ephraim would have wanted to get out of it.'

'I told you…' she said huffily, 'I was in the Muggle Business Relations office looking for George's paperwork and the Blasters were coming… That's why I panicked and jumped into the fireplace.'
Draco rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'But how did the Blasters know you were there?''

'Because when I grabbed George's contract from Guldstern's desk, it set off the sneakoscope... it was one of those standard issue Ministry ones. We often used to leave them lying around when there was sensitive information.'

Draco narrowed his eyes inquisitively. 'You didn't mention the sneakoscope before...'

'Did I not?' She could see herself reflected in his eyes... and she looked frightened. 'I guess – I guess, I was in a bit of a fug at the time.' In fact, when she thought about it, she'd felt in a bit of a 'fug' ever since her trip to Arcana. That oily, black darkness that had weighed down on her... that she hadn't even told Draco about... it didn't feel like it had completely lifted. It seemed to wash through her in waves – in and out, like a dark sea lapping at the fringes of her mind, cold and expectant.

'You know I'm right, don't you?' Draco said in cool, clear tones.

Hermione went cold and felt her arm hairs stand on end. 'Yes... Oh fuck. I was set-up.' Her hand shot to her forehead. 'It's so bloody obvious when I think about it. George's Troobles contract was far too easy to find...'

Draco nodded. 'Everything was in place... The contract. The sneakoscope. The Blasters...'

'And the lifts didn't work, either! But then one arrived and George got in - and that was the last I saw of him. And once Ephraim had me trapped in Arcana and I was convinced they had George, I was putty in his hands!'

Harry and Draco exchanged glances.

Draco looked nauseous. 'They were definitely expecting you, Hermione - which means someone or something is watching you.'

'Oh god,' Hermione said, burying her face in her hands. 'It has to be something in my house...'

Bill was watching her with anxious eyes. 'I can run a security sweep.'

'She can't stay there,' Draco asserted. 'And neither can Rose or Hugo... Or, Ron for that matter.'

'I'd rather Ron didn't know anything just yet,' Harry said quickly.

'If we're being watched, Harry, I damn well think he should!' Hermione retorted.

'Look, I know it's scary, but your best tactic is to check the house, beef up your security and PRETEND that nothing's changed.'

Bill agreed. 'Yeah. Thinking about it, if you moved out, it'd make Ephraim suspicious – at the moment, he trusts you.'

He'd obviously moved on from wanting to kidnap Sylvestra, Hermione thought bitterly. All these bloody men, she thought, deciding her fate.

'Ephraim doesn't TRUST her!' Draco exploded to her left. 'He wants her. It's completely different! Just get her the fuck out, for Christ's sake!'

'Butt out! This has got nothing to do with you!' Bill snorted.
But Draco ignored him. 'Hermione… take the kids and move! PLEASE!'

'I said keep your fucking snooty Malfoy nose out of it!' Bill thundered. 'I'll keep her safe!'

'SAFE? You want her to do this daft shit for Ephraim, which is literally throwing her into harm's way – but you couldn't give a crap about *that*, as long as you get your fucking criminal brother back!' Draco snarled in return.

'Take that back, you cretinous cunt!' Bill yelled. 'YOU'RE the fucking criminal!'

But before Draco could respond, Hermione jumped in instead. 'Calm down! Both of you!' She placed a restraining hand on Draco's arm. She could sense his whiteness surging and sparking…

'Please…'

'I'm perfectly *calm*,' Draco said between gritted teeth.

'I'm not going to uproot my children and run away JUST YET,' she said.

'Sure,' Draco said, his voice laced with bitterness, 'but if you're not careful, it might be too fucking late…'

'I could say the same for you at Malfoy Manor!' Hermione said snippily. 'But you're still there! Even though you KNOW Ephraim is onto you!'

'We need someone on the inside. And I'M the logical person…'

She suddenly felt like she could throttle him… 'It's not logical if the only way you end up leaving Malfoy Manor is in a bloody coffin, is it?!

'Well, that might be the best outcome all-round,' Bill sneered.

'Hey!' Henrik said, stepping forwards. 'Dial it down…'

Bill wheeled round to face the road beyond the park railings.

'Look, I don't know what the beef is between you guys,' Henrik said, 'I gather from Harry a lot of shit went down at school or something…'

'You could say that again,' Harry remarked, rolling his eyes.

'But you've got big fucking shit to be getting on with now; and that should be your main focus, not arguing amongst yourselves like bloody school-kids… And it's for Hermione to decide what she wants to do, not *you* guys… she's brave and she's clever. And you should trust her.'

Hermione was still reeling from her exchange with Draco. She'd felt the full force of his anguish and frustration… But she was grateful to Henrik.

Harry took a deep breath and stood up. 'Right. I'm getting sick of hanging around to see if fucking Ernie MacMillan and Terry Boot can stomach having Draco in their precious little gang…' He looked over to Draco. 'Shall we just invite ourselves in?'

Ziff looked perplexed. 'Fuck me. Did *everyone* hate you at school, Draco?'

Draco sighed. 'Yeah. Pretty much… I was a sort of… Wizard-Nazi supremacist at the time, so it's hardly surprising…'
'And you were a total *dick,*' Harry said. 'Come on.'

XXX

Hannah looked flustered when she answered the door. 'I was just coming to fetch you… they've got a few questions.' She ushered them towards the living-room.

'She actually meant *objections,* didn't she? But was too nice to say it,' Draco muttered to Harry and Hermione. 'Maybe it's best you do this without me? I'm not in the mood for an evening of being flinched at.'

Harry laughed. 'It'll be fine!'

'Just be nice,' Hermione whispered, squeezing his hand.

Hermione had been friends with Ernie MacMillan at Hogwarts, but over the years this friendship had diminished to a cursory nod when passing in the corridors at the Ministry, so it felt a little awkward to be suddenly parachuting into his life.

Ernie did his level best to maintain a fixed smile when Draco sauntered into his living-room, while his Muggle boyfriend, Tim, plied them with glasses of chilled, organic Chardonnay and Tuscan antipasti platters.

'Thelonious and Dennis couldn't make it, unfortunately,' Hannah said.

'Dennis. Dennis Creevey?' Draco asked. Hermione fervently wished he hadn't looked like he was slightly sneering when he said that.

Ernie's living-room was a bright, modern space: bleached colour-scheme, expensive parquet floor… Two sofas and a couple of armchairs were ranged around a low, rectangular table. Henrik and Ziff immediately commandeered a small table and chairs set against the back wall.

'Please… take a seat if you can find one!' Ernie trilled. He then squeezed onto one of the sofas next to Harry and Bill, while Hermione took one of the armchairs next to Hannah and Neville pulled up a dining chair.

Hermione was seated opposite a diminutive, doll-like woman she'd never met before, who Neville introduced as Tansy Pintucket, a leading light of Kickback, who worked in Wizengamot Administration Services. Tansy flashed Hermione a tentative half-smile, momentarily struck dumb by the level of 'celebrity' she suddenly found herself in company with.

Next to Tansy was Melissa Osgood – typically bright and cheery, but her incessant twittering betrayed her nerves. And beside her was Terry Boot.

Draco remained standing, next to a sideboard replete with drinks and ramekins brimming with crisps and feta-stuffed olives. It was more genteel soirée than the hotbed of revolutionary militancy claimed by the Ministry...

'Shall we start?' Ernie asked the room, beaming beatifically, until his eyes alighted on Draco. 'Malfoy… There's more seats in the dining room if you want to get one.'

It had been so long since Hermione had thought of Draco as 'Malfoy', for a brief moment she wondered who Ernie was talking to…

'I'm okay standing,' Draco said.
Terry Boot jumped to his feet with a throaty grunt and sped out of the room, returning with a dining chair. However, rather than offer it to Draco, he kept it for himself, placing it in the furthest corner of the sitting-room from where he glared at Draco, like a squat, dark-browed toad, with relentless, laser-like hatred.

Harry's eyebrows shot up in surprise and Draco looked at Terry in astonishment, before gingerly taking Terry's place on the sofa next to Melissa. She shot him a fluttery smile, frantically smoothing down her skirt with brisk, jerky movements.

Ernie called everyone to order, welcoming them to this 'extraordinary' meeting of Sub Rosa. He explained, chiefly for Henrik and Ziff's benefit, what Sub Rosa was all about and what it hoped to achieve - to destroy Witchell and his corrupt politics. He gave everyone a toothsome smile when he'd finished. 'Any questions?'

Hermione was aware of Draco writhing in his seat for the duration of Ernie's speech. And her heart sank…

'Yeah, I've got a question…'

Everyone's heads swivelled in Draco's direction and there was a discernible ripple of tension.

'What's the fucking point of taking down Witchell?'

Ernie opened his mouth to speak but didn't get a chance to reply because Draco continued. 'All I'm hearing is you bleating on about the bloody Ministry. But Silas is a nothing. A nobody. He's just a tool.'

Hermione opened her mouth to intercede – this really wasn't the best tactic to win Sub Rosa's support – but tiny Tansy Pintucket was yelling at the top of her voice…'Silas Witchell is a tool of fascistic, capitalist oppression, depriving us of our rights and freedoms! It's our moral duty to take a firm stand against him and his regime.'

'I'm not saying Silas is pleasant, far from it,' Draco retorted, 'but the moment you get shot of him, my mother's new husband will walk right in and take his place.'

'By tainting Silas, we taint all his acolytes, too.'

'Acolyte?' Draco spat. 'It's the other way round!'

'Hardly,' Tansy said prissily. 'Silas is the Minister responsible for the New Brooms Policies. Silas introduced the Loyalty Bonds. Silas is marginalising minorities and overturning years of hard-fought freedoms –' she smiled, round-eyed with admiration at Hermione, 'hard-fought by you, Hermione.'

Tansy clearly expected Hermione to be flattered, but Hermione was more worried that they might be talking at cross-purposes here. Neville and Hannah and the absent-Dennis saw the greater perils posed by Ephraim, but the same couldn't be said for their comrades-in-arms.

'Who is this Silas?' Ziff asked, bemused. 'I thought the bad guy was this Gilgad chap.'

'We should be focusing on Silas,' Melissa said, patting Tansy's hand in a show of sisterly support, 'not Ephraim Golowitz. Sure, Ephraim struts around Hogsmeade like he owns the blooming place… though I suppose he kind of does, now he's been elected Mayor.'

'That's not how democracy works, actually,' Tansy pointed out.
'Well, it didn't work at all in Hogsmeade,' Neville muttered. 'Nobody gets 99.7% of the vote, unless it's rigged.'

'And that right there is an edition of Sub Rosa!' Ernie exclaimed excitedly. 'Yet another symptom of Silas's fascist regime!'

'Fuck Silas,' Draco said peevishly, 'he'll be gone within weeks… probably sooner.' He threw Harry and Hermione a desperate look. 'We're wasting our time here…'

'I had to leave a promising career because of Silas's disgusting, discriminatory policies,' Ernie groused. 'And three of our friends are missing!'

'And my husband has been forced to pay for a Loyalty Bond from our own savings just to keep his job!' Melissa cried, rounding on Draco and jabbing him in the chest with a sharply, manicured nail.

Draco recoiled in shock.

'All of this is truly terrible,' Hermione said hastily, addressing the group, 'and Draco isn't saying you should stop the important work you're doing.'

'Far from it,' Harry said smoothly, 'but Draco has to work closely with Golowitz, so he gets a bit wound-up when others don't see how dangerous he is... understandable, really…'

'The worst thing that Ephraim's doing, as far as I can see, is bankrolling our fraudulent Minister,' Melissa said tartly.

'No, Melissa, it's a lot worse than that... Have you heard of The Zametsky Effect?' Bill asked.

'When loads of Muggles suddenly die and the wizards survive?' Ernie said.

'Yes, yes… Neville's told us a bit about that already… but the problem is, Dark Flux doesn't exist,' Tansy said, a shrewish look on her face.

'It does…it really, truly does!' Hermione cried, 'and it kills Muggle-borns, too.'

Harry beckoned Henrik to the table. 'Henrik? Show them your research.' Henrik lugged Ziff's laptop over and paraded photo after photo of Dark Flux victims.

Ernie, who'd been spreading a thick slab of pâté onto a cracker until it broke apart in his hands, looked distinctly queasy.

'Dark Flux occurs naturally, but Ephraim and his associates have found a way to weaponise it,' Hermione explained. 'We know for certain of at least four deliberate attacks – and we suspect there's been more.'

'Two of those attacks were HERE - in Britain,' Draco declared. 'People should know that.'

'Piffle!' Tansy said, fiddling with the arm of her steel-rimmed spectacles as she spoke. 'There's been no mention of any such attacks ANYWHERE.'

Draco shook his head in despair. 'I thought the whole fucking point of Sub Rosa was YOU guys were reporting stuff that the Daily Prophet was ignoring?'

Melissa arched a sceptical eyebrow. 'Are you saying the new Mayor of Hogsmeade is a genocidal maniac? Is this the return of a new Dark Lord?'
'The big worry,' Hermione warned, 'is that one of Gilgad's companies, Herb Healing, sells multiple products to multiple Muggles all over the world and-'

'Hang on!' Ernie bellowed, holding out his hand to silence Hermione and turning on Draco: 'Don't YOU work for Herb Healing?'

'President. In office, but not in power.'

There was a weighty silence punctuated by a very confused-looking Ziff. 'Guys… this is important and all, but, Draco, I'm getting a bit lost over here … what the fuck is a New Dark Lord?'

Draco heaved a sigh. 'It's what people called this - this –' he paused, briefly closing his eyes, aware that everyone was looking at him as he searched for the right words, 'extremely dangerous Wizard, who became very powerful and for a time controlled our world. He was a total psychopath, a supremacist, who believed that non-magical people and … and those of us like… like Hermione, here, who weren't born into a wizarding family, were inferior scum, basically... It was a time of madness and great tragedy.'

Ziff's pale, narrow face seemed to sharpen inquisitively as he hung on Draco's every word. 'Was this when you were a Wizard-Nazi?'

Draco turned pleading eyes to Hermione. 'Yeah. I was one of his followers. Whereas these guys...' he gestured to everyone else sitting around the low, rectangular table, 'they fought him and won.'

'And this Ephraim dude. He's a supremacist, too?'

'Not – not in quite the same way… though most of his followers are, so Ephraim throws them a bone or two, keeps them sweet…' Draco argued. 'No, what he really wants is power. Power and glory. And at any price. And for Muggles to know we exist. He wants to carve out territories – little magical fiefdoms – and he wants to rule them all.'

'It's why he's developed Dark Flux as a weapon,' Hermione pointed out.

Ernie looked confused. 'I'm not following.'

'Blackmail,' Draco said drily. 'So this is a serious matter for the British Muggle State, too.'

'I still think Sub Rosa should focus its efforts on our campaign against Silas and the Ministry,' Tansy said forcefully.

Draco shook his head in pained disbelief. 'Have you listened to a word we've said? Silas is a fucking nobody!'

Ernie puffed up his chest, indignant. 'I won't have you talking to my friend like that!'

'For fuck's sake,' Draco snapped back. 'If you're too fucking stupid or cowardly to understand the extremely heavy shit we're all wading blindly into, there's no helping you, is there?'

Hermione watched with growing anxiety. His temper was rapidly fraying. This had been a humiliating experience for him.

'Draco mentioned Ephraim's followers,' Harry quickly interjected. 'If you're going to help us out at all, I think it's important that they become targets, too. His daughter, for example…'

'Sylvestra?' Melissa shrieked. 'That's ridiculous! I'm sorry, but I don't buy that!'
'Well, you're going to have to,' Draco said laconically. 'She's a deranged psychopath.' He focused on Terry Boot. 'You work at St Mungo's, right?'

Terry slowly blinked assent.

'Well, there's two guys there you have to watch out for – Selwyn Haast and Josep. Selwyn is the brains behind weaponising Dark Flux.'

'Oh, this is just terrible!' Melissa pouted, 'Selwyn's lovely! He was very, very helpful when Hilary had scrofungulus. He seemed so NORMAL.'

'No, Melissa. He's not, he's really not,' Draco said wearily.

'Is there any way you could get pictures of these people, Draco? And the bodyguards, too?' Harry asked. 'Everyone here's under threat, so it would help to know what our enemies look like.'

'Why are WE in danger?' Ernie squealed, crumbs flying out of his mouth. He'd been stolidly gnawing a piece of pain rustique and camembert for the majority of this exchange. 'Last I heard, the Ministry thinks Sub Rosa's the work of FOREIGN terrorists… The Daily Prophet was going on about some evil Swiss guy called Jeroboam.'

'It's made-up bullshit – they just want folks to think there's an evil wizard out there so they can blame any screwed-up shit on HIM,' Draco said in droll tones. 'Ephraim even wants Hermione to launch a bloody prosecution, which is completely, fucking moronic because Jeroboam's DEAD and I'm sure Ephraim knows that already.'

Ernie gawped at Hermione, looking as though his head was going to explode. 'Golowitz wants you to prosecute a DEAD MAN?'

Hermione flushed pink. When said out loud it really was ridiculous…

'There's also a bunch of crooked Aurors,' Harry pointed out, 'I can't really say any more than that at the moment but trust me, the Department for Magical Law Enforcement is corrupt. If you agree to help us I can feed you properly-sourced information…'

'But if you think that, Harry, wouldn't it be sensible to use Ron as a spy?' Neville asked.

Harry's face froze. 'No,' he replied, 'not at the moment. Keeping him innocent keeps him safer.' He glanced uneasily in Hermione's direction.

The room lapsed into awkward silence…

'I think we should move straight to the vote,' Neville declared to his fellow-members of the Sub Rosa Executive Steering Committee. 'It's my view that we change our editorial direction, and instead of just taking pot-shots at the Ministry, we also target Golowitz and his friends. But… we have to be sure that anything we write can be sourced from somewhere else and not JUST these guys - Draco, in particular, seeing as he's forced to live and work with these people.'

Draco smiled wanly. 'That's very thoughtful of you, Neville… but – you know what? Sometimes you've just got to go with it. Tell it as it is… Warn everybody where supporting Ephraim leads. The two Dark Flux attacks here in Britain… you should start with those. Cite Muggle sources if you have to. Ziff can crack into police files…'

'Neville!' Ernie said in distraught tones, clambering up from the sofa and toppling Harry into Bill in the process. 'I demand a chat in the kitchen.'
Terry Boot scrambled to his feet and glowered at Neville. 'I agree.'

Ernie and Terry marched out of the living-room, Tansy and Melissa scampering behind, followed by Neville and Hannah.

They could hear raised voices radiating from behind the closed door…

'Didn't know whether to laugh or cry for most of that,' Harry said crankily.

Draco shook his head in frustration. 'This bunch are flaky as fuck and will probably drop us all in it.'

'Oh, they're not THAT bad,' Tim, Ernie's partner, said.

Draco jumped out of his skin. He hadn't noticed that Tim was still in the room behind him.

'I didn't mean…'

Tim shrugged. 'It's okay. But from what I'm hearing, you need help from all sides on this…' He carried on talking as he topped up everyone's wine glasses. 'I'm happy to help you in any way I can… I work in Whitehall, by the way. Cabinet Office. Civil servant.'

Draco gave him a penetrating stare. 'Would it count as spying when WE don't really exist?'

Tim laughed; a self-effacing, tinkling kind of laugh. 'I confess a few stray documents regarding your kind have passed by my desk before – and others certainly could - if they were useful?'

'The two attacks…'

Tim nodded. 'I'll look into that right away… should have something to give Ernie by tomorrow.'

'That'd be fantastic, thank you,' Hermione said.

'And… there might be particulars relating to Mr Golowitz that could be persuaded to come my way, too. He's not unknown to us Muggles, you know!' Tim added. 'And not all our interest in Mr Golowitz is business-based, either. His father-in-law was a US Senator with some rather shocking connections. For all your talk about Mr Golowitz not being an ideological fascist, Draco, he's kept company with many who are…' Tim scanned the room with pale, unblinking eyes. 'There's no room for flaking fuckily at all with this gentleman, I can assure you,' he said in a voice that could cut glass. And then, in an abrupt change of tone – 'I whisked up some panacottas and raspberry coulis earlier; would any of you care to sample one?'

Tim slipped off to the kitchen, his shoes squeaking on the gleaming, parquet floor… leaving the living-room in silence.

'FUCKING. JAMES. BOND!' Ziff hissed excitedly.

Everyone burst out laughing.

'I wouldn't go that far…' Harry grinned.

'But pretty fucking useful all the same!' Draco said.

'We might have a problem with Terry Boot,' Bill observed. 'He appears to be harbouring a grudge…'

Draco shrugged helplessly. 'What can I do?'
'Can we trust him?' Hermione asked. Terry's blind hatred of Draco had been rather alarming.

'Let's fucking hope so,' Draco said, swirling his wine before taking a deep swig – 'because if not – we're doomed.' He switched focus to Ziff. 'I'm not sure reminding everyone of my Wizard-Nazi past helped matters, either!'

Ziff chuckled and his button-black eyes twinkled. 'Oh, I did it deliberately!'

'What do you mean?' Harry asked, nonplussed.

'Because it looks to me like these people still don't trust Draco, and by making Draco talk about what happened, showing his true feelings, hopefully it showed that he's NOT a Wizard-Nazi anymore – and that none of you are the same people you were when you were school-children,' Ziff said, in his strange, staccato monotone.

Draco studied Ziff, a pensive expression on his face. 'Well, I hope you're right… I don't want to be an impediment… this stuff, it's – it's too important.'

'You're not an impediment, Draco,' Harry stated. 'We have history… lots… and I've no doubt we'll have other difficulties to come.' His eyes flicked, unconsciously, towards Hermione. 'But personally, I like working with you – and no one's more surprised by that than me!'

Draco looked visibly shocked to hear this.

'When I was away in Argentina last week I put a lot of thought to our situation here,' Harry continued, 'and I realised the magnitude, the huge responsibility we bear for what happens next. And it struck me that to succeed, we've all got to learn to put aside any personal grievances, because, believe me, they're going to pale into insignificance when the shit hits the fan on this.' Harry looked them all in the eye, lingering, perhaps, for a few seconds longer on Bill… 'It's more than likely we will all have to risk our lives – at some point - for each other. We must be prepared to do that or we will fail, and the consequences of that are simply too grave. Our world – both our worlds - would change irrevocably.'

Everyone sat in stunned silence… and for a brief moment, the dank, grey gloom that Hermione felt had wormed its way inside of her, lifted.

'They're coming back!' Bill hissed.

The high commanders of the Sub Rosa Executive Steering Committee filed into the sitting-room. Ernie launched into a long, convoluted speech, during which Hermione was increasingly convinced that Sub Rosa were rejecting cooperation on the grounds of - editorial integrity, personal security, and persons of questionable probity (code for Draco).

'So, we'll start off with these Dark Flux attacks and take it from there,' Ernie concluded.

'You're going to help us?' Hermione asked, confused.

'Of course we are!' Hannah yelped, pink-cheeked with exasperation. 'How could we not?'

There was a communal sigh of relief and within minutes more drinks were being served and the room was suddenly alive with chatter.

Draco passed Hermione a gin and tonic and then, rather than return to the sofa, he stood behind her, one hand resting on the back of her armchair, nestled against her hair - which was a disaster, because she missed out on half the conversations in the room as she could barely concentrate...
She gathered enough to realise that everyone was talking about stories *Sub Rosa* could run that damaged Ephraim's associates… Zoltan Guldstern's name was cropping up frequently, to the point where Hermione began to pity the chap for the absolute pasting that was clearly coming his way.

There were countless stories about Portia Witchell, too, that from the sounds of it, would likely inflict terminal damage on her budding romance with Selwyn Haast.

'I reckon she's fucking Ephraim, actually,' Draco drawled. His voice rang loud in Hermione's ears, shocking her into attention.

Melissa looked quite excited to hear this. 'Ooh! We should write about that!'

'He's married to my MUM…' Draco added, in curt tones. 'However, there… there's another potential story you could run? Not so much a story but an ongoing series – a *Missing Person* appeal. I could give you the relevant info and a picture.'

Oh no, Hermione thought with sinking dread… was he going to mention George?

'Who?' Neville asked.

'Chap called Voltimand.'

Bill directed a fierce, questioning look at Draco. 'You sure about this?'

'Yup. Absolutely.' There was cold determination in Draco's voice.

'I take it you're doing something OFFICIAL to take this Ephraim fellow down?' Ernie asked Harry, a wary glint in his eye.

'I'm building a case through Auror HQ and Henrik is compiling evidence of Dark Flux attacks.'

'If you come across any whistleblowers, tell Harry,' Hermione suggested. 'Tony would have been amazing,' she said to Ernie. Tony Goldstein was Ernie's former flatmate.

Ernie's face darkened.

'He had a colleague - Binta Koranteng. She's a bit elusive… Do you remember her?'

Ernie shook his head.

'Gunter and Los Rojos would have been IDEAL,' Draco muttered under his breath, 'but not if their credibility is shredded by this crackpot Wizengamot hearing…'

Hermione turned to look at him. 'Let it go,' she mouthed, even though she agreed…

Draco pulled a face and moved away, called by Ziff and Henrik to look at something on Ziff's laptop.

'Now it's important that all of you avoid catching the attention of these Blaster vigilantes…' Bill was saying to *Sub Rosa*. 'Their main job is to take you down.'

'Over my dead body!' Ernie snorted.

'I'm not that keen on tackling any dark wizards if I'm being honest,' Tansy Pintucket admitted in a small voice. 'I'm a bit of a squib on the quiet…'
'No one's expecting you to,' Bill said kindly.

Tim bustled into the living-room, a bowl of chili chips in one hand and a ramekin heaped high with homemade hummus in the other and placed them on the table where Ziff was showing Draco a website.

'Astrum's a shell company, registered in Belize since last November…' Henrik was explaining to Harry and – supposedly – to herself, if she could but choose which conversation to belong to. 'Single shareholder, Swiss, Les Treize Portes Fermées.'

Harry shook his head. 'You've got to be kidding… Hey, Draco! You remember Astrum, that company your friend Miguel worked for? Turns out it was a front for Los Rojos... Their headquarters is that coffee shop in Geneva, where I met Gunter.'

Draco raised his eyebrows in surprise. 'Maybe we should pay them a visit? Come and look at this. It's the website Gunter said we should use to keep in touch.' He swished Ziff’s laptop round to face Harry. 'It's a fan site for that TV show, Space Force 7 – weird, huh?'

'Like your phony scanner,' Henrik said with a loud belly-laugh.

Selwyn Haast… Hermione thought. Him, too.

'You know, this show's kinda controversial in gamer circles?' Ziff said.

'How so?' Hermione asked in alarm, thinking about Scorpius and Alfred's addiction.

'There's this wacko theory that the hero, Warrior aZarth, is a sort of Christian supremacist superhero, cleansing the galaxy…'

'How do we communicate with Gunter?' Harry asked Draco.

'Oh, he posts on forums there as Troyanda13. We can send private messages to that account.'

'Thirteen Roses, eh? Is he unlucky in love?' Ziff quipped to everyone's complete incomprehension.

'What – what did you say?' Hermione asked, exchanging looks with Draco. He, too, had leant forwards, suddenly alert.

'Thirteen Roses. It's Ukrainian.'

Troyanda13…the thirteen roses. Ukrainian… The Zametsky Roses… Katya.

Everyone continued talking… an endless flow of excited, animated conversation but Hermione suddenly knew she had to get out of there – if only for a moment. There was too much swirling around her head.

She stumbled from her armchair in search of the cool of the bathroom.

Once inside, she stood stock-still, paralysed… her heart racing.

Surely Los Rojos had to be connected to Katya and Svetlana? Did they know her?

Was Katya even ONE of them? Surely that wasn't possible.

Someone knocked at the door. 'Coming,' she said meekly, flushing the loo unnecessarily and opening the door.
It was Draco… grim-faced, wild-eyed.

He pushed her back inside and slammed the door shut.

She could feel his whiteness blazing inside of him and when he spoke it was as though his words scalded his mouth.

'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?'

'Don't jump to conclusions, Draco.'

'Has she been watching us all this fucking time?' he growled.

'I doubt that very much. Did she have animagus skills?'

'They can be acquired. Fucking hard work, but not impossible…' His eyes were a hard, flint-grey, boring into her. 'I'm trying to be calm about this,' he said, gripping her shoulders.

'You're not doing a good job of it,' she smirked, even though she was trembling inside. She was in love with him and maybe he still loved her?… She felt such a fool. A hapless, lovesick fool…

Draco shook his head as though coming out of a trance. 'No...I'm being stupid. She isn't one of Los Rojos…'

'But there's a connection, Draco.'

The shadow of Katya hovered between them… but was then banished by Draco as he gently tugged her towards him.

'I don't want her, Hermione. You know that, don't you?' he said, his throat catching. 'I don't want Katya anymore…'

They lapsed into silence, staring at each other, until she couldn't stand it any longer and flung her arms around his neck. She clung on tightly, savouring the feel of his stubble against her cheek and his intense warmth.

'I'm sorry we argued earlier,' she murmured. 'In the park…'

He held her round the waist with one hand while his other hand softly caressed the nape of her neck, making her ache inside with desire.

'I'm not sorry,' he whispered. 'You were angry because you care, and that meant something.'

'I don't just care for you, Draco,' she groaned, but she couldn't say anymore…she didn't dare… He wrapped his arms so tightly around her she thought she might pass out and the feel of his warm mouth sliding luxuriantly against her neck and face was making her want to cry out.

An eruption of laughter from the living-room beyond the bathroom brought her momentarily to her senses and she eased herself backwards, but he wasn't having any of it, and he twisted his hands into hers and pulled her flush against him… His mouth hovered over hers and they gazed at each other, eyes hard, hearts pumping.

No sooner had the thought occurred but she was saying it… 'Ron's away tonight. And the kids…' She swallowed as she spoke, acutely aware what this meant.

Draco's breathing hitched in his chest. 'Well… we live in dangerous times, Hermione. I'm more
than happy to volunteer myself as your overnight protector,' he said, sounding light-hearted, even though he was holding her hands so tight she thought her fingers might crack.

'As my protector, you say?'

'Yeah…' he stared down at the floor, and then glanced up at her from beneath long lashes and her heart turned over.

'And what would this 'protecting' entail?'

'Oh… making sure you're safe and happy and relaxed - and fucking you till you scream, I imagine…' And then his mouth was on hers; soft and sweet. 'LOTS of fucking,' he breathed…

'Gosh… not so relaxing, then,' she gasped. Her cheeks were burning. It felt like her entire body was blushing.

She had to pull away from his grasp because her head was spinning and she felt if she touched him or he touched her, one more time, she'd probably make a complete fool of herself in Ernie MacMillan's bathroom…

'You – you seem very sure of yourself, Mr Malfoy,' she said with a pert smile, struggling to catch her breath, trying to inject some distance between them, before she fell apart… 'You can't just presume I'd let you make love to me…'

Draco grinned wickedly, his eyes hot and glittering. 'That's fine…you can make love to me, then.'

He cradled her cheek in his hand and she closed her eyes. She was drowning in colour… saturated in white - and when she opened her eyes, he was staring at her intently. 'But seriously, Hermione,' he said. 'This isn't a game we're playing here. We would make love – to each other - and everything would be different. You have to want that.'

Hermione opened her mouth to reply but the sound of a fist thumping on the bathroom door that Hermione instinctively recognised as belonging to Harry, pulled her back to reality.

'You okay in there?' Harry asked.

'Just coming,' Hermione called, as Draco Apparated.

XXX

'I'm happy to beef up everyone's home security. Henrik, Ziff? Try and keep on the move, okay?' Bill said, his voice resonating around the room.

'Harry's sorting us out,' Henrik said.

'Good. Now, at some point, sooner rather than later I'm afraid,' Bill continued, 'we'll need to think about a safe house. Although… I'm really sorry, Hermione,' he said, catching her eye as she returned to the living-room, 'for reasons we discussed earlier, we can't shift Rose and Hugo – not once you're working with Ephraim.'

Hermione realised, with a flush of emotion, that Bill was right.

'You have to think carefully about what you tell loved ones. I'm telling my wife everything; but that's it for me…'

When Draco Apparated, had he actually left? she wondered, but she could hear his voice amongst
laughter echoing from the kitchen and the clank of glasses – drinks being made, she fancied. Judging from their absence, he was with Tim and Henrik.

'Draco?' Bill said as Draco came into the living-room with Tim. 'Harry and I think you should move back to that flat in Paris once we move more directly on Ephraim... You're a key witness.'

'Yeah, but if I'm in Paris I'm not actually doing any witnessing, am I?' Draco replied with a shrug.

'Should we ask others to help us out?' Hannah asked.

'What about Agatha Thrussington?' Melissa suggested. 'She'd be a very useful addition to Sub Rosa.'

'You can't be serious!' Draco said scornfully. 'Total ditz!'

'We can't just rule someone out because you've slept with them, Draco! There'd be hardly anyone left!' Melissa rebuked him in return, prompting snorts of laughter from Ernie and Tansy.

'We're giving everyone a mobile phone,' Harry said, 'although obviously they won't be of much use in many of the places where we live and work. Hannah at The Leaky Cauldron will be our communications hub … Any further questions?'

'Would anyone like a top-up?' Tim asked, brandishing a fresh bottle of wine.

Hermione looked out of the window. Night had fallen while they were talking… a shiver of excitement sliced through her. She refused a further drink and slowly gathered her belongings together.

She shot a glance at Draco. He was chatting to Henrik and Ziff, but she could sense he was tracking her movements. He moved to within a few feet of her and refused a further drink from Tim, and now he was standing behind her, laughing at something Henrik said and being teased by Melissa for being such a bore and leaving early, and all the while Hermione was wondering how they could leave together without anyone noticing…

'Hermione, do you mind if I crash at yours tonight?' Harry asked. 'I've got a stupidly early breakfast meeting tomorrow morning, so I won't get in your way…'

'Oh… Sure,' she said, nodding much more enthusiastically than the situation required.

'We can also do a security sweep of the premises,' he said, trying to sound upbeat, as though this was the usual fun thing friends did on a night in.

'Good thinking. Yes. Definitely. I'd like to get going if that's ok? Bit tired.'

She quietly said her goodbyes and slipped outside to an exterior courtyard - and waited.

Had he noticed?

The front door eased open and was then quietly closed behind her.

'Fucking Potter!' Draco frowned… his eyes shone in the light from an overhanging lantern posted above the door.

'No, Draco, he's just being a good friend…'

'If you say so…' he said peevishly, then: 'Corundum… Look for corundum… Stones, ornaments,
any suspicious-looking jewellery you've never seen before, soaps, the food cupboard, the coals in
the grate, check the cutlery drawer! In fact, go through every drawer… just in case.'

Hermione laughed. 'We will… Don't worry, Draco. Harry's the best Auror in Europe…'

'He fucking better be…'

XXX

'So annoying,' Ron griped, reading the note that had arrived from the Ministry as he ate breakfast.
'Us Humptys are being called up to guard this blasted Malfoy Plaque ceremony at the Ministry…
Bloody hell. Dad'll do his nut!'

'When is it?'

Ron turned the note over. 'Doesn't say… Don't know why the event needs a flipping armed guard!

'Maybe they're worried about protests?'

'Nah, it'll be this Sub Rosa lot. Carmichael says there's now proof they're foreign saboteurs.'

'And you believe that?'

'Dunno what to believe, Hermione,' Ron replied. 'I'm not convinced our knowing Witchell's got a
farting problem's a threat to our national security, if that's what you mean?'

'What about this then?' Hermione asked, flapping the latest issue of Sub Rosa with its graphic
account of the Dark Flux attack in Scotland. 'Most definitely a question of national security! Would
you agree?'

Ron stared at her stonily. 'Carmichael says—'

'And what about what your WIFE says, Ron? What about everything I told you before? Everything
I warned you about?'

'We don't even know if this… he dashed his hand against the Sub Rosa pamphlet, 'is real, do we?
All the information is from the MUGGLE police… it could be a ploy.'

'A ploy to do what exactly?' Hermione screeched. 'What kind of ploy would involve Muggles
killing themselves?'

'Has it not occurred to you, that I might know a lot more about who might be responsible for this
than I'm at liberty to say? Carmichael says that this threat—'

'Carmichael is a corrupt liar!' Hermione shrieked, slapping the Sub Rosa pamphlet onto the kitchen
table, straight onto Ron's buttered toast.

Ron held her gaze and she could see the inklings of true fear - though of what she wasn't certain.

'Half the office tells me they saw you at Narcissa Malfoy's wedding. You and Bill...' Ron said
suddenly. 'Is it true?'

'Does it matter if it is?'

Ron shook his head and proceeded to scrape butter from the Sub Rosa pamphlet with a knife.
'Forget I said it,' he said in a low, grating voice.
There was a roar of Floo flames. 'It's only me!' shrialed Angelina Weasley from the living-room.

'Bit fucking early,' Ron groused.

'Ron! I need a BIG favour!' Angelina said, slumping onto a chair at the kitchen table. 'I'm being badgered by George's horrid shop manager. He says there's some very big decisions about the future of the business and they have to be made NOW, today, or at least very, very soon! And with George away and leaving no instructions, he's expecting ME to step in…'

Ron was astounded to hear this. 'That doesn't sound like George…'

Angelina puckered her lips. 'It does, actually… but I can't do this. I'm terrible at money stuff. So… as his brother, if you get a free mo, could you pop in to see the manager this morning?' Angelina asked in wheedling tones. 'Or at least come into the meeting with me?'

Ron explained he had a load of paperwork to catch up on…but agreed to stop by on his way to work.

'Great! I'll meet you outside the shop at ten-thirty – Oh, Poppet!' Angelina trilled as Rose emerged, yawning in her dressing gown. 'She's going to be very pretty, isn't she?' The tips of Rose's ears went bright pink. She hated being praised.

XXX

For Hermione, it was a blessed relief to get the kids back to school. As much as she enjoyed them, mixing childcare with plotting to take down a mass murderer was tricky.

She marched out of the school gates, grateful to get some free time to psych herself up for her trip to the opera with Ephraim tonight - and walked straight into Bill.

'Did you get my message?' she asked with a fixedly, bright smile that she hoped would forestall any lectures… she really wasn't in the mood. 'Harry and I ransacked the house the other night… couldn't find any bugs or tracking devices… so the identity of our mysterious eavesdropper remains unsolved, but if there's a Gringott's Security Level Five, I'd really appreciate it!

Bill was stern-faced. 'It's time we had our little chat.'

Hermione had a sinking feeling. She'd hoped she'd dodged this particular Sword of Damocles…

'I think you know what – or should that be, who – we need to talk about…'

She carried on walking, Bill striding beside her. 'I take it you mean, Draco…'

'You don't deny it then?' Bill said in biting tones.

'Deny what?'

'That you're having an affair!'

'I don't want to talk about this, Bill… not today. Please not today,' she begged.

Bill's eyes blazed in righteous blue anger and he grabbed her hand and pulled her towards him. 'I saw you both. I saw you… you can't expect me to just forget it ever happened.'

'I'm not denying what you saw! I'm not denying anything, actually! I just… I don't want to talk about it, that's all.'
'How long have you been sleeping with him?'

'I'm NOT sleeping with him…' She broke free and continued walking. Bill ghosting her every step.

'Are you going to? Hermione… Please answer my question.'

Hermione ground to a halt and stared defiantly at her brother-in-law. 'You can't expect me to answer that!'

Bill shook his head in sorrowful dismay. 'So that means, yes. You are…'

'Even if I was, it's no business of yours.'

Bill laughed out loud; a nasty, barking laugh. 'Yes it is! You're my brother's wife… and you're my friend, my family.' He clasped both her hands tightly in his. 'And it's because I love you I don't want you to get hurt… I'm trying to stop you making a complete idiot of yourself, which you will do, if this THING you have with Draco goes any further.'

'Well, that's for me to decide and live with.' Hermione tried to retract her hands, but he had a vice-like grip.

'For Merlin's sake, Hermione. He has a track record for this type of thing… and it's not pretty. And the last thing we need at the moment, with everything going on—'

'I'm perfectly aware of all that, Bill. I know his history… who fucking doesn't?'

Bill gazed at her with big, beseeching eyes… he looked desperate. 'Look… I can see the man thinks he has feelings for you – in fact, I know he does. But what if you're just a glory-fuck? And boy, what a triumph fucking YOU of all people would be for him! Surely you can see that?'

Hermione finally managed to wrench herself free and ran towards Wisteria Cottage.

Bill stared at his now-empty hands, slowly shaking his head. 'Hermione!' he shouted, chasing after her. 'Please! I'm trying to be reasonable here.'

She marched purposefully towards her front door, Bill trotting to catch up.

'You also have to realise, Hermione, that when this all blows up, the wizarding world will NEVER forgive Draco – again – for being on the wrong side.'

'His being on the wrong side is what'll help bring Ephraim down!'

'But that's not what'll be remembered… He's married to Ephraim's daughter.'

There was a long silence.

Bill pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed… 'And my family… they would never understand. Not just because of the - the turmoil and pain something like this would cause, but because he's a Malfoy… I know our past histories shouldn't count, but they do. Some things can't be made better.'

Hermione's head dropped. She felt drained. She knew all of this; she thought about it all the time.

Bill placed his hands on her shoulders.

'I won't do anything to deliberately hurt you, Hermione. I promise. I can see how this has happened; I've seen your Memories… And I'm prepared to defend you from loose talk… And I'll
work with Draco, because Harry was right, this thing, this crisis - it's too big. I'm just—'

'—Putting me in my place,' she said miserably.

The front door swung open and Ron was standing there, a look of shock on his face.

'Thought I heard voices,' he muttered, 'quick – get in here!'

Bill and Hermione exchanged horrified looks and followed Ron inside.

'I've got some serious questions for you!' Ron hissed, 'and I expect some straight answers.'

Hermione gaped at him fearfully.

'We can explain,' Bill said, placing a calming hand on his brother's arm, but Ron furiously shrugged him off.

'Who the fuck are these people? I mean, I had to let them in… They've got a kid with them!' Ron continued.

Hermione could hear voices coming from the kitchen.

'Mr Weasley?' asked a strange-looking young woman with a shock of pitch-black hair and a face all but disfigured by an array of black and silver piercings. 'Have you got a bathroom? Joyana's been sick,' she said with a distinctly Antipodean twang.

'Oh!' Hermione gasped in surprise, unsure whether to be happy or worried at these developments. 'You must be Kai? I'm Hermione Weasley. I met your mother, Shona, in Wanaka.'

'You're the lady who sent the owl?' came another voice and a sandy-haired woman holding a squirming toddler in her arms pushed past Kai. 'I'm Arlene.'

Hermione rushed forwards. 'Yes, that was me!'

The toddler was smeared in vomit and looked like she might be sick again. Her eyes were white and sightless…

'The Portkeys didn't agree with her,' Arlene explained. She had a soft, crinkled face; once good-looking but fading fast. 'But we had to get her out. I'm sure you understand why.'

'Of course. I'll show you where the bathroom is.' Hermione cast a nervous glance at Ron, who was watching this unfold from the hallway, his mouth hanging open.

XXX

Once Hermione had settled everyone with cups of tea and roped Ron into serving up some of Molly's cauldron cakes, she dodged outside, venturing far enough away to call Draco at Herb Healing.

'Bill just called,' Draco said.

'Can you bring Henrik? And please. Come quickly… I should get back in there… Ron's dealing with them on his own at the moment.'

'RON!' Draco yelled so loudly she almost dropped the phone.
'Yes. I was on school run.'

There was a long silence from the other end of the line.

'Draco?'

'What do we do?'


 Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Chapter Summary

Fireworks at home… and at the Opera. Hermione and Draco face their feelings…

42. **The Very Ecstasy of Love**

'Leave me and Bill to handle Ron. Bill's just gone to fetch Fleur,' Harry said to Hermione. He'd arrived a few minutes after Draco had side-Apparated with Henrik into the garden.

Henrik had helped defuse initial tensions. He'd made a great show of befriending Ron and listened with keen empathy to Arlene as she tearfully explained everything that had happened.

Arlene had already started to make a connection between Herb Healing's regular health check-ups on babies like Joyana and her child's deteriorating physical condition, so Hermione's message had come as something of a relief that she wasn't slowly going mad.

Ron watched from the far side of the kitchen, an expression of dark, unalloyed bemusement and fury on his face.

XXX

Arlene and Kai were entranced by Fleur.

'Such a lovely lady,' Arlene cooed, accepting yet another cup of tea.

'Will we kip here?' Kai said, eyeing Hermione's pokey kitchen with cool disdain.

Joyana chose this particular moment to launch into a full-throttle screaming fit; one look at Ron's thunderous face and Hermione knew that was impossible. And they had to be safe – very safe.

'Oh, we've got space,' Fleur said brightly. 'And our eldest two go back to school tomorrow, so their room will be free after that.' Bill didn't look overjoyed.

'Bollocks,' he muttered to Hermione, 'Harry and I plan to steal the corundum from the Haast's flat this afternoon. I was going to stow it at the cottage and work on it later.'

'They can't stay here! I've got that blasted opera tonight…'

Ron cut off any conversation by heaping a pile of dirty crockery into the sink with a resounding crash.

'Is anyone going to have the common decency to tell me what the fuck is going on?' he griped. He glared at Hermione with bristling hostility. 'And what the fuck's Malfoy doing here?' He threw a look of unbridled disgust in Draco's direction.

Harry shot a worried glance at the kitchen table; everyone was listening. 'Let's go into the living-room, Ron,' he said, shoving him out of the kitchen.
'It looks like it's going to be a lovely sunny afternoon; perfect for the beach,' Fleur said brightly to Arlene and Kai, suggesting they decamp to Shell Cottage.

Henrik nodded with such enthusiasm that Hermione thought he would literally walk into the gaping jaws of hell if Fleur suggested it.

XXX

'What's this crap about you meeting this Golowitz chap tonight at an OPERA?' Ron snarled as Hermione entered the living room.

Hermione gazed at the others. Draco was standing by the window, wearing an unfathomable, bottled-up expression; one Hermione remembered well but hadn't seen for some time... Harry was sat on the sofa next to Bill. They looked worried.

Ron was standing by the fireplace, a broken man. Harry had told him (mostly) everything.

Hermione sat down on Ron's favourite armchair in between the sofa and the fireplace. 'I've no choice.' She told Ron about George's wand. And the roses Ephraim had sent to her mother.

'I still don't see why YOU have to go?' Ron said. 'I'll go... take a few lads from the office. We'll sort this out in no time!'

'NO, RON!' Harry swiftly interjected. 'You can't talk about this to ANYONE. Half the Aurors are working for Golowitz; most are corrupt as hell.'

'Bollocks!' Ron shouted, red-faced and spitting mad. 'The guys I work with are top notch, whiter than white.'

'Carmichael isn't,' Harry said bluntly.

Ron seemed to shrivel a little hearing this.

'Listen, Ron. If you blab, you'll need to leave the job or you'll get taken down,' Harry continued. 'And you'd expose all of us, too.'

Ron's eyes darted from side-to-side, digesting everything he'd heard. 'Does ALL OF US include whoever's behind this Sub Rosa shit? Is it you?' he said, focusing on Hermione.

'It's not SHIT, Ron,' Hermione said acerbically, 'and no, it's not me.'

'But you know who it is, don't you?'

Hermione looked her husband in the eye and wondered if she still trusted him enough to tell him. She couldn't be sure anymore that he wouldn't betray Sub Rosa to the 'Great Carmichael' to curry favour. She sighed deeply... 'I'd rather not say.'

'Don't you trust me?' Ron said in wheedling tones.

The oily darkness clicked into life in her head; she could feel it... Her eyes flicked to the open living-room door.

'Close the door,' she said to Draco in urgent tones.

He furrowed his brow, bewildered, but immediately did as she asked and then stood against the closed door, effectively entrapping them in the room.
'I said – Don’t you trust me?' Ron repeated, slowly, deliberately. There was a furious glint in his eyes.

'I don't know,' she said in a choked voice. 'I'm sorry…'

'SORRY!' Ron exploded and Bill leapt to his feet, immediately placing his hand on Ron's arm and levering him backwards. Hermione hadn't noticed Ron had crept closer; hadn't noticed the hair-trigger rage lurking beneath the surface. He'd seemed sarcastic rather than livid…

'Gerroff me!' Ron bellowed, successfully dodging Bill. 'Some kind of brother you fucking are! Keeping all these secrets… but happy to consort with fucking Malfoy behind my back.'

Hermione shot a warning look at Draco. It was better he stay quiet.

It occurred to her, however, that Ron didn't even look at Draco when he said this… in fact, he hadn't looked at him at all.

'I was trying to protect you,' Bill remonstrated. 'Like Harry said, it's sometimes better not to know things…'

'You wanted me to look like a total twat is what it is! Okay, so say it's true and all my mates at work are actually criminals… then that means I've been made an even bigger fool of, doesn't it?' Ron argued. He turned to Harry. 'Are you protecting Ginny, too? Because I think she'll be fucking flummoxed when she finds out you've been saving mankind from a Muggle-murdering maniac and didn't bother mentioning it.'

Harry squirmed uncomfortably on the sofa.

'To be honest, Bill. I'm kind of relieved in one way,' Ron pouted, 'because I'd started worrying you and Hermione were having an affair. You spend so much time together these days; like you taking her to that blasted wedding at the creepy House of Horrors – something she'd NEVER normally have done.' He gave Hermione a sidelong glance and a coldness lurched through her.

Bill's face instantly flushed puce.

Ron cocked his head and studied him. 'Yeah. I was going to bring it up with Fleur, actually…' he said in casual tones, lip jutted out. 'Lucky those Kiwis turned up and let the cat out the bag or Merlin knows what might have happened…'

'You're being ridiculous, Ron,' Bill said peevishly.

'I had to go to the wedding!' Hermione shrilled. 'Ephraim wanted me there… And really, Ron, I understand you're upset, but you can't diminish everything that's going on to wondering whether I'm screwing someone. That's just PATHETIC!'

'Is it?' Ron asked, his eyes bulging ominously. 'Imagine how I felt when I go to work yesterday and all my mates didn't stop talking about how you danced a flippin' Tango with Malfoy! I thought you were babysitting!'

'Your mates sound like total twats, Ron,' Harry said vituperatively.

'Well, you can fuck off! So-called best friend, lying to me for MONTHS!' Ron roared.

Hermione looked at Harry, Bill and Draco and blushed to the roots of her hair. Ron wasn't fun when he lost his temper.
'I think it's best you all leave,' she said in a small voice.

Harry brusquely shook his head. 'Not until I know Ron understands everything; it's too risky.'

Ron stared at him, slack-jawed. 'Of course I UNDERSTAND, I'm not a total fuckwit. If this Golowitz is as much of a murdering bastard as you say he is, then I'd be plain barmy not to want him stopped!... But I'm not happy at all to be left out of the loop like this – and I'm definitely not sold on the guys I work with, day in day out, being a bunch of two-bit Voldemorts, either!'

'But surely you can see that nothing's as it should be at the Ministry, Ron? You spend half your bloody life there!' Hermione complained.

'Just don't say anything to these MATES of yours!' Harry demanded. He was losing patience…

'Don't worry, I'll pretend everything's sweetness and light! I'll pretend that my wife didn't lie to my face over and over!' Ron said, his eyes hard and glittering.

'For god's sake, Ron, I did tell you! I told you that everything about Dark Flux was true!' she cried. 'But you chose not to believe me … you made out I was mad, that I was – was jealous of you, that I was HORMONAL!'

'You'd got yourself into a tizz about THAT MAN'S father being dead!' Ron bawled, pointing at Draco – but still not looking at him... 'That's as fucking weird as it gets, Hermione; that you'd even CARE about those people.'

'It was important information…'

'Yeah, but the simple fact is I asked you not to go near Malfoy once he killed that Muggle - and you did – you worked on his case with Harry and didn't tell me, sneaking around the place like I'm an ogre.'

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose. 'I can see how that would piss you off and I'm sorry it's upset you…'

'For fuck's sake, Draco didn't kill anyone!' Harry said in pithy tones. 'And she wasn't a Muggle!'

Hermione chanced a look at Draco. He was watching, hollow-eyed.

'And there was never a case at Auror HQ, either, was there? That was all bullshit,' Ron said, clearly remembering every slight and sorrow. He gazed at Hermione, a peculiar light gleaming in his eye. 'So where the fuck did all that money come from, Hermione?'

Hermione's heart missed a beat. 'What – what money?'

Ron smiled. 'You know what money, don't play with me. Harry… Did you give her money?'

Harry threw a desperate look at Hermione. He had no idea what he was talking about.

'It was a LOT of money,' Ron said. He told Bill and Harry exactly how much and they gaped in amazement. 'Who gave you the money?'

Ron advanced closer. 'Who gave you the money, Hermione?' His face was inches from hers.

'I DID!' Draco shouted.
And yet Ron still didn't look at him…

'What was the money for, Hermione?' Ron thundered. 'I deserve to know. I'm your husband.'

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, but Draco got in first.

'To stop her working for Ephraim…' Draco said, eyes dark and blazing. 'Because he's a dangerous cunt and he wants her and he wants to control her – and you should be more worried about THAT instead of this self-pitying fuckage.'

'Sounds like bollocks,' Ron sniffed, eyes narrowed as he studied Hermione's face. 'It was too much fucking money for that… a whole fucking house worth! What are you not telling me?'

'Nothing…He just told you.' She willed Draco not to mention Scorpius…

'What house?' Draco asked, sharply.

'He's bought me a house,' Hermione said, suddenly unable to stop tears streaming down her face.

'YEAH,' Ron laughed, 'with YOUR money!' Now he was looking at Draco… targeting Draco with a look of pure venom. 'What's the REAL reason you gave her that money?'

'She was also helping me out,' Draco was trying to stay calm and just about managing, 'with a personal matter…'

Ron's eyebrows shot up. 'I bet she was!'

'I'm not listening to this crap,' Harry said angrily, making for the door – although really it was an excuse to get to Draco in case he did something regrettable. 'Get over yourself, Ron! We've got much bigger things to worry about than your hurt feelings!'


Harry and Draco exchanged confused looks.

'What are you scared of?' Draco asked, his eyes crinkling in concern.

'I don't know,' she sobbed, overcome with a queasy sense of dread… and she contorted her arms trying to hide her face away.

Ron shrugged at the others. 'See? Hormonal.'

'I'M NOT HORMONAL!' Hermione screeched, in a voice that didn't sound like her own. 'I just don't feel safe.'

'We checked the house,' Harry said, white-faced.

'Just – just – please,' she said, wretchedly. But then another feeling clicked inside of her head; a desire to get away, to get out of the room, even if it meant being out THERE.

Hermione sprinted to the door and roughly pushed Draco and Harry away, not daring to look at either and ran out into the hallway – her head immediately throbbing with the darkness – but she pushed through to the clearer air of the kitchen. There was the sound of a scuffle, raised voices.

And then Ron was behind her. He'd Apparated.
'Has he tried it on with you?' Ron hissed. 'He fucks anything that isn't nailed down from what I've heard.'

'Leave me alone!' she cried, holding her hands to her head. This throbbing…the swell of colour inside of her…it was too much. Too much…

She was dimly aware that the others had followed…but she was struggling to think clearly.

'You had every chance to tell me that money wasn't ours, Hermione,' Ron said in rebuking tones. 'And now I'm up to my eyeballs in debt! You should have said something. That was really selfish of you!'

'I didn't want a house!' Hermione shrieked. 'I didn't want a house!'

'I was trying to make things right…' Ron said piteously.

'But nothing's right, Ron! Nothing's right!' And she felt ashamed that the sorry debacle, the hollowness of her marriage was being exposed in the raw.

'I think it's better you leave, all of you,' Ron said abruptly. 'I need to speak to my wife – alone.'

'Yes,' Hermione sobbed, looking at Draco. 'Please go.'

'Look, mate, we're sorry…but you're not being yourself,' Bill said, placing his hand on Ron's arm. But Ron shrugged him off.

Instead, Ron levelled a dark stare at Draco, who stood motionless by the kitchen door, tense and pallid.

'You never come here again, Malfoy, is that clear?' Ron said. He turned to Hermione. 'You're not to go near him either, because everything…' and he again raised his eyes to Draco in the doorway, 'everything went to shit from the moment you came into this house! When you fed me a load of old shit about this evil, fucking wizard who I'm now told is DEAD! And now my own brother, my best friend and, most certainly, my wife seem to trust YOU more than they do me!'

Draco stared at Ron with red-eyed fury, lip curled into a contemptuous sneer. Hermione could sense white-hot anger massing inside of him, barely contained.

Say nothing, Hermione pleaded silently.

'Or maybe this was your game all along? This whole Ephraim schtick…Maybe you're working with him? He's your bloody stepfather, for Pete's sake!'

'Shut up, Ron!' Harry said, 'everything we've told you today is TRUE!'

But Ron ignored him. 'And you're married to his daughter – although we all know you don't care about that considering the number of women you were screwing while she was around…Or maybe you're lashing out at your brand-new Daddy because he's shagging your precious Mummy…is that it?'

'RON!' Hermione howled. 'Stop this!' She grabbed him, trying to distract him. But Ron pushed her away and she fell against the table…and suddenly she couldn't hear what anyone was saying.

She felt seized by a storming torrent of anger that threatened to explode from her. A violent burst of purple…and her wand juddered in her hand. She couldn't remember summoning it.
There was movement and shouting and Draco was bellowing in Ron's face and Harry had encircled Draco with his arms and was pulling him backwards.

She felt she was watching events through a narrow letterbox – the light had dimmed…

And now Bill and Ron were arguing… but Draco was looking straight past Ron and at her and he looked frightened. He was saying something… possibly even, shouting. And Harry was coming towards her.

Ron looked confused. Scared. He reached out to touch her but she flinched … 'Get out!' she screamed at all of them. 'GET OUT!'

The purple tsunami of raw anger inside of her boiled over; she could feel it bursting from every pore… from the looks on the men's face she was frightening them, but she was beyond caring. The thick, oily blackness coiled deep inside of her seemed to push through and her wand was glowing. She unleashed a fierce, dark power that she never knew she had and the cupboard doors spun off their hinges and the drawers swung open and each item of crockery and cutlery spun out and every single piece of furniture, including the table and the chairs, and the cauldrons hanging from hooks attached to the beams and the curtains at the window and the pictures on the walls flew high into the air – and crashed to the ground in a single, simultaneous, clattering tumult.

Everyone stared at her… terror in their eyes.

And a voice spoke from the open door, penetrating the dark, grey fub that had possessed her mind.

'Hermione?'

She blinked. It was Angelina…

Angelina rushed to her and clutched her into a fierce, protective embrace.

How long had she been standing there?

Angelina targeted the men with a ferocious glare. 'She asked you to GET OUT. I think you should do just that!'

XXX

'You look gorgeous, darling,' Angelina said, swishing Hermione's silver stole around her neck in a stylish manner that Hermione could never have managed to do herself. The stole accompanied the violet silk dress from Buenos Aires.

'Thank you – for everything.'

Angelina squeezed her arm and winked. 'It's okay - you were at your wit's end. It happens to us all at some point.' She smiled ruefully. 'You never know, I might need helping out myself one of these days… particularly now I've got a house full!'

It had been lucky Angelina turned up when she did – she'd lost patience waiting for Ron to show up at 'Weasley's Wizard Wheezes'. She'd helped Hermione fix up the kitchen and had proven a kind, non-judgmental listener. Hermione was grateful, especially as they'd never been close.

Angelina had then offered to take in the 'Kiwis' as she called them, because there was more space at her house than Shell Cottage.
They were standing outside the Royal Opera House. The street was a humming buzz of activity - a constant flow of people crowded out the pavements, a long line of taxis snaked along the street, motorcycle couriers were weaving expertly between the parked cars and the tinny thump-thump of music was blaring from gaudy Tuk-Tuks. Hermione sniffed in the sharp acrid smell of the city mixed with a faint, pleasant burst of trees in full spring blossom and the rich, exotic tang of Korean food from a nearby restaurant.

'What time is it?' Hermione asked anxiously.

Angelina glanced at her watch. 'You've got five minutes.' Ephraim had sent an owl asking her to come early for a meeting…

'Will Draco be there?' Angelina asked.

'Not sure...it's a Gilgad corporate hospitality thing.'

Angelina gazed at her. 'Strange… you look a bit like his wife… Katya?'

'Did you know her?'

'A couple of years ago I did some painting classes at Madam Puddifoot's in Hogsmeade. Katya attended, too. Sweet girl. Good painter but a bit SAFE – fluffy pets and flowers, that sort of thing. I was shocked when I heard she'd been locked up in a loony bin!'

'Is that what you've heard?'

'Haven't you? Not St Mungo's... somewhere foreign.'

'Who told you this?' Hermione asked, burning with curiosity.

'I don't remember….' Her eyes flicked to the lobby. 'Statuesque blonde alert!' Angelina leant forwards and whispered: 'We're being watched…’

'Careful. She's a Legilimens.'

'From this distance, she'd need supersonic powers!' Angelina patted Hermione's arm affectionately. 'Okay, so our marriage might be dead, but George is still a good guy. Please try and get him home - and be careful!'

Hermione nodded and moved away.

Sylvestra ushered Hermione into the foyer and they quickly peeled away from the crowd towards the lift. But Sylvestra then led them around a corner to an isolated corridor Hermione had never seen before.

'In here,' Sylvestra said silkily, gesturing with a swanlike grace that the situation barely merited, to an empty lift. They ascended in stony silence.

In this cramped space, Sylvestra's physicality was commanding, awe-inspiring; sleek Amazonian limbs, honeyed skin, glossy lips and an unnerving sense of 'nakedness' due to her gossamer-thin, skin-coloured dress.

How did he resist her? Hermione thought.

'How many floors?' It was taking an awfully long time.
'Enough.' Sylvestra studied Hermione with unabashed curiosity, her eyes roving, appraising.

'You're quite beautiful, really, aren't you?' she said eventually.

Hermione blushed hard.

'One moment…' Sylvestra moved closer, so close their bodies touched… Hermione felt overpowered by her fragrance, the warmth of her skin.

'Let's just fix you up a bit.' Sylvestra brushed her hand across Hermione's hair, scattering silvery droplets of what Hermione could only describe as pure sensation; a chill tremor ran through her.

'That's better.'

'What have you done?'

'Tidied a few loose strands.' Sylvestra lightly brushed Hermione's cheek with a single finger. Hermione quailed, but tried to stay calm. She could sense a faint whiff of Sylvestra's dense blackness – but quickly chased it out of her mind.

'Your friend who you were just talking to was right … you do look a bit like her.'

Hermione was stunned that Sylvestra had caught that conversation…

'And yet, you're also hugely different…'

'Shame she's not around for us to check,' Hermione piped up, feeling brave.

Sylvestra nodded slowly. 'Yes, it is… You and I should have a little chat sometime, Hermione. Get to know each other.' This was pretty much the last thing Hermione ever wanted to do.

'My father thinks very highly of you,' Sylvestra said cordially, 'and we all know Draco does.' Her lips tightened at this. 'And you're a nice lady – which is why I think you should know, woman to woman…' Her fingertips lightly stroked Hermione's arms, making her shiver. 'This infatuation Draco has with you, it's not about you at all… it's about the person you ever-so-slightly resemble. My beloved sister.' There was a brief flicker of the insanity Hermione had once seen on Sylvestra's face… 'Draco's only kind to you, because he was so desperately unkind to her.'

'You don't really believe that, do you?'

Sylvestra stared at her; her eyes suddenly darker and larger. Hermione suppressed an icy shudder.

'Katya was the most miserable wretch imaginable… now THAT is most certainly true.'

The lift doors swung open and Hermione had never been more relieved to see Torquil, looking businesslike and dapper, beetling towards them at an alarming rate. 'There you are!' he snapped. 'Come on! He's waiting!'

XXX

Hermione was ushered into a small, plain office. Ephraim was seated at a large, oak desk, looking through a sheaf of parchments. He didn't look up when she entered.

A tall, trim man with dappled grey hair, immaculately garbed in a pinstripe double-breasted robe, was standing behind Ephraim. He coolly regarded Hermione, arms folded, chin held high. It wasn't an act of aggression so much as effortless superiority.

To Hermione's surprise, Silas Witchell was languishing in a corner, silent and bowed. She hadn't
noticed him at first.

Torquil settled Hermione in a low chair directly in front of Ephraim. Hermione's professional successor (and Ephraim's mistress), Portia Witchell, was seated to her left.

Sylvestra, Hermione noticed, hadn't hung around. Karl loitered near the door; a large and unwieldy presence.

'Who are we still waiting for?' Ephraim asked Torquil, 'can we start without them?'

'Zigarroa will be at the reception. Mr Jinks, unfortunately, can't make it.'

Hermione's heart sank. Mr Jinks! She'd hoped to never see him again.

Ephraim dismissed them with a sweep of his hand. 'They can catch up…' He finally fixed Hermione with his ardent blue gaze.

They stared at each other in silence until Hermione said, in firm, measured tones: 'You took unnecessary measures to get me here today. In future, NEVER use my mother…'

Ephraim puckered apologetically. 'A fine woman… She's nothing to fear from me, I can assure you.'

It wasn't quite the answer Hermione hoped for.

'As for George,' Hermione continued, moving onto the true reason for this meeting as far as she was concerned, 'I propose a direct exchange. My services for his freedom?'

Ephraim grinned, his brilliant white teeth a stark contrast to his nut-brown, tanned skin.

'I want more than your services. I want your loyalty.'

Hermione glared at him, suddenly bold. She'd had enough of the men in her life pushing her around. 'Well, you can't have it. I don't like you.'

Portia gasped in horror.

But Ephraim laughed uproariously. He laughed so hard he had to wipe tears from his eyes. 'What a shame, because I like you immensely.'

Hermione worried she'd overplayed her hand. Ephraim was the type of man who probably laughed before delivering the killer blow…

'Okay. Services will suffice – for now.' He gestured to Portia. 'Miss Witchell here has requested that you make a formal representation to an exciting new tribunal she's set up—' he gave Portia a vacant look, 'remind me, what silly jargon-laden name have you given it?'

Portia's mouth twitched in irritation. 'MIIPS – The Ministry International Information for Public Prosecution Services Committee.'

Ephraim pulled a face. 'We'll just stick to MIIPS, shall we?'

'Is this MIIPS legally bound by the Wizengamot?' Hermione asked Portia.

Portia opened her mouth to reply but the silent, smart-robed man behind Ephraim cut in instead. 'It reports to ME,' he said in cool, patrician tones.
'Goodness. How very disobliging of me,' Ephraim said, 'This is Mr Julius Merriman, our new head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation.'

Julius Merriman gave Hermione a small, respectful bow. 'In view of Mr Jeroboam's nationality, it's my job to liaise with the Swiss Ministry on all matters pertaining to extradition.'

'Mr Jinks will be the administrative overseer of the MIIPS investigative unit,' Ephraim said, 'but it will be your job, Hermione, to PRESENT the case, in person, to the MIIPS committee and then the Wizengamot, once we've secured the necessary permissions and protocols and so forth. Is that clear?'

'Not at all,' Hermione said, shaking her head in exasperation. 'We've discussed this before, Ephraim, and I'm still unclear what the actual charges levelled against Mr Jeroboam would be? I can't present a case without EVIDENCE.'

Ephraim sat back in his chair and frowned.

Hermione continued. 'At least we now know that Dark Flux attacks are, indeed, happening… that appalling incident in Scotland, for example. Maybe we should ask the British Muggle Police for more information?'

'But, Hermione, we have your Memories from Santa Maria!' Ephraim chortled.

'Insufficient evidence, alone, as you well know, Ephraim…'

Ephraim stared at her, twiddling with the ruby ring on his finger. 'An Argentinian colleague, Señor Zigarroa, has arrived in London with witness statements from multiple Dark Flux sites - Ecuador, Bolivia… somewhere else… These could bolster your case. He's here tonight. You should meet him.'

'Well, that might be useful,' Hermione lied, knowing full well that he knew she was lying and that he was lying, too.

'And there's the scanner we procured… Surefire evidence of Jeroboam's interest in Dark Flux!' Torquil said, bobbing momentarily into view.

'Ah, yes… the scanner that my clottish stepson then proceeded to lose…' Ephraim said with a grimace.

Hermione laughed. 'It's all very WEAK, though, isn't it? Nowhere near enough to build a case for the prosecution!'

'We believe it is,' Torquil butted in, 'and that remains our intention.'

'I doubt that very much. It's why you've invented this fancy new committee with the stupidly long name to publicly air concerns about Jeroboam – hoping to persuade Mr Merriman here to negotiate Jeroboam's extradition with the Swiss - although I'm sure Mr Merriman is perfectly aware that the Swiss Ministry has NEVER extradited a Swiss national to the Wizengamot. Not once.'

'You underestimate the prestige of the British Wizengamot, Mrs Weasley.' Torquil flicked anxious eyes at Ephraim, who was watching this exchange very closely.

'No… I hold it in the highest regard. It's one of the finest and most ancient legal bodies in the world, which is why any plans Minister Witchell might have to change the way prosecutions can be conducted or evidence presented, are doomed to failure! Executive statute isn't enough. It takes
years of legislative grind… believe me, *I should know!*

Of course, this didn't matter to Ephraim. Any attacks on Jeroboam – or other foreign 'aliens' - were for political promotion only.

'Are you saying there is nothing directly linking Saul Jeroboam to Dark Flux attacks?' Julius Merriman asked, beadily.

'Nothing that I personally know of,' Hermione said. 'Other than the fact that he was researching Dark Flux some thirty years ago with other like-minded scientists. They called themselves The Geneva Group. But then Mr Golowitz here would know far more about this than I would, as he was a member.'

'Gracious me,' Merriman said, 'that's exciting. Ephraim could be a witness.'

Hermione nodded. 'That would be logical.'

Ephraim hadn't moved his eyes from Hermione's face throughout the entire course of this conversation.

'Your Memories presumably include witnesses mentioning Jeroboam's connection with Los Rojos?' Torquil asked, hopping nervously from one foot to the other.

'There is one gentleman, yes.'

Torquil glowed with relief.

'Los Rojos murdered him,' Hermione continued, revelling in Torquil's precipitous crash with reality.

'But isn't that proof enough?' Portia Witchell asked.

Hermione smothered a laugh. 'How so? It's proof that Los Rojos murdered him. It's *not* proof that Los Rojos are anything to do with Saul Jeroboam… beyond a bit of hearsay from a dead man.'

'So why else were these Los Rojos creatures *present* at this Dark Flux case in Argentina?' Portia asked, incredulous.

'Why then were WE?' Hermione asked back.

Portia blushed hot pink.

'That's what any Chief Warlock worth their salt in any court of law would ask,' Hermione added.

Julius Merriman rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'Your MIIPPS investigation is going to need some *bolstering,*' he said to Portia.

'It would help matters immensely if we have your memories as evidence, Mrs Weasley,' Torquil said.

'Don't waste your breath,' Ephraim said, 'she won't give them over. Not yet.'

'But there's also the matter of these vile pamphlets,' the Minister for Magic cried out from his dusty corner of the room. 'You've told me, Ephraim, that they're the work of this dark Swiss wizard – undermining all the good works we've done, the plans we've made… if we can't nail this bastard they'll just go on and on…'
Ephraim rolled his eyes.

'If I may say, Miss Witchell,' Merriman said, addressing the Minister's daughter, 'it might be more logical if MIIPS investigates these Los Rojos instead?'

'Tricky though, isn't it, when they're faceless, nameless and without known nationality…' Hermione drawled.

'But it's not these Rojos who are writing this tripe about me… is it?' Silas whinged.

'Are you telling us there's no way forward to prosecute Jeroboam?' Portia asked. She actually IS a lawyer, Hermione thought, trying to divine a path through the morass.

'Not from here, no. You'd be better off talking to someone like Harry Potter. Auror HQ is the only Pan-European Auror network with the legal teeth to investigate and prosecute international cases.' It was as though an icy wind had swept through the room. She secretly cheered at the effect her dear friend's name could instill in people.

'What do we do?' Portia asked Ephraim.

He blinked and briefly looked away from Hermione. 'We proceed as before.'

'But Mrs Weasley makes some fair points,' Julius said.

'Indeed, she does, and a woman of her wit and understanding will also be the one who can come up with solutions,' Ephraim asserted. 'We focus on Saul Jeroboam and the threat he poses. For now…'

Julius Merriman stared at Ephraim, mouth agape. Hermione wished she could warn him that this reaction was very ill-advised.

'There is one potential witness that Mrs Weasley has excluded from her assessments thus far, although that can't be helped as she has absolutely no idea where he is,' Ephraim said. He looked at Karl. 'Has the chap from the Ministry arrived yet?'

To Hermione's shock, Percy Weasley stalked into the room, carrying a pile of parchments. He was equally surprised to see her too.

'Good evening, sir,' Percy said, addressing the Minister in the corner – clearly confused. 'I brought the missives you requested.'

'Thank you, Weasley,' Silas grunted.

Ephraim pointed to the desk in front of him. 'Did the Minister say your name is WEASLEY?'

Percy nodded, flushing pink from collar to hairline.

'Are you two related?' he asked Hermione.

'Percy's my brother-in-law.'

'ANOTHER brother? Ah, yes! I remember now.' He turned to Percy. 'Can you explain these papers? For the benefit of the room?'

Percy nodded. 'Certainly. As Head of Magical Transportation I was asked last December to log any irregular messages from Britain to abroad. These are communiqués from Anthony Goldstein – a
highly regarded scientist – sent to Argentina during the first week of that month.'

Merriman raised his eyebrows at this and thumbed casually through the parchments.

'This Goldstein worked for Jeroboam…' Torquil said.

'And where is he now?'

Torquil heaved a tragic sigh. 'That's something of a mystery.'

Julius Merriman gave Hermione a meaningful look which she had to pretend she returned, for form's sake. This proved that Tony had been a steer for Los Rojos, but for those who didn't know that Jeroboam was actually dead, it also indicated a possible connection back to Jeroboam too – with Tony as middleman.

'Actually,' Percy continued, 'we have reason to believe Tony is in Bermuda - with his longtime girlfriend, Padma Patil.'

'Is that TRUE?' Hermione asked.

Percy thrust a parchment into her hand… 'We received this yesterday from a Bermuda post office.'

It looked like Padma's handwriting… asking Tony if she could join him. But there was no mention of Bermuda and no date.

'Good work, Weasley,' Ephraim beamed.

Percy was dismissed and there was a strong sense that the meeting was drawing to a close.

'Torquil,' Ephraim said. 'See that Hermione is safely delivered to The Crush Room. Narcissa wants to see her…'

XXX

The Crush Room was long, pale and gold, ornately splendid in an abundantly rococo style. Three large crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling and the thick red carpet was barely visible through the assembled crowd of richly-dressed guests quaffing flutes of champagne.

Sylvestra, looked serenely regal in the centre of the room, surrounded by a gaggle of guests, hanging on her every word.

'Doesn't she look wonderful?' Narcissa said, sidling up to Hermione. 'Look at these poor Muggles. They're in awe of her, aren't they?'

Narcissa looked resplendent in a long, black gown, adorned with gold chains snaking around her waist and neckline - although she seemed older, peering at Hermione as though she was trying to remember her from a dream.

'Well, Sylvestra's a very beautiful woman,' Hermione said, 'I don't think you need to be a MUGGLE to notice that!'

'Oh, I'm so glad you came tonight,' Narcissa enthused. 'Draco's somewhere in here. Ephraim insisted. Last minute. Some nasty journalists have gatecrashed our wee gathering and Draco's very adept at the old schmoozing.' She breezily indicated towards the general mêlée. 'Oh dear… I'm sorry to say this, but I'm a little nervous when I'm amongst so many of them.' she said, dropping her voice. 'Torquil! You're looking very spruce tonight!'
'Thank you,' Torquil said, nervously fiddling with his cufflinks. His eyes darted around the room. 'Ah! There he is!' He intercepted a grizzly-looking, elderly man with thick, rectangular black spectacles, sporting the most outrageously large, ginger side-burns - like two small foxes climbing down his face - that Hermione had ever seen on a man. The man turned small, shrewish peat-brown eyes in Torquil's direction and then alighted on Hermione and Narcissa.

'Señor Zigarroa!' Torquil exclaimed. 'Here's the lady I was telling you about…'

'Ah, La Señora Weasley,' Zigarroa said in a harsh, rasping voice, pitched so low, Hermione had to lean towards him to catch what he was saying and was rewarded with a puff of pungent, garlicky halitosis. He clasped her hand tightly in his. 'You're chief prosecutor for this case I understand?'

'Yes, I am,' Hermione smiled. It was hard to talk while holding your breath she found.

'We have accumulated scripts from various partes of the continent for your perusal.'

'Santa Maria?'

He pursed his lips. 'No … that is where these Rojos were skulking. I will show you the scripts when we get into the opera.'

Hermione was stumped by this; surely talking would be prohibited?

But his meaning was soon made clear when she was led to a private box; a wood-panelled den two tiers up from the auditorium with a close view of the stage and the orchestra pit.

It was soon clear to her that this wasn't your usual opera box.

It was larger and accommodated a wide, luxurious, velvet couch. Two cushioned chairs, pushed together, were positioned at the front of the box.

Ephraim was waiting for her in one of these seats. He patted the space next to him.

He was a heavy, blue presence at her side.

She was instantly put on her guard by his opening comment - delivered in full chivalric pomp. 'I didn't feel it was appropriate to say anything earlier, Hermione, but you look spectacularly lovely this evening.'

Hermione closed her ears to his gushing twaddle.

'Ephraim. I'm only here to discuss terms for George's release.'

'Relax, Hermione, enjoy your evening… you deserve it... Word of warning though, if you see my hapless stepson, I advise you to avoid being monopolised by him. My lovely daughter has nothing but jealous bones in her body. She's been thoroughly miserable these past few days since you and Draco stole the show at my wedding.'

'Your lovely daughter has nothing to worry about,' Hermione muttered irritably.

The door at the back of the box creaked open and they were joined by Zigarroa and his wife, a hunched, wizened little woman weighed down by a surfeit of chunky jewels wrapped around her neck.

Hermione smiled politely, aggravated beyond belief that they were still talking amongst themselves and the opera was about to start; the conductor had come to the pit and his baton was raised and
the audience was hushed, but Zigarroa was gabbling in loud, voluble Spanish to his wife and noisily pulling a stash of parchments from a leather folder and passing them to Hermione.

Ephraim watched her, his eyes shining in amusement.

'Nobody, magical or Muggle, can see or hear us in here, Hermione,' he said. 'For centuries, us magical folk have had a tradition of conducting our most private transactions at affairs just like this…' He swept his hand across the broad sweep of the auditorium.

The stage curtains had risen, and a young man, a painter, was singing winsomely in a church. His friend appeared to be in a dire situation, on the run from the authorities - and she wasn't able to hear a damn word of it as Zigarroa thrust more parchments at her, pointing out various – undoubtedly fictitious – incidents where 'these pernicious attacks' had occurred.

She could feel Ephraim's presence throughout; his thigh was jammed against hers, a persistent throb of blazing blue.

Ephraim brushed the parchments aside. 'She's had enough now.'

'Tosca is one of my favourite operas,' Señora Zigarroa said in a small, cheeping voice, like a tiny bird. 'Such a magnificent heroine.'

'Indeed,' Ephraim said in a low, rumbling voice. Hermione felt the power of him scything though her mind; emboldened, fiery.

'This little worm of a man,' he said dismissively at the young hero on stage. 'He doesn't deserve her… Ah! Here she is!'

A strikingly beautiful, dark-haired soprano had arrived on stage.

'She's a jealous type… doesn't trust her lover. But there's a glorious nobility to her, don't you think, Hermione?'

There was cannon fire and Tosca had gone off-stage… Hermione's mind drifted. She furtively scanned the boxes to their left and right for a tell-tale flash of silvery hair. She spied Narcissa next to Sylvester a few boxes along. Narcissa looked like she was dozing and Sylvester kept turning to talk to someone behind her.

Hermione nudged Ephraim. 'Is this the ONLY magical box?'

'Yes… Here comes Scarpia!'

An older man dressed in a rather stiff and pompous costume had taken centre-stage. He had an earthy, rolling baritone, laced with menace.

Tosca returned and there was a tense exchange; Scarpia was clearly in love with Tosca, but she detested every damn inch of him. He was trying to sow the seeds of suspicion against her lover… but Hermione now realised there was a rather valiant plot underway, that Tosca hadn't fully realised: the little worm of a man that Ephraim had so keenly despised was a quiet revolutionary, fighting against a brutal regime – epitomized by Scarpia, the corrupt chief of police.

'Did you enjoy that?' Ephraim asked at the interval.

'Very much.'
'I suggest you write a description of your experiences in Argentina and pass them onto Mr Jinks,' Ephraim said abruptly, switching topic – he had just received a note from one of his lackeys and what he read had clearly bothered him greatly.

Ephraim's mouth twisted angrily as Narcissa swept into the box. He offered her his seat. 'Don't get too comfortable. I'm coming back after the interval.'

'Have you seen Draco?'

'Somewhere,' Ephraim said airily.

'I need to find the bathroom,' Hermione said apologetically. Luckily Señora Zigarroa engaged Narcissa in conversation.

Hermione followed Ephraim. She sensed his weighty anger and was intrigued. He dodged constant interruptions from his guests along the narrow confines of the corridor skirting the boxes that led towards the crush room. He was in a hurry…

A young, fair-haired man with a chiseled beard, lean and smart in a well-fitting suit, approached Ephraim and whispered in what appeared to be urgent tones. Ephraim nodded emphatically and was delivered by the young man to a party of journalists, brandishing Dictaphones and notepads. He smiled and laughed and snagged flutes of champagne from passing waiters to hand around.

But the young, bearded man looked agitated. He cast a glance around the room and plucked a phone from his pocket.

To Hermione's delight, she saw Ziff weaving his way through the crowd. He raised his eyebrows in greeting.

'What are you doing here?' she mouthed, not wanting to draw too much attention to the fact they knew each other.

'Draco fixed me up with a temp job.'

'Is he here?'

'He was…' He raised his eyebrows. 'Are you okay? You look tired…'

'Yes,' Hermione said absent-mindedly, frantically scanning the Crush Room. Where was he?

She really did need the toilet and after queuing for what felt like an age, she only just made it back to the box in time for the bell to ring.

Ephraim eased back into the seat beside her moments before the curtain was raised.

'And so, the tragedy begins…' Ephraim murmured. His words chilled her.

They were alone.

She could already feel Ephraim's glistening tendrils of blue stealing into her mind. He seemed sunk in dark depression.

She tried a little thought experiment. She closed her eyes and summoned a pale, purple haze into her mind, letting it flower and bloom and gradually deepen into a thick, glossy, viscous colour, pulsing with strength and vibrancy… Yes, that felt good, she thought. It crouched, low and defensive in the corner of her mind, but she occasionally released it in gentle eddies, cleansing and
refreshing - keeping Ephraim at bay.

It also meant she could watch the drama unfold below her. There was a fierce argument between Scarpia and Tosca and then her poor lover, battered and bloodied, stumbled onstage. He was to be executed.

'We still need to agree on the terms of our agreement, Ephraim, regarding George,' Hermione murmured. The fact the opera was rather enthralling had become a genuine handicap to her mission.

'Proceed as we are,' he said.

'But you're asking me to do something impossible… that's not helping my – or should I say, George's - cause, is it?'

'Present the case and George will be freed.'

'That's it?' she asked, bewildered. 'You don't need it to succeed?'

He smiled. 'No.'

She heaved a baffled sigh. 'Okay. When?'

'A fortnight from now? That should suffice.' She could sense him studying her profile. 'Los Rojos… I want to know more about them.'

She smiled to herself. 'I hope you're not expecting me to provide answers.'

'No. They're not part of this deal.'

'I'm amazed that with all your reach and resources, you really have no idea who they are?' She couldn't help thinking about Katya … Troyanda13.

'Only that they're a cult of sorts: Jeroboam's disciples… We once ambushed a straggler in Indonesia. His worship of Jeroboam was most disconcerting.'

'What happened?'

'He killed himself before Troy could torture any decent information out of him,' Ephraim harrumphed. 'So we have no idea about who they are, where they're based, how they travel… all the usual information you need when planning your opponents' annihilation.'

'I guess once you've dispensed with Jeroboam as a credible threat you can move onto Los Rojos, can't you?' Hermione said… 'The faceless bogeymen…'

There was a dramatic burst of vibrant azure blue exploding through her, trying to occupy every pore and cell of her body.

'I wish you'd work for me, Hermione.'

'I am doing… and I did. In Argentina.'

He sighed deeply. 'Turns out you and Draco were my worst possible combination… Damn those bastards nobbling your rather stupid husband, ensuring you went to Argentina instead!'

Hermione felt a little sickened. 'Can we stop talking like this?'
'But we both know EVERYTHING, Hermione… why pretend otherwise? At least between ourselves…'

'I'm not sure I'm ready to drop the layers of obfuscation and artifice in our relationship just yet, Ephraim – too much honesty could be terminal, and as I'm definitely in the weaker position…'

'I'd never kill you.'

She shot him a defiant look. 'Well, you COULD… Anything's possible. I could even kill you?'

To her horror, she felt a burst of raw desire from him… She was perfectly aware that his feelings for her had developed in a disturbing direction, but this was something altogether more acute.

He stared at her. 'You're so like her, you even look like her…'

She felt profoundly, disturbingly confused.

'Katya?'

Ephraim recoiled. 'Gracious, no! Nothing like…'

'I'm told I am.'

'You're not… She was sweet, unassuming, a tiny bit dull, really. But she was my favourite child; Sylvestra's far too intense for comfort – No, Hermione… you're like Katya's mother. Anna. In body, face and soul.'

Hermione felt a flutter of panic in her chest… Why hadn't she thought of that before?

'What happened between you?'

'Many beautiful things… and then she betrayed me. Professionally and personally. On the personal side, she went back to her husband – though it didn't last.'

'He didn't forgive her?'

'He committed suicide the same day. Horrible mess…'

Hermione felt a creeping unease.

'Ah! That's more like it,' Ephraim grunted, returning his attention to the opera. Tosca was presented with a dilemma. Sleep with her enemy, the brooding, malevolent Scarpia, or her lover, Cavaradossi, would die.

A slow smile stole across Ephraim's face and he turned to study Hermione with renewed interest. 'What a perfectly evil man.'

'Hideous,' she shuddered, but then Hermione found herself moved to tears when Tosca burst into brilliant song; a plaintive, beautiful song. And yet Scarpia was unmoved by her plight.

'He doesn't love her at all! He just wants power over her. He only loves himself.'

Ephraim shrugged artlessly. 'Is that so very wrong?'

'Of course… surely even YOU know the difference between love and power?'
He fixed deep blue eyes on her face. 'But love IS power, Hermione. Surely, YOU know that?'

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She was suddenly struggling to push him out of her head.

'Stop hating me so much,' he warned.

'I don't HATE you; that's too strong a word,' she lied.

He grimaced. 'But of course you do.'

'No, I just find you supremely irritating,' she snapped.

He grinned amiably. 'Oh my, I bet you're wonderful when you're angry… as long as your ire doesn't have the whole house crashing down around your ears, eh?'

It was hugely satisfying, Hermione decided, to see Scarpia stabbed in the gut by Tosca when he finally made his move on her…

The act ended and Hermione heaved a sigh of relief. She'd survived the experience unscathed. Ephraim would have to attend to his guests.

Now that the intrusions of real life had returned, Hermione could sense his energy depleting…

The door opened and the young man with the beard entered, a harried expression on his face. 'Sorry to disturb you, sir, but you have to see this,' he said, passing his phone to Ephraim.

Ephraim shot a look at Hermione. 'Not here,' he grunted.

Muggle business, Hermione surmised.

'There you are!' said Draco from the open door - supposedly to his stepfather.

Ephraim regarded him moodily and Hermione sensed a brisk return to the brutish violence that had been reasonably muted for the past couple of hours she'd spent in his company.

'Well, chop, chop, Draco, we've got people to butter up; you're very good at that sort of thing,' Ephraim said.

Hermione would have struggled to believe that once upon a time.

He grasped Draco by the elbow and steered him determinedly away.

XXX

Hermione seated herself at the front of the box as the lights dipped. Strange to have a box to herself, a box where no one could see her or hear her, but she could spy on the rest of the world, the hundreds of people crammed into their seats waiting expectantly for the curtain to rise and the final act to unfold.

The door clicked open and her heart jumped when Draco slipped inside, carefully closing the door behind him.

'I'm not meant to be here but fuck it.' He shot her an anxious look. 'You survived Ephraim?'

She gave him a weary smile. 'All I need to do to secure George's release is present this fake case…
nothing else. It's a propaganda exercise.'

'When?'

'Two weeks.'

Draco looked pensive. 'Feels like a deadline to save the fucking world… Mind you, looks like Ziff
and Henrik are playing their part. Ephraim's been accused of all sorts of illegal stuff by the US
financial crimes network.'

The singers were back on stage; the hero was looking rather down on his luck.

But the moment Draco settled himself next to her, Hermione immediately sensed that his cheerful
demeanour had been a façade. He was a confusing knot of fear and paranoia.

Despite being 'invisible', Hermione felt oddly exposed.

They moved to the shadowy obscurity of the couch at the back of the box. The soft lovelorn
mellifluousness of the young male tenor flooded the space. The lush, orchestral music seemed to
shape the warm dark air around them.

'No one can come in. Colloportus; expires as soon as the show's over… We've got the place to
ourselves,' Draco said. 'Which means… you can tell me the truth, Hermione. I need answers.
Because today was the absolute WORST day. You terrified me. Ron terrified me. The whole
fucking thing that's going on with us… it terrified me.'

'What do you mean?' It was now HER turn to feel terrified. Her stomach flip-flopped over and over
inside of her and she was suddenly breathless. She felt she was being dumped from a relationship
that hadn't even started yet – not in the 'real' sense of it.

Draco sighed deeply and stared at his hands in his lap. 'Look, I've never been a particularly
insecure type. Bit of a bastard, really. But…' he paused, as though gathering himself, 'but today… it
got fucking real for me… the consequences. And if I'm being honest, it screwed with my head.'

She didn't really know what to say. A frisson of alarm trembled through her.

'Ron's not a bad man, you know that, don't you? He acted out because he was scared.'

'You don't need to defend your husband to me, Hermione.'

'Oh, but I do.'

'I wanted to kill him…' Draco's words hovered between them, dark and menacing. 'Don't worry, I
won't. I'm a cunt, not a murderer… and I get where he's coming from, actually… but,' Draco shook
his head. 'I had to stand and watch while you were in pain. While some incredible, freaky, scary
shit happened to you. This crazy magic you have – that for some weird reason I feel off you - it
went MANIC. Harry said afterwards he'd rarely seen anything like it… I mean, it was just too
fucking much…' His voice trailed off as he recalled what happened. 'So, I need you to know that -
one way or another – that's never happening again, alright?… Don't EVER expect me to hold back
doing NOTHING - like some fucking incidental nobody, like something you're too embarrassed to
be around… is that clear?'

'Yes…' she said, still terrified.

Draco pulled her closer and his eyes, a deep, smoky grey, bored into her in such a way she had to
catch her breath. 'Here's the truth... I decided something when I was standing in your living-room and you might not like what I'm going to say, because ... it makes everything even more complicated than it already is.' He paused and then spoke quickly before he regretted it. 'The thing is, I really fucking want you... more than that, actually... I want to be with you... Don't get pissed at me, because I can't help feeling it – and it's getting worse with every fucking minute of every fucking day, and ... shit...' he blinked hard, 'I'm probably making a complete twat of myself... but - that's where I'm at. And you need to know that. And you can do what the fuck you like with it, but I'm laying it out because one of us needs to!... Or you need to tell me to back the fuck up and – and leave you alone.'

'Draco. This thing... it's chewing me up, too... surely you know that? I tell you all the time!'

He seemed to hold his breath as he processed this. 'It doesn't feel like it when something like this morning happens. When I'm stuck on the outside looking in, like some fucking part-time voyeur... I can look, but not fucking touch, like I have to pretend that I'm not... fucking...madly, crazy... totally besotted like my world's-blowing-up-on-me about you?' He ran out of road, not daring to say more and groaned in frustration... 'You know what I'm saying, don't you? If you don't, I might just have to throw myself out of this fucking box and have done with it!'

She burst out laughing. 'I think you'd bounce back! It's magic, remember?' Her laughter petered out. His face was dark, brooding; like the moment before she asked him to dance at Club Ofelia all those months ago... 'Draco. I feel the same.'

... 'So, I'm not alone with this absolutely amazing but unbelievable hell that's completely eating me up from the inside then?' he asked, with a droll smile.

'Definitely not.'

He gazed at her and a blazing white flared up inside of him. His hand touched her face. 'You've no idea how happy I am to hear that.'

Everything faded away for her. The contrast with how she felt towards Ron and the love she felt for Draco had become a vast, gaping chasm.

She doubted things could ever be the same. Which meant a whole host of difficulties and consequences – but she didn't want to think about that right now.

She leant into him. 'Now, as much as I love your heartfelt conversation,' she delicately glanced her lips across his... 'I need you to stop talking.'

He stared at her and a strange tension moved the air between them... And suddenly her heart was hammering loudly inside of her and she felt flushed with excitement and a powerful sense of inevitability.

She couldn't stop shivering, almost as though she was both hot and cold at the same time.

Draco swallowed hard; she could feel his whiteness throbbing. He scooped her into his arms and kissed her with startling passion, and his hands, ruffling her silk dress upwards, were hot on her body. 'Bit pent-up...’ he breathed. But she wanted this; to be closer, still closer... her mouth sought his again and the feel of his tongue exploring her mouth and his hands roughly pushing her dress down and flipping off her bra and knickers sent a rush of acute arousal spearing through her.

She frantically set to unbuttoning his shirt and trousers with shaking fingers, peppering his face and neck with kisses. She could feel his heart pumping violently in his chest.
Skin against skin - and everything suddenly seemed to be coming at her in a rush; a detonation of raw, visceral, unstoppable need... She choked back a moan at the feeling of his hot, wet mouth on her body, and his arousal, unmistakably hard and insistent, nudging against her, while their hands caressed each other...

'Too much…' he hissed, screwing his eyes tightly shut, pulling her arms around his neck and muscling his hand into her hair, smashing his mouth against hers; and they were lost in a deep, frenzied kiss… She straddled him, grinding herself against him, teeth gritted. And then his mouth was on her breasts, his tongue teasing her nipples until she trembled, until she wanted to bite down on his neck.

He tilted her face to look at him. His breathing was chaotic; and they both knew that there was no turning back now from what they were going to do together. It would become part of their lives, their histories, forever.

She gasped at the shock of feeling that tore through her, at the searing shard of brilliant white – something extraordinary, something blinding – and Draco's eyes opened wide; electrified. For a brief second she wondered why she hadn't realised that this would happen; that with hugely magnified feeling and intimacy, the scorching brightness would be overwhelming.

She tightly closed her eyes, mastering herself, wanting to hold onto this moment for as long as possible, struggling to resist the desperate desire to immediately push the ache inside of her to the brink of oblivion – but she couldn't hold on, because as they moved against each other, there were other shades too, strange and beautiful resonances.

And she was lost in a world of heightened colour and untrammelled sensation and sound… the sound of his long, sighing breaths hitching in his chest, almost in time to the dip and swell of the orchestral music and impassioned singing that seemed to fill the space around them, enveloping them in the darkness.

'Oh, Jesus fuck… Hermione,' he panted, a desperate edge to his voice… His hands gripped her body, trying to slow her down, but she couldn't help herself from rocking against him with increasing urgency.

He blinked hard and seized her firmly round the waist to stop her moving. His face was half-bathed in the white light cast from the stage below them. The pupils in his eyes were so dilated, the blackness almost obscured the grey and he was biting down hard on his lip, straining for control…

'Slower,' he demanded in a low, gravelly voice, fighting for breath.

So they kissed deeply, lovingly; slowing their pace. But the delirious hot white waves shuddering through her as they slid tremulously against each other in long, excruciatingly tender strokes, were too much... Restraint was quickly, inexorably slipping away, and they were increasingly unable to think beyond their hot sweaty need for each other. He clutched her buttocks and bucked upwards forcefully against her, and she found she was pounding downwards in lockstep, unable to fight the exquisite sensations building up inside of her. He threw her sideways onto the couch and made love to her with such powerful intensity she was crying out and the furniture was bouncing noisily against the floor.

Draco momentarily paused, staring down at her, his eyes glowing, his whiteness vibrating at a million miles an hour – and with a ragged groan, he hitched her legs tightly around him and reared upwards, crushing her against the wall of the box, pinning her arms flat against the wooden panelling. He thrust deeply, greedily inside of her, with what seemed like cruel, merciless insistency, his lips hard against hers... The blissful feeling spiralling through her was so
overwhelming she wanted to explode.

They stumbled, crumpling to the floor as one, mouths locked, bodies entangled, and he continued to drive into her with such remorseless, brutal intensity, her whole body, her mind, was saturated with a pulsing, bleached white.

Scraps of their reality - the dimmed interior of the box and the audience below, dappled with light from the glow of the stage, the magnificence of the music, the crash of percussion and throbbing violins and the ethereal beauty and drama of the singers' voices soaring, combining, crying out - flickered at the periphery of her consciousness. She could feel a wildness, a savage power building inside of her, cresting, peaking. She gripped him tightly, repeatedly meeting his body with her own with a breath-taking ferocity, like a terrifying act of mutual self-destruction... His voice was a broken, guttural sob, like he was drowning, and she felt blinded by the explosive force that ripped through her; a pristine, dazzling white-out.

There was a deafening report of gun shot and hysterical screaming and for a brief moment her heart raced even faster...

Draco laughed softly. 'It's okay, beautiful. It's the opera.' He gently stroked her face and brushed his lips against hers. They lay together, limbs intertwined, struggling to catch their breath, listening to the rise and swell of the music.

She could sense it hadn't ended well for the lovers on stage... but the eruption of loud, whooped applause immediately after, jolted them both into wide-eyed panic.

'Shit,' Draco growled, hoisting her off the floor in a single sweeping movement.

She tugged her dress up as he frantically pulled on his trousers and they started giggling uncontrollably as the lights went up and the applause strengthened and she couldn't find her bra and his shirt was hanging half on, half off and she was frantically trying to help him do his buttons up with anxious, fumbling fingers, wiping away tears of laughter.

'Hold there,' he said, still desperately trying to regain control of his breathing. His eyes were dancing with light and his lips looked pink and swollen, ravaged by kissing. He smoothed back her hair, which was clinging to her damp cheeks and pulled her dress straight, smoothing it over her hips and thighs.

'Accio,' he whispered to her bra, which was hanging from one of the chairs, stuffing it into his pocket at the exact same moment that the door clicked open and Ephraim walked into the box.

'Damn it all,' he grunted, his voice ringing around the box, over the thunderous claps and brays ringing around the theatre as the singers took their bows. 'Fucking Muggle busybodies,' he said to Draco. 'We need to smooth a few ruffled feathers so best behaviour, boy. Sylvestra is taking your mother home and we'll treat these journalists to a few drinks in town.'

Draco's irritation was palpable.

'I'll make sure Hermione gets home safely first,' Draco said casually.

'No need for that,' Ephraim said smoothly.

He gave her a shrewd, appraising look and she wondered how much of a state she looked. Her heartbeat still hadn't slowed and despite Draco's efforts her hair was wild and wayward and her dress was clinging to her stickily.
'You look like you've been through the mill,' Ephraim said, his eyes twinkling. She couldn't help but translate that in her head as looking like she'd been fucked very hard and was now struggling to recover any sense of reality. 'It's a very tragic opera, isn't it?' Ephraim said, allaying her fears that he was a secret Legilimens.

He turned to Draco. 'Don't you just love that about Muggles? They're so goddamned emotional. I love to see that in them...' He grinned at her. 'I wish I'd been here to watch you.'

'Hermione's a witch,' Draco said caustically.

But Ephraim's words and the manner in which he'd said them had sent Hermione into an inward flutter of panic. She'd sensed the unmistakable double-meaning in his words, trailed by the glistening streak of blue that swirled through her with playful menace. His eyes gleamed with vicarious pleasure.

'You'd better hurry along,' Ephraim said, 'your brother-in-law's waiting for you in the lobby.'

'George?'

Ephraim laughed nastily and wrapped his arm around her shoulder, hugging her close. 'The case first, my dearest. And then you'll be one of us,' he whispered in her ear, and then, to her horror, he planted a warm, wet kiss on her cheek.

Draco levelled a vicious look at Ephraim, but his stepfather swept Hermione away from him and out of the box.

Bill was waiting for her by the main doors to the opera house.

'Survived?' he asked in jocular tones, looking her up and down with a slightly furrowed brow.

'Just about,' she replied with a wan smile, hoping he didn't notice that she was bra-less. She was acutely aware of the slick wetness between her legs; there'd been no time to clean herself up and Draco had vanished her knickers.

'You're staying at Shell Cottage,' he said, holding Hermione's hand as they jostled their way through the crowds.

'Kids are already there; fast asleep,' Bill murmured. 'Ron's gone away... Work assignment. He says sorry he acted like a prat.' He shot a worried glance at her. 'Maybe it's best you have a bit of time apart…'

They finally broke free of the gaggle of theatre-goers clotting the pavement, crossed the road, turned left and then right into a quiet courtyard, from where they could Apparate home. 'One bit of good news, Harry and I got hold of the Haasts' corundum… it's sitting in a sealed glass box in my study at home.'

'That's great,' Hermione mumbled, but her mind was full of Draco, replaying what they'd done together, sending fresh butterflies tumbling through her at the memory of his mouth on her and the feeling of him inside her.
"HATE TO SAY I TOLD YOU SO" by THE HIVES

"VISSI D'ARTE" from TOSCA by GIACOMO PUCCINI

"THE GREATEST LIGHT IS THE GREATEST SHADE" by THE JOY FORMIDABLE

"EMPIRE OF OUR OWN" by RAIGN

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
El Mago de Abaran

Chapter Summary

Paranoia, planning and panic… The Day after the Night before

43. El Mago de Abaran

Bill had added a study to Shell Cottage about ten years ago. The room jutted out at right angles
from the sitting-room, with large, arched windows facing out on both sides of the house: one
overlooking the garden and the other gazing out to sea.

During the day, the room was suffused with bright light, illuminating copious over-loaded
bookshelves and an array of intriguing magical instruments, stacks of parchments and a solid silver
quill that Bill kept in a special holder carved from a unicorn horn.

At night, the windows looked out onto deep darkness, except south-facing, where the view was
punctuated by tiny, twinkling lights from fishing boats far out in the bay.

An ornate brass lantern shone a weak, orange light onto Bill's desk – an old, oversized dining table
jammed up against a wall.

A glass box containing a chunky, crystalline rock was currently placed on this desk and was
emitting a faint, pulsing glow.

'Should it be doing that?' Hermione asked, anxiously.

'It wasn't, earlier.'

'Are we sure it can't hear us when the glass cover's on?'

'Pretty sure…' Bill didn't sound as certain as Hermione would have liked.

'But Ephraim's ring doesn't have a glass cover.'

'True. But that's an actual ruby. I suspect this is low-grade corundum, closer to its natural state. The
rocks probably absorb what they hear and can then be activated to replay those sounds. There's
probably all sorts of clever enchantments we don't yet know anything about that control how they
work.'

Hermione leant over to examine the pulsing rock under its glass lid. 'We don't need to know them
all, Bill… We just need to work out what to do with this one… see if we can use it to gatecrash
their communications.'

'I'll try out some code-breakers; see what happens,' Bill mused. 'My problem is we need to return it
to the Haasts before they realise the rock in their living room's a dud. We only used a Doubling
Charm.'

He offered her a glass of homemade mulberry wine and was clearly in the mood for talking, but all
Hermione wanted to do was shower and go to bed and think about Draco.
She yawned. 'I'm shattered. Where am I sleeping?'

'Fleur made up the sofa for you in the living-room, if that's okay?'

They headed back to the hallway. The living-room was accessed from here.

'After tonight the girls' bedroom's free,' Bill said. 'Fleur and I popped to yours and packed a few things.'

'You didn't have to…'

'We did. Your house was making you super-paranoid.'

'Seriously, I'm fine!'

Bill vehemently shook his head. 'I don't want you there alone. And with Ron away on his supposed work trip…'

'He often goes away,' Hermione said brusquely.

'Well… I'm not sure he went away because of work…'

'Are you trying to tell me my marriage is over?'

Bill gave her a long look. 'Do you want it to be?'

'I don't know. '

She had to be careful. Bill was a good friend, but he was Ron's brother.

Regardless of her feelings for Draco, divorce was fairly taboo in the wizarding world. Many marriages were forged with unbreakable bonds... something she'd once thought 'romantic' – until she got married herself and refused, surprising everybody.

'I've got enough to be thinking about at the moment.' She'd already updated Bill with an (edited) account of her evening: the new MIIPS Committee, Señor Zigarroa, and her arrangement with Ephraim.

'Two weeks is too long for George,' Bill said, shaking his head. 'We have to get him out sooner.'

'I was thinking we should try to get hold of his wand. It's being kept at the Ministry… But listen - I'm hoping I never have to actually do this fake trial shit Ephraim wants because we'll have found a way to bring him down.'

'But what if you DO have to?'

'Then I'll publicly accuse Ephraim instead,' she declared boldly.

Bill turned white. 'No, Hermione. No, no. They'd kill you on the spot.'

She was so surprised by the bereft look on Bill's face she had to look away. He didn't realise that she might be left with no choice.

'We can't let that happen,' he said, taking her hands in his. They felt warm and solid.

But she pulled away. 'We'll talk tomorrow.'
Lying sleepless on the sofa hours later, she heard him slowly climb the stairs to bed.

XXX

An owl from Ephraim arrived during breakfast the next morning – although it was more like brunch. Hermione had slept in.

Fleur and Bill had already taken Rose and Hugo to school and waved off Victoire and Dominique at Kings Cross Station.

‘What does he say?’ Fleur asked, spooning fried eggs from a skillet onto Hermione's plate, even though she wasn't hungry.

‘He's invited me to dinner. Tonight.’

‘We brought Grumio if you want to write back,’ Fleur said.

‘I'd rather return his own owl…’ She was already scrawling a refusal on the back of his message.

‘Maybe Draco was onto something?’ Bill mumbled. ‘He wants you.’

Hermione rolled her eyes. ‘He thinks I look like ANNA… Katya's mother.’

‘That doesn't sound healthy,’ Fleur said, sitting down and pouring herself a glass of orange juice.

‘It isn't,’ Hermione said crabbily. She stood up purposefully from the breakfast table. ‘I'd rather get this blasted report out the way. Can I use your study while you're at work?’ she asked Bill.

XXX

It was a cloudy day and the view of the bay from Bill's study window was grey and dismal. The steep cliffs were bleak and somber-looking and the leaden sea thrashing the rocks below seemed to match Hermione's ill-temper. She'd also started her period overnight, which made her feel even crankier.

It was silent in the house. Fleur had popped to Diagon Alley with Louis to buy ingredients to make a Girding Potion for baby Joyana, who was still listless from her trip. The only sound was Hermione's quill scratching on one of Bill's high-quality, calf-skin vellum parchments.

But writing about Argentina only enhanced her sense of desolation… She was lost in memory – walking with Draco through Recoleta Park on a sun-kissed morning felt like light years ago.

And her thoughts drifted all too easily to the dark intimacy of the magical opera box last night. Her stomach twisted at the memory of Draco's hands on her, the feel of his body, his soft mouth and ragged breathing…

Her insides felt tightly knotted with an odd mixture of rapture and nerves.

Why hadn't he sent her an owl this morning, instead of bloody Ephraim?

Where was he now? What was he doing? He was being alive somewhere that wasn't here, with her, and that was almost unbearable…

She feared Bill was right. Had she been a glory-fuck?

A blank, grey veil seemed to descend on her with startling rapidity, further crushing her mood – she
felt like sighing and crying all at the same time. But then a bright, rosy flash caught her eye…

It was the corundum, just a few inches away from her on Bill's desk – shielded, thankfully, by its glass cover.

She watched it pulse for a few minutes and dark unease stirred within her. It felt like a living, breathing thing… even though she knew it was a dead lump of rock imbued with magical properties; nothing more.

The moment it ceased glowing, curiosity got the better of her and the rock was out of its case and the desk was soon littered with a stack of Bill's code-breaking manuals replete with obscure arithmantic equations and complex incantations.

She methodically tapped the rock with her wand and repeatedly cast spell after spell in the hope that the rock would somehow give up its secrets.

She eventually got bored and decided to raid the kitchen for a cup of tea and a bite to eat, when a thunderous, booming sound resounded around the house.

She dashed back to the study…

A loud male voice she'd never heard before was declaiming in a thick, foreign accent.

What the hell was that language?

Sometimes it was like Spanish - but not a Spanish she recognised - and sometimes the voice dropped to a low, grating hiss and spoke in something entirely alien to her. She grabbed her quill and parchment - she'd have to re-write Ephraim's report - but time was of the essence.

She strained to make sense of the words she was hearing, picking out a few here and there. There were gaps, but she had a vague phonetic transcript which she could try and make sense of later.

There was one word, however, peppered throughout, that was unmistakable.

A single name: SALVEDRA. SALVEDRA. SALVEDRA. SALVEDRA… and then in Spanish, Recuerda mi nombre. Di mi nombre… SALVEDRA, SALVEDRA, SALVEDRA…

She stopped writing…

This is him, she thought. THIS IS SALVEDRA. He wasn't dead, after all.

But what was this? It sounded like a call to prayer or a political speech.

The rock fell silent.

She waited a few moments and then prodded the rock - with a little more force than intended. The rock rapidly spun around, skidding across the table... teetering on the edge.

'Bollocks!' she cursed, blocking its fall with her wand. She immediately picked it up to return to its glass case before she irredeemably damaged it - Bill would never forgive her - and froze…

There was a sneaking, rustling sound; a shuffled footstep… wheezy breathing… followed by a deeper silence. But this silence was the sound of someone listening intently - to her.

She held her breath, half-fearing that the sound of her heart thumping in her chest was audible.
And then came the deep, insidious voice, even lower this time - even closer…. *Quis es? Quis es? ... Who are you? Hablame.*

Hermione heard the back door into the kitchen bang shut. She instantly slammed the rock into its glass case and sealed it.

Fleur was unloading a bag of shopping in the kitchen; bunches of herbs and an array of jellied items in small glass jars.

'You okay?' Fleur asked, sweeping the family cat, Maginoire, off the kitchen table, where he had pounced for a curious sniff of a jar of doxy eggs.

'The corundum… it spoke!' Hermione exclaimed.

'What's a corn drum?' Louis asked.

Fleur stopped what she was doing and pulled a packet of Pepper Imps out of her shopping bag, thrusting them into Louis's hand.

Louis's eyes lit up. 'Thought these were for later?'

'I need to talk to Aunty Hermione… it's important, grown-up stuff.'

Louis scampered upstairs to his bedroom as fast as his little legs could carry him, clutching the packet of sweets before his mother changed her mind.

'What happened?' Fleur said, turning to Hermione.

Hermione quickly explained and then hastened to the study and grabbed the parchment with her transcript.

Fleur sank onto a chair and studied Hermione's phonetic transcription carefully, speaking the words out loud to try and make sense of them. 'I know a bit of Spanish… for example, *vivir* here means to live. But I think these are Catalan… Is this exactly how you heard it?'

'More or less.'

Fleur grabbed a pencil and began piecing the words together, repeating them out loud.

'Okay… is this how it sounded?'

She read out what she'd done: '…Escolta'm... sóc l'única esperança... bakarra... bakarra... contra les bestioles... kaltetzen gaituztenak... el nostre dret a existir... viure... viure... vivir... bizitzeko... bizitzeko. '

Hermione nodded.

'Some of these words sound like gobbledygook.' Fleur chewed the end of the pencil, exasperated. 'Maybe Bill will understand them?'

Hermione squinted at the parchment. 'No... I think they're Basque.'

She sat down next to Fleur and they examined the words together. 'Maybe we can work out the Spanish and Catalan? Etymologically, they share the same Latin roots as other Romantic languages. So, I suspect *l'única esperança* is THE ONLY HOPE.'
Fleur agreed. 'And this Sóc, maybe that's the same as Soy – I AM in Spanish?'

'I AM THE ONLY HOPE?'

'Maybe this Salvedra sees himself as - as a saviour of some kind? And Di mi nombre - I think that's SAY MY NAME.' Fleur looked nonplussed. 'Hermione. It sounds like he's alive…'

'I think he is.' Had a living Salvedra been watching her from that portrait in Arcana? Was that even possible? Hermione shuddered when she remembered the eerie sensation that someone else, living and breathing, had been in that 'empty' room with her...

'Contra les bestioles,' Fleur said. 'It's similar to contre les bêtes in French… against the beasts.'

Muggles… 'It's a supremacist creed,' Hermione muttered darkly. And it was more than that she feared… 'El nostre dret a existir… OUR RIGHT TO EXIST. It's Ephraim's campaign manifesto.'

'What did you do to the rock to make it talk to you?'

Hermione fetched the most recent grimoire she'd been browsing. It had to be one of the last few incantations she'd attempted - Desistum Perdere, Perdix Perdere or Erorzen Profunda.

Fleur studied the phrases, a quizzical expression on her face. 'I wonder if anyone else who has a rock like this could also hear you?'

Hermione felt a little panicked. 'I don't know. I hope not... Maybe the rock glows to alert you that someone's left a message that can then be played back? Bit like a Muggle answering machine. '

One thing for sure: they had to find out more about Salvedra as a matter of urgency. He'd known Ephraim for at least thirty years - they were in The Geneva Group together.

Draco had also speculated that there were split loyalties amongst Ephraim's cohorts. Was Salvedra a rival to Ephraim? She instantly thought of Sylvestra's black eyes... Or even his superior?

Hermione abruptly stood up from the table. 'Can I send Demosthenes to Hogwarts?'

XXX

'And you're definite the voice you heard was Salvedra speaking, not someone speaking about Salvedra?' Bill asked.

Bill had ducked out of work claiming a family crisis…

'I can't be definite, but... yes, I think it was him,' Hermione said, feeling distinctly crotchety. She pushed her hands through her hair and rubbed her eyes. She must look a state she realised. She was still wearing her pyjamas from this morning.

'Neville sent some books over,' Fleur explained to Bill, indicating the piles of crumbling ancient grimoires and encyclopedias in front of her. 'We're trying to find a connection between this Salvedra and that mountain…Atalaya.'

Hermione pointed to the 1620 edition of Calendarium Naturale Magicum Perpetuum. 'In here it says rocks and minerals with particular magical properties are usually found in clusters at the same site... I'm thinking all these rocks are quarried from the same mountain? And Dolores had a picture of this Mount Atalaya… Remember? I assumed she came from there – or the town nearby. But now I think Salvedra might be there, too.'
'We could do with some geographical information before we get too involved in planning a grand expedition,' Bill mused, following Hermione's line of thought to its inevitable conclusion… 'Maybe that Ziff can help out? I'll pop to Ottery St Catchpole and grab the kids. Save you a trip.'

'Was the town near Atalaya called Abaran?' Fleur asked a few minutes after Bill had left. She'd been thumbing through a green leather book, *Enciclopedia Mágica de la Antigua Iberia*, its pages so thin they were almost translucent. 'There's mention here of a long-standing wizarding community in the Abaran area in The Valle de Ricote: a well-known refuge for magical folk.' Fleur looked Hermione in the eye. 'From what I'm reading here, wizards in Spain were subject to pretty serious persecution; many fled to the Americas."

Hermione had a tingling sensation at the back of her neck. She shivered and looked around the study.

She gazed through the windows, checking both directions.

For a moment she'd thought someone had tapped her on the shoulder. And the tingling sensation was now crawling upwards from the nape of her neck into her scalp. It felt like the roots of her hair tightened.

'You alright?' Fleur asked her. 'You look a little green… Here, have some lemonade.' She started to pour her a glass but Hermione shook her head and walked out of the study and into the sitting-room. It was still and quiet.

'Is Louis upstairs?' she asked.

'No, he went with Bill. He could do with some fresh air… Oh! Hermione! The rock-thing. It's doing that glowing thing again!'

Hermione rushed back to the study… Had she sensed it? she wondered.

The rock was skulking under its glass shield in a far corner of the room, pulsing pink.

'We still don't know which password you used to hear Salvedra's message, do we?' Fleur said, studying a parchment with the three possible incantation options.

Fleur had her hand on the glass cover…

'No! Let's wait for Bill to get back…' It didn't feel safe.

XXX

Neville arrived before Bill.

'I'm missing Shepherd's Pie for this, I'll have you know,' Neville said, lugging even more books onto the table. 'Thelonious is more than happy to Floo over anything else we need and Dennis volunteered to be library gopher – but if I can use your owl, Fleur, I could send a message to Hannah and rally the troops? More eyes will make quicker work.'

'Good idea, Neville,' Hermione said, nose buried in one of her trusty favorites from Hogwarts – a translation of Giordano Bruno's *De Vinculis In Genere*.

Fleur blinked hard and pushed her book aside. 'My eyes have gone all squirrelly – and I still need to make that Girding Lotion and get it over to baby Joyana.'
'We can hold the fort,' Neville murmured, returning to the room. He picked up Clavis Est ad Omnes Mythologiis, the book he'd examined to the point of exhaustion just over a week ago and had probably hoped to never see again. 'This was the book that listed the three Salvedras… we're focusing on the third one, aren't we?' he said, finding the correct page.

'Yes, born 1904 in Alzika… although the first one, Salvedra Otzoa-Azarola, is the wizard who developed that Visual Resonation technique I was telling you about.' Lucius's photo of Salvedra also had 'Quis es?' written on the back... and she'd said it... and she'd heard it, yes, she'd heard it since, but she didn't like to think about that. 'When was he born, Neville?'

'1775, place called Borox. The second chap was… Cicera, 1849…'

'No, the Borox one...'

The light outside was starting to fade… thin, streaks of purplish blue and the faintest patina of rosy orange as the sun started to set over the slate-grey sea. Hermione switched on the lantern Bill kept on his desk and illuminated the few others he had distributed around the room.

Hermione could hear Bill returning home with the kids. Rose and Hugo were delighted to see 'Uncle Neville' and Bill informed her that Harry was on his way, desperate to figure out the corundum.

Hermione pushed aside a translation of Galdrabok and then began browsing through more of the ornately decorated, undoubtedly priceless ancient tracts that Neville had smuggled out of Hogwarts.

She wanted to find writings by this Salvedra… What were his core beliefs? What made him the kind of wizard who was honoured with pictures and had an incredibly powerful witch literally prostrating herself before him?

Twenty minutes later she emerged, blinking like a mole into the light. She eyed the plate of sandwiches Bill had placed in front of her with distaste. They were already curling at the edges…

'Hermione thinks we should brave a reconnaissance trip to Salvedra's lair,' Bill grinned when Harry arrived.

'He's a bit full of himself, isn't he?' Harry muttered, reading Hermione's rough translation of the transcript.

Hermione was so engrossed in a monster volume of Archidoxis Magica she barely registered the chatty arrival of Melissa Osgood.

'Tansy's painting placards with Kickback. They plan a protest this weekend in Diagon Alley… still no sign of their friends I'm afraid. Ernie can't come. He's busy writing tomorrow's Sub Rosa,' Melissa twittered, removing her jacket and pulling up a chair.

'Ooh,' said Fleur, 'are we allowed a sneak preview?'

'Guldstern,' Neville smirked. 'Nasty corruption scandal… The MD at Troobles, Arvin Spaithe, went on the record.'

There were new arrivals; Hermione could hear Ziff's heavily-accented voice chatting to Fleur in the sitting-room… Hold on, she thought, how did Ziff get here? There was no way he could have got to Cornwall from London so quickly without magical assistance?
It had to be Draco.

However, Ziff entered alone, eyes bulging in wonder at Bill's quirky study crammed with archaic esoterica.

The room was now over-crowded so Bill went to fetch more chairs from the kitchen while Ziff laid out some sheets of paper on the scant space left beside Hermione's tower of books on the desk.

'Maps and guides of this Mount Atalaya,' Ziff explained. 'It's actually closer to Cieza than Abaran.'

'Where are the possible incantations for this rock?' Harry asked Hermione. He was kneeling on the floor, examining the corundum. She quickly sought out the slip of parchment and knelt beside him.

'It won't work, Harry. The rock has to glow first,' she said. 'DON'T take the lid off!'

'Has the rock glowed since the weird Salvedra thing happened?'

'A couple of times…' Bill said, returning with chairs.

'It's amazing how chanting some abracadaba business would convert a crystal into a communication device,' Ziff said in his peculiar, stilted staccato.

'It's called magic,' Melissa said tartly.

Not so strange, actually,' said Draco, 'early Muggle radios used a crystal and metal wire.'

Hermione's head shot up from her crouched position next to the rock.

He was here.

'Like a half-duplex radio, maybe?' Ziff said. 'Or a walkie talkie? It sounds like the channel was briefly open at both ends.'

Bill turned to Hermione, who was hauling herself back onto her chair whilst trying to muscle her wild, bushy hair into a semblance of sanity. 'Did you say or do anything to the rock after this Salvedra's preachy shit?'

'I – I, yes,' Hermione replied, aware that she was suddenly flushed scarlet. 'Yes. I did…' She tried to recall exactly what had happened but to her utter frustration her mind had gone completely blank of anything other than a stark awareness of Draco looking at her. She shut her eyes tightly to summon the scene into her head. 'I poked it – and it started spinning and I panicked and stopped it from falling off the table.'

'Did you say anything?' Harry asked urgently.

'Bollocks…'

Ziff burst out laughing.

Hermione flicked a glance at Draco; he was busy negotiating where to sit with Melissa.

'Oh, sorry, Draco, I'm hogging all the space. I'm such a nuisance!' Melissa trilled. She held his arm to steady herself as she stood up from her seat - hardly necessary, Hermione thought sourly - and shuffled it along a few inches. A further chair was passed to Draco, who was then forced to squeeze himself in between Melissa – with acres of space to Bill on her left - and the wall.
A thought occurred to her…. 'Actually… pass me Clavis Est ad Omnes Mythologiiis, would you, Melissa?' Hermione asked forcefully. 'It's right by you.'

Melissa looked a bit lost and pushed a few books around in a frustratingly slow manner. Draco helped, finding the book for Melissa. 'Thank you.' Melissa flashed him a saccharine-sweet smile that set Hermione's teeth on edge.

Hermione quickly found the page detailing Salvedra's birthplace. 'BOROX!' she yelled.

'I beg your pardon!' Melissa cried in feigned outrage.

Hermione read aloud the entry: 'Otzoa-Azarola, Salvedra; born in BOROX of Toledo, date unknown but circa 1775.'

The room fell silent.

'Bollocks,' Harry repeated. 'BOROX… yes, I can imagine an egotistical bastard like this using his birthplace as a special access password.' He passed the transcript of Salvedra's message across the table to Draco. Melissa craned close to Draco to read it too.

'But this Borox-Salvedra was born over a hundred years BEFORE the Salvedra who was part of the Geneva Group,' Bill said… 'So it can't be HIM … Unless…'

'Unless he's two hundred and thirty-eight years old…' Hermione said.

'How the hell is that possible?' Ziff gasped.

'Wizards live longer than Muggles,' Melissa said.

'But that's unusually long… Maybe he's an alchemist?' Draco suggested.

'I – I just feel this is an extraordinary wizard,' Hermione said. 'He was involved with The Geneva Group, which means he's highly scholastic and interested in the Science of Magic. There should be writings from him – somewhere.'

Look at me, Hermione was silently pleading. Just once. … But he hadn't. She could sense his whiteness, though… Bubbling; Nervous.

'Magic isn't science,' Melissa said huffily, 'that's for Muggles! We can't explain our magic. That's what makes it so special.'

'We can, actually,' Draco said, without bothering to explain.

'Incoming!' Neville warned, dumping more books onto the table. 'There's a few Spanish books in here and something Catalan. Anyone prepared to brave the Spanish?'

'Fleur was reading it earlier,' Hermione said.

Bill grabbed a book and headed out of the study.

'Back home in Finland I came top in Spanish class, if that's any help?' Ziff said.

'What are we even looking for?' Melissa asked in querulous tones, staring at the books with undisguised hostility.

'It's really important to know as much about Salvedra as possible; how he thinks, where he's based,
stuff like that,' Hermione said. 'The fact he's pushing RIGHT TO EXIST shows he's a major influence on Ephraim.'

'And he seems to have lived forever – which, I'm sorry, but from past experience rarely amounts to something good…' Harry added.

'Exactly. And that speech he made, saying his name over and over… It's like a cult leader addressing his followers. For all we know, there's loads of them? Even Minister Witchell?'

Hermione added for Melissa's particular benefit.

'For a while now I've thought there's divided loyalties in Ephraim's camp.' Draco flicked a glance at Hermione. 'And this might explain it… Some might be Salvedrists – for want of a better word – while others support Ephraim.'

'Except I'm convinced that Ephraim is passionately wedded to this Right to Exist policy,' Hermione said. This was what made him so dangerous… he truly believed it.

'But maybe Salvedra wants to assert our Right to Exist by eliminating Muggles, while Ephraim just wants to dominate – politically?' Draco suggested. 'Both camps would still want Dark Flux, but maybe use it differently?'

He was looking at Hermione now; a long, lingering look – and for a moment she was lost in his eyes. She could feel his whiteness; wild, jangling.

But her fillip of sudden swooping joy couldn't last… Melissa snatched a book from the top of the pile. 'What one would you like, Draco?' she said brightly.

'Whatever one you'd like to give me, Melissa,' he replied. Had he flirted back? SHIT. Obviously nailing this wizard's identity and his whereabouts was really important, but Hermione suddenly felt like crying in a dark corner. She loved him, for fuck's sake.

She had to focus…

Ziff was on his knees studying the corundum. 'Wow… A magical walkie-talkie crystal!'

'Don't take it out, whatever you do!' Bill cried out, coming back into the study.

'You say it glows?' Ziff said.

'We don't know why,' Harry said, twisting around in his seat.

'Hermione. Did you touch the rock with your wand when you said Borox?'

Hermione thought about this. 'I'm not sure… Maybe it was a combination of the word and movement? The rock spun anti-clockwise.'

'Which would replicate the mechanical movement inside a nimbometer,' Draco muttered, fighting to open a large book with some difficulty as he was effectively pinned against the wall and Melissa appeared to have sidled closer.

'My guess is when this Salvedra person decides to communicate, he does some hocus-pocus at his end… at the base… and it lights up to tell you to say your incantation thingy,' Ziff said. 'And then you hear his message; and then you do the "bollocks" bit if you want to reply in real-time - a bit like using a PTT button opening the channel. It might be the same or something different if you just want to record a message… Who knows?"
'My cousin had a walkie talkie set when we were kids,' Harry said in disconsolate tones. Hermione suspected Dudley hadn't allowed Harry to play with it.

'But are these messages heard by everyone else who has the same type of walkie talkie?' Hermione asked, apprehensively.

Ziff pondered this. 'I suspect these rocks work like an Intranet and this Salvedra hosts the main server.'

'I'm completely lost over here! What's he talking about?' Melissa giggled to Draco.

'Sounds like Salvedra's definitely based at Atalaya then…' Draco said, 'because Ephraim uses Atalaya as his personal password for computers and devices – it's clearly his private joke… Look, I can barely move here,' he grumbled, irritation spilling over - and it was true. He was squashed tight against the wall. 'Do you mind if I slightly shrink the table?' He deftly tapped the desk and noisily shunted his chair into clear air so he was now midway between Melissa and Hermione.

'Which means the main communications hub for this organization is at Atalaya…' Hermione reached for the photos Ziff had printed off and held up a picture of a mountain… 'He's here, basically,' she said. Harry took the photo from her grasp and studied it, a concentrated expression on his face.

'The painting in Dolores's house…' Draco murmured.

'Not much of a mountain though, is it?' Melissa said scathingly. 'More of an arrogant hill!' She tittered at her own joke.

Fleur swept into the study, trailing the ghastly odour of Girding Lotion in her wake. She was clutching a small, shabby book – Encantadas Asturianas.

'Hermione,' Fleur said excitedly. 'This book mentions El Gran Mago de Abaran… that's Spanish for The Great Wizard of Abaran… gives all sorts of dates for when he was in Abaran, but it also says he was a Professor Otzoa-Azarola at Girona University between…' she quickly leafed to the right section, '2001 and 2006. Sounds like our guy, doesn't it?'

Draco looked at Hermione. 'That's him.'

'What do you mean?' Bill asked, his face glowing inquisitively.

'Sylvestra went to school in Girona.'

'School or university?'

'School – but there's no reason why a Professor Otzoa-Azarola couldn't freelance, is there?'

Hermione now remembered the conversation she'd had with Astoria, describing her visit to 'El Sol y Ter.'

'Is Girona near this Abaran?' Bill asked.

'No – it's at the far end of the country,' Ziff said, unfurling his map of Spain. He pointed to Girona in the North-East and Abaran closer to the South-East.

'Where was the house you and Astoria visited Ephraim?' Hermione asked Draco, 'the place where you first met Katya?' She added the final stinger because she was sure Draco had told her
differently in the past and she wanted to see his reaction.

'It was his wife's house, sold after she died, and it was—' he pointed to a spot close to Girona, 'around here.' He briefly glanced in Hermione's direction. 'I forget I met Katya there. She seemed very young. Hated the place.'

'So, is that it then?' Melissa said, clapping her hands together. 'Now we know he is who you all thought he is, are we done?'

'Not yet. We still need to know more,' Hermione said impatiently.

'But why?'

'Because tomorrow I'm going to go to Abaran to find him,' Hermione said.

'Correction. WE are going,' Draco said under his breath, keeping his eyes averted. Hermione couldn't help but smile… It was the best feeling she'd had all day.

'I agree,' Harry said. 'We need to check this guy out.'

Bill scooped Ziff's maps, guides and print-outs into a single pile. 'Better get planning.'

Hermione turned to Ziff. 'When you've got a moment, could you take a look at this?' She flicked through *El Libro de la Luz Caída*. 'It looks like there's information about El Gran Mago de Abaran on these few pages here... and,' she quickly scanned at frenetic speed through the remainder, looking for words to jump out at her, 'and here.'

'Aunty Fleur, can we come in to say goodnight to Mummy?' Rose's voice piped up.

'Quickly, yes...I'm just popping over to Angelina's,' Fleur said to Bill. She handed *Encantadas Asturianas* to Neville...

'I'll take you up,' Hermione said to Rose, but Hugo had swept into the room and had pinned her to the chair with a bear-hug. 'Oi, you… off to bed,' she laughed.

'And who might you be?' Melissa asked, twinkly-eyed.

'Hugo,' he said, but he looked straight at Draco. 'You owe me a football match.'

'Hugo, darling…' Hermione said, her voice quavering, embarrassed.

'I do, actually,' Draco said, looking deadly serious.

'When?'

Draco was momentarily lost for words.

'Are you trying to catch bad wizards, Mummy?' Hugo asked.

'But isn't that Daddy's job?' Rose said from the door.

'Mummies can catch bad wizards too!' Neville chimed in with a cheery grin.

Hugo persuaded Hermione to allow him a pre-bedtime pumpkin juice and Rose inched her way into the room and ducked under the table, emerging between Hermione and Draco. She began
thumbing through the strewn books and pamphlets, automatically tidying them into piles. Draco's mouth twitched with amusement.

'Okay, Hermione,' Ziff said elatedly, holding El Libro de la Luz Caída aloft, 'this Mago – he's built himself a fortress. Please excuse my terrible translation! … There are many tales connected to this place, the mountain they call Atalaya - and the locals are very afraid and - I'm not going to repeat any of these stories…' He looked at Rose and Hugo… 'But, while I think this is your man, I rather hope it isn’t – if you get my drift?'

'The bad wizard,' Rose declared in deep, sonorous tones. 'What's that you're reading?' she asked Draco.

'This is the longest pumpkin juice in the world,' Harry chortled at Hugo who was now lolling against him, slurping tiny, tiny sips to stay up as long as possible.

'The thing about THIS wizard,' Draco said to Rose, 'is he's been alive for over two hundred years. Can you imagine that?'

She screwed up her face. 'I think that'd get boring…'

'I agree.'

'And everyone you know might die before you,' Rose continued. 'I'd hate that.'

Draco looked at her, a solemn look on his face. 'I think I'd hate that too, actually.' And he did, Hermione thought… she could feel it off him. She realised she was staring at him and quickly looked away, but her eyes fell to his hands as he closed his book and neatly placed it on one of Rose's tidy piles. He had such beautiful hands, she thought. Long, tapering fingers. Her mind instantly shifted to the opera box last night and the feel of those hands on her body…

'What's that one?' Rose asked, pointing to a pamphlet, Voces Magicae Erotas.

'It says – in Ancient Greek I believe – Magical Voices about Love.'

'Now that's what would be sad about being hundreds and hundreds of years old…' She pointed to the other pamphlet, 'maybe the sad wizard's one of those? Demons live forever, don't they, because they're from hell?'

Draco scrutinised the pamphlet. 'Voces Magicae Daemonas – how did you read this, Rose? That was very clever of you.'

She shrugged. 'Obvious.'

'Well, luckily, there's no such thing as demons.'

'So, why's there a book about them?' Rose replied in cool tones. She scooped her voluminous red hair over her shoulder and gave Draco a haughty look.

'Not everything you read in books is real.' He looked over at Hermione and grinned, his grey eyes gleaming. Her heart sang in reply.

'Why did somebody write it then?'

'Because people like to tell each other stories, for all sorts of weird and wonderful reasons.'

'Like scaring little girls before they go to bed,' Bill commented wryly.
'Exactly,' Draco agreed.

'It's not real, then? There's no bad wizard?' Rose said. Hermione could see she was a little bit relieved, in spite of herself.

'Merlin, no!' Draco laughed, 'no wizard would dare be bad with your Mummy around or your Uncle Harry, would they?'

'Rose darling, school tomorrow,' Hermione said softly to her daughter, standing up to ease her away from Draco's side. Draco was a lot closer than she expected. He was so close, she could feel his warmth, like a gust of heated air gently stroking her skin.

She ushered the children out of the room and tucked them into bed upstairs, taking a few moments before heading back to take a deep, calming breath and at least wash her face.

XXX

When Hermione returned to the room it was clear a dispute had broken out.

'Absolute bollocks! They could pick up the idea of demons from anywhere, Bill!' Harry said, tersely.

'Which is why – and no offence intended, Ziff – wizardkind is probably best keeping separate from Muggle culture,' Melissa said, tightly folding her arms and nodding with prim sagacity.

'Bullshit!' Draco burst out. 'What about Muggle music and cinema and technology and decent fucking restaurants? Why should we be separated from those?'

'But maybe it's best our kids learn this stuff when they're OLDER and can make their own decisions?' Bill argued.

'Why? What are we? Fucking Amish?'

'What's Amish?' Melissa shrilled.

'But none of what you are saying discounts the existence of demons – or possession,' Ziff maintained, stroking his meticulously pruned goatee in a distant, meditative manner.

'I've never heard of someone being possessed by a kelpie or a kappa!' Melissa contended. 'That's plain stupid.'

'I've never heard of those creatures at all,' Ziff said dismissively, 'but in Muggle culture there's a long tradition of a different occultist type of magic, associated with a supernatural realm…'

Hermione sat down – her chair was now next to Draco's and she was sure the table had shrunk from earlier.

'The comment Rose made about demons… Ziff wondered if Salvedra might be channeling,' Draco explained in quiet tones. 'We were just explaining that this isn't very likely.'

'Not gonna lie… I hate the idea of a demon that could possess somebody…' Neville said with a discernible shudder.

'But possession happens, Neville,' Harry said quietly. 'I'm not suggesting this as a reason for Salvedra being billions of years old or whatever he is, but what about Professor Quirrell? Or what happened with Ginny?'
'But that wasn't *demon* possession, Harry,' Hermione said, 'that was still Voldemort – in *essence*, or parking a little bit of his soul in somebody else's body or an enchanted object.'

'Voldemort wasn't a demon or a supernatural being at all,' Draco grunted. 'He was just a bog-standard wizard, who got a bit ahead of himself…'

Bill laughed hollowly. 'A bit more than that, Draco! Think how powerful he was!'

Draco looked uncomfortable, 'Yeah, I suppose, but, like us, he was still physiologically human. He just happened to be a super-powerful, psychopathic cunt as well.'

'If anyone or anything was what you're calling a demon – and not in a nasty little beastie way like a Kappa – then it was *you-know-who*,' Melissa sulked. 'If a demon is meant to live forever and possess people, then that's exactly what HE did!'

Draco groaned in vexation. 'No, Melissa, he used dark magic – spells - to try to become immortal. He tried to subvert the rules of magic… to test the limits of natural science, to become LIKE a demon. And that's when it becomes dark magic. It's fucking scary, but it's nothing to…' he pushed *Voces Magicae Daemonas* with a single finger into the centre of the table, 'this* kind of thing. This is nihilist. This is hopeless. You can defeat dark magic with better magic that works. With this kind of shit, all you can do is avoid it or hope it isn't real.'

'But what if it IS real?' Neville said. He suddenly looked like he wanted to be anywhere but in Bill's study. It was pitch black outside and Hermione thought their reflections in the window, lit up by the soft, orange glow of the lanterns, looked warm and secure but also strangely vulnerable. 'I mean, it sounds to me like this Salvedra can possess people, too. It says here…' Neville slapped *Encantadas Asturianas*, 'that he developed something called *Proyección Astral*.'

'Man, that's some freaky shit!' Ziff said, goggle-eyed, reading over Neville's shoulder. 'Means he can split his consciousness from his body and be in other places or things or people, far away from himself.'

Hermione rubbed her arms, suddenly goosebumped. She instantly chilled at the memory of Sylvestra's black eyes in that room in Arcana.

And that feeling that she wasn't alone… But she'd felt that elsewhere, too, hadn't she?

She could sense Draco's eyes on her… 'You okay?' he asked.

'That's just stupid!' Melissa groused, 'now you're trying to scare us!' She heaved a huge sigh of frustration and reached for the pumpkin juice and was then disappointed when she discovered that the flagon was empty.

'None of this is a fucking picnic, Melissa!' Draco said, bristling. 'PEOPLE HAVE DIED.'

'I'll tell you what's scary, guys,' Ziff said… he picked up *El Libro de la Luz Caída* and read – in his halting translation – 'EL Gran Mago de Abaran is defended by a red, glass dragon of his own devising. The numerous deaths of cattle and small children … are alternatively laid at the door of … the culpability of the grand wizard or indeed his fiery friend… Okay, so to sum that up, this dude has a DRAGON. A fucking dragon. That's something you need to think about if you go to this Atalaya.'

'A GLASS dragon?' Harry scoffed.

'The rock! It's flashing!' Bill called out. 'Who's got the codes?'
'That would be me.' But Draco hesitated to hand them over.

However, Harry had already muscled the rock in its glass case to the table. The rock's pulsing glow was reflected in his glasses - and then it ceased.

Draco reluctantly passed him the codes and Harry removed the cover and tapped the rock with his wand: 'Perdix Perdere!'

'No, it's the third one,' Hermione said testily, suddenly certain - and she targeted the rock with her wand, muttering 'Erorzen Profunda'. The rock jolted and her wand fizzed, emitting a purple spark – and nothing. 'I felt sure…' she griped, repositioning the rock with her fingers. She instantly felt a sharp ache in her knuckles and gasped.

'Erorzen Profunda,' she whispered again.

Salvedra's voice suddenly rang around the room … a low, cloying, hissing voice; insidious. It crawled up Hermione's spine and seemed to hang, menacingly, in the air around her - slow and lispy.

'QUIS ES?… QUIS ES? Who are you? … Show me…'

Draco instantly slammed the glass lid back onto the corundum and turned to look at Hermione, eyes pale, face drained of colour.

Hermione's heart was racing manically inside her chest.

'Looks like they know the corundum in the Haast's house's a fake,' Harry said to Bill. 'We have to act fast. Get to this Abaran. Take out the mothership.'

'You're going to have to count me out of this little adventure,' Melissa said regretfully. 'Hilary would have kittens if he thought I was tearing about the Spanish countryside slaying dark wizards.'

Hermione had to stifle a giggle; the idea of perfectly-kempt Melissa doing any of that, was even less likely than demons actually existing.

'I've got work tomorrow,' Neville sighed.

Draco snuck a glance at Hermione. 'I'm not sure you should go.'

'Why not?' she stammered. She loved that he cared… but she had to go. She knew it.

'You know why,' he murmured.

And she did... Salvedra had been searching for her. The rock had sprung into life when SHE touched it.

XXX

Everyone moved into the hallway soon after. Hermione was desperate to speak to Draco, but every time she was within a few feet, Bill commanded her attention or Melissa butted in.

'I'm a bit nervous after all the things we've been talking about – and that creepy voice,' Melissa bleated to Draco, thinking she was out of earshot. 'Hilary's away tonight… you couldn't do the gentlemanly thing and escort me home, could you?'

'Through the Floo Network?' Draco asked in incredulous tones. 'There won't be any demons in
THERE, Melissa, I can assure you.

'I meant… once I'm at home.'

Draco looked perplexed. 'Sorry. I'm not following.

'She means will you go home with her?' Harry had been eavesdropping, too.

'Not like THAT,' Melissa said in hoity-toity tones. 'Honestly!'

Draco and Harry grinned as Melissa stalked imperiously away.

Draco's eyes sought Hermione's, but Bill was bearing down on her with quills and parchment and shoving her towards the kitchen. 'Shall we work up our plan for tomorrow?' he said chirply. 'We should leave early.'

Hermione could sense that Draco was in the kitchen doorway behind her.

'Are you okay to pop me back to London, mate?' Ziff asked. 'Got an early start.'

'Oh? Sure.' Draco's fingertips briefly trailed against Hermione's arm. She instantly felt electrified.

Bill was foraging through the kitchen cupboards. 'We should take some provisions … Hermione, can you help me find the dittany? I don't know where Fleur keeps it.'

'Where is Fleur?' Harry asked pointedly.

'Angelina's…'

'Still? … I might go and hurry her along,' Harry added in casual tones.

Bill swung around and peered at the clock. 'Maybe they got chatting?' but dark concern shaded his features.

As they spoke there was a loud commotion and a thud from the sitting-room, followed by cries and a loud, piercing wail.

'Shit!' Bill bellowed, sprinting into the sitting-room.

The wailing came from baby Joyana, clutched tightly in her mother's arms. Arlene was wide-eyed with terror. Fleur was patting Arlene on the back and trying to comfort the baby. Kai had tumbled clumsily onto the floor; a picture of peevish gloom.

'What's happened?' Bill screeched.

Angelina crashed out of the fireplace, clutching her nightdress around her.

'Fucking Blasters!' Angelina cried. 'They came round with torches and dogs – a whole fucking pack of them!'

'Why?... Who?' Bill looked desperate.

Angelina was so furious at first, she could hardly speak and had to take a deep breath to calm down. 'Half of them were Aurors; you'd know some of them, Harry… Jervis Grimshaw, Tom Bennet – the one Ron works with, Charlie Dowson, Smeeth, Nesbit… loads more! Fair few I'd never seen … but the guy who took over Florian Fortescue's when he died – HE was there! And
one of the barmen from The Three Broomsticks!' She spotted Hermione. 'When I said that one of these days I'd be at my wit's end, I didn't bloody expect it to be the next fucking day!'

'Come on, I'll make tea,' Hermione said grimly, getting the nod from Fleur. But as she spoke she could see Draco's silvery hair in the garden through the window. He was walking towards the front door. Harry went to let him in.

'Can we stay here?' Kai asked Bill.

'Of course!' Bill exchanged glances with Fleur. 'It's safe here.'

'Are the wards up to date?' Fleur asked in tremulous tones.

He nodded emphatically. 'I'm paranoid, love, you know me…' She gave him a small grin in return.

'What did they want?' Draco asked, his voice commanding the room's attention.

'The guy who led the *posse*…never seen him before…' Angelina's voice dripped with derisory disdain. 'He said we were hiding *Sub Rosa* saboteurs.'

'Had you told anyone that you had Arlene and Kai staying with you?' Draco pressed. 'Because they obviously KNEW, didn't they?'

Hermione hung her head and sighed. 'Angelina…' everyone turned to look at her. 'Sylvestra heard us talking outside the opera house.'

'But we didn't mention *these* guys,' Angelina said, puzzled. 'We were talking about…' she gestured with her head towards Draco. It hadn't been the subtlest of nods, Hermione thought with a heavy heart…

'Did the Blasters see Arlene and Kai?' Harry asked. 'That's what matters.'

'We hid upstairs in the attics while they searched the house,' Arlene said plaintively, 'but they were still hanging outside for ages – and then Joyana started crying, so Angelina distracted them with a big row – she was something fierce! – and we made a break for it.'

'I stunned a few of the fuckers and ran after them,' Angelina said cockily.

Harry and Draco looked at each other. Hermione could sense their mutual despair.

'But now they'll be looking for you,' Harry said. 'They'll think you've got something to hide.'

'Unless they knew already…which they clearly did,' Draco added. 'I know you checked Hermione's house, Harry, but either someone was watching the place yesterday morning or you missed something. Because we still haven't worked out how they knew to set up George at the Ministry, have we?'

Harry looked worried.

'I take it you knocked on the door when you arrived?' Hermione asked Kai.

Kai nodded. 'We'd never just *Floo* in – that's rude,'

'So that looks like someone was watching the house,' Hermione said in cool tones.

Draco grimaced. 'They're fucking toying with us…' Hermione could tell he was unconvinced; he
believed there was something inside her house. The problem was... deep down, she agreed, but thinking about it was too frightening. 'Was Tom Bennet with the Blasters?'

'Old mates, aren't you?' Angelina said archly.

'OLD as in former, yes... Well, Bennet was with Ephraim earlier.'

'Bugger... Do you think this might be about George?' Angelina groaned. Her eyes flashed towards Hermione. 'A get-a-move-on message?'

'I doubt it,' Hermione said crossly. 'The truth is, you guys are valuable,' she said to Arlene and Kai. 'And we're going to keep you safe.' She turned to Bill. 'Do you think one of us should quickly check The Burrow? Make sure these Blasters aren't just making nasty house-calls?'

'I'll do it,' Harry said, marching into the fireplace.

'Mummy?' came Rose's voice from the doorway. Her face was scrunched and pale with tiredness. 'What are you talking about?'

'Oh... nothing important, darling.' Hermione scooped her up, just as baby Joyana started crying again.

XXX

'With all the new people, can we still stay here?' Rose asked, a fearful frown on her face. Hermione tucked her tightly into one of the single beds crammed into Victoire and Dominque's bedroom. Hugo was splayed on the other bed, covers entwined around his legs. His quiet shushing breaths echoed around the room.

'Of course we can,' Hermione smiled, 'so leave a little space for me in the bed, won't you?'

Rose nodded enthusiastically. 'Good... I don't want to go home.'

'Why not?'

Rose's voice dropped to an almost inaudible whisper. 'The bad wizard...'

A bolt of alarm shot through Hermione. She was holding her breath. 'Who, darling?'

Rose shrugged and looked down. 'I don't know... he's not always there. Only sometimes.'

Hermione's heart was suddenly clattering in her chest and her mouth was dry. Had someone come into her house and frightened her child?

'When – when does he come?'

'Changes... sometimes at night, sometimes in the morning...'

'What does he look like, Rose?' Hermione asked, desperately trying to keep her tone light.

Rose snuggled closer to her mother. 'I've never seen him... and sometimes it changes. He changes.'

Hermione wasn't sure if she should be relieved or not. Maybe this was a figment of Rose's imagination?

Except, she feared it wasn't...
'I feel him,' Rose said – 'his eyes… their eyes… they watch, they're watching.'

Hermione held her daughter tight and kissed her on the head. Outwardly she seemed calm but a chaos of panic was ripping her up inside. 'Where do you feel these eyes?'

'Just… sort of around. Downstairs.'

The darkness… there was a darkness. She knew that darkness.

'Don't you worry,' Hermione said firmly. 'We're not going back.'

XXX

'Draco?' Hermione said, gently tugging his sleeve. He was standing in the kitchen doorway. Everyone was drinking tea and there was even some jolly banter. Harry had returned from The Burrow. He'd told an irate Molly that he was drunk and had accidentally Floo-ed into the wrong house...

Draco immediately followed her across the hallway to the living-room where she'd slept last night; presumably one or more of the new arrivals would move in tonight.

It was dark. Draco was about to light the lamps with a flick of his wand but Hermione clamped her hand around his wrist.

'No,' she whispered.

They stood in the darkness, illuminated solely by a shard of moonlight shining through the window. But she felt irradiated by his whiteness… she didn't need light.

'What's happened?' he asked, his voice low and quiet like hers.

Hermione suddenly felt seized with what felt like stage fright. She'd been so paranoid about Draco all day, but the moment she'd needed someone, he'd been her only thought.

'It's – it's Rose… she says she feels eyes in our house…'

He gently tilted her chin up and looked at her, an intense expression on his face. 'And you agree with her.'

She nodded. 'Not – not all the time… but yes. Yes, I do.'

'Is she okay?'

'I think so…'

Draco sighed and pulled her into his arms. 'That's it. You're not going back. Not ever.'

She breathed him in, the sense of him tumbling through her like soft, running water. 'We're safe here.'

'But it's not a permanent solution, Hermione.'

'Well, hopefully it won't need to be.' … One day.

'We still need to work on that, unfortunately.'
Hermione looked up at him. 'I think we're going to need another safe house anyway… there's the others: *Sub Rosa*. It's only going to get worse… before it gets better.'

He nodded mournfully and they fell into silence, gazing at each other; Hermione felt she might burst with feeling.

He gently stroked her face, looking at her with dark, velvety eyes. 'What I'd give to sleep with you tonight…' he murmured softly.

She smiled. 'It'd be difficult…' she whispered, 'not enough beds, too many people.' But his lean, hard fingers caressed her back, her sides, and she was suddenly dizzy with desire. She could hear his heart beating loudly; the sound was pulsing through the wall of dazzling white that she could feel from him. 'And – and I wouldn't be much fun…' she looked up at him, 'wrong time of the month…' she mouthed, cheeks glowing.

He grinned, gradually easing her back until they were pressed against the wall. 'I don't care about that…'

'Oh, Ron says…'

'I'm not Ron…' His face was close to her own… she could feel the warmth of his breath and she yearned for his mouth on hers.

'No… no you're not,' she breathed.

'And – I also want to *sleep* with you,' Draco said, smiling. He ghosted his lips across hers prompting a flurry of butterflies in her stomach. 'And wake up beside you. And make love to you all over again.' His lips continued to brush against her jaw and round to her neck.

She clutched her fingers hard into his arms, almost faint with need. 'You're killing me…' she groaned. She knew if he kissed her now, kissed her with the heated feeling that was swimming between them, they wouldn't be able to stop.

'I – I thought you didn't care,' she confessed. 'I'm such a twat.'

'Why would you think that?' Draco looked at her, genuinely confused.

'Oh, you never looked at me and I didn't hear from you… and I got myself paranoid… God, I feel like a bloody lovesick teenager. It's embarrassing.'

Draco laughed and his eyes glistened. 'Well… that makes two of us.' He leant his forehead against hers. 'I had a day from hell, trapped with Ephraim; and then seeing you this evening - I didn't know what to fucking do with myself. I felt too much…'

She couldn't stop smiling. 'I thought I was a *glory-fuck*.'

He blew his cheeks out and leant even closer into her, looking at her in such a way that she forgot to breathe. 'A GLORIOUS fuck I think is the word you're looking for;' he whispered, his breath tickling her face. His body was hard against her; his arousal unmistakable. She couldn't resist pushing against him. He closed his eyes and eased out a shuddering breath...

But there were voices approaching.

Hermione choked back the stab of acute frustration that coursed through both of them. They reluctantly pulled apart and Hermione threw the lights on with a flick of her wrist.
He shook his head, smiling in despair. 'It's even worse now, isn't it? We need somewhere of our own.'

She gave him a sad smile. 'I better go and check on Rose.'

He nodded. She touched his cheek and was about to leave, but - she had to tell him... 'Draco. Salvedra... he spoke to me before. At Arcana. I felt the darkness, you see. His darkness. And I couldn't move. And then he said it.'

'Said what?' Draco asked, looking like his heart had been crushed to ash.

She opened her mouth to say, but changed her mind. Somehow that felt safer... but was it already too late?

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"CACTUS" by TELEMAN

"NEVER EVER" by ROYKSOPP (feat: SUSANNE SUNDFOR)

"DO YOU REALISE?" by THE FLAMING LIPS

"LOVELY EYES" by OSCAR

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
44. El Drac Dormit es Desperta

‘I thought Salvedra built a FORTRESS! This is pathetic,’ Melissa complained.

It was true. Instead of the grand citadel Hermione had envisaged, the ‘Castillo de Cieza’ was little more than a crumbling, graffiti-covered sandstone wall, jutting out from the peak of Mount Atalaya.

This was Hermione’s second disappointment of the day. The first had been Melissa’s sudden change of heart. She’d woken up, yearning for adventure, and hightailed it back to Shell Cottage first thing.

Mount Atalaya was closer in stature and scope to the ‘arrogant hill’ Melissa had scoffed at the night before. It reared above the modern market town of Cieza. They’d been able to Portkey into the visitors’ car park and hike the short, dusty track to the Castillo.

Draco and Harry walked ahead to the next rocky outcrop beyond the ruined wall and were studying the bleak, scrubby landscape, Ziff’s printed map in hand. Harry beckoned and they dipped from view.

Bill tugged a long, scarlet cape from Melissa’s bag. ‘Put this on,’ he grunted.

Melissa pulled a face and miniaturised the cape, folding it like a handkerchief into the pocket of her fitted robe.

Bringing the red cloaks had been Harry’s idea, to disguise themselves as Los Rojos.

They traipsed after Draco and Harry, who were marching downhill towards a forested area, tucked into the deep cleft between the apex of Mount Atalaya and a lower, secondary peak.

‘I think we’re best following the line of the river,’ Bill said, pointing to a glistening, blue streak, snaking sinuously through the trees below, curving around the back of the mountain before continuing alongside a patchwork expanse of fields towards Abaran a few miles away.

Melissa half-skidded down the path, sliding on loose, powdery stones to reach Draco and Harry at the head of the party.

‘Bit of a handicap that one,’ Bill muttered.

‘She’s only here to bat her eyelids at Draco,’ Hermione replied, unable to extinguish the rancour from her voice.

Bill shook his head as Melissa crashed into Draco, who had to pick her up from the ground and help dust down her pristine, jet-black robe. He appeared to be instructing her to don the red cape.
Draco, Harry and Melissa disappeared into a thick clump of palm trees fringing the riverbank below.

Bill looked up. Spits of rain were falling from rapidly darkening, asphalt-grey skies. ‘Weather changing,’ he grumbling.

‘And very rapidly,’ Hermione noted with an inkling of alarm. A monstrous bank of black cloud was rolling over the mountainous Sierra looming behind Atalaya towards them. A fierce drumming rattled through the skies followed by a heart-stopping thunderclap, which seemed to explode directly into Hermione’s ears.

A luminous skein of lightning wove its way through the clouds, electrifying the air. Hermione could feel the hairs on her arms prickle and her scalp tingled.

A torrent of rain drenched them in seconds, despite Hermione quickly casting Impervius Charms. But it was difficult to see where the others had headed through the sheet of water that seemed to block their path to the woodland.

‘Think they’re that way!’ Bill cried, his voice almost whipped away by the sudden swirl of dusty wind that threw his long, red hair into a frenzy, slapping his face and stopping his mouth. They dashed into the comparative solace of the palm trees, where the sound of the rain hammering on the leaves was almost deafening.

There was a frenzied squawking and a mass of birds ascended from the treetops on the opposite riverbank; a black veil that swayed and swirled.

Hermione was shocked to feel her magic surge, wild and exuberant, deep inside her... Her vision suddenly fractured into a million glistening pieces coalescing into a shining mosaic, shot through with pure, golden light. Bill’s face reared into view, a gleaming Picasso, and she could hear her name being called – loud, frantic. It took a few moments for her to recognise the voice as Draco’s.

Her vision instantly cleared; everything was sharper, cleaner. It felt like she was seeing for the first time.

The colours of this drenched landscape were deep and vibrant. Every whorl and rivet in the grainy bark of the trees surrounding them was clearly delineated. The foliage and the palm fronds dangling high above were the brightest, most vivid combination of greens and golds she’d ever seen. Every single molecule in the wall of water tumbling from the sky appeared both transclucent and yet teeming with colour – luxurious vermilion red, rich creamy magenta, azure blue, buttercup yellow...

‘Hermione!’ Draco continued shouting...

‘This way!’ Bill yelled, snatching Hermione out of her trance.

Draco cut a lonely figure, fighting his way through the scything rain and the dense mass of thick tree trunks to get to them.

His hair shimmered like silver satin out of the clouded gloom...

‘We’re here!’ Hermione screamed, a savage burst of energy erupting inside of her. Every sense had sprung to life; she could feel the forceful throb of her blood pumping through her veins.

She ran towards Draco, Bill close behind.
Draco grabbed hold of her and she had to clamp her teeth together and push her arms to her side to stop herself from wrapping her arms around him and kissing him with wanton desperation…

He was panting hard and leant forwards, one hand on her shoulder, to catch his breath. ‘Thank fucking god,’ he said, shaking his head. He’d clearly forgot to cast an Impervius Charm. His cape, shirt and jeans were soaked through and one side of him was coated in thick, sandy mud. ‘Don’t know what happened…’

Hermione could see every crease and pore in his skin… the dark root of every single stubble-hair on his face. His lips were a glorious fuschia, his skin glowed ethereal gold. Every single raindrop caught in his eye-lashes was dazzling and his eyes were like silver suns boring into her.

She was pierced by an acute stab of desire that threatened to overwhelm her. She could barely stand upright.

Draco had noticed… and was conflicted, confused. But he kept his hand on her shoulder; a warm, steadying presence, anchoring her into the reality of their situation, infusing her with a soft, calm whiteness.

He was telling Bill – telling them both – that the rain had fallen so fast and with such vigour, half the riverbank had collapsed into a fast-flowing slurry… ‘I can’t find the other two!’

The skies were darkening rapidly to dense dusk and another blinding bolt of striated lightning struck the opposite riverbank amidst a furious flurry of dust and chipped wood. A clattering refrain of thunder echoed through the valley...

This wizard’s a beast!’ Bill snarled. ‘Come on!’

Draco slipped his hand around Hermione’s. ‘Just breath, beautiful…’ he said in low tones, ‘it’s the magic…’

‘It’s almost too much…’ She could feel its power rippling through her, wanting to break out of her. She clutched his hand so tightly her fingernails were gouging into his skin. She wondered if she should turn back… but she couldn’t leave Draco and Harry alone in this place.

‘Use it,’ Draco commanded. ‘Use the magic. Find Harry.’

He was right, if she could just focus…

‘This is where I lost sight of them!’ Draco yelled to Bill who was striding on ahead.

Bill surveyed the torn-up riverbank with an anxious eye. ‘Harry!’ he shouted, but his voice sounded weak and pathetic amidst the groan and crunch of trees bending and cracking in the swirling winds’ path.

A faint smudge of green was spinning somewhere to the right of Hermione’s temple… flickering, then fading…

‘He’s over here,’ she said, pulling Draco after her as she tramped through a closely-packed cluster of violently wind-shook palm trees. The ground was a slurry of churned-up mud, brush and exposed, limb-like tree roots.

She glimpsed a flash of red through the trees… Melissa! Her pinned and perfect hair had been spun into a tangle and her red cloak was flapping so violently in the wind, she looked like she might take flight. She was gritting her teeth and crying, holding onto something long and dark slipping into a
It was Harry.

They immediately slid down the bank, followed by Bill, and wrestled a low-hanging branch from a tree, thrusting it into Harry’s outstretched hand. A fiery spear of light beamed from Bill’s wand and seized hold of it.

‘Get behind me and pull!’ Bill cried, casting a Carpe Retractum.

Harry slowly emerged from the muddy morass, but this wasn’t enough, Hermione thought sourly. Something had a hold of him and was pulling him back down again.

She saw Harry’s glasses had slipped off and were sinking into the mud so she quickly accioed them and stowed them safely in her pocket.

‘Don’t move, Harry!’ she shouted. His flailing limbs were embroiling him deeper and deeper. ‘Locomotor Mortis!’ she screamed, her wand glowing purple.

She tried to banish the sweaty panic that had overtaken her and muttered a Mobilicorpus, over and over… Harry’s body slid slowly upwards but then fell backwards into the swamp. Her magic wasn’t strong enough. At least… her usual magic.

*Just want it*, she thought. Really, really want it! She closed her eyes, concentrating so hard it felt like her brain was on fire, and imagined Harry standing beside her…

This time she felt something unlock within her; a sense that whatever was holding Harry had disengaged and he was free to move.

Moments later, he was lying on the riverbank, vomiting mud and struggling to breath. Hermione quickly cast a counterspell so that he was able to move freely again.

Bill slapped Harry on his back like he was a child - ‘Get it out, Harry. Come on, get it all out.’

Melissa muscled in. ‘He needs Anapneo!’

She smeared mud and vomit from Harry’s face using the edge of her cloak and cast the spell. Harry spluttered and a trail of noxious, yellow liquid oozed from his mouth. He blinked, sat up, and his hand automatically went to his face.

‘Looking for these?’ Hermione smiled, pressing his glasses into his hand. ‘Thanks,’ he rasped, ‘and thanks, Melissa. That was a close one.’ He put his glasses on and inched his way up from the floor with Bill’s help.

Another monstrous clap of thunder resounded through the forest. The rain was beating so hard the congealed mass of slime and mud that coated Harry from top to bottom was slipping wetly down his body. His face, pink and raw-looking, was re-emerging from its caked brown mask.

A blazing bolt of lightning streaked across the sky and there was a sharp crack and sizzle from the trees opposite. A weaving plume of smoke spiraled skywards… A tall mastic tree was burning.

‘He’s over there…’ Hermione murmured. ‘We need to cross the river.’

Melissa turned horrified eyes to her. ‘He’s too strong!’

‘Either that or he has grotesquely over-active wards,’ Draco said in acid tones. ‘Is there anything
Bill shook his head, perplexed. ‘This is Wild West stuff; it’s a strange kind of magic, actually. It – it tastes strange.’ He screwed his mouth up in disgust.

‘He’s using light,’ Hermione said. It suddenly seemed very clear to her – and this nudged her into a dawning realization that this was the basis for the colour-magic that she increasingly – reluctantly - felt beholden to.

This surreal, magical landscape had been rendered in shades of ‘light’ and the oddly, electrical sensation that licked through her with relentless rapidity was a magical manipulation of the electromagnetic field. It rendered this world unreal, untethered; as though they’d stepped into a crazed Hieronymous Bosch painting.

This other-worldly perception was exacerbated by a whirring buzz, like an army of tiny chain-saws, getting louder and louder.

‘What the bloody hell is that?’ Melissa shrilled. A purple and black striped insect, as big as a hand, was hovering close by before shooting upwards, slipping into the highest, darkest folds of the palm tree grove.

‘It’s a visp,’ Harry croaked. ‘I thought they’d died out.’

‘Are they dangerous?’ Draco asked.

‘Highly. Their sting can be fatal or disfigure for life.’

‘Then why the fuck aren’t we running?’ Draco cried, as the monotonous whirring sound suddenly gained in volume and a sizeable purplish blur blotted out the dark clouds above, casting them into cold, stygian gloom. ‘There’s thousands of the fuckers!’

He grabbed Hermione’s hand and they ran deep into the forest, dodging trees and leaping over mounds of rutted earth. But they’d soon reached the end of the woods and were standing exposed on the sandy bank beside the river, which was flowing unnaturally fast, churning around rocks, spiraling into dark, bubbling whirlpools.

Hermione gazed at the watery maelstrom between them and the land opposite. ‘Can we Apparate?’

‘Just tried that … blocked.’

Harry and Melissa were sprinting towards them; but Bill flew past, heading right.

‘Boat!’ he called.

Hermione peered through the rain and wind at Bill and Harry as they struggled to unleash a tied-up zodiac. The wind kept lifting it up and dashing it against Bill’s body, trying to push him into the river.

Hermione and Draco rushed to help.

‘They’re coming!’ Harry yelled.

Hermione didn’t dare look back, but she could almost feel the wind stirring and parting, allowing the swarm of visps to home in.

Melissa looked aghast at the inflatable boat and the raging river.
‘I can’t!’ she shrieked.

‘You haven’t got a choice!’ Draco shouted back.

‘But there’ll be grindylows and Kappas and I’m scared of water! I – I just want to get out of this damn place!’

‘Unless you have a secret spell to counter an unbelievably powerful tempest jinx and kill off those blasted visps, you’re getting in that boat!’ Bill roared.

Melissa shook her head, sobbing hysterically.

‘We haven’t got time for this!’ Harry complained, wading through the mud, hauling Melissa over his shoulder and throwing her into the boat.

The zodiac immediately started spinning manically and Melissa’s panicked screams reached such a pitch they were overpowering the thundering sound of the visps who were now swirling dangerously around them.

Everyone threw themselves into the boat after her and used their wands as paddles to frantically steer away from the bank. Searing cracks of lightning that scorched the eyes lit up the foaming flood that surged around them.

Bill fiddled with the outboard motor. ‘Damn… it’s broken,’ he hissed, but Draco targeted it with his wand and the engine clicked into gear, propelling them far from the riverbank into the turbulent midstream.

Hermione’s heart was in her mouth as the zodiac bumped and bounced downriver, perching for a few instants atop jagged rocks before sliding rapidly through broiling froth - almost upending them. Melissa’s screams rang in her ears…

The boat rocked and swayed and rounded a corner; they were closer to the opposite bank now. Harry blasted rocks out of their path, his wand hand shaking with the effort… but one rock swooped out of sight and a large tail smacked onto the water with a reverberating splash, half-filling the boat.

A dark, watery abyss opened up in front of them and the zodiac lurched forwards, its prow plunging into the river. Everyone slid to the front of the boat, colliding painfully in a tangled heap. Melissa tried to stand but the boat suddenly reared up, driven by something beneath the water, and she lost her footing and somersaulted - narrowly missing the outboard motor - straight into the water.

The boat steadied; but Melissa had been dragged down.

Before anyone had time to react, Bill had stripped off his scarlet robe and leapt straight in after her.

Draco immediately killed the engine… Without its mechanical chug-chug they could clearly hear the wailing of the visps hovering on the distant riverbank and the metronomic beat of hard raindrops, the size of small boulders, strafing the water.

Hermione desperately scanned the river, but she could barely see beyond the rain assaulting her vision, and two pairs of hands hustled her away from the edge of the boat.

‘Just stay still!’ Harry insisted, keeping his hand hooked around her arm. ‘There’s something under us…’
Draco returned his hand to the tiller and squinted into the dark, chaos of the river. Rivulets of water flowed down his face... he looked cold and sodden. But then his eyes widened and he flung himself backwards, crashing into Harry and Hermione, as a jet of water fountained from the river and the slick, black tail they’d seen earlier slapped the boat with formidable force, pushing it upstream.

‘NO!’ Hermione screamed as they were pushed further away... further from Bill. She broke free from Harry’s grip and reached overboard, paddling her wand fruitlessly in the river, desperate to fight the boat’s forward motion.

Harry began shooting white plumes of light into the murky water behind them... a chain of white bubbles was trailing the boat, fast approaching.

The meagre light shining into the river illuminated Bill - face pale, red hair streaming in all directions - moving in agonizingly slow motion towards the boat, dragging a flowing red streak in his wake. He surfaced explosively, gulping lung-fulls of air...

‘Take her!’ he shouted to Draco and Harry, hoisting Melissa’s inert figure towards them.

Grunting with the effort, they pulled Melissa on-board. She flopped heavily onto her back, gaping like a fish, her eyes fixed into an unseeing trance.

Hermione targeted Bill with her wand and levitated him out of the water. He flew clumsily through the air and belly-flopped heavily on top of Melissa’s prone figure. Melissa screamed in shock and her cries intensified as Draco summoned a wave on their left-hand side, which crashed into the side of the inflatable boat jolting it into the riverbank. He immediately scrambled ashore and fastened the zodiac to a tree.

‘Do you need a hand?’ Harry asked Bill, who’d scooped Melissa into his arms. She’d finally stopped screaming but was now shivering uncontrollably. Bill shook his head and they trudged after Hermione through the boggy mud.

‘The burnt tree was back there,’ Draco said, pointing to a glade surrounded by densely-clumped mastic trees and blackthorn thickets. ‘That way,’ he indicated further along the riverbank, ‘is the way to Abaran.’

XXX

It was gloomly under the canopy of the mastic trees and the ground beneath their feet was a mulch of mud and leaves. Hermione was soaked to the skin and cold mud was oozing into her walking boots. Impervius Charms had been rendered irrelevant by this deluge.

‘Melissa’s freezing,’ Bill said. ‘We’ve got to rest.’

Harry frowned. ‘It’s getting darker... We should push on.’ But one look at Melissa, who was blue-lipped and shaking, and he quickly relented.

Harry and Draco gathered scrub and sliced off low-hanging branches with their wands to build a fire, while Bill conjured a sturdy shield charm.

Draco lit the make-do campfire with a quick Incendio and everybody huddled as close to the blaze as possible.

Hermione took hold of Melissa’s hands. They felt like ice blocks. ‘You okay?’
Melissa shook her head. ‘I – I just can’t get warm.’ Her teeth chattered as she spoke.

Hermione hugged her, hoping body heat might help. She could sense a faint whiff of colour; like static on an old TV. Hermione closed her eyes and summoned up her own rich purple; it felt vibrant and warm in comparison.

‘Melissa…’ she whispered, a novel idea sprouting within her… it was worth a shot. ‘Close your eyes and think of nothing.’

Hermione concentrated and infused her purple colour with as much heat as she could muster. The effort made her feel flushed, even a little sweaty. She then tried to ease a swoosh of colour towards Melissa’s faded granular grey. She could see it in her mind’s eye, gently suffusing, merging…

‘What are you doing?’ Bill asked curiously.

‘Warming her up.’

Melissa’s eyes started watering, her cheeks glowed and her lips looked less thin and pale than before. ‘Thank you…’

‘Get closer to the fire.’ Hermione coaxed the flames with a flap of her hand.

‘That’s a neat trick you’ve got going there,’ Harry remarked.

‘I’ve never done it before.’

‘It’d be good to learn more about this colour-magic thing,’ Bill said dubiously. ‘Strikes me it’s getting stronger in you, Hermione.’

She considered this. ‘Particularly here… This place. It’s made from colour-magic.’

She gazed at their surroundings, pulsating with lush, vibrant colours; photons, crackling and jostling. And the light seemed to fractionally bend and waver…

And Draco, beside her. He was a burning white beacon in her mind’s eye. Ever-present.

‘This is Salvedra’s domain,’ Harry said thoughtfully. He eyed Hermione with concern. ‘This colour-thing you have with people… have you felt anything or anyone new since coming here?’

Hermione shook her head. ‘Only Melissa.’

‘What’s MY colour?’ Bill asked abruptly.

‘Sorry,’ she smiled. ‘I don’t know.’

‘That’s not fair,’ Bill said, disgruntled. ‘Even Draco has a colour.’

Draco smirked into the fire.

‘I don’t know why I have it with some people and not others,’ Hermione replied. ‘It’s NOT favouritism! I can sense Ephraim and I really don’t want to!… He’s blue.’ Even thinking about it made her feel edgy. ‘It’s very powerful with him. I can even sense his feelings,’ she added in lower tones.

‘How long did it take you to sense mine?’ Draco asked bluntly. His question took her unawares – it was too open in this company - and she blushed deeply.
‘You’re purple,’ Harry said to Hermione.

‘Oh? You see colours, too?’ she asked, pleasantly surprised.

Harry smiled sadly. ‘No. You had a very violet-tinged aura when you blew up the other day in your kitchen… it was pretty fucking freaky.’

‘Your colour changes, though,’ Draco said in matter-of-fact tones. ‘Depending on your mood.’

She stared at him, open-mouthed. ‘Does it?’

He nodded. ‘Not dramatically, but it’s noticeable. It’s not like you veer from purple to green to black… although, there is a bit of black, actually. A tiny bit… more than usual in this place.’ He didn’t look very happy at that.

‘Hold on! Do you have this colour thing too?’ Bill had flushed crimson with alarm.

‘Only with Hermione,’ Draco replied.

‘And you sense her feelings, too?’ Bill asked in querulous tones.

Draco opened his mouth to reply, but Harry interrupted. ‘Does Ephraim know you can feel his thoughts?’ he asked Hermione.

‘He’s oblivious.’

‘For now,’ Draco said acerbically. ‘It’s a bit like you and the rock in Bill’s study… what if he accidentally finds a way to push back?’ He poked the fire with a stick, a fierce look on his face. ‘He’d love it if he could…’

‘I’d be able to defend myself,’ Hermione said stoutly. But no sooner had she said that than a cascade of brilliant, incandescent white - potent, arousing - drenched her mind.

Draco shot her a twinkly sidelong glance. ‘Is that so?’

‘I – I’d be prepared,’ she retorted, hot-faced and breathless… privately furious with him. But he’d made his point; she couldn’t deny it.

‘And I’ll tell you what else has been bugging me,’ Draco said in cutting, angry tones, slicing at the flames with his wand. ‘What did Ephraim mean the other night when he said that you will be one of us?’

‘He was being inappropriately chummy,’ she replied, hoping that would placate him.

‘Has Ephraim tried anything on with you, Hermione?’ Harry asked anxiously.

‘He’s remarkably respectful, actually. Threatening; but respectful.’

‘He’s playing you…’ Draco said in a low-pitched growl, slashing the fire and scattering a flurry of bright red sparks.

‘My worry is this colour-magic is a type of dark magic – a bit like what you used with that Visual Resonation – something you should never have done,’ Bill said, bitterly.

Hermione pondered this. ‘Why is it dark magic?’
‘Because it draws from your soul.’

Hermione hadn’t expected to hear that.

‘That’s the case with most dark magic,’ Harry observed. ‘And you really shouldn’t have done that, Hermione.’ He regarded her with narrowed eyes. ‘But I get the feeling there’s a lot you’re doing these days that might surprise me,’ he said, drawing a sharp look from Draco.

Hermione’s face was the same colour as the embers in the waning fire.

‘Dark magic always leaves a deficit… you owe something,’ Harry warned. ‘If colour magic IS dark magic and draws from the soul, then it’s not the safest form of magic to be meddling with…’

‘Then building this fuck off dreamscape must have cost Salvedra a WORLD of souls!’ Draco exclaimed. ‘It’s extraordinary.’

‘Does that mean every time I sense what Draco or you is feeling, I’m chipping away at my soul?’ Hermione asked, horrified. The same applied to Draco, of course…

‘Dunno…’ Harry admitted. ‘There’s theories that certain forms of magic can counter-balance dark magic… love, for example.’ His eyes darkened.

‘The problem I’ve got, Harry, is I can’t stop what’s happening to me… it just… IS…’ Their eyes met and she knew her words could be read in a number of ways.

And then suddenly, the earth exploded beneath them and Hermione felt she was being tossed high into the air, rotating round and round, higher and higher - sucked away from the riverbank and her friends, towards another place - somewhere unknown, unseen…

She felt herself leaping through space – endless, empty space - but the tall boughs of a tree ahead of her were fast approaching and could be grasped if she just focused…. She flinched with pain as the rough bark of a branch grazed her palm, but she was now swinging high above the ground. Her hands were stinging and rainwater was drenching her hair, pelting her eyes like icy bullets - but she was alive.

She dared to look down. The ground beneath her had been ripped apart, a vast earthy scar. A nest of writhing flobberworms was spilling over the seam of a deep, long trench.

Where was everybody?

‘Hello?’ she cried out, ashamed of the fearful whimper in her voice. ‘Draco? Harry?’

She could hear a dog barking; a throaty howl echoing around the glade. It seemed to weave through the trees, sometimes closer, sometimes further away.

Then suddenly the rain stopped; like a tap had been turned off.

She looked up. The rainclouds were barrelling rapidly through the skies dragging a long stretch of silvery white sky behind them. A sunlit sky should have been a welcome sight, but an eerie orange glow seemed to expand and bloom, encompassing the entire firmament.

The temperature suddenly soared. It was so hot it felt like all the moisture in her lungs had been squeezed out and replaced with scalding air. She couldn’t think straight… couldn’t think at all.

The sluggish heat loosened her limbs and relaxed her hold on the branch she’d been clinging onto
and a warm, wafting breeze encircled her, cocooned her - and then she was falling... a sullen, leaden sensation descending through her body... faster, faster and then so fast her mind went blank as the swirling blur of the ground below rushed to meet her.

She was lying on the ground, more shocked than hurt. She didn’t remember casting a cushioning charm...

‘Come on,’ Harry said, emerging from the undergrowth, wand held high.

‘Did you just...?’

‘Let’s find the others.’

‘What happened?’ she cried, reality suddenly slamming into her consciousness like a wall of pain. Draco...

‘They ran into the forest.’

Steam rose from the damp foliage and the churned-up ground. The flobberworms looked a thousand times bigger and seemed to be swelling, thrashing.

Hermione recoiled and quickly clambered to her feet.

A series of explosive cracks resounded through the valley and a wisp of purple ascended nonchalantly into the sky before fading to grey.

‘Firecrackers!’ she said, pointing to the far tree-line. She could hear barking again and was that the ominous whirring sound of the visps? Sure enough, a long trail of visps, a vibrating, violet cloud, was streaming across the sky...

‘Oh, hell!’ she cried, gripped by panic as they ran into the trees. She grabbed Harry’s hand but kept slipping from his grasp. He was still cold, slippery, in spite of the heat.

The ground was rutted and hard and the tall, black trunks of the trees seemed to quiver and jump out of their path as they passed... the river was flowing fast to their left.

An almighty shriek burst through the air... it was a man.

‘Who the hell was that?’ Hermione asked Harry, her stomach clenching in anxiety.

‘This way, quick!’ Harry said abruptly, driving her deeper and deeper into the woodlands where the canopy was thick and entwined and the hot white sky couldn’t penetrate. The relief was palpable but there was no time to enjoy the cool respite because the shriek was now matched by another piercing cry.

Harry ran ahead; plunging even deeper into the woods where the tree trunks were so wide she couldn’t see beyond them. ‘Harry?’ she cried. ‘Where are we going?’ She could barely keep track of him, weaving speedily through the trees in front of her, his feet barely touching the ground... In fact, were they touching the ground at all?

The distant sound of cries and screams was getting even MORE distant... and now... now she couldn’t hear them...

‘Harry?’ she asked in quieter, tremulous tones. The figure in front had momentarily flickered and vanished but he was back again, up ahead, and seemed to be staring at her with large, dark eyes.
'Oh god,’ she sobbed… ‘you’re not Harry, are you?’

All she could hear was a strange, rushing sound; a furious wind whipping the treetops into a frenzy. And the swirling, rustling leaves were whispering, she felt sure… If she listened closely it sounded like...

No. She couldn’t bear it… But she couldn’t unhear it…

‘NO!’ she screeched in desperation, only to hear her voice echoing back at her.

She had to avert her eyes from the darkness to her right, where the hazy figure of not-Harry appeared to have slipped – an impenetrable black consciousness bearing down on her with astonishing rapidity.

She knew she mustn’t go in that direction – she had to resist. And yet the path forward was pushing her closer, and every time she veered left, the trees stood in her path.

She concentrated hard - Bugger her soul! She had to get out of this place! – and pushed back with as much strength as she could muster. She needed to bend the trees.

The strain was unbearable, her head was aching, but Draco was lost out there and Harry…

But there he was! Tramping through the trees in the opposite direction... It was Harry! She could sense a hot swirl of moss green and she found she could move faster, freer - and the whipping whirl of trees curling around her, guiding her away from Harry was quivering, faltering... She reached out a hand and pushed – the tree-trunks swayed, scattering golden ochre leaves and the forest floor was coated in a gleaming, emerald moss.

Far from dark and forbidding, the trees now looked like they were studded in brightly-coloured jewels, leading her away from the darkness.

_I can break free_, she thought, if I turn around and walk slowly… So she did just that and when she opened her eyes she was next to Harry and they had broken free into empty space.

‘Where did you come from?’ he asked, a distraught look on his face. ‘I saw you lost in the woods and came to find you!’

‘Salvedra…’

Harry gave her a long, wordless stare - but then his eyes alighted on something behind her, sending green darts of panic shooting through him.

Bill was caught in the clutches of a vast, writhing tree with long, greedy limbs. The ground was littered with oozing, hacked-off branches and large, oval pods, many of them stamped open, their wormy guts wriggling onto the ground… Bill had clearly put up a fight.

‘What the hell is THAT?’

‘Something that’s going to fucking kill Bill if we don’t kill it first!’ And Harry bounded over the pods and attacked the tree with his wand, slashing at the tree’s limbs as they wound tighter.

Hermione joined him, repeatedly screaming ‘Diffindo!’ - stabbing and cutting until a lurid green sappy fluid was running down her wand-hand.

She could hear high-pitched screaming – Melissa – and more barking; not just one but two,
possibly three dogs…

Draco, she thought, a constant whine in her head… Where was Draco?

There was another blood-curdling scream, even more penetrating than the last, and a thunderous, pounding sound, followed by the pained yelp of a dog.

Melissa’s voice tailed off…

Hermione could barely see through thick tears as she fought the tree. Choices, fucking choices… And they’d only come because she suggested it!

‘Go on!’ Harry bellowed, ‘go and find him!’

She immediately sprinted towards Melissa’s cries.

Melissa was lying on the ground, her arm a livid mess of shredded tissue and bloody meat. An enormous dog – in fact it wasn’t a dog, Hermione realized as she approached, but a hulking, black-furred beast – was quivering and steaming in a mass of fur and bones and slick, slimy organs beside her.

‘Have you seen Draco?’ Hermione called.

‘He got ch-chased… through the tend-riculos…’ Melissa said in deep, shuddering breaths. She tried to point but her arm was in no fit state to move and she wailed aloud at the effort.

A wall of sinuous vines towered ahead; thickening, closing in on a narrow gap, through which he’d likely fled.

She turned to Melissa, her face contorted in an agony of despair.

‘What do I do?’ she begged.

‘I’m alive… he might not be.’

What kind of answer was that?

Hermione felt a searing twinge in her side… a spiky ball had latched onto her. She flicked it off with her wand.

‘Watch out!’ Melissa cried – and in the nick of time, as a further volley of spiky balls was hurled in their direction, drawing Hermione’s eyes right. A trio of oversized, shiny green venomous tentaculas with erect crimson leaves were marching towards them with murderous intent.

‘Oh, fuck…’

Melissa was lying defenceless on the floor, but Draco was being pursued on the other side of this vast wall of sentient vines - and there was a ferocious burst of barking which seemed to amplify, sharpen… circling, harassing.

Hermione screamed ‘Incendio!’ at the venomous tentaculas.

But these weren’t ordinary plants; these had been enchanted to survive and destroy and a brief smattering of flames flickered across their gleaming, spiky foliage and faded, leaving the plants unharmed and undeterred.
‘Bombarda!’ she roared – and it was almighty! The venomous tentaculas stopped in their tracks, seemingly bewildered by the plume of pulverised dust and grass expelled from the gaping hole that Hermione had wrenched out of the ground.

The space in the thorny thicket was still just wide enough to squeeze through… and in that split-second, Hermione decided.

‘I’ll be back!’ she promised Melissa and threw herself headlong into the gap, charging full-pelt towards the other side, despite multiple slithering, hissing tendrils grabbing at her arms and hair, wrapping themselves around her ankles. There was a sharp cracking of twigs and a thousand prickles scratched her skin, jabbing her flesh, her face, like an invasion of angry hypodermic needles…

She kicked the vines away, firing off Reductos… The dog-monster had ceased barking. Had Draco killed it? Or was it too busy feasting on its prize?

The thought was so sickening, so unbearable, she screamed and shouted and punched and tore at the tendriculos, fuelled by adrenalised, hot-headed wrath… She hacked feverishly with her wand at the thick, fibrous mass that blocked her path.

The knobby arms of the tendriculos quivered and its vines retracted as though stung, releasing her with a sudden lunging thrust, vaulting her into clean air.

Draco was kneeling on the grass, doubled-up, blood smeared on his cheek and sprayed across his shirt. His red robe was tattered, discarded, scrunched beside the mushed up bloody carcass of a dog-monster…

A panicked sob burst from her. ‘Oh god, are you okay?’ She collapsed onto the ground beside him.

‘Fine-ish…’ he choked. ‘Where the fuck did you go?’ He pulled her close and buried his face in her hair… she wrapped her arms around him and he flinched.

‘Sorry!’

‘No… I’m okay.’ He threw a scornful glance at the dog-monster’s sagging, bloodied corpse. ‘Bastard headbutted me. Like a bloody ten-ton truck…’

Hermione quickly unbuttoned his shirt. There was a large angry bruise on his torso but the skin wasn’t broken. She quickly cast every single pain-relief spell she could think of…

‘Weirdest thing…’ Draco said, ‘killing curse did fuck all! I had to bloody bull-fight! Then blow the fuckers up.’

She wiped the blood from his face with her robe.

‘You’re a bit scuffed-up yourself,’ he said softly, gently whispering away the worst of the bloody scratches on her face. ‘What happened?’

‘Bill needs backup!’ Harry barked, tramping through the tendriculos and dragging Draco to his feet.

Bill was crouched low next to Melissa fending off a hail of spiky missiles from the freshly-recovered venomous tentaculas.

Hermione dashed to Melissa’s side to tend to her injured arm. It was sticky with blood; serrated
chunks of flesh hung loose. Melissa stared at her, teeth bared in pain.

‘You’ll be fine,’ Hermione murmured.

She heavily anaesthetised the arm and cast Vulnera Sanentur before conjuring a bandage.

Harry and Draco were charging at the murderous plants, shooting volleys of fireballs with deadly accuracy. The plants couldn’t withstand their combined attack and collapsed, falling into each other, before keeling over with a final, hissing groan.

Bill stepped forwards and set them ablaze.

‘Anyone hear more from those visp fuckers?’ Draco asked, in a parched, scratchy voice.

‘I’m getting more worried about the dragon-that-was-promised…’ Harry admitted.

‘If there’s a dragon, it’ll be guarding wherever this evil motherfucker likes to hole up. Let’s just find this blasted rock so we can get out of this bloody nightmare!’ Bill asserted.

A nightmare. That was precisely how this felt, Hermione thought. ‘Maybe none of this is real?’ she murmured, half to herself.

‘Really?’ Draco gasped, rubbing his abdomen. ‘This feels very fucking real, Hermione.’

‘The venomous tentaculas - they came from there!’ Hermione pointed with her wand. ‘That’s where Salvedra is!’

‘And the dragon…’ Harry added.

‘Can you walk?’ Bill asked Melissa.

‘If we could just find somewhere safe…’ Melissa started to say.

‘Nowhere’s safe,’ Draco said abrasively.

They plodded wearily beyond the forest’s edge and spotted a dark tunnel burrowed into a steep rockface, wreathed in vines, stretching and slinking insidiously towards them. The rock glistened in the strong sunlight.

The strange-tasting magic was more potent now. Hermione’s mouth felt alive with a curious metallic tang. Flashes of blood-red and dense black speared her mind and the scene before her shook.

‘He’s close…’ she whispered to no-one in particular, but then sensed the warm white of Draco, walking purposefully beside her.

‘We find the rock he uses and run – we don’t try to take him on. He’s too strong,’ Draco warned. She could feel his pain, still pulsating inside of him. He was trying to hide it, veiling it in a bleached haze.

She felt muted hysteria brimming up inside of her. The idea that that any of them, ALL of them, even – could take on a wizard with this amount of power and capability seemed farcical.

‘What are you finding so funny?’ Draco said, seemingly nettled, but his white was affectionate and soothing.
He stopped and placed his hand on her arm. His eyes were steel-grey and intense and she could see the bold, curving loop of emotion that surged through him and into her.

He eyed her curiously and there were dancing spots of white in front of her eyes.

In fact there were lots of colours. A whirling kaleidoscope…

‘This place is starting to fuck you up,’ he said in grating tones.

But Harry’s green was glaring and bright and surging ahead … ‘It’s there - the fucking dragon!’

‘Where?’ And then she saw it - a long, shiny red serpent with monstrous batwings folded against its body, lying flat against the rockface wall, its sharp, pointed face cocked towards them. ‘It wasn’t there a minute ago!’

Hermione’s heart pumped violently inside of her, but she was also transfixed - and thinking, too… She’d spent the night translating the Spanish encyclopedia of all things magical.

‘It’s a Cuelebre,’ she announced to the group. ‘It’s not as scary as it looks.’

‘Looks scary enough to me!’ griped Bill. ‘It’s sizing me up for supper.’

Admittedly, its glassy, beady eye did seem to be fixed most intently on Bill and as he moved forwards, the line of scales along the ridge of its back seemed to bristle and twitch in his direction, emanating an odd clinking sound.

‘It’s really quite easy to placate,’ Hermione said in a soft, still voice. ‘You need to feed it hot stones.’

‘We WHAT?’ Bill expostulated in awed horror.

‘Can’t we just blast it to smithereens?’ Harry suggested.

‘Flying glass?’ Hermione replied prissily, ‘no thank you!’

‘We could melt it?’ Bill offered.

Hermione gave him a withering look. ‘It’s a tried and tested deterrent; why not hold off the crazy, aggressive stuff until you need it?’

‘We can do this,’ Melissa said determinedly. ‘Why don’t you go ahead and find this wizard and his silly crystal?’

‘You and Draco go on,’ Bill agreed. ‘We’ll feed the dragon and find our way back to the car park and meet you there.’

‘Come on then.’ Draco teased Hermione’s fingertips with his own, urging her forwards.

Melissa was already hunting for stones with her unhurt arm.

‘We’ll have to lure it closer to feed it,’ Harry said. The dragon had skittered a few metres down the wall towards them with a loud, resounding clank.

Its eyes were still firmly trained on Bill’s bright, coppery hair, its eyes flicking white then black then red then white then black…
‘It’s fascinating,’ Hermione breathed, but Draco pulled her into the tunnel.

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They were quickly swallowed up into inky darkness.

‘Stay close,’ Draco murmured. She could hear his heart pumping furiously. Each heartbeat burst white, like a firework.

A pale, sepia spot at the end of the tunnel broadened slowly into a long, cavernous room, with high, vaulted ceilings - like an underground cathedral. The walls were a dull, beige plaster, poorly lit by a few random, flickering torches. A faint wind whistled around the room. A selection of incongruously large paintings lined the walls… and, oddly, a few blank canvases.

‘Hmm. An art gallery,’ Draco remarked, ‘didn’t expect that.’

The paintings were dark and disconsolate. Barren landscapes, bleak mountains, tumbling waterfalls, and the occasional sylvan scene – a trickling brook, a rustic, ruined cottage.

As they walked down the hallway it grew colder and their breaths spooled out before them, curling white zephyrs, frosted and moist.

There was an over-sized, black grand piano at the far end of the gallery. Come to think of it… had Hermione heard the faint tinkle of piano music when they first entered this hulking space? And had she heard the sweet, haunting refrain of a woman singing? She fancied she did… but she couldn’t be sure.

It felt like a dreamtime ago…

‘Our old friend, Señor Canaro,’ Draco said, brandishing a small, brass-framed photograph. ‘And look who’s with him. Can’t say I’m surprised.’

Canaro was grinning next to Selwyn Haast, and Asusto – the man who had murdered Miguel - had his arm draped around the shoulders of Sylvestra Golowitz…

‘They must have been Canaro’s students at school in Girona,’ Hermione mused.

‘And look who’s loitering in the background?’ Draco said, jabbing his finger at a lean, wolfish figure in the shadows: Salvedra.

‘He doesn’t much like being in the spotlight,’ Hermione said, thinking back to the photo of The Geneva Group.

‘Where is he?’ Draco asked, a note of anxiety in his voice. He pocketed the photo and walked on solemnly towards an open door.

‘Wait for me,’ she breathed, but suddenly it felt like her tongue had been glued to the roof of her mouth and he was fading from view…

‘Draco!’ she cried out, but her voice was swallowed up into nothing. ‘No… no.’ She felt a rising panic inside of her. ‘Don’t leave me.’

There were rapid footsteps tripping behind her; she turned to look but couldn’t. Couldn’t turn. Couldn’t move. And Harry, his red cloak bouncing as he ran, passed her by without a second glance.
Draco had spun around and his eyes were wide and staring. He looked terrified.

They were talking in agitated tones and then pressed onwards.

Hermione sensed she wasn’t alone a familiar presence. The same weighty breathing…

It was directly behind her and then beside her, encircling her and now, above her.

She snapped her head backwards and there, directly on the ceiling, was a thin, angular presence, spiky and black – limbs splayed like a spider indeed, was he more spider than man? She didn’t know, she didn’t know anything anymore And his skin was sallow and his eyes two piercing jet-black coals swallowing up his lean, narrow face.

Cold, unadulterated terror froze her limbs and she felt herself soaring and spinning until she was hanging from the ceiling too and Salvedra’s face was hovering close to her own. He opened his mouth and a gaping black chasm seemed to fill the space in her mind, a dark blankness, a tunnel to nowhere.

‘Quis Es?’ Harsh and grating, but there was genuine curiosity there, too. The words resounded in her head. They seemed to penetrate every pore of her body She reeled at the opaque blackness that engulfed her. She’d forgotten how to breath or think or feel. A smoky haze was overtaking her senses; a feeling of being wrapped in a translucent, golden sheath…

And then unfurled and fallen.

She blinked her eyes open – she hadn’t even realised they were shut and she was pinned to the wall. Flat and unsupported.

Draco! She screamed. Harry!

She needed their help and fast. Before she was fixed forever.

Around her was a vast blank space; the hall was as before, but empty now. The obscene dark wizard with his spidery limbs and beetle-black eyes was gone.

Harry trotted back into the hall and back towards the tunnel.

No, don’t go! she screamed. Don’t leave me here! She could feel herself crying, but there were no tears no sound.

Draco followed; pale, panicked. She could hear his breathing, fast and shallow. He ran past.

NO! she yelled, trying to thump the canvas NO hell, it’s a canvas! I’m in the canvas look at me, look at me. Draco!

He stopped and seemed to hear something Was it Salvedra returning? Was it her? Could he hear her screaming?

Hermione screwed up her eyes and tried to block every single scintilla of sense still remaining so she was as blank as the canvas she’d been embedded in; but she wasn’t fixed, not yet She could be saved, she knew it…

She thought about her purple, the colour of her wand, maybe of her soul? Yes, that was a comforting notion. She trickled the purple into her mind. It eased its way, like a thick, glossy paint, iridescent and gleaming, gathering strength…
And she caught a whiff of white… Draco was close, she could feel him. She concentrated and swirled her purple to the edges of the white - and gently whispered it over the boundaries so that it stained the edges and then forged a channel, a strong, clean channel into the white… it began to run amok, rivulets of deep, liquid purple, branching out, suffusing the white with purple veins, a soft lilac sheen…

And a voice was coming at her, urgent yet softly-spoken.

‘Stay with me, beautiful, stay with me.’ It was Draco… ‘I’m going to try again,’ he said in a clear, calm voice, ‘don’t fight this… you’re going to have to find me, find me, Hermione, find me, you can do this, come to me.’

And now there was movement; wild, frantic movement – it was her, running, running like her life depended on it.

‘Keep coming!’ Draco commanded. ‘Please, Hermione… please.’

It felt like doors were swinging open, one after another, long grey corridors, white corridors, and more doors, swinging open, faster and faster, and bold, bright, shiny white at the end.

‘Come on, come on, come to me!’ She could hear Draco’s voice; louder now, as though his mouth was inside her ear. She gasped, feeling the blinding life-force of a dazzling white light seize hold of her and whisk her into a blizzard of feeling.

And through the blinding white she felt a heat, and skin, and she dreamt she was lost in a kiss – a soft, warm wonderful kiss - and the wash of white gradually faded to a pleasant low-lying thrum – and she was still kissing him.

‘No time for that,’ Harry said gruffly, ‘we’ve got to find the others.’

‘What happened?’ Hermione asked, solely aware of the warmth of Draco holding her.

‘You were lost,’ Draco said, a twisted smile on his face. ‘And I felt you wake up inside of me.’

‘You brought me back,’ she said, hot tears spilling onto her cheeks. ‘Draco, I –’

…I love you, she thought in a rush of thought and feeling - but Draco gently stopped her mouth with his hand.

His smiling eyes slunk sidewards to Harry, kicking his boot-heel into the gleaming ivory marble floor, and then circled back to hers.

‘And now… we run!’

Hermione’s mind was still blurred by a silvery haze, a fading fog, but as they sped past the huge pictures in the gallery, she could see glistening shapes and figures, skulking or hiding or screaming in despair.

There was a flurry of movement behind them, a sense of rushing blackness, of large wings… unfolding and spreading…

‘This way,’ Harry yelled, pushing them ahead. He stopped and turned, pointing his wand towards the hall and slammed the door shut.

They had arrived on a terrace, overlooking a rose garden. The garden was in full bloom and the air
was clotted with rich, heady scents.

Draco pointed to a large, rosy crystal on a plinth. ‘There’s your goddamned mothership, Potter!’ He shrunk it and slipped it into his jeans pocket.

‘He’s broken through!’ Harry shouted.

And he had. There was a scampering of feet – multiple feet – on the marble floors; rapidly advancing.

Hermione didn’t dare turn around to see what exactly was chasing them, as she feared it would haunt her dreams until the end of her days.

‘Confringo!’ came Harry’s voice, followed by the same from Draco. There was a crashing blast; an explosion of rock and rubble and a thick choking miasma of sandy dust and shards of glass that seemed to fill the air around them…

Both wizards had stopped in their tracks and were targeting their wands at Salvedra’s citadel with staggering ferocity and firepower; thumping out spell after spell, curving arcs of glistening, naked power careening and smashing into the building, breaking it apart.

Hermione took a deep breath and summoned up the strength to join them… all three together slamming jet after jet of pure, unadulterated carnage into the heart of Salvedra’s terrifying lair. Her wand had been made for this, she realised, delighting in its virile strength. She tried to ignore the myriad cries that assailed her mind, fearing something – others, perhaps - had been lost...

A line of black flames rose from the outer perimeter of the building – a final breached defence.

Harry stepped forwards…

A huge, black shape twisted and turned and surged upwards, and then a violent spasm of blue flame blasted into the garden.

‘Get her out!’

‘I am!’ Draco bawled, all but carrying Hermione at breakneck speed along the long gravel path that led to a locked garden gate… Hermione could see a suspended tongue of blue inching towards them; accelerating… Draco levelled his wand at the gate which blew off its hinges and they dived into a dull, scrubby landscape. Draco threw himself on top of her and Apparated.

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Hermione blinked hard, opening her eyes to take in the faded dregs of a pale, evening sunshine in a clouded, dusky sky. Light drizzle dusted her face.

‘You okay?’ Draco asked, pulling her into a sitting position.

‘Where are we?’ she asked, gazing around. It was the bleak, pitiless, scrappy landscape from earlier… the small town below the hill was now peppered with a few twinkling streetlights.

‘I forgot about the car park…’ Draco smiled.

‘Hey! You guys!’

Draco rolled his eyes in irritation. ‘She’s recovered, then.’
Melissa was yelling from the car park below. ‘Get a move on! Bill got hit by the visps!’

‘Not good,’ Hermione exhaled, suddenly thrown into panic. ‘Where’s Harry?’

They scampered rapidly down the path to the others.

Bill’s face and arms were pitted with glowing pustules and he was struggling to speak.

Harry arrived and pulled a face of self-disgust… ‘I think he got away,’ he said bitterly.

XXX

‘I’ve never treated visp stings before, but there’s a first time for everything,’ Arlene declared, plucking a long, spindly set of silver tweezers from her bag and grinning toothsomely at Bill.

Hermione screwed her face up, checking it still worked – it felt numb after a string of aggressive healing spells to treat the scratches and gashes from the tendriculos.

Neville and Thelonious Drake, a slim, soft-spoken young man with large, soulful eyes, had headed over to Bill’s study from Hogwarts and were studying Salvedra’s rock with Draco.

Henrik had travelled to Cornwall by train from London that afternoon – much to Fleur’s surprise – and was equally mesmerized.

Everyone concluded the best help Melissa could get was from her own father - Britain’s most accomplished apothecary – so Angelina was escorting her to Hogsmeade.

Harry, however, looked miserable and stepped outside. Hermione followed.

He was standing in the dark, gulping in the clean sea-air. It was gently raining, but it felt clean and wholesome after the oily, cloying world of Salvedra’s dreamscape.

‘You okay?’ Hermione asked, touching his arm.

Harry gave her a shy smile, barely visible in the soft lantern light from the doorway. But she could tell he was upset.

‘Pissed off he got away,’ he said. ‘A colossal mistake.’

It was true… Salvedra posed a serious, existential threat.

‘But it’s not all doom and gloom, Harry,’ Hermione said, trying to offer words of comfort. ‘We’ve broken into their communications.’

‘For how long? Most organisations have backup plans…’ He shot her a nervous glance. ‘And I just - I just feel something was off about the whole thing, too. Truth is… It’s YOU I’m worried about, really…’

Hermione’s heart thudded inside. The Kiss… ‘What – what do you mean?’

‘This colour-magic business for one… and its connection to Salvedra.’

‘Oh, I doubt he created it, Harry.’

‘But he’s mastered it - with incredible results, as today showed,’ Harry pointed out. ‘And…’ he clearly felt uncomfortable voicing this… ‘I couldn’t help but feel that everyone but you was
Hermione’s mouth fell open in shocked hurt. ‘Harry, I was almost – literally – framed! You saw that!’ She knew with utter certainty that her life had almost been folded into that blank canvas, into emptiness; that her heart had slowed, almost to the point of annihilation. ‘And he tried to separate me off in the forest!’

‘But not to KILL you, Hermione. To KEEP you,’ Harry said, gazing at her forlornly.

Hermione felt sickened. Was he right?

‘I wondered last night, when the rock responded to YOUR touch, if Salvedra was deliberately targeting you… You’d piqued his curiosity. I covered up at the time, saying the Haasts had worked out we’d swapped rocks, but I didn’t really believe it. And neither did Draco.’

‘So why the hell did you agree to this trip?’

‘Because I also realised that we have to kill him. Salvedra’s the spiritual leader of this – this weird Right to Exist cult. He’s had years and years to manipulate events to his liking. In Ephraim he’s found his most dangerous – and most successful – protégé.’

Hermione shuddered. ‘So are you saying we – I – was lured there?’

Harry blinked rapidly. ‘No, I’m not saying that… I don’t know! But once you decided you were going, there was no stopping you – only protecting you, to the best of our ability… I’d lay down my life for you and you damn well know it, Hermione… and in fairness to Draco, he never wanted you to go at all.’

‘But I’m a nobody in the grand scheme of things… Why would Salvedra want to capture me?’

Hermione fretted.

Harry looked at her, a hawkish look on his face. ‘I’d like to know that too… it might be because you have this colour-magic and he wants to exploit that? Maybe it’s the souls of people like you that fuel his magical nightmare? … Or, he sees YOU as a very real stumbling-block to his masterplan. And I suspect that’s connected to Ephraim…’

‘I still don’t see—’

‘Draco’s right that Ephraim’s a bit infatuated with you, Hermione.’

‘It’s not ME he’s infatuated with, Harry,’ Hermione scoffed. ‘It’s ANNA. Ephraim says I look like her.’

‘Katya’s mother?’ There was a hard edge to Harry’s voice.

Hermione nodded, feeling slightly ashamed, although she didn’t know why.

‘Have you told Draco?’

‘Not yet.’ She wasn’t sure she wanted to, either.

Harry sighed and placed his arm around her shoulder, holding her close. She felt embalmed by a hot surge of shiny, viridian green. ‘Anyway. We all lived to fight another day… and we’ll need those days.’

Hermione had a sinking feeling that those days were rapidly running out.
'I guess I owe you thanks for looking out for me.'

‘Hardly… we nearly lost you. If it hadn’t been for Draco…’

His greenness spiked… a momentary burst of disquiet…

‘He pulled me back, Harry… from – from wherever it was I’d been banished to.’ She looked up at him. ‘You understand that, don’t you?’

‘I know, I know,’ Harry breathed, ‘…but – I can’t deny it felt strange to see you kiss him.’

His arm dropped from her shoulder and he squeezed her hand. She could feel a deep melancholy rise up inside of him. They stood in silence and listened to the whoosh and roar of the sea crashing against the rocks below…

Suddenly, there was a loud clamour; a voice ringing around the house.

‘The mothership!’ Harry cried. ‘It’s come to life!’

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“DREAMS SO REAL” by METRIC

“WITCHCRAFT” by PENDULUM

“DRIFTING AWAY” by FAITHLESS

“RAIN, IN YOUR BLACK EYES” by EZIO BOSSO

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
The Hogsmeade Fire

Chapter Summary

A risky rescue, disaster in Hogsmeade, love-magic…

45. The Hogsmeade Fire

Hermione and Harry dashed to the study. Draco, Neville and Thelonious were listening to a woman's voice; low, guttural, laced with menace. A voice that seemed to bring the dense blackness of the night outside into the softly-lit study where they were standing.

'Cadena 3. I have the boy. He sleeps. We're in the Muggle motor vehicle. The witch was clever and transfigured him. I'm watching the caravan. They haven't noticed he's missing …. Ah! Now they have! … The Muggle is walking with a light in her hand… She's crying. Can you hear her?'

Hermione's worst fears were confirmed when she heard Gwen's voice...

'Where are you? This isn't funny anymore…' There was a broken sob in her voice.

The woman's gravelly voice returned. 'I await instructions. What do I do with the witch? … I don't understand why it's the weakling Muggle looking for the boy? She might call the Muggle Aurors. Do I kill her?'

The rock lapsed into silence, matched only by the shocked silence in Bill's study as everybody stood and stared at each other, not really knowing what to do or say.

Fleur hastened into the room. 'We could hear that from upstairs,' she panted. 'Who was it?'

'Hulda,' Draco said, staring at the rock like he was trying to explode it with sheer force of will. 'She works for Sylvestra.'

'Who's the boy?' Fleur asked, daring to voice what everyone was thinking.

'Either my son or Hermione's nephew,' Draco replied. He looked directly at Hermione. 'But I fear it's Alfred.'

Hermione nodded… 'Will Hulda kill them?' She swallowed back her anguish. They had to act calmly, decisively.

'Hulda's a good dog. She'll wait to hear from Sylvestra,' Draco said, but she didn't like how he looked away when he spoke. 'Harry, you're the only one who knows where they're staying.'

Harry was leaning against the wall, arms folded, head bowed. He looked sunk in depression. 'Some caravan park on the Isle of Wight. It's somewhere Gwen's liked before and it's by the sea.'

'But it's an island! There's sea everywhere!' Hermione shrilled.

Harry turned desperate eyes to her. 'That's all I know. I waved them off on the ferry from Portsmouth. Gwen texted me a couple of days ago…' He fished his phone out of this pocket and
checked it... 'She said they'd seen your uncle a couple of times and Gwen visited her mum... All's well. That's it.'

'Can you call her?' Fleur asked.

'But Hulda will think she's calling the police, and... and... Oh, Christ. I've killed her... My wonderful, beautiful cousin...' Hermione instantly thought about Uncle Derek... how would he bear such a thing? 'And when they find out that Alfred isn't who they think he is - that's he just a little Muggle boy - what will happen to him?'

'They're not defenceless. Parvati's there,' Harry said. 'We've got time to get them.'

'But from where?' Hermione shrieked, exasperated.

Henrik had been listening at the door and now stepped into view, placing both his hands on Hermione's shoulder and forcing her to look at him. 'Is Gwen on Facebook?'

'Is she WHAT?'

'Does she use any websites where she posts pictures of herself, holiday snaps, writes messages, that sort of thing?' Draco asked.

Hermione shook her head, not really understanding. Her parent's clinic had a website ... and she had an email account.

'She spends a lot of time on the Internet.' Tears swirled into her eyes. 'I think she's quite lonely, really.'

'What's her full name?' Henrik asked.

'Gwendolen Pickle.'

Henrik exchanged a hopeful look with Draco.

'Can't be too many Gwendolen Pickles in this world,' Draco said. 'Where does she live?'

'Borehamwood...' but Henrik was already pulling out his phone and following Draco out of the study, Fleur trailing behind.

'I'll get you Bill's broom,' Fleur said, 'you're best getting to Tinworth. It's five minutes, tops.'

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Hermione quick-washed and changed in five minutes flat. She didn't dare think about how dog-tired she was or the fact she still felt queasy from Salvedra's framing spell.

The front door clattered open and Henrik and Draco charged back into the house.

Draco was pacing impatiently in the hallway and Harry was giving orders of some kind to Thelonious and Neville in the study.

'So they're at a farm near somewhere called Freshwater Bay,' Draco told Hermione as she pulled on her boots, which were still cold and wet from earlier. 'We can do this alone, Hermione.'

'I think it's better YOU don't go, actually,' Hermione said in curt tones. She'd been practicing this little speech for the past two minutes in her head but then it came out wrong. 'Hulda will recognise
you. But she's never actually met me and she doesn't know Henrik.' Unfortunately EVERYBODY knew what Harry Potter looked like.

'Then transfigure me!' Draco exclaimed.

'It's too risky.'

'It's my fucking son!'

'Which makes it even more important this doesn't get screwed up.'

'You can come, as long as you keep out of sight,' Harry said tetchily. 'Stick to the caravan and Parvati. We'll be Team Scorpius. Hermione and Henrik can grab Alfred and Gwen…'

'That means Hermione side-Apparating three fucking Muggles!' Draco remonstrated.

'I can do that – no problem,' she said brusquely.

'We're not Apparating. Thelonious is a whiz at Portkeys and can work up a cloaking device as long as it's not too far – which luckily it isn't. Henrik's giving him the info he needs right now,' Harry said. 'Our best tactic is to stage this as though we're MUGGLES – not magic. Cause a commotion! I'm thinking we steal a car which Henrik drives into Hulda's car! We can use the chaos to spirit them away.'

'Call that a PLAN, Potter? It's plain IDIOTIC!' Draco said scathingly. 'You want Henrik to CRASH a car! That could kill Hermione, Alfred and himself!'

Harry closed his eyes as though tuning out the desire to punch Draco in the face.

'This is the plan!' Harry said impatiently. 'It's best recommendation is it's QUICK! Come on!'

Minutes later and Hermione was hurtling at full-pelt across a rutted field. She'd told Henrik she could drive – which was a lie, of course, although she'd watched Ron a few times – because there'd been an over-excitable glint in Henrik's eyes when he sat behind the steering-wheel that she simply couldn't trust…

She could just make out the vague outlines of boxy, white caravan shapes at the far end of the field.

She stamped her foot onto the accelerator and the farmer's Land Rover Defender that Henrik had hotwired surged forwards with a resounding grunt, scattering a herd of bellowing cows, knocking over a bin and sending a washing line draped with a sweater and a pair of men's underpants flying across the bonnet … she narrowly missed smacking into a chalet-style toilet building and then mowed down a tent - thankfully, unoccupied.

'I don't know how to stop!' she screamed.

'Slam your foot on the brake!' Henrik was yelling at the top of his voice from behind his hands. 'That one!' he screamed, pointing at her feet.

Lights popped on around the darkened campsite and there were shouted warnings from open caravan doorways; faces were illuminated by phones as campers frantically dialled '999' in advance of impending catastrophe.
Hermione pumped a pedal on the floor with her foot and the car crunched to a halt and then bounced, slapping into the back of the parked black Ford Mondeo that they'd already identified as Hulda's vehicle, with a loud CLUNK. The backscreen window shattered on impact and the car pitched forwards.

Henrik cried out in alarm and braced for impact, shielding his face with his arms. Hermione felt winded, and for a moment, she feared the steering wheel had wedged itself to her internal organs. She was shaking with adrenalin…

A child started screaming… good news! It meant Alfred was alive.

Gwen threw herself at the car, her face distorted with fury and relief, as she tried to rip the back door off. Henrik leapt out of the Land Rover and was helping her… a host of campers were running towards the car. Hermione pushed open the driver’s door and toppled to the ground, grateful when an older man rushed to help her. She felt like throwing up, but she needed to see where Hulda had got to. She pushed the man away as politely as she could and stumbled towards the Ford Mondeo.

'Hermione!' screeched Gwen, her eyes wide with shock.

'Where's the woman who was in the car?' Hermione demanded; eyes fixed on the empty driver's seat… she'd dropped a small chunk of rock in flight, which Hermione instantly pocketed.

'She just upped and left,' said another woman, close by. 'One moment she was there, next she was gone!'

'Never seen anything like it…' said another. 'She looked very shook up!'

'You got Alfred?' Hermione called to Henrik. Alfred was squashed flat against Henrik's chest, moaning and squirming in terror. There was a streak of flashing blue lights entering the lane that accessed the farm from the main road below where they had Portkeyed to. They had to get away, fast.

'Come with me!' Hermione cried to Gwen, seizing her cousin's hand and dragging her towards the nearest caravan. Henrik and Alfred jogged behind them. Alfred was now screaming in Henrik's ear to be let down…

'What the hell's going on?' Gwen squealed, trying to unclasp her hand from Hermione's.

'I'll explain in a minute!' Hermione yelled, pushing her cousin behind the caravan, out of sight of the crowd that was surging towards them, torchlights flashing. The main lights of the campsite flickered on, drenching the scene with bright, phosphorescent light.

'Are we all together?' Hermione gasped. She searched her pockets for the pen lid Thelonious had given her to Portkey home but couldn't find it. No time to worry about that, she thought…

'Hold onto Gwen very tightly!' she shouted to Henrik. She grabbed her cousin's arm, focused hard and Apparated.

XXX

They landed heavily in the flowerbed outside the kitchen window at Shell Cottage. Gwen snatched Alfred from Henrik's arms and fell into a bout of high-pitched, hysterical screaming. Hermione quickly studied them – nobody had been Splinched, that was the main thing. And only now did she allow herself to breath, panting with relief.
The entire operation had taken just six minutes.

The kitchen door swung open and Parvati came running out to greet them.

'What's happening?!' Gwen cried – and she really was crying, now. She held on tightly to Parvati. 'How did YOU get here?'

Alfred wriggled out of his mother's arms and scampered through the doorway into the cottage.

'Alfred!' his mother yelped. 'Get back here!' Gwen was frantically trying to haul herself up from the flowerbed but kept slipping back down again. Henrik hooked his arms under her shoulders and dragged her up into a standing position; it wasn't elegant, but it worked. It was only now that Gwen recognised him.

'You're the weirdo Danish guy!' she gasped, and her hands flew to her mouth in surprised horror. 'What the fuck are YOU doing here?' She spun around to face Hermione. 'One minute we were – we were – I couldn't find Alfred ANYWHERE! The silly boy ran off! … oh god, do you think he was being abducted?' She started crying again, but this time it was tears of relief. 'You saved him!' she bawled; her face crumpled…. But then she remembered. She looked around; eyes wide in terror. 'Where are the caravans? I must have blacked out.'

Fleur had come to the kitchen door. 'Would you like a cup of tea?' she asked, smiling serenely. Gwen paused her rant to study this latest arrival. Like many others before her, she seemed dumbfounded by Fleur and was easily persuaded into the cramped kitchen. Hermione noted that Rose and Hugo were out of bed, with their cousin Louis, eyes round as owls. But she could hardly blame them…

'And you're here too?' Gwen said, her hand shot back to her mouth and she stared with wonder at Rose and Hugo, as though they were miraculous apparitions. Fleur eased her onto a chair at the kitchen table.

'This must all seem very strange to you,' Fleur said in comforting tones. She smiled benignly at Gwen and gently rubbed her back.

'I'm getting used to strange…' she breathed. 'Parvati's been tutoring me. Where's Alfred?

'With the other little boy and his Dad,' Hugo said, sidling up to Gwen and giving her a friendly squeeze.

'Good to see you… you little scamp,' Gwen said. 'Wherever this is…' she added in a dramatic stage whisper.

'This is Aunty Fleur's house,' Rose chirruped. She nodded at Fleur who was bringing a steaming cup of tea to the table. 'And my Uncle Bill's – but he's feeling poorly.'

'Is Bill one of Ron's million brothers?' Gwen asked Hermione.

'Yes. This is Shell Cottage. You're in Cornwall, Gwen.'

Gwen shook her head in wonder and took a small sip of her tea. She looked at Rose and Hugo's eager, shining faces in puzzlement and then back at Hermione.

'Oh lordy. I don't think I'll ever get used to this!'

Hermione caught a glimpse of Henrik ogling Gwen with unabashed glee. He looked smitten.
Parvati was looking less content.

'I'd like to know how that bloody scary woman found us…' she said, tight-lipped. 'Who the hell was she?'

Hermione sat down heavily at the kitchen table, still feeling a little sick. It was true. How HAD they known where to find them?

'Her name's Hulda. She works for Sylvestra.'

Parvati rolled her eyes.

'That Sylvestra, is that the one who ordered that OTHER thing? The blue thing?' Gwen asked shrewdly. 'At Parvati's?'

'There's no way Harry would have told anyone where we were headed,' Parvati said, looking worried.

'Where is Harry?' Hermione asked.

'The study,' Parvati said. She looked at Henrik. 'Sorry. I don't think we've met.' She extended her hand and Henrik shook it, smiling so hard his unfeasibly white teeth glinted in the lamplight.

'I'm Henrik. I'm a Muggle, too,' he glanced at Gwen.

'Well, I don't understand how this happened,' Hermione said, 'but it looks to me like everyone needs a safe haven.' She'd known this was coming. But so soon?

She became aware that Draco was watching them from the doorway between the kitchen and the sitting room; he was leaning against the door-jamb, arms folded, and seemed torn between both rooms. She was relieved to see he had a fresh shirt; slightly too big - one of Bill's. But at least it wasn't covered in dog-monster blood.

'It's a tight squeeze, but you're welcome to stay,' Fleur said brightly, cracking open a tin of biscuits. Hugo and Louis had their hands in the tin before it hit the table.

'Alfred! And Alfred's friend!' Rose called, 'there won't be any biscuits left!'

Alfred ran into the room, almost knocking Draco over, dragging Scorpius behind him.

'Do you want one, Dad?' Scorpius said in his strange robot-voice.

Hermione watched a range of emotions pass across Draco's face as his son spoke, finally settling on speechless awe. He nodded and accepted the biscuit.

'You okay, Draco?' Gwen asked from the table.

Draco cleared his throat. 'Thanks for looking after him for me,' he said gruffly, nodding at Scorpius who was bickering over the biscuit tin with Alfred. He smiled and moved away.

Hermione chased after him.

He wandered deep into the house, away from the kitchen and the sitting-room and the study where Harry, Neville and Thelonious were talking to Bill – who'd finally made it downstairs - outside into the garden, where he slumped heavily against the external wall of the house.
The moment Hermione joined him, he pulled her into his arms. She could feel wetness on her cheek.

He eventually loosened his hold and gazed at her, eyes shining with tears. 'You must think I'm a right wuss,' he beamed, but as he said it he had to look away again.

She gently coaxed him to face her and wiped away the tears from his cheeks.

'Don't be silly,' she said with a wide smile.

'He's normal… Well. Almost.' They both laughed.

'Compared to how he was when I first met him at Malfoy Manor, Draco, he's a different child.'

Draco gazed at her intently. 'He's never going back. And I don't want to, either. I just need a few days to wrap up my affairs there and I'm OUT.'

'Good,' she said. A flicker of hope flared inside of her… ‘Are you going to ask Bill if you can stay here?’

'I can try. But I think we both know what the answer will be.'

But your son's here.'

'And YOU.'

'That wouldn't be your most persuasive argument.'

'Exactly,' he said with a grimace. He pulled her back into his arms. 'But I fucking need you, Hermione. Can we PLEASE find a way to be alone? I'm running mad with all sorts of fucking filthy thoughts about what I want to do with you.'

She slipped her hand into his oversized shirt and gently smoothed his chest. 'But aren't you in terrible pain?' she teased.

'I'm a super-quick healer,' he grinned, but then squinted over her shoulder into the dark depths of the garden. 'What's that?'

She spun around to look. A disheveled shape was stumbling slowly, painfully, towards them, before collapsing into a heap on the lawn.

'That's Angelina!'

Draco groaned wearily. 'This is turning into a very long day.'

XXX

'Bloody Blasters have gone on the rampage in Hogsmeade and attacked J Pippins accusing Melissa's dad of being a Sub Rosa saboteur. Both Melissa and her father have been taken…' Harry explained to everybody in the study – everybody except Angelina, who'd been swept into the living-room by Arlene 'to get fixed-up,' and Gwen and Fleur who were busy apportioning children to various beds. Louis was loudly complaining that he was being separated from the other kids because he was being moved into his parents’ bedroom. Hermione didn't have a clue where she'd end up, but frankly, even the floor looked inviting.

But sleep wouldn't be happening any time soon…
'Taken where?' Neville asked in sharp tones.

'Angelina's convinced they're still in Hogsmeade. The Blasters were waiting for Ephraim to arrive to tell them what to do.' Harry shrugged helplessly. 'That's all Angelina knows; she got out fast. Things were turning ugly.'

'What do you mean, UGLY?' Neville pressed.

'There's a fire. It's spreading…'

'And looting, violence,' Bill added. He winced as he spoke. There was a cluster of livid-looking visp stings concentrated at the corner of this mouth, which clearly hurt when he spoke. 'Dervish and Banges has been ransacked.'

'Who the hell's rioting?' Draco asked, shaking his head in disbelief. 'Not being funny, but the most controversial thing to happen in Hogsmeade is The Three Broomsticks running out of pumpkin pasties. This isn't normal!'

'The Blasters have been patrolling the streets of Hogsmeade this past week,' Thelonious said. '…ever since Ephraim won the election. Numbers picking up daily. Not just Aurors; but locals, too. And – and there's a weird atmosphere.' His large, dark eyes glowed as he spoke. He seemed a shy, young man – Hermione didn't know him at all – but she sensed he was someone who felt deeply.

'This is MY fault,' Neville moaned, collapsing into a chair, and pushing his hands into his hair. 'I should have realised that Silas would work out the source of that Sub Rosa story about his drug addiction…' His face suddenly looked grey and lined in the meagre lamplight. 'And now Melissa's in danger.'

'We're ALL in danger, Hermione thought, but didn't dare say it out loud.

Draco didn't have such qualms. 'Melissa knows pretty much EVERYTHING, doesn't she?'

Harry gave Draco a bleak look. 'If she's taken into custody at the Ministry, we should be fine… there's still SOME official protocols, I should think.'

'She won't be, though, will she?' Draco said. 'If Ephraim's in Hogsmeade with his fucking Blasters, it'll be Troy who handles her first… and that won't be pretty!'

Bill looked uneasy. 'I hate to say this, but if Melissa's tortured, she'll talk. She's already vulnerable… her arm…'

'A few of us need to get to Hogsmeade. Check out what's going on and find Melissa,' Harry said. 'Neville?'

Neville nodded.

'Count me in,' Parvati said.

'Sorry, but we've just rescued you,' Draco said apologetically. 'We shouldn't make that too obvious.'

'I'll come,' Kai, the gothic teenager offered.

Harry scrutinised her for a moment. 'I'm afraid not… we need you safe.'

'Melissa has a right to a lawyer,' Hermione said, an idea forming.
Draco narrowed his eyes. 'They won't care about that! These Blasters are fucking vigilantes.'

'Then Ephraim needs to be reminded that we're still – just about - a country that abides by the law,' Hermione said tartly in return.

XXX

They Apparated to the hillside beyond Dervish and Banges. From their vantage point, they could see a substantial chunk of Hogsmeade was in thrall to an inferno – a feast of scarlet and orange and long, slurry scarlet streaks, so bright it hurt the eyes; it was a glaring gash of colour in a dense, black landscape. Thick blue smoke hung in the air, rendering the scene unreal.

J Pippin's Potions and its neighbours had been destroyed, but the blaze had spread to other shops and a spray of sparks was flickering between the thatched roofs of the tightly-packed cottages nestled behind. Even from this distance, they could hear the sharp crunch of cracking timbers and the whumping thuds of falling masonry.

Tall arcing jets of water were flying high into the sky and the streets were alive with hordes of people running to and fro. Their shouts and cries echoed off the mountain behind them. Knight Blasters in full ungainly costume holding aloft flaming torches were busy clearing broken buildings, carrying away people and belongings, trailing buckets of water from the stream that bisected the village. Someone using a sonorous charm was bellowing instructions - organising a non-stop line-up of wizards, working in shifts, unleashing a barrage of extinguishing spells.

The moment they stepped into the chaotic mayhem of Hogsmeade High Street Hermione was disoriented. The noise and smell and the choking smoke and the constant blur of panicked people and lights streaming past was almost unbearable.

'The worry's the thatch!' Thelonious reported after chasing down the views of passing friends – most of the teachers from Hogwarts had streamed into the village to help. Dennis Creevey bobbed between two wizards blocking the central thoroughfare as they levitated a house-worth of goods and lights streaming past was almost unbearable.

'They need more wizards round the back of Ceridwen's Cauldrons… the Hobsons' house has caught fire!' Dennis squealed. He did a double-take when he realised that Draco was standing next to him and actually blushed.

'Is Ephraim here?' Draco asked.

Dennis nodded. 'He was in The Three Horseshoes about half an hour ago, rallying the troops… Was all a bit St Crispin's Day, frankly.'

'What's that?' Harry mouthed to Hermione.

'Shakespeare…'

'Do you know if Melissa and her father are still here?' Harry barked at Dennis.

Dennis blushed again. 'My spies tell me the Blasters moved them to a safe location. Here. In Hogsmeade.'

'Well, can we talk to your spies please?' Draco asked sarcastically. 'Maybe they've spied some more since you last spoke to them?'

But it was Ephraim they needed, Hermione thought.
She scanned the crowd.

She couldn't see him, but she could sense him. A faint lick of blue was tingling at her temples… He was moving through the crowd a few hundred metres away. And a small mob of Blasters was chivvying locals away from the tiny side-street that led to the Hog's Head Inn.

'I know where they are,' she murmured.

Draco and Harry followed her gaze. 'I've never actually met Ephraim,' Harry said.

Hermione could sense a pair of cold, blue eyes turned in their direction before being jostled uphill and out of sight.

'He knows we're here.'

XXX

Hermione and Harry waited in the shadows opposite the Hog's Head Inn, sneered at by two surly Blasters who neither had ever seen before.

They watched as a huge water-filled balloon, the size of a double-decker bus, was levitated high above the burning houses. Neville, Dennis and Thelonious had volunteered to be part of the water-balloon operation. Harry looked a little disappointed not to be joining in.

Draco came out of the Hog's Head Inn looking peevish. 'My stepfather's holding court and loving every fucking minute of it. Locals coming in like petty petitioners paying homage to the king... But he says he'll talk to you both—'

A small explosion reverberated through the village, echoing off the walls. A couple of cottages were being deliberately destroyed to prevent the fire from spreading further.

XXX

Hermione felt Ephraim's eyes on her from the moment she walked into the bar – coolly observing; a predator tracking its prey. He was indeed seated like the lord of the manor at a long table ranged at the back of the front bar with Torquil at his side, taking notes and sending messages.

The pub was packed and very loud. The decibel level of excitement surged as Harry walked into the thick of the Blasters hanging around the bar area, taking a break from fire-fighting with a bottle of butterbeer. Most knew Harry well, particularly those Aurors he'd worked with, and there was a great deal of jovial back-slapping.

He's very good at this, Hermione thought proudly. He wasn't a showy man, but he had a natural ease of manner; an authoritative bonhomie. For a brief, hopeful moment, she realised many of these Blasters weren't BAD people at all; they simply weren't thoughtful, or sceptical. They wanted to believe in people and causes greater than themselves, which sadly meant they could be manipulated.

And they believed in Ephraim – for now.

Tom Bennet was at the bar and made a great fuss of Draco, showing what pals they were…

'Hello, stranger,' he said. 'Fucking horror-show this fire, innit?'

'Yeah. I'm here to give a hand.'
A tall man with a stiff quiff of hair on the top of his head, sporting a conceited sneer, stood next to Tom and stared at Hermione.

'Have we met?' she asked.

'I've never had the pleasure,' he said. 'But I feel I know you, Mrs Weasley. I'm Auror Carmichael.' His smile was insipid and his handshake limp and clammy. 'Ron talks about you all the time at work…'

Hermione forced a bright smile. 'Oh, well we have plenty in common then, because Ron talks about YOU all the time at home… when he's AT home, that is, which hasn't been much lately.'

Carmichael gave her a sour smile. 'Unfortunately, criminals are an international menace…'

'Indeed… but it's such a secretive business… I hardly know where Ron is half the time! I mean, he could be ANYWHERE at the moment - I wouldn't have a clue.'

'Oh, he's not on assignment, he asked for personal leave,' Carmichael said nastily. 'Had a hankering to see Argentina! Maybe he wants to learn the Tango?'

'ARGENTINA?'

'You're up,' Tom interjected, peering over the Blasters to Ephraim.

Carmichael directed Hermione to the back table where Ephraim was reclining back in his chair, his face half-cast in shadow from the staircase that loomed above this side of the bar. She anxiously looked towards Harry who pulled away from the braying bunch of Aurors at the bar and followed.

'Harry Potter…' Ephraim whispered to Hermione, a small smile curling his lips. 'Bravo.'

Hermione shrugged and sat down without permission.

Torquil effusively shook Harry's hand. 'Good to see you, Harry. Hope all's well at home? How's Ginny?'

Harry was wreathed in smiles and chit-chat. To Hermione's amusement, Harry hadn't even acknowledged Ephraim.

'That's enough now, Torquil!' Ephraim snapped. 'We've got an emergency on our hands. You and Mr Potter can catch up some other time.'

Torquil seemed to visibly shrink.

'Go make yourself useful and see that my stepson doesn't go walkabout.' Hermione spotted Draco locked in earnest conversation with Torquil's henchman, Igor, in a far corner of the bar.

Torquil unfurled his spindly frame from his chair and took his leave, bowing obsequiously.

Hermione could sense Ephraim was furious. And his fury was mainly directed at Harry… He didn't like being upstaged.

'You haven't met my dear friend, Harry, have you?' Hermione smiled.

Ephraim's face crinkled into a semblance of a smile. 'How can I help you, Mr Potter?'

'Melissa Osgood,' Harry said, getting straight to the point. Ephraim's face stiffened. 'I believe you
have her in custody.'

Ephraim's eyes looked upwards as he considered his response. 'This is a Ministry matter. I'm not at liberty to disclose—'

'Has she already been moved to the Ministry?' Harry asked blithely. 'I ask because she's a person of interest in an Auror HQ operation and I've been tasked with escorting her to Paris. It won't go down well if I come back empty-handed – so I'm hoping you can help me out here.'

Ephraim considered this. 'I see. Well. In my capacity as a fellow private citizen, I see no reason why the Ministry should object to her leaving the country – as long as the allegations against her are untrue and the Ministry has the relevant paperwork and rubber stamps and all that malarkey.'

'What allegations?' Hermione asked.

Ephraim's mouth twisted and he folded his arms tightly across his chest. 'Accessory to conspiracy against the Minister for Magic, collaboration with foreign powers. Treason, basically.' He promptly returned his attention to Harry. 'I believe it was the Minister himself who commanded the Blasters to make the arrests. I think your request is best made to him. I'm merely Mayor of this fair village – and we have quite a situation going on, as you can see.'

'Ephraim,' Hermione said, dropping her voice to a whisper. 'She's still here, isn't she?'

Ephraim slid his blue-eyed gaze towards her. But Hermione raised her eyes above Ephraim to Karl and an Auror, standing by the door that led into the private back bar.

'In there…'

Ephraim's face creased into a slow, reptilian smile. 'Oh, Hermione. Does it matter WHERE she is? She's in Ministry custody until the Minister says she's free to go. And that's the end of it.'

'But she's entitled to speak to a lawyer,' Hermione persisted, levelling her haughtiest look at him.

Ephraim screwed up his face in irritation. 'Gracious me… are we still abiding by all that old hat garbage?'

'It's the rule of law,'

Ephraim grunted. 'As far as I'm aware, she hasn't asked for one.'

Hermione stood up. 'I'd like to speak to her, remind her of her rights… Maybe the trauma of watching her poor father getting arrested and his house set on fire has given her temporary amnesia?'

Harry automatically placed his hand on Hermione's, coaxing her to sit back down again.

'Absolutely no amnesia, whatsoever, from what I understand…' Ephraim sighed. 'She's been talking to Troy this past hour I believe and never once mentioned a desire to see you or anybody like you. If anything's muddling her mind it's the pain… She has the most appalling injury, poor mite. Her arm looked like it was hanging off when I saw it…'

'Then she's legally entitled to medical care. Troy shouldn't be anywhere near her!'

'The problem with Troy is once he's put his mind to something he's like a dog with a bone, Hermione… just won't let go,' Ephraim frowned. 'He thinks he's doing the goddam Ministry's work
for them – and, to all intents and purposes, he IS.' His blue eyes were steelier, harder than usual… Harry's presence had thrown him, Hermione thought.

She leant closer, across the table. 'Ephraim… you have to give her to Harry. Auror HQ—'

But Ephraim surged towards her… Hermione could sense Harry tensing.

'We will speak to her tonight, Hermione, and then she can walk free. How's that?'

'You're making a grave mistake,' she hissed. 'First, you're not following legal protocols. And whatever you might think, there's a good number of Blasters in this room who STILL respect the primacy of law in our country and would be horrified to learn that you don't. And second,' she dropped her voice even lower, 'you have no idea of the consequences of what she might say… and to who…'

Ephraim stared at her. Then he furtively glanced over at the bar. She could sense he was seeking Draco out.

'You should let her come with us, right now,' Harry added.

'Oh, cut the crap, Potter,' Ephraim snarled. 'She's not going to bloody Auror HQ tonight, tomorrow or any other day!' He switched focus to Hermione. 'And if I'm doing a deal with ANYBODY; it's Hermione. Understood?'

Harry glowered at him but Hermione placed her hand on his arm. 'It's okay, Harry. I'll take it from here.'

Once Harry had left, Ephraim smiled broadly. '…The famous Harry Potter! Can't see the fuss myself."

'People love a good man and he's still much-loved. I'm sure you can see THAT.'

A muscle in Ephraim's cheek twitched in annoyance. 'I can't let Melissa go tonight. The Minister demands a formal statement. He's sending one of his deputies. They're going to insist on listening to her girlish tittle-tattle come what may…'

'Couldn't you just say that she's said what she has to say and let her go?'

Ephraim shook his head. 'The Minister is ridiculously sensitive to any matters pertaining to Sub Rosa. It's tantamount to treason in his eyes… Indeed, that was declared by Executive Statute to be the Ministry's legal position only yesterday - Sub Rosa, and anyone connected, are OFFICIALLY traitors and will be punished as such.'

'What - what's that mean?'

'Execution.'

'But that's ridiculous!' The stakes had just been ratcheted up even higher... They had to get Melissa out of there! 'Let me take her tonight, Ephraim... Please,' Hermione begged, suddenly desperate. 'Nobody needs to know.'

'Too many people know too much already, Hermione… Half the goddamned village has traipsed through here this evening… I wouldn't know where to start if we had to obliviate everyone…' Ephraim fixed grave, blue eyes on her face. Something - some kind of emotion - flickered in their depths. '...Which means - there's no easy way around this... It's not possible for her to physically
leave this place.'

'So... what are you suggesting? You're suggesting SOMETHING, aren't you?'

'Well, I obviously can't release her until the Ministry delegation has seen her.' His eyes bored into hers. 'But... I can let you see her first... how's that sound?'

They fell into silence; although this was relative to the commotion in the bar behind them. There was a long line of supplicants heading out of the door, queuing to speak to Ephraim.

'What – what do you want in return?'

For a brief moment, his face sagged. 'The fact you're even here asking for her to be freed before she makes a formal statement is sufficient motive for me to try and help you, Hermione... Because, mark my words, unless stopped, that young woman will talk.'

It took her a moment to realise what he was saying. 'You presume I'm trying to save my own skin.'

His eyes flicked towards the bar. 'It's your skin I'm most worried about, I won't deny it... but not entirely. I can't pick and choose who I get to save in this instance. I didn't plan this... This is a tragic case of over-exuberance in the lower ranks. It's out of my control.'

Hermione heaved a despondent sigh. She'd be in his debt... but, she'd always been an adept at Memory Charms. There was a way out of this. He'd given her a way out...

'Thank you, Ephraim,' she said, standing up.

'Come and see me tomorrow... actually, no... this fire debacle will drag on... Come and see me at the quidditch thing on Sunday, instead. Bring the report you promised. I've been waiting far too long already.'

'It's been two days!'

His face fell. 'Oh, it felt like ages...'

'And I know nothing about a quidditch thing."

'Draco will know... you can take him in to see Melissa if you like. Or maybe Potter would suit your purpose better?'

'That really won't be necessary...'

'Well, you might want to reconsider that, Hermione. In spite of your bold talk on occasion, you don't strike me as the type who could... you know...'

She blanched. 'What are you suggesting?' Her heart beat faster.

'Absolutely no wands allowed, my dear. Custodial rules. Surely YOU know that?"

'I – yes. Of course.' She couldn't do complex memory charms WITHOUT a wand! 'Thank you.'

'XXX

'Hermione!' Melissa cried. 'Draco! Oh thank Merlin! Have you come to get me out of here? Do you know where they've taken my Dad? My arm... it's killing me! I need a healer.'
They'd been given fifteen minutes with her. Fifteen minutes to try and convince her to not mention anything or anyone...

The back bar was a dimly-lit, grungy place made even worse by the sole source of illumination being a single candle. Melissa was slumped on the floor – there was no furniture – and looked white and exhausted. She'd suffered enough today, Hermione thought dismally.

Draco and Hermione sat beside her. 'Melissa… we have a situation,' Hermione said.

Melissa stared at her and her face crumpled. Tears flowed fast down her cheeks.

'I know… I'm not stupid. I've worked it all out… That evil man, Troy; he's explained what will happen to any of you if I talk. There'll be a kangaroo court trial and almost certain execution... they're even talking of making executions public now, particularly those involving traitors... It's so fucking medieval!'

'Bloody barbaric,' Draco shuddered, head dropping.

'It's not just the traitors who suffer, Troy says. Their families will be ostracised.' Melissa groped in the darkness for Draco's hand. 'I must admit, Draco, when Troy said that, I was sorely tempted to say that YOU were Sub Rosa… if only because it implicated Ephraim himself…'

'I take it you didn't,' he said, with a sad half-smile.

'They can't do this, Melissa. These rulings can be appealed, I'm sure of it,' Hermione argued. 'We might be wizards but we still abide by UK Common Law. The death penalty is illegal in this country. It would mean total severance with the British State.' But as she spoke, she felt hot panic rising inside of her. They didn't care about that anymore...

Melissa vehemently shook her head… 'It's not the only law they're changing, Hermione. There’s stuff in the New Family Act. From what I've heard…'

'We're running out of time,' Draco said under his breath.

Hermione steeled herself.

'We need an assurance you won't say anything, Melissa. And you need to tell us if you've already spoken to anyone. I'm not judging you if you have! We just need to know…'

'I haven't said anything to Hilary, if that's what you mean. I wouldn't dare! He's a Blaster, now. He did know about the Minister's prescriptions, though. I – I even wondered if he grassed me up? The thing is… he left me a couple of weeks ago…' Melissa burst into loud pealing sobs.

Hermione wrapped her arms around her. 'Oh, you poor thing… you should have told us,' she said, aghast that Melissa had been carrying so much pain.

'I was too embarrassed…' Melissa wept. 'I've made a complete fool of myself, haven't I? I often do... It's probably why Hilary left me.'

'Not at all, don't be silly,' Hermione said, squeezing her hand. 'A lot of marriages fall into… difficulties.' Her eyes welled up… 'It's – it's just one of those things… things change.'

She glanced at Draco. He was looking at the ground, a sombre look on his face.

'Oh, I don't think much changed at all… not really…' Melissa sighed. 'I mean, I loved him, of
course I did, but it was one-way traffic. I see that now. We lacked passion. I guess I'm not the kind of girl who gets swept up into *grand romance*. Not like you, Hermione…'

'I don't think I'm that kind of girl, either, Melissa!'

Melissa looked between Hermione and Draco and smiled. 'You'd die for each other. I saw that today. It was suddenly very clear and really rather beautiful… Your face, Hermione! When I was injured and you knew you should defend me, but you wanted to find Draco, to save Draco. It was all you could think about… And when you were missing, Draco was in pieces!' Hermione couldn't even look at Draco. In fact she could hardly breathe… or see through the tears that were falling from her eyes. 'I know he would die for you, Hermione… and that's how I know why he's here - in this room. Right now…' Melissa turned to Draco. 'You wouldn't just die for her, would you? You'd kill for her too…'

Draco looked white as a sheet. 'Yes,' he said. 'I'm sorry, Melissa.'

'No one has to *die!*' Hermione said, appealing to both Draco and Melissa. 'Just – just promise to try not to say anything…'

Melissa shook her head. 'I can't do that. They'll use torture – there's – there's already been a little bit of that.' She grimaced as she held up her bandaged arm. There was fresh blood on the linens. 'And they'll use veritaserum. I know how these things work.'

'I can try wandless magic… it's very tricky with memory charms,' Hermione sobbed, 'but I can try…. And then when everything's over and we're safe again, I can undo them.'

Melissa shook her head. 'Memory charms are vulnerable to torture.'

Draco nodded solemnly. 'She's right.'

There was a sharp rap on the door. 'We haven't got long,' Hermione said urgently. 'Please. Just – just give me an assurance…'

But tears silently rolled down Melissa's cheeks. She quickly wiped her nose on the back of her bloodied bandage, leaving a red smear on her face. 'Just do it quickly,' Melissa said to Draco. She put her hands around her neck. 'This is the best way… I've always had a silly little neck.'

Draco put his face in his hands, unable to look at her…

She couldn't let this happen, Hermione thought… There was one final possibility.

'Melissa… you remember I used that colour-magic on you today? I don't know if it works for memory charms… I've no idea how it could, actually… but–'

'It's worth a shot,' Melissa said. 'I could end up a vegetable I suppose… but there'd always be a chance of reversing the damage, I'm sure of it…'

Her optimism was more upsetting than anything else, Hermione realised - but she had to compose herself.

'Hermione,' Draco warned. 'You've no idea how to do this… you could scramble her brains forever. We don't know enough about how this magic works.'

'I'm happy to take that risk,' Melissa smiled. 'I don't think you'd actually enjoy killing me, Draco, even if you think I'm really irritating!'
She grabbed hold of Hermione's hands. Her eyes were large and glistening in the candlelight. 'Please. Take this away from me… take this burden away. If removing memories is too difficult, then make new ones. Give me another world that I can believe in; send me to sleep and give me beautiful dreams. A beautiful place. Somewhere I can spend the rest of time if necessary… just in case you don't work out how to reverse me back again. But I have faith that you can, Hermione.'

Hermione fell into Melissa's arms, crying hard now. I'm so sorry this has happened to you… I'm so sorry we bumped into each other that day – here in Hogsmeade. This is all my fault.'

'No,' Melissa said, stroking Hermione's hair. 'It's been quite an adventure doing the right thing for once. I've always been very selfish you know… And I'll admit, Hermione, I was so jealous of you when we were at the Ministry… and I'm sorry for that. But now we're depending on you, so don't give up… because this world's worth saving, I've realised that…'

'Okay…' Hermione said, taking a deep breath. 'Okay, Melissa… tell me what world you'd like to live in…'

And Melissa told her.

At first, Hermione was barely able to summon her colour into her head. She felt panicked, blocked. She fumbled for Draco's hand in the darkness and drew his whiteness into her. And now she could see her colour – vibrant and gleaming - wanting to do what she asked of it. But…

'I'm not sure I can do this alone,' she breathed. 'I'm not powerful enough.'

'You're not alone though, are you?' Draco said, wrapping one arm around her and the other around Melissa. 'And seeing as my soul's pretty f*cked up already, let me do this with you…' he said hoarsely.

Slowly but surely, Hermione pushed her colour into Melissa's wavering, trembling granulated grey… Earlier today she'd pushed in warmth – but this was cold. Stark and cold. Not to kill… No. But to spiral Melissa into deep hibernation, deep and buried inside her mind. Somewhere safe and beautiful, where Melissa could feel free and happy… But one day she'd wake up and the world would be new again, and she'd be new again - and all would be well…

XXX

'She's not dead,' she whispered to Ephraim. He was waiting outside - heavy-browed, tense - under the staircase and beside a side-door.

He told her to wait while he checked. 'As good as…' he murmured.

'She's not dead,' Hermione repeated. She was swallowing a sob and looked away. She couldn't bear to cry in front of Ephraim. It was humiliating.

'I'll keep her safe here tonight and the Ministry will come and assume she hurt herself,' he said in a low voice. 'This was for the best, Hermione… sometimes we have to do things we regret for the greater good.'

'My greater good is not the same as yours,' she hissed.

He eyed her sorrowfully. 'Not yet, perhaps.'

She shook her head violently. 'How do we get her tomorrow?'
'I'll send word. I'll have her Apparated to somewhere neutral…'

'Thank you. I have to go now.'

'We'll talk Sunday.'

XXX

The three of them walked away from Hogsmeade, past the swirling crowds and the noise and the heat and the charred remains of once-loved shop-fronts - it was unbearably hot and the smoke was thick and soupy and scorched the lungs. A long stream of squawking, hooting owls flew high above and away from Hogsmeade… the Post Office must have caught fire.

Once they were on the road that forked towards the mountains, Harry said: 'Thinking about it, I should pop back and tell Neville and the others what's happened… They're terrified, on top of everything else.'

Hermione nodded mutely.

'I'll meet you by the caves… rest, Hermione. You look exhausted.'

'I'm not exhausted… I feel SHIT,' Hermione retorted. 'I'm sorry to sound hysterical about this, but I don't know that I can do what I promised!… I don't know if I can bring Melissa back!'

'You didn't promise,' Draco said. 'You tried your best in ridiculously difficult circumstances. Melissa knew that.'

'Whether we like it or not, though, we need to understand this magic better,' Harry sighed.

'But Bill says it's dark magic…' Hermione said. That was her fear. Her big fear. That she was being taken over by something dark and unmanageable.

'We don't know that for sure.'

Hermione shook her head. 'I don't want this…'

'But you're stuck with it,' Harry said bluntly. He placed his hands on her shoulders. 'And we have to learn how to use it.'

He hugged her tightly and started to walk away. 'I won't be long… the Blasters were saying they think they've almost got the fire under control now. And at least it looks like no one's been hurt. Just property.'

XXX

Draco took her hand and they walked in silence up the lane which grew darker and quieter and more winding, and colder, too. All they could hear was the sound of their feet on the stony path and their breathing.

Hermione was acutely aware of Draco's hand wrapped around hers. The warmth of his skin.

'You alright?' Draco asked.

'Not especially… Are you?'

'Well… It's been the longest day in history…'
The moon was little more than a slim, creamy slither, meaning it was so dark they could barely see one foot in front of the other. But if they looked over their shoulders, Hogsmeade was still a-glow through the thick clagging plume of smoke that hung like a blue blanket over the valley.

The tall, tapering shapes of trees were ranged to their right. Hermione tugged Draco towards them. They sat down on damp grass… and the air seemed to sigh around them.

'We can wait here…'

It seemed surreal, she thought, to be sat on this hill, shivering a little in the darkness, watching Hogsmeade burn… almost unbelievable that such a thing could be happening at all… that a part of her life, their life, and their past was being destroyed like this.

'Oh god… that was fucking terrible…' Draco burst out, shielding his face. 'I feel like we killed her.' She could hear his heart thumping loudly; it seemed to throb through her.

'I guess we kind of did – in mind, if not in body… At least for now.'

She leant her head against his shoulder and he coiled an arm around her waist and they gazed at the village burning below.

'I'll find a way to bring her back…' She tried to inject hopefulness into her voice.

'But we don't live in one of those fucking fairy tales where the princess springs back to life, do we?'

'No, but colour-magic kind of does, actually,' Hermione said, aware she sounded a little ridiculous, if not desperate. Salvedra's world, although dangerous and dreadful, had been beautiful. Truly, the stuff that dreams were made of…

Draco pulled her closer, but it was beginning to feel like it wasn't close enough, and the way his fingers were pressing into her waist, she could sense he felt the same.

He looked down at her. His eyes were glistening in the dark and his face was a pale oval; his mouth a thick, black smear…

She reached out and touched his lips, tracing their outline with her thumb… he opened his mouth and gently bit the end of it – and continued to stare down at her, his eyes large and dark. And suddenly her stomach was somersaulting…

It probably wasn't right, not after what they'd done… but she couldn't fight the acute tightening sensation deep inside of her, the sudden racing of her heart. Somehow, the thick, grey darkness made it easier to forget, to live in the moment...

'Hermione,' he breathed and his voice juddered. He gently eased her down onto the cool, damp grass and loomed over her… She could sense his whiteness surging wildly inside of him… fierce bolts of energy.

She desperately needed to feel his mouth on hers, to feel warm. She caressed the nape of his neck and sank her fingers into his hair, bending his mouth to hers. They kissed slowly and deeply, his tongue moving against hers in a way that made her moan and shake, craving more.

He pulled back, gasping for breath and urgently unfastened her shirt, her bra. The cold was a shock and her nipples were instantly hard and aching.
His mouth slid, hot and wet, across her face and throat and down to her breasts; the cool night air teased the saliva trails he left on her body, making her shiver.

Was this wrong she thought?

But her mind was becoming a hot, white blank; her desire for him rapidly swelling into a piercing whine inside of her…

She unbuttoned his shirt and he was ripping open his fly with one hand, grunting with the effort. He felt like a hot iron against her cool skin. She slid her jeans down, kicking them off impatiently, then helped with his. She desperately wanted him inside her… to feel alive and real.

Their mouths met and they kissed each other with pitiless, bruising passion, teeth grazing lips: no judgement and no thought between them, beyond an increasingly violent need for release.

She muscled her arms and legs tight around him, pulling him close, so that he was nestled deep between her thighs… He ground slowly into her, like he was exploring her with his body… tentative at first, sighing as he moved. She trembled uncontrollably at the feel of his hot, moist mouth and the wet, rhythmic slap of his body - cool and hard, skin smooth like gleaming marble - against hers.

'My god,' she choked, suddenly struggling to breathe; incredulous at how their colour-magic connection meant her feelings were magnified by what he was feeling, too… raw sensation flooding through her, in a dazzling wash of white.

The urge to come hard was fast building inside of her; she gripped him and greedily pushed herself against him… but he grabbed her hands and forced them to the ground behind her with considerable force, keeping her pinned down.

'Not yet,' he said, breathing in soft, light pants, 'I wondered…' he continued, staring down at her, eyes shining out of the dark, 'if it was a fluke… but…' he then closed his eyes as he drove into her and groaned. 'Jesus fuck… it's real… this feeling… it's both of us…' He gazed at her, shaking. 'Hermione, my love… We need a week in bed… for scientific research.'

She couldn't help but laugh. 'How do you propose we manage that?'

'God knows, but one day… please god, one day,' he rasped, seizing her with urgent force and kissing her until her head was spinning with light and all coherent thought was vanquished and they were making love with a frenzied wildness; more animal than she'd ever considered herself capable of, thrashing and writhing, desperately lost to the waves of white-hot blissful sensation surging through them.

She rolled on top of him and grasped his outstretched fists, which were clenched into tight balls, wanting nothing more than to quickly grind herself to the limit.

'Oh, Christ,' she moaned, head flung back, gazing up at the stars… A pulsating current was burning through her, every muscle contracting, skin on fire.

Draco took hold of her hips, pulling her to meet him with savage force, before flipping her onto the ground and pounding into her with such fierce intensity it felt like her lower body was climbing his.

An overwhelming pressure, something monstrous and deep, was building inside of her, a burning glow… She could sense he was gone, lost to the moment; blind, visceral need had taken him over, and suddenly it felt like her stomach was dropping from a huge height and a rush of heat and colour and electrifying pleasure was blasting through her with shocking power and strength,
making her scream out loud…

*Oh, her fucking soul be damned,* she thought, revelling in the extraordinary swirl of colours and emotion and heightened physical sensation that swirled between them, as Draco fell against her, groaning into her neck, his body convulsing in swift, sharp shocks.

Nothing else felt like this. Nothing could…

They didn't move for a while; short, shuddering breaths gradually eased into long, deep sighs, hearts slowed, a dreamy high - cleansed and good.

But the brute reality of their situation weaselled its way back into Hermione's consciousness. She suddenly imagined Harry striding purposefully up the hill and sat up with a start, momentarily stunned at her flagrant, risky behaviour… She'd been desperate, untethered, *feral*, even…

'That was very wrong of us,' she said abruptly.

'Bollocks. It was magnificent,' he sighed, pulling her into his arms.

'Harry could have walked up and we wouldn't have even noticed.'

'Well, he did say we needed to learn more about colour-magic…' he grinned.

She twisted round to look at him. 'And we're going to need a shower… I'd forgotten.' There'd be blood...

'I didn't,' he said.

She shivered, suddenly cold.

He wrapped her cloak round them, warding off the chill mountain air, and scooped her closer.

There was a sudden stillness from him and he looked at her with such intense feeling for some inexplicable reason she felt like crying. 'Hermione… I know you feel guilty. But… we needed to feel, not think. There's no shame in that…'

'I know… but that's HOW I feel guilty. Well, one of the reasons I suppose… Can Melissa even *feel* anymore?'

He smoothed her hair; his hand was shaking. 'Look. We had to do what we did. *Sub Rosa* will be devastated. But at least they'll be alive and we can fix this fucking shit; not just what happened tonight… but the crap with Salvedra and Ephraim and the fact someone's watching you in your house and this whole crazy fucking magic thing and – and the personal stuff, too – and the simple fact that this world's going completely bloody beserk on us… Because we *will* fix it. Somehow… I truly think that.'

But there were other things, she thought, that she hadn't mentioned to him.

Katya … because a dark notion had struck her today in Salvedra's dreamscape, something she couldn't bear to face - not yet.

And there was still the darkness, that god awful darkness… but somehow, Draco kept that at bay.

'You didn't used to be so hopeful, Draco… In fact – just before we had sex, you were bemoaning the lack of fairy tale princesses!'
He smiled. 'You're right… I'm a fickle cunt, aren't I? But when I'm close to you, everything just feels a whole load better. It's quite simple, really.'

She laughed. 'I never thought you were a softie, Draco Malfoy. You know that?'

'A man of surprises,' he said, kissing her.

She laid her head against his chest and closed her eyes, suddenly tired. She could feel wave after wave of something pure and perfect; his heart thudding underneath, an insistent bass-beat… She nuzzled into the warmth of his neck and treasured the feel and smell of him, knowing in that moment, she loved the very essence of him. And maybe, just maybe, he was right after all…

'You're shattered. I'm taking you back to Shell Cottage,' Draco said, 'and then I'll come back here to help.'

'Will I see you later? Are you coming to see Scorpius?' It was getting painful now not knowing when she'd be with him again.

'Of course.'

When they eventually stood up, Hermione realised she could see all around the hillside. 'We were so exposed!' she exclaimed, struck with fresh shame. 'Anyone from any direction could have seen us!'

'No they couldn't, they'd never have found us… I made sure of that. Lucky for you, Hermione,' Draco smirked, 'one of us is a Slytherin.'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"PANIC, SHEAR BLOODY PANIC" from SHERLOCK HOLMES" by HANS ZIMMER

"WHAT ELSE IS THERE?" by ROYKSOPP

"COMMENT JE VAIS FAIRE" by HOSHI

"EDEN" by ANNA CALVI

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
May Violets Spring

Chapter Summary

Hermione embraces her powers and deepens her bond with Draco… but worlds dramatically collide with horrific consequences

46. May Violets Spring

Hermione woke up to the sound of murmured voices… she was still feeling exhausted and would have happily continued dozing, but the discomfort of lying at an awkward angle, fully clothed, with her feet parked next to Henrik, soon got the better of her. She eased into a more comfortable position, ensuring she didn't wake Henrik who was lightly snoring, his head lolled against the back of the sofa.

With her head balanced on the arm of the sofa she could see into the kitchen… the door was ajar. Draco was at the kitchen table, his hand on a mug of tea or coffee; when he leant forwards, most of his face came into view. Who was he talking to? She could make out another man's hand on the table and an occasional flash of red hair… Bill.

'… but I reckoned I should speak to you…'

'Fleur feels you should be with your son.'

'Well, that's my thinking, too—' Hermione didn't quite catch the end of Draco's sentence, though.

'But that's not the only person you'd be close to, is it?'

Draco leant back in his seat, out of sight; there was a pause - and then Draco said something quick in muted tones…

'I know you would, mate – but we can't afford unnecessary drama…' Bill said tersely. 'Not with so much going on. Do you understand?'

Draco said nothing, but he gave a slight nod. 'This is your home, Bill. I'd never want to impose.'

Bill said something inaudible.

Then, Draco. '… Tinworth, maybe?'

Bill gave a short, sharp laugh. 'You'd stick out like a sore thumb!'

'But it'd be handy…' Draco persevered.

'You can Apparate!' Bill scoffed, with grand hand gestures. 'Might as well be in London or Malfoy Manor… same difference.'

Draco looked away from him and raised the mug of tea or coffee to his mouth… 'Malfoy Manor's unsustainable. Ephraim's on to me. He's finally twigged I've been mis-signing business papers since
returning from Paris... and it's killing the business. Goods stuck in ports, bills unpaid... so I'm now going to need a safe house—'

Hermione's heart missed a beat... He hadn't told her he was doing this! He always said his Malfoy birthright - his sole ability to sign off major family business - was what kept him alive. That, and Ephraim's attachment to Narcissa... But now they were married, he'd got what he wanted out of her...

'Harry set Ziff and Henrik up in secure digs, I believe,' said Bill.

'He didn't, actually. Auror HQ weren't as cooperative as he'd hoped,' Draco said coldly.

'So where are they staying?'

'Somewhere less safe than they deserve.' Draco didn't hide his bitterness.

Hermione could sense Bill was agonising here... he couldn't refuse refuge to Henrik and Ziff but reject Draco. Their star witness...

But this was clearly a frank man-to-man chat. 'Henrik's already here and Ziff can stay until there's a safe alternative, but while I appreciate your part in all of this – you can't join them.'

'What about Sub Rosa?' Draco asked; louder, needling... 'Are they allowed to stay? Because that shit's coming at us very quickly now.'

'Until a safe base comes online...'

'Except it won't just COME ONLINE, will it?' Draco's voice rose.

Bill nodded. 'I'll get onto it... Most will move out. Including Parvati.'

'I'll join Parvati and Scorpius, obviously.'

'... means Hermione and her kids continue with us. And Ron - when he gets back...'

Draco's face froze.

'Because he WILL come back, Draco,' Bill continued in low, insistent tones. 'So, you need to understand that the thing you WANT won't happen.'

Draco stared back at him, tightlipped.

'You've no idea what I want...'

'Oh, but I do,' Bill said. 'I'm not blaming you. Hermione's a wonderful woman. But, in spite of their current difficulties, she still loves my brother.'

'Has she told you that?' Sharp, quick...

Bill hesitated... 'We're very close... that's how I know she's not been herself since losing her job, since all this crap kicked off... Listen, Hermione's not the kind of woman to lead a man on, but she's in a susceptible state. I get that you bonded in Argentina - Harry agrees with me on this - and I don't doubt your feelings for her are genuine. But hers aren't.'

'Does Harry agree about that as well?' There was a sardonic lilt to Draco's voice, but a tiny note of self-doubt underneath.
'Most couples go through tricky patches. No doubt YOU did, with BOTH your wives,' Bill intoned. 'Once everything returns to normal, Hermione will want her happy, secure life back; on the fast-track to become Minister for Magic. If I were you, mate, I'd face up to that and move on, rather than meddling in their marriage.'

There was a long silence. Hermione couldn't see either man's face…

'You really don't know her at all, do you?' Draco said darkly.

'Your problem, Draco, is I DO.'

The back door banged open. Someone else – a man - had entered the kitchen. There was a burble of voices. The kitchen door was closed...

Hermione sensed Henrik was awake, watching her, but when she turned her head to meet his eyes, to her surprise, he was still fast asleep.

Peculiar, she thought. She'd felt sure he was looking at her. She carried on staring at him for a while, half-expecting him to flash her a broad grin – a joke - but no, he was definitely sleeping.

Yet she still had an unsettling feeling that they weren't quite alone.

She sat up and gazed around the sitting-room. Nobody… She squinted at the window leading out onto the garden. It was bathed in the rosy glow of morning's first light, but she couldn't see anyone looking in.

She could still feel it… the sensation was getting stronger, prickling her arms, setting her hairs on end.

Her heart beat faster until she couldn't bear it anymore, couldn't bear sitting on the sofa, afraid to look up in case she saw something she regretted seeing – then hating her own paranoia.

She needed occupation but wasn't capable of conversation; particularly with Bill. A shower to drown out the humming anxieties threading inexorably through her head - worry for Draco, the sickly guilt she was feeling about Melissa, her fear of just about everything.

XXX

After freshening-up and creeping upstairs to the twin bedroom to grab a change of clothes without waking the children, all crammed in together, Hermione headed into the garden to clear her head. It was a crisp, Spring morning and the bay glistened invitingly.

She was delirious with tiredness but the fresh air was enervating.

She stood in the garden and closed her eyes, breathing in the fresh, salt air, savouring the sounds of the surging whoosh and sigh of the waves hitting the sandy beach below the clifftops and the harsh squawks of giant seagulls divebombing into the sea, hunting an early morning meal.

She shivered involuntarily and a cool tingle scurried up her arms and her spine…

She thought about making love with Draco on the hillside high above Hogsmeade... Despite the circumstances, it had felt free, honest, uninhibited. She felt cleansed and alive and in love.

A squibble of satisfaction, mingled with gnawing anxiety for him, churned through her.

Bill was plain WRONG. There was so much of her old life she didn't want back. She didn't want
her old job at the Ministry. And she really, really didn't want to be married to Ron... Of course, with everything else going on, this was tricky to resolve.

'Daily Prophet's a shocker,' Harry called from the porch.

He beckoned her to a bench overlooking the bay. He carried the paper under his arm and two cups of tea.

Naturally, the front page was devoted to the Hogsmeade fire. Mercifully, no casualties - and the fire blamed on 'deliberate sabotage'… though no details given. And no mention of Melissa and her father... swept into the dustbin of disposable news. And silence from the Ministry. The Mayor of Hogsmeade was the sole official spokesperson.

Harry's 'pitching in with the locals' to fight the blaze, however, was rewarded with a short news-item: 'Prodigal Son Potter Returns to Homeland to Save Hogsmeade.'

'Read on,' Harry said, peering over his glasses at her as he supped his cup of tea.

Hermione was stupefied. 'What the hell is this?'

'A new statute … Ephraim's blasted Impunity Laws. He's written an article detailing thirteen domains, as he calls them, where he thinks magical folk deserve an unchallenged Right to Exist; wielding sole administrative control. They're all listed…'

Hermione scanned the list:

**CORNWALL:**
- Aberfala South - Tinworth coast to Falmouth
- Penwith – Coast from Lamorna to Sennen Cove
- Trevena – Tintagel, St Nectan and Boscastle

**DEVON:**
- Queerditch Quod – Godric's Hollow to Wistmere Wood

**DORSET:**
- Old Anglestone West – Wimbourne to Puddlemere

**GLOUCESTERSHIRE:**
- The Burh – Mould-on-the-Wold and its environs

**YORKSHIRE:**
- Eborakan – Ilkley to Upper Flagley, including Janet's Foss and Goredale Scar

**WALES:**
- Mona – Half of Anglesey
- Idris Gawr – Cadair Idris and Dolgellau to Bala

**SCOTLAND:**
Glenesk – Banchory to Montrose and the Angus Glens

Skye – The Isle of Skye

IRELAND:

Antroim Ridge – Antrim Coast from Ballycastle to the Giant's Causeway.

LINCOLNSHIRE:

Great Fen or Five Fens

Towns of shared interest:

Chudley, Caerphilly, Appleby, Barnton, Tutshill, Wigtown, Cokeworth, Ottery St Catchpole and Folborough.

Places of special interest:

Cadair Idris

Lamorna

Castlerigg

Janet's Foss

Grimes Graves

Hambledon Hill

'It's a guided tour of Quidditch clubs,' Hermione said pithily.

'Except, Folborough… presumably makes the cut because of Malfoy Manor. And this Great Fen domain.'

'Where the hell's Grimes Graves?' Hermione asked, screwing up her nose.

'No idea. Another stone circle? There's two: Lamorna, here in Cornwall, and Castlerigg… It's all very clever,' Harry said. 'These domains are where wizards mainly live already.'

'There's no major towns or cities…'

'Yeah, but some of these places have military installations, Hermione! Muggles won't just hand them over! Not without kicking up a fuss.'

Hermione felt a little sick. 'Well, as we know, that's the point of Dark Flux. Give us what we want or we kill you…'

Harry's face darkened. '… but the Muggles have already won. With modern weaponry, they'd hunt us down and smash us to pulp.'

They exchanged guilty looks. 'I don't think wizardkind gets it…'

'A few, perhaps… Draco,' Harry said. 'Who'd have thought that when we were younger?' He gave her a sharp look. 'But then, who'd have thought a lot of things?'
Hermione felt her cheeks burning with emotion. Her gaze dropped to her teacup.

'Has he seen this?' Hermione asked.

'He thinks it means Ephraim's about to make his final push to become Minister and is setting out the specifics of his agenda.'

Hermione shuddered as a cool sea-breeze twisted through her hair. It was still a little damp from her shower.

'Did you know Draco hasn't been signing off Herb Healing business?' she asked, rounding on Harry.

Harry blinked rapidly; cornered. '... It's been an incredibly effective strategy, Hermione. The Herb Healing distribution network's in freefall; bills unpaid, products can't be made or transported. Products that could have delivered death...'

'Better he'd just walked away permanently!'

'We needed him on the inside for as long as possible...' Harry gazed out to sea, avoiding her fiery gaze.

'Then we're DESPICABLE! Enabling Herb Healing was his lifeline.'

'It was HIS decision, alone. Henrik worked it out first because he follows Muggle business news! And then I discussed it with Draco that time we met in Paris... the day of the Dark Flux attack at Parvati's.'

'Why didn't either of you tell me?'

'To avoid THIS kind of reaction!' He gave her a pained look. 'And that's how he wants it...so please, don't let on you know.'

'I didn't need protecting, Harry,' she said, irked. 'But we've reached a point where Draco clearly does.'

'I know...' he murmured. 'Anyway, Draco and I are in London this morning, meeting Torquil's security guy, Igor. He tried to blackmail Draco because he saw him at Svetlana Kerpin's house back in January - but Draco's recruited him to be our informant instead...'

'But surely you're both exhausted? Have you had any sleep?'

'Not yet.' It was Draco. She gave a start when he placed his hand on her shoulder.

She twisted round to smile at him and he shunted her along the bench and sat down beside her. His arm rested on the back of the bench behind her and she automatically lolled against his shoulder, feeling calmer, warmer.

'You're not going into work, are you?' she asked, trying to suppress the note of alarm in her voice.

'Nah... can't be arsed. After seeing this Igor chap I'm grabbing coffee with Ziff then pissing off back to Malfoy Manor for a quick nap... I need to sort some stuff with Mother.'

She craned to look up at him. His clothes smelt of smoke.

'Bill's building a shield tent for Melissa,' he said. 'She'll be warm and secure until she's conscious
again.'

'Maybe we could all do with a shield tent?'

He gazed down at her, his eyes clouded and grey with tiredness. She wanted to tell him that Bill was wrong. She wouldn't just 'return' to her old life… too much had happened.

'You should tell Ziff his temp job is over,' Harry said in laconic tones.

'It already is. He's mapped Gilgad's communications network onto his own computers. Guy's a bloody genius... We're talking about starting up a tech business when all this shit gets sorted…'

'Muggle?'

Draco nodded.

'Where?' Hermione asked.

Draco regarded her with still, grey eyes… 'Depends. But probably Paris.'

'Parvati said something worrying last night... How did Hulda find them at that campsite?'

'I think Sylvestra tracked Gwen,' Draco sighed. 'She probably knows you were with Parvati when I gave Scorpius away.'

'Maybe Astoria told her?' Harry suggested.

'For the right price? Possibly... Anyway, Gwen's your most likely family member to take in a young boy, seeing as she has one herself.'

'The fact Scorpius is still so important to them might actually be a good sign,' Harry said. 'Maybe they don’t have too many other blood-bag kids to source their Dark Flux weapon-shit from? At least not close by…'

'Plus Sylvestra's a pigheaded bitch who doesn't like losing control!' Draco groused. 'I still worry there's other kids out there we need to find... If we saved them, we'd block their supply of Dark Flux…'

'We need to keep Joyana safe,' Hermione murmured. She was still worrying about Gwen, though. 'Gwen's mum still lives in Borehamwood. We need Bill to somehow set up wards without her noticing!'

Harry and Draco made their move. The moment Harry's back was turned and he was walking towards the perimeter of the property to Apparate, Draco bent his head and brushed his lips against Hermione's - an unspoken promise. Her lips tingled at his touch – and his audacity. She was starkly aware that they were in full view of the house.

She watched them walk deeper into the garden: Draco - slightly taller and straight-backed, hair gleaming; Harry - scruffy dark hair, wiry build and a determined stoop as he hastened forwards.

Draco put his hand on Harry's shoulder and they disappeared.

XXX

Hermione snatched some sleep upstairs, but was awoken by a terrific rumpus; raised, outraged voices…
She could hear the children playing in the garden and when she peered through the window she spotted Arlene, sat on the bench she'd occupied earlier, nursing Joyana.

Angelina rolled her eyes in Hermione's direction when she walked into the sitting-room. 'Looks like someone got wind of Thelonious being *Sub Rosa*… Hogwarts sacked him!'

'Me, too,' Dennis cheeped in a sorrowful voice from the sofa. He stared dejectedly at a bashed-up, leather hold-all and a teetering pile of books on a small table next to the sofa.

'What's happened?'

'Professor Goertner gave us our marching orders,' Dennis explained.

'But he didn't seem happy about it…' Thelonious added graciously.

'Did he mention *Sub Rosa*? This was now DEADLY serious.

Angelina swung round to face Thelonious. 'Not being funny, but could it be because you're GAY?'

Bill opened his mouth to rebuke her but then snapped it shut. 'What did your letter say?'

Thelonious plucked it from his robe pocket and handed it over.

'Inappropriate behaviour … unbefitting … malign, moral influence,' Bill read aloud, scanning the official letter. 'Did you get the same?' he asked Dennis.

Dennis handed his letter to Bill.

'Different origins…' Bill said, studying the letterheads. 'Thelonious's comes from the Department for Moral Comportment … what the fuck's that?'

Everyone looked askance at each other except for Alfred - hiding behind Henrik in the kitchen doorway – who gasped to hear Bill swear and promptly ran away to the garden.

'... Dennis's letter is a standard termination notice from Hogwarts.'

'Is it illegal in your world to be GAY?' Gwen asked, incredulous.

'No… at least, it wasn't,' Hermione replied, feeling thoroughly ashamed by it all. 'Has Neville been sacked too?'

'He was still in Hogsmeade this morning,' Thelonious said. 'We haven't seen him.'

'Where will you go?' Parvati asked.

Dennis sadly stroked his pile of books. 'Hogwarts is my home.'

'Well, you can stay here,' Fleur said, casting a desperate glance at Bill, who bowed his head to the inevitable…

'We can pitch up at The Leaky Cauldron,' Thelonious demurred.

But Fleur wouldn't hear of such a thing and promptly suggested sandwiches and tea.

Hermione and Parvati volunteered to make lunch and moved to the kitchen, followed by Bill.

'I've been thinking about Seamus Finnigan,' Parvati piped up as she buttered bread. 'He inherited a
holiday home – big, ole place on the coast. It's roomy and there's a fabulous beach.'

'You're thinking *safe house*?'

Parvati smiled at her with a frank, brown-eyed gaze. 'The kids would love it.'

'Are you still in contact?' Bill asked, an excited gleam in his eye.

'Not regularly, but we're friends.'

'The travel ban doesn't apply to Ireland!' Bill said jovially. 'Send Demosthenes straight away.' If the visp stings had actually enabled him to smile, this would have been the happiest Hermione had seen Bill look for days.

Parvati continued stolidly spreading butter on the bread. 'I'll do that … I reckon it'd be nice to keep ALL the kids together?'

Hermione jumped at this. 'Definitely! And Hugo *loves* the seaside… the sea's too choppy here.'…. Draco would be there with his son.

'Well… let's see what Seamus has to say first, shall we?' Bill said, looking a little less ecstatic at the idea now that the penny had dropped.

XXX

Draco and Harry arrived late afternoon with Melissa.

Thelonious and Bill had constructed a shield tent in the garden and Melissa was laid inside. She looked peaceful on a fur-lined bed and would be preserved for as long as it took for Hermione to reverse her magically-induced catatonia. Everyone – including *Sub Rosa*, who'd arrived in dribs and drabs throughout the afternoon – headed back indoors, but Hermione stayed.

She surreptitiously tried to reverse the magic, but failed. 'I'll bring you back, I promise…' she whispered.

The tent was secure, but utilitarian, so Hermione conjured flowers, butterflies… sad that they'd soon dissipate.

'I just wanted to make it prettier,' she murmured sadly, when Draco and Harry came outside to check on her.

'Try colour-magic,' Harry suggested.

Hermione shuddered. 'That's how we got into this mess…'

'Actually, no… it's how you solved a problem,' Harry argued.

'Bill thinks it's dangerous.'

'We don't know that, though, do we?' Draco said, agreeing with Harry. 'Take Visual Resonation… sure, that may be dark because it's a technique created by a *dark* wizard. But that doesn't mean ALL colour-magic is dark. I mean, OUR type of magic isn't automatically dark, is it? It depends on what you do with it… Who casts the spell.'

'So, you're saying colour-magic is… neutral?'
'ALL magic is neutral! It's just energy, isn't it?'

He had a good point.

'Well, I grabbed a few books about alternative types of magic from my father's library this morning and looked up colour-magic,' Draco continued. 'It's very ancient, seldom-used, and yes, it CAN draw on the soul, which enhances its potency…'

'But only if the caster's motivated by anger or hate,' Harry said. 'This is a very personal magic, Hermione, powered by all sorts of emotions.'

'LOVE,' Draco said, his eyes glistening, 'love can create colour-magic… Although colour-magic can't create Love, in return. Gamp's rules still apply.'

'The point we're making is - it's a question of personal will.'

Hermione stared at them both, feeling a little stunned.

'Does that mean I'm not destroying myself?' she asked in a small voice.

Draco vehemently shook his head. 'The magic YOU create? Not at all…' He took her hands in his. 'You're not dark; you're all that's good. You want to act for the good of others – and that's what matters here.'

Hermione couldn't help herself. She burst into tears... She'd been so fearful about what was happening to her. 'I'm not ALL good,' she sniffed, weeping now into Draco's shirt as he pressed her close. He smelt warm and good and she didn't care that Harry was there.

'But in essence, you are,' Draco said. 'You're not driven by malice or revenge. Someone like Salvedra – well, he's clearly a total cock.' Hermione laughed. It seemed like a pitifully small insult for such a grand and dangerous wizard – and yet, somehow, apt. 'I suspect Salvedra – and other wizards in Spain - suffered terrible persecution. One of those Spanish magic books mentioned how wizards were forced to emigrate. Maybe Salvedra's borne a long and deep-felt grudge ever since? His magic feels dark because he's riddled with vengeance and paranoia. But, ultimately, dark colour-magic is like any other dark magic – you just have to use better magic to beat it.'

'And that's something you can work on, Hermione,' Harry said. 'Fight fire with fire…'

'But GOOD fire,' Draco said very forcefully, giving Harry a stern, reprimanding look.

Hermione couldn't help but smile. Like Harry, his instinct was to protect, she realised. She doubted he even knew this about himself, because he'd been such a cowardly child...

'I'm nothing like as strong as someone like Salvedra – or even Sylvestra, I suspect,' Hermione pointed out.

'You think Sylvestra uses colour-magic?' Harry asked.

'Probably anyone who studied with Salvedra does… so that's Selwyn and Asusto.'

'Possibly Zoltan, too…' Draco added. 'He lived in Spain.'

'Salvedra manipulated light, you said… maybe you could try doing the same?' Harry suggested.

'He's not just creating illusions, Harry. That glass dragon. Even though they don't actually exist, it was real!'
'And visps,' Draco added, 'died out years ago, possibly never existed… but Bill's got stings like fuck-off quills stuck in his gob that prove they were no illusion.'

'Salvedra's world was all about making dreams into reality, wasn't it?' Hermione said excitedly.

'I guess we were halfway there last night with Melissa,' Draco said, casting a sorry eye on Melissa's peacefully prone figure. 'You made a world inside her mind… using a sort of legilimency, I suppose.'

'But I'm not a Legilimens.'

'Not usually. But when you needed it, you willed it.'

'I couldn't have done it without you, Draco.'

Harry eyed them thoughtfully. 'Maybe that's the key…?'

They both looked at him, expectant - but Harry seemed to trail off inside his own head… He quickly gathered himself. 'You should try it, Hermione.'

'Try what?' Hermione suddenly felt nervous.

'The colour-magic… make something.'

Hermione looked at Shell Cottage. 'Bill wouldn't like it.'

'Then let's go for a walk,' Draco said.

The three of them rapidly trotted along the cliff-path towards an open, scrappy area of grass.

'Here,' Draco said. 'Let's conjure something using colour-magic.' He handed Harry their wands.

Despite her trepidation, bubbling excitement brewed up inside of her.

'Okay… don't expect miracles…' She paused. 'Do I just WILL it? That's too easy!'

'No, it's not… I spent AGES trying to will some toilet-roll into existence in the bathroom earlier and had to resort to our usual magic instead!' Harry grumbled.

'Okay. I'm just going to wing it,' Hermione breathed, sitting down on the grass.

She summoned a small, purple flower into her mind's eye… A tender green shoot stretching its way upwards, like it was waking up… Petals tentatively unfurling, moist and wrinkled, before unfolding, proud and unblemished, as the flower turned its face to the thin, watery streaks of sun in the sky above.

She held the image for as long as she could, fearing it might collapse, shaking with the effort.

Draco sat beside her, a vivid pulsing white, and placed his hand on her back.

'Can you see it?'

'Almost…' He inched closer until she could feel his breath, like a warm, curling zephyr, on her cheek. A shiver of delight ran through her body.

'Fucking WOW!' Harry said. 'Hermione! Look!'
A perfect, purple flower was nestling amidst the scrubby grass.

'Is it real?'

Harry delicately stroked its petals and stem and gently tugged it. 'It's actually growing!' He shot her an intense, questioning look. 'You didn't use Orchideous?'

'I just willed it… but…' she smiled at Draco, 'you helped…'

'Maybe I'm your human battery-pack?' he said, arching his eyebrow and grinning wickedly.

She watched the delicate flower swaying in the breeze. 'It looks lonely…' She closed her eyes and longed for a field's worth of flowers.

She could sense Draco's heart skipping a beat - pure excitement coursing through him. He had his hand wrapped tightly around hers…

'Open your eyes,' he whispered.

The cliff-edge was a sea of purple.

Harry stared at the flowers and to Hermione's surprise he wiped tears from his eyes. When he looked at them both, his face was bright and open.

'This is fucking amazing! YOU'RE fucking amazing! This is how we beat Salvedra,' he said, 'because, in my heart, I believe he's the root of all this poison. He started it… everything stems from his ideology, his revenge.'

'You once told me that Salvedra and The Geneva Group weren't important,' Hermione said tartly, recalling their argument on the beach below…

'I changed my mind, Hermione. I've changed my mind about a lot of things, actually.'

'So does this prove to you that colour-magic isn't just some dark, evil thing destroying your soul?' Draco asked, keeping his hand firmly clasped around hers. 'Because these gorgeous living flowers came from your desire to create something beautiful and peaceful… which is exactly what you did with Melissa.'

Yet again, Hermione's eyes filled with tears. She fell against him and would have loved to have kissed him - if Harry hadn't been there.

But then… 'I've got an idea!' she exclaimed.

XXX

It took an hour to finish Melissa's new home.

They constructed a glass house, festooned with pink roses and purple clematis, lush orange honeysuckle trumpets, powdery-white jasmine and bell-like fuchsias. Hermione wove dainty sparkling splashes of light, like twinkling glow-worms, between the tendrils and fronds of tall, arching feathery ferns.

When they finally stepped outside, to Hermione's amazement, everyone was waiting on the lawn.

Bill firmly folded his arms… 'All very pretty, Hermione, but did you use—?'
'It's exactly what Melissa would like!' Tansy Pintucket beamed, face rapt and shining.

'Wowsers!' Hugo said breathlessly. 'She's like Sleeping Beauty!'

'No. Snow White!' Rose asserted. 'In my fairy tales compendium, there's a picture of Snow White in a glass box, just like this!'

'Our very own fairy tale princess,' Draco muttered in Hermione's ear. 'Can't say I ever imagined it would be Melissa Osgood…'

Louis had brought a football outside and the boys were soon kicking the ball from one end of the garden to the other. Hermione was relieved Melissa's glass house was shatterproof.

'No excuses,' she whispered to Draco.

'No! I'm on it!' he said, entering the fray… 'Hey, Hugo! You pick the teams!' XXX

The night drew on and children were dispatched to bed and drinks were flowing downstairs. Hermione wondered at this festive, bacchanalian spirit. Today had been sad… Hogsmeade had burned and one of their own had been lost – for now. But maybe they needed this? An awareness that a peaceful day was worth celebrating because it might be the last for some time – if not, forever.

There was fighting talk from Bill once the firewhisky was opened about rescuing George. Some of his ire was directed at herself for not pushing Ephraim harder and at Draco for leaving Malfoy Manor.

'He's panicking,' Fleur explained in gentle tones to Hermione, '…scared of the family falling apart, of his parents going through the pain of losing another son.'

'I'm doing what I can!'

Fleur patted her arm. 'I know. But patience isn't Bill's strongest suit.'

'I should go,' Draco murmured to Hermione in the kitchen.

'Oh? Where?'

Draco shrugged. 'I can't stay here.'

The party was already peeling off to bed and Bill had fallen asleep in the armchair in the sitting-room and was snoring loudly.

They stared at each other.

'Where?' she asked again, this time more urgently.

'…Where is there?' A thought occurred to him and he pulled something from his jeans pocket. A small, silver rose twinkled in his palm … 'I forgot. This was waiting for me at Malfoy Manor…' He gave it to her. 'You need to add it to the collection.'

'I will,' she said, closing her hand on the charm. 'Though the others aren't here, they're at…' She smiled at him. 'Was that you being Slytherin again?'
'What do you mean?' He looked genuinely innocent, but then… 'Ah!… But it scares you.'

'Not all the time.'

XXX

Wisteria Cottage was solemnly dark and still.

'Don't put on any lights,' Draco warned, 'just in case someone's watching.'

They fell against each other, holding onto each other in the darkness.

'Does it feel safe?' he asked.

She closed her eyes, exploring her little house with her mind. 'We're good…'

They kissed, softly at first, but with increasing passion; falling against the hallway wall, losing themselves in their need for each other. 'Bedroom…' he murmured, cutting to the chase. 'We need the bedroom.'

They were already discarding each others' clothes and frantically kicking off shoes, as they felt their way along the landing, mouths and bodies still clamped together. They stumbled through the bedroom door, tripping over the threshold and each other, giggling uncontrollably at their clumsy haste, and fell onto the bed locked in a tight embrace.

'And finally – we have a bed…' she sighed happily, luxuriating at the feel of their warm, naked skin as they explored each other with their hands and mouths, and kissed so hard she almost blacked out. Cool, silvery moonlight streamed through the window, ghosting their bodies in a silky, shimmering sheen; their intertwined limbs looked pale and ethereal, things of beauty.

'I'm so turned on I've forgotten how to breathe,' Draco panted, making her chuckle.

'Well, this might just kill you then,' she said naughtily, trailing kisses down his chest, to his stomach, following the thin line of hair that led downwards and taking him into her mouth. He grunted in response and jerked upwards, sending her heart racing.

'No, that's – that's too much,' he gasped, gently easing her away. 'And…' he added cheekily, 'I really, really want to come inside you...' She could feel his arousal pushing hard against her and was struggling not to grind herself onto him and let rip.

'What do you want to say?' she asked, snaking her arms around his neck and smothering his face and chest with kisses, lost in his warmth, his smell, the feel of him. She'd always been quite repressed sexually, but something about Draco had set her free.

'Well...' he said hesitantly, stroking her breasts distractedly, '…you have the most fantastic tits for one - fucking amazing.'

She burst out laughing. 'Wow. Was that it? I feel transformed!' And she opened her arms wide and heaved a sigh of mock elation.

'No. Seriously,' he smiled. 'They're absolutely fucking amazing…' and he bent his head to her breasts to nuzzle them, tantalizing her nipples with his tongue, making her tremble with pleasure.

'Okay… I get the point,' she panted.
He stared down at her. His eyes, gleaming in the moonlight, were bleary with lust.

'It's true, though. You're pretty fucking perfect to me, Hermione. In every way,'

'Even the annoying bits?'

'Especially the annoying bits. They're amongst my oldest friends. I can barely remember my life before them, actually.'

'Same for me with you,' she mused, tenderly stroking his hair from his eyes. 'And yet, here we are.'

'Yes… here we are,' he repeated… and his breath suddenly hitched in his chest.

And there was a long, charged pause – as though he was deliberating… and then he gazed down at her with a peculiarly concentrated stillness; 'And – what I want to say, Hermione…' Her heart instantly quickened. 'Well… you already know of course, in fact – we both know – by that I mean I know the other way, too…'

She couldn't help but laugh – she DID know. 'You're talking gibberish, Draco – just – just say it… or, we don't have to say it at all, I mean there's no RULE.'

'What a fucking hypocrite!' he grinned. 'You nearly blurted it in front of Harry when you came out of the picture at Atalaya!'

'Did I?' she thought back… but that ghostly gallery in Salvedra's citadel felt light years away from this moment of pure, glistening rapture. Yes. She had nearly said it… 'That wasn't my finest moment!'

'Everything's your finest moment, beautiful. In fact any moment with you in it is fucking EXCELLENT.'

Hermione sighed. 'The problem is, if we say it… it makes everything really fucking complicated.'

'It has CONSEQUENCES,' Draco said in mock, lugubrious tones. 'But let's be honest here, we're already deep into the complication zone. We're lying on your bed and we're going to fuck loads – and we both know that won't be the end of the complications and definitely not the end of the fucking - because we're in love.'

Despite the build-up, he caught her by surprise. A flood of heat surged through her and she could sense her cheeks were aflame, and to her surprise, tears were pricking her eyelids.

'Well, that's one way to put it out there,' she breathed and smiled at the same time. He gently wiped a tear away from her cheek. She could feel him glowing; warm, content … joyous.

'It's just how it is... It's the truth. It's our reality…' he smiled, eyes shining. 'I love you, Hermione… very, very much. More than I could have ever believed possible of a cankered old soul like me… I am completely, totally and head over heels in fucking love with you. And it's the best fucking feeling in the world.'

She stared at him, lost in his eyes. 'I'm in love with you, too…' And a powerful sense of relief washed over her to at last hear what she'd been carrying inside, out loud.

They both exhaled deeply, releasing pent-up breaths, collapsing into giddy laughter. She laid a hand on his cheek and he instantly chased it with his mouth, planting a light kiss on her palm. And then he kissed her face, her neck, her breasts… and she couldn't stop smiling.
She wanted to be lost in him, to make love to him over and over until their bodies ached, to savour every single sensation and sigh - and the first time they made love that night it was with an agonisingly slow, focused intensity, eyes fixed on each other's face, testing the thin line between control and wild, frenzied abandon… sometimes pausing to kiss each other deeply, passionately, to lick and kiss and softly bite each other's necks and bodies. She shivered uncontrollably at the sound of their blissful moans echoing around the room.

His face was a torment. 'You make me feel like a fucking schoolboy,' he said between gritted teeth. And they held still, revelling in the shimmering, heady colours of pure sensation, the tremulous heat of their bodies joined together. He tightly closed his eyes, clearly trying to calm down…. And she was fighting an urge to grip him hard, finish herself off.

'You're a lost cause,' she teased, writhing against him, tightly encasing his body with her legs and gently rocking.

'NO - don't move…'

She pulled his head to hers and kissed him hard; an all-consuming kiss.

'Oh, god…' he groaned, slapping her back down, sensory threshold breached. She could sense his composure crashing. He grasped her knees, wrenching them far apart to break her hold on him, then tilted her hips upwards to meet his body as he repeatedly thrust deep inside of her with urgent, obliterating force, like a man possessed.

She could feel his desire for her - a powerful, blazing bolt of incandescent white energy, electrifying her senses, building on the deep ache inside of her; a fierce twist, sharpening, swelling, screwing itself tighter and tighter until she was panting hard and her heart was hammering. She cried out as the brute power of it all pushed her over the edge, enveloping her in tremor after tremor of delicious sensation, and she wrapped her body tightly around his as he shuddered violently, saying her name over and over.

'Christ almighty, I feel almost angry!' he gasped, once he could breathe again. He swivelled round to face her. 'How have we lived so many years on this planet without doing this all the fucking time? Just think what we've missed out on? We need a time-turner.'

'Oh, Draco. You beautiful, wonderful idiot,' she said, tenderly planting a kiss on his lips.

She felt dizzy; drunk with happiness.

They talked and laughed and cracked stupid jokes and caressed and kissed every inch of each other's body for a long time after.

And when they made love again, they rolled around with such vigour they fell off the bed and had to haul themselves back on, dragging the bedsheets down onto the floor amidst their desperate scramble to get back to each other.

It was almost morning when Hermione realised that she should Apparate back to Shell Cottage before the household – including their own children – woke up and noticed she was missing.

'It wouldn't take much for Bill to work out I was with you,' Hermione said with a guilty sigh. 'Part of me doesn't give a crap – but in the circumstances…'

'But the shit's going to hit the fan sometime, you know that, don't you?' Draco said, gazing at her with wide, grey eyes.
'When Ron gets back…'

'Exactly. And the truth is – and don't get mad - I don't think I can hide that I love you anymore. I know I should, but I just can't. And, yes. I'm a selfish cunt…'

She looked at his face in the faint dawn light now bringing the details of her bedroom, formerly lost to the darkness, to life…

'I don't want to hide either. But I'm scared of hurting people who've hurt enough already. And then there's the children…'

'Okay… maybe we adopt a policy of don't flaunt but don't hide?' He considered this. 'Except for Bill… maybe a bit of HIDING with him… for now.'

Hermione laughed. 'You really ARE scared of him, aren't you? He's actually lovely.'

'He hates me with every fibre of his being.'

'What about Harry?'

'Oh, he almost tolerates me these days. Though I'm not sure that would be the case if he thought we were fucking.'

Hermione laughed, but it petered into a groan. 'I don't want to get up…' she said, burying her face against Draco's chest. She could have happily stayed warm and cocooned like this forever.

'Me, neither,' Draco said in a sad, reluctant voice, 'I've got this bloody plaque ceremony for my father later; it's going to be hard on Mother… she's not very well I'm afraid.'

'What's wrong?' She'd suspected something wasn't right.

Draco stared up at the ceiling. 'I don't know… Delayed grief?'

'Draco…' Hermione said cautiously. 'I heard you and Bill talking this morning... You said you weren't signing off on Herb Healing business.

Draco gave her a sharp look. 'I didn't want you worrying…'

'I worried anyway! It's what I do!'

He folded her close. 'Well, it's been useful sabotage... Sorry not to have said anything, but I needed time to murder Herb Healing.'

'And now it's over?'

'Soon… I promise.' He sat up. 'I'm parched. Do you want a drink?'

They both went to the kitchen; the garden beyond the French windows was still shrouded in darkness courtesy of the elm trees that bordered the property. Hermione poured them a glass of water. Draco embraced her from behind. She relished the feel of his naked skin, cool and dry, against hers, and the tingling sensation prompted by his mouth lightly nipping her neck and ears.

'We should stop now…' she whimpered, 'reality beckons.'

'THIS is reality, too.'
There was an odd tapping sound. Hermione could feel Draco tense.

'What was that?' Hermione said, spinning around.

It came again. This time louder, more insistent.

Draco gawped at the French Windows. Hermione followed his eyes and saw a hooded figure standing on the other side of the door – staring straight at them.

The cloaked figure tapped again, and now she sensed a bright, lurid green staining her consciousness… 'Harry!' 

Draco summoned his wand and instantly conjured bathrobes for them. 'I think this falls into the category of FLAUNTING… don't you think?'

'I can handle him.'

'No…' Draco said. 'I'm not leaving you to deal with this alone. And he's already targeting me with a death-stare of laser-like precision, Hermione.'

She dashed to let Harry in. 'Sorry,' she breathed, pink-cheeked.

'One of the problems of living in the wizarding world,' Harry said, unable to look at them properly, 'we can't use phones.' He looked even more embarrassed than she felt.

'A simple text would be – useful, sometimes,' she concurred. 'Would you… like a cup of tea?' But he shook his head.

'How did you know Hermione was here?' Draco asked.

'I knew she couldn't be at Malfoy Manor and remembered this place was empty, so I thought I'd chance it.' He turned to Hermione. 'I think it's best I get you back to Shell Cottage before the whole house wakes up.'

'Other than you, does anyone know I'm not there?' Hermione asked meekly. She couldn't believe how calm they were all being! It felt unreal, eerie…

'Gwen… Alfred felt sick and Gwen was looking for you to see if you had Calpol or something. I was sleeping in the sitting-room – well, trying to; almost impossible with Bill's snoring - and Gwen came and woke me.'

Hermione heaved a deep sigh and buried her face in her hands. Despite his outwardly calm demeanour, she could sense Harry's mood – a livid, sickly green, palpating with a strangely muscular energy.

'She's got a cool head has your cousin,' Harry remarked, 'she knew not to wake Bill…'

'I'm SO glad she asked YOU, Harry,' Hermione said, almost light-headed with relief. The mere thought of Bill standing at the French Windows instead, made her feel physically ill.

'Draco… I should warn you,' Harry said, a tight set to his mouth. 'This plaque ceremony at the Ministry this evening… *Kickback* were planning a protest in Diagon Alley today, but they've switched to the Ministry and plan to create a major stink. I've no idea what they're going to do, but it's going to be dramatic, apparently.'

Draco groaned. 'It was already going to be shit.'
'The Humptys are going to be there… They're like the back-up band for the Blasters,' Hermione remarked, remembering her conversation with Ron, in this very kitchen, just six days ago. So much had happened… She suddenly felt faint with tiredness.

'Go get some sleep,' Draco said, gently.

XXX

Hermione and Harry Apparated back to the purple field beyond the wall… The flowers were still there; thriving, strong.

Harry was dark and taciturn as they walked back to Shell Cottage.

'Sorry…' Hermione muttered under her breath, wishing he'd at least look at her. He'd been calm, even pleasant, when they were with Draco.

Fortunately, they were the only ones up and Shell Cottage was quiet and still. Harry closed the kitchen door that connected to the sitting-room. They both spoke in low, hushed tones. Harry made them a pot of tea and toast. Hermione hadn't realised how ravenous she was and wolfed down three rounds in quick succession. She was struck at how Harry was overcoming his disappointment, even anger, by being particularly solicitous and kind. She couldn't make it out at all.

She glanced at the front page of the *Daily Prophet*. It was largely devoted to rumours concerning Silas Witchell who hadn't been seen since Tuesday. Speculation was rife that he'd been stricken with Dragon Pox or run mad with shame at *Sub Rosa's* constant allegations.

'Well, I saw him Tuesday night,' Hermione muttered. 'He definitely *didn't* have dragonpox.' Hermione's eyes sought Harry's as he sat down opposite her. She couldn't bear this 'blockage' between them. 'Harry… this thing with Draco… it's…'

'Yes, yes, it's not what I thought… blah, blah.'

She stared him directly in the eye. 'No, it IS what you thought. More, actually.'

Harry screwed his eyes up tightly and his hand momentarily went to his scar, as though it pained him. She felt a flood of fierce, jarring green rolling off him.

'I know…' he grimaced. 'I don't need to see fucking colours to know how you feel about each other.'

'Please let me get on with it in my own way,' she begged.

Harry screwed up his hands into tight balls and kneaded his forehead… 'Have you any idea how much shit will go down?'

'Yes.'

The sitting-room door swung open and Bill stumbled in. He looked hungover and almost stumbled backwards in surprise when he saw them at the table.

'Blimey, you're up early!'
'I really appreciate what everyone's doing for us,' Gwen sighed, 'but I worry that Alfred's satisfaction with his own life, OUR life, might be ruined for good… I pretty much had to stop him from throwing himself off the cliff-wall earlier with a broomstick! He'd give his eye-teeth to be magical.'

'Maybe he is?' Parvati said cheerily.

'Has he ever done something surprising?' Hermione asked curiously.

'Plenty of things! But none of them could be termed magical,' sniffed Gwen.

Midway through an intense game of backgammon, Hermione's parents turned up.

'What a lovely surprise!' Jean Granger said. 'You'll all have to come back for tea!'

'Yes, please,' Scorpius said, his eyes lighting up.

'Good job an' all,' Uncle Derek said fondly. 'You could do with a bit of fattening up, son.' Uncle Derek seemed perkier around Scorpius; and Scorpius was less tongue-tied, less metronomic.

They were a merry bunch; playing cards, chatting, dispatching the kids to the vending machine to fetch copious drinks. For a brief while, Hermione relaxed and the sinister world they were embroiled in faded away. She sat in an upright, plasticky armchair – her Dad insisted because he thought she looked peaky – and despite it being the least comfortable chair she'd ever had the misery to sit in, her eyes gradually closed and she found herself dozing off…

When she woke up, the mood had changed. Her parents were looking in horror at something on the TV set attached to the wall opposite Uncle Derek's bed.

'Looks a bad business…' Uncle Derek said, coaxing Scorpius and Rose back to a game of Rummy, away from the TV set. Henrik turned to Hermione, a dismal expression on his face.

The volume was off but the chyron running along the bottom of the screen was reporting the discovery of four dead hikers at the Merry Ladies of Lamorna – a stone circle in Cornwall.

There were rumours that the bodies had been arranged, head to toe, in a ring…

'Bloody hell,' Gwen hissed, her hand over her mouth, 'that's super-creepy.'

'Can we turn it up a tiny bit?' Parvati squeaked.

A reporter was at the site… pictures of ambulances, their flashing blue lights illuminating the misshapen stones, standing still and sentinel-like – long-distance shots of emergency service personnel and blue body-bags being wheeled away.

'POLICE AREN'T COMMENTING ON REPORTS OF TWO FURTHER FATALITIES, THREE DAYS AGO, AT DUNVEGAN CASTLE ON THE ISLE OF SKYE,' the reporter said. 'SOURCES SUGGEST THESE FATALITIES SHARED SIMILAR CHARACTERISTICS TO THE FOUR DEATHS THAT HAVE TRAGICALLY OCCURRED HERE TODAY.'

'Maybe it's one of those suicide cults?' Hermione's Dad whispered.

'Reminds me of that weird thing a few weeks ago at Janet's Foss,' her mother said. She glanced nervously at her daughter.

JANET'S FOSS, as well... Hermione felt her throat thicken in panic. Ephraim's list!
'What happened?' Gwen asked.

'Two walkers died from hypothermia – they were bright blue, apparently.'

'I've got to make a call,' Hermione said urgently, dashing from the room into the corridor, but Gwen and Henrik sprinted after her.

'You need to tell Harry,' Gwen said. 'And Draco.'

'I'm about to… can you lot go back to my parents' house? I could meet you there.'

'But Alfred's in Cornwall,' Gwen said in a faltering voice.

'He's safe there,' Henrik said in firm, reassuring tones. 'Bill's house can't be seen or found or hurt by anyone without Bill having allowed it in the first place.'

'You sure about that?' Gwen asked, hollow-eyed.

Parvati came tripping out of the room. 'Your parents are quietly freaking out in there, Hermione. I think we get them back home.'

'Could – could you do that for me?' Hermione asked. 'I need to get to the Ministry.' Her eyes skimmed a wall-clock positioned above the nurses station. The Plaque Ceremony was about to begin. 'Actually… do you mind contacting Harry? Tell him where you are… I'll come soon.'

There was a sizeable crowd crammed into the Ministry atrium for the unveiling of Lucius Malfoy's memorial plaque. Narcissa, friends and family were seated on a dais draped in silver, sporting the Malfoy crest.

Hermione's view was obscured by rows of pointy hats. The great and good of the wizarding world had chosen to show their respects by decking themselves out in full, traditional regalia.

Hermione eventually worked her way through the crowd to the side of the dais furthest from The Humptys. There didn't appear to have been any civil disturbance to speak of, although she spied a few Sub Rosa pamphlets trodden underfoot.

Hermione didn't immediately recognise anyone, but spotted Agatha Thrussington, squashed against the dais, her pinched, pushy face gawking at the Golowitz couple and their entourage.

Where was Draco? Her sense of unease was magnified by the look on Narcissa's face. It was only natural that she should look glum, but this was a woman whose soul had been crushed.

Ephraim was addressing the crowd with suitably solemn pomp but Narcissa never once raised her eyes to look at him. Maybe the sight of Portia Witchell, looking like a plump, pretty pigeon, seated to Narcissa's left, explained matters?

Narcissa was invited to pull aside a curtain, unveiling the plaque. She performed her duty in a lacklustre fashion and then shuffled off-stage, assisted by Sylvestra.

Hermione saw that Karl was just a few feet away from her, but he was scanning the milling crowd with a relentless, watchful eye, tracking Narcissa. He swiftly moved to intercept her.

A melancholic, siren song washed over the gathering… Hermione's attention was drawn to a shimmering nymph-like creature draped across the fountain at the heart of the atrium. A jet of
multi-coloured water spooled and splashed from the fountain, shooting high into the air. The crowd clapped and whooped and elves bearing Exultantes started circling amongst them.

A piercing blue smashed into Hermione's consciousness and flowed like teardrops across Hermione's vision.

She turned to face Ephraim. He was standing on the dais but staring at her with mind-throbbing intensity. Torquil had sidled up to him and was whispering in his ear. He looked visibly shocked; eyes wide, nostrils flared...

There was a sudden cataclysmic burst of rocket fire and the nymph-like creature was shot from the fountain, exploding into a luminous ball of flame, descending to the ground in a flurry of pink ashes. The crowd squealed in shock and then cheered… but there was fresh commotion as a pack of screaming Kickback activists streamed into the atrium, brandishing placards and klaxons.

A line of protestors, wearing silver skull masks, knelt on one knee and fired arcing streams of what looked like blood high into the air... the blood coalesced into a shimmering red sheet high above the fountain and then punctured, raining down on the crowd. There were wails and shouts of fury and distress as the onlookers were soaked in blood and the fountain was now awash with red… The atrium looked like the scene of a massacre… Hermione briefly identified, despite her skull mask, Tansy Pintucket, beating a large bass drum, almost as big as herself, with booming, heart-thudding regularity…

Hermione looked down at herself. She, too, was drenched in sticky, red liquid…

For a brief, addled moment she thought she saw someone looking like Bill weaving through the crowd... followed by Angelina, and was that Kai, the goth teenager? But then she was rubbing more crimson liquid from her eyes as yet another cloudburst of blood exploded above her.

The Humptys had now been deployed and stunners were being fired and the crowd was running in all directions, screeching and trampling, hats flying, children crying.

A hand fell on her shoulder and for a moment she felt utterly desolate and dead inside.

'Well, this is interesting...' Sylvestra said in soft, emollient tones that didn't quite match the chaos surrounding them.

'Leave her!' Ephraim barked abruptly. Sylvestra quickly slunk away.

'You don't want to be seen here,' Ephraim said, bending his mouth to her ear. 'Those Humpty nitwits have orders to pick up ANYONE suspicious-looking… Leave now.'

'But I'm working for YOU, aren't I? Hermione pouted sardonically, 'hardly a suspicious personage!'

Her heart was clattering inside her. WHERE THE HELL WAS DRACO?

Ephraim had a splash of blood-red spearing his hair and face; like a scarlet lightning bolt. His smart blue robes were splattered in red.

'Let me get you somewhere safe.'

'But is ANYWHERE safe, anymore? There's some rather terrifying news out there in the REAL fucking world! In MY world!' Hermione spat. ' Innocent people dying for no fucking reason other than the fact they're like ME! Murdered because egotistical freaks like YOU can't bear the fact
they don't give a shit that you're so fucking amazing and magical!

Ephraim blinked hard and she felt a torrent of boiling blue swamping her senses. There was confusion, shock… and she couldn't work out why.

'I don't know what you're talking about!' he hissed, and his hand gripped her shoulder with steely strength.

'Well, if this is another case of over-exuberance in the lower ranks,' she said sarcastically, quoting his own words back to him from the night of the Hogsmeade fire, 'you'd better get a grip on your people – FAST!'

Ephraim shook his head mournfully and his blood-soaked hand eased into her hair - and was about to speak - but his face suddenly stilled and he slowly stood upright.

Draco was standing behind him. He was gouging his wand into Ephraim's neck.

'Get your fucking dirty hands off her!' he snarled.

Ephraim instantly put his hands in the air and twisted towards his stepson. 'I was about to help her get away from this hellhole, actually!'

The scene before them did resemble something from hell, Hermione thought soberly. The Humptys had been joined by a cadre of Blasters and had encircled the protesters, stupefying and then kicking them. Hermione could hear crunching thuds, pitiful mews, sobbing… The atrium was a mess of sloshing bloody liquid, broken glasses and crumpled hats… the crowd was dispersing, bellowing abuse at Kickback in retreat.

'There's no need for this, son,' Ephraim growled. Hermione could see the whites of his eyes glinting through the dripping red mask of liquid on his face; his teeth glowed, unnaturally white.

Draco bit his lower lip and his face was blank, expressionless; eyes cold and chill.

'I'm not your SON,' Draco sneered.

'You're more like me than either of my children, Draco,' Ephraim said cockily… Troy and Karl were fast approaching.

'Draco…' Hermione warned, her hand pressing his arm, forcing him to lower his wand. 'Let's get out of here.'

Troy was now standing behind Draco – a looming, malevolent presence.

Ephraim grinned smarmily. 'Whatever you do, Hermione… don't miss our Quidditch date tomorrow. Your brother-in-law's life depends on it.'

'Fuck George Weasley,' Draco snapped, lip curled contemptuously. 'And fuck you!'

Hermione vehemently shook her head, still keeping her hand on Draco's arm. His whiteness was pinging wildly; so much so, it was making her head spin.

'Come on,' she urged, tugging his sleeve…

They Apparated to the greenhouse in her parents' garden. Draco was still shaking with anger.

'Draco… something dreadful's happened…'
'I know,' he said, white-faced. 'I was at Ziff's, running late. Harry called. He explained everything.'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"BLUEBELL KNOLL" by THE COCTEAU TWINS

"DON'T PANIC" by COLDPLAY

"THE ONLY EXCEPTION" by PARAMORE

"ISRAEL (LIVE AT ROYAL ALBERT HALL)" by SIOUXSIE & THE BANSHEES

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Chapter Summary

Amidst deepening crisis, Draco meets the Grangers, Ephraim gets mad - and an unwelcome surprise

47. Of Casual Slaughters

'Are your parents in?' Draco asked.

He gazed through the greenhouse windows across the dark lawn, illuminated by lights from the kitchen, towards the Grangers' house. His eyes dropped to Hermione, looking tired and bloodied, and he bit his lower lip anxiously.

'We'd better clean you up or they might think I've attacked you.'

They set to the task of scourging the congealing blood-mixture from her hair, face and clothes.

'You shouldn't have threatened Ephraim,' Hermione said under her breath, giving voice to the anxiety gnawing away inside of her. 'He'll have it in for you now.'

'He already did. It was just a matter of time… And I couldn't stand him touching you.'

'He touched my hair… It wasn't exactly assault.'

'It was inappropriate.' Draco pushed his fingers through her wild, bushy locks and stared at her, an intense expression on his face. She flushed at his touch, the warm solidity of his hand. 'See?' he breathed. 'It's intimate, isn't it?'

'It is when you do it.' She gave him a sad half-smile.

'Hermione?'

It was her father… peering into the greenhouse. She sensed a frisson of unease tremble through Draco.

'Sorry to barge in on you like this,' Draco said, shaking hands with Hermione's father, who introduced himself in return as Robert Granger.

'There's been another attack. Somewhere in Dorset,' Robert warned, as they trudged towards the house. The kitchen door was open and a thin rectangle of harsh bright light was shining onto the patio. 'Harry's turned up - and a Finnish lad. Funny name.'

Hermione's mother was frenetically mixing salad dressing into a bowl of leaves in the kitchen and Gwen was squeezing an array of mugs and an outsized plate of biscuits onto a tray to take through to the living-room.

The panicked voices of reporters on the TV news channel blared throughout the house.
'You made it,' Gwen smiled in relief.

'Things got a bit hairy at the Ministry...' Hermione said, but didn't continue, because her family were eyeing her with pale-faced confusion.

'I've put chicken wings in the oven. Do you think the kids will be fine with that?' Jean Granger asked, but then stared at Draco, blinking rapidly... 'Your son's upstairs. It is your son, isn't it? The resemblance is unmistakable.'

'Yes. Thanks.'

Jean continued to stare and Hermione knew her mother had worked out exactly who Draco was and why he was standing awkwardly in her kitchen.

'The blonde chap... Parvati's boyfriend... he says these horrible killings are connected to your lot?'

'I'm afraid so,' Draco said with an apologetic air, like he was personally responsible. Gwen weaved past them, throwing Hermione a pitying look.

'Henrik isn't actually Parv—' Hermione started to say, but Harry and Ziff bounded into the kitchen. The stiff tension on Draco's face momentarily melted.

'Good. You're here,' Harry grunted. 'We're plotting out these attacks on a map. Definitely following a pattern. The Domains…'

Hermione nodded glumly.

'Would you mind if I used your computer, Mr Granger?' Ziff asked Robert.

Robert looked too confused by events to deny him.

Hermione steered Harry aside and recounted what had happened at the Ministry. 'What's puzzling though, is Ephraim didn't know about today's attack…'

'He's a dirty liar,' Draco sneered, lip curled maliciously.

'No. He was shocked. I sensed it! Someone else did this!' He'd lashed out at Sylvestra... Was it her? She'd been behind the attack at Parvati's apartment block. And probably murdered Voltimand, too. Both attacks fuelled by grudge and grievance...

'I agree with Draco,' Harry scowled. 'This fits Ephraim's agenda; to use Dark Flux to strike terror into Muggles.'

'What's Dark Flux?' Robert asked.

'Something that kills innocent people,' Jean said, dismally. 'Something magical.' She marched out of the kitchen carrying bowls of food.

Hermione turned helpless eyes to her father. 'I'm sorry you even have to know about this, Dad. I don't want you worrying…'

'But we already do. Your mother spends half her time looking out for the "weird" stuff.'

'I guess it must be odd having your child living in a separate world?' Draco murmured, half to himself.
'Unbearable.'

Hermione had never heard her father say that before...

Parvati appeared at the doorway. 'Another attack!'  

Hermione followed her into a large, open-plan room, split between a dining-area and a space dominated by a TV and two sofas.

Jean eased a large map to one side of the dining-table to accommodate her hastily-arranged meal; though nobody appeared to have much appetite.

Hermione gingerly perched on the arm of the sofa next to Henrik, who was staring fixedly at his phone.

'IT'S NOW BELIEVED THAT THE POLICE ARE TREATING THESE MULTIPLE DEATHS AT THREE DIFFERENT SITES AS TERRORISM...' a TV reporter was saying breathlessly. Her hair was being whipped furiously by a bitter wind and her face looked pinched and raw. The landscape was bleak, barren and behind her rose a peculiar, conical stone tower.

Gwen glared at the TV, arms folded tightly across her chest. ‘Mind if I turn it down a bit? Might scare the kids upstairs,’ she said, seizing the remote.

A montage of shots, with voice-over commentary, showed the events from earlier when the bodies had been discovered at the Lamorna stone circle, juxtaposed with ambulances and police cars crowded into a narrow access road leading to a hill with the conical monument perched on top. '… TARFSIDE HAS LONG BEEN A POPULAR HAUNT FOR HIKERS – THE MAULE MONUMENT IS A PARTICULARLY FAMOUS LANDMARK…'

A local was interviewed. He walked his dogs to the Hill of Rowan every day, usually twice. The two dead hikers – both known to the local community - hadn't been there this morning, but when he returned that afternoon they were lying side by side.

'LOOKED LIKE THEY'D BEEN DELIBERATELY PLACED LIKE THAT,' he said mournfully.

‘ANTI-TERRORISM SPECIALISTS ARE DUE TO ARRIVE AT THE SCENE,’ continued the reporter.

'Where's Tarfside?' Harry asked, briskly smoothing out creases from the map on the table.

Parvati was clutching the now-crumpled copy of this morning's Daily Prophet. 'It's not on the list of Domains.'

'Scotland,' Jean said, handing round mugs of tea. 'The Angus Glens. Robert and I walked there a few years back.' She pointed to it on the map.

Robert whipped out a pen from his cardigan’s inner pocket. 'Use this, Harry.'

Harry marked the spot with a cross. 'Check if there's a Domain near Montrose,' he said to Parvati. She scanned the list and nodded.

'It's worth marking ALL the places where there's been attacks, Harry,' Draco said.

'Yeah. I'm sketching out these Domains; that way we can see what's left.'

'You think there'll be an attack in ALL of them?' Parvati asked, aghast.
Jean, pale as porridge, peered over Parvati's shoulder at the list.

She really shouldn't have exposed her parents like this, Hermione thought, guilt churning queasily through her. But they'd needed Muggle TV, the Internet...

'Probably not today; but at some point,' Harry said morosely. 'I've no idea how we police this…'

'You think you should go to the police?' Jean asked, round-eyed.

Harry looked daunted, exhausted…. 'Even talking to you about this stuff borders on illegal in our world, Jean. But, honestly? I don't know how we stop this happening… And at some point the Muggle government will work it out. And then we're properly screwed.'

Draco squinted at the map. 'Where was the other attack?'

'Affpuddle…' Harry said. 'It's not official, but police have cordoned off a pub. Henrik's seen rumours… at least two blue bodies. Ziff's hacking local police for confirmation.'

'We need help with this,' Draco murmured, locking eyes with Ziff who was hurrying out of Robert's office.

'Well, I'm due to speak to Troyanda13 tonight…' Ziff said.

Harry raised his eyebrows. 'Los Rojos?'

'Draco, have you got a number for the government guy, Tim – Ernie's boyfriend?' Hermione called out from the other side of the room.

'I'll text him; see what he knows.' He pulled out his phone.

Robert was unable to hide the look of surprise that flickered across his face. 'Are you Draco Malfoy?'

Draco looked up, startled. 'Yes…'

Robert exchanged a look with his wife. 'We once met your father.'

Hermione could sense Draco’s whiteness spiking dramatically - panic mixed with sorrow.

'Draco's father died a couple of months ago,' she said, joining them at the table.

'I'm sorry for your loss,' Robert said politely.

'Oh…' Draco laughed mirthlessly, 'not many people are sorry, that is. Understandably.'

'But he was still your father,' Robert said, straight-faced and serious, holding Draco's gaze with his own, until Draco nodded and looked away, fumbling his phone back into his pocket.

'Where's that?' he asked, pointing to a cross in Yorkshire.

'Janet's Foss. Yorkshire Dales. Mum said there were two deaths there,' Hermione replied.

'About three weeks ago?' Robert said. 'Looks like this has been going on for a while…'

'What happened here?' Draco said, indicating the Isle of Skye.

'Dunvegan Castle. On the news this morning…' Hermione looked at him, concern etched on her
face, sensing the weight of emotion - of failure - bearing down inside of him… inside ALL of them.

'I don't see how Ephraim got the time to plan it all,' Draco said helplessly. 'He's got all this Muggle financial crap going on. That and – and there was the wedding… and that stupid ceremony today. The trip to Israel… His damned election… The fire! Plus he's effectively running the Ministry and the Blasters and—'

'Because this wasn't him,' Hermione said, her voice dropping to a whisper. 'Not ALL of it... Some, at least, has to be Salvedra. Or his supporters.'

'Like Sylvestra…'

'Exactly.' Were these attacks a direct challenge to his authority?

'Okeydokey,' Ziff announced, marking a fresh cross on the map. 'Dead guy washed up HERE - Merlin's Cave - a month ago… Drowned; but lots of below-the-line comments in the local paper saying he was creepy neon blue…'

'That's Tintagel,' Draco said. 'Where King Arthur's supposed to have lived.' He cross-referenced it with the list of Domains. 'That's in Treverna… How many Domains have reported attacks?'

Hermione called them out and Parvati totted them up, crossing them off the list. 'Treverna, Penwith, Eborakan, Old Anglestone West, Glenesk, Skíö … That's six.'

'Seven more to come,' Harry murmured.

'Add the Scottish campsite where Asusto killed the three researchers,' Draco said firmly. 'St Ninians.'

Hermione marked it with a cross.

'But that's not a Domain,' Parvati said plaintively.

'And neither's Malfoy Manor where they murdered my grandfather,' Draco said bitterly. 'Or Widford, where you live.'

'Those attacks were personal…' Hermione sighed.

'St Ninian's is near Wigtown. That's listed here as a Town of Shared Interest,' Ziff noted.

'Bloody hell. If we include THOSE as well, then there's loads more!' Harry griped.

There was a thunderous crash from Hermione's old bedroom upstairs. Gwen was about to spring up from the sofa but Hermione had already hotfooted it to the door.

Halfway upstairs she fell against the wall – head spinning, heart pounding... This was too much! Draco... Here. In her family home. Meeting her parents. Their children playing in her bedroom… A surreal juxtaposition against this backdrop of painful, unnecessary slaughter.

'What a mess!' she shrilled. An entire bookshelf had tumbled to the floor and she was ankle-deep in books and papers.

Rose and Scorpius frantically gathered up books, darting nervous glances in her direction. Hermione struggled to lever the bookshelf off the floor; she never used magic in her parents' house.
'Let me…' Draco pushed the bookshelf back into place with considerably more ease. His sleeves were rolled up and she couldn't help but stare at the faded dark mark on his arm.

'What order do you want the books in, Mummy?'

'Oh… I don't mind.'

'First or last names? Or what the book's called?' Scorpius asked in earnest.

'It's really not important!' Hermione replied in a fluster.

Draco placed his hand on her shoulder – a small, soothing gesture. 'How about surname?' He crouched down with the children. 'You know. Like Malfoy.'

Rose made a puking face. 'Not Malfoy… we HATE Malfoys.'

'But I'M a Malfoy,' Scorpius said, his face puckering. Hermione felt like crying… 'No, no, not you.' She instantly fell to her knees beside him. 'Not any Malfoy, actually… she didn't mean it.'

'But you and Daddy and Grandad and Aunt Ginny and everybody really, says Malfoys are wicked people. BAD wizards!' Rose's face was screwed-up in righteous outrage. 'So you can't be a Malfoy,' she told Scorpius, 'because you're nice.'

'But I AM a Malfoy, Rosie. And so's my Dad.' Scorpius looked at Draco and Rose's eyes followed, round with fearful wonder as though she feared Draco might suddenly bite her.

'It's just a name…' Draco grinned. 'You can call us something different if you like?'

Rose considered this. 'Like MALFOP? Would that be better?'

Scorpius vehemently shook his head. 'What about AZARTH? Scorpius AZARTH?'

'NO!' Hermione and Draco said at the same time…

'But you said names don't matter?' Scorpius said, confused.

'Malfoy's perfectly fine,' Hermione reassured him.

'Look! You've mixed in some Bs with the Cs there…' Draco said.

Rose looked mortified.

'This is my favourite,' Scorpius said, grasping a burgundy leather-bound copy of Oliver Twist. 'I read it with Milton, our house-elf.'

Draco raised his eyebrows … this was clearly news to him.

'YOU'VE read it?' Rose asked.

'Uh huh.'

Rose gazed at him in awe. She turned to Hermione and Draco, her mouth framed into a gaping oval.

'If you're going to be Scorpius Malfop,' she suddenly said, feverishly, 'maybe I should
Scorpius looked at her, a concentrated look on his face. 'Rose Bush!'

'Boring… What about Rose Papadackydooky?'

Scorpius giggled. 'I know!' he erupted gleefully. 'What about Rose Twist?'

'Ooh! I like that!' Rose jumped to her feet and started dancing about; wiggling her hands in the air, up and down, up and down, while making an odd, ghostly fluting sound… Scorpius fell about laughing, dabling his hands like a manic conductor.

Gwen's voice hollered from the doorway, suggesting they come and see Robert's train set in the loft…and in a flash, they were gone.

'Well, at least your child's strange as well. I feel a bit better now,' Draco grinned.

'I'm so sorry about that whole Weasleys hating Malfoys thing... Hopefully Scorpius won't hold it against Rose.'

'He won't.'

They stared at each other, until Hermione had to look away and smother a sigh… just the look on his face and how his arms – even with that mark - were so fucking beautiful… It was all too much – here on her bedroom floor, in her childhood home…

'For fuck's sake, guys,' Harry muttered from the doorway, 'I see why you might want to forget that the world's going to shit for five minutes but—'

'But it's still going to shit…' Draco sighed.

'We were just putting these books away!' Hermione remonstrated.

Harry raised his eyes to the ceiling and wafted his hand at the bookshelf. Hermione and Draco had to duck as the books flew up as one and snuggled back into position on the shelf.

But as they were leaving the room, Draco eyed the newly-shelved books with cold contempt and couldn't resist swapping round a Trollope for an Eliot.

XXX

'Nasty twist to the stone circle murders, I'm afraid,' Ziff told them as they entered the living-room. 'All four victims were shot with airgun pellets and one of the investigating chemicals experts has dropped down dead. Faulty hazmat suit. Bodies now being moved to Porton Down.'

'What's that?' Parvati asked.

'It's where the UK Military conducts chemical and biological weapon research,' Henrik said. They were all seated around the dining-table, except for Hermione's mother, who hovered anxiously between rooms.

'Police say there's no known connection between the victims, either,' Ziff added.

'Which means it was a complex operation – two-man job at least,' Henrik said solemnly. 'It involved identifying and killing four random people and arranging them to look like a ritual killing – all without anyone noticing.'
'But you wouldn't really need more than one person if you used magic,' Parvati stated.

Henrik shrugged. 'Perhaps, but it's more complicated than these other killings; the one at Tarfside, for example... you've two hikers walking together. Someone like you guys can just grab, kill and Apparate – literally getting away with murder...'

Hermione shuddered. Someone like them, like her... someone magical. Yes. They had horrific capabilities. God forbid the Muggle population ever knew the truth.

'I reckon this Lamorna operation required expertise. A proper hitman,' Henrik continued.

'You seem to know what you're talking about,' Harry observed.

Henrik stroked his blonde stubble, a contrite look on his face. 'I'm ex-FE, Harry. Danish Intelligence... I was a hitman.'

Everyone stared at him. Hermione couldn't imagine gentle, amiable Henrik killing anybody!... She caught sight of her mother's face - tense, mask-like - as she cleared away the used plates and leftovers.

'I suspect Asusto – the guy who masterminded the Argentine operation with Dolores and Canaro – is Gilgad's go-to assassin,' Draco said. 'But there's so much happening here at the same time... it can't all have been him. And I doubt Troy or Karl were involved. They've been stuck in Hogsmeade and the Ministry.'

'Sorry to interrupt, Draco,' Robert said, an enquiring look on his face. 'But do you know why these attacks are happening?'

'There's a wizard trying to wrest control of our society,' Draco explained. 'He wants to blackmail the Muggles, using an evil racist weapon, into giving us these Domains to rule over.' He gestured to the Domains on the map to illustrate his point. 'It's demented.'

Robert slowly nodded his head, but wasn't satisfied. 'But why here? Why Britain?'

Hermione glanced at her mother. She was standing behind her husband, gnawing her nails anxiously.

Draco's face stilled. 'I'm afraid my family's largely to blame... My father was ill and the man who brought this upon us owned a pharmaceutical company and helped him. We were broke, so this man effectively bought us – took over our companies – and now he's married to my mother.'

'And you're married to his daughter, having already dated her sister...' Harry added, soberly.

Draco looked momentarily stricken. 'True. It's my fault, too.'

Hermione intertwined her fingers with his under the table and gently squeezed his hand.

'You're married?' Jean cried in alarm.

Draco instantly blushed. 'Yes. My wife - this man's daughter - is missing.' For a moment it felt like the oxygen had been sucked out of the room.

'I've – I've got something else I need to discuss with you guys, actually,' Ziff said, breaking the silence. 'I've kind of met a young Vietnamese woman online... worked for Gilgad before they closed her lab down. She's called Tuyệt...' The tips of his ears glowed pink as he said her name.
'She has three children she's saved from atrocities who she's hiding from what she calls 'company-soldiers'. She's asked me for help getting them out of Vietnam.'

'Can't she travel with them herself?' Harry asked.

'They're very young. And she's alone. I'm – I'm only mentioning this because I've promised Túyên I'd ask you guys…'

'I don't want to sound hard-hearted,' Harry said, with the air of a man who knew he was about to be hard-hearted, 'but we've got enough to be thinking about here!'

'When you say atrocities, do you mean like what happened with Scorpius?' Draco asked.

Ziff nodded.

'How long would it take to get them out?'

'That depends on a number of factors…' Ziff said, ruminatively.

Jean urgently beckoned Hermione to join her in the kitchen and firmly closed the kitchen door.

'The absolute last person in the world you ever thought it could or should be … that's what you told me last weekend!' Jean said, rounding on her. 'It's Draco, isn't it?'

Was that really less than a week ago? It felt like forever.

'Don't try and wriggle out of this!'

'I'm not trying to wriggle out of anything! Yes … it's Draco.'

'But he's MARRIED.'

'And so am I… But you said unhappiness was corrosive and—'

'I said to sort it out, Hermione! Not sleep with another woman's husband!'

Hermione felt like she'd swallowed a large, cold stone. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her mother look so disappointed.

'And this man hurt you when you were younger. Don't think I've forgotten that! Yes, he's handsome and charming and knows to say all the right things, but—'

'Mum, please…' Hermione hissed, gesturing to her mother to keep her voice down. 'I'm not about to sign away my life to him!'

Jean rolled her eyes. 'Yes, you are. You already have. Both of you! It's plain as the nose on your face!'

Hermione didn't know what to say… she felt winded.

'I'm a good judge of character, Hermione. This is a man who gets what he wants,' Jean continued in emphatic tones. 'And he wants you…'

'You say that like it's a bad thing!' Hermione bristled.

Jean shook her head disconsolately. 'But you're throwing your life into confusion!'
'It already is! We're in the middle of something horrible! Nothing's normal, Mum. Surely you see that?' But there was a faraway look in Jean's eyes… 'I won't let anything happen to Rose and Hugo. I promise. I'd rather be alone.'

'Oh, you'd never hurt anyone deliberately, I know that… But your life's about to change very fast,' Jean clucked. 'Have you told Ron?'

'He's away.'

'Well, you'd better tell him soon. Or Draco will.'

'No, he won't! He's not stupid!'

Jean's eyes were intent on Hermione's face. 'You told me and your father when you went to Hogwarts that each child was tested by a magical hat that could see inside of you, into your soul… and you were then sorted into categories. I remember this because Draco was one of the people you told me you were supposed to avoid!'

Hermione's mouth fell open in shock. 'Good lord, Mum… We were CHILDREN! You can't live your life based on what a HAT once told you! We're none of us defined by a few select characteristics for the whole of our lives. It's our experiences that shape us… that change us along the way.'

Hermione could hear everyone debating beyond the closed door… Draco's voice was forthright, clear.

'And I've changed… Surely you can see that? You saw how unhappy I'd become!'

Jean's face fell. 'Oh, Hermione—' But the door swung open and Robert strode into the kitchen.

'Not disturbing anything, am I?'

Both women shook their heads.

'I've offered Ziff and Henrik the garage,' he said enthusiastically. 'Seems a shame to have renovated it and it never gets used! And they could do with a safe space; one with Wifi!'

'Oh!' Jean said, unable to conceal her trepidation. 'Both? Henrik's confession hadn't endeared him.

'Henrik wants to stay put at Bill's house – Parvati's there, I suppose - but Ziff's agreed.'

Hermione audibly groaned. 'Dad, Parvati and Henrik—'

'You're welcome to stay here too, you know!' Robert continued, blithely. 'Rose told me how she doesn't want to go back to her uncle's house anymore.'

'Why?'

'Something about eyes following her? She's always been an imaginative child… but I thought I'd mention it, because she was really rather upset!'

XXX

These latest events called for an emergency meeting in Bill and Fleur's sitting-room.

'This is appalling,' Dennis wept. 'It's mass murder!'
'We've been so dumb taking pot-shots at the Ministry…' Ernie said, sheepishly. He turned to Draco. 'I spoke to Tim earlier. He's pulling together as much information as he can… I think *Sub Rosa* runs this as soon as possible. It's the right thing to do.'

Hermione agreed. 'Match these events to Ephraim's Domain list - while it's fresh in everyone's minds.'

'Ephraim's shown more of his hand now,' Harry remarked. 'The ugly scenes with the Blasters in Hogsmeade and the Ministry and this 'Right to Exist' stuff will have bothered more people than we imagine.'

'And far fewer, too,' Draco said in dark tones. Bill shook his head at him in irritation.

Neville gave Tansy a crooked grin. 'Lucky you made it out of that scrum today!'

Tansy looked crestfallen, though. 'But we've lost people… banged up in the Ministry dungeons.'

'LOSING people's become a bit of a habit these days, hasn't it?' Bill said caustically. His whole being drooped with misery. Hermione braced herself for a re-run of last night's rant… 'And your pulling out of bloody Malfoy Manor isn't helping matters!' Bill snarled at Draco.

'It sounds like it's too dangerous for him to stay!' Thelonious interjected.

'But nobody's keeping tabs on this nonsense! Or finding out about my poor bloody brother! And sticking your fucking wand in Ephraim's face has likely made matters worse!' he said to Draco, reproachfully.

'So I DID see you at the Ministry!' Hermione exclaimed.

Bill stared miserably at the floor. 'Kai managed to sneak into the Evidence Room in the Aurors' Office - but George's wand wasn't even there!'

'Of course it fucking wasn't!' Draco said, eyes blazing. 'It never was.'

'But Ephraim told Hermione—'

'He was trying to scare her into doing what he wants!'

'Fat lot of good *that's* done! Except this shitty deal you've agreed, Hermione… Two fucking weeks!' Bill fumed.

‘Less than that now…’

‘Still too long! *Anything* could happen!’

'For Christ's sake, Bill!' Hermione snapped, tears springing to her eyes. 'What more do you want of me?'

'MORE! More than what you're doing!' Bill thundered in return.

'I can't see what else she can do,' Neville said wearily.

‘I could sleep with him?’ Hermione suggested to Bill in mocking tones.

'He didn't mean that,' Fleur whimpered from the piano stool, where she looked hunched and uncomfortable.
Draco glared at Bill. 'He better not have done.'

'Can we please focus on the fucking huge and terrible thing that happened today?' Harry yelled, clearly irked. He directed everyone's attention to the blown-up list of 'Domains', now pinned to the landscape painting above the fireplace. 'There's simply not enough of us to monitor everything that's going on… Not only do we have to worry about trying to keep track of Ephraim's people, we now have a hit-list of areas and towns and countless fucking villages and bloody heritage sites where innocent Muggles might get struck down with Dark Flux.'

It wasn't an *inspiring* presentation, Hermione thought. More a cry of despair.

'I'm a good flier – Arlene, too. We could run regular flypasts; check nothing freaky's happening,' Angelina boasted.

'Sorry, Angelina, but these are big areas – some far away. We need informants on the ground and more people… Draco and I are skyping Gunter – Los Rojos – tonight,' Harry announced. 'We're going to ask for help; see if we can cut a deal.'

Many in the room shot confused looks at each other…

'Los Rojos are animagi,' Draco explained further. 'As crows they'll cover more ground than *any* of us can on a piddling little broomstick.'


XXX

'That was hell,' Draco grumbled to Hermione once the meeting had dispersed. 'And Bill's losing his shit…'

They were in the garden. Harry had already set off to Apparate with Draco due to follow, heading back to her parents' house. Her father was helping Ziff move a mass of tech from his bedsit in Vauxhall into the Grangers' garage. They planned to properly rig the place up.

'Boys night in at the Granger's house,' Draco grinned. 'Gonna be *wild*!'

Hermione thought about what her father had said. 'Dad told me Rose doesn't want to be here anymore… She claims the *eyes* are back.'

'Do you agree?'

'I don't know…' She'd thought there was *something* yesterday morning… even this evening… a little.

As soon as they were out of sight of any windows, Draco coiled Hermione into his arms. 'If we found some *other* place, somewhere separate that feels SAFE, would you think about maybe…?' He didn't need to finish the question. It hung between them.

She thought about how her mother had described him. *A man who gets what he wants*…

'Yes,' she said, hoping *she* did too, because she ached to be with him now… Miraculous as it sometimes seemed, he was fast becoming her point of sanity.

They kissed, deep and hard, leaning against the exterior wall of the house. 'Please don't see Ephraim tomorrow at this stupid Quidditch thing,' Draco murmured, his mouth against her ear.

'I have to,' she groaned.
'Then I'll come along, too.'

Hermione instantly bridled... Relations between Draco and Ephraim had hit toxic. 'Nothing can happen to me at a quidditch match! It's a public place!'

'His mask is slipping; he's getting greedy. You see that, don't you?' Draco said urgently.

'I just have to hand in this flipping report…' She also had to WRITE it, she thought, mournfully. 'I'll leave straight after. How's that?'

'Why not just hand it into reception at Arcana?'

'I have to do this, Draco… George is a good man.'

Draco's name was being called.

'Harry's waiting…' But Draco was kissing her neck in a manner that suggested he wasn't planning on going anywhere; not yet. And then his mouth was on hers and the shell-covered wall of the house was hard against her back. She tightly wound her arms around his neck, mind blank, face heated, and kissed him fiercely in return.

'You've got to go…' she said eventually, gently pushing him away...

'You're shagging him, aren't you?' came Bill's voice, once Draco had sprinted off into the darkness.

'What… why are you saying that?' Her heart raced wildly. And she realised how totally stupid she sounded. He'd obviously been watching.

'Don't insult my intelligence,' Bill said snidely. 'You're all gooey eyes and - and little touches - and snogging like naughty schoolchildren when you think no one's looking.'

Hermione didn't know what to say.

'You said you wouldn't.'

'I never said anything of the sort!'

'How could you?'

She couldn't be bothered to argue. 'Because amidst all the shit, this is the one thing that actually feels good in my life right now.'

'How can it be GOOD?'

'Are you asking for EXPLICIT details?' Hermione said in barbed tones, knowing full well he wasn't…

Bill turned a shade of scarlet.

'I love him.'

'But… you can't.'

'I can. And I do. Please, Bill… We have so many other things to be worrying about!'

'What about the kids?'
Hermione almost boiled over with frustration. 'The kids don't need to know about this – not YET at any rate!'

'What do I say to the family?'

This had escalated… fast! 'NOTHING. Why do that? Why do that NOW? Please. Bill. Stop this!'

'But they have to know! It's only right.'

'Not NOW they don't! At least let me speak to Ron first!'

'You're going to?'

'YES. Yes, I am… When he gets back.' Because there was no right time; no point waiting for the world to suddenly right itself…

Bill shook his head and blew his cheeks out. 'This is fucking me up. I just – I just want things to go back to how they were!'

She placed both her hands on either side of his neck and looked him deep in the eyes. He had to see she meant this… 'But I don't, Bill… And I won't.'

He placed both his hands over hers, but she tugged her hands free and hugged him instead.

Bill didn't move and the hug soon felt wooden, awkward. But Hermione could sense this wasn't just about her and Draco and the potential family fallout.

So she hugged him even tighter and eventually his arms encircled her and he held her close too.

XXX

'Do you want milk in your coffee?' Bill asked the next morning. He seemed a lot calmer.

'Bill says you're seeing Ephraim later,' Angelina said, striding into the kitchen, trailed by Kai. 'I don't want to be stressed, but could you speed up this stupid trial thing? The kids have written asking how their Dad's doing in America…'

'There's more coffee if you want it, Angelina,' Bill said, rising from the table. 'Hermione – come and see what miracles Parvati’s wrought with the corundum.'

She followed him to his study. Parvati was kneeling on the floor surrounded by Sound Spheres. Rose and Scorpius were busily arranging them into a tidy line.

Hermione sat on the floor next to them. 'Where did these come from?' she asked Parvati.

'Thelonious and Neville broke into WWN.'

Scorpius picked up a Sound Sphere and marvelled at its glistening iridescence. 'It's like a see-through snitch.'

'Your Daddy owns a quidditch team. Did you know that, Scorpius?' Bill asked.

Scorpius shook his head.

'Which team?' Rose asked.
'The Wasps…' Bill looked a little like he'd just swallowed one.

'My Daddy likes the Chudleigh Cannons,' Rose said. But Scorpius looked blank.

'The Wasps are playing today, actually - this anniversary event at Queerditch Marsh,' Bill said ruefully. Hermione suspected he'd have loved to have been there.

'Right, you two, scoot outside to play with the others while the weather's fine,' Parvati said firmly. As if on cue, a football bounced off the windows and Hermione could see Hugo collapse into giggles, pointing at Louis and Alfred.

Louis grabbed the ball and kicked it to Alfred, who hoofed it high into the air, narrowly missing a ferocious-looking Molly Weasley, who'd just Apparated onto the lawn. Alfred yelped and ran behind Louis, but fortunately Fleur was marching purposefully towards them all.

'Bugger,' Bill said softly. He slammed the study door. 'Let's get this done quickly. Okay, so we've drained Salvedra's rock of its stored communications – it only goes back to the first message you heard from Salvedra, Hermione. And it's pretty damn obvious they know their communications network has been breached, so this is all we're getting - for now… Though Thelonious has an idea how to kickstart it… Right. I'll play them in order… Just so it makes sense - they call the corundums Cadenas – and Salvedra's was Corazón.'

'HEART,' Hermione mused. 'Makes sense.'

The first two messages were Salvedra's – but next up was Sylvestra: 'Corazón, Cadena 1. Torquil says he can't contact Selwyn. French Cadena isn't working.'

This was followed by a distant-sounding voice… but Hermione knew it was Selwyn Haast. 'We have death in the desert – Josep and I will follow-up.'

'What's that mean?' Parvati asked, unnerved.

'Dark Flux… Possibly, Egypt?' Bill conjectured.

Sylvestra: 'Torquil's being a bore… Can someone fix his blasted Cadena?'

Torquil: 'Cadena not working! On Cadena 2. Consider moving package. Almost discovered.'

Torquil, again: 'I'd appreciate an answer? … And our friends from the East are demanding risk money. Too much interest from the Muggle Witch's husband.'

'You're the Muggle Witch, Hermione,' Bill remarked.

'They’re talking about Ron’s investigation… These 'friends' are the East European smuggling gang!'

The next message was relayed by a voice Hermione had never heard before.

'Master. Lost eyes on Muggle Witch. Domicile blacked out. Suggest call-in…'

Hermione chilled. This was whoever had been watching her house…

Ephraim: 'Where's the husband?'

Unknown voice: 'Auror One says he applied for overseas travel license. Destination unknown.'
'Auror One must be Carmichael…' Bill said thoughtfully.

'Carmichael told me Ron's in Argentina.'

'ARGENTINA?' Bill's eyes almost popped out of his head.

'I take it you told Ron that's where Ephraim sent Ruddy Krenzel?'

'Harry did.'

'How did you work out Carmichael was corrupted?'

Bill looked a little uncomfortable. 'Found the documents for Katya Malfoy's money trace... Carmichael was the Auror who signed them off.'

Next up, Torquil: 'I've placated our friends from the East.'

But nobody seemed to care...

Ephraim was back. 'I need to know where she is. Do not make yourself known to her. Do not touch her. Is that clear? Keep to Cadena 1.'

'Cadena 1… His ring,' Hermione thought aloud.

Sylvestra, in pithy tones. 'Ask Draco.'

Ephraim, urgently: 'Where is he?'

This exchange confirmed Hermione’s suspicion. Ephraim's ring - similar to Salvedra's Corazón - handled private two-way communications.

Selwyn was getting impatient. 'Grandmaster – I await your wise words! Where are you?'

'Is Ephraim Grandmaster?' Parvati asked.

'No, it's Salvedra, I'm sure of it.'

The final exchange of messages was between Hulda and Sylvestra...

'It's quite easy to dismiss Torquil – certainly the rest of them seem to – but what he says about the "friends from the East" is interesting, isn't it? Hermione said, a curious glint in her eye. 'I wonder if this East European gang's transporting Dark Flux materials?'

'Clearly Draco's going on strike blocked all their usual distribution channels,' Bill reflected.

Molly's voice, loud and pealing, rang around the house. Bill stood up with a sigh. 'Brilliant work, Parvati. Where are you off to?' he called out, surprised at Hermione's sudden dash from the room to the stairs.

'I've got a report to finish!'

You look nice,' Gwen said admiringly when Hermione came into the kitchen, grabbing a scone that Arlene had made earlier and cramming it into her mouth.

'Oh, there you are!' Molly shrilled, entering from the garden. Alfred had been heading indoors too,
but quickly retreated, throwing the other children a despairing glance. He loitered by the back
door, his eyes firmly trained on Arlene's heaped pile of scones; a boy with a job to do…

'And you're Hermione's friend!' Molly smiled graciously at Gwen. 'She's never mentioned you!'

'Cousin…' Hermione broke in. Had Molly noticed Scorpius?

'Which one's yours?' Molly asked, spinning around. Alfred managed to jump out of view, but
Hermione could sense that Molly had zoomed-in on the child who looked exactly like Draco
Malfoy.

'Alfred…'

Molly narrowed her eyes inquisitively at the children, discussing something between themselves;
Scorpius trudged towards the kitchen, like a man to the gallows, Hugo tagging along behind…

'I haven't had a Hugo-hug yet!' Molly chirruped, clasping Hugo close. He squirmed, keeping his
eyes fixed on the plate of scones.

'You wanting a scone, Alfred?' Molly said beadily to Scorpius.

'I'm not Alfred.' Scorpius's grating, robotic voice clearly disconcerted Molly. 'He's hiding behind
the door.'

'Scorps!' Alfred whined, with a look of utter betrayal on his face and a great deal of dramatic eye-
rolling.

Molly's eyes twinkled humorously at Alfred, but darkened in confusion when she looked at
Scorpius.

'Hermione?' Scorpius flushed pink. 'Could we possibly…?'

'Why don't you just take the plate and share them outside?' she whispered, gently squeezing his
shoulder. He grinned from ear-to-ear.

The three boys ran off to the garden, Alfred tugging the plate nearer himself as Scorpius doled out
the scones between them all.

'Is Ron away again?' Molly asked Hermione.

'Oh, you know him… non-stop.'

'Can't believe he didn't tell me…' Molly snapped a smile at Gwen. 'Is the FOREIGN chap your
husband?' Henrik must have arrived at some point…

'No! He's a friend… OUR friend.'

'I'm surprised to see Harry here,' Molly said, switching her attention to Hermione. 'Thought he'd be
at the Quidditch... All proceeds going to the Hogsmeade Restoration Fund, so it's a good cause.'
For a moment, she looked genuinely bereft. 'It'd be wonderful if the Falcons took down
those ghastly Wasps! That'd wipe the smirk off Draco Malfoy's face, wouldn't it?' Molly chuckled.
'Why's his son here?'

Hermione opened her mouth to formulate a reply but luckily Harry entered the kitchen and came to
her rescue.
'I'd have thought you'd be down at Queerditch Marsh, Molly!' he said jovially. 'Match will be underway by now.'

'I'm amazed YOU aren't there!' she shrilled in reply, clearing the kitchen table of the heaped detritus that had grown directly out of breakfast and been staggered over several meals since.

'Ugh, me too!' Harry said with deft cordiality. 'But Bill's roped me in on some top-secret scheme he's involved in.'

Hermione took this opportunity to inch past Gwen and subtly beckon her outside.

'Sounds intriguing, Harry,' Molly enthused. 'Almost as intriguing as why Draco Malfoy's son is in Bill's garden, but your sister-in-law didn't enlighten me.'

'Oh, Draco asked as a favour… poor kid doesn't like crowds.'

'Since when have you been friends with him?'

Harry thought for a moment. 'Christmas?'

'I've got to slip away for a bit. Can you cover for me?' Hermione whispered.

Gwen raised her eyebrows. 'Seeing your parents?'

XXX

The quidditch match was in full flow when Hermione arrived at the Queerditch Marsh stadium. It rose up from boggy wasteland, a vast disc-shaped mirage, like a beached UFO. Hermione could hear the roar of voices from the moment she Apparated into the bordering woods.

Hermione soon found herself marooned on a jam-packed stand, amidst a sea of black and grey Falmouth Falcons flags, some distance from the 'Minister's Box.' Ephraim was seated with various high-level Ministry officials – although not the Minister, himself.

She craned upwards to watch tiny specks of colour zooming in the sky. From this distance, the black and yellow robes of the Wasps really did look like their namesakes.

A steward ushered her into an antechamber, positioned directly behind Ephraim's covered section of the stand.

She perched nervously on a couch, desperately wanting this ordeal over as soon as possible.

The young bearded man she'd seen at the opera offered her an Exultante, which she refused. She noticed he spoke in a French accent. He cast anxious glances at her in between peering through a narrow parting in the red velvet curtain which divided this room from the VIP seating area.

'You have the report?' Ephraim asked, banishing the young bearded man from their presence.

'Here,' Hermione said tersely, handing it over.

He thumbed through it, disinterested. 'But no Memories…'

'Once George is safely home.' She spun around on her heel and was about to leave but Ephraim sighed in loud exasperation and a burst of blue exploded inside her head. His hand shot out and he grabbed her roughly by the shoulder, hoisting her back with shocking strength. She felt sure his iron grip would leave bruises.
'Not what we agreed, Hermione. George goes home after the case is presented!'  

She fought to free herself from his grasp but he twisted her towards a table where a fresh edition of *Sub Rosa* was on display.  

Ephraim's face adorned the front page, directly linking him to a graphic description of yesterday's Dark Flux attacks.  

'These damned friends of yours writing all these stupid lies!' Ephraim's eyes burned blue; hawkish, angry. 'They have to STOP! Immediately! Is that clear?'  

'Don't think I have any control over *Sub Rosa*,' she said tartly. 'According to your patsies at the *Daily Prophet*, you're better off asking Jeroboam.'  

'We both know that would be very, very stupid!' he grimaced. He leant closer, his head touching hers – she felt eclipsed by his overweening presence. 'Dead men can't talk.'  

Hermione didn't dare show she was scared, that he made her skin crawl cold…  

'Dear me. What would all your fans out there think if they knew that Jeroboam didn't actually exist? Maybe that should be *Sub Rosa*'s next big scoop?'  

She couldn't resist baiting him… even though it was unwise.  

'Let them try!' he scoffed. 'The beauty of the thing, Hermione - as I'm sure you're well aware – is that MY truth cancels out YOUR truth; and, to be fair, it can work the other way round! What even IS truth?  

'I came to deliver your blasted report, not indulge in bloody philosophical discourse!' Hermione sighed. She finally shook herself free from his grasp. 'Although, if you really want my opinion on the matter, using Jeroboam - a *fictional* construct - to bolster your political position isn't just UNTRUE, it's PATHETIC!'  

Ephraim smirked. 'I was always more interested in transcendental truths, Hermione. That's why I'm a scientist... However, I want you to know one thing…' He slashed at *Sub Rosa* with his wand, splicing it into a frenzy of tiny little pieces, 'THIS story ISN'T true! And I want *Sub Rosa* to write a formal correction. Is that clear?' He loomed over her. 'I need you to believe I didn't do this. Yes, I've sanctioned other crimes. I've hardly led a *virtuous* life, as you well know… But this senseless slaughter was not my doing!'  

'So who did it?'  

Ephraim stared at her. His wand-hand was shaking. He couldn't say, she realised. Either he didn't know - or he didn't dare admit it.  

'You don't care about poor dead *Muggles*!' Hermione glowered, heatedly. 'Your only worry is for yourself; scared that the people will turn against you and you won't become Minister for Magic!'  

'I don't need to curry favour with the *people,*' he said, disdainfully. 'If I told them to fart out their navels most of them would try – and you know it!'  

'So why are you demanding a correction?' she asked, genuinely bewildered.  

He looked at her in astonishment. 'Because what was printed was wrong! Because this is not what I set out to do!'
'But you ENABLED this!' Hermione shrilled, suddenly sick of appeasing this monstrous man. 'You've worked on Dark Flux all your life. Invested millions and killed indiscriminately in pursuit of a weapon of pure evil. Allowed the torture of innocent children…'

Ephraim glared at her, unblinking.

'You courted people who believed in your stupid, senseless, selfish ideology, not caring who you worked with, who you encouraged, as long as it benefited you! You're guilty as hell, Ephraim! YOU opened Pandora's Box… so don't be surprised by what flies out and smacks you in the face.'

'I thought you wanted to keep up pretenses between us, Hermione…' Ephraim said regretfully. 'But it seems we've ventured far, far beyond that point…'

He was right.

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to regain control of herself. She sank onto the couch, despondent…

She'd probably killed George.

Ephraim, a vibrant glowing blue, was quickly beside her. 'That was foolish of you, wasn't it?… Impulsive… Emotional.'

She averted her face from his gaze.

'Melissa… George… You've become quite beholden to me, Hermione, haven't you?'

Ephraim slipped a finger under her chin, coaxing her to look at him… He gently brushed her hair away from her face.

Intimate, that was what Draco had called it… Yes, it was. An overture. An easing into what he truly wanted… because she knew now that he did. She could feel it burgeoning from his every pore.

He studied her with keen-eyed scrutiny. 'Just like ANNA; you don't get that everything I'm doing – EVERYTHING - is for the good of us all. The right to be ourselves… not to live in fear and suspicion. For us all to come together, celebrating our common humanity. Pursuing honourable goals that better this beautiful world we share.'

'I don't disapprove of the END you desire, Ephraim, it's your MEANS I have a problem with.' She held his gaze for as long as she could, but the connection between them was simply too strong and she had to break away.

'I was the scientist and Anna was the philosopher,' Ephraim said, lost for a moment in nostalgic reverie. 'We worked well together… I feel I've spent my entire life searching for that spark of creative dynamism, the joy of soul-to-soul cooperation! It's been a life of perpetual disappointment.'

'Shame,' she said, sarcastically. But there was something strangely unbalanced and erratic about him today, she thought... a peculiar, throbbing madness; dark and terrifying.

'Of course, the problem with Anna was she thought too much.'

'Well, that's the problem with philosophy,' Hermione sighed. 'Eventually you run up against Ethics.'
'I'm not immune to ethical considerations,' he leered.

'You just don't care enough to live by them.'

He pursed his lips in irritation; she could sense a host of thoughts and feelings, even memories, had crowded into this single moment, because his mood abruptly deepened and the bright blue that perpetually seeped from his mind into hers darkened considerably - a violent and unexpected ambush.

Draco was right... An open channel between them could work both ways.

Beyond the velvet curtain there was a prolonged bout of raucous cheering…

'I've delayed you from the match for too long,' she gabbled, suddenly desperate to escape. But Ephraim had her pinned down.

There was no point shouting for help; everyone here worked for him.

'Oh, I can't stand quidditch! Something else we have in common.' He shot her an amused look, as though a joke had snuck, unbidden, into his mind.

'How terribly rude of me,' he chortled. 'I've been wittering on about this blasted woman, Anna, who you've never met or even care about… when you could just see her for yourself!'

'See ANNA?' Had he lost his mind?

'Yes, Hermione. People like us can do that, you know… it's really very easy. You should learn; you almost DID – with Melissa. Such raw talent... Impressive.'

People like us? But of course. He knew she had colour-magic.

As did he…

'I don't understand.'

'Yes, you do.'

The piercing blue of his eyes seemed to swirl and magnify, occluding her vision… She felt she couldn't move and his face was close, closer…

She tightly shut her eyes. 'No, Hermione. Open them.' His voice had softened to a tender croon – inside her head.

She blinked her eyes open and gasped.

She was in a room… a bedroom. Dark, wood-panelled walls; a lilac, tasseled lampshade over a brass lamp-stand shaped into the form of a naked, writhing woman; bedsheets crumpled on the bed beside her – used, loved-in.

A man – bedsheet draped lazily over long, tanned limbs, tousled hair splayed on the pillow, blue eyes shimmering with light and love - was watching a woman with short, wavy brown hair and skin, so pale, it glowed, standing beside the bed, inching a flame-red dress up her body.

She looked over her shoulder, fully-rouged lips shining. Her eyes gleamed in the light from the lamp… 'Zip me up, darling, would you?' she said in a thick, foreign accent.
The man reached forwards and the sheet fell away, exposing his naked torso.

He did so, then smoothed his hands over her shoulders, down her arms. For a moment, Hermione thought she, too, could feel his touch.

Anna turned around – now fully-dressed – and smiled, a slow, luxuriant smile that faintly dimpled her cheeks.

'Do you have to leave?' Ephraim asked in a sleepy, indifferent drawl from the bed, but Hermione could sense his inner heartache.

Anna's eyes circled wearily. 'I promised Reynaldo I'd be home early... And I've hardly seen my son in days. Saul works us too hard.'

SON? She had a son!

And Hermione could see that, yes, she did bear a slight resemblance to Anna – more so than Katya, for sure. But the person who Anna most closely resembled – to a somewhat shocking degree – was GWEN. Not just because they shared the same hairstyle… but even her mannerisms. The slight, twitching purse of her lips, the way she tilted her head when she talked…

Ephraim could never, ever meet her…

But she didn't have time to ponder this or learn anything more…

She was back on the couch and the crowd beyond the curtain was roaring and stamping.

Ephraim was watching her with a gleeful smirk; smug to have asserted power over her…

'Well?' he asked.

'Very interesting. Thank you,' she said, demurely, straining to hide her fury at him. How fucking dare he intrude on her mind like that?

And now she had to get out of here... She smoothed her skirt and fussied with her handbag in a show of readiness to leave.

'Is that all you have to say?' he pouted.

'That's - that's all I WANT to say.'

'But what did you think?'

Hermione shrugged, affecting nonchalance. 'Well… Am I supposed to be impressed by your ability to force your thoughts on me? Or are you asking for my opinion on your former lover? I mean, it was hardly your most philosophical encounter, was it?'

Ephraim batted this away, clearly disappointed by her refusal to react. 'It was the first thing that came to mind.' He rubbed his eyes wearily. 'Go on then. Run along…' He was releasing her!

Finally…

'I need to know our deal with George is still on…'

'Yes, yes... George is safe and well and will remain so. For now... although if Sub Rosa over-step the mark again, I wouldn't feel quite so confident.'
Hermione nodded and stood up, about to walk away, but he lashed out with a new, worrying question. 'Where are you living at the moment? You're not at home these days.'

'How would you know that?'

'You can't be _too_ far away…. Rose and Hugo still go to school – although they missed Friday. I guess you were too exhausted by the tragic events in Hogsmeade to even care…'

Hermione froze. Why was he talking about her children?

'I'm staying with friends.'

'Well, I hope you're well-protected – _wherever_ you are. You've caught the attention of extremely dangerous people… I do my utmost to protect you – not that you appreciate my efforts.'

She stared at him blankly, refusing to buckle.

'Are you staying with Harry? He's a much more modest sort of chap, than I expected... Although I did wonder to myself why you married Ron and not HIM.'

'Harry's my friend!'

Ephraim arched a sceptical eyebrow.

'You do realise, Ephraim, that a man and a woman can be _close_, but not lovers?'

'Not really. One always wants the other but doesn't dare admit it. But you'd have been better-suited to Harry. You like _clever_ men, Hermione.'

'You're assuming Ron's stupid – which he's not.'

'And you like POWER – political power - more than you want to admit…' He continued to study her, eyes sparkling. 'What about my stepson? Is Draco just a friend or … are you now _lovers_?'

She suppressed a shiver. His eyes had flashed ominously when he said Draco's name.

'… Because something's CHANGED between you. I can feel it… I mean, I'd ask him myself, but he appears to be shunning my company these days. Most inconvenient! We _need_ him home. I want him back.'

'We're _friends_…. Just friends,' she said, clenching her fists tightly. It wouldn't go well for Draco if Ephraim thought otherwise.

'Tell him to come home... He's got nothing to fear! I'm _much_ fonder of Draco than you realise…' Ephraim said in wheedling tones. 'Although it's always disconcerting when one meets oneself.'

'You're nothing like each other!' she spluttered.

'Not _now_, no! I've had a life of bitterness and regret. Draco still has all that to come – poor sod. But he does remind me of myself at his age. Handsome, clever – madly in love with a woman who belongs to somebody else.'

'Honestly, Ephraim? It's neither my fault nor Draco's, for that matter, that you've suffered romantic disappointment in your life. Please don't try and cast us as stand-ins in – in some weird nostalgic re-enactment of your own _miserable_ failures…'
'Except History *does* repeat itself, my lovely. Over and over. Problems arise when people forget that.' A peevish shadow fell across his face. ‘Which means I know there’s no need for ME to ever hurt Draco - because the person who will destroy him, *utterly*, will be you! That’s his fate. And yours, too. To bear the pain of what you will do to him…'

A sustained roar of cacophonous excitement hailed from the crowd beyond the curtain.

Ephraim heaved a deep sigh and stood up. 'From the sounds of the bellowing herd out there, they’ve caught the snitch.'

The young, bearded Frenchman flicked back the velvet curtain and nodded to his master.

Ephraim offered his hand for her to shake, but she pretended not to notice.

'If Mr Jinks needs anything more, he can send me an owl...' she said, rapidly walking away before he changed his mind.

She tripped past Karl, loitering outside the box, and headed into the crowd – caught in the midst of a thick scrummage of brightly-clad, noisy Wasps fans, jumping up and down in full-voiced celebration.

Dusk had fallen and the stadium was alight with myriad flames - burning copies of *Sub Rosa* - held aloft by spectators.

Ephraim, resplendent in his all-encompassing pomp and charisma, ascended a staircase leading to a large, floating platform, hovering above the Quidditch pitch.

He was greeted like a rock star. The crowd were hooting and singing and waving ‘Right to Exist’ banners that fluttered down from the sky like confetti.

Suddenly, Hermione was being crushed and battered by the swelling mob, as they surged forwards – yelling at the top of their voices: ‘We have a Right to Exist! We have a Right to Exist!’

She had to get out, fast, but every time she tried to thread her way through what appeared to be a slim chance of an opening in the crowd, she was blocked off and re-routed.

She found herself at the top of a flight of steps, heading down towards the pitch. She tried to shut out the sound of Ephraim’s voice booming from every direction and the wild applause of the crowd in response.

They loved him!

But now she found her route down the steps was obstructed by a huddle of fans, spilling out from their seats. She was jostled into the fray and somebody’s elbow cracked hard against her head, spinning her around with frightening force. She tottered and fell to her knees where she was buffeted by blows from all sides.

A heavy boot slammed down on her hand as the crowd stampeded towards the pitch. She shrieked and instinctively pushed the wizard’s legs, upending him so that he fell down the steps, howling with rage.

She saw an opening in the crowd open up to her left and dragged herself away from the steps into free air, resisting the urge to whip out her wand and stupefy anyone who dared encroach on her path to freedom.
She could sense she was being pursued but didn't dare look back…

Finally, she arrived at the end of a row of seats. There was an exit sign.

The crowd was raging behind her at a deafening pitch… she glanced over her shoulder and could see an enormous banner hanging high over the ground. To her surprise, it featured a monstrous jeering face; the face of Saul Jeroboam. The crowd were throwing bottles and mud and screaming abuse at the top of their voices.

This mania had sprung up from nowhere; it didn't seem real!

There was a clattering of urgent footsteps and she was suddenly swathed in bright white… She gasped in relief.

Draco swiftly manoeuvred her through the turnstile gates to the sweet emptiness of the muddy field outside the stadium.

'I've been trying to catch up with you for ages!' He looked like he'd been caught in a whirlwind; his hair was sticking up all over the place and his shirt had been ripped open, his robe hanging loose. He was clutching his wand in one hand. 'You couldn't hear me over the noise.'

'Has the world gone crazy? It's like everyone's been hexed into some strange kind of madness!'

'That was the most frustrating fucking hour of my life! I KNEW you'd come! And Mother told me Ephraim was in a dark mood, a dangerous mood…' He shook his head. 'All the time you were with him; it was hell…'

'I should have listened to you. I should never have come…'

There was a loud string of popping bangs from inside the stadium and soaring, colourful fireworks were discharged high into the sky. They both stared at the whirling, flying illuminations, fizzing and squealing to a chorus of excited cries and cheers… an array of colours dappled their faces.

Draco turned to her and kissed her tenderly. 'Where shall we go, beautiful?'

XXX

It was past midnight when Hermione woke up, blissfully warm and content, nestling in Draco's arms.

'You okay?' he murmured sleepily.

She made a soft, throaty noise and snuggled closer and was about to fall asleep again when it struck her – she was back in her bed at Wisteria Cottage, lying naked with Draco.

They'd headed here after the quidditch… After feeling like everything and everyone was rapidly closing in, spending the night talking and making love with Draco had been a joyous, blessed relief. But they’d relaxed too much… and fallen asleep.

Draco's eyes fluttered open; she could feel his eyelashes trembling against her skin.

'Oops,' he beamed.

'Yes… Oops,' she smiled back.

He sighed. 'I imagine Bill locks Shell Fort very securely at night… How do we smuggle you back?'
'Probably best by Floo?'

'Okay. We'll do that then…'

His hand was stroking her side and caressing her breasts… 'Do we… have to leave immediately?'

'Fairly soon…'

His hand trailed tantalizingly along her thighs, moving upwards, his fingers dancing and teasing… and his mouth was hot on her face and neck….

'Oh god…' she groaned, eyes rolling back in sudden ecstasy.

And he said something back, but his voice was mushed against her skin and he was panting too hard to speak clearly…

XXX

They'd fallen asleep again. It was now the middle of the night.

Draco woke her up. 'Hermione…' he grinned. 'I think it's now or never to head back to Shell Cottage.'

'Okay… We should go. Gwen will be worried.'

She lay against his chest, listening to his breathing, sighing at the long, gentle strokes of his hand against her arm. It felt far too nice… 'No…' she murmured. 'Best not to touch.' She eased herself from his arms and swung her legs over the bed. The bedroom door was open.

She grabbed her wand and hunted through the mess of their clothes on the floor leading to the doorway for her underwear, but stopped as the hairs on her arms prickled and a darkness swirled through her…

'Draco?' she said, wide-eyed. 'There's something here.'

'Something or someone?'

'Both.' She entered the hallway. The darkness strengthened...

Draco had his wand drawn, illuminated. He turned right towards the kitchen…

'It's THIS way,' she said in hushed tones, nodding down the hallway towards the front door instead. She couldn't SEE anyone – the lights were off - but she could feel them … The eyes.

She advanced towards the door, pausing by the mirror.

She turned to look, wand aloft, and muttered 'Lumos'… and then she knew.

Her breath caught in her throat and she stared at her reflection, instinctively covering her nakedness as best as she could with her arms…

It came from behind her.

THE PAINTING. The old painting that had been in the attic at The Burrow!

She turned around and stepped closer so that her nose was almost pressed against the brown,
lacquered canvas and she could smell the oil paint.

Draco was pelting down the hallway towards her, but she held her hand out to stop him advancing further.

'What is it?' he asked, but she turned and put her fingers to her lips.

She could feel the eyes boring into her – prurient, aggrieved… MADDENED.

'QUICK!' she urged Draco, 'we have to get out!'

They tugged their clothes on and she pushed him through the living-room door, hoping that he wasn't obvious, but knowing, in her heart, that the damage was already done… There was a sense now of somebody fast approaching. She could feel every footstep from beyond the front door in tandem with the thud of her heart beating inside her chest.

There was an envelope on the doormat. She squatted down and snatched it and followed Draco into the living-room, slamming the door behind her.

Yes. It was blocked off, once the door was closed… how long had she known this? How long had she intuited, deep down, that she felt safer in here? She didn't have the luxury of time to think about this, and the envelope in her hand contained something heavy, metallic.

'Shall I open that?' Draco asked, not giving her a choice as he swiped it from her hand, muttering spells with a concentrated expression.

He ripped open the envelope and his wand shone on a packet of papers and a set of house-keys. He scanned the document and then silently passed it to her, underlining what it said with his finger… These were the keys to her new house. The one that Ron had bought with Draco's money.

XXX

Hermione fell out of the fireplace, Draco close behind… Grey dawn light was streaking through the sitting-room windows at Shell Cottage, slicing through the gloom.

It took Hermione a moment to adjust her eyes.

There was a disheveled heap lying on the sofa… A tall man with a mop of frizzy hair, long, gangly limbs tethered together, a gag on his mouth and a blindfold strapped around his eyes.

Hermione inched closer, trying to make out who the hell it was…

She sensed Draco tensing behind her and followed his gaze to their left, to the armchair pushed into the corner of the room.

A shadowy figure was sitting there, holding a glass of firewhisky. Eyes glistening bright, staring out of the darkness.

'Hello, Ron,' Draco said in cool tones. 'I see you found Ruddy Krenzel…'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“MAD WORLD” by GARY JULES
“WALK THE WALK” by GAZ COOMBES

“MOUNTAIN/Топа (LIVE)” by ZEMFIRA

"IN THE HOUSE" by JOHN MURPHY (from ‘28 Days Later’)

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
'Well… this is awkward,' Ron said, grinning toothily.

There was a long silence, broken by Ruddy Krenzel stirring on the sofa. Ron slammed him with a brisk Petrificus Totalus.

'Guy's a right fucking wriggler,' he griped. He absentmindedly rubbed a deeply-scored scratch-mark on his chin.

'Maybe he wants the toilet or something?' Hermione suggested, looking from Ruddy to her husband. She could sense Draco's whiteness ballooning into something large and fierce beside her. *Keep a lid on it,* she silently begged.

She couldn't deal with this now… There were other things - serious, frightening - to worry about. How long had Ephraim been watching her? And now he knew she'd lied about her relationship with Draco…

And that strange rushing sensation… had it been real or imagined? Someone coming to get them, to take him away from her?

A thousand thoughts surged into her head in a single second… odd recollections, moments where she'd felt unsafe, times when Ephraim had made sneaky little side-comments.

Oh god, she thought. It's been a while.

'How did you track him down?' Draco asked Ron, affecting genuine curiosity.

'Easy-peasy...' Ron was bursting with bravura. 'Ruddy likes beer, betting and quidditch…' He clumsily struck these off on his fingers for emphasis, just missing by a beat each time.

*Shit.* He's pissed, Hermione thought glumly.

Ron looked at Draco then at his almost-empty glass of firewhisky and smacked his lips. 'Fancy a nightcap? Or…' he flicked his eyes to the dawn light beyond the window, 'or … breakfast I s'pose?'

'No… I'm – I'm good.'

Ron shrugged and levered himself up from the armchair. 'Well… gonna see if there's a drop more in the kitchen…' He swayed as he stood up and staggered out.

'You should go,' Hermione hissed under her breath.

Draco shook his head. 'I'm not leaving you alone.' He dragged his eyes to the open kitchen door.
There was a fair amount of clonking and the sound of a tap splashing violently. 'He's in no fit state…'

'Maybe we both go?' she suggested, eyeing up the fireplace. 'He might forget we were ever here.'

Draco laughed nervously.

There was a tumbling sound and a crash of glass. Hermione dashed into the kitchen.

Ron was lying on the floor, his legs twisted under his body, head lolling against the stove. A glass of firewhisky was dangling precariously from his hand, but the bottle had smashed and dirt-brown liquid was speedily shooting across the floor to greet her.

'Bloody hell, Ron,' Hermione muttered, throwing on the lights. But his total lack of coordination and sleepy eyes twisted at her insides all the same.

Draco and Hermione hoisted Ron off the floor and pushed him onto a chair at the kitchen table. Somehow Ron had kept his freshly brimming glass aloft throughout.

He raised his glass, eyes glazed. 'Cheers!' he drawled and then promptly slipped sideways, caught in the nick of time by Draco.

Draco sat down, hemming Ron in by jamming his chair against him, while Hermione briskly cleaned up the broken bottle of firewhisky.

'You're a fucking lucky cunt, Malfoy,' Ron slurred, nodding his head… He carried on nodding and his chin momentarily slid to his chest before his eyes pinged open. Hermione could feel Ron's eyes trailing her as she moved around the kitchen. 'Turned out a right beauty, didn't she? Bet you didn't think that when we were at school, eh?' He burst into a paroxysm of snorting giggles.

Hermione sighed. 'He needs to go and lie down.' But she didn't think there were many options – particularly with Krenzel hogging the sofa.

'You didn't answer my question!' Ron said to Draco, his face suddenly stern, offended. 'I said, she's beautiful, isn't she?' He blinked slowly and made a strange, smoothing gesture with his hand that Hermione instantly sensed had a cruder connotation that she couldn't quite fathom…

Draco didn't respond.

'You enjoying fucking her?' Ron continued, in surprisingly chirpy tones… He took a deep glug of his drink - but it spilled down his chin and he wavered, eyes rolling. Draco shot out an arm and kept him upright.

'I'm alright…' Ron said, shrugging him off peevishly. 'I'm – I'm good, mate…'

'Please, Ron, go to bed!' Hermione said helplessly, blinking back tears. This was such a humiliating mess they'd got into – but now wasn't the right time to talk to Ron. He was far too drunk.

'Ain't no fucking bed!' Ron spat. 'Came 'ere 'cos I've special cargo…' His eyes rolled towards the living-room door. 'Gonna break Harry's case wide open!' He gestured as he spoke, just missing hitting Draco. 'An' Bill's got loads of wards and crap… But no fucking beds! Nowhere to go!' His voice rose; bewildered, tremulous… His brow then furrowed as he looked from Hermione to Draco. 'Hang on… you came by Floo but with all Bill's special bloody protections there's only a few places you can Floo from… Can't 'ave been The Burrow, which means…' He slapped his head in realisation. 'Oh man!' His mouth twisted and his shoulders shook in hilarity, 'that's just plain
rude! Did you fuck in our bed?'

Draco looked down. There was a bright tension pulsing from him that was giving Hermione a headache.

'Sorry… didn't mean to offend you,' Ron said sardonically, his face alive with manic glee. 'I'll rephrase that for the benefit of this new dogs' bollocks, super-shiny, super-sensitive Malfoy – the fucking MALFOY 2.0. Have you MADE SWEET LOVE to my wife in my bed?'

Draco stared at him. But he was grey, all grey…

Hermione felt strangely disoriented, like she was watching a scene in a play rather than reality. She could barely believe that this was her own life, her own marriage… 'We can't talk about this now, Ron,' she reasoned, trying to control the tremor in her voice, 'because you're completely wasted and things might get said that—'

'MIGHT?' Ron exploded. 'SHOULD, more like… It's only right I know what the fuck's going on with my own wife.' He looked like he wanted to say more but stared at her instead, lips clamped tight like he was blockading a hurricane of words and noise behind his teeth… but then a soft, weary sigh seemed to shudder through his body.

'S okay, Hermione. I'm not gonna - gonna hurt you…' Ron's blue eyes tried to focus on his glass of firewhisky. It wobbled and sloshed and for a moment he was mesmerised. 'You're still my top girl,' he said wistfully. 'Can't just turn off a whole lifetime loving someone like that…' he tried to click his fingers, but missed.

'You - you need to go and lie down,' she said weakly.

Ron nodded slowly, absorbing this information and wondering what the hell to do with it.

'Get Bill,' Draco said to Hermione in terse tones. But she was reluctant to leave them alone.

'It'll be alright,' Draco assured her.

'Yeah, we'll be alright,' Ron said, his cheeks red and shiny, eyes watering. 'Malfoy 2.0 and I can have a wee chat; man-to-man… and he can finally tell me how many times he's fucked my wife in our bed…' He leered at Draco, eyes bulging fearsomely. 'Once? Twice?'

'Cut it out,' Draco snarled, levelling a furious glare at him.

'Fucking Merlin's balls, it's more, innit?' Ron sighed before bursting into convulsive giggles. 'Like fucking rabbits I bet!' He made a great show of sniffing in Hermione's direction. 'I can smell it off you, love… and you'll like this, Malfoy,' he suddenly switched focus, 'I reckon she loves fucking you. That last burst of crazy, before everything drops.'

Ron drained his drink and swiped his hand over his mouth.

A figure was at the door, half in shadow. Hermione's heart jumped.

For a moment she'd thought it was Anna, but it was Gwen, wrapping a red silk dressing-gown around herself and looking pale and cold.

'What's going on?' she asked, anxiously.

'Ron's a bit worse for wear,' Hermione explained, tearfully.
Ron raised his eyebrows at Gwen as she entered the kitchen and then hiccupped. 'A pretty lady in red...'

His words sent a shiver up Hermione's spine... Ephraim. The Quidditch Dinner. *I'd like to see you in Red. I think that colour would work well on you, Hermione.* Because of Anna? Or because he'd SEEN her, studying her reflection in her hallway mirror, wearing the jinxed red dress?

What else had he seen?

A cowering voice crept into her head as she ran to fetch Bill... *You. Naked...* Such a mistake, she thought, her heart plummeting.

Bill was already pulling on his dressing-gown and rubbing sleep from his eyes.

'Heard something smash and voices,' he muttered.

'Ron's VERY drunk,' Hermione hissed. 'And... things have got a bit...'

Bill paused. 'Draco here?... Right. We'll shove Ron into our room, he can sleep it off... I better warn Fleur.'

Hermione headed downstairs. She peered through the sitting-room door at the prone, silent figure of Ruddy Krenzel. He needed food, drink, a bathroom break.

Her eyes drifted up to the landscape picture above the fireplace. She'd felt moments of darkness in that room ... It didn't feel like Ephraim, though. Not here.

She had to warn Bill.

She approached the kitchen with some trepidation, but Ron had fallen asleep against Gwen, his head lying heavily on her arm. She looked at Hermione with large, soulful eyes.

'Poor Ron,' she sighed. 'Not quite the all-conquering hero he hoped to be.'

Bill and Draco moved Ron upstairs and Hermione heaved a sigh of relief.

Okay. HE KNEW. But all-out war had been averted for a few hours... which was a blessing, because she really didn't have the space in her head for *more* drama at this moment in time.

'You alright?' she asked Draco when he returned.

He seemed outwardly calm, but there was a broiling darkness scything through him.

'Was it that Spanish spell? The one where you push your soul or your consciousness into other places?' he asked abruptly.

'The painting?' She was a bit nonplussed at first, after everything that had just happened with Ron...

'Did Neville leave the book with Salvedra's spells in the study?'

'It's back at Hogwarts,' Bill said, joining them. 'Why do you ask?'

Hermione took a deep breath. Onto the next crisis, and the sun wasn't even fully up yet... 'We were at Wisteria Cottage.' Bill's mouth tightened and he turned away to make a pot of tea. But he was listening. 'I had a sense of something ... like we were being watched through a painting in the
hallway. It felt like Ephraim.'

Bill spun around. 'Cadair Idris? The one from the Burrow?'

She nodded.

'Prewett family heirloom. Horrid ole thing…'

Parvati came into the kitchen, followed by Fleur. Shell Cottage was stirring into life.

'Who's the man on the sofa?' Parvati whispered, looking perturbed.

Bill closed the door and explained.

'He can't stay there!' Fleur cried, pulling a vast cauldron onto the hob.

'Harry's moving him to Paris… though Ron wants to talk to him here first. He's got hold of veritaserum. Not sure where we keep him, though.'

Kai had come through the backdoor with a basketful of eggs for Fleur. 'What about the old tin mine?'

The hours rolled by and Krenzel was moved to the old mine office. Draco kept out of sight, but Hermione worried that despite being Langlocked and immobilised – Krenzel's ears had been working just fine...

All the while, she dreaded Ron waking up.

XXX

'You need to remove all your paintings,' Hermione and Draco told Bill and Fleur in the garden.

Neville had procured Encantadas Asturianas from Hogwarts and used a dictionary to translate the spell for 'Proyección Astral' – the ability to shift consciousness, via a medium, to a different physical location. Hermione noted this was another spell prefaced with Salvedra's 'Quis Es?'

Was that what had allowed Salvedra in? His passcode?

But Hermione believed Ephraim had already tracked her down at Wisteria Cottage before she'd used Visual Resonation on Salvedra's photo…

'Do you need colour-magic to do it?' Fleur asked.

'Don't know… What matters now is taking precautions to stop it happening. Avoid talking about anything important indoors.'

Bill's eyes turned downwards; sad and serious. 'This place was probably one of the most secure sites in England.'

Hermione sighed. 'I keep thinking over conversations we've had and where… when we talked about Seamus Finnigan's house, were we in the kitchen?'

Bill blinked rapidly and his crown of red hair framed his face like a halo. 'There's no pictures in there.'

'How about the study?' Draco asked.
'Just a family photo.'

'I think it's only paintings…' Hermione mused. Paintings uncluttered by people – with the exception perhaps of Salvedra, himself. It would be easier to sweep through big, broad landscapes, sneak through forests, crawl through undergrowth… Perhaps watch from cottages or castles? 'Like the painting in the sitting-room…'

'The gloomy landscape? Used to be in the kitchen... Originally belonged to my old Aunt who gave us the cottage,' Bill said contemplatively. 'I keep it for sentimental reasons.'

Hermione pondered this. 'Maybe it's older paintings … or a particular paint? Or canvas? We should compare MY painting with YOURS.' Her mind moved to Salvedra's haunting gallery in Atalaya. Yes. Landscapes. And big blank canvases… paintings still to be made and hung…

Fleur cringed in alarm. 'Hold on! If it's possible to project through these pictures, does that mean we're being watched ALL the time?'

'Doubt it,' Draco said, reassuringly. 'Whoever casts this spell can only watch through the picture in real-time - they're not walking around amongst us, invisible, split from themselves. And it's a difficult, time-consuming spell to perform.'

'A spell that can be learned,' Hermione said bitterly. 'Salvedra invented it, Ephraim probably acquired it… I wonder how they find who they're looking for?' The thought of Salvedra hunting for her through paintings made her shiver.

Draco’s eyes lit up. 'The fact this can be learned is a good thing! It means WE can learn it, too… There's plenty of old, landscape paintings in Malfoy Manor!'

'Could we not move the painting you're scared of to a different place and deliberately feed misinformation?' proposed Fleur.

'That's ingenious, actually,' Hermione smirked. 'We could talk loudly about how Ron's found Krenzel's long-lost twin brother!'

'That's not the only person they might know about…' Bill said, not able to share her mirth, 'The KIWIS…'

Fleur looked nauseous. 'And your son, Draco… They want him too.'

'The Leaky Cauldron… STACKS of old pictures in that place,' Bill added, in dark, ominous tones. 'Neville, Hannah… They're not protected.'

'Well, let's hope Seamus Finnigan comes good,' Draco said.

Harry and Henrik arrived that afternoon.

Harry had a backpack in his hand which Hermione eyed curiously… But he had something serious to say to Draco.

'Torquil showed up at my house in Paris,' Harry grimaced. 'All very friendly, but he clearly had one single objective: YOU.'

'They want me back,' Draco said glumly.
'Well, I don't know if you've seen Sub Rosa today – but there's a massive piece on the Wasps; going on about fraud and money-laundering,' Harry said. 'Don't think Torquil's too chuffed. Got the feeling they know it all came from you…'

Draco shrugged. 'Most of it could ONLY come from me… but I knew that when I gave Neville the details.'

'It won't just be that,' Henrik said. 'They need you for the business, Draco. Herb Healing's falling apart.'

'I suspect they're using this East European smuggling gang for anything dodgy - you need to press Krenzel on that, Harry. He'll know.'

'Well, Ron's having a go at him first and then I'll ship him out. In the meantime - we're going to Vietnam.'

'When?' Draco asked.

Harry hoisted his backpack over his shoulder. 'Now.'

Hermione shook her head. 'Maybe count me out…'

Ron would be wanting answers. He deserved them. And he'd be up soon. Fleur had taken him a cup of tea about twenty minutes ago and Hugo had already gone in to see him.

'Once we've got these kids out of Vietnam, where do they stay?' Draco asked.

'We'll cross that bridge when we come to it,' Harry said crisply. 'Right, Hermione.' He checked his watch. 'We've got seven minutes to make our first connection… and your fucked-up personal life will still be here when we get back. But we've got a job to do and having a woman with us would be handy.'

Hermione gazed at Draco and then she felt eyes on her back… from the house.

It was Ron, peering from the upstairs window. He was up.

'I'll just check on the kids and have a quick word with Gwen…'

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They portkeyed to the Magical Transit Terminus in Gent and made it with moments to spare onto a public portkey to Chisinau where they were the only travellers. The Portkey station was a shack in a field where an old woman checked their ticket stubs, then ladled a thick, green soup into small clay pots and urged them to drink.

'Well, it'd be rude not to…' Henrik muttered and drained the soup in one go. The old woman beamed, exposing toothless gums.

'Mult?' she asked, but Henrik rubbed his stomach, making out he was full. 'Tastes like grass,' he said in low tones.

The lady checked a clock on the table and pointed to an old car fender.

Moments later and they were being jostled to the ground amidst billowing dust as a horde of travellers surged towards a long trestle table set at the entrance to a vast, white tent.
Hermione whisked her head towards the alluring sound of a muezzin call, hovering ethereally in the sky above them. A rosy-pink and sandstone city stretched away in the distance, peppered with lofty blue domes and sparkling towers... the air was thick with chalk-white dust and the city looked to her like a vision in a dream.

She gawped at the price emblazoned on the ticket. 'Harry! This must have cost you a small fortune!'

'I'm rich. Don't worry about it.'

Their next port-of-call was Luang Prabang. They landed in a muddy field, adjacent to a river.

They'd finally caught up with the night...

A string of sampans passed downriver and a pleasure boat, decked in glowing orange lanterns, was moored close by. Excited chatter drifted towards them, blending with the violent buzz of insects. Some crashed into Hermione's face and hair and stuck to her skin, which was suddenly dripping with sweat. She batted them away and looked across the river to the town, nestling in a lush, forested crescent in a curve of the river.

'An array of ramshackle buildings with red-tiled roofs and the pitched gables of numerous temples peeked out from tree-lined byways. The town twinkled softly under the indigo sky sprinkled with a smattering of stars. A large, silver moon, like a ghostly galleon, shone luminously on a skein of mist weaving around a clump of distant hills.

'I'd love to come here properly,' Hermione said to Draco.

'It's beautiful,' he said. 'And Samarkand. Looked amazing! That's the problem with Portkey travel and Apparition... you're in, out - no time to appreciate.'

'Maybe Muggles get it right? Apart from flying, they travel slowly, so they see the world around them.'

'Over here!' Harry shouted. They followed him into the darkness. A small, pink light illuminated a tall, teak pillar. Harry fished through his pockets. 'Okay, so...' He pulled out a slip of paper. 'Everyone put their hands on the post.'

The next moment, Hermione felt the tug familiar to Portkey travel in her stomach and the strange, disorientating swirl that immediately succeeded it, but this time there was an additional kaleidoscopic twist that packed more punch than she felt ready for. It was a matter of seconds only... and then she felt firm ground beneath her feet; but she was still clutching onto the teak pillar, perspiring profusely and feeling shaken.

'Bugger, did it fail?' she gasped, eyes tightly shut. She could still see glinting eddies of colour floating around in her head. The sickness was dissipating, but less rapidly than she would have liked. A comforting white embraced her, gently peeling her hands from the pillar.

'You can let go now,' said Draco's voice close to her ear.

'It's a different transport system in these parts,' Harry grinned. 'Henrik and I got used to it in Thailand. You buy a special password – spelt phonetically for us dumb foreigners. Anyway. Welcome to Hội An.'
Hermione instantly loved Hồ Chí An. Even at this late hour, it was a buzzy, vibrant city, and as they ventured deep into the historic centre – criss-crossed by a network of slow, lazy canals, lit up by rows of brightly coloured paper lanterns – its narrow streets were thronged with tourists and locals, shopping and socialising at outside cafes and bars. They had to watch out for a constant stream of brashly decorated cyclos, ribbons and flags streaming from the riders' handlebars, and the occasional throaty thrum of a moped weaving through the crowds.

The town was a feast of Chinese-style wooden shopfronts and faded yellow buildings, some shabby and stained, often higgledy-piggledy, sometimes with multiple storeys of varying height and breadth piled incongruously on top of each other. These jaunty-looking buildings looked like they might topple over at any moment and seemed to lean into the street.

Harry and Draco stopped to check their mobiles.

'I'm not sure where we're meeting this Túyên,' Harry said grudgingly, '…had nothing back from Ziff.'

'I have…' Draco said, pulling a face at his phone. 'She can't get here until five o'clock in the morning!'

Harry looked crestfallen, but Henrik's eyes brightened. 'But this place is great, guys!' he chortled. 'And it's a hot night! We should have a couple of beers and chill!'

'She's booked us rooms, though, at a hotel - The Lazy Lotus.' Draco's mouth twitched in amusement. 'Somehow I doubt that was one of those swanky resorts we passed on the way in…'

'Well, let's find it and grab a beer,' Harry said huffily.

Draco mapped it on his phone and after a few sharp turns and dead ends and Henrik almost getting run over by a moped, they arrived at a tall, narrow building with crumbling white paintwork and teal-blue shutters.

Draco and Harry went into reception to see if Túyên had left a message.

'We have rooms,' Harry said, '…well, more like matchboxes, really.'

'And now for a cold beer!' Henrik declared, pointing to a two-storey wooden building close by, with ornate balustrades and a pretty front garden strewn with fairy lights.

'The Tom Tom Club,' he announced, reading a roughly-painted sign and rubbing his hands in excited anticipation.

The garden throbbed with the pleasant, pulsing beat of music and the burble of contented chatter. Diners were seated at long tables.

They passed through the garden into a dimly-lit bar playing vintage jazz and blues, furnished with tatty, lime-green sofas, rattan lamps and a pool table. A huge, richly-decorated ceiling-fan whirred relentlessly in the heart of the room.

Hermione stared up at the fan, relishing the cool, dappling sensation as the spinning air wicked the sweat from her skin.

The throbbing music they'd heard from the street echoed down a rickety wooden staircase and there was a muffled thump-thump on the ceiling from numerous dancing feet.
'Four beers! Big ones!' Henrik shouted at the barman.

'We haven't got any Vietnamese money,' Hermione moaned.

'Here you go,' Harry said, mushing a scrunch-up wad of notes from his pocket into her hand. 'Pocket money…'

'Harry…'

'I don't want to be the only one who has to go to the bar all night!' He bought beers and the barman poured long, sweet liqueurs adding a fizzing dash of soda spritz.

'I like it here,' Draco said, eyes sparkling. Hermione sat next to him on a bar stool while Harry and Henrik played pool, braying with laughter whenever one of them missed a shot. They repeatedly ordered beers and liqueurs... Harry was soon slurring.

'How many rooms do we have?' Hermione whispered to Draco.

A slow smile crept across his face. He teased his finger down her spine. 'I've thought of little else.'

'We should stay a while… for form's sake.'

'Sure,' he said, gently stroking away a curling loop of her hair that had fallen onto her face.

'We need to talk about Ron.'

Draco's face fell and his mood with it. 'I guess he's staying at Shell Cottage now.'

She gulped back her drink and signalled for two more. 'The truth is, Ron will be useful.'

Draco kept his eyes away from hers, distractedly peeling the label off his frosted beer-bottle on the bar. 'Yeah… I see that.'

'He still has proper access to the Ministry.'

'Did you tell him you were coming here?'

'There was no time…'

Draco sighed, despondently.

'You okay?' she breathed, placing her hand on his thigh.

'Fucking great,' he said gruffly. He stared at her, his eyes flint-grey and furious… and then shook his head. 'Look. Ignore me… I'm being a prick. It's not your fault.'

'I bet it is.'

He laughed. 'Well, yeah, maybe it is… All your fucking fault, beautiful.' He hooked his arm around her waist and pulled her close. 'Thing is – I'm in love with you. I want to be with you… but I don't know how to GET you. There's a load of crap you'd have to go through for that to actually happen... and there's nothing I can do to make that better. I'm the fucking interloper. The family-wrecker. And – a fucking, bloody Malfoy…'

He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth…
'...And now with Ron back,' he continued, 'it'll feel easier not to stir stuff up. Easier – possibly even right - to choose not to hurt people… I mean, Hugo. He's such a fucking happy little guy; the thought of that being crushed out of him is bloody horrendous! And Rose. God, she's amazing; so like you...’ He shook his head and chuckled, eyes distant as he thought about it. 'She's got that kind of hoity thing going on that you had when you were a kid!' He did a little impression; lips pinched, looking down his nose... 'It's fucking priceless! But... she's shyer, a bit vulnerable, really... More than you were I think. I mean, you came across as fucking fearless, even though it must have been hairy as hell going into a whole new world with cunts like me waiting to trip you up!' He chewed his lower lip thoughtfully… 'I'm not sure that would have been as easy for Rose...' A look of apologetic horror shaded his face. 'Jesus, I'm sorry, Hermione, you don't need me prattling on about your own bloody kids. Tell me to shut the fuck up if I'm crossing the line here. It's just that it's all,' he thumped his chest, 'all stuck in here, that's the thing.' He screwed-up his face and returned to fussing with his beer-bottle label.

Hermione didn't know what to say. She felt like crying inside, but she was also exploding with love for him.

'And… this is going to sound really pathetic – and a bit scary I'm afraid,' he warned, focusing hard on the beer-bottle, 'and I know I don't own you and I've no fucking right to feel like this, but… I'm terrified you're going to sleep with Ron again.' He flicked a glance at her; an ashamed glance. 'And that makes me want to kill him.' She shivered involuntarily. For a brief moment she'd sensed a distinct darkness clouding his brilliant white.

And then she recalled how she felt whenever Katya was mentioned… Like a cold, heavy rock being dragged through her gullet. 'Please don't! I couldn't bear having to visit you in Azkaban.' Her hand shot to her mouth… 'Oh god. I'm so sorry…' She cringed at her insensitivity… she'd clean forgotten Lucius's time in prison.

Draco looked at her, eyes shining. 'It's okay. And I promise… I won't kill your husband.' She laughed. 'Good... well I'm glad that's settled...' She edged closer. 'And I won't be sleeping with Ron, Draco... because – my marriage is over. And Ron knows it... Yes, there'll be talking, probably fighting, too. But I can't possibly feel how I feel about you and stay married! It's just not right... to anyone.'

He studied her for a moment and a smile curled his lips. He grabbed his drink and swigged it back. 'Another?' he asked.

'Yes... and let's talk about something else,' she said, her hand on his neck, not caring if this was 'flaunting'...

They talked and laughed and drank, giddy with freedom from their usual world… but there soon came a point when normal conversation was increasingly difficult - when Hermione found herself pausing mid-sentence to admire the liquid sheen that lingered on his lips when he drank and how his mouth moved when he spoke. She stared at his hands and his finger as it gently caressed the rim of the glass. His shirt was a little damp with sweat, a few buttons undone. His chest was a shadowy dip beneath the fabric. She longed to slip her hand under his shirt and feel the heat of his body.

They stopped talking and stared longingly at each her.
'God, I want to fuck you so hard,' he groaned in frustration.

She instantly felt a sharp twist of desire, knowing he would – that this was where tonight was headed. She thought about making love with him last night… and the other nights they'd been together… wonderful, ecstatic – addictive.

'Fuck it,' he snapped, 'let's at least dance.' He grabbed her hand and spun her off the stool. They fell up the stairs, giggling hysterically. The dance-floor was dark and hazy; shadowy forms moving to a sultry electric beat and a woman singing, a slight husk to her voice; alluring and provocative.

Holding her hand, Draco pulled her into the crowd of dancers and then wrapped her tightly in his arms and kissed her deeply.

She snaked her arms around his neck and kissed him back, not wanting to stop. Her heart was beating violently inside her chest and she wanted nothing more but this moment, the steamy heat and the wet warmth of his mouth, and for it to live on forever.

'Hey! More drinks!' Henrik exclaimed, nudging ice-cold beers against their cheeks. Hermione gasped and jumped back, almost spilling beer down Henrik.

'Henrik!' she exclaimed, 'You're a bloody winner.'

'Thanks!' Henrik chuckled, 'That's what you get for being a good sport.'

'You need a pick-me-up,' Harry said, slamming a small glass into her hand with a liquid that looked suspiciously like water. Hermione knocked it back.

It had a sharp, acidic flavour and she instantly shuddered as though hit by a wall of freezing water. 'That's – that's incredible,' she said. Her heart was racing and she felt a fresh surge of energy.

Henrik and Draco were already onto their second and laughing so hard they were falling into each other.

'You gonna dance with me, Hermione?' Harry asked. He'd knocked his glasses halfway off his nose.
when he'd tipped his head back to drain his drink.

Hermione held his hands and managed a twirl, but she could feel a strange ferocity in him and for some reason this made her feel unaccountably sad. She looked over to Draco who immediately captured her with his hand and whirled her away to dance again, holding her around the waist and spinning her and pushing his hands through her hair and bringing her mouth to meet his own…

'This is total FLAUNTING,' she murmured, luxuriating in the feel of his body hard against hers.

'Harry knows we're fucking, Hermione,' Draco said, his voice ringing through her with thrilling resonance.

'But he doesn't approve.'

'Does it matter?'

She opened her mouth to reply but was lost in his eyes.

The next moment they were running hand-in-hand across the dance floor, down the stairs, through the garden into the street.

'Which way's the hotel?' she asked; the street was empty apart from a few drunken dawdlers some distance away. Draco didn't reply, steering her into an alley next to the Tom Tom Club. Dance music blared through open windows; a backdrop to his harsh, grating breathing.

He slammed her against a wall and she could barely contain the moan that escaped her, as his hands slunk under her t-shirt and bra. She trembled at his firm touch on her bare skin. He caressed her breasts and her belly and her legs were shaking as he eased his fingers under the waistband of her jeans, deftly undoing the buttons, and slid his hand into her knickers.

He groaned when he touched her. 'I've wanted to do this to you all night,' he growled, and he tilted her face back to look at him. She rapidly felt herself losing control, unable to defend herself against the heated sensations his fingers were arousing in her.

'Too much…' she gasped. 'We need the hotel…'

She tried to remember where it was and shivered as a faint breeze seemed to envelop her. A light smattering of rain danced off her arms and face and his mouth was gnawing at her neck and ear and then kissing her with bruising passion.

The rain was suddenly thrashing down hard, bouncing off the ground; thousands of leaping raindrops, illuminated like myriad fireflies in the glaring pool of light from a streetlamp. She could feel her body tightening; a blast of electrifying white…

'Not here – not in the street,' she panted, almost flinching as his fingers continued to delve and tease; but it was too late, inescapable, and she came hard with a sharp, guttural cry, which she buried into his neck and then his mouth, revelling in the slow, sinuous movement of his tongue against hers. She quivered uncontrollably as the cool rain slid down their faces and hair and drenched their clothes.

Voices approached from the other end of the alley. Draco stumbled backwards and they tottered out of the shadows and into the road.

Hermione spotted the sign for The Lazy Lotus, dangling in the breeze, dripping and swaying. They ran at breakneck speed, grabbing a key from reception, and took the stairs two at a time to the top
floor bedroom, collapsing onto the bed with a loud crash, frantically pulling clothes off, desperate to feel their naked skin against each other.

There was a raw, adrenaline aggression to their love-making. She felt an almost primal urge to inflict sensation on him: his shocked gasp when she made love to him with a hard, merciless brutality she didn't know she possessed, smashing him into the headboard, the metallic tang of his blood seeping into her mouth when she nipped his lip … captivated and excited her. And she could sense it was the same for him with her...

They were lost and wild in this strange darkened room in a strange place, far away from their everyday lives, their sweat-soaked faces and bodies illuminated by the faint glow of a streetlamp outside the window. They writhed and thrashed and pounded against each other with a trance-like, devastating passion, unashamedly loud in their ecstasy. The rest of the world had fallen away; and all that existed was the present, the moment, and each other. Her heart hurt with the exquisite joy and intensity of it all.

'Perfect,' she whispered, already nostalgic, as she lay against him much later, bodies sore but sated, legs intertwined, basking in their warm, white glow.

He grinned and kissed her head and her eyelids and hugged her close. 'You're a fucking beast, Granger,' he murmured. 'Who'd have thought it?'

She laughed… but it was buried deep inside of her… and his fingers gently rubbed her back and her neck and the soft warmth of sleep gradually overpowered her.

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There was a loud walloping sound, drilling repeatedly in her head. Ceaseless. Angry.

Her heart-rate soared and she sat up with a gasp. Draco sat up too, eyes wide, breathing heavily.

'Shit,' he whistled softly.

They both jumped out of bed and pulled on the clothes they had thrown around the tiny matchbox-sized room – a room with what looked like thin, cardboard walls and the window opened wide onto the canal below, a moth-eaten, stained lace curtain twisting in the breeze. Pale dawn was slowly streaking across the sky, but the streetlights were still blaring orange and insects batted and fluttered in their pools of light.

'Did either of us remember to cast a Muffliato?' Draco asked. They looked at each other guiltily and yet couldn't stop smiling.

A second round of knocking on the door shook them back to reality. 'Don't forget your wand,' Draco said, pointing to a bedside table where she'd placed her necklace.

Harry was waiting outside; tired, wan and thoroughly fed-up. 'Tuyên's waiting in reception.'

'Hope a café's open; I'm starving,' Draco said, pulling on his boots. His hair was sticking up in all directions. Hermione automatically smoothed it down and caught Harry's eye. He struggled to maintain eye-contact and shuffled wearily downstairs.

Henrik came out from the room opposite. His face was pink and puffy, hair damp and knotted.

'You two fuck very loud,' he said, baldly.
Hermione was already inclined to like Tuyễn when she suggested they stop for a bowl of phở from a wooden lean-to on the outskirts of Hôi An.

They sat in silence on rough-hewn stools, straw and dust at their feet, gazing out onto fields. A flock of chattering black birds swooped and dove into the fields then shot high into the sky as one, before wheeling around and dipping behind a line of trees on the crest of a low-slung hill in the distance.

Farm workers, many wearing cone-shaped hats made from bamboo, hastened past – on foot, by moped, one even on a donkey – waving, smiling. Hermione timidly waved back.

Tuyễn chatted amiably to the stall-keeper – a wizened old man, his brown arms pitted and scarred and one of his eyes glassy and sightless. A smile lit up her round face and her voice was fast and lilting.

'Did you have a very excellent time in beautiful Hôi An?' Tuyễn asked as they greedily gobbled their bowls of phở. There was no point expecting common courtesy from half-drunk hungry men, Hermione thought with a sigh, even though her head was throbbing and her tongue felt furred. 'It's a wonderful place.'

Tuyễn beamed proudly, exposing two prominent front teeth - something that only served to endear her more.

'I am most sorry you could not travel direct to Kon Kotứ – we are needing special permission to travel there and escort.' She grinned broadly. 'Which is me.'

'Is it far?' Hermione asked.

'A village in the Highlands, most famous for our kind. We travel there by the Chuyên Đồng Bài,' Tuyễn explained.

'The travelling post?'

'A most efficient form of transporting.'

Hermione recalled Harry's slip of paper in Luang Prabang. 'How does someone get hold of a pass?'

'Is usual to buy from Thầy Pháp - that is magical leader in each place. It is I who ask permission for you to come for these children.'

'They're at Kon Kotứ?' asked Harry.

Tuyễn nodded demurely. 'The gentleman with whom I have been discussing … he's not here?'

'Just us,' Henrik said gruffly, wiping broth from his mouth with the back of his hand.

Tuyễn cocked her head to study him. 'You have dryness of throat and chest… I have ointment should you desire?'

Henrik couldn't disguise his revulsion when Tuyễn produced a glass jar stuffed with a greyish jelly that looked like molten slugs.

'This from herb most important to our magic here – is the Ngài. Every village has a Thầy Cúng - very learned in ways of the Ngài; to heal maladies and the soul…' she gazed at Hermione, 'this is
something we are all needing from time to time.’

Henrik squeezed the lid off the jar with a brisk flick of his wrist. He gingerly sniffed its contents and quickly returned the jar to Tuyễn with an apologetic smile. ‘My woes are more self-inflicted,’ he admitted hoarsely.

‘You may use, too,’ Tuyễn said coyly to Hermione. ‘Your heart is hurting.’

‘Oh?’ Hermione said, and her hand flew to her chest.

Tuyễn’s eyes danced good-humouredly. ‘I mean, inside.’

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A young man with a goat was embracing the travelling post, chanting and singing.

They waited in line.

‘At Kon Kotứ, we see Bảo, the Thầy Pháp… but we will move with utmost stealth. There are those there who fear us…’ Tuyễn said sadly. ‘Bảo guards the children. He is good man.’

‘Was Gilgad based in Kon Kotứ?’ Harry asked.

‘No. Huế,’ Draco answered. ‘The main plant closed last year.’

‘Most correct,’ Tuyễn said, nodding in respectful acquiescence. ‘A great many people have lost their work.’

The man and his goat finally vanished with a resounding ‘pop.’

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Kon Kotứ was a small, straggling village, comprising a motley collection of traditional, gabled cottages constructed from bamboo and rushes, amidst a scrubby, ochre-coloured landscape. The scant roads running through the village were unpaved. It felt like they, and a handful of clucking chickens running amok, were the only living souls here.

A giant, inflated, curving sail woven from rushes was at the heart of the village. ‘That is the Rong,’ Tuyễn said, following the direction of Hermione’s curious gaze. ‘Important place to meet and buy things.’

They walked away from the village for five minutes along a featureless path. Orange dust soon coated Hermione’s trainers. They passed acres of glossy, green coffee plants, peppered with the bent shapes of workers wearing the conical hats they’d seen in HỘi An.

Tuyễn led them towards a shallow bank, festooned with green splats of foliage, stretching towards a distant range of hills.

‘Are you from Kon Kotứ?’ Hermione asked.

‘Near. We are Bahnar people, but many tribes. Hoàng, the baby, she is Jolồng.’

Hermione noticed Harry was flagging, kicking up balls of dust as he trudged wearily behind Tuyễn. She felt guilty and embarrassed for keeping him awake last night...

‘You told Ziff there are three children,’ Draco said.
Tuyền turned sad eyes in his direction. 'Most have no family. Parents of Vithu came from Cambodia,' Tuyền continued. 'He has six years and is very strong…'

'And the other?' Draco asked.

'Tiên has no mother. She's but two. She must leave this place.'

Tuyền stopped by a clump of white mulberry bushes guarding the entrance to a tunnel cut into the red clay bank.

'Bảo here.'

Hermione and Draco exchanged worried looks. The tunnel was low, narrow and roughly-hewn into the claggy soil, but they followed Tuyền inside.

Tuyền lit a lantern which swung as she walked, casting them as large, looming shadows against the deep red walls. Hermione could feel the dust kicked up by Tuyền ahead lining her throat, coating her hair and clothes. Harry fell into a prolonged bout of coughing behind.

The tunnel broadened into a wide rocky cavern where a smouldering fire lit up the crouching figure of a broad man in an orange robe and a second man, face etched and lined with age, hunched broodily in a dark corner. The broad man stood up to greet them, a grim look on his face.

Tuyền handled the introductions and then rattled off a series of curt statements in quickfire dialect. Bảo looked sullen, replying with a couple of clipped, pithy ripostes that infuriated Tuyền.

'Looks like trouble,' Harry muttered, surreptitiously sneaking his wand into his hand.

The man hunched in the corner jabbed an extended finger at Harry, squealing in rowdy indignation.

'We should back out of here…' Draco said under his breath.

Tuyền turned to them, tears springing from her eyes. 'It is with gravest regrets that I must report the Thầy Pháp has passed Vithu and Tiên to the Thầy Đồng Họ in Huế… A most powerful man…'

Bảo began shouting again, gesticulating wildly… His eyes were dark with fury, but Hermione felt he was actually angrier with himself. The man in the corner was staring at them with brazen malice. This was HIS fault…

'The Thầy Bói, Khăn – it is he who is with us…' Tuyền's eyes flicked to the hawkish old man. 'His gift is foretelling the future. He saw company-soldiers arrive to Kon Kotứ if we take the children.' Tuyền's voice quavered with emotion as she spoke.

'Bollocks. He's been bought,' Draco hissed. 'Let's take the kid and go… Harry, cover the old guy.'

Harry immediately targeted his wand at the old man, Khăn, while Draco stepped purposefully towards Bảo.

Bảo was brave, though. He prodded Draco's chest with a long, bony finger. Draco winced, but stood his ground.

But then the incandescent Thầy Pháp felt Draco's wand poking his stomach. His lip curled in disgust and he looked for a moment like he might spit in Draco's face.

'Give us the child,' Draco insisted, his voice ringing around the cavern, laced with his finest
rendition of cold hauteur. Eddies of dust shimmied from the ceiling, alighting on Bào's balding pate.

Bào's hand darted to his head and he inadvertently glanced right. Henrik hurried into a shadowy alcove, returning with a small, raggedy bundle.

'Okay, everybody move out,' Draco said, inching backwards up the tunnel. They kept their eyes firmly trained on Bào and Khăn – who was now standing and watching them with narrowed eyes – until they rounded a bend and marched rapidly towards the exit.

Harry loitered behind, wand outstretched, and then ran towards them the moment they broke out into the open air.

Hermione had never been so glad to see grey, clouded skies.

As soon as they were at a safe distance, they paused to draw breath.

'We need this Chuqen Hong or whatever it was you call it,' Henrik panted, clutching the baby. 'Fast.'

Tuyềnnen was twisting her hands in anguish. 'You won't try to get the others?' she pleaded. 'The,Thây Đong Họ will return them to the company-soldiers.'

'Of course we're getting the others!' Draco said brusquely.

The bundle of rags in Henrik's arms was stirring, and a tiny, angry fist was punching the air. Henrik rocked and shushed her. 'She's hungry!' 

Harry was already pulling a bottle from his backpack. He muttered a charm shaking the bottle to produce fresh milk.

'Wow, Harry, that's very organised,' Hermione said, reaching for the child.

But Henrik looked mortally offended.

'Have you ever fed a baby?' Harry asked impatiently.

Henrik was determined to try and dutifully held the bottle for the baby, frowning in deep concentration, as they trotted back to the travelling post.

'Will we see the… head magic guy in Huế?' Hermione asked Tuyềnnen.

She shook her head vehemently. 'Quàn not good man,' she muttered. 'But I have a friend who maybe help?'

XXX

'What time is it in London?' Draco asked, brandishing his phone.

'Middle of the night,' Harry grunted. He was slumped on a stone bench, arms folded, eyes closed.

'Ziff won't care. He's like an owl!' Henrik claimed.

Since arriving in Huế, Hermione had taken charge of Baby Hoàng. She was a thin, scrawny little thing.
Hermione was amazed at Harry's preparedness for this mission - producing a disposable nappy when required. He'd always been good with children, as had Ron, especially with Rose. He'd been less involved with Hugo as a baby because of his immersion in the infamous Angelotti trial - which Draco had been part of.

Draco walked away from the group, phone slapped to his ear. He was talking; Ziff was, indeed, a night-owl.

Tuyễn was taking a long time returning from Huế. The brief glimpse Hermione had of Huế suggested a busy city, bifurcated by a wide river, clogged with boats, bridges heaving with cars and mopeds and cyclos and streams of people hurrying to work. Cyclos transported them along the river-bank - affording tantalising views of magnificent palace and temple ruins - before whizzing beyond the traffic-clogged city into clean air and bright green vegetation.

They'd alighted at a scrubby spot beside a dull sage-green lake, its banks overrun with jungly palm and rubber trees. It was unbearably hot, despite overcast skies and a weak, pale disc of a sun occasionally peering between the clouds.

'Should one of us head home with the baby?' Hermione asked Harry and Henrik.

Draco returned. 'No response,' he said with an unhappy sigh to Harry. 'But I've updated Ziff…'

'What do you think we do?' Harry said.

Hermione was about to ask more but Hoàng suddenly started wailing; her tiny hands beat at the air in frustration.

Hermione couldn't bear babies crying… She patted her back in a desperate attempt to placate her.

Henrik beamed down at Hoàng, although Hermione feared his shaggy appearance might distress Hoàng further, but the baby's shrieks morphed into soft, gurgling hiccups and her hand padded Henrik's beard.

Hermione was stunned to hear a stream of playful, cooing babble – in Danish – flowing from Henrik's mouth. 'I'll take this,' Henrik asserted, hoisting the raggy bundle into his arms and walking around with her, twittering and cooing.

Tuyễn returned on a cyclo, accompanied by a young man. 'Meet my friend, Giang,' she explained. 'He lead us to other children.'

Giang nodded gravely to each of them.

'Giang says we move fast as Khán and Bão tell Quân we come here,' Tuyễn warned. She raised an eyebrow at Giang who led them down a rough track, before tripping down a bank to a pathway circumnavigating the lake.

It was hot work and Hermione's hangover was fast returning. The lake was small. A surprising amount of litter clogged its dark, murky waters. But when she raised her eyes to its far end she was amazed to see a huge metallic dragon; coppery and fierce, with a long looping grey and turquoise tail, set apart on its own island - surrounded by walkways and a dilapidated rollercoaster... A deserted theme-park.

'Many tourists come here,' Giang said in a gentle, lispy voice. His eyes fell to the floor after speaking. 'But not since long time.'
'Not good place when nightfall... Junkies,' Tuyênn added.

'Well, we plan to be safely back in England by tonight,' Harry groused.

'Gilgad's facility wasn't here,' Draco said pointedly.

'No, but children brought here for – for wellness testing,' Tuyênn explained. Giang mumbled in Vietnamese. 'Giang say Quân come; must move quick.'

They followed Tuyênn's slight figure over a dilapidated walkway crossing an abandoned swimming-pool, dark green with algae. The walkway passed by a broken blue water-chute and then joined another walkway spanning a further stretch of lake. Many of the wooden steps were missing or hanging precariously.

Henrik struggled to maintain a safe footing while holding the baby. 'Anyone got a scarf or a shawl?'

It seemed unlikely in this hot, sticky weather - but Giang unfurled a long yellow cumberband encircling his black smock-dress which Henrik used to snugly secure baby Hoàng.

As they approached the dragon island, an eerie silence fell on the group. Up close, the giant metal dragon was no less impressive, but it was in a serious state of disrepair: tiles hanging off, joints rusted, smothered in graffiti. The entrance took them through the gaping jaws of the dragon.

Giang cast a furtive glance back to the banks of the lake. 'Quân...' he whimpered, eyes wide with panic.

A tall man decked in heavy, ornamental dress, flanked by three men, was watching them enter the dragon from the far side of the lake. He strode purposefully to the end of the walkway they'd just crossed. He lifted up a golden staff, slamming it onto the ground. Hermione felt her insides lurch and her head spin. She tumbled onto the floor, surprised to see both Draco and Tuyênn had joined her.

'We must move fast,' Tuyênn gasped in fright.

Henrik was gripping the long tooth of the dragon, a fierce grimace on his face. 'Stay down!' he shouted.

This time the entire Dragon structure shook and a few loose tiles, masquerading as scales, crashed to the floor. Harry crouched behind a wall and targeted Quân with a fireball. It erupted into the parched-looking rubber trees behind Quân and his men, throwing them into momentary confusion. Two men shot off in another direction and looked to be circling the lake. Was there another entrance?

Quân pounded his stake into the ground with even more ferocity.

A shockwave, shimmering in myriad colours surged across the walkway. Hermione focused hard, hoping to ping it back, but was too late... 'Run!' Draco shouted.

The walkway exploded into a blurred mess of flying wood and broken metal and it felt like the vast, metal dragon was rocking. It heaved and creaked and there was an unbearable grinding sound, as though the entire, ruined structure was being unscrewed.

Metal staircases ran in various directions from a small, open landing. Tuyênn was on the verge of tears, gabbling agitatedly to Giang. These were clearly peaceful magical folk, happy to dabble with
their herbs and their cures for various ailments – nothing like this.

'A couple of us should defend the dragon,' Hermione said, raising her voice over the violent scraping of metal… 'Harry … and either myself or Draco.'

'Possible there are company-soldiers below,' Tuyễn said, quickly comprehending the situation.

'INCOMING!' Henrik yelled, steadying himself in preparation for yet another of Quân's resounding bolts of energy. The metal dragon screeched and sizzled with a stomach-churning smell of burnt metal.

'Tuyễn, does Giang know where these children are kept?' Draco barked.

She nodded mutely.

'Right, Henrik, pass little sleeping beauty to Tuyễn… Tuyễn, take shelter … there's a gap in the wall over there. Henrik, you go with Hermione and Giang to get the children… Use your gun if necessary; these company-soldiers might well be Muggles…' He threw Hermione a regretful look.

'Ready?' said Harry.

'Too fucking right. I'll take the other side of the dragon - you cover me and try to take out this total thundercunt in the silly costume.'

Henrik finished fastening the cumberband around Tuyễn.

'Come,' Giang said urgently, heading down a dark staircase.

'Hermione…' Draco said.

'No time for that!' Harry shouted, pulling him out of sight as another of Quân's shockwaves pummelled the building.

Hermione was too scared to register how she was feeling. All she knew was she must follow Giang, who she'd only met half an hour ago, down, down, down into the bowels of the dragon. A dank, fetid darkness gradually swallowed them up. Giang plucked a white handkerchief from his pocket and waved it. A beam of bright light illuminated their surroundings … a damp-walled cavern carved from black stone absorbing the light, but Giang's light was too powerful and resisted the temptation to seep into the walls and die away.

The floor felt strangely spongy and was covered in broken bottles, plastic bags and thousands of fish bones crunching underfoot. It felt oddly alive… For a brief, crazy moment, it felt to Hermione like they were trespassing through the belly of a real, live monstrous dragon.

'This is some fucking crazy shit,' Henrik muttered. His face was awash with sweat, glistening in the light from Giang's handkerchief.

A bolted iron door confronted them, blocking their path.

'In there,' whispered Giang.

At that same moment, a huge thunderous clattering raged above them and shook the foundations of the dragon. Maybe the peculiar, unscrewing sensation was real? The black stone walls seemed to be sliding, slipping… and the floor beneath them shuddered.

Hermione was momentarily immobilised by a rush of raw fear. Draco, Harry… they must have felt
that shockwave even more powerfully.

She steadied herself and pointed her wand at the door, summoning her magic with a deep breath. 'REDUCTO!' she screamed… but the door barely juddered.

She tried again, but the door refused to budge.

'Bombarda!' she screeched, but the spell bounced off the doors, throwing her off-balance.

She refused to be undone by this, she decided. She closed her eyes and called her colour, her purple - a rich, throbbing purple - to mind, until it filled every nook and cranny of her being… And waited for another violent shockwave to hit…

She didn't have to wait long. The walls trembled and the floor quivered and a crashing boom was heard from overhead, followed by another – it was a firefight, and closer than before.

'EXPULSO!' she immediately shouted, hoping to harness the energy from both her colour-magic and the blast - and the iron doors shook and fell backwards, landing with a loud, echoing thwack onto the floor.

'Stay close!' she cried, jumping into the room beyond, her lit wand held aloft. They found themselves in a broad passageway, but she could sense now that they were close to their targets… and that they were not alone…

A dark figure flung himself onto the ground in front of them from the ceiling. He raised his arm with what looked like a scimitar in his hand and seemed ready to slice Hermione in two, but she knocked him back with a powerful 'Stupefy' – although not as powerful as she had hoped, because he leapt up and charged again. This time, Henrik was ready, and a resounding report rang around the room as he fired his gun, catapulting their attacker backwards with such force he crashed into the wall with a sickening thump.

The thin, reedy sound of a crying child emanated from a room to their right.

'This way!' Giang shouted, but he was grabbed from behind and thrown to the ground by another dark-clad figure. His luminous handkerchief was snuffed out and the light from Hermione's wand wasn't enough to penetrate the pitch-black darkness that suddenly surrounded him.

Hermione could still hear the muted sobs of the child to her right, but she felt frozen, because she had no idea where the dark figure was lurking. And her Lumos was only strong enough to light up herself.

Her magic had been muted. How could this be?

She whispered Nox, snuffing out the light from her wand. If anything, its tiny, petering light was acting as a beacon, exposing her position.

Luckily, she could sense Henrik's sea-green a few feet behind. She inched towards him and muttered a Muffliato to disguise their footsteps. She placed a hand on Henrik's arm and tugged him forwards.

But the moment they moved, the dark figure was in front of them, teeth glinting in the darkness and something else… something in his hand.

Hermione realised her Muffliato had failed… She wanted to scream in exasperation. Where had she experienced this before? But her memory failed her; lost in a haze.
The child was still crying...

'We have to run!' she shrieked to Henrik. They swerved the advancing figure, heading towards the tiny sobs, like a mewling kitten...

But Henrik had other ideas. He fired his gun – once, then twice – but the dark figure then dodged out of sight.

Hermione continued onwards; she could still hear Henrik's laboured breathing – but then he cried out, a shriek of pain followed by a terrible gurgling sound, like he was drowning. There was a crunching thud and she couldn't hear him anymore... although she could still sense a whiff of his soft sea-green...

Where was he? she thought feverishly… but she couldn't even see where he'd landed in this dense darkness!

She had to move on, alone... Find the children.

She scurried into the blackness, desperately trying to summon a Lumos again - but her wand puttered and faded.

The child's crying echoed from one dark wall to the next… that, and a dripping sound, getting louder and louder.

She heard an uncanny shuffling, not too far behind her. Her shadowy companion…

A silvery dart sliced the air a few millimetres from her left ear. Then another, and another to her right – and a further dart slashed through her hair.

She instinctively ducked and crawled along the slimy, spongey floor. An oily filthy smell sent her stomach churning – and she knew she had to vomit. Once she started, she couldn't stop… hot, alcoholic-tinged liquid projected uncontrollably from her mouth, soaking her clothes, smearing her face, saturating her hair… and she now knew he was coming, like a sharp gust of wind, and his hands were upon her, pulling her head backwards by her hair, his knee jabbing painfully into her back.

She spied the glint of metal in his hand and frantically tried to summon her powers; but she was empty and cold. Without her magic she would die… but she didn't want to die. She couldn't let that happen… Fleeting images of her children, of Draco, of Harry, of Ron’s smile tumbled through her mind.

She had only one source of remaining power to draw on...

A blazing burst of purple pulsed and throbbed, filling her until she thought she might explode with the power of it… and with a savagery and strength that stunned her, she bucked backwards, throwing her attacker off-guard, turned and flipped her legs into his face, then kicked his hand holding the knife. They both chased after the weapon. She squeaked in panic as he piled on top of her, but the knife was already in her grasp. He reached to grab it, compressing and twisting her wrist so that she howled in pain, shocked at the sound of her bones cracking.

She smashed her wand repeatedly into his face. The shadow-man momentarily loosened his grip, affording her a split second to slash the knife across his body, ignoring the sickening pain in her wrist. He roared furiously, tossing her backwards so that her head smashed against the floor and then he knelt on her broken wrist until she was choking and crying and relinquished the knife.
He loomed above her, his fist poised to pulverize her, knife ready to plunge - but she clenched her teeth, swiftly trying to conjure something… a snake, a sword, ANYTHING, using colour-magic… but there wasn't enough light, she realised dimly. It needed light!

An image of Anna popped into her head from nowhere… Followed by Melissa. Yes! That was it... her only hope.

She summoned a piercing, blinding white light mingled with acute, bone-aching pain into her head - and drove it, with venomous, pulsating power from her mind into his.

The shadow-man reeled backwards, babbling in confusion. She closed her eyes - embracing the blackness - and continued to push… pain and light - searing, dazzling, raging into his mind. She could feel his sense of self curdling, crying out for relief.

She opened her eyes... A flashing glint of metal carved through the darkness and was swallowed into the black, and the shadow man slumped to the floor, flailing and jerking - and then stillness.

… Was he dead? What had happened?

But she didn't have time to think; the child was still crying. It needed her.

Hermione painfully pulled herself upright and moved towards a room, faintly lit by a dim blue light. A child, about Hugo's age – Vithu, she presumed - was leashed to a bed. He was unconscious; sleeping, not dead, she begged…

A toddler was standing in a cot in the corner, holding the rails, bawling inconsolably.

The room was lined with dark, misshapen objects and an array of jars and bottles emanating a bright, neon blue; some smashed, contents dripping. A luminous blue liquid was oozing towards her, exuding a faintly glowing miasma.

She moved deeper into the room but could feel a heavy, clotting sensation in her chest, as though her lungs were turning to stone - a sense that life was being squeezed out of her.

It struck her with a horrible, fearful certainty that Henrik and herself – the Muggle and the Muggle-born - had been the worst people to come down here. This adventure had only ever had one end for them both.

She could sense it now… a bitter blue tang. The reason why her magic had failed.

Dark Flux…

Hot tears erupted onto Hermione's cheeks… The building still rocked with cataclysmic shudders and the piercing metallic screech was never-ceasing and a dreary blackness was descending rapidly through her, cell by cell.

The toddler reached out, desperation on her face. And Hermione knew what she had to do… She had no power to resist the Anteractivity that the Dark Flux would soon inflict on her fragile body, but she maybe had a few short minutes to resist if she drew on every remaining dreg of energy, pushing the pulsing purple inside of her to its furthest limits.

She frantically looked for some way to release Vithu. She scanned the sideboards, sharply aware that the lick of purple in her mind's eye was already curling at the edges, being withered by the Dark Flux attacking her respiratory system. She grabbed a shard of broken glass and with every ounce of remaining strength slashed at the binds pinning the boy to the bed. His eyes batted open...
and he gasped.

There was a distinct crushing sensation in her head now; she felt faint and weary and she realised that she couldn't remember the last time she'd breathed.

But she continued to loosen the bindings, even though her limbs were increasingly numb and leaden… and as the malevolent swirl of blue fought its way irrevocably into her mind, puncturing her defences, the ties slipped away and she hauled the boy off the bed, dragging him towards the cot.

I need to breathe, I need to breathe, she was thinking … but she was still fighting the blue, with all her might, although it was mixing, melding, staining her purple into a forlorn, blackish indigo – like the night sky in Luang Prabang… and the memory of the lanterns on the river, swirled dreamily into view… and Draco's warm white standing beside her…

She could live, she could do this… even though her feet felt lumpen and heavy; fighting through thick, grey sludge. The cot was close, a few inches at most – but it felt like the steepest hike on the highest mountain… The boy slouched heavily against her, his feet scraping on the floor – and the eyes of the toddler were wide, her mouth open and screaming soundlessly, because there was no sound… nothing but stillness and her heart was booming thunderously in her ears… She saw an arm extend towards the child and pull it from the cot, and the child's face wet with tears was against her own. And for a brief moment its cries echoed back into her head.

She turned to go but could see nothing but bright blue haze – like light at the bottom of a swimming pool.

There was a blaze of white approaching, coming faster. She trudged towards it, except each foot was glued to the floor…

'Tiề'n!' someone cried. 'Tiề'n!'

The child in her arms was stretching into the blue … and the lights were blinding bright. So very, very bright. And a new colour was adding to her confusion – a vicious, vivid lick of scarlet.

Cloaked, red figures standing with spears of white light…

She shuffled forwards and opened her mouth to exhale, but there was no more air. And then she saw Draco pushing through the red cloaks, knocking them aside - and he was shouting, but she couldn't hear him, because the blue had come and then the black… and then she fell into his arms.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:
"I PUT A SPELL ON YOU" by NINA SIMONE

"NIGHT & DAY" by ELLA FITZGERALD

"THE AGONY & THE ECSTASY" by HIGH CONTRAST

"BABY WHEN THE LIGHTS GO OUT" by DAVID GUETTA (ft: Cozi)

"LOVE LIKE BLOOD" by KILLING JOKE

"ANOTHER DAY" by THIS MORTAL COIL
Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Chapter Summary

Anna's fate, a cruel curse and clues about Katya...

ACT 6 : 'When sorrows come, they come not single spies. But in battalions!'

49. King of Infinite Space

Hermione woke up in a windowless room. Two bunk-beds, adorned with crimson blankets, faced each other. She was lying on the bottom level of one bunk-bed and Harry was sitting on the bed opposite. The gangway between them was so narrow, his knees were hitting her mattress.

'Where am I?'

'Geneva; with Los Rojos. You've lost a day sleeping… How do you feel?'

She looked at her right wrist, swaddled in a pink bandage. 'This bandage could do with loosening. It's cutting off my circulation.'

Harry tapped it with his wand and she sighed with relief. 'Your wrist was broken. Los Rojos have an amazing healer, Leila. She fixed you up.'

As the fog of sleep gradually cleared, the events from Vietnam flashed through Hermione's mind – a dark and disturbing montage. She recalled with horrible clarity the thud as Henrik fell to the floor.

'Henrik?'

'Alive – and recovering, thankfully…' Hermione felt like weeping with relief. 'He's at Shell Cottage now.'

'And the children?'

'Safe. Tuyết, too… she's Tiên's aunt as it turns out. But her friend, Giang, didn't make it.'

'I feared that,' Hermione sighed.

'Brave bloke… We wouldn't have found those kids without him.'

They fell into silence.

'One good thing…' Harry smiled wanly, 'the Irish safe house came through. Most have moved already, but Ron and the kids have stayed on.'

'And Scorpius?'

'Well… Bill wants Scorpius in Ireland, but your kids want him at Shell Cottage. Depends on Draco, I suppose… Should warn you. He's in a right bloody mess; blaming himself for suggesting you and Henrik rescued the kids.'
'He wasn't to know there'd be Dark Flux… None of us did!'

Harry groaned. 'Exactly!... We were too busy being bombarded by that bloody Dong Quan Wong Dickweed to think straight.'

'Where is he?'

The door opened and Draco burst into the room, tripping over Harry's knees. 'Lawyers are cocksuckers of the highest fucking calibre,' he huffed – and then he caught sight of Hermione. 'You're awake…' He flushed pink and his hand went to his forehead. He sank down next to her and ghosted his hand across the bed to touch her, but then thought better of it – unsure how she'd react.

She grabbed his hand instead, but the warmth of his skin and the uncertain expression on his face flicked a switch inside of her and she burst into loud, raucous tears.

Draco scooped her tightly into his arms and stroked her back, soothing her. 'You're okay… safe now,' he murmured into her hair. 'And I'm truly, truly sorry. That was the worst fucking decision.'

'You didn't know…' she said, catching her breath and wiping her eyes. 'And I ignored the warning signs. My magic started to fail…'

'Like in Santa Maria.'

'It felt the same as that nasty blue ball Los Rojos used in the morgue…'

'That wasn't actually Dark Flux,' Harry pointed out. 'They've developed some weird Gimlotts hybrid – has the same effect, though.'

'I only realised it was Dark Flux when I got to the children.'

'Then why did you carry on?'

'I had to! The toddler was crying and – and Vithu reminded me of Hugo.'

'Well, when you put it like that…' Draco tenderly stroked a strand of her unruly, sleep-mussed hair from her face. 'You really are one of those stupidly brave Gryffindors, aren't you?'

'We've been wondering how you survived,' Harry said tentatively.

Hermione reflected on this. 'Colour-magic… Bought me a few minutes.'

'Only just,' Draco said in low tones. 'You won't always be able to rely on it to get out of sticky situations.'

'He's right,' Harry agreed. 'There's - there's another thing we don't understand… the dead guy. Gunter reckons he killed himself.'

Harry made a slashing motion across his throat…

Hermione tried to recall what happened when she'd been attacked… but the memory felt hazy, uncertain. 'I didn't do that… but maybe I drove him to it?' She shuddered at the thought. 'I tried to conjure something to defend myself – but it was pitch-black and colour-magic didn't work. So I forced light and pain into his head, instead – a kind of colour-magic Confundus.'

'What made you think of doing that?' Draco asked, amazed. 'Was it Melissa?'
'Sort of…' In truth, it was Ephraim… and the memory of Anna. But she wasn't comfortable admitting this to Draco. Not yet. 'Why were you going on about lawyers when you came in?'

'Oh, I've sold my share in Herb Healing and resigned – well, almost. Lawyers just finishing off the final details.'

'Have you been back to England?'

'No. Your Dad's sorting it. He's good mates with a corporate lawyer…'

'When did you hatch this up?'

'The other night – when we moved Ziff into the garage. You're not annoyed, are you? Ephraim won't know your Dad was involved.'

'Krenzel's come good, too,' Harry said. 'Ron's bought off the smuggling gang… well, Draco has.'

'But HOW? Were you also negotiating with Eastern European criminals while I was dead to the world?' Hermione asked Draco archly.

'No… Ron was. I sorted it with him on the phone, well, Bill's phone.'

'You SPOKE to Ron?'

'And Bill. Both fucking useless. Bill gets into such a tizzy with tech. I mean, the man's over forty, for fuck's sake,' Draco griped.

'Yes. But you spoke to Ron… was he okay?'

'Civil enough… I mean, he wanted me to hand over squillions of galleons, so—'

'You haven't got an endless well of money!'

'No, but compared to most, I'm still stupidly rich. Anyway, I didn't offer money. We've got a huge fuck-off vault hidden at our old French cottage, stuffed full of dark magic shit that I want nothing to do with. I told Ron this gang can take the lot.'

Hermione's attention was drawn to voices beyond the door… Los Rojos.

'They want to meet you,' Harry said.

'Might be awkward…' She looked down at herself, garbed in a baggy black t-shirt that wasn't hers. Under her bedsheet, she had nothing on. 'Where are my clothes?’

'Ruined,' Draco informed her. 'We've all had to borrow.’

She looked at them both in matching black jeans and t-shirts.

'This is their uniform when they're not wearing their scarlet superman capes,' Draco said.

Harry pointed to a pair of black trousers at the end of her bed. 'They left you those… but we can pop out and get you some… other bits and pieces… before you talk to Gunter.'

'What are they like?’

Draco's mouth twitched. 'Total fucking fruitcakes… They still follow Saul Jeroboam's orders!'
'But he's DEAD!''

'Physically… yes,' Harry said. 'But you know how weird wizards get about trying to be immortal? Well, this one's really taken the biscuit! He was fatally wounded a few years ago; and his final wish was to have his consciousness uploaded onto a sort of hybridic magical-holodeck he'd been working on.'

'These guys are obsessed with merging magic and Muggle tech,' Draco pointed out, 'some of their ideas are pretty cool, actually.'

'Ooh my god! This holodeck! Is it based on *Space Force 7*?'

Draco chortled. 'Bloody bonkers, isn't it? The *Supreme Commander's* granting us – you and me – an audience, apparently… Think it's to prove ourselves worthy before they agree to pitch in with us. Bit fucking rich after Argentina - and even though this Gunter's perfectly cordial, the fucker *shot* me! I won't be forgetting that in a hurry…'

'They call themselves Troyanda13,' Harry said, 'because there were originally thirteen of them - all descended from families banished from Zametsky over a century ago.'

'As in the thirteen *Zametsky* Roses,' Hermione interjected, thinking of Katya's necklace and the communications network the Zametsky diaspora had used over the years.

'Guess so. Jeroboam tracked them down and trained them to be his disciples.'

'Blimey,' said Hermione. 'Between THIS cult and bloody Salvedra's lot, are we the only normal people left?'

'Good question,' Harry said, rising from the bed. 'Right, I'm going to check if we've got time-slots for meeting the Great Gunter and the Wonderful Wizard of Oz... And then we'll go shopping.'

Hermione instantly squeezed Draco's hand, hoping he'd stay put.

'Draco, is Katya one of them?' she asked the moment Harry had sauntered out of the room.

'I haven't asked,' Draco said, looking a little sheepish. He gazed at her, eyes shining. '...You've no idea how fucking wonderful it is to have you here.' He kissed her on the forehead, and then leant his head against hers. 'When you fell, I thought… well, I thought you'd died, actually.'

'I had no intention of dying…' She snaked her arms around his neck and kissed him with soft, tremulous lips, savouring the sensation – relieved to still be able to experience this. 'It's good to be alive,' she murmured against his mouth. 'Let's hope we can sort this out fast. I want to get back. See the kids. See Henrik. We're wasting time here.'

Draco's face momentarily clouded. 'Where you going back to?'

She gave him a crooked smile and pulled him down onto the bed next to her. 'Wherever you are will be my first preference…'

She laid her head against him, blissfully happy to be alive and to feel his warmth and the thud of his heart beating beneath her.

'I expected you to be in much worse shape,' he said.

'…I was probably more injured from our night together in Hoi An.'
'But what a night,' he smirked cheekily. 'What a fucking magnificent night…' He swallowed hard and she watched his Adam's apple hitch in his throat. He turned on his side to face her, twisting his arms tightly around her body. Intertwined so closely on the narrow bed, his hot breath tickling her lips and cheek, his sudden arousal became impossible to ignore.

Suddenly, the idea that there was a whole busy world of semi-evil but probably not-so-bad-really vigilantes a few steps away from their door - even that Harry might return at any given moment - seemed to excite Hermione far more than she thought was healthy.

'Oh god, this is insane,' she said, face flushed, smothering an ashamed groan into his chest.

'What is?'

She sat up and with her un-bandaged hand, whipped off the baggy black t-shirt in one brisk movement… 'I have an intense urge to celebrate my survival,' she grinned.

Draco stared at her breasts and his cheeks and eyes glowed… 'God, Ron got that right…' he said hoarsely, 'I really am the fucking luckiest cunt in the world…' His eyes flicked anxiously to the door. 'But what about…?'

'Sorted,' she whispered, firmly sealing it with her mind as she ripped open the flies on his jeans.

He seemed to stop breathing and his eyes shone even brighter.

'I fucking love you,' he said in grating tones.

XXX

'Troyanda13' – or Los Rojos as Hermione still thought of them - were based in a warehouse situated behind a coffee shop, Les Treize Portes Fermées.

It was a bright, modern space with frosted windows arching from the floor to the ceiling along one side of the building. It was furnished with a combination of reclaimed woods and upcycled industrial equipment. Scarlet throws and cushions were scattered artfully and medieval tapestries hung from the bare-brick walls, alongside life-size framed posters from the TV show, Space Force 7.

It looked like an upmarket student's union bar, Hermione thought, but the abundance of computer and IT hardware also gave it the vibe of a trendy loft-space office for an up-and-coming software design firm.

Troyanda13 were relatively young, busy types, feverishly tapping away on computers or drinking coffee in small huddles – there was a gentle babble of chatter and the occasional shy burst of laughter.

A few nodded a courteous greeting as Hermione crossed the floor to join Harry, who was sat alone at a far table, nursing a cup of tea.

'Where's Draco?' he asked.

'Having a nap. Where did you get the tea?'

Harry pointed to a drinks machine. 'I'll get you one if you want; took me five goes to master and you definitely need two fully functioning limbs – but I warn you, it's vile.'
'Let's get something out instead...' She cast her eyes around them. 'Do we need to sign out or anything? Strange; this is kind of how I imagine the Gryffindor common room would look if Hogwarts was rebuilt for the 21st century.'

'Well, there's something a bit Gryffindor about these guys, I reckon,' Harry said. 'Lots of bold ideas and gung-ho stuff, but not a single thought-out plan between them. No Hermione Granger, that's for sure.'

'Have we had our summons?'

'Not yet… maybe the Supreme Commander needs a reboot?'

Hermione spluttered with laughter and they scampered out into the city.

After a speedy shopping spree they headed down a steep hill lined with swanky boutiques and cafes to a waterfront, where they sat on a bench gazing out at Lake Geneva; steel-grey under stormy skies. A tall, shooting fountain in the lake was to their right; its plume arcing and spraying high into the sky.

'Draco and I had a little heart-to-heart earlier – well, quite a big one, actually,' Harry said. 'But we're fine,' he added quickly. 'I mean, we have to be – I'd be fucking ungrateful if we weren't. He saved my life in Vietnam.'

'Lord… What happened?'

'Well, I won't bore you with the gory details … but I suspect Tuyên probably thinks we're total monsters. When Draco pretty much took the head off that Thay Donkey Cock bloke with his golden staff thingy, she almost had a nervous breakdown… It was all a bit – harrowing. And… necessary, unfortunately.'

'Draco did what?'

'Remember when we said Draco wasn't a killer?' Harry shook his head. 'Boy, did we get that wrong. When the man decides something, he's all in… No chickening out. Not anymore… Which brings me on to you.'

'Oh dear…' Hermione sighed, in dread. 'Is this about the other night? I'm so sorry, Harry! We forgot to soundproof the room…' It had been the worst type of 'flaunting'.

'Listening to my best mate's wife screw another man all night wasn't fun…'

'But I'm your best friend, too, Harry – not just Ron. Please remember that.'

'And Draco still has testicles because of it…'

They laughed.

'Bloody hell, though, Hermione… where did all this lustiness come from?' Harry asked, his voice rising as he spoke. 'You never used to be a particularly passionate person, as far as I could tell.'

'I've always been passionate, Harry,' Hermione said – though until now, not really about sex… even so… 'Or are we back to my being sexless again?' She cocked her head and levelled a beady-eyed stare at him, like an uptight robin.

'NO, I take it all back, that's something else I – I read wrong. I apologise. And I'd mean that
even more if your rampant sex drive wasn't going to rip a huge fucking hole in the very fabric of our being! … Draco told me about your encounter with Ron.'

'Wasn't quite how I wanted Ron to find out…'

'I suspect he'd already had someone whisper in his ear,' Harry murmured. 'I feel terrible for him, Hermione... We've drifted a bit lately – but Ron's still my oldest friend.'

'I know.'

'And from a selfish point of view, I'm not sure what happens to US. You and Ron together's been … convenient. I'm still part of your lives. But NOW? Can I stay friends with both of you?'

'Of course you can!'

'But what about when Ginny finds out?... She'll hit the roof! I'm scared she'll ban me from knowing you, which is not a choice I'm wanting to make any time soon… and the fact you're with Draco's only going to make this a lot, lot worse.'

'Oh, Harry…' Hermione sighed. 'I've fallen in love with the wrong man at the wrong time.'

Harry stared at the lake ahead. 'No, Hermione… Truth is, Draco might actually be the right man for you, and at the right time – because he feeds this colour-magic you've got going on, and despite my misgivings, that's going to be essential…'

She cuddled up to him and gazed at the vast greyness of Lake Geneva, the water pockmarked by ever widening concentric circles as rain tumbled softly from the sky. A small yellow ferry was docking a few metres away and disgorging its passengers, quickly wrestling umbrellas into action to fend off the rain.

Hermione leaned her head on Harry's shoulders, enjoying the faint patina of raindrops dancing on her cheeks. She could feel his green… a sludgy sage today, spliced with shards of gleaming jade. 'What would it take for you to develop colour-magic too?' she said speculatively. 'I think you have it. Draco definitely does, if he'd allow himself to go with the flow. But I sense it very strongly in you… Mind you, I've noticed even Henrik has a colour… Green.'

Harry looked quietly triumphant. 'Good ole Henrik… the Green Team!' And he nodded fiercely at a large, white seagull who stepped back in surprise.

When they got back, Draco was nowhere to be seen. Hermione checked the dormitory, but the bed was made. A few of Los Rojos were chatting in the main 'common-room' – but nobody looked up.

She ventured into a kitchenette and encountered a tall, lanky woman with an intricately-woven, electric blue plait that almost touched the floor. She was wearing Troyanda13's standard black ensemble but was padding around barefoot. Hermione spied a silver anklet peeking out from the bottom of her trousers.

'Hi. I'm Elizaveta,' she said in a low, husky voice. She sounded Russian.

Elizaveta looked down at her mug of steaming tea. 'You like one?' She grimaced in the direction of the common-room. 'Much better than horrid machine…'

'Oh. I just had coffee, thanks.'
Elizaveta peered at Hermione from beneath hooded lids. She was wearing a metallic grey eyeshadow. 'I make you a tea.'

'No! Really…'

Elizaveta tapped her nose in a knowing manner. 'Not just any tea.' She reached into a cupboard and pulled out a jar and liberally ladled a couple of spoons of a brown herbal mixture into a mug. 'Smartweed… but I mix in dash of Silphium… extremely rare!'

'Silphium?' Hermione's cheeks glowed. 'Isn't that an aphrodisiac? I don't think I need that…'

Elizaveta barked with laughter. It was a deep, throaty laugh. 'No, I doubt you do… I've already met him.' She passed Hermione the steaming brew. 'But this is to be sure there are no surprises…' She furtively raised her eyebrows in such a way that Hermione couldn't help but blush to the roots of her hair. In the midst of everything, this was something she'd forgotten about – it hadn't been an urgent issue with Ron these past months.

'Where do you get the Silphium from?' Hermione asked, trying to make light… 'I thought it was extinct.'

Elizaveta eyed Hermione over her mug of tea. 'Shipped from Morocco. Very expensive. But does the job.'

'They certainly don't sell it in Diagon Alley,' Hermione rejoined with a nervous titter, feeling a little plain and provincial before Elizaveta.

'No, they won't,' Elizaveta said, jutting her lip out. 'But you have other measures?'

Hermione really hadn't expected to be casually chatting about contraception with a complete stranger in Troyanda13's kitchen... 'I used to drink rue tea, but it didn't always agree with me.'

Elizaveta emphatically shook her head. 'Not good for nervous system… your heart… it was beating very fast sometimes?'

Hermione could barely remember. 'Perhaps.'

'Queen Anne's Lace… your apothecary will sell as seeds. Easy to keep on your person and carry around…'

Hermione nodded mutely… presumably this was a recommendation.

'Gunter's waiting,' Harry said apprehensively, beckoning Hermione from the kitchen.

'Have you seen Draco?'

'He's probably in there already,'

To Hermione's disquiet, however, Draco wasn't.

They were ushered into a pokey meeting room with slate grey walls and a vivid vermilion ceiling.

At first glance, Gunter was a plain, unassuming chap; more slightly-built than Hermione expected. Maybe there was something about the scarlet robes that added stature? He had aquiline features and odd, reddish-brown eyes… there was something strangely familiar about him that she couldn't quite put her finger on.
He tilted his head to meet her gaze when she entered the room and a sudden blinding flash of scarlet streaked across her vision… He seemed startled, but quickly collected himself and stood up to greet them.

'Pleasure to finally meet you, Mrs Weasley.' He nodded at Harry.

Gunter was flanked by a stocky man with small but piercing blue eyes and a bushy ginger beard who introduced himself as Niko.

To Hermione's surprise, Elizaveta followed them into the room and sat beside Gunter.

'This is Elizaveta,' Gunter said in polite deference to their new arrival.

'We met,' Elizaveta said in droll tones. She smiled and to Hermione's fascination her mouth glinted silver. Hermione now saw she had two sharp metal teeth, on either side of her upper jaw incisors.

'I thought Draco would be here,' Hermione said, sitting down at the meeting-table.

'He was speaking on his phone … somewhere.' Gunter's eyes didn't leave her face as he spoke, as though he was seeking something out.

'Okay.' Hermione shuffled uncomfortably under the weight of his red-eyed gaze. 'I -I want to thank you for helping us… helping me.'

'No need,' Gunter said in clipped tones. Having stared at her as though mesmerised, he was now evading eye-contact altogether, sitting down and flicking through a folder in front of him. 'The Supreme Commander received the message from your Muggle colleague and felt it wise we rally to your cause. He views you as potential allies.'

'Do you?'

'I'm in the service of the Supreme Commander…'

'Yes… but, he's dead.' Gunter raised his eyes to meet hers and a spike of scarlet shot through her.

'There's something I'd like to discuss before you see the Supreme Commander,' he said quickly. 'Whilst we share your concerns about Gilgad's activities and uniting our forces has a certain logic - there are more personal issues that may harm future collaboration.' He spoke impeccable English but with a heavy accent, forcing Hermione to concentrate.

'For sure!' Hermione chided, 'you were absolute arseholes to me and Draco in Argentina – not to mention the fact you SHOT him.'

Gunter smiled weakly. 'I had my reasons.'

'That's as may be… but it's not the sort of thing that engenders trust, is it? But that was then, and this is now. We want to trust you, because we need you.'

There was a flash of silver out of the corner of Hermione's eye – it was Elizaveta smiling.

'Yes, TRUST is the issue here. While I do not doubt both your exemplary past achievements, Mr Malfoy's record is less... inspiring. But... we remain open-minded.' Somehow, Hermione doubted this… 'What I would like to know, however, is this: You should have died, Mrs Weasley, from exposure to Dark Flux materials. Why didn't you?' Gunter asked stonily.

Hermione had an inkling he already knew… 'Please – call me Hermione.'
He bobbed his head in assent and waited.

'I don't know,' she said.

Gunter gave her a shrewd look. 'Why are you lying?'

'I'll be honest if you're honest with me.'

A burst of irritation sparked in Gunter's eyes and she shuddered, recalling him in the morgue at Santa Maria… how he'd slowly rolled the blue ball in his palm before releasing it to attack Jonas Arbuthnot.

'I'll permit you one question.'

Gunter's red-bearded colleague, Niko, lifted a single eyebrow in Harry's direction; a shared note of exasperation.

'But first, Mrs Weasley, you must answer mine. I repeat. How did you survive Dark Flux?' He jabbed his finger at the file in front of him. 'I know you're Muggle-born.'

'I – I have a type of magic… I barely understand it myself… but it uses colour and light rather than quarkons. Dark Flux – similar to that blue ball you attacked me and Draco with - appears to switch off my usual magic, but I was still able to use colour-magic.'

Niko gave Gunter a sharp look. 'La Luz,' he said, pronouncing it like Luw-th. 'She has La Luz. I feel it in her.'

'Of course she does.' Gunter smiled, a thin, pale smile, at Hermione. 'Both Niko and I are also blessed with La Luz, as we call it – though some say Magiya Sveta. But it's interesting to me that you were able to defend yourself from something as powerful as Dark Flux. Are you well-practiced in using La Luz, Hermione?' He enunciated Hermione with particular precision and care.

She vehemently shook her head. 'No… it's all new to me!'

'What triggered it?' Gunter asked, eyes narrowed. 'Witches and wizards often only discover their gift when something traumatic happens – an emotional crisis or a strong hex or jinx.'

Hermione lifted her eyes to the scarlet ceiling… 'My first colour-magic experience was when you attacked my husband. I Apparated to my garden and I sensed you'd been there.'

'So, BEFORE you found your husband?' Gunter pressed. 'Sounds more like foreshadowing than trauma…'

'Hermione's had plenty of trauma to contend with,' Harry interjected forcefully. 'We fought Voldemort as youngsters… witnessed things kids our age should never have to.'

'Agreed,' Gunter said, 'but Hermione's manifestation is more recent. Of course LOVE can spark La Luz… though like any magic, La Luz can't create love. Had you embarked on a love affair with Mr Malfoy when you first felt La Luz?' he asked Hermione, but then answered her question for her. 'No, that came later… your relationship was of a feisty, prickly nature when we first tracked you.'

Hermione bristled with irritation at his smugness. So calm about SPYING on her!

'I don't recall experiencing colour-magic before you broke into my home.'

'No magical shock?'
'No, I…' But then something occurred to her; something, surely, inconceivable... 'I wore a jinxed dress one evening?' The red dress she wore to Le Bonheur… The red dress Bill had jinxed.

The dress that looked like Anna's…

Gunter shrugged. 'That possibly did it... Does Mr Malfoy also have La Luz?'

'No – well, sort of. I see his colour and he sees mine… I find magic easier when he's around.'

Gunter furrowed his brow quizzically. 'I see. Well… maybe his gift is latent?'

She pondered this a moment. 'When we were at Atalaya, Draco was able to WILL me out of a painting that Salvedra had locked me into… could that mean Draco already has this La Luz and doesn't know it?'

Gunter turned a sickly grey. 'You've been to Atalaya?'

'Yes,' Harry said.

'But how did you find it?'

'We just walked right in and—'

'How many of you?'

'Five.'

Gunter's face was rigid with shock. 'And you all survived?'

'Sure… it wasn't fun, but—'

'Salvedra's dragon injured our Supreme Commander. He's never truly recovered.'

'He DIED from his injuries,' Niko stated. He, at least, was willing to countenance the truth that Saul was dead.

'Oh,' Harry said. 'Turned out to be a rather stupid dragon, actually... Eyes bigger than its belly. We overfed it with hot stones… Killed it.'

Elizaveta spluttered with laughter.

Gunter's lips tightened. 'I fail to see what's funny, Elizaveta.'

Hermione took a deep breath. 'My turn… Do you have a connection with Katya Malfoy?'

Gunter blinked rapidly. He hadn't expected this… 'Why do you ask?'

'Because all of you – Troyanda13 – are descended from those poor souls who were banished from Zametsky. As is Katya – Draco's wife. She's been missing almost two years but sends Draco silver charms – Zametsky Roses – although her late aunt, a Svetlana Kerpin, sent at least one of those…'

Gunter continued to stare at her wordlessly. There was no attempt to stop her talking so Hermione carried on. 'Svetlana Kerpin's sister was Anna Cornec –' Hermione noted that Niko, his fingers nervously combing through his beard, shot a look at Gunter… 'Many years ago, Anna Cornec worked with both your Supreme Commander and Ephraim Golowitz. Katya was Anna and Ephraim's daughter. I think Katya knew what her father planned to do with Dark Flux and it's why
she left home. I also think the fact you call yourselves Troyanda13, can't be a coincidence… Zametsky has a tradition associated with thirteen roses. So, again. Do you know Katya Malfoy?'

Gunter angled his head to one side and calmly studied her. 'You confuse me, Hermione. You and Draco are lovers. So, why do you give a damn where his wife is?'

Hermione blushed hard. 'She also has a daughter – Magda.'

'A daughter?'

'Yes. Katya was about six months pregnant when she left Draco.'

Gunter stared at her, a peculiar look in his eye… his redness was swirling violently.

'I think Draco would love to see his child very much, but has given up hope,' she added.

'So - you're partly motivated by love?'

'Perhaps… Gunter, please don't toy with me here,' Hermione begged earnestly. 'If you know where Katya is, please tell me.'

Gunter sighed deeply. 'I don't know where she is…or even if she's alive.' And she could see he was telling the truth. 'However, in answer to your first question. I DO have a connection to Katya… I'm her brother.'

'Her BROTHER?'

'Hold on… Are you Ephraim Golowitz's son?' Harry asked, incredulous.

'No, Harry,' Hermione said, suddenly comprehending. 'Gunter's parents were Anna and Reynaldo Cornec.' … Anna in her red dress… explaining to Ephraim why she was heading home to her husband… 'I've hardly seen my son in days. Saul works us too hard.'

Gunter nodded slowly. 'But I never knew my mother… vague, childish memories, like footprints on a snowy day… nor ever cared to. She deserted me and my father and then he died – most miserably – and since then Saul Jeroboam has been more a parent to me than anyone whose blood I share.'

'Of course…' Hermione said. He put on a good show but she could see his redness swelling and dipping; silent sobbing. Though did he even know this himself? she wondered.

She was almost too frightened to ask her follow-up question: Her heart was beating fast inside her chest and her palms were suddenly greasy with sweat.

Was Katya HERE?

'Have you … ever met her?… Your sister, that is…'

The door swung open and a stooped, crooked man with thin, greying hair gave Gunter a low bow.

'Thank you, Abigor,' Gunter said. He turned to Hermione. 'The Supreme Commander awaits.'

Hermione gave Harry a worried parting look and the doors clanked loudly as they slid shut behind her.

XXX
Abigor ushered Hermione into a lift and they descended deep into the ground, arriving at a long, clinical-white corridor. He wordlessly beckoned her with a gnarled, claw-like hand.

At the end of the corridor there was a further set of doors, which parted with a loud whoosh, leading to a dark room with smooth, obsidian black walls. A desk and a large red leather chair were the only items of furniture; a single, stark lamp the sole source of illumination – a pale yellow circle of light on the empty desk.

Abigor held out his hand, demanding her wand.

'İ'd rather keep it.' But he emphatically shook his head.

'Is Draco coming? Am I meeting Mr Jeroboam?'

'Indeed you are, Mrs Weasley,' came a high, narrow voice from behind the desk. 'You only need to give up your wand for the duration of our interview. It's a technical matter.'

She blinked and a hazy image strengthened into a small, wiry man with a pale face and trim black beard, standing next to the red leather armchair. The entire scene, she realised, was a skilfully-rendered 3D hologram.

She looked behind her. Funnel-shaped spotlights were ranged around the room and a blinding light was shining through a rectangular hole cut into the wall. Captive dust motes shimmered and spun, gleaming silver. A bank of computers and servers were lined up against the back wall, shielded by a yellow, magical glow.

Merging Muggle tech and magic was an exciting innovation, Hermione thought. It therefore seemed peculiarly antiquated to have given up her wand!

Jeroboam gestured to a black stone bench. 'Please, take a seat.'

The bench was cold, hard and very low, meaning Hermione had to look up to Saul Jeroboam, now sitting in his armchair, legs crossed, his small, pasty face dwarfed by the chair's vast red wings. It was a chair designed to accommodate a beefy heroic type; the Supreme Commander of a star fleet in a popular TV show.

Hermione sighed inwardly at the tragic charade she was being forced to play along with.

Jeroboam scrutinised her with cold, black eyes, like wizened currants in a pale, suet pudding.

'You owe me an apology, Mrs Weasley,' he said snippily. 'I understand you're collaborating with Ephraim Golowitz - my mortal enemy - to vilify me in the British Wizengamot!'

Hermione's face fell. 'I can explain—'

'No doubt you'll claim Ephraim's given you little choice in the matter...’ he continued in a high, whiny voice.

'Well—'

'However, your easy capitulation indicates a weak, spineless character, lacking moral fibre. '

'That's not fair! My brother-in-law, George, is being held HOSTAGE, Mr Jeroboam, and—'

But Jeroboam's hand abruptly scythed the air, cutting her off ... 'Will you submit your memories from Argentina to the Wizengamot?''
'Not if I can help it!'

'Which means you will!' Jeroboam snorted, disdainfully. 'Those Memories will paint an unjustly black picture of my faithful followers…'

Hermione's frustration boiled over. 'Which would be THEIR fault! They behaved abysmally! They toyed with us, they deceived, they murdered…'

'It was a WAR you stepped into!' Jeroboam shrilled. 'Not some girlish tea-party!'

Hermione targeted him with a ferocious glare. 'Gunter also shot Draco!'

Jeroboam fluttered his eyelids in a mocking fashion. 'Dear me, Mrs Weasley… Expending emotion over such a worthless piece of rubbish is beneath you… a whey-faced boy who's allowed his family purse and honour – even his mother's vagina - to be entirely colonised by Ephraim Golowitz.'

'Draco's trying to take Ephraim down,' Hermione insisted in agitated tones. 'And I'm only pretending to do what Ephraim wants! My plan is to use the Wizengamot hearing to denounce him, not you.'

'Poppycock!' Jeroboam sneered. 'I've met your type before… Gutless and gullible! I've therefore decided that any cooperation between us is impossible.'

'No! Please don't say that!' Hermione gasped. They needed Los Rojos… 'Maybe you don't understand the seriousness of this?… All our worst fears are being realised: Dark Flux attacks are escalating, innocent Muggles are being slaughtered.'

Telling Jeroboam he didn't understand something was clearly a big mistake… His nose wrinkled as though infected by a rancid smell and he glowered at her with undisguised contempt.

'Of course I understand! It's been my life's work to understand Dark Flux, and NOBODY understands Ephraim and what he is capable of as well as I!'

'I – I didn't mean to insult you,' Hermione backtracked, 'and naturally I bow to your – your superior knowledge of Ephraim.'

'You only know what he wants you to know! It's how you've been taken in! I, too, was once seduced by Ephraim's glamour! He was young, charming, handsome … His research into Magical Leptons was nothing short of OUTSTANDING… I wilfully blinded myself to his dark ambitions! It appears you're making the same mistake.'

'Just because YOU were once a fool, doesn't mean I am,' Hermione bristled.

'Then why are you doing what he asks of you? This fake prosecution?'

'I've told you—'

Jeroboam's image flickered and fizzed; she wasn't sure if he was smiling or frowning. 'That's the problem with jumped-up know-it-alls like yourself… you think you know everything, and then you come unstuck!'

'I've no such delusions…'

'No doubt you've ignored the dangers posed by SALVEDRA…' He smirked smugly and his black
eyes twinkled.

Hermione opened her mouth to object, but Jeroboam's face suddenly puckered into a regretful half-smile. 'I confess I failed to foresee the devastating consequences bringing Salvedra and Ephraim together entailed. But how could I NOT include Salvedra in The Geneva Group? His work on Magical Lepton Radiation was... genius...’ Jeroboam looked misty-eyed at the memory. 'Ironically, the one person who never trusted Salvedra was Anna… Despite her whorish nature and base morals, she raised ethical concerns.' He wriggled uncomfortably in his capacious red leather armchair.

'We haven't ignored Salvedra at all!… In fact, I've met him!' Hermione said, nose in the air. 'At his citadel in Abaran.'

Jeroboam stared at her and his chin quivered… 'ATALAYA?'

'Yes. We destroyed his castle… but sadly, he escaped.'

Jeroboam looked aghast. 'WHERE IS HE?'

'I – I don't know… But we'll find him and—'

'But don't you see what you've done?' Jeroboam screeched… 'You've released him!'

Hermione could feel hot red staining her cheeks and her heart was suddenly clattering inside her chest.

'YOU IMBECILE!' Jeroboam snarled. 'I suspect you're too small-minded to understand…'

'Without INFORMATION, I'm hardly like to, am I?' Hermione retorted.

'I secured him… I made sure he couldn't leave Atalaya,' Jeroboam raged. 'And I suffered great loss in the process.'

'Your life,' Hermione said bluntly.

Jeroboam sneered at her, his face scrunched and wizened. 'I was protecting my child... Protecting Gunter!'

'But Gunter's father was Reynaldo Cornec,' Hermione countered, genuinely perplexed.

Jeroboam's face crumpled and for a moment he looked lost in grief. 'Now that was a GOOD man! An honourable man… I count it as the worst day of my life when he died. He didn't deserve the cuckoldry, lies and eternal disgrace that HARLOT brought down upon him… Anna didn't deserve Reynaldo's son! She didn't deserve to have anything of his!' Jeroboam's face cracked into a leering grin. 'Of course she didn't get a choice in the matter and no doubt her wretched life was immeasurably more miserable as a result!' 'I'm sorry… I don't understand.'

Jeroboam's beetle-black eyes shone brightly at her discomfort... 'Salvedra CURSED her… He laid claim to her children – to Gunter and the bastard spawn she bore Ephraim. If Anna was to ever use magic, her children automatically belonged to SALVEDRA. To do with as he chose… although we all know what that means.'

Hermione's stomach lurched in fear. 'NO… no I don't.'
Jeroboam's image glitched and shook and a dark shadow fell across his face; his eyes shrivelled into jet-black pin-points; snake-like, insidious… 'He harvests SOULS!' he hissed.

Hermione shivered. The people in the pictures… the people in the pictures… He'd wanted HER soul!

'So Anna ran away, like a coward; changed her identity…'

'Fayana Le Berre…' Hermione said, recalling the gravestone where Harry's spy had seen Rozella lay violets … *Fayana Le Berre, 2010.*

'Yes, I do believe that was her MUGGLE name.' Jeroboam shook his head in disgust, as though he'd chewed on something foul-tasting. 'Ephraim's wife, Iona, took the female child, and I took Gunter. We couldn't abide the idea of magical children being raised as Muggles!'

Hermione's head was suddenly swimming… 'But why did Salvedra curse her?'

Jeroboam shook his head, hot with impatience.

'Because Anna stole Salvedra's life-work… his research into how to artificially CREATE Dark Flux - and then had the audacity to *complete* it! Yes, ANNA! – a fluff-headed chit of a girl - chanced on the formula that had evaded us for so long… and, I believe, the antidote, too.'

Jeroboam's beady eyes suddenly glinted with dark malice. 'And then she made her greatest mistake… She summoned us all to warn of Salvedra. But Ephraim betrayed her. '

'But he loved her!' Hermione said, incredulous.

'Indeed he did. Ephraim was always an *obsessive* man…'

'So why did he betray her?'

'Because he was also in thrall to Salvedra and the path they'd chosen. It's why they've spent the intervening years trying to replicate her discovery.'

Hermione was suddenly brimming with curiosity. 'What did Anna do with the formula?'

'She never said; even after the most prolonged and bloody torture – Salvedra was a particular adept, I have to say.' He smacked his lips nastily. 'Of course, by rights, that formula was MINE.'

'How so?'

'Because *I* led The Geneva Group! Our findings were to be credited to ALL of us! Not some jacked-up little tart who got too big for her boots! As much as I disliked Salvedra, I was overjoyed when he finally found her to wreak his revenge - though I never doubted he would; he always does. He killed her, of course.'

Hermione chilled at his morbid glee. 'But if Anna was dead, surely you had no reason to fear Salvedra's *curse*?'

'I had to be sure… that's why I confronted Salvedra. And defeated him.'

'Except… except you didn't, Mr Jeroboam.'

His image trembled and a glaring white streaked across the scene before her… 'I imprisoned him in the dark valley of his making!'
Hermione heaved a sigh. Such a vain, obdurate, nasty little man...

Jeroboam squinted at her for a long while. 'Ephraim must have very mixed feelings towards you, Mrs Weasley. I suspect you now understand why…'

'I don't follow.'

Jeroboam giggled. 'Your striking resemblance to Anna, of course! No doubt he's mentioned it?'

Hermione blushed hotly.

'As I said, he's an obsessive man. And GUILTY. He betrayed the woman he loved… Maybe that's what's keeping you alive? For now…'

Jeroboam's eyes swerved away from her face. Hermione sensed Gunter before she saw him.

'Ah! Gunter… And welcome, Mr Malfoy … Please, take a seat.' He swept his eyes to the back of the room where Niko was hovering by the doors - standing guard.

Gunter made a brusque, swishing movement with his arm and stepped aside to reveal a second stone bench.

Draco cast Hermione a swift, nervous glance and sat down, Gunter standing behind him; a scarlet hawk guarding its prey.

Jeroboam gave Draco a long, appraising look, his black eyes hard and shiny in the soft yellow light of his desk-lamp. 'It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Mr Malfoy.'

Draco stared blankly ahead, all traces of emotion tidily packed away under Jeroboam's stern inspection.

He nodded politely.

Jeroboam raised his eyes to Gunter. 'I've made a decision. Troyanda13 will NOT be cooperating with these people….'

Gunter flicked a startled glance at Niko, but then bowed his head obediently.

'The question is – what do we do with them?' Jeroboam asked.

'That is for you to decide, Supreme Commander,' Gunter said.

Jeroboam's attention returned to Draco.

'I'm thinking of sending a message to your stepfather…' he said, 'and you can help me out with this.'

'We're not really on speaking terms these days,' Draco muttered.

'That wasn't the kind of message I meant,' Jeroboam said with a frosty smile. 'Gunter. Do what you have to do…'

What the hell did that mean? Hermione thought, alarm chiming through her, but then there was a loud grating sound in the ceiling and a large vent opened up directly above them, followed by a rush of blue fog that stung her eyes and caught in her throat, prompting a coughing fit. It was the same substance Los Rojos had used in the morgue at Santa Maria. It killed magic…
'This isn't personal,' Gunter muttered, seizing Draco around the throat. Draco squirmed violently, elbowing Gunter in the groin. Gunter shrieked but kept a vice-like grip on Draco, pressing his fingers hard against Draco's neck – effectively immobilising him.

'NO!' Hermione howled, throwing herself at Gunter… but a powerful blast of raw magic knocked her backwards with such force, she flew across the room, crashing heavily into the wall and slumping onto the floor…

Jeroboam's crooked servant, Abigor, was standing in the shadows beside Draco pointing at her, a twisted leer on his face.

He had colour-magic…

She lay there stunned; everything seemed to dim and swirl and there was a strange babbling sound in her ears – shouts, shrieks, confusion that seemed to get louder and louder as though she was gradually surfaced from underwater.

Was that Harry? It sounded like it… Where had he come from? And a woman was screaming…

Hermione sat up, blinking out of the darkness… Draco had been wrapped into a glowing, magical net. He was fighting to break free but the net shrank and tightened every time he moved… even from this distance, Hermione could see that it was cutting into his flesh… blood glinted on his exposed lower arms.

'NO, Draco!' she screeched, panicked anguish exploding through her. 'Stay still! Please stay still!'

Draco cast her a pained, desperate look…

Harry was holding Elizaveta in an armlock, his wand pressed against her throat. But what good was that? Hermione thought. Harry's magic wouldn't work… unless he planned to stab her or break her neck.

She glimpsed Niko skulking at the back of the room… but his face was obscured by the swirling blue mist.

Gunter, however, was torn… eyes shifting between Elizaveta in Harry's grasp and Jeroboam.

Jeroboam was screeching at Gunter. 'She's a NOBODY! Replaceable!'

'It doesn't have to be like this, Gunter,' Harry said, his voice low and determined.

Elizaveta gazed at Gunter, pleading. 'Don't hurt them … They're good people.'

'Shut up, you stupid hussy!' Jeroboam jeered, lip curled in derision. 'I've instructed Gunter to kill Mr Malfoy and that's that!'

'She's not STUPID, she's as much Troyanda13 as I am!' Gunter said defensively.

'But she's not aware of the FACTS of the situation,' Jeroboam said in rebuking tones. 'I've run every scenario through my programming and it's always the same outcome – if I wish to send a message to Ephraim, then Mr Malfoy's death will hurt him most, because Mr Malfoy is necessary for Herb Healing, the means by which Ephraim will slaughter thousands upon thousands of innocents…'

'Looks like you're behind the times,' Harry said with a sardonic smirk. 'Draco's RESIGNED from
Herb Healing! And the company's well and truly fucked. If you kill Draco, you'd probably be doing Ephraim a favour…'

Jeroboam fell silent and blinked rapidly… Hermione wondered if he was accessing his computer programme.

He vehemently shook his head. 'I have no new information on that… You're lying, Mr Potter.'

'It was only finalised a few minutes ago.'

Gunter looked uneasy. 'Maybe we should wait until tomorrow, Supreme Commander? Verify the facts first.'

Jeroboam’s face was shrouded in dark peevishness. 'Really, Gunter? Are you so easily taken in? I will not have my will thwarted in this manner!'

But then his eyes alighted on Hermione and a slow smile spread across his face.

'Ah! But we have Mrs Weasley! With her striking resemblance to Anna!' He snickered merrily… 'What could be more perfect? Forget Mr Malfoy, Gunter, if we want to hurt Ephraim – kill HER instead!'

'I'm warning you, Gunter!' Harry yelled, face puce. His wand was pushed so firmly against Elizaveta's neck, she was wailing in pain. 'I WILL kill her!'

Hermione could see Gunter's redness, a screaming scarlet that scorched the eyes, washing through him in waves of pain. It was almost unbearable…

'Please don't listen to Saul!' Hermione cried, scrambling to her feet. 'He's gone mad! Insane!'

She didn't dare look at Draco… she sensed his whiteness building; something large, violent and bloody that would kill him the instant he dared to break through the net.

Jeroboam burst into loud, mocking laughter. 'Me? INSANE? I've more intelligence in my little finger than all of you put together!'

'But it's a DEAD finger! It doesn't even exist!' Hermione snapped. 'YOU don't exist!'

'Says the degenerate, ignorant, adulterous strumpet…' Jeroboam sniffed haughtily. 'Just like Anna…'

'Anna wasn't a strumpet!' Hermione moved closer to the holographic image; so close her face was bathed in shifting streaks of light. 'She was a bloody HEROINE! By stealing and hiding that formula, she's done more to save lives than YOU ever did! You've been tracking Ephraim for YEARS and yet you've done nothing to prevent Ephraim developing Dark Flux and using it.'

Jeroboam was drawn in… 'I wanted to understand how he created it… to observe and learn. Scientific enquiry is my key objective!'

'But many have suffered and died!'

'Oh… I don't believe there's THAT much suffering with Dark Flux. Death is almost instantaneous,' Jeroboam said in an offhand manner.

Hermione spun round to face Gunter. 'Do you agree with that? Do you honestly think the deaths of innocents is a fair trade-off to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of a computer programme?'
Gunter hung his head in despair. 'No.' He took a deep breath and faced Jeroboam. 'And this has perturbed me greatly. We could have done more.'

Jeroboam's face creased into shocked disbelief… 'Are you refuting my wisdom? You disappoint me, Gunter. You forget all I've done for you… When your own mother deserted you, I took you as my own…'

'But she DIDN'T desert you!' Hermione told Gunter. 'Salvedra CURSED her, claiming a right to take you if she ever used magic… So she did what she thought was best… She escaped into the Muggle world and gave you away - because she loved you.'

She felt sure of this… she could almost hear Anna's voice inside of her, weeping, urging her on…

Jeroboam glowered at Hermione, teeth bared in contempt. 'Shut up, you – you filthy slut! ABIGOR!' he screeched at his crooked servant. 'Kill the bitch!' Abigor levelled a deadly stare at Hermione and she could sense a surge of power, ready to strike… She steeled herself, summoning her colour, but there was a flurry of movement behind her and Elizaveta was scrabbling on the floor… and Harry had sprung across the room towards Abigor… and then a fierce white blast warped the space around them, flinging Abigor upwards, smashing him hard against the ceiling. Over and over…

A crack tore through the plaster and Abigor fell heavily to the floor, dust and chunks of concrete falling in his wake… his body shattered and contorted, blood spraying their feet and clothes.

Draco, wreathed in a shimmering white aura, had burst from the net and was staring at Hermione.

The dark look in his eyes slightly terrified her… questions, confusion, astonishment. He was trembling…

'Draco?' Harry said tentatively. 'Did you do that?'

Niko had joined them. 'Saul's lied to you!' he said to Gunter. 'All these years the bastard lied to ALL OF US!'

He exchanged a look with Elizaveta, who was now standing solemnly beside Harry, and then threw an accusatory look at Jeroboam. 'You told us Anna was the treacherous woman who'd stolen the cure for Dark Flux! She was the wicked witch of our childhoods. The woman you frightened us with… US, your poor, beholden little orphans.'

'I couldn't risk Gunter trying to find her,' Jeroboam said hopelessly. 'What if – if she'd lapsed and cast a spell? Salvedra would have taken him…' Jeroboam's face suddenly sagged, the hologram blurring, fading… 'Gunter. Son… I was protecting you! Anna was a fickle, silly woman… unable to control her emotions. And – and she hurt Reynaldo. She hurt him so much, he took his own life… I never forgave her for that.'

'No, you fool!' Hermione's eyes flashed scornfully. 'Anna went back to him – she went back to Reynaldo!' 'Is that true?' Gunter asked. She could feel his mind probing hers, feeling out her magic.

'Yes.' Horrible mess… Ephraim had said. He knew because he was there… 'Ephraim told me. And that same night Reynaldo committed suicide.'

'I bet Ephraim murdered him…' Draco muttered darkly.
Gunter inclined his head to one side, examining her. 'Ephraim must trust you, to tell you such a thing… Is that because you remind him of my mother? Because… because you DO look like her, Hermione. I noticed it earlier…'

Hermione could feel Draco's eyes watching her. 'How would you know what your mother looked like, Gunter?'

'Because… I saw her die,' he said sorrowfully.

Jeroboam looked shell-shocked. 'What are you saying?'

'When Salvedra came for her, she sent you a Patronus, begging for help. So I guess she DID trigger the curse, after all. But you dismissed it... I remember that,' Gunter said sadly. 'Your response intrigued me. And I was curious.'

Jeroboam stared at him, stony-faced.

'I was too late…' Gunter continued. 'She was lying on the ground – a bleeding, broken thing.' He paused to mop fat tears from his face. 'They'd hunted her down like blood-crazed beasts! She'd tried to run… but she was skin and bone, half-mad with fear and paranoia, alone in a crumbling, old ruin – empty of things, people or life... She'd thrown herself from the roof.' He looked at Hermione, a sad, lost look in his eye, and his hand reached out to her and then faltered... 'It was wretched! Pitiful! … Shaming. As she lay dying, somehow she recognised me. She tried to hold my hand and called me Mon Fils… My Son… It haunted me.'

Hermione could see his redness rising and falling inside of him.

'I secretly went to her funeral and saw a woman who looked like me.'

'Svetlana…'

Gunter nodded. 'I spied on her. And bit by bit, I pieced together the truth.' He looked up at Jeroboam. 'And yet I still held faith with you. I didn't allow myself to grieve what was never mine… because – because I stupidly believed you! I believed she'd abandoned me… And then you returned from Atalaya, a mess of a man. And YOU died too,' he sobbed, his face disfigured by grief and rage. 'And that should have been the end of it.' He lifted his eyes to Jeroboam. 'I'm sorry, Saul, but it's time you were deleted.'

'I did what was right! I always do!' Jeroboam spluttered.

'You do NOTHING!' Harry said… 'It's these guys do all the actual work.' He nodded towards Gunter, Niko and Elizaveta. 'You're useless.'

'But I have a lifetime of knowledge!' Jeroboam boasted.

Gunter cast his eye in the direction of the bank of computers at the back of the room. 'They have to be destroyed – utterly. And there's a spell…'

'GUNTER! Son!' Jeroboam screeched… 'You can't!'

'I have to,' Gunter said, taking hold of Elizaveta's hand for support. 'Saul deployed GX61… kills off standard magic. So I'm going to need help from those who have La Luz, if that's okay?'

He faced the servers, raised his arm, and shut his eyes tightly. The glowing net surrounding the bank of servers dissipated… 'Ready?' he said to Hermione and Draco. 'Just think it, then forget it…
and let it flow.'

'NO!' squealed Jeroboam behind them. 'NOOO!'

But Hermione focused hard on the hardware exploding into a thousand little pieces – vanquishing the hatred, bile and deceit of the decrepit old man who had kept thirteen young people hostage to his lies and grudges for the entirety of their lives.

And then she let her power flood forth…

Harry ducked as shards of metal and plastic flew in all directions; jagged projectiles, smashed glass.

A powerful rolling white rippled through Hermione, a churning, heaving force… it was Draco. She could see his whiteness; a shining haze…

And Jeroboam's image flickered, faded and disappeared.

Gunter stared at the carnage, before turning to Draco. 'Hermione said you didn't have La Luz.'

Draco looked embarrassed. 'What's that?'

'Colour-magic,' Harry said, raising his eyebrows.

'Well… I didn't. Not until five minutes ago.'

Gunter gave Hermione a lopsided grin. 'See? It takes an emotional crisis… He thought he'd seen the woman he loved die… and then he thought he'd have to see that all over again.'

Hermione locked eyes with Draco. His whiteness was wild and roaring.

'You deserve the truth about Katya…' Gunter said abruptly to Draco. 'My sister.'

Just her name… it dragged at Hermione's insides - like a cold claw.

Gunter took a deep breath. 'Hermione asked me earlier if I'd met her… I told the truth when I said I don't know where she is now, but I – I saw her - twice. Once in Paris, from afar, in a café with our Aunt. And again… The day she disappeared.'

Draco knitted his brow curiously and stepped forwards, head bent. 'In England?'

Gunter shook his head. 'No. At Anna's ruined château. September, 2011. She was with a young, red-headed woman – a Muggle friend of Svetlana's. You met her… the day you and Hermione crashed a broomstick…'

'Rozella,' Harry said.

Hermione glanced at Draco, but his face was pale and blank – and his blazing whiteness had dwindled; flat and cold.

'They were with an older Muggle man in a wheelchair. But when they arrived, Katya hurried the old man into the château and the Muggle girl tried to escape in a car - but a wizard attacked her.'

There was a distant look in Gunter's eyes as he spoke. 'So I killed him… I then Apparated into the grounds and Katya ran from the ruins… I called out, but the moment she saw me, she screamed and fell… fell into a pond.'
The room fell into tense silence.

'But then she was raised out of the water… high, high into the sky and spun round and round…' Gunter turned his reddish-brown eyes on Draco's taut, pallid face. 'And then she vanished.'

'Apparated?' Draco asked.

'I don't know.'

'Who did this to her?'

'The witch who rescued you from the morgue in Santa Maria. Dolores…'

'Dolores?' Hermione repeated, stunned. 'Why was she there?'

Gunter shrugged. 'Ephraim was there, too. He was incensed…'

'With Katya?'

'With Dolores… Wands were drawn. One of Ephraim's men was killed. But Dolores? She didn't care… She laughed in Ephraim's face!'

'Did you see Katya's child at all?' Draco asked urgently.

Gunter shook his head.

Draco looked forlorn, punch-drunk.

'I'm sorry to have led you on a merry dance while you were looking for your wife, Draco,' Gunter admitted. 'The truth is, once I learned you'd been a faithless man to my sister, it stirred me to spite… I lay down breadcrumbs of hopeful enquiry for you to scamper after – to no end.'

'You seem to have taken great pleasure in fucking my head up,' Draco groused. He folded his arms tightly and looked daggers at Gunter. 'I mean, the whole fucking farce in Argentina was one big piss-take, wasn't it?'

Gunter looked between Draco and Hermione and gave them a thin smile. 'Not entirely… We have one of our own embedded in Ephraim's team – Pascal Louboutier…' Elizaveta gave him an admonishing scowl. 'It's important he stays undercover… But he informed me about your trip. I tried to stop you—' he smiled bravely at Draco here, 'but you persisted. So I decided Hermione would be your better travelling companion, figuring that perhaps both of you, together, would be more dangerous for Ephraim.'

Hermione recalled how Ephraim had said the exact same thing, but more regrettably.

'At least I got THAT right. And now we're going to help you,' Gunter said. 'In any way we can…' Gunter moved towards the door with Elizaveta and Niko. 'We must speak with the rest of the team.'

XXX

The last Portkey to London wasn't for half an hour so they bought coffees and gazed out at the dark, navy expanse of Lake Geneva, punctuated by the twinkling lights of boats moored off-shore.

Harry explained how he'd worked with Niko and Elizaveta to break into Jeroboam's sanctum… Niko had gauged the temperature of the meeting and tapped three times on the door to tell Harry to 'fake' his capture of Elizaveta – forcing a reaction from Gunter.
That guy's a fucking freak,' Draco frowned. He was sad-eyed and his whiteness was sheathed in grey.

'And tragic,' Hermione said. 'He's lost his father, his mother, his aunt, possibly his sister – all the family he's ever known about! And yet he never knew a single one!'

'He hasn't worked out Rozella's his half-sister,' Harry mused. 'The old man in the wheelchair sounds like Bernard Gagnon, Rozella's father. Hopefully he escaped…'

'Maybe Katya cast a disillusionment charm on him?'

'That'd make him a potentially useful witness…' Harry said tentatively. 'I'm going to ask Brick and Gabrielle to help track him down – might be easier to find an old Muggle in a wheelchair … and then we may find Rozella and Magda, too.'

'But not Katya,' Draco said. 'It's obvious Ephraim's known everything all along! He really is a fucking, inexecrable cunt.' He raised his eyebrows at Hermione, but she was thinking about the spell Dolores had cast… and Salvedra's curse. Thoughts… she had so many of them.

'And yet Katya's roses keep coming,' Harry pointed out. 'How many are needed to hear a message?'

'Thirteen. Three more and we have the set.'

Hermione shivered with cold and quickly cast a warming charm… the wind was whipping across the lake; waves slapping rhythmically against a line of boats tied up close by.

'Hermione?' Draco suddenly said, his voice ringing out… 'Has Ephraim said you look like Anna?'

His question caught her unawares. 'I – I don't know… possibly.'

'Don't lie,' Draco said tersely. A searing, incandescent whiteness jarred through him. 'He has, hasn't he? It explains … rather too much, actually.'

'Yes,' she said warily, 'at the opera. His usual nonsense… you know.' She felt strangely vulnerable, exposed. 'I doubt I look like her at all! He's just a weirdo fantasist…'

'You obviously do, though… Jeroboam knew her when she was a similar age to you and he thought so.'

'Well, I don't! If anything Gwen does, actually…'

'GWEN?' Draco shook his head, bewildered. Hermione closed her eyes, realising she'd slipped up… 'How would you even know that? When have you seen Anna? The only picture we have of her is scrubbed out!'

Hermione looked away.

'Please, Hermione. You forget I can see your feelings…' Draco begged. 'There's something you're not telling me.'

'Ephraim shared a memory,' Hermione said. '… Said it's what people like us can do.'

'What memory?' Draco asked, trying and failing to stay calm. She could see his whiteness flashing like an emergency siren, round and round.

'He was just showing off.'
But Draco's eyes had gone ice-cold. And she'd gone this far… 'Anna. Getting dressed. Ephraim watching…'

'Where?'

'… A bedroom.' Okay, so she'd said it now and Draco's panic wasn't just restricted to his inner whiteness – it was writ large on his face and in his eyes.

'The cunt.'

She rolled her eyes at Harry, hoping to play it down; but his expression was similarly grim.

'Anyway…'

'No. Don't act like it's normal!' Draco exploded. 'HE has colour-magic. And he knows you do, too. He's gone and opened that godforsaken-fucking channel between you we've been quietly panicking about. And then the first thing he does is whisk you to a post-coital scene with his ex-girlfriend - who he thinks you look like… NOT COOL AT ALL!'

'Draco,' Harry said, 'you're upset with Gunter and what he said and—'

'No, Potter. This is FUCKING serious!'

'Ephraim's pathetic,' Hermione said dismissively. 'Lost in some nostalgic fantasy… I'm just a passing whim!'

Draco shook his head. 'He'll take you! He's a man who gets what he wants.'

His words chilled her.

'And the worst fucking thing is yes, I SHOULD be upset... I SHOULD feel bad about my poor, bloody wife, I should be fucking devastated,' Draco said scathingly to Harry, 'but there's nothing here! He thumped his fist against his chest and his eyes were wet with tears. 'Just. NOTHING! … I must be a monster.'

Harry looked at Draco, concern shining from his eyes. 'It's okay… everything's just a bit mixed-up, that's all. We'll talk tomorrow… Let's get some rest.'

Draco looked at Harry and nodded, exhaling slowly. 'Thing is, I don't know where to go… I can't go to Malfoy Manor. I can't go to Shell Cottage. I obviously can't go and stay at your gaffe because Ginny might behead me or something…'

'Don't you want to come with me?' Hermione asked plaintively, reaching out her hand.

He clutched it tightly and held on, as though trying to stay afloat and his eyes glowed; pale silver discs in the moonlight.

'More than anything in the whole fucking world... if you'll have me. But I'm a bloody liability these days, Hermione.'

She smiled and pulled him close and his whiteness wrapped itself, warm and relieved, around her. 'I've got an idea.'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:
"TOUCH ME" by THE DOORS

"INTO THE FIRE" by THIRTEEN SENSES

"THE CURSE" by AGNES OBEL

"THE DROWNING MAN" by THE CURE

"OVER THE RAINBOW" by JUDY GARLAND

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
A Dream Itself is but a Shadow

Chapter Summary

A disturbing new front opens in the battle with Ephraim; Hermione’s personal problems mount…

50. A Dream Itself is but a Shadow

‘Am I Simply Modern or Classic and Elegant or In Between?’ Hermione asked Draco. She wielded an iPad with various photos depicting different styles of home décor and furnishings.

Draco was sitting on a chair in her parents’ kitchen and Jean Granger was frowning in deep concentration as she cut Draco’s hair.

‘Are we basing this off Wisteria Cottage?’ Draco asked, casting a cursory glance at the webpage on the iPad. ‘I can’t see a category for Eclectic and Ramshackle…’

Jean chuckled.

‘Furnishing Wisteria Cottage was a more ORGANIC process,’ Hermione said loftily. ‘Truth is, I’ve never been much into home furnishings. Always far too busy.’

‘Well… go for In Between then.’

‘Oh lordy. This is such a faff,’ Hermione complained. ‘It’d be easier to furnish as I go along… having STRANGERS do it all for you seems wrong somehow.’

‘But much quicker, Hermione,’ her mother said, ‘which is why anyone uses this service in the first place.’

‘And I have to choose for EVERY room!... Ah, that’s a nice living-room, though… Classic Transitional… the Glam is ghastly!... Gracious, what’s a Mid Century Industrial dining-room look like?... Oh. It’s okay, actually… Oh no, I have to do the bedrooms!’ She thrust the iPad at Draco.

‘Master Bedroom… what do you think?’

‘What do YOU think? It’s your house.’

‘But you paid for it. And it’s possible you and Scorpius will be living in it.’

‘It’s still your house, Hermione.’

‘I don’t even like it!’

‘It’s still your TEMPORARY house.’

‘Oh dear,’ Hermione sighed. ‘This is VERY stressful! There’s too many styles to choose from! Do I want Modern Transitional or Modern Retro? And what does Coastal Traditional even mean? Ottery St Catchpole’s miles away from the sea!’
‘Stop laughing, Draco, I nearly had your ear off…’ Jean muttered crossly.

Hermione turned a pleading face to Draco.

‘I can’t see you in that,’ he relented, pointing to one of the photos. He gave her an appraising look. ‘Or THAT. It’s cold.’

‘Which means… Modern Retro. Yes. That was my favourite.’

‘Why didn’t you just say that before?’ Draco laughed.

‘I need to get the keys from Shell Cottage,’ Hermione murmured. ‘I’ll pop there after this meeting in Whitehall.’

‘Harry’s there this morning if you want him to get them for you,’ Draco said.

Ron… she should speak to Ron, really. ‘Yes. I’ll ask Harry. Shall we move Henrik to… what’s this place called?’

‘FOLKVANGR – very appropriate, actually… Freyja’s heavenly garden in Norse myth.’

‘Who’s Freyja?’ Jean asked.

‘A very beautiful goddess… symbolic of love and fertility.’

‘This isn’t being reported as an attack,’ Robert said, pointing to a story in the newspaper, ‘but it matches your list of domains this Ephraim’s after. Two co-workers at the tourist office in Dolgellau – that’s at Cadair Idris - were found dead yesterday morning. The office was destroyed by fire.’

Draco read the article, hollow-eyed and solemn. ‘Why wasn’t this on the news?’

‘Maybe government’s trying put a lid on it?’ Robert said. ‘There’s been a lot of weird and wonderful speculation. Spreads panic…’

Jean Granger eyed them all with dark-eyed despair. ‘Except everything that’s been suggested isn’t half as weird and wonderful as the actual truth, Robert! A real-life evil wizard is killing people!’

Robert heaved a regretful sigh and looked out of the kitchen window. ‘Right. I’m going to mow the lawn while the sun’s out…’ But he returned moments later. ‘Your brother-in-law with the scar just showed up - with Neville. They’ve got two big packages.’

XXX

Bill had ventured to Wisteria Cottage and lugged the ‘Cadair Idris’ painting from the hallway, along with the old landscape painting from his sitting-room, to the Grangers’ greenhouse.

‘Fleur wanted these out of Shell Cottage,’ he said, standing the paintings against a line of buckets on a potting table next to Jean’s geraniums. They were covered in sacking.

‘I’ve done a bit of homework,’ he continued. ‘They’re well over fifty years old and were probably owned by my great-uncle, Ignatius Prewett. Both were painted with oils and varnished with Stypticus Solution. Hogwarts used this for headmasters’ portraits back in the day with a binding spell - Ligatus Viscotum. Stypticus Solution was commonly available then, but rarely used now … Might be what enables this Projection nonsense.’

‘What about the canvases?’ Hermione asked, fingering the edges of ‘Cadair Idris’. The back of the
canvas had been blacked-out… And Bill’s painting. The same…

‘Yes, I noticed that,’ Bill said ruminatively, scratching the Visp welts on his chin. They’d dried out but were still red and glaring. ‘I think it’s coincidence.’

‘Did you bring Encantadas Asturianas? I need to learn Salvedra’s spell.’

‘Well, we haven’t got time to do that now,’ Draco said, leading everyone back into the garden – away from the paintings. ‘Ernie’s boyfriend, Tim, sent us an urgent message last night, summoning us to the Cabinet Office in Whitehall.’

Bill looked worried. ‘Strictly speaking, by talking to the Muggles you’ll be breaking the International Statute of Secrecy.’

‘We’re aware of the irony,’ Hermione said in laconic tones. ‘But Tim understands our world. He’ll be discreet.’

‘Bloody hope so,’ Bill muttered morosely. ‘There’s zero chance of you making Minister for Magic, Hermione, if this gets out…’

‘Oh… I gave up on that a long time ago,’ Hermione sighed.

Bill gave her a querying look, then – ‘I’ve got to go and show my face at Gringott’s. They must think I’m dying, the number of sickies I keep pulling… Oh, and Harry arrived with our new Swiss friends earlier. They’d already allocated “domains” between themselves and flown off to monitor them by the time I set off for here. Very organised!’

‘Good,’ Draco murmured.

‘And Ron’s negotiating with Torquil for George’s release,’ Bill added in one quick breath as he prepared to Apparate.

‘He’s WHAT?’ Hermione cried.

‘Trading Krenzel… that’s the hope, anyway.’ And Bill was gone.

XXX

Tim ushered Hermione, Draco, Neville and Ziff into a small, wood-panelled meeting room in the bowels of the Cabinet Office building in Whitehall.

The busy workings of the executive branch of the UK’s Muggle government were above them, while a COBR Emergency session was underway a few doors down.

‘The Prime Minister was going to pop in for a chat, but events have overtaken us,’ Tim explained. He was trussed into a smart double-breasted blazer with shiny gold buttons. ‘Another attack I’m afraid; Northern Ireland. About twenty minutes ago.’

A set of TV screens at one end of the room was relaying live footage: a windswept concrete jetty with a crouched stone building at its far end, jutting into swirling seas; and a long line of emergency vehicles.

Tim blanched. ‘Ballintoy Harbour. Used to go there when I was a kid.’

A surly-looking, jowly man in a pin-striped suit swept into the room and sat down. He was followed by a lean, dark-haired woman in a tight pencil skirt and cream, silk blouse with
impressive shoulder-pads.

Tim introduced them as Henry Beaumont from ‘JTAC’ and Gretchen Dedlock from the Serious Organised Crime Agency.

Henry scowled at the TV screens. ‘Four dead. Café. Signs of struggle.’

Draco looked confused. ‘Struggle?’

‘That’s what I said.’ Henry regarded Draco with unalloyed suspicion. ‘Your lot.’

‘Are you sure?’ Hermione asked.

‘Blue.’

‘Who we waiting for?’ Gretchen asked in a clear-cut, bell-like voice.

‘Oh… Alenka Horvat. She’s from INTCEN,’ Tim said, ‘that’s the EU’s Intelligence and Situation Centre,’ he added by way of explanation for the wizards.

Neville’s eyes widened in horror. ‘Are they attacking Europe, too?’

Tim shook his head. ‘Alenka’s here to observe… we also have an attaché coming from the American Embassy. Ephraim’s still an AMERICAN citizen.’

‘Fucking Yanks,’ Henry grumbled. ‘Always late.’

‘I think we start without them,’ Tim said with a testy smile at his colleague. ‘The facts of the matter are these: only a tiny few of us from Her Majesty’s Government and security agencies know you exist… and those of us who DO know are in a difficult position. We reserve the right to defend ourselves but it has to be a clandestine operation; hence Mi5’s involvement.’ He nodded at Henry.

‘We’re neutralising Mr Golowitz’s UK assets,’ Henry said in clipped tones. He studied them with red-rimmed, puffy eyes – the eyes of an irascible, heavy drinker, Hermione thought. ‘That includes locations.’

‘Business or residential?’ Draco asked.

‘Both…’ Henry flipped open a file and traced his finger down a page. ‘Malfoy Manor. Tad egotistical to name your house after yourself, isn’t it, Mr Malfoy?’ he snorted. Hermione sensed Draco’s whiteness bloom angrily. ‘Our preliminary surveillance indicates your blasted magic stuff has the place in lockdown.’

‘You need someone with magical powers to break the wards. They’re very complex.’

Henry’s purplish lips inched into a thin smile.

‘Which I guess is where I come in,’ Draco added.

‘Precisely.’

‘Draco’s mother still lives there,’ Neville pointed out.

Possibly more than that… Hermione thought; an indiscriminate attack was out of the question.

‘Once the wards are dropped, what do you plan to do? A missile strike? A full armed invasion?…
A plague of locusts?’ Draco asked sarcastically.

Henry Beaumont gave him a withering stare. ‘That’s neither here nor there. We just need these WARDS down.’

Draco returned his stare; cool, grey-eyed. ‘You won’t act unless I give the go-ahead. My friend Mr Longbottom is right. I have to secure the place first.’

Gretchen Dedlock swiveled her head from the TV screens and examined Draco with keen interest, like he was an exotic specimen she was viewing for the first time.

‘And presumably you need to know Ephraim is actually THERE when you attack?’ Hermione added in crisp, forthright tones.

‘I’m afraid we can’t discuss Mr Golowitz’s fate,’ Tim said hastily. ‘We must first negotiate with our American allies… Her Majesty’s Government can’t be seen to assassinate a prominent foreign businessman on British soil.’

As if on cue, the rest of the party arrived. Decimus Clemans - a grey-faced factotum from the US Embassy who looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here - and a diminutive, middle-aged woman wearing an extravagant orange scarf. She introduced herself as Alenka Horvat.

‘We follow this Golowitz a long time,’ Alenka said in a loud, declamatory voice. ‘Much suspicion from time his wife, Iona, died in Spain five years ago.’

‘Senator Hart’s daughter?’ Mr Clemans asked, interest piqued. ‘Are you suggesting Ephraim killed her?’

Alenka shrugged ostentatiously, sending a cloud of dandruff flying from her shoulders. ‘There was death certificate, but no body… not the ONLY unusual occurrence at that address.’

‘Are you talking about El Sol y Ter?’ Draco asked.

Alenka arched a questioning look in his direction. ‘You know it?’

‘I visited some years ago. It was sold after Iona died.’

Alenka brusquely shook her head. ‘Nope. Left to daughter.’

‘Can we get back on-topic?’ Gretchen Dedlock said curtly.

Henry grunted his agreement.

‘You should know about another wizard who’s equally responsible for these terrible killings,’ Hermione quickly said before the conversation sped on to other matters. ‘Salvedra Otzoa-Azarola. Ephraim’s long-time associate.’ Hermione briefly explained his relevance, while Alenka studiously jotted down notes in a small, leather-bound book and Henry yawned.

‘Ms Horvat can handle him,’ Henry said in bored tones. ‘I want to discuss our plans regarding Mr Golowitz – here in the UK… Bank accounts are frozen…’ He glanced at Gretchen Dedlock, who nodded enthusiastically, ‘…with immediate effect - and we’ve issued a Stop Flag Indicator on his passport - so he can’t skip the country without us knowing.’

‘Except he can,’ Draco drawled. ‘Ephraim’s a wizard. Official International Portkey departures are recorded by the Ministry for Magic – which he controls.’
Henry Beaumont’s high colour deepened and he firmly crossed his arms, a disgruntled look on his face.

‘What can you tell us about Arcana?’ he said, changing the subject.

‘What do you want to know?’

‘Security infrastructure,’ Gretchen said, looking up from her phone. She levelled a long, dark-eyed gaze at Draco and smiled. ‘How can it be breached?’

‘I have the floorplan on file if you want and a detailed CAD design detailing entrance and exit points,’ Ziff interjected.

‘Deep entry would be best,’ Gretchen said, keeping her eyes firmly trained on Draco. Something in her tone instantly made Hermione bridle.

‘Well, I have the blueprints showing the configuration of the drains under the Arcana building - if that helps?’ Ziff said chirpily.

‘Yes, entry from the bottom up would be … exciting,’ Gretchen said, her focus remaining on Draco.

Draco cast a desperate, sidelong glance at Hermione.

‘What about staff?’ Tim asked uneasily. ‘Is there a regular night-shift?’

‘Which day?’ said Draco.

‘How about the weekend? THIS weekend?’ Gretchen asked.

‘Are you talking about blowing up Arcana?’ Draco asked her, eyebrows raised.

‘She definitely wants to blow something,’ Decimus Clemans snuffled, spittle on his lips.

‘There’s Muggle employees at Arcana too, you know,’ Neville said snappily. ‘It’s not just wicked wizards.’

Tim agreed. ‘There’s no question of any undue risks being taken, Neville. It’s imperative Mr Golowitz’s network of interests is substantially weakened – but we’ve enough indiscriminate slaughter already…’

‘I want clearance to discuss this with the relevant financial authorities before any action is taken,’ Decimus Clemans intoned. ‘Gilgad Inc has a large number of shareholders, including heavyweight institutional investors.’

Henry Beaumont shook his head. ‘We can’t authorise that.’

‘Can’t or won’t?’

‘Both. National Security is paramount.’

XXX

‘I hope that wasn’t too hair-raising,’ Tim apologised as he escorted them out of the building. ‘My colleagues are cynical shits. I’ll make sure you have plenty of warning about Malfoy Manor, Draco.’
'Just take Ephraim out,’ Draco said, teeth gritted in determination. ‘I’ll do what I can about Mother, obviously, but I don’t give a shit if the place goes up in smoke. As long as HE’s in it when it does.’

‘Leave us to find out when he’s there,’ Hermione said, thinking about the paintings.

Tim nodded slowly, digesting this. ‘The number I gave you, Draco, is my private line. Only use that and don’t respond to queries from ANYONE else. Is that clear?’

XXX

Parvati was at the Grangers’ house with Rose, Hugo and Scorpius when they returned to Parsons Green. They’d been visiting Uncle Derek.

‘We’ve had a lovely time,’ Jean said brightly, ‘Derek was really rather chatty!’

‘He says Rita’s going on a Rhine River cruise with one of her friends from the Bridge Club!’ Robert said, barely able to suppress a triumphalist punch in the air.

‘Bill had said her house was too tricky to secure and she should move in here - WITH US,’ Jean explained, as she pulled mugs from a cupboard to make tea.

Robert pointed his hand at his head in the shape of a gun and pretended to pull the trigger… Draco smiled.

‘You’re being very mean,’ Jean said in reproving tones to her husband. ‘Rita’s had a lot on her plate.’

Both Jean and Robert had to go to the Surgery and Parvati and Neville were heading back to Shell Cottage to work on the Corundum with Thelonious.

‘Thelonious is weirdly clever!’ Parvati told Hermione. ‘He’s working on a countermanding spell…. I’ve been relegated to technical support.’

‘I’m sure you count for a bit more than that…’

‘We could really do with Draco’s help. We occasionally manage to get random voices but we’ve no idea who we’re listening to.’

‘Can you bring the rocks here?’

‘Bill wouldn’t like that,’ Parvati grimaced. ‘It’s tricky, isn’t it?’

Hermione sighed so deeply she almost forgot to breath in again.

Parvati eyed her with concern. ‘Anyway, Henrik wants to come and see you. He’s perked up a lot but getting bored now everyone’s moved to the Blue House.’

‘The house in Ireland?’

Parvati nodded. ‘A couple of those *Rojos* are being posted there… They’re nice, actually – though Gunter’s a bit…’

‘Scary?’

‘I was going to say terrifying.’
Hoping the world wouldn’t suddenly implode on them for a few hours, Hermione and Draco took the kids to the park and then went shopping - with Draco and the kids spending a small fortune buying robot construction kits and related paraphernalia. This was followed by a trip to the cinema, where Hugo ate so much popcorn his tummy got too big for his shorts.

By teatime, the Grangers’ living-room had been entirely colonized by The Great Robot Project… This wasn’t going to be ANY robot, Hermione was informed, but something entirely original. A sort of Frankenstein concoction of multiple robot kits and various other parts that Draco and the children had ferreted out from the back of the garage, which, despite Robert’s much-vaunted renovation, remained a shrine to his inability to throw away ancient household appliances.

“This is going to be AMAZEBALLS,” Hugo said, eyes bulging with excitement.

Things were clearly getting serious when Draco – under Rose’s watchful gaze – started soldering various sections of the super-robot in the garden. They clearly harboured higher pretensions to scientific endeavour, discussing at length the electronic circuitry required to make it an unfeasibly high-functioning robot. Magic was strictly outlawed, even though Hugo begged Draco to make the robot ‘twitch’ a little.

By the time Parvati returned from Shell Cottage, the robot was fast becoming something many modern art galleries would happily term ‘quixotic postmodern’.

Parvati was duly impressed… ‘Draco’s pretty good at this sort of thing, isn’t he?’ she remarked to Hermione.

‘Maybe he’d have been an engineer or an architect if he’d been Muggle?’

‘I meant the kids,’ Parvati grinned.

Hermione smiled. It was true. Half of her wished it wasn’t because it made everything so damned complicated… Obviously, Rose and Hugo were unaware of their true relationship. Draco was just another family friend and Scorpius’s Dad.

‘There was a late edition of the Daily Prophet,’ Parvati said. Something in the way she watched Draco and the kids, a rueful look on her face, sent chills through Hermione. ‘They’ve published The New Family Act.’

‘Oh? Has that already gone through?’ New legislation was notoriously tardy...

‘This afternoon. With immediate effect.’ Draco was painstakingly hooking up a circuit board, designed to operate a karate-chop motion, while the children passed him tools. ‘You should read these statutes yourself, sometime, Hermione.’

‘Not today.’

‘No, not today…’

Harry arrived so Hermione left Draco and the kids with Parvati and Ziff - fully recruited to the Robot-building operation - while they ventured into the Grangers’ greenhouse.

Harry had bad news.
'We think one of Troyanda13 – Pyotr - has been killed.'

A sinking feeling descended into Hermione’s stomach.

‘Ballintoy Harbour?’

Harry nodded dismally. ‘He was sent there to look out for any trouble – looks like he found it. He hasn’t been in contact…’

That explained the ‘struggle’ Henry had mentioned. ‘Will Troyanda13 stay?’

‘More determined than ever! They’re very close. Like family.’

‘To all intents and purposes they are - growing up with their dysfunctional Dad... A bit like Fagin in *Oliver Twist.*’ Hermione thought of Scorpius’s favourite book.

‘Had any luck breaking into the pictures?’ Harry asked, switching attention to the shielded canvases.

‘Haven’t tried yet.’

Harry shot her a quizzical look. ‘What’ve you been doing all day?’

‘Oh, meeting Muggle spooks - and we had a nice afternoon with the kids.’ She felt almost guilty saying this…

But Harry gave her a thin smile. ‘Enjoy it while you can.’ He took a deep breath and picked up *Encantadas Asturianas.* ‘Okay… let’s see if we can tackle this spell.’

‘It might need colour-magic.’

‘No harm my trying, though.’ Harry scanned the page. ‘Damn. I forgot. It’s in fucking Spanish.’

Hermione shook her head. ‘Give it here…’ She tried to decipher the text as best she could… ‘Whatever you do, never say *that*…’ she pointed to ‘Quis es?’

‘Why not?’

The thought of Salvedra’s dark, gaping mouth, looking like he might swallow her whole, slunk unbidden into Hermione’s head. ‘Gives me the creeps.’

There were other words, slightly set apart. ‘I’ll try these and focus very hard on one of the paintings. Let me do it alone first. Keep watch.’

Harry swept aside the cover from the landscape that had hung in Shell Cottage and placed two chairs in front of it.

Hermione sat down and stared...

A cold, tickling sensation crawled up her back; like an ice-spider scurrying for cover... Were they being watched? She closed her eyes to latch onto any trace of colour. But, no… It was just her and Harry in her parents’ greenhouse on a warm, dusky evening.

Even so… ‘I’m nervous,’ she admitted.

Harry squeezed her hand tight. ‘Remember, your body’s out here – it’s just your mind that moves. I
'Okay…' she glanced at the script in *Encantadas Asturianas*. ‘I’ll think of someone… see what happens.’

‘Who?’

The rock or the hard place? The devil or the deep blue sea? Scylla or Charybdis?

‘Sylvestra,’ she said… choosing neither.

Hermione memorised and repeated the Spanish phrase, closed her eyes and focused hard … but there was nothing. Harry’s hand was hot and she had a fresh sheen of perspiration on her forehead. She heard a car-door slam on the drive and her mother exclaiming happily. And she could hear Draco and the kids laughing from afar – their voices carrying across the buzzing burr of Mr Smith’s lawnmower next-door.

London suburbia on a warm spring evening…

Hermione sighed heavily. ‘I’m too distracted… maybe I just say it in English?’

But Harry didn’t reply. And neither could she feel his hand…

Panic took hold. She gasped, feeling like her heart was being squeezed inside her chest.

She snapped her eyes open… Blackness. A complete void.

What had she done wrong? Was she dead?

But the black gradually lifted - like dense, clotted storm-clouds drifting slowly away – and she was gazing at a glossy, green field and the skies above were leaden-grey and purple. A tree dripped moss-green to her left. And it felt sticky, sweet… and yet the thrumming drone of Mr Smith’s lawnmower persisted.

But there was no sign of Sylvestra.

She looked down at her body. It looked like her. And yet it didn’t look like anything at all… She lacked substance, like she was made of light… She watched as her fingers trailed heads of corn.

Where had THOSE come from?

She looked behind her. A churning, thunderous sky with a malignant, queasy green tint.

But it was moving purposefully – so she walked towards it, rapidly, silently – apart from the chasing lawnmower. Her feet (if indeed, they WERE feet) whirred along in a purple haze.

A scurrying sound to her right!… What was that?

And a small, sneaking movement… buried inside a gaping, dark hole in a hollowed-out tree.

The tree loomed large and forbidding beside her; a hoary, brown, wizened thing; limbs long and knobbly.

She leaned closer, but the tree cracked and groaned and she felt a rushing wind shaking its branches, raking through her hair - and the steady plip-plop of raindrops… but not here. Behind her.
The hum and roar of the lawnmower swirled back into range… she was moving towards, yet away from it. Both in front and behind...

The ground was undulating and sodden underfoot and a brackenish stretch of water looped left, out of the corner of her eye, bounded by tall, grey rushes. The raindrops had gathered pace and a bed of shiny green lily-pads trembled under the weight of water… the rain was suddenly louder; her face wet and cold.

A tower rose up ahead – touching distance. Rough, grey stone; cracked and lined and coated in dense, dark ivy and a climbing vine woven tightly around its circumference.

A dark cleft was hewn into the stone, almost obscured by a heavy clump of foliage.

She hastened towards it, sharply aware of a presence close behind. Someone or something fast approaching…

She stepped inside.

Blankness. Black… Gradual grey.

A long, winding staircase circling higher and higher… was that a light flickering in an unseen breeze? High above her?

And a voice. A thin, reedy wail.

It hovered and swayed and curled around her… She felt suffocated. Scared.

No, she thought. I can’t stay. Even though she was suffused with a boundless pity that seemed to permeate every pore of whatever passed for her body here.

But something told her that if she ventured up that spiral staircase, it would be the end of her… She’d never come out again.

She quickly stepped backwards into the rain and the open skies and swung around… whoever was chasing her had moved on. She felt sure.

SYLVESTRA, she thought. Where are you?

She gazed right. A shadow loomed. Close to her face. She brushed it aside…

I can walk through this water, she thought. And she did. Skating across the surface towards a blur of green and blue and a shimmering veil that shivered in the breeze.

Where’s the wind coming from? she thought, eyeing the sky curiously. The rain was falling – a light grey sheet - but the clouds were fixed; immutable heavy things…

A shady figure moved across a space beyond the veil and there was the soft, tinkling of piano keys and then a slammed lid that startled her. An expanse of gold shone through the gloom… A long, gauzy crimson robe… and a hand – perfectly manicured – rested on a desk. Fingernails drumming impatiently.

Hermione suppressed a jubilant whoop … she’d done it! She’d found her.

Sylvestra, a sharp crease indenting the gap between her narrowed eyes, was peering at the painting.

A cold, black lick of fear washed over her.
‘Hermione.’ A voice in her ear. She gasped. ‘HERMIONE.’

Louder, determined.

Where was the buzz of the lawnmower? It was too silent.

‘DRACO?’ she called.

Yes. It was Draco… A bubbling whiteness surged and enveloped her and she was moving rapidly across ochre plains and fresh-cut lawns and writhing vines pressing down on her.

HERMIONE!

A tall, shimmering figure was standing on top of a hill. She ran towards it – towards Draco - and fell through the veil.

‘HERMIONE?’ Harry asked. His voice was urgent. Panicked.

‘I can’t see!’ she squealed. ‘Draco?’

‘I’m here.’ His hands were holding hers. ‘Blink,’ he commanded. ‘Keep blinking.’

‘Why?’ she asked, incredulous, not understanding - but she did as he asked.

Her eyes were streaming, but Draco wiped them and bit by bit everything became clear, solid. He looked at her, a dark, enquiring expression on his face.

‘Well that was fucking creepy.’

‘What was?’

‘Your eyes. They were black.’

‘BLACK?’ Like Sylvestra’s at Arcana… She craned to hear Mr Smith’s lawnmower. It had stopped. ‘It worked.’

‘You saw Sylvestra?’ Harry asked. He looked drained.

She nodded. ‘How long was I in there?’

‘Felt like forever.’ Draco swallowed hard. Only now did she realise how frightened they’d been.

‘Where was she?’ Harry asked.

‘Malfoy Manor,’ Draco replied. ‘Katya’s room.’

‘You saw her too?’ Hermione asked.

‘No. I just – just recognised where you were.’

‘So… you came in after me?’

‘Of course I fucking did! I used the other painting… But I was looking for you – not Sylvestra.’ He chewed his lip anxiously. ‘I know this is the right thing to do, what we NEED to do… but it feels fucking dangerous.’

‘I suspect it is.’
‘Maybe we need some kind of anchor? Something constant - that brings you back.’

‘I shouldn’t have left…’ Harry said guiltily.

Hermione thought a moment. ‘No, Harry – you weren’t the anchor. It was the sound of Mr Smith mowing his lawn next-door. I could hear it throughout … until I couldn’t.’ She smiled at Draco. ‘Thank you for coming …. Did – did you follow me to the tower?’

The weeping woman…

Draco shook his head. His eyes were dark and fathomless and for a moment his whiteness was blotched with black. He grabbed the sacking Bill had draped over the pictures and covered them from view.

*Just say it,* Hermione told herself. *Just say it…*

‘Draco.’ He reluctantly turned to face her, a slightly peevish cast to his face. ‘I think Katya’s at Malfoy Manor.’

‘Did you see her?’ Harry asked, astonished.

‘No…’ Hermione vehemently shook her head. ‘Not ACTUALLY there… but - in one of the pictures.’

Draco ruffled his hand through his hair and sighed. He turned to look at Harry.

But Harry remained confused. ‘You think she’s in a picture the way YOU were at Atalaya?’

‘Well… I can’t be sure, obviously.’ Draco’s whiteness was spinning – was it fury? Confusion? Was it a desperate desire to dive back into the painting and pull his wife out?

‘Bollocks,’ Draco swore in soft tones… looking at Harry, then the floor, then through the window-panes to the darkness falling outside. ‘Gunter saw her *Apparate.*’

‘He didn’t know, actually,’ Harry said. ‘But – it’s highly likely she did. It’s what any sensible witch would have done in the circumstances…’

‘Exactly,’ Draco said. ‘We don’t know where she is, Hermione. And it’s great – kind – that you want to find her so much…’ The look he gave her was both grudging and gratified – peculiar. ‘But when Salvedra stole *you,* he locked you into an EMPTY canvas… and we now know Salvedra was stuck in Atalaya when Gunter saw Katya.’

‘But Dolores was there and I suspect she’s close to Salvedra. She had a painting of Atalaya…’

Draco shook his head.

‘And remember Anna’s Curse, Draco! We now know Anna sent a Patronus when Salvedra came for her, meaning she forfeited her children – including Katya. Maybe Salvedra used Dolores to finally claim his prize?’

‘He hasn’t taken *Gunter,*’ Harry pointed out. ‘The curse likely died when Anna did…’

She looked between them. There was a fixed set to Draco’s mouth. And Harry appeared to agree with him.

‘Okay… maybe I’m just getting paranoid,’ she conceded. *You’re not, though, are you?*
couldn’t help thinking… you’re not… ‘But before the Muggles blow up Malfoy Manor – or whatever it is they want to do with the place - can we please check Katya isn’t going up in smoke with it?’

She recalled the sound of the voices – crying and screaming – as they destroyed Salvedra’s citadel. She didn’t want to mention this out loud… the memory of that moment stabbed painfully at her mind.

‘Of course,’ Draco affirmed - appeasing her.

‘Well. At least we know we can find Salvedra… Might take a bit of time and practice. But it’s very possible,’ Hermione said. ‘And we can keep an eye on Malfoy Manor – see when Ephraim’s there.’

‘I’ll come with you next time – once we make sure we have a reliable anchor.’ Draco gave Harry a shirty look.

‘Well, if Harry stands outside and keeps talking or singing or something…’

Harry looked aghast at this.

‘Sure… but not tonight,’ Draco said in firm tones. ‘Your Mum’s made lasagne… Looks fucking delicious.’

XXX

‘Being a sneaky fucker, I’ve wondered if I should have this conversation with you at all,’ Draco said.

They’d gone to bed late, making sure the children didn’t know they were sharing a bedroom, and then ‘sealed’ the room accordingly. They were lying cocooned in bed; naked, warm and close.

Draco smoothed her hair from her face and smiled. ‘It’s nothing terrible, don’t panic.’

‘Well, that makes a change…’

‘No, it’s just that I can count,’ he stated. ‘And I’ve been counting…’

‘Counting what?’

‘Well, this is going to sound super-creepy.’ His fingers gently teased her body as he talked; deft, tingling touches that sent her insides somersaulting with desire. ‘But - I’ve got a reasonable grasp of the female reproductive cycle. And … we fuck a lot.’

She couldn’t stop grinning…

‘Now, even the Slytherin in me knows… that’d be no way to woo a girl. And we’re getting dangerous…’

Hermione thought about yesterday’s Silphium tea… How long did it last? It was famously strong… She reached up and lightly brushed her lips across his. ‘Don’t panic. I’m fine, but I’ll visit Diagon Alley tomorrow.’

He stared at her and a strange tension arose between them as though they were both holding their breath, ambushed by a clamour of thoughts and feelings…
‘Thing is… ’ he breathed, ‘I really, really want to fuck you,’ and he dipped his mouth to hers, drawing her into a deep, succulent kiss.

‘Tonight?’ she murmured, but he was kissing her again, with greater urgency, his tongue sweeping against hers as his hand moved down her body, fingers brushing her nipples and circling her belly-button before nestling between her legs where he caressed her with increasing purpose.

‘Yeah… tonight.’ His eyes were dark and glossy as he gazed down at her…‘but, we can always do this instead, if you’d rather,’ he smirked cheekily, his fingers dancing and stroking.

‘That’s - too much,’ Hermione gasped, shocked at how super-sensitised she felt.

‘Okay…What about this?’ he breathed, his voice close to her ear.

‘Oh god,’ she whimpered, clutching his shoulder as he set to pumping his fingers inside her with ruthless determination – ‘You fucking gorgeous bastard,’ she choked, grinding herself forcefully against his hand. ‘No… Don’t stop…’ she stuttered, when he shifted position and trailed his mouth down her body.

His hands slid along her thighs, gently opening her out. She succumbed to the warmth of his mouth against her, moaning and writhing in pleasure… until a torrent of sweet sensation rippled through her; like she was bursting out of herself, spiralling into ecstasy…

She felt dazed; heart racing maniacally - and she could sense Draco lying beside her, trembling - his whiteness pulsing in bold, blinding flashes.

They entwined their arms around each other and knotted their hands in each other’s hair and kissed deeply, passionately; increasingly unable to fight the acute desire that swirled and tumbled through them, forcing the inevitable, urging Hermione to coil her body around his and let him drive into her with heart-stopping force.

They cried out in relief as their bodies and mouths locked together… then made love in long, sweeping strokes, building layer upon layer of soft, heated sensation; every touch and sigh and movement electrified.

‘Holy fuck…’ Draco groaned, chest heaving as he strained to calm down. ‘You feel amazing.’

A frisson of intense, exquisite feeling rolled inexorably through them … engulfing them in a soaring tumult of colour and sensation and raw emotion, faster and faster, until Draco grabbed her buttocks and was plunging deep and hard into her, overtaken by a fierce, fervid, all-consuming urgency.

‘That feels incredible…’ Hermione moaned, mind blown, stifling the urge to scream out loud against his neck.

‘Need to know,’ he rasped, face flushed. ‘I need to know, Hermione…’

But she was caught in glorious, dazzling rapture…

‘Can I come inside you?’ His eyes closed tight in blissful agony. ‘Need to know fast.’

‘Yes,’ she breathed, gripping him hard, and was lost in the throes of an explosive, white-hot orgasm that ripped through her with stunning velocity and power.

XXX
She’d screwed up. Screwed up BIG TIME… she thought over and over. They’d lost control. SHE’D lost control. Something she never used to do…

‘How long does a cup of Smartweed and Silphium tea last as a contraceptive?’ Hermione asked the apothecary at Mr Mulpepper’s in Diagon Alley.

‘Well, that’s not a typical combination,’ the apothecary said, eyeing her curiously from behind his thin, wire-framed spectacles. ‘Silphium is extremely rare.’

Hermione’s mouth twitched irritably. ‘At a guess…’

‘Like all tea solutions, it needs regular dosage,’ the apothecary said. ‘Probably lasts about a day… hard to say, really.’ Annoyingly vague, Hermione thought, shoveling her purchases with undue vigour into her handbag.

It was probably alright, she reasoned… after all, she wasn’t SLAP-BANG in the danger zone but she’d have to make up her ‘tea’ as soon as she got home.

She quickly swallowed a Queen Anne’s Lace seed before heading back into Diagon Alley.

It seemed so much itself it was odd to think that this world was slipping into hell-bound chaos with Ephraim and his cabal at the helm.

Parvati was waiting. ‘Sorted?’

‘Hope so,’ Hermione said under her breath, lost in thought.

What the hell was happening to her? she wondered. It was like she’d been unzipped from the inside, and a lifetime’s worth of raw, untapped emotion and longing and daring was just… flooding out of her. She was out of control…

And this passion, this intimacy, this constant yearning she had for Draco… It surpassed anything she could have even remotely imagined feeling in her former life.

She wanted him all the time – even NOW, when she was feeling pretty pissed off - to the point where she could barely stop sighing and her stomach was churning in a butterflied furor at the memory of his skin against hers.

She wanted to yell out loud that she loved him and he loved her. The strength of feeling raging inside of her almost made her teeth ache.

‘Hermione? Are you okay?’ Parvati asked, a quizzical expression on her face.

Hermione was pulled from her daze. They’d walked the entire length of Diagon Alley and were now sitting in The Leaky Cauldron and Parvati had returned from the bar with a pumpkin juice for Hermione and a sorrel soda for herself.

‘I’m fine,’ Hermione smiled, almost resenting Parvati for crudely pulling her out of her reverie into an enforced engagement with reality; meaning she had to push Draco from the front of her mind to the back, where he would remain as a softly-shining spectral presence until she was able to bring him back to the fore again.

‘Neville’s popping over,’ Parvati said. ‘Wants a chat.’

‘Great.’ … It already felt like she’d been gone ages. What were Draco and the kids doing?
Parvati gave her a serious look. ‘This whole business with Ron must have been very upsetting for you.’

‘Oh? Yes… dreadful.’ In truth, Hermione was barely thinking about him at all… Jesus. What kind of shit-for-brains was she? She’d killed her marriage and it ‘slipped’ her mind!

‘You have to be careful.’ Parvati’s face was a stern warning. She plucked a copy of yesterday’s Daily Prophet from her bag and placed it on the table between them.

Hermione inwardly groaned. All the stuff she’d hoped to avoid was staring her straight in the face. Ephraim. More Ephraim. Speculation about Silas Witchell’s whereabouts relegated to a lowly N.I.B. on Page Five. Oh. And Sylvestra… looking ridiculously fashionable modelling Madam Malkin’s latest range of Parisian robes.

‘Skip this junk,’ Parvati griped, spinning the pages to a news-story covering the recently-passed New Family Act.

‘This,’ Parvati said, stabbing her finger at a few paragraphs at the foot of the page.

Hermione had to squint. The type-face had been shrunk she felt sure of it.

Her first thought was that all these new laws and statutes – similar to the introduction of capital punishment - represented severance from United Kingdom Common Law.

But then she read on…

New ‘Muggle-born Stipulations’ pertaining to the custody of offspring in the event of separation or divorce… A coldness slunk through her.

In the interests of preserving a child’s magical heritage, where that child was born to a pure-blood (or half-blood) and a Muggle-born, the Muggle-born parent would not be granted custody rights of any description or duration.

‘BUGGER.’

‘Read on,’ Parvati said.

In the event of a separation – and any such separation would be defined by the ‘magical’ (pure-blood/half-blood) parent - there was a six-day exemption rule.

After six days, the ‘magical’ parent could demand the return of a child and apply for the Muggle-born parent to be banned from seeing that child, on the grounds that the child had been abducted and forcibly removed from their magical heritage.

Tears streamed slowly and silently down Hermione’s face.

‘Let’s get you upstairs,’ Parvati said briskly.

They were in Hannah’s room – though barely used now; but any further thoughts were crushed into dark oblivion by a weight of feeling pressing down on Hermione like an anvil to the brain.

The fact she’d been feeling annoyed with herself, with him, melted into irrelevance. Because her heart and soul had made a choice… And she’d chosen Draco. She wanted Draco… to live her future life with Draco.

In fact, it wasn’t even a choice at all… There simply wasn’t room in her heart anymore for Ron.
Indeed, she’d rather be alone than return to her past life.

‘I hope Ron doesn’t read this…’ she said, her cheeks wet with tears. She was frantically counting how many days she had left with the kids – or otherwise.

‘If he doesn’t, someone else will.’

Draco hadn’t seen this yet… A few days of blissful ignorance. What harm was there in that?

There was a scrabbling at the door and Neville came in.

‘Boy, am I glad to see you,’ he said. ‘I need a little steer on this Sub Rosa piece. I had a word with Draco yesterday, and we think it’s time we went full jugular. I want to know everything about Katya Malfoy and Ephraim’s past with The Geneva Group.’

XXX

Hermione returned to her parents’ house later than she’d hoped. Neville had been a bag of nerves, treating every word committed to paper as though he was signing his death sentence.

Draco had been home alone with the kids, but Robert had just returned from his allotment.

The Great Robot Project had taken shape while she was out and there was heated discussion on colour schemes and appearance. Draco had drawn the line at a straw bonnet and bow-tie, as proposed by Hugo, because it didn’t quite mesh with the post-industrial aesthetic that a robot naturally lent itself to.

Hermione made her special tea in the kitchen. She was unable to dismiss the glumness that had descended on her since reading the Daily Prophet…

‘What’s happened?’ Draco asked. He cast a desultory glance at the mug of tea in her hand.

‘Reality,’ she grumbled.

He moved the tea to one side and folded her into his arms.

‘Am I allowed to snog your face off with the kids next-door?’ he whispered, giving the open door to the living-room a cursory nod.

She twisted her hands into his hair and bent his face to hers, kissing him with an ardency that would have had them panting and naked had it not been for the high-pitched squeals of excitement and dispute hailing from the open doorway.

‘Fuck,’ he said in grating tones. ‘We need to talk about something, actually. Alone.’

XXX

Draco made sure the paintings in the greenhouse were covered up.

He smiled warmly - but his eyes, cool asphalt, told a different story. He leaned against her and exhaled a long, deep breath into her hair and kissed her on her forehead. A worrying grey was swirling through him.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked. She was struck by a vulnerability in him. It jarred through her with piercing acuity. There was a neediness within Draco that he did well to conceal most of the time.

‘We’re still going to the zoo this afternoon, aren’t we?’ she said, forcing a jocular tone that she
suddenly didn’t feel.

Draco gave her a crooked smile. ‘But am I even allowed to be around your kids, Hermione?’

She gave a surprised laugh. ‘Of course, you are!’

‘Don’t be so sure,’ he replied. He pulled out a thick wad of parchment, slapping it onto a table supporting Jean’s profusion of tomato plants.

It was a copy of the New Family Act.

Someone had scrawled ‘PERCHANCE TO DREAM’ in lurid green ink on the front cover.

Hermione instantly froze. ‘Who sent this?’

‘Dunno,’ Draco said gloomily. ‘Someone who’s read _Hamlet_… “To Sleep – Perchance to Dream; ay, there’s the rub.” It’s one of those moments when Hamlet considers topping himself.’

‘Have you read it?’

‘_Hamlet_?’

‘No... THIS.’ She pointed to the document.

‘The relevant passages…’ He leant against the table and folded his arms. ‘Have you?’

‘Parvati just showed me.’ She turned large, appealing eyes to him. ‘I hoped we could have one more day of feeling happy.’

He shrugged. ‘Better we BOTH know now… better we share the fact that our lives are doomed to shit.’

‘Laws can be changed,’ she declared, trying to sound upbeat.

He nodded soberly, but she could tell he didn’t quite believe that.

‘This act can be opposed on other grounds, too,’ she said in a tone of forced brightness. ‘It represents a major constitutional break.’

‘Perhaps…’ He was busy flicking through the document, found a page towards the end, and passed it to Hermione. ‘These last-minute clauses might upset more than Muggle-borns, actually.’

Hermione quickly scanned the page. ‘ALL divorces?’

He nodded. ‘A new seven-year rule… ANY couple, regardless of blood status, has to be legally separated for seven years before applying for a divorce. And look at this wee beauty…’ he stabbed his finger at the text. ‘You could almost think this clause was added for my particular benefit.’

It certainly seemed an unusual addition… Where a spouse was missing, current law stated that a person could be declared dead after seven years - at which point, the surviving spouse became eligible to remarry.

That law had now changed.

The surviving spouse was now INELIGIBLE to move on for _the remainder of their natural lives_, until the missing spouse was confirmed dead by both the Wizengamot and a panel of medical
experts at St Mungo’s.

‘Look, I know we haven’t really discussed this stuff and I’d hate to jump the gun… but if we continue this – this…’ for a moment Draco seemed overcome by uncharacteristic timidity.

‘Relationship, Draco,’ Hermione said in a clear, bold voice, ‘we’re in a relationship… it’s okay, we’re allowed to say it out loud.’

‘But I don’t just want to say it out loud,’ Draco asserted bullishly, ‘I want to shout it from the fucking rooftops! And that’s the problem! We’ve been put on lockdown.’ He held her shoulders making her look at him. ‘This fucking bullshit legislation kills you ever being with me, doesn’t it? From every bloody direction! Because even though I’m crazy about you, I’d never ask you to leave your children… I’d never expect you to choose.’

‘Well… we have to win. And change the law,’ she said, sounding feistier than she felt, because Draco was right: Ephraim and his legal lackeys had closed off every avenue. And it was PERSONAL. Even that conveniently tagged-on coda… was it Ephraim’s revenge for how Draco had treated Katya?

‘This makes me want to kill the world.’ She was barely aware she’d said it out loud.

Draco eyed her curiously. ‘… To kill THIS world.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘If we reverted to English Common Law as Muggles, or moved to a different jurisdiction altogether – France, for example – then the British Wizengamot wouldn’t have any hold over us.’

‘I’m not sure how you switch from one society to another,’ she said cautiously.

‘You just do it. Plenty have.’

‘And how exactly does someone fall out of OUR world, the wizarding world? There isn’t an official leaving ceremony! I mean… what exactly would that kind of thing require?’

Draco shrugged. ‘Lord knows! Breaking your wand in front of the Wizengamot? An oath to renounce practising magic?’

‘A life WITHOUT magic?’ She stared at him, incredulous, and then burst out laughing. ‘Oh Draco,’ she sighed, hooking her arms around his neck. ‘Maybe the best we can do is enjoy what’s left of today and worry about the rest another time?’

Bright sunbeams flowed through the glass ceiling above, lighting up his face, but she could sense darkness scything relentlessly through him.

XXX

‘Lie next to it,’ Scorpius urged his Dad, excited. They were in a covered walkway with a full-wall window facing into the tiger enclosure.

The tiger was lying next to the window, fully outstretched, its fur mashed against the glass.

Draco did as his son asked.

‘It can’t get you,’ Rose assured him. ‘The glass would stop it.’
'Oh good, and it’s a nice tiger,’ Draco said, eyeing the tiger’s huge face mere inches from his own with only a little suspicion.

Hermione looked at the children nervously. She remembered a story Harry had once told her about how he’d inadvertently vanished the glass barrier from a snake enclosure when he was a child – possibly at this same zoo?

‘Maybe you should get up now, Draco?’

‘Come and lie with me,’ he said instead.

Hugo and Scorpius pushed her to the floor. As a joint unit, they were surprisingly strong.

Hermione lay beside Draco and held his hand.

Draco turned his head to the glass and jumped. ‘Look, it’s opened its eyes! It’s watching us.’

She stared transfixed at the large amber eye of the tiger… And then Draco attacked her, tickling and growling, and the kids were apoplectic with laughter and screaming and she was giggling uncontrollably.

Hugo’s favourites were the penguins, but Rose preferred the Giraffe House… Two long-necked, gangly beasts of beauty looking incongruous, bowed by the confines of their space.

Hermione sat on a bench and watched them craning and stooping, desperately trying to communicate through a set of bars. She felt unaccountably sad.

‘Don’t worry, Mummy,’ Rose said. ‘I think they’re allowed to be together when no one else can see.’

Draco looked over at them and smiled, but the giraffes had made him sad, too. She could tell.

XXX

It was an unseasonably warm, sunny evening. Robert suggested a barbeque and spent a good hour trying to light it.

Draco had gone shopping with Rose to seek out the perfect paints and some other construction items to finish the robot. To Hermione’s surprise he’d borrowed her mum’s car.

‘I didn’t know you could drive,’ she said.

He seemed genuinely bemused by this. ‘I’m thirty-two years old! Of course I can!’

Ziff emerged, bleary-eyed, from the garage, and joined everyone in the garden.

‘I’ve been tracking Gilgad’s most recent communications using the Atalaya password.’ He had a concerned look in his eye. ‘Looks like special imports arrived last week from Egypt… delivered direct to a London address - a shop called Purge & Dowse, Ltd… I’ve looked it up and the place shut down years ago… is this connected to you guys?’

‘That’s St Mungo’s,’ Hermione said. ‘It’s our hospital.’

‘Didn’t you pay off the smugglers?’ Robert said to Draco, brandishing meat tongs in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other.
‘Not last week…’

‘Oh, these deliveries arrived by Muggle delivery networks,’ Ziff said. ‘There was a lot of chat about a trace in Egypt… I think magic’s been outlawed.’

‘There was a revolution a couple of years back so the authorities are paranoid,’ Draco said. ‘But this is worrying… I heard some weeks ago that even though Gilgad had mothballed an old site somewhere near Aswan, they still had operatives in the area.’

‘The messages we managed to hear off Salvedra’s rock - someone talked of “death in the desert” – I think it was Selwyn,’ Hermione sighed.

‘More children… more supply,’ Ziff pointed out.

‘Harry and Henrik were thinking of popping out to take a look around some time… might be too dangerous now,’ Draco said, thoughtfully.

Henrik himself turned up a short while later with Parvati fussing around him in case ‘he overdid it.’ Bill had tagged along, too.

‘We have a couple of things to talk about,’ Bill muttered to Hermione, joining them at the dining table on the patio.

RON business, Hermione thought, glancing anxiously at the kids. ‘After pudding.’

The Great Robot Project – a towering chaos of ugly splendor - had now been moved outside and was occupying a long trestle table.

‘That’s awesome,’ Henrik said. He was wearing a hulking white body brace and moved awkwardly. Hermione was grateful beyond words that he’d made this trip.

Draco was distracted over dinner, constantly googling the ingredients for the glues and paints being used to decorate the robot; occasionally dashing to the trestle table to sift out the cobalt blue, chromium green and cadmium red. ‘Use the quinacridone instead,’ he told Scorpius, who was longing for a bright red robot torso.

‘Have you told them its name?’ Rose chortled. ‘It’s the coolest name ever.’

Hugo looked a little forlorn.

‘Megatastic Roboticus?’ Ziff suggested, gleefully.

‘Nope, it’s Droscorpcion Hugamus!’ Scorpius announced with relish.

Hugo’s face puckered. ‘I didn’t fit on the big name…’

‘No, because you’re VERY important and have your own special word,’ Hermione said in placatory tones.

‘But it means nothing…’ Hugo grunted, scuffing his trainer against the leg of the table.

‘Oh, Hugo, you couldn’t be more wrong I’m afraid. It’s a complicated piece of etymology,’ Draco said, blinding the boy with fancy words that somehow sounded unbelievably rational and obvious. He pulled the boy onto the bench beside him. ‘Hugamus means “We’re HUGE” - Humungous. Amazeballs, even.’
‘So that’s what MY name’s for?’

‘Well, it wouldn’t work with anybody else’s boring ole name, would it?’ Draco explained in matter-of-fact tones. ‘Only Hugo could be Hugamus.’

‘Oh,’ Hugo said, eyes round with pride.

‘Yeah, I kind of envy you, actually,’ Draco said in a calculatedly offhanded way.

‘Me, too, wish I could be Hugamus,’ said Scorpius, looking like he truly meant it, whereas Rose giggled.

XXX

Before long, Drosccorpion Hugamus was looking resplendent in a shiny new coat of red, blue and green with fierce-looking white-glow shark’s teeth. A full demonstration of his amazing skills and feats wasn’t going to be possible until the paint was fully dried.

Draco seemed reluctant to sign it off as a done deed. ‘I think we could tinker with his neck movements – make him swivel rather than jerk,’ he told the kids and he carefully removed the control panel for this particular sector and set to attacking it with deep concentration using a pair of tweezers and a neat little instrument he’d bought on his earlier shopping trip. Ziff proposed a way to network the robot so that it could be controlled remotely while Parvati and Henrik were seriously trying Draco’s patience as they threw out ever more surreal suggestions for the robot’s next stage of development.

‘Ron would like to talk to you,’ Bill said to Hermione in quieter tones as they hunted for a corkscrew in the Granger kitchen.

‘I’ll come and see him tomorrow,’ she said tartly. She found the corkscrew buried at the back of the cutlery drawer.

Bill looked hesitant. ‘Maybe not tomorrow. He’s still trying to trade Krenzel…’

‘Oh. They haven’t taken up his offer? That’s a shame.’ For the first time she sensed a flicker of colour from him… a faint, brownish-burgundy. ‘I still intend to do this stupid anti-Jeroboam case for Ephraim, Bill.. or at least pretend to. Nothing’s changed. I’ll – I’ll contact him.’

‘Ron thinks you should return to Wisteria Cottage.’

‘Has he gone back?’ Hermione forced the corkscrew into the wine bottle.

Parvati and Draco passed through the kitchen with the kids. ‘It’s too dark to work on the robot now,’ Draco explained.

He cast a worried look at Bill and Hermione recognising the serious undercurrent to their conversation - and withdrew.

‘Not yet,’ Bill said, continuing where he’d left off once Draco had left the room… ‘But there’s no reason for you NOT to go home anymore. The painting was the problem; not the house. Having said that, it’s still safer at Shell Cottage.’

Hermione shook her head. ‘But Draco can’t stay there. Means I can’t, either.’

‘You still need to come and speak to Ron, though…’ Bill said tersely. ‘It’s the right thing to do.
You’re not doing yourself any favours hiding away like this.’

‘And I said I will!’ The tone of their exchange was getting tetchier. Hermione glanced out the kitchen window. In the distance, far beyond the rooftops stretching away from the house, a rolling grey cloud wafted across the face of the moon.

The dying embers from Robert’s barbeque glowed orange in the gathering gloom. Ziff and Henrik were laughing at the patio table. It was a contented scene… Parvati swept through the kitchen to join them, briefly raising her eyebrows in sympathy at Hermione as she passed.

‘When you come, I’d rather you didn’t bring Draco,’ Bill said. ‘It’s not personal … but I have to respect my brother’s wishes.’

‘I understand that. Although presumably if Ron isn’t in, Draco can be there? Parvati says they need him to decipher the corundum.’

‘Just – just send word ahead that you’re coming. Ron doesn’t want to play nice with the man who’s sleeping with his wife… makes sense I suppose…’

Hermione looked away to uncork the red wine-bottle but pulled the corkscrew with a little more force than necessary, splashing a few drops onto the sideboard.

‘Ron also wants me to ask you if the kids can come back to Shell Cottage tomorrow… he wants to take them to his parents for a family dinner.’ Bill looked decidedly awkward saying this… he wasn’t enjoying his role as go-between.

Hermione shot a look at Bill. ‘Is Ron telling them?’

‘I hope not.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘You might change your mind.’

‘I won’t.’ She poured them both a glass of wine.

Bill shook his head and sighed. ‘Ron didn’t deserve this. He’s been a good husband. He’s not perfect. But who is? Certainly not Draco.’

‘I know that, Bill,’ Hermione said coldly, passing him his wine. She pulled open the dishwasher to grab a few more glasses.

‘But surely you see that what you’re doing is unsustainable? Look, I don’t actually hate Draco. And I certainly don’t hate you. But I hate what you’re both doing and how this could affect my family and your children, who I love very much.’ He leant closer and said in a harsh whisper. ‘They’ve no bloody idea that this fun guy they’re happily making robots with is someone who could replace their father…’

‘He’d never replace their father, Bill. That’s nonsense!’ Hermione hissed in return.

‘Well, not with these new laws, no, that’s highly unlikely – if not impossible,’ Bill said with a nonchalant shrug. ‘But their attachment to their father shouldn’t be something that’s ordained by law in the first place.’

‘I agree.’ DAMN, he’d read the Daily Prophet… ‘Did you send something to Draco earlier?’
Bill gave her a perplexed frown. ‘No… What sort of thing?’

‘The New Family Act.’ She gave him an accusatory glare.

Bill’s hand moved to his visp stings. He stared at her pensively. ‘That wasn’t me…’

Draco was standing in the kitchen doorway.

‘There’s been a huge explosion in Central London,’ he said, locking eyes with Hermione. ‘They did it.’


‘ARCANA?’ Hermione asked.

‘Police saying it’s a gas explosion.’ Draco’s tone was cool, measured, but Hermione could sense his inner fluster. ‘It’s completely gone…’

‘Hold on… The MUGGLES blew up Arcana? SHIT!’ Bill blew out his cheeks. ‘This won’t go down well…’ He looked between Draco and Hermione. ‘You can’t have ANYONE know you talked to the Muggle authorities, is that clear?’

‘This wasn’t our choice. We were INFORMED, not asked,’ Hermione said pointedly. Her mind was reeling. ‘You’re certain George wasn’t being kept there?’

Bill nodded. ‘He was moved a while back.’

Hermione suddenly prickled with cold. She rubbed her arms for warmth. ‘I should feel happier about this,’ she said.

‘I know what you mean,’ Draco said. ‘This must be the first major attack by Muggles on wizards in Britain for centuries… let’s hope they don’t get a taste for it.’

EPHRAIM. Did he know?

‘Where are you going?’ Bill asked as Hermione swept past him into the garden.

Draco followed as she headed to the greenhouse. ‘We need an anchor. Hey! You guys!’ he called to Parvati, Ziff and Henrik. ‘Could do with some backup!’

With the lights on in the greenhouse, the Grangers’ garden outside looked dark and forbidding.

‘I’m NOT singing,’ Bill said, determinedly, once everything was explained.

‘You don’t need to sing… bang something on the table or whistle! Just make a noise!’ Hermione cried. ‘As long as we can hear you.’

‘Can we play music from my phone?’ Henrik asked, brandishing his mobile. ‘That way it’s on all the time.’

‘I don’t know,’ Hermione said. ‘Perhaps?’

‘We’ll try both,’ Parvati said, snatching Henrik’s phone and scrolling through his music collection. She alighted on a track and hit play and Ziff turned over some spare flowerpots, grabbed a trowel and a weeding fork, and set to rhythmically bashing them.
‘God, that’s dreadful,’ Draco grumbled, ‘there’s got to be another way… I doubt Salvedra has a backup band on standby every time he decides to go a-wandering.’

‘It’ll do for now,’ Hermione said, grasping his hand in hers in readiness. ‘Just don’t stop – whatever you do!’ she appealed to the others.

‘Shall we try it in English? I translated it,’ Draco said.

Hermione looked at the slip of paper Draco had fished out of his pocket – ‘To seek what lies within, and find what lies without.’

‘Okay… let’s go.’

XXX

‘Are you thinking hard about Ephraim?’ Hermione said primly to Draco… they’d been wandering through colour-soaked landscapes - vivid hues bleeding into dull, featureless wastelands - for what felt like an age and her nerves were starting to fray.

‘I’m trying,’ Draco grunted. ‘He’s not a man I like to dwell on…’ He suddenly stopped. ‘Malfoy Manor!’

They were standing at the top of a hill and nestled in the valley below, looking decidedly dolls house and a little misshapen, was a semblance of Malfoy Manor…

‘View from Folborough Hill,’ Hermione murmured. ‘I thought it was auctioned off at your mother’s wedding?’

‘Clearly not,’ Draco said. ‘It’s a bit rubbish…’

He was right. It was a lifeless, drab landscape compared to some of the wilder creations they’d stepped through to get here. Neat, characterless lines and an all-pervasive smudgy brown…

‘Where did it hang?’

Draco marched purposefully towards the edge of the painting and peered into a grey mushy void… he leant closer and for a brief, horrible moment, Hermione thought he would fall through.

‘It’s been moved… used to hang in the passageway by the kitchens, but it’s been shunted into the corner of my mother’s drawing-room… she just walked past,’ he said, his voice falling to a sigh.

‘Is he there?’

‘Someone walked away the moment I looked in… HERMIONE!’

Hermione scampered through the clanging, sticky grass towards him. ‘What is it?’

She squinted at the scene before her, barely able to make out the large white sofas and ornate fireplace of Narcissa’s drawing-room through a greasy, dirty-looking film.

Ephraim had entered the drawing-room with another man…

‘That’s the guy from the American embassy!’ Draco exclaimed.

Hermione felt a little sick. ‘Decimus Clemans…’
‘Shit. He knows everything.’

‘No. Not everything…’

‘Enough!’

Hermione thought back to the conversation at the Cabinet Office. When had Clemans arrived? She hoped it was AFTER they discussed targeting Malfoy Manor.

‘He knows that WE know all about Salvedra… but then Ephraim would expect that, I’m sure.’

‘We talked about El Sol y Ter… the house in Spain. They’ll consider that location a bust, I expect…’

Hermione suddenly felt cold and goosebumped. She craned her head to catch sound of the trashy Europop that Henrik seemed to have a surprising penchant for… there was a faint tinkling sound and a brash electro-beat and the steady thump-thump of Ziff on his makeshift flower-pot drum-kit… There was another sense, too. Something or someone else was here with them, she felt sure.

‘Arcana… we talked about Arcana,’ she said.

‘…which means anything incriminating or valuable might have been moved out.’

‘And anything could have been moved IN,’ Hermione added darkly, thinking about George. Panic fluttered inside her chest. ‘Oh, Draco… He’ll know that Ziff had the security blueprints for Arcana. And this will have confirmed that Neville’s working with us.’

‘Won’t take too much homework to know that Tim is Ernie’s partner… And this also means he’ll know for sure WE – and Neville – have breached the International Statute of Secrecy. We’ve conspired with the Muggles against the wizarding world…’

‘Pipe down,’ Hermione hissed. Ephraim was walking towards their corner of the room…

‘I doubt he can hear us.’

‘Sssh!’

The grey fog swirled and there was a loud, rushing sound… ‘Oh fuck. He’s not coming in, is he?’ Draco said, turning chalk-white.

Hermione watched, entranced, as Ephraim’s face loomed large – his cerulean blue eyes were enormous; she could make out faint flecks of grey on his iris.

‘Time to go, beautiful,’ Draco whispered, tugging her sleeve. But as they turned, Hermione felt certain she’d seen Ephraim smile and his eyes follow her as she hurried away…

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“LUCRETIA MY REFLECTION” by SISTERS OF MERCY

“BROTSJOR” by OLAFUR ARNULDS

"UNTOUCHABLE" by GIRLS ALOUD
“DANCE WITH ME” by DARIO MARIANELLI (from ‘Anna Karenina’)

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
51. Some Strange Eruption to Our State

‘Fleur’s given Hannah a calming draught,’ Hermione announced to Thelonious and Bill. ‘Harry’s gone back to the Ministry to see if he can find out more.’

Thelonious was sat at the kitchen table, head buried in his hands. ‘I can’t believe this has happened.’

‘I can, unfortunately,’ Hermione said. She should have sent a message to Neville last night after seeing Ephraim talking to the attaché from the American Embassy. But she’d assumed he’d returned to The Blue House or even here – Shell Cottage – for the night.

Instead, Neville and Hannah had stayed at The Leaky Cauldron. He’d worked long into the night on the next issue of Sub Rosa, covering Katya and Ephraim’s early work with The Geneva Group.

‘He wanted it PERFECT,’ Hannah had wailed.

But in the early hours, Aurors Dowson and Bennet had arrived, arresting Neville for treason.

‘You think it’s this Muggle business?’ Bill asked. ‘Not Sub Rosa?’

Hermione shrugged. ‘The duty clerk at the Wizengamot dungeons didn’t say… and there was nobody else about. I guess it IS Sunday.’

Most people were happily having a lie-in – much as she’d been doing with Draco - when Harry’s Patronus arrived, followed swiftly by Harry himself.

‘But surely Neville’s entitled to see a lawyer?’ Thelonious said, looking distraught.

‘Theoretically, yes… but we’re not in normal times anymore, are we?’ Hermione looked at Bill and Thelonious, a desperate look on her face. ‘I’ll try again tomorrow… He can’t be indicted without speaking to a lawyer and seeing as the Wizengamot’s on a Beltane break from Wednesday for three days…’

‘Three days!’ Bill erupted. ‘That’s not normal!’

‘No… it isn’t… but it means he has to be formally charged tomorrow or Tuesday.’

Hermione wondered what evidence would be used against Neville… Would they summon Decimus Clemans, a Muggle, to the Wizengamot to give evidence? If so, then Draco, herself and Ziff would also be in the firing-line; especially if they reviewed his Memories.

A sea of black moved past the kitchen window. It was Gunter and the remaining nine members of Troyanda13 - excluding their spy working for Ephraim - garbed from head to toe in mourning.
Hermione headed outside to speak to Gunter and offer her condolences.

It was a bleak, grey day and the wind was whipping their cloaks in their faces.

Gunter’s reddish-brown eyes looked sunken, making him look more hawkish than usual.

‘I heard about your friend, Neville,’ he said ruefully.

‘And I’m sorry you lost your friend, Pyotr.’

Gunter avoided her gaze. ‘He contacted saying he was too late to stop the attack… but was determined to challenge this terrorist – a young, dark-haired man - to a duel… Even at the end, Pyotr was a man of honour.’

Troyanda13 strode away to perform a private memorial ritual - but would then disband to continue their vigils over vast tracts of British territory.

Something in their gait reminded Hermione of a ‘posse’ heading out in a cowboy movie.

They parted to allow a sole figure to pass through their ranks. It was Ron; his mouth a twisted scar and his red hair bouncing in the wind.

He slowed when he saw Hermione, unsure of her response.

For a moment, Hermione wanted to turn and run.

‘Finally bothered to show up, have you?’ Ron said in droll tones.

‘Just dropped Hannah back from the Ministry… we tried to see Neville.’ Her voice echoed in her head as she spoke.

‘Any luck?’

‘No…’

‘What cell’s he in?’

‘F.’

Ron flinched and made a hissing sound. ‘Means he’s ultra-high security. They call it The Bin. Reserved for folks heading to Azkaban….’

‘Or the gallows.’

Ron gave her a sharp look. ‘That’s just to scare people… Won’t happen.’

‘But, legally, it can.’

Hermione gazed out to sea and sighed. ‘How did we get here? Just six months ago, everything was so NORMAL. And then suddenly it wasn’t.’

‘Are you talking about Neville and George being banged up and us on the brink of war with the Muggles? Or our marriage?’

‘Not everything’s personal, Ron; it might feel that way because we’re the ones living it, but while
we’re obsessing over our stupid, meaningless little lives - it’s all too easy to not notice that the world’s going VERY, VERY wrong.’

‘Problem with you, Hermione, is you’ve always lived in your own little bubble-world, with people who think like you and talk like you… and anyone who ever wanted to think or say different didn’t fucking dare because you’d chew their head off!’ Ron said vehemently.

‘That’s not fair,’ Hermione bridled. ‘I was worried – rightly as it turns out – that there was growing anti-Muggle-born feeling. All that constant yammering on in the papers about Muggle-borns getting all the good jobs… Warning signs.’

‘Dragging the fucking Muggles into our business is a really stupid way of trying to solve this, though,’ Ron said peevishly. The wind had picked up and his hair was being blown into his eyes. He pushed it away, a deep scowl on his face. ‘Neville’s been hung, drawn and quartered in the Prophet today… all sorts of crap about him being a foreign agent, conspiring with the Muggles to destroy us – and a great, big fuck-off picture of a hole in the ground where Arcana stood … I was there myself, yesterday.’

‘Yes. I heard you were cutting a deal.’

‘Just tryin’ to get George out their clutches, that’s all.’ Ron grunted in exasperation. ‘I mean they’re bastards. I totally get it. That Torquil’s a right stuck-up git. But loads of people like Ephraim – even Tana thinks he’s alright.’

‘TANA!’ It beggared belief… Tana was one of Ron’s more trustworthy, level-headed colleagues.

‘Thing is, there’s been worry for some time that us magical folk are screwed - going to die out - because too many are fucking off to live like Muggles.’

‘Then why push away Muggle-borns? We’re magical, too!’ Hermione tried to stay calm, measured – but her irritation was rising. ‘All we want is to be accepted.’

Ron gave her a piercing look. ‘I get that… I’m just telling you what ordinary folks are saying, those scared there isn’t enough to go round… Jobs, money… space. Magical families spend their lives – generations, really – building everything up, and then Muggle-borns swan in and rule the roost. It’s why Ephraim’s Right to Exist is popular. He’s telling people what they want to hear.’

‘But HOW he wants to do this is all WRONG,’ Hermione remonstrated. ‘It only works by turning on people…and provoking the Muggles.’

‘Wrong to YOU. But then you’re Muggle-born. Ask Malfoy what he thinks,’ Ron said, tight-lipped. ‘It’s what he believes in.’

‘It isn’t, actually. He thinks Ephraim’s Right to Exist is suicidal.’

‘Yeah… but that’s worrying about his own skin, isn’t it? Because the Muggles would thrash us.’

Hermione stared Ron directly in the eye. ‘Sure. That worries him, of course it does. But Draco’s more comfortable in the Muggle world these days. I sometimes think he wants to leave the wizarding world altogether… He’s had enough.’

Ron stared at her in stony silence. ‘LEAVE?’

‘I’d have thought you’d like that,’ Hermione smirked.
Ron’s eyes darted from side to side. He looked less pleased than panicked.

‘I mean, it’s not just wizards like Draco who are getting sick of it … the more that gets chucked at Muggle-borns, the more THEY’LL want to leave too,’ Hermione continued. ‘They won’t want to operate under wizarding law if it punishes them for being DIFFERENT.’

‘It’ll take a new Minister for Magic to reverse things,’ Ron asserted. There was a cold glint in his eye. They both knew what they were REALLY talking about… yes, Ron had read about The New Family Act. That was all too clear… ‘I thought that’d be YOU one day, Hermione, but you’ve thrown that chance away! Our society’s very judgey. Particularly with women… I mean, I look a right fucking tit at the moment – my wife’s knobbing someone and everyone knows about it and is too fucking afraid to mention your fucking name in front of me - but actually… I’ll come out fine! It’s YOU I feel sorry for.’

Hermione wanted to reply but her throat felt stopped up.

She couldn’t stop thinking how cold it was standing on this clifftop in the wind. And her eye was caught by a flock of seagulls swooping and diving over the sea.

‘Not often I see you stuck for words,’ Ron said in a grating voice, filling the sudden void that had opened up between them.

‘I don’t know what to say,’

‘Best we say nothing then, isn’t it?’

She folded her arms tightly around her. ‘It’s cold. I’m going back inside.’

Ron sniffed the sky. ‘Where did the Spring go?’ He walked alongside her as far as the house. ‘Is he here? Parvati said they need him to listen to that bloody rock they’re obsessed with.’

‘No. He’s at home.’

Ron shot her a look. ‘HOME? Malfoy Manor?’

Hermione flushed pink. ‘That’s not what I meant…’

Ron looked at her, eyes shining brightly and nodded slowly. ‘I see…’

‘I’ll make sure the kids are here to go the Burrow,’ Hermione called after him as he trotted away from the cottage towards the perimeter of the property – presumably to Apparate.

XXX

Bill jumped back from the window. Hermione suspected he’d been watching her talk with Ron.

Henrik was sitting at the kitchen-table with Thelonious, poring over a read-out of the latest rambling phrases and half-heard whispers gleaned from the rocks. Parvati was hovering by the stove, tea mugs at the ready. She beckoned Hermione over.

‘How was Ron?’

Hermione sighed and shook her head. ‘When did you arrive?’

‘Few minutes ago. I need to finish up some stuff with Thelonious.’ Parvati poured milk into everybody’s tea.
'I’ve got to fetch Rose and Hugo … They’re going to the Burrow for tea,’ Hermione said. She looked out of the window at Ron’s retreating form as he stomped purposefully away.

Parvati followed her gaze. ‘What about Scorpius? They’re inseparable at the moment.’

‘Oh. I very much doubt HE’s invited to The Burrow! But I’ll bring him here to play until Ron gets back from wherever he’s gone to - and then I’ll collect him later.’

‘Shame. He’d love it,’ Parvati said. ‘And Molly wouldn’t mind. She loves kids.’

Yes, The Burrow was just the sort of quirky, higgledy-piggledy kind of place a child would adore.

‘We’re moving to this modern monstrosity in Ottery St Catchpole later – Draco should be on his way there now,’ Hermione said. ‘It’s just a stone’s throw from The Burrow. Across a field… You’re welcome to join us.’ She saw through the window that Bill was chasing his brother down.

‘Well, legally, I have to. Scorpius is in my care,’ Parvati said, handing tea to Henrik and Thelonious. They looked dark-browed, anxious…

‘Hermione… You, Draco and Ziff - you have to stay very hidden,’ Henrik said, a worried frown on his face. ‘Instead of moving to this Folkvangr, maybe you move to this Blue House with the scary bastards in the red cloaks guarding it?’

‘Only two of them,’ Parvati said crisply. ‘Niko, and the fit one, Oleg…’

Henrik raised his eyebrows at her. ‘You think he’s FIT, do you?’

Parvati’s cheeks glowed. ‘I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it, would I? Gwen thinks so, too.’

Henrik sniffed. ‘He’s very smiley.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’ Parvati said archly. ‘Better than being miserable all the time…’

Henrik’s face puckered. ‘There’s a lot to be miserable about! If there wasn’t I’d – I’d smile all fucking day…’ he seemed to stumble on a thought as he spoke and his eyes circled the others… ‘we all would. I’m sure of it.’

‘Oh, I dunno. I’ve always had something of a melancholic disposition,’ Thelonious sighed.

But Parvati’s large, brown eyes welled-up. ‘My sister’s missing. And nobody bloody cares. And I feel like I’m crying inside half the time. And I did a really, really stupid thing having an affair with Ephraim - and I now hate myself for it, because I wish I’d just – just killed him, because then none of this shit would have happened. And Neville wouldn’t be in bloody prison… So seeing someone smile – for absolutely no reason other than it feels nice to do it – is bloody great.’

Hermione wrapped her arm around Parvati’s shoulders. 'We do care. I promise.'

‘But all I hear is George this, George that… and it’s terrible, truly terrible that he’s being kept hostage…’ Parvati wept. ‘But we don’t even know if Padma’s alive or dead.’

Thelonious held Parvati’s hand. ‘You’re brave and honourable and very, very strong. And you hold things together, Parvati - for all of us. I couldn’t have done this corundum work without you. And look how Scorpius adores you… all the kids, actually.’

‘Scorpius is a wonderful child,’ Parvati said, dabbing her eyes with a tissue that Hermione passed her. ‘He’s gifted. And kind. Even though he’s suffered more than a child ever should… I love him.
very much.’ She returned her focus to Henrik. ‘So pardon me for liking happy people, Henrik. But right now, I take any happiness I can get.’

Henrik gazed at Parvati open-mouthed. He looked like a small bomb had gone off inside of him and he was struggling to contain it. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘I didn’t mean to upset you.’ He tried to smile, but it came out as a lopsided grimace instead. ‘You can like the smiley man all you like if it makes you feel happier. You deserve it.’

Parvati took a deep, sighing breath. ‘I don’t FANCY him… that wasn’t what I meant.’

‘But you said—’

Hermione gave Henrik a hard stare and, what she hoped, was an imperceptible shake of the head.

‘Parvati,’ Thelonious cut in quickly, ‘do you want to explain to Hermione what we’ve done with the corundum?’

‘Oh. Me?’ Parvati looked surprised and pleased. ‘More YOU, Thelonious, but yes – Thelonious has found a way we can stay in contact using the rocks. We’ve got Corazon from Atalaya. That’ll stay here…’

‘Which means I will, too,’ Thelonious said.

‘And the French rock is going to The Blue House and…’ Parvati handed a small rock that Hermione recognised as the one Hulda had dropped at the campsite on the Isle of Wight, ‘…and this one’s for you. It’s small enough to be mobile…’

Hermione turned the corundum over in her hand, admiring how the metallic streaks striated the stone.

Thelonious pulled out a piece of parchment and passed it across the table.

‘To listen to THEIR conversations - when the rocks glow pink - you tap the rock with your wand and say: “Min ámán túúl áányì?”… I’ve written it down phonetically for you. It means “What lives in the water?”… Once you hear the message and want the rock to switch off, you tap it and say “Háhám ámán” – “The Water of the river.” But we used different passwords for when WE want to communicate…’

Parvati indicated two other words on the parchment. ‘We say “Dààrìl” – which is “Be Present” - and the rock then glows yellow – and we can leave a message. And say “Híssì” - which is “Voice” - to speak back.’

‘What language is this?’ Hermione asked.

‘Nobiin.. it’s what my ancestors spoke,’ Thelonious said, with a flicker of pride in his eyes. ‘Nubian… Similar to Sudanese.’

‘There’s been a woman ranting and raving on Corazon lately… sounds foreign,’ Parvati said. ‘Draco might know her.’

‘Draco might know her.’

‘Sounds like Dolores…’ Hermione said.

‘And a foreign man. But Bill says it isn’t Salvedra.’

Hermione pondered this. ‘Asusto… Gilgad’s chief assassin. I think he’s the one orchestrating these
Dark Flux attacks.’

Henrik nodded in agreement.

XXX

Hermione almost fell asleep in the bath… The water was cool and the bubbles had long evaporated.

What time was it?

She called out to Draco… but there was no reply.

She got out and headed into the bedroom. _Modern Retro_… it was much nicer than she thought it would be. She’d expected to see Draco sprawled across the bed, fast asleep. He’d made the long drive to Devon earlier today with her Dad and Ziff. Robert had been desperate to visit Folkvangr – curious to see what a remote furnishing service could come up with. They hadn’t hung around. Robert had clinic first thing tomorrow morning.

Maybe Draco had gone downstairs? Or braved The Burrow to pick up the kids? Parvati had communicated earlier, telling them Scorpius was attending ‘family tea’ too, and she’d go with the kids and walk back afterwards.

Hermione looked out of the window. She could see The Burrow across dark fields. There were chinks of light between the trees… She glanced at a clock on her bedside table.

Late… Maybe the kids were sleeping over?

The doorbell rang. Loud, insistent… Unnerving.

Why wasn’t Draco answering?

She huffily pulled open a bag of clothes and threw on the first thing to hand – a red silk slip - and wrapped a lilac dressing gown around herself.

Downstairs, it was still and quiet.

‘Hermione!’ It was Bill. ‘Open up!’

Hermione swallowed hard. It was dark, late – and Bill sounded agitated.

He tumbled into the house, followed by Fleur, pale and furious.

‘He’s got some explaining to do!’ she said tersely.

Hermione looked beyond them… Harry and Ron were standing outside the porch, looking awkward. Harry was staring at Hermione, hands on hips…

‘What’s happened?’ she asked – suddenly fearing the worst.

‘Draco’s at The Burrow and is being arrested. He was sent a note telling him that if he doesn’t go, Ephraim will take Scorpius instead,’ Fleur said with her characteristic bluntness. ‘Ron traded Draco for George. But then he felt bad about it because it meant luring Draco using Scorpius, so he told Bill who _also_ felt bad about it, and EVENTUALLY Bill told ME.’

She sneered at her husband. Bill looked red-faced, ashamed.
'It wasn’t meant to be The Burrow!’ Bill moaned. ‘Scorpius wasn’t meant to go there at all!... Ron was meant to take him somewhere neutral.’

Hermione felt like her insides had been thrown into her throat.

She didn’t know what to say, turning away from everybody and moving into the kitchen. The lights were on. The shine from the clean marble surfaces hurt her eyes...

There was a letter from Draco.

She picked it up, hands trembling.

Her heart turned over and she wanted to scream out loud in pain… But she didn’t have time for that.

She roughly pushed past Bill and Fleur and ran upstairs to what would be the kids’ room… ‘Captain Magic’. She needed ‘Captain Magic’…

‘What are you doing?’ Bill asked, trailing after her like a puppy who’d not only soiled the carpet but eaten it, too.

‘RON!’ Hermione called. He stepped into the house - shrunken, wary. ‘You obviously know you’ve been despicable… but I need to know how and when you’re getting George!’

Ron cleared his throat. ‘Ten – ten o’ clock… Blasters. They’re taking him to The Burrow. That’s when the exchange happens.’

Hermione stared at him with dry-eyed disdain. ‘So that’s when they ARREST Draco?’

‘Think so. Torquil just said Ephraim wants him home.’

‘HOME?’ Harry said quizzically. ‘Would Draco be under house arrest?’

‘Look! I don’t know! I panicked, okay? I just agreed with everything Torquil said… I just wanted my brother back.’

‘But as well as being a catatonically stupid and morally shitty thing to do, Ron, you didn’t even get any fucking guarantees!’ Harry groused. ‘There’s nothing to stop Ephraim whisking Draco away and the Blasters turning up empty-handed, is there?’

‘They could still take Scorpius as well!’ Fleur cut in.

‘Did you know about this when we spoke this morning?’ Hermione asked Ron heatedly.

‘No. But you said you were leaving the wizarding world. That you’d take the kids!’ Ron’s voice rose to a whine. ‘And when I met with Torquil, he said they’d lost track of Draco and wanted to bring him in; so – that was that.’

‘I didn’t say I was leaving the wizarding world at all… I said Muggle-borns were being pushed out. It’s not the same thing, is it? I was talking about these stupid fucking laws!’ Hermione turned away, sick of the sight of him. ‘I don’t have time for this – not now…’

She couldn’t wear slippers… Where were her boots?

‘But you said Draco wanted to leave…’ Ron persisted. ‘Which means YOU will.’
‘Has anyone tried Apparating to The Burrow?’ Hermione asked, ignoring Ron.

‘I have,’ Harry said sombrely. ‘Doesn’t work… shutdown.’

‘If you become Muggles, how will I see my kids? They’ll be MUGGLE kids,’ Ron asked urgently. He’d been thinking this through, Hermione realised.

‘You dare to ask me this when these bloody laws already outlaw ME from seeing them, because I’m not fucking “magical” enough?’ Hermione shouted, suddenly irate. ‘How fucking dare you? And how fucking dare you even think for one single moment I’d stop you seeing them! You’re their father, for Christ’s sake. They love you. I’m not a monster!’

She sat on the stairs to pull her boots on.

Ron looked at her and his cheeks were stained red with emotion. ‘No. You just love somebody else…’

Hermione looked up at him and her eyes swam with tears. ‘Yes, Ron. I do… I’m sorry.’

Ron bowed his head, digesting this. She stood up to go.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked anxiously.

‘I’m going to The Burrow!’

‘But, Hermione! Ephraim might be there… or this other scary freak everyone’s always going on about.’

She gave him a frank gaze. ‘I don’t care.’

‘We’ll ALL get him…’ Bill interjected. ‘It’s the least we can do.’

‘Troyanda13…’ Hermione murmured, thinking about the rock. ‘Who’s at Shell Cottage?’

‘Thelonious and Henrik.’

‘Do they know about this?’

‘Thelonious does…’ Fleur said. ‘He was there when Bill confessed.’ She threw a withering look in his direction. ‘You were lucky Henrik was having a nap!’

XXX

Hermione set off across the fields that stretched between the back of Folkvangr and The Burrow. It was a starless, ink-black night sky. The street-lights of Ottery St Catchpole pooled pale orange and fell further and further behind as she trudged through damp, uncut grass. Her bare legs were soon soaked.

A rushing sound and rapid, heavy footfalls… ‘You can’t go alone!’ Harry wheezed.

‘Then come with me,’ Hermione replied... Harry could do wandless magic.

A flurry of wings overhead and three red-cloaked men were walking towards them.

‘Hermione,’ Gunter said, holding out his hand to halt her march. ‘We’ve flown over the target. There’s three guards. Oleg here–’ Gunter nodded towards a tall, dark-haired man, ‘has already
contacted Parvati. She’s in a room on a higher floor with your children.’

‘And Scorpius?’

Oleg said something in either Russian or German – Hermione was too flustered to make sense of it – and Gunter brusquely nodded. ‘Yes. All three. Draco’s still downstairs.’

The five of them continued striding towards The Burrow.

‘Bill and Ron want to wait for The Blasters to arrive with their brother George before we make a move to secure Draco,’ Harry said. ‘The Blasters arrive at ten.’

Gunter checked his watch. ‘That’s… fifteen minutes. Your aim then is simply to make sure they don’t try and remove Draco or his son before the Blasters come. Ephraim is a dishonourable man and can’t be trusted. However, once the Blasters have arrived and they hand over George, we then attack and take Draco back.’ He pulled a blue ball out of his pocket and thrust it into Hermione’s hand. ‘When the Blasters arrive, use this … it will stop standard magic and we can then control the situation with La Luz – although, obviously, if you encounter problems before, you might not have any choice but to use it early… You squeeze it three times and say AUS to disperse GX61. Now. Repeat what I just said.’

Hermione did and slipped the blue ball into her dressing-gown pocket. ‘I should change my clothes!’ she muttered.

‘No!’ Niko’s small, blue eyes opened wide. ‘Better you look like you’re acting on impulse!’

‘The problem with Hermione detonating this thing to kill magic is it kills MY magic, too,’ Harry complained, dropping his voice. They were fast approaching the edge of the property and the crooked chimneys of The Burrow were peeking over the top of tall, freshly-blossomed cherry trees.

‘But Hermione and Draco can use La Luz!’ Gunter asserted.

‘Is Ephraim there?’ Hermione asked in a small, timid voice. ‘He has it.’

Gunter nodded. ‘But there are more of us… Niko and I have La Luz, too, remember? You are not alone in this, Hermione, okay? Oleg will immediately enter the house from upstairs to protect Parvati and the children.’

Hermione stopped in her tracks and gave Gunter a heartfelt smile. ‘Thank you for coming.’

Gunter brusquely nodded.

‘Did you see who’s inside?’ Harry asked.

Oleg and Gunter briefly conferred. ‘The elderly parents, two blonde women – but NOT Ephraim’s daughter - a woman with long, red hair and two, possibly three men with Ephraim.’


They arrived at a high hedge separating the field from The Burrow’s paddock. ‘Two of us will hide Bill, Fleur and your husband using La Luz,’ Gunter explained. ‘It’ll mean they can move about unseen and secure this George when The Blasters arrive.’

‘You know, it might be wise to have a neutral third party here when the Blasters come?’ Hermione suggested.
She quickly fished her corundum rock from her pocket and tapped it. ‘Đààríl,’ she muttered… She whispered her message, even though a Muffliato had been deployed. ‘Henrik, there’s a man who works at the Ministry for Magic… Julius Merriman… I met him a couple of weeks ago and I think he can be trusted…’ She relayed the necessary details and Henrik wished her luck, a regretful pang in his voice as they shut down communications.

Hermione could see a large, hulking woman with unkempt, straw-like hair patrolling the side of the house closest to them… Hulda, she presumed. ‘Where are the other two?’

‘One at the front … another round the back,’ Niko informed her. ‘You should move now.’

Hulda cast a strange, puzzled look at Hermione and Harry as they passed, but did nothing to stop them… Hermione realized she must present a bewildering picture in her short silk dressing-robe clutching a ‘Captain Magic’ teddy-bear.

A tall, lean man was lolling against the front door.

Hermione recognised him. Igor… supposedly spying for Draco these days, although their arrangement remained untested.

He gave them a thin, lugubrious smile and tapped on the door, slinking inside.

Harry gently squeezed her hand. ‘Remember. We’re *distractions*. Making sure there’s nothing fishy going on… Our job is to run down the clock until George gets here and… you know the rest,’ he murmured.

The door opened a crack and Molly’s face – grey and lined with worry – appeared.

‘Oh…’ she said, her eyes falling to the ground. ‘It’s you.’

‘I’ve brought Hugo his teddy-bear,’ Hermione said in loud, pealing tones, hoping her voice rang out, beyond Molly, into the kitchen. ‘I assume he’s sleeping over.’

Molly looked up and her eyes were full of tears. She gently shook her head. That one slight gesture told Hermione all she needed to know.

Molly knew about her and Draco…

Hermione thrust a shaking hand forwards, offering Molly the teddy-bear, but Molly didn’t touch it.

A large hand pulled the door open. The lofty figure of Grimm, who Hermione instantly recognised as the Dark Flux attacker at Parvati’s apartment, towered over them.

‘Aren’t you going to invite them in?’ Ephraim’s opulent, polished baritone resounded around the Weasleys’ overcrowded kitchen.

Hermione and Harry inched past Grimm into the kitchen.

A runtish, misshapen man, with a shiny pate and pink, porcine eyes was standing guard over Draco, slumped at the table. Hermione quickly dragged her eyes away, aware that Ginny and Arthur, both seated at the table - strewn with leftovers from dinner – were watching her. The hairs on her arm tingled as she passed the runtish man… Colour-magic. Damn. They had two…

‘Harry…’ Ginny said in soft, muted tones. Agatha Thrussington was beside her, to Draco’s left. She patted Hermione’s arm as she passed, but Hermione didn’t get a chance to engage, because
Ephraim rose to his feet and stepped forward, grasping Hermione’s hand with his own.

‘What a wonderful surprise!’ His eyes twinkled greedily.

**Distract, distract…** Hermione told herself.

‘Ephraim,’ Hermione gushed, planting a kiss on both of his cheeks. He was furnace-hot to touch and she could feel his blueness flare fierce and bright inside of him.

Ephraim was momentarily struck dumb. Hermione kept a firm hold of Ephraim’s hand and allowed him to lead her to the head of the table where he conjured a chair and wedged it next to him.

Portia Witchell, looking plump and prissy, was on Ephraim’s right, next to Ginny. She eyed Hermione with undisguised contempt.

Hermione’s heart sank when she saw the look of irate incredulity on the faces of Molly, backed up against the kitchen stove by Grimm, wand aloft, and Arthur, who was at the table, facing Portia.

‘I’m afraid you must give up your wand,’ Ephraim said in regrettable tones. ‘We’ve already relieved Harry of HIS.’ Igor had disarmed Harry and was urging him to sit next to Arthur.

Hermione chanced a glance at Draco…

He stared at her from under his hair which had flopped onto his face. A stream of blood had flowed from an open gash on his forehead and was staining his white shirt.

She tore her eyes away from him.

‘I don’t have it,’ Hermione said. ‘I came to bring my son his teddy-bear… otherwise he won’t sleep.’

Ephraim stared at her, lip curled in disbelief. ‘You wouldn’t leave home without your WAND!’

‘But I did…’ Hermione said pertly. She opened her dressing-gown to show she was only wearing a slip underneath. ’As you can see, I was on my way to bed…’

To Hermione’s astonishment, Ephraim blushed. ‘Where IS home these days?’ he asked, eyebrows raised. ‘You’ve rather complicated your domestic situation through your little dalliance with my stepson, haven’t you?’ Hermione could sense cold envy inside him. She knew he wasn’t expecting an honest answer… so she didn’t bother replying.

She snuck a look at Ginny, lips pursed, staring at her hands on the table in front of her.

‘How about some refreshments, Mrs Weasley?’ Ephraim beamed.

‘It’s really not necessary,’ Hermione bleated, turning to Molly. ‘I came to say goodnight to the kids… are they already asleep?’ she added, desperate for someone – anyone – to at least tell her that they were okay.

‘They’re okay,’ Draco said quietly. They briefly locked eyes. Hermione sensed a surge of concern, fear, frustration from him.

But poor Molly was in a complete fluster by now… flinging open cake-tins and pouring a range of sugary snacks onto a medley of plates, thrusting glasses of her much-fabled cowslip wine into people’s hands, whether they wanted it or not.
‘Where have you been these past few days, Hermione?’ Ephraim said airily. ‘I haven’t seen you since – well, since yesterday, actually – although that was a rather unorthodox way of SEEING somebody, wasn’t it?’

Even from three seats away, Hermione could hear Harry sighing.

‘Here and there,’ Hermione murmured, trying to sound casual.

‘An adventure, perhaps?’ Ephraim asked in a tone of forced jollity.

‘You could say that… I – I recently got back from Geneva.’

She could sense Draco and Harry recoiling.

‘Ah! Lovely city.’

‘I didn’t see much. I was visiting someone you may have even heard of, Ephraim,’ Hermione said, plastering a phony smile onto her face. To hell with it, she thought… ‘The son of your old girlfriend, Anna. You know. The one you betrayed to Salvedra.’

Ephraim stiffened and his eyes narrowed. ‘Gunter…’ Hermione could sense a dark chaos threading rapidly through him.

‘Have you met?’

‘Hermione…’ Draco growled in warning.

‘I went to Geneva for a hen party last year,’ Agatha Thrussington trilled. ‘Fab bar in the old town… can’t for the life of me remember the name…’

‘Nobody cares…’ Draco hissed, dismissively. His runtish guard suppressed a snort of laughter and pressed his wand against Draco’s neck to silence him.

Loud, stomping steps echoed down the stairs behind Hermione. She craned round to see Karl emerging into the kitchen.

Her heart-rate soared. He’d been upstairs with the children!

Karl tossed his master a nod.

‘Don’t panic, Hermione,’ Ephraim smiled, his hand warm on her arm, ‘the children are FINE… I have faults a-plenty. But infanticide isn’t one of them.’

‘They’re running late,’ Igor cut in. ‘Do you want me to chase them up?’

A shade of concern momentarily scuttled across Ephraim’s voice and he glanced at his watch. ‘Tell Zoltan to contact Auror One.’

Igor nodded and withdrew.

Zoltan Guldstern must be the man at the back of the house, Hermione thought quickly. Draco once surmised he had colour-magic.

She totted up the colour-magic tally: Ephraim’s team three; but they had four.

‘Well… isn’t this jolly?’ Ephraim chortled, raising his glass of wine. ‘How pleasant to finally catch
up with my errant stepson… shame he’s being marched straight to jail.’

So he was definitely being ARRESTED, Hermione thought, seeking out Harry’s eye… that was good news – of sorts. Although it involved the Blasters.

‘Yes, I’m afraid your lover, Hermione, has proved himself to be a faithless fellow,’ Ephraim said. Arthur a quiet, resentful presence to her left, visibly jolted. ‘Imagine conspiring with Neville Longbottom - of ALL people - against the wizarding world? Incredible… Although much of Sub Rosa has clearly come straight from Draco… not that I’m verifying a single word that filthy rag has propagated,’ he added hastily, with a stern look at Agatha, before returning his attention to Hermione. ‘I obviously knew Draco had you and Harry – even BILL - as his new playmates… but Longbottom, too?’ Ephraim turned to Arthur and Molly. ‘Heart-warming, isn’t it? From what I understand, based on foreign news reports – weren’t the Malfoys and your lot implacably opposed during the Second Wizarding War?’

‘Yes,’ Molly Weasley said. She shot a deadly look in Draco’s direction.

‘But that was a long time ago,’ Harry said. ‘Things change.’

‘But do people, Harry?’ Ephraim said. ‘That’s what matters.’

‘I’ve decided they do. Very much so.’ Harry fixed Ephraim with a cold-eyed stare.

‘Well, maybe you could destroy your reputation in one foul swoop and stand as a character witness during Draco’s trial?’ Ephraim said with a smarmy grin. ‘His list of charges will be LONG and the evidence compelling!’

‘What charges?’ Hermione asked, feigning innocence.

She could feel a shard of effervescent blue spearing her consciousness… ‘Must we play this little game, Hermione?’ said Ephraim. ‘You know full well Arcana was destroyed by the Muggles and that Draco and Neville planned it.’

‘But what proof do you have?’

Ephraim opened his mouth to speak… but changed his mind.

He looked between Hermione and Draco. ‘That’s not for me to say.’ A slow grin spread across his face. ‘That’s for Draco…’ Ephraim raised an eyebrow at the runtish, piggy-eyed man. ‘Josep… show everybody how we’ll get our proof.’

Josep laid his hand on Draco’s head and took a deep breath. Draco almost shot off his seat in sudden, piercing pain and for a moment it sounded like he’d swallowed his tongue…

‘Stop it!’ Hermione cried, panic-stricken, jumping up. ‘You can’t obtain evidence through TORTURE. The Wizengamot won’t stand for it!’

Ephraim cackled, rocking with laughter. ‘The Wizengamot will stand for anything I tell it to!’

A strategy formed in Hermione’s mind; it was risky – but everything was these days… ‘But it was ME! Not Draco… I went to see the Muggles, Ephraim!’

The smile dropped from Ephraim’s face. He firmly shook his head and pushed her back down again. ‘No, my lovely… Not you. It wasn’t you…’
‘But you know I did! The embassy man. Decimus Clemans. He told you! It’s silly to deny it,’ she said breezily. She placed her hand on his arm, forcing him to pay attention. ‘Ephraim, listen! YOU KNOW IT WAS ME. You’re arresting an innocent man.’

‘My dear, sweet girl,’ Ephraim sighed melodramatically, ‘maybe your perverse fancy for my stepson and the guilt – the terrible guilt you must bear for all you’ve done to hurt this good family – has completely addled your mind!’ He cast a despairing look at Molly and Arthur.

‘He’s right!’ Draco said, staring at her, dark-eyed. ‘You don’t know anything! It was me. JUST me. Nobody else.’

‘NO!’ Hermione shrieked. ‘It was ME. Not you! I’M the Muggle-born. YOU hate them… you hate Muddles like me. Everybody knows it! Why on earth would you side with MUGGLES?’

She gazed around the room… ‘I’m right, aren’t I? You could ALL of you testify to that, couldn’t you?’

Arthur squinted at her, open-jawed…

‘HERMIONE!’ Draco yelled… and there was a brief gusting of magic that seemed to trickle along the table… a couple of wine-glasses tottered and a few crumbs scurried in the breeze. ‘Shut the fuck up!’

‘But it’s the truth…’ She gave Agatha an earnest look. ‘You need to write about this in the Daily Prophet. That it was ME… And I’m SUB ROSA, too! It’s ALL me… I wrote every single word.’

Draco turned on Agatha. ‘You’ll do no such fucking thing, Agatha! You’ll write your stupid wank-piece about how fucking marvelous Ephraim is and say I was arrested – and there’s an end to it!’

Agatha stared vacantly at him. She turned to Ginny… ‘What do I do?’

‘Fucked if I know!’

‘You do what my stepson said – Hermione’s reputation is not to be tarnished,’ Ephraim said, ‘and while you’re at it, you can also mention the other rather disgusting allegation that’s hanging over Draco… murdering his own grandfather!’

Agatha nodded timorously, grabbed her wine-glass and swigged back her wine in one gulp.

‘No!… That WASN’T me!’ Draco snarled. ‘That was YOU. Or someone close to you!’

Arthur Weasley was shaking his head in disbelief. He looked frailer, older than Hermione had ever seen him. ‘I’m sorry but this is RIDICULOUS! Draco’s grandparents have been dead for years!’

Draco shook his head. ‘No, Mr Weasley… My true grandfather was a man called Voltimand. He was a Muggle-born… I first met him on the night of my mother’s wedding.’ He closed his eyes and pinched the top of his nose, momentarily gathering his thoughts. ‘He was murdered that same evening.’

‘Did you kill him out of shame because you’re a half-blood?’ Ginny asked, round-eyed.

‘No, Ginny!’ Harry said, sharp-toned. ‘Draco found his body. Ask Bill. He was with him…’

‘You tried to set me up,’ Draco said, glaring at Ephraim. ‘But you’re the fucking murderer… my grandfather and fucking shitloads of innocent Muggles – and it’ll be Muggle-borns, too, one day…
except you forget - you can’t pick and choose which Mudbloods live or die with Dark Flux… If we’d been just a few minutes earlier the night we found Voltimand then – then Hermione would be dead, too…’

The two men exchanged long looks. Hermione could sense that Ephraim was quietly smouldering with emotion and breathing heavily.

Ephraim cocked his head in Josep’s direction: ‘Josep. Go and check where Igor’s got to, would you? And swap with Hulda.’

Josep nodded and headed out, slamming the kitchen door so hard the candles on the table jumped and spluttered and Agatha’s empty wine-glass toppled over and smashed.

‘This is going to be very disappointing for your mother, Draco,’ Ephraim sighed. ‘She’s been very ill, you know.’

‘There’s been a nasty bout of Dragonpox doing the rounds,’ Molly babbled nervously.

‘Nothing like that…’ Ephraim scoffed. ‘She’s just… fading away. A mere wisp of a thing… Your arrest will likely hasten her demise.’

Draco had gone very pale.

‘He’s talking bollocks, mate,’ Harry said, ‘in fact, you talk a lot of bollocks, Ephraim. You’re one of those people who just love the sound of their own fucking voice…’

Ephraim stared at him with icy disdain.

‘And you, boy, lack common decency and good taste. We were speaking about my beloved wife!’ Ephraim roared.

Draco burst out laughing. ‘Don’t pretend for one moment you LOVE my mother… you’re screwing that po-faced skank over there while trying to get into Hermione’s knickers – which is fucking hilarious, because she despises you.’

Hermione could feel Ephraim exploding with rage, yet he maintained a cool, composed demeanor.

Molly looked to Arthur with frightened, desperate eyes.

‘Ignore him,’ Hermione said to Ephraim, ‘he’s just running his mouth off. It’s something he does.’

‘Stop trying to protect him all the time!’ Ephraim snapped. ‘I’m just warning him that a certain sad event looks inevitable!’

‘Oh, go ahead and kill her,’ Draco said bitterly. ‘You clearly want to…’

Molly gawped in shocked revulsion. ‘You can’t talk like that about your own mother!’

Hermione shook her head at Draco, silently pleading with him to stop.

‘I’ve already lost one parent,’ Draco said with weary insouciance. ‘Might as well lose both and start over… oh, and Agatha, just to be crystal clear – my father, who was quite a disgusting individual – as the friends he made clearly exemplify-‘ and he nodded in Ephraim’s direction, ‘died of Gimlott’s Disease. You got that? I can spell it, if you want?’

‘You should go now,’ Arthur said to Ephraim in a quiet, firm voice. ‘We don’t want any trouble.
We’ve had enough in our lives.’

Ephraim flicked a glance at his watch. ‘Soon enough…’

The front door swung open and Hulda - crazy-eyed and built like a giantess – stepped inside. Molly audibly gasped.

Hulda shook her head at Ephraim and his face clouded.

‘Mrs Weasley,’ Ephraim declared. ‘I apologise for my stepson’s crassness this evening. Not to mention his intrusion into your family affairs – quite unforgivable. Rest assured, he will be reined in… A bit of discipline is in order… Draco has done just about everything in his power to destroy me lately – vindictive, ungrateful little sod.’ Hermione could feel his burgeoning impatience with the Blasters’ delay … triggering a pent-up desire to strike out.

Ephraim flashed Molly a sanctimonious smile. ‘You should feel PROUD that Ron has shown himself to be such an upstanding citizen arranging this. He will be duly rewarded… But please accept this small thank you gift for your kind hospitality this evening…’ Ephraim bent his mouth to Hermione’s ear. ‘I hate to say this, but the next minute of your life might not be your best. Draco has to learn his place.’

Draco shook his head in disgust at Ephraim, his eyes glistening with malice.

‘Show him who’s boss, would you, Hulda?’

Hulda - all too happy to please - immediately bashed her clenched fist, the size and heft of a small boulder, against the back of Draco’s head with such furious force it slammed into the table and bounced back again - blood instantly spurting from his lip which had split.

Hermione gasped and tears sprang into her eyes. Hulda held Draco’s head back by the hair, his face smeared with blood - but Draco stared defiantly at Ephraim.

Harry instinctively stood up but Grimm prodded him back down with a sharp jab of his wand.

‘PLEASE! No violence!’ Molly squealed. Hermione noticed, with sadness, that Molly’s hands were shaking uncontrollably. ‘This is MY house…’

Karl tapped his wand rhythmically against the oven next to Molly… Bored psychopaths, Hermione thought. What could be worse?

Ephraim rolled his eyes, world-weary... ‘Again, Hulda…’

This time, Hulda forced her knee into Draco’s back and pushed him hard against the table… she dug her nails into his forehead and scraped them down his cheeks gouging deep red, scratches. Draco shuddered in pain but bit down on his lip hard, determined not to give either Hulda or Ephraim any satisfaction.

Hermione swallowed back tears, barely able to watch.

‘If you please, sir, you will stop this right now!’ Arthur Weasley shouted, quivering in fury. ‘I want you to leave!’

Ephraim leered at him and there was a very real sense of danger… Karl had stealthily closed in on Arthur.
‘I don’t trust this old man,’ Ephraim muttered darkly. ‘Sort him out, Karl.’

Karl pulled Arthur’s chair from the table and tethered him with an Incarcerous. Arthur wriggled like an eel, desperate to break free, but Karl swiped his wand through the air andArthur’s chair keeled over, crashing to the floor, bringing down Molly’s carefully-arranged shelves lined with jars of herbs and condiments as he fell.

Molly screamed and threw herself at Karl, but he swatted her away with a fierce, swiping blow.

Ginny instantly jumped up, eyes blazing, bristling with fury… ‘How dare you!’ she shrilled, but Portia immobilised her with a quick swish of her wand.

‘You’re the fucking DEVIL,’ Hermione hissed, shaking with rage. This was spiraling fast… where were the bloody Blasters? Would she have to deploy the GX61? But how could she smuggle the ball out of her pocket without Ephraim noticing? His thigh was jammed tightly against hers – a solid wall of fleshy heat.

She darted a quick look at Harry, who was clenching his fists – trying to stay calm. Maybe he was better-placed to detonate the GX61? She needed to send him the ball without Ephraim noticing...

She casually picked up her wine-glass and, using magic, exploded it directly in front of Ephraim. His face was drenched in wine and he had glass fragments in his hair, down his clothes… and in that moment she felt her pocket lighten.

Ephraim blinked in shock and wiped his face. He grabbed her roughly by the wrists, forcing her to cry out in pain as his hand grasped her bandage, and levered her onto his lap, pinioning her arms to her sides and gripping her legs between his in a powerful pincer movement.

‘Now then, my dear, such savage humour doesn’t suit you! Play nice.’ His blueness was all-encompassing: effervescent, gleeful, sparkling.

‘Get off her you filthy fuck!’ Draco thundered, jumping up and almost up-ending the table - but Hulda wheeled him around and smashed her fist into his face, again and again...

‘Stop it!’ Hermione cried... this was unbearable...

Agatha slapped her empty wine-glass against Hulda’s beefy arm, but Hulda zapped it away and crushed her against the wall with a single sweeping wallop.

Blood was flowing from Draco’s nose and he was panting hard. But he stared unflinching, at Ephraim’s face, bristling with hatred.

‘Not so pretty now, is he?’ Ephraim chortled, stroking Hermione’s arm. She writhed, desperate to release herself from his grasp.

‘Leave her alone!’ Harry bellowed, his face white with anger. There was a sudden surge of raw electrical energy pulsating through the room.

Ephraim glared back, but Hermione could sense his uncertainty...

‘I’m going to fucking kill you, Ephraim,’ Draco spat, wiping blood from his mouth onto his shirt-sleeve.

Hermione could feel Ephraim tensing. ‘If you talk like that to me again, son, I’ll have Hulda Crucio you so hard, your balls will drop off.’ He ogled Hermione. ‘He won’t be much use to you
then, will he, darling?’

‘Did you hear what I said?! I WILL kill you!’ Draco repeated. Hermione could sense his whiteness busting out of him – desperate to explode with monumental power.

‘Just … take him down!’ Ephraim roared, patience snapping like an elastic band.

Agatha and Molly both screamed as Hulda’s face cracked into a manic grin, teeth exposed. She cracked her knuckles and punched Draco in the temples with such force he almost flew off the chair… He scrambled to stay upright, feet skidding beneath him, hands grabbing the edge of the table.

Hulda hovered above him, fist raised to pummel him to the ground, but he swerved and swung his arm out, catching her chin – momentarily fending her off.

She roared in frustration, eyes bulging, and karate-chopped him in the side of the neck.

His face turned crimson and he gasped for breath.

’Harry! Do something!’ Hermione howled.

But Grimm had hauled Harry to his feet and pushed his wand so deeply into the hollow of his cheek, Hermione feared it would spear straight through to the other side.

But he had the ball…she could see it in his hand…

‘Monsters!’ Arthur bellowed from his prone position on the floor, desperately trying to lever his chair off the floor by grabbing at the last remaining shelf. But Karl smacked him back down.

Molly’s face seemed to swell with rage and her hair sparked. She swung her stout little body at Karl’s back, fists flying. ‘Get off him!’ she croaked, with shrill-voiced venom. But Karl spun round and whipped her with his wand and pointed it at her head.

Ephraim chuckled and slunk his arm around Hermione’s shoulders, drawing her close, as though they were watching a spectacle laid on for their amusement.

She recoiled at his closeness; the hot damp sensation of his breath on her cheek… and whimpered as he momentarily buried his face in her hair.

A ferocious burst of magic erupted like a shockwave from Draco’s side of the table… shattering the remaining crockery and wine-glasses into thousands of little pieces, hurtling towards Ephraim. He sprang up from his seat dragging Hermione with him.

The candles on the table, already dipping and wavering, extinguished, throwing everyone around the table into an ominous gloom. The only remaining light sources in the kitchen were the candles ranged on the sideboards and a lonely candle on the window-sill, swooping and swirling in a breeze.

Ephraim glowered at his stepson and sent a burst of colour-magic back down the table, throwing Draco against Hulda’s rock-hard body… the air in the room seemed to fold and shimmer… Hermione felt every hair on her body stand on end, as though electrified. Ephraim’s power shocked her…

There were shouts and cries outside and a whir and flurry of flashing lights – wands firing… The Blasters had arrived!
‘NOW, HARRY!’ Hermione screamed. But Ephraim slapped his hand over her mouth and muscled her tight into his arms… she could feel his magic pulsating through her.

Draco shot him a vicious look and another burst of magic, even more violent than the last, exploded across the table; it jumped and rattled and layers of wood were stripped away in long, splintering curls from the table and the chairs shook… He burst free from Hulda’s hold; but she kept her wand levelled at his head.

There was a sudden, bright blue flash and a flurry of blue vapour spiraled skywards – Harry had detonated the GX61…

Harry swiftly twisted out of Grimm’s grasp and head-butted him in the chin. Grimm gasped and stumbled, frantically waving his wand, which sparked and failed…

Draco, wreathed in glistening white, stared at Grimm - and then at Molly’s pots and pans and a heavy cauldron hanging from hooks in the ceiling beam. They wobbled, clanked and clattered and flung themselves at Grimm, bashing him to the floor.

Hermione could sense Ephraim vibrating with a mixture of cold-blooded fury and confusion. But also sneaking admiration… He hadn’t expected this of Draco.

Hulda gaped at Draco, her nose wrinkled in puzzlement.

Agatha took advantage of her lapse in concentration to swipe her chair from under her and batter Hulda with all her might, pushing her back against the front door.

‘Control Draco!’ Ephraim commanded Karl but Hermione summoned her colour-magic, a deep, dark violet, and instantly spun a gleaming purple vortex, whacking Karl across the chest and winding him. He grunted and fell against the table with a loud thunk. Molly threw a cast-iron skillet at Karl’s head, which he caught and threw back, intercepted by Harry…

‘Now, now, my lovely,’ Ephraim said, easing out a sigh. He put his hands around Hermione’s neck and pressed his lips to her ear. ‘You’re very new to this game… but the things I could teach you… Oh, Hermione… you’ve no idea…’

She could sense his magic curling its way deep inside of her… a luminous, blue snake, slinking and coiling itself, growing larger, more powerful. She shook her head, mute with fear, tears springing from her eyes.

He was putting her on lockdown, neutralising her magic by overpowering it with his own…

Draco loomed large and steely-eyed across the table, then surged towards them, dodging Karl and Harry who were physically brawling, scattering pots and pans and kitchen implements while Molly repeatedly smacked a frying-pan against Karl’s back…

Draco’s whiteness was wild; swooping and diving, chasing round and round…

Ephraim pushed Hermione to the fore. ‘You can’t kill me. I see you thinking it… I know you as well as I know myself…’ Draco’s eyes were dense black, staring. ‘If you try anything it will be UNCONTROLLED and it could go tragically wrong. I doubt you’ve ever killed someone before; you’d never forgive yourself.’

‘Oh, I’m getting rather good at killing people these days…’

Hermione summoned as much power as she could still muster… desperately trying to push pain
into Ephraim’s head. Pain and light… But she was blocked. Blocked by blue…

‘I’ll take her!’ Ephraim warned, ‘Wait and see, Draco!’

‘Over my fucking dead body!’ Draco yelled in return.

Ephraim laughed out loud. ‘Oh, I expect it will be, son!’

Ephraim threw up a shimmering blue shield… controlling its path with his hand… forcing Draco backwards, and levered Hermione towards the shadows of the staircase. She thrashed and screamed… but felt limp, powerless.

Hulda let rip a piercing cry and Agatha suddenly slid across the table. Hulda was on top of her, a howling banshee wielding a chair. She snapped the leg off with a loud crack and was about to drive a killer blow into Agatha’s chest when Harry threw a cauldron at Hulda … and the makeshift stake sank deep into Agatha’s shoulder.

Agatha screeched in agony, face puce, gasping for breath…

Draco clambered onto the table and seized Hulda by her hair, spinning her onto the floor… But she held onto his leg, toppling him after her, and then straddled him and let rip a raging, barbarous war-cry - a diabolical beast, slavering in fury. Her hands grasped his neck and she shook him from side to side.

Molly’s chin started to wobble and she burst into tears and to Hermione’s surprise she kicked Hulda in the back, over and over… ‘Get off him! Get out!’

‘Stop this, Ephraim!’ Hermione yelled at Ephraim. ‘PLEASE! You’re the only one who can!’

But he seemed frozen… his magic tightened its hold on her, squeezing her so hard she thought she might black-out.

Harry had finally pummeled Karl to the floor, but Grimm reared up from the array of pots and pans that had felled him, a sharp blade glinting in his hand… He grabbed hold of Molly, stopping Harry in his tracks…

Hermione saw that Ginny’s eyes were wide and staring… ‘Unlock’ she thought… and a prolonged, furious scream erupted from Ginny’s gaping mouth – a stream of shrill, raucous sound that resounded around the room… She leapt onto the table to help her friend, kicking Portia in the face.

Portia slumped head-first into a puddle of straw-coloured wine and mushed-up wood shavings.

Hulda threw Draco across the floor. His body skated across the tiles and crunched into Arthur’s over-turned chair. She advanced, breathing heavily, and kicked him with sharp, staccato-like brutality. Arthur bellowed at her to stop, pushed his feet against the wall and tipped his chair over, rolling onto Draco…

Sweeping, thunderous swathes of colour-magic were rumbling around The Burrow. Long, rolling waves of red and orange …

The colour-magic was so strong, Hermione felt her own magic stir inside of her, prickling her skin, like she was being pumped full of an oily swirl of heat, enlivening every cell of her body…

Ephraim took a deep, shuddering breath… ‘Who’s outside? Who came with you?’

‘People you should be fucking terrified of,’ she spat… her magic was slowly reviving, trying to
beat him back. Short, sharp pulses of energy…

‘This isn’t what I want, Hermione – you get that, don’t you?’ Ephraim said, twisting Hermione’s head to look at him. He held her face in his hands and his blue eyes burned into her. ‘You should let me get on with what I have to do… Right to Exist will benefit EVERYBODY if done my way… But others have intervened now… because you’ve pushed too far.’

She recoiled at the feel of his hands, warm and sticky on her face… she had to think, think fast, but her mind was ablaze with a brutish blue fire… ‘And I can push further! I have Memories, Ephraim, that I can submit to the Wizengamot. I can PROVE I colluded with the Muggles.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ Ephraim scoffed. ‘You can’t PROSECUTE yourself!’

‘Trials need witnesses.’

His eyes widened. ‘Don’t you dare!’

‘Then let Draco go. Let Neville go.’

‘If Draco goes to prison I can PROTECT him from those who want him dead… He’s outlived his usefulness,’ Ephraim argued, grinding his teeth. She could feel his spittle on her face… ‘And I can protect you, too, and those you love. My cause is a worthy one, Hermione. We can work on it together.’

His madness was so powerful, he glowed in the strange half-light.

‘Your CAUSE helps nobody… it’s based on threats, murder, hypocrisy. I want nothing to do with it – or you!’

‘But you’d have power, Hermione. Great power to do the things you want to do. To make the world a better place. You have my word.’

‘Your WORD? It means nothing…’ Hermione sneered. ‘You BETRAY people you claim you care for. You betrayed Anna, who warned you what following Salvedra could lead to – and now she’s dead.’

Hermione could sense his tumult of emotions, his conflict… years of pain and guilt. And doubt. Yes, there was doubt, too.

‘I gave up love for this cause, Hermione,’ Ephraim said. His eyes were large and glittering. ‘There’s no way back, only forwards.’

A bright, burning miasma erupted into the heart of the room - a roiling kaleidoscope of pulsating colour, weaving and gushing and filling the space…

It had to be Draco.

A bolt of incandescent white threw Hulda high into the air. She screamed - harsh, guttural – flailing helplessly, and flew through the window, shards of broken glass and wood spattering full-throttle in all directions.

A blast of colours was raging outside: wand and colour magic combined.

Hermione glimpsed Zoltan Guldstern spinning wildly through the air like a human tornado, irradiating an uncontrolled spray of colour-bombs that gouged craters into the ground and
peppered everything around him as he fell...

A stray blast pounded the front wall of The Burrow with a gut-churning crunch. A seismic tremor shook its foundations and a deep crack shot through the plaster of the kitchen wall, accelerating rapidly around the broken window-frame, fanning out into myriad tiny cracks around the door… the wall jolted and there was a harsh grinding noise as dusty, choking powder eased into the kitchen...

Everyone stopped and held their breath, followed by audible gasps and shrieks as the wall started to slide and crumble, turfing grit and pulverized brick and chunks of plaster into the air as it collapsed with a resounding thud.

Hermione was barely able to see as what looked like a fine snowy drizzle interspersed with heavy, white hunks of plaster rained down from the ceiling. A deep, cavernous crack was opening out above them and the beams creaked and the room swayed.

Amidst the frenetic stampede of shoving to escape before the ceiling collapsed, Hermione squirmed free and ran up the stairs; Draco was close behind. She glanced over the banisters. Harry was lifting Agatha off the table.

Through the landing window she could see a band of Blasters stepping through a veil of fine, grey dust that had billowed from the house, torches held aloft. There were bodies slumped on the ground…

‘George! George!’ Molly screeched…

‘Top floor!’ Arthur shouted from behind. ‘Quick!’

Parvati was ashen but calm.

The house was tottering… there was no doubt about it. But the room had been sound-proofed…

‘We have to get out,’ Draco said. ‘Mr Weasley, can we Apparate from here?’

Arthur was panting – clinging onto the door-jamb. His face puckered and he shook his head.

‘Draco!’ Rose spluttered, eyes wide in horror at the bloodied state of him, ‘what happened?’

He knelt down and held her close, although he was almost leaning on her in exhaustion.

‘I’m fine – nothing to worry about… we have to stay very calm… nice and calm, because there’s – there’s been an earthquake.’

Scorpius’s mouth was a gaping oval… ‘WOW!’

But Rose wasn’t convinced. She gently touched Draco’s face and frowned.

‘Is he alright?’ Hermione asked Parvati. She was stroking Hugo’s hair as he slept.

‘Did you give him something?’ Arthur asked.

Parvati shook her head. ‘An old sleep charm my Ayah taught me and Padma…’ Her voice tailed off. ‘Draco? Can you carry him? I don’t want him to wake up and——’

‘Sure,’ he grunted, edging up from the floor with Hermione’s help. His hand was warm in hers and she’d have loved nothing more than to fall against him and hold tight… But the house was
creaking and groaning and they had to move fast in case The Burrow’s haphazard, corkscrew structure fell apart.

There was a crashing sound behind the closed door.

‘The stairs,’ Arthur muttered, looking bereft.

Hermione dashed to the window, yanking it open. ‘This way… We can use cushioning charms.’ She slipped her wand from its hiding place pushed deep inside the ‘Captain America’ teddy-bear and focused hard, summoning Draco and Arthur’s wands.

She almost lost her footing as the house rocked and swayed.

This had to be fast, Hermione thought… She’d use colour-magic.

‘Got him?’ she asked Draco. He nodded, wrapping his arm tightly around Hugo.

XXX

The paddock was lit up by blazing torches, orange flames slurred and streaked against a black night sky, held aloft by many of the Blasters. They were clustered around Ephraim, who was talking to a tall man in dress-robes.

Hermione recognized the clipped, patrician tones of Julius Merriman and she sighed in relief. And another welcome voice… Tana McLaughlin.

‘This way,’ Arthur mouthed to them, leading away from the Blasters into a bushy undergrowth that stretched the length of the driveway. Here they could be close to the throng, but concealed…

‘You have to be quiet, darlings,’ Hermione said to Rose and Scorpius. Their small faces shone out of the darkness. Draco stood beside her. Hugo’s head rested on Draco’s shoulder and his arms wound around his neck.

Hermione spotted Molly huddled with George some distance behind the pack of Blasters.

Troyanda13 and Ephraim’s entourage – with the exception of Karl - had vanished.

Two Blasters lay on the ground, covered by cloaks.

Other voices were feeding in from the darkness…

‘Have you heard the news, sir?’ One of the Blasters shouted above the sudden clamour.

‘Mr Merriman was just telling me,’ Ephraim said, furrowing his brow.

‘Silas Witchell stabbed himself to death… apparently,’ came a harsh whisper from behind them.

Hermione jumped out of her skin. It was Ron, skulking in the thicket.

‘This is a matter, I believe, that requires urgent investigation, Ephraim,’ Julius intoned.

Ephraim agreed… ‘Shocking news. If you valiant people would kindly escort me to the Ministry, we can get on with that, right away…’ He looked at Portia, standing solemnly beside him. ‘I can barely imagine the agonies you must be suffering, my dear.’

Julius Merriman nodded soberly.
‘And it remains our objective, does it not? That we hold free and fair elections?’ Ephraim said, addressing Julius in particular. ‘This is the way forward for our great society.’

‘I hope you stand, sir,’ one of the Blasters said deferentially. Hermione recognized him as Hilary Osgood, Melissa’s husband – and she felt a little sick.

Another Blaster stepped forwards and ripped off his helmet. It was Auror Carmichael. Hermione sensed Ron wincing behind her.

‘I thought we were arresting Draco Malfoy?’

Ephraim scanned their surroundings.

‘We attempted to apprehend him, but a tussle broke out and we were intercepted by foreign interlopers.’ Ephraim’s face crumpled in sorrow as he gazed at the fallen Blasters. ‘Such cruel slaughters… they will not die in vain.’

‘But where is he?’ Carmichael persisted.

‘He got away,’ Ephraim said with a grimace. ‘And if he’s any sense he’ll STAY away – and any he closely associates with. Because be in no doubt, he remains a key suspect. I’ve no doubt our finest Aurors will be stepping up investigations into his collusion with the Muggle State. The fault is partly mine… I failed to see the warning signs - but there’s been mounting evidence for some time of his aversion to our own, to our glorious magical heritage… and his growing allegiance to the Muggle world. Maybe his shame at being a Half-Blood was too much for a fragile mind to bear?’ Ephraim’s voice faltered and tears shone on his cheeks, illuminated by the flickering, orange glow of the torches. ‘Be in no doubt, my friends. This pains me deeply. This betrayal… For I love him as a son. As my very own… And would wish him to know that.’

Hermione glanced at Draco, who was shaking with quiet laughter.

She put her fingers to her lips…

‘Where’s the scary bastards with the red cloaks gone?’ one of the Blasters, concealed under his helmet asked. It was Tom Bennet.

‘Disappeared,’ said another to Ephraim. ‘Them and the invisible fuckers… took out poor Toffit and Grieves, sir.’

‘That’s… deeply concerning,’ Ephraim muttered. ‘Has anyone seen Agatha Thrussington? I fear she might be in league with Mr Malfoy…’ he continued, a sour look on his face.’

Gradually, the Blasters peeled away and Apparated and with one final blue-eyed gaze that Hermione felt for one awful moment had spotted them, Ephraim joined them.

Molly and George stepped tentatively into the middle of the driveway and stared at The Burrow… a deep gash, like a lightning bolt, had been wrenched through the front of the building. A cloud of dust was still wafting through the broken window and the soft thump of falling masonry and the sharp crack of breaking beams echoed through the darkness.

‘My home,’ Molly said, shaking with tears and anger.

Ginny emerged from the bushes, Harry and Bill in tow.

‘You can’t stay here, Mum,’ Ginny said in plaintive tones.
Bill embraced George tightly. ‘Good to have you home, mate.’

Molly clung on to George. ‘All this time I thought you were in America!’

‘No,’ George sighed. ‘I’ve been in some godforsaken hole – literally – for a fortnight.’

‘We have to talk tomorrow, Mr Weasley. About your house…’ Draco said. ‘This is my fault.’

Arthur frowned. ‘Not entirely… But, yes, we can talk.’

Ron stepped forwards, a surly look on his face. ‘That’s my son you’ve got there, Malfoy.’

‘And he’ll still be your son in the morning when he wakes up,’ Draco said grumpily, hoisting Hugo into a more comfortable position.

‘Just don’t act like you’re their Dad… is that clear?’

‘And don’t ever use my son as BAIT,’ Draco said, in a voice that could cut glass.

‘Stop this, BOTH of you…’ Hermione remonstrated. She looked down at Rose and Scorpius. Both were listening, eyes round as saucers.

‘Well. I sorted it. It’s sorted…’ Ron said. ‘I did the right thing.’

‘The right thing?’ Arthur seethed. ‘Have you seen the state of our home? Of your mother? And that poor young woman who came along tonight and has been rushed to a healer?… You call THAT sorted?’

‘Anyone seen Hermione and Draco? Oh, there you are…’ Harry said as they joined him on the driveway. ‘Can’t be arsed to head to Paris – I’ll stop at yours tonight if that’s okay?’

‘Harry?’ Ginny said. ‘Aren’t you coming to Shell Cottage?’

‘No. Hermione’s… You coming?’

Ginny shook her head. ‘Those wizards in red already took Agatha to Bill’s.’

Ginny hadn’t looked her in the eye. Not once, Hermione realized. She sighed inwardly. And when she’d grinned at George, he’d given her the briefest of smiles in return and looked away. Someone must have told him while she was fetching the children…

It wasn’t surprising… And the truth was, everyone had been amazing tonight – defending a man they despised, because it was the right thing to do.

She couldn’t expect much more than that.

‘Rosie! Look at what the earthquake did!’ Scorpius pointed at the gaping chasm in the front of The Burrow.

Everyone turned and stared.

‘No, silly…’ Rose said in hoity-toity tones. ‘Your Daddy said that so we wouldn’t be scared. It was the BAD WIZARD.’

Scorpius looked crestfallen. ‘I told you he was bad!’ He looked dark and serious.
Rose looked at Draco with large, sorrowful eyes. ‘Are you hurting?’

‘Only a little,’ he said, trying to smile as much as his bashed-up mouth allowed him. But there was a rush of emotion that transmitted to Hermione in a rolling cloud of silver-tinged white.

They started walking away from The Burrow. Bill walked with Ron, just behind. Parvati and Harry ahead.

‘At least he didn’t take us away,’ Rosie added.

‘What do you mean?’ Draco asked.

‘The bad wizard came and told us he’d take me and Scorpius if you didn’t come. But that if you came, then we wouldn’t have to – not this time.’

‘Not any time, Rosie,’ Draco said. ‘Not ever.’ He exchanged a worried look with Hermione.

‘Good, because we don’t want to... I don’t want to go back.’ Scorpius sucked in his lower lip and looked for a moment like he might cry.

‘We won’t be…’ Draco squeezed his shoulder.

‘Why did he want YOU, Rose?’ Hermione asked tentatively.

‘Because he asked me stuff and then said I can see things. And that’s special.’

Ron looked physically sick…

They struck out across the fields.

‘Well, you’ve nothing to worry about,’ Hermione said, taking both children by the hand. ‘There’s no bad wizards where we’re going.’

‘We need to talk about this, Hermione,’ Ron said under his breath, looking stricken.

She shook her head at him. ‘Not tonight.’ She wondered if Ron was going to try and walk all the way back to Folkvangr with them… But when she looked back, he’d Apparated.

Bill shuffled after them, limping. ‘I’m so sorry - about everything…’ he said to Draco.

‘To be honest, Bill, I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,’ Draco said, his mouth a hard, thin line. ‘Do you mind if we leave the postmortem until tomorrow? We’ve got a load of stuff to be thinking about…’

‘Too right,’ Harry grinned. ‘Ephraim’s going to regret standing down tonight – because he did. He chickened.’

Scorpius made a silly chicken sound and Rose burst out laughing and joined in. They strutted ahead towards the lights of Folkvangr, clucking as they went.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"BLINDED BY THE SUN" by THE SEAHORSES
"HELP I'M ALIVE" by METRIC

"COLOSSUS" by IDLES

"WHEN THE SUN GOES DOWN" by ARCTIC MONKEYS

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
The Insolence of Office

Chapter Summary

Beltane Bonanza, Election Fever and a dangerous desert mission…

52. The Insolence of Office

Naked, writhing limbs, coated in a gleaming sheen of sweat, an opaque pall of long, tousled hair fanning out over his face… the bed-sheets were crumpled, falling to the floor.

‘I wish she’d bloody move,’ Hermione grumbled. ‘I want to see who’s underneath her.’

She glanced at Gunter. His face was as red as the cape he usually wore. He gurgled something non-committal.

‘Oh! They’ve shifted! Was that a glimpse of his hair?’ Hermione asked excitedly, ‘sort of sandy brown, would you say?’ But the man’s face was buried in Sylvestra’s breasts.

‘I think we’ve seen enough now,’ Gunter muttered in stiff tones.

‘I’m not a voyeur!’ Hermione said, horrified. ‘It’s important to know who she’s shagging!… Where are they?’ She squinted through the gauzy grey ‘veil’ that separated them from the unreality of the picture-space and the bedroom where she’d tracked Sylvestra down to. It certainly wasn’t the sort of bedroom one would expect in Malfoy Manor, but plain, with a single bed and an armchair.

Through the window she could see clouds scudding rapidly through a pale sky - no landmarks – and a sweeping flash of brown… regular, metronomic… skirting the top-left edge of the window.

‘Come on!’ Gunter pulled her back into the picture. ‘Man has the stamina of an ox,’ he grumbled.

‘Gosh, Gunter. You’ve no qualms torturing and murdering,’ Hermione said, remembering Senor Canaro, ‘but a bit of rumpy-pumpy and you’re like a squeamish schoolgirl.’

‘This is one of the lovelier pictures we’ve been through,’ Gunter said, looking around. This was the first time he’d ever done Proyección Astral… His reddish eyes were bathed in saturated pink from an abundance of roses...

The garden was bathed in a soft, white light, dappling a crisscrossed network of paths. Tall, arching trellises interwoven with climbing roses of every hue, framed the multiple entrances to the garden – five in all – leading to a pentagonal fishpond. Plump, golden fish teemed in its coppery depths and clear, sparkling water tinkled from an ornate fountain.

A marble statue at the pond’s edge - a woman swathed in a flowing toga, hair swept into an elegant chignon, left hand resting on a truncated classical column – lifted her gaze towards the veil and beyond.

‘She looks like you,’ Gunter remarked.

They walked through the garden to a shady arbour, passing a glass house with tall stained-glass
windows. The interior was inviting – light, airy space shot through with a multiplicity of jewel-like colours… a sumptuous couch draped in furs and silk.

‘Set for a lovers’ tryst,’ Hermione murmured.

Gunter gave the glass house a cursory look and accelerated out of the picture.

XXX

Draco was in the kitchen making tea.

He listened in silence, hands on hips, as Hermione recounted in elaborate detail their remarkable success in tracking down Sylvestra, expressing disappointment that they never learnt the identity of her lover.

Gunter was cringing as she spoke, inching towards the door.

‘It just went on and on, didn’t it?’ Hermione said brightly.

Gunter nodded, eyes downcast.

‘Well… poor guy was probably at that soul-shrivelling stage with her… kind of hard to get beyond,’ Draco sneered, dark-browed.

‘Oh god, I forgot!’ Hermione recoiled, swamped in peevish envy of Sylvestra’s sleek limbs and perfect curves.

‘So had I. Best left that way…’

‘YOU’VE had SEX with that woman?’ Gunter asked Draco, open-jawed.

Draco curled his lip in disgust. ‘To my eternal shame... Anyway, we’ve more important things to talk about than Sylvestra’s rotting soul. I had a call from Igor… Zoltan’s dead. Hulda survived – just.’ He looked particularly cross about this. ‘And Ephraim’s taken control at the Ministry – no fucking surprises there – but – and this IS a surprise - he meant what he said about an election. Flyers being posted to every wizarding household – not here, obviously.’

He swirled the teapot and poured tea into a line of mugs and grabbed milk from the fridge.

‘And I’ve had Tim on the phone…’ he gave Hermione a meaningful look, ‘…managed to push back a Muggle attack on Malfoy Manor for now.’

‘You’re in a very bad mood, Draco,’ Hermione said with a fond smile. ‘Come here.’

She delicately blended in the thick daubs of dittany that were smeared in congealing lumps all over his face. She’d fetched some from Wisteria Cottage this morning, popping to the kids’ school on the walk back, blaming ongoing family crisis for their absence. She’d told Draco to rest, but that hadn’t been possible. Henrik was noisily shuffling bags and boxes into the house, Bill was frantically setting-up wards and the children were running up and down the stairs screaming with laughter.

‘Not improved by you and Gunter spending the morning at a fucking peepshow!’ Draco muttered grumpily.

Gunter’s stern face cracked into a grin. When he smiled he looked a different person, Hermione thought. ‘I’ll give the others a hand,’ he said, slipping away.
‘It was a very BORING peepshow,’ Hermione said. He winced when she encircled him with her arms.

‘Ribs...’

‘You need to rest; get yourself better.’

His face softened and his hand slid to the small of her back and he pulled her flush against him. ‘I’m not completely broken … Could do with some distraction from the inevitable descent of Weasley world on our beautiful sanctum…’

She flushed pink and glanced at the kitchen clock. ‘Unfortunately, I’m going up the hill with Gunter to practice conjuration and that cool invisible thing they did last night.’ She gently brushed a kiss against his swollen lips. ‘And there’s no way the Weasleys will be coming here… don’t you worry.’

‘As long as your fucking idiot-husband doesn’t show up,’ Draco growled, but she silenced him with another kiss.

XXX

Ron was almost the ONLY Weasley not at Folkvangr when Hermione returned from the hillside with Gunter – weary but exhilarated after three hours of practicing colour-magic.

She’d learned a lot. Gunter’s voice: Focus and flow, focus and flow… rang in her ears. He’d recommended a few ‘shortcuts’ – adapting spells she was accustomed to. ‘Helps give your magic a structure, a vocabulary… Niko’s different. He’s completely given to La Luz – a purist.’

Hermione and Gunter entered Folkvangr by the back gate that led straight from the fields passing The Burrow.

The children were giving Arthur a demonstration of Droscorpion Hugamus. Arthur was moving a little awkwardly after last night but doing his best not to show it.

Draco was beetling between the garden - answering Arthur’s endless stream of questions about the robot - and Henrik and Harry were pretending to sketch a plan on a large sheet of paper on the dining table.

Fleur sauntered over and seized a pencil. ‘Draco… tell me where to put everything.’

Draco explained to Hermione that Tim wanted an in-depth sketch of Malfoy Manor. ‘I’m also trying to pinpoint where we had landscape paintings.’

This was a splendid distraction from Molly, George and Ginny – seated upright on the sofas, staring with glassy fixedness at Draco and the others. Parvati was perched uncomfortably on an Eames-style armchair.

At least Ron wasn’t here…

‘Milton visited,’ Draco said. ‘Scorpius was over the moon.’

Henrik shook his head in wonder. ‘Wow… I mean, you folks are fucking weird enough, but that elf! Super-creepy but kind of cute...’

‘He’s a total bastard, actually,’ Draco grinned. ‘But he’s been more of a Dad to Scorpius than I
'ever was.'

‘Don’t be silly,’ Fleur chided kindly.

‘Parvati – we need refreshments over here,’ Henrik said.

‘I’m not YOUR bloody house-elf, Henrik Thyssen,’ she said prissily, though her eyes were smiling. ‘Get them yourself.’

‘Strange furniture,’ Molly said in a choked-sounding croak to Hermione.

‘Nice, though.’

Everyone nodded in silence.

‘I’ll – I’ll get more tea… and biscuits?’

‘I’ll give you a hand,’ said Harry. Draco watched enviously as they left the room.

‘Why’s everybody here?’ Hermione asked Harry.

‘Courtesy call?’

Hermione laughed nervously. ‘Oh god, this is terrible…’

‘It’ll be fine.’ Harry briskly popped the kettle on. Like herself, he slipped easily into Muggle ways. They were minimising magic to ensure electrical appliances and devices worked.

‘I didn’t have any more luck at the Ministry,’ he said sourly. ‘Neville’s not allowed visitors.’

‘HELL.’

‘Ron’s trying this afternoon… and Tana McLaughlin says she’ll keep an eye on him for us.’

When they returned to the living-room, Ginny pointedly shuffled along one place on the sofa so Harry felt he had to sit down, facing Hermione. It was torture listening to the others having fun drawing Malfoy Manor behind her…

‘Jesus, exactly how many bloody rooms were there in the west wing?’ Draco said, scratching his head.

‘Windows all fixed,’ Bill declared, gambolling down the stairs. He squinted at the map. ‘You must have spent your childhood getting lost, Draco.’

‘In more ways than one…’

Arthur had come in from the garden and was watching. ‘Did you each have your own drawing-room?’

‘Well, this was – IS – my mother’s. And this is the Garden Room – which overlooks the drive. And there’s a queer little boudoir HERE,’ Draco pointed to the diagram, ‘though I’ve never known anyone to actually sit in it. And … and there was THIS one. But we stopped using it.’ His voice dropped…

‘But that’s where the Wedding Breakfast was held,’ Bill said.
'I don’t think Ephraim knows its history.'

Hermione twisted around and momentarily caught Draco’s eye…

Draco traced his finger along a higher floor. ‘This wing was out of bounds because of my father’s Gimlott’s. Stuffed with old paintings I imagine, and over here…’ he indicated the ‘family’ section of the house, ‘there were some old paintings along the corridors, but not landscapes, mainly portraits.’

‘What about the study?’ Hermione asked.

‘Snaggle-tooth Malfoys.’

‘Oh yes,’ she grinned.

‘Anyway, Milton’s doing an audit to fill in the blanks.’

‘There’s definitely a picture here,’ Bill piped up indicating the Garden Room. ‘I know this because I was lurking by the fireplace waiting for Ron at the wedding and the door was open—’

‘Schmaltzy floral crap in there if I remember,’ Draco grunted.

‘Pink hell…’ Bill grimaced. ‘Didn’t quite fit….’

‘Did it have a fountain? And a statue of a lady?’ Hermione asked in jocular tones, thinking about the picture from earlier.

Bill nodded hard. ‘That’s the one.’

Hermione hadn’t expected him to say that…

‘We were IN it this morning!’ Gunter gawped.

Draco threw Hermione a confused look. ‘But you didn’t think it was Malfoy Manor.’

‘It wasn’t!’

Draco gave Hermione a hard stare. ‘Do you think it’s possible to PHYSICALLY enter the pictures and move around?’

Hermione pondered this a moment. ‘You mean Sylvestra’s taken a picture somewhere else?’

‘Yes… so she can transit to her lover’s house…’

Hermione stood up, thinking she should try.

‘No!’ Draco said, ‘… not until we know how it works.’

‘Or IF it works,’ Fleur said, ‘there’s no mention of that in Encantadas Asturianas.’

‘Sounds rather frightening,’ Molly said.

‘It’s not that different to Apparating,’ Bill said with a shrug.

‘Mum and I are moving over to this Blue House tomorrow,’ George suddenly said to Hermione, catching her off-guard. It was the first time he’d actually looked at her. Ginny was still unable to bring herself to and had sat straight-backed and uncharacteristically taciturn throughout.
‘Oh! Well, that’s probably for the best… in the circumstances.’

Molly’s face puckered and for a moment she looked like she might cry.

‘Dad’s staying here,’ Ginny said. She’d ALMOST looked at her then, Hermione thought, but her mouth was tight as a gin-trap.

‘Not HERE, but The Burrow – although I might stop here occasionally, if that’s okay?’ Arthur said, exchanging a look with Draco that Hermione wished she understood.

‘It’s Beltane on Wednesday,’ Molly said crisply. ‘So we’ll have our Beltane dinner at this Blue Place.’

There was a silence… broken by Ginny: ‘I’ll be bringing James, Albus and Lily of course.’ Even her voice! It was weirdly FORMAL, Hermione thought.

Hermione chanced a look at Harry, who looked like he wanted to fall down the back of the sofa.

‘Harry… what’s the camera like on your phone?’ Draco was trying to take a picture of the plan.

‘Damn sight better than yours,’ Harry said, dashing to the table. They discussed the merits of different phones until Molly turned to Arthur, a desperate look in her eye. ‘We’re just a pair of stupid, old wizards, aren’t we?’ she sighed.

‘Everyone’s making a cake,’ Ginny suddenly said to Hermione.

Hermione blushed to her ears. ‘What for?’ She could sense the dining-table smiling behind her…

‘Beltane!’ Ginny snapped.

‘Oh.’ Hermione sighed. As much as it would bother her not being invited to Beltane, she didn’t actually want to go… ‘What sort of cake do you want?’

Ginny thought a moment. ‘Bitter lemon?’

Hermione nodded mutely.

‘Your friend Gwen will be there,’ Molly said.

‘My cousin… Yes. She lives there.’

‘Are we ALL invited?’ Parvati asked, tilting her head as she asked.

Molly flushed. ‘You’re more than welcome.’

‘Don’t panic, Mrs Weasley,’ Draco said, staring at his phone as he sent a photo. ‘I won’t be coming.’

‘Yes you will!’ Fleur shrilled. ‘It’s not just a family dinner. It’s ALL of us. And you deserve to see how well the children you helped rescue are doing…’

‘And you can’t leave Scorpius out,’ Parvati said. ‘That’d be horrible.’

Hermione looked out of the window where the kids were falling about laughing, making Droscorpion Hugamus lift his arms up and down.
‘Of course you’re coming,’ Bill muttered to Draco, shaking his head.

‘But Ron might be there,’ Molly said, her mouth tight.

‘He won’t,’ Harry said. ‘He’s taking Krenzel to Auror HQ in Paris and briefing Francoise. Should be away a few days.’

A few days? But that took the kids past the six-day limit, Hermione thought with a pang of alarm.

Draco’s phone was ringing. ‘Ziff,’ he murmured, heading outside.

Hermione watched as Hugo, bursting with excitement, tried to drag Draco over to the robot. Draco was trying to look enthusiastic but his face was conflicted. Something he was listening to was upsetting him.

‘We came to tell you that we’re not going to make a big deal of this … this THING you’ve done, Hermione,’ Molly said in clipped tones with a sharp look at her husband. ‘Not with everything else going on at the moment.’

‘Sorry?’ Hermione asked, dazedly, dragging her eyes from the garden.

Molly looked around the room. ‘It’s probably better we talk in private.’

Hermione nodded. ‘Sure.’ But neither women made a move.

Parvati sighed and moved to the dining table.

‘Do – do you mean NOW?’ Hermione asked, face glowing scarlet.

‘We have questions,’ Ginny said tersely.

‘What kind of questions can you possibly have?’ Henrik interjected, his voice ringing out across the room. ‘It’s what IS… best not to know or you just stir yourselves up further.’

‘It’s okay, Henrik,’ Hermione said, biting her lip in frustration.

‘But he’s right,’ Parvati said. ‘You’ve so much else to worry about … we all have!’

George grunted wearily. ‘There was a man I was kept prisoner with… They cut out his tongue so we couldn’t talk. I never knew who he was…’ The room fell silent. ‘And a woman, too. She cried and cried. All the time… I never saw her face.’

‘And you’ve no idea where you were?’ Gunter asked, an inquisitive look on his face.

George looked a little unnerved to be addressed directly by Gunter. ‘No idea… Fields. Flat fields. Nothing for miles…’

Draco came back into the living-room, still talking to Ziff. ‘Okay… He’s just here… I’ll ask…’ He removed the phone from his ear. ‘Harry… can you get Ziff? There’s been a very serious Dark Flux attack in Egypt. He wants to give us the details.’

Harry immediately headed outside.

‘He’ll be with you in a moment…’ Draco continued, sinking onto the sofa next to Hermione. His hand unconsciously sought hers; large, warm, thumb tenderly stroking. Hermione instantly froze, aware that Molly and Ginny’s eyes – identical hard brown chips – were watching.
‘Okay... sure... Oh, Hello.... Yeah, we’re good.’ His voice momentarily lifted, but his mood hadn’t. *Your Mum*, he mouthed at Hermione. ‘And you? Good. Yes. Any time... Sure...’ His voice dropped an octave and there was a long pause. ‘She’s right here if you want a word?... Okay... Will do... Take care.’

‘What was Ziff saying?’ Hermione asked. Should she move her hand?

‘A market-place.’ Draco’s face darkened. ‘Wipe-out.’ His eyes suddenly glistened and he looked down at his hand on hers. ‘They think it was a kid.’

‘A kid?’ Hermione cried, aghast.

Henrik crossed the room. ‘What? Like – like a suicide bomber?’

Draco’s hand went to his forehead and he stared at Hermione and Henrik. ‘God, I hope not...’

‘So this Ephraim Golowitz – he’s one of those terror people?’ Arthur asked tentatively.

‘A TERRORIST? Yeah... Pretty much,’ Henrik said.

‘More like the main backer. The money. The frontman...’ Hermione said. ‘There’s a sort of MILITANT wing, too.’

Gunter was at the back door. ‘I’ll go tell the others. We need to go there.’

‘There’s a travel ban... And Egypt’s off-limits to magical folk,’ Bill said.

‘But why EGYPT?’ Parvati asked. ‘That’s not *Right to Exist* stuff!’

‘Good point,’ Draco said. He looked at Hermione. ‘Trialling new toys?’

XXX

‘I’m heading to Paris tonight with Niko and Ginny. Ron's gone ahead,’ Harry told Hermione and Draco that evening. After the Weasleys and Ziff had left, he’d headed to Shell Cottage for a meeting with Troyanda13.

‘How will you travel?’ Draco asked.

‘Illegal portkey... and I’m faking a Black Ghost operation – that’s Auror HQ lingo for covert ops – to get Niko and I out to Egypt.’

‘Please be careful out there, Harry,’ Hermione said.

‘Oh... and one other thing!’ Harry broke into a smile. ‘Dennis Creevey wants to run for Minister for Magic!’

‘DENNIS CREEVEY!’ Draco exploded.

‘Good on him,’ Hermione said. ‘Ephraim needs to be held to account.’

‘But Ephraim has to LOSE!’

‘Dennis thinks he should stand because he’s Muggle-born,’ Harry said, giving Hermione a regretful look. ‘Someone needs to expose all this monstrous Family Act stuff.’
But Hermione thought back to Ron’s conversation at Shell Cottage. ‘The thing is, Muggle-borns are… what? Twenty percent of the wizarding population? Probably less, actually. Most people won’t give a crap.’

‘It’s not just the Muggle-born bullshit though, is it?’ Draco said. ‘There’s the other nasty tacked-on divorce laws.’

‘And the rampant homophobia…’ Harry said, his eyes boring into Hermione’s face, ‘and the rewards system for producing children, and the graded marriages by blood-status… it’s all very, very damning.’

‘Well, it can’t be me, Harry, if that’s what you’re thinking,’ Hermione said, folding her arms. ‘I’m an adulteress having a torrid love affair with a married man - and we’re shacked-up in a Muggle house… I wouldn’t get past the first hustings.’

Harry smiled. ‘Put like that, no. It can’t be you… Any other Muggle-borns we can think of?’

They looked at each other blankly.

‘So that’s a NO, then,’ Harry said.

‘Well, if Dennis wants to run against Ephraim, he gets my full support,’ Hermione said.

‘He’ll fucking need it,’ Draco said, shaking his head.

XXX

In the middle of the night, Draco nudged her awake…

‘What is it?’ she asked sleepily.

‘I’ve been thinking… Dennis doesn’t actually need to win.’

Hermione curled up close and snorted with laughter against his chest. ‘You woke me up to say THAT?’

But she could sense that Draco was very much awake.

‘We’re looking at this all wrong… It doesn’t matter who wins – as long as Ephraim doesn’t! And, assuming the Muggles don’t blow him to smithereens first, an election hustings is now our best chance to take Ephraim on in a public forum,’ Draco continued, ‘because even though I’d love Ephraim to just fuck off and die, his ideas, his lies need to be discredited, too.’

Hermione’s eyes snapped open. He was right… George’s return meant there wasn’t going to be a silly anti-Jeroboam trial anymore… Ephraim clearly didn’t need it.

‘We could stage an intervention on behalf of Dennis – the Sub Rosa candidate.’

‘Exactly…’ Draco lapsed into uneasy silence. ‘I’m sorry this has happened like this, Hermione. I know you've always wanted to be Minister for Magic. And you’d be great. Better than Dennis fucking Creevey.’

‘There’s other things I can do with my life.’

‘But you wanted it,’ Draco said, drawing her into a tight embrace.
‘Not now… It’s too soon… I’d have to be smart and respectable and looking very married to Ron, when I want to be married to you…’ she stopped short, realising what she’d just said… ‘What I mean is… well, you know…’

He was grinning. ‘I DO know,’ he said, kissing her softly on the mouth, ‘because I VERY MUCH want to be married to you one of these days…’ She kissed him back, moving her leg across his body to get as close as possible. ‘As far as I’m concerned, Hermione,’ Draco smiled, ‘we’re in a fight here to rid the world of evil AND for the Right to Divorce…’

Hermione spluttered with laughter. ‘I’m not sure we should recommend that to Dennis as a campaign slogan!’

But then a muddle of darker, anxious thoughts threaded through her. ‘Though, truth is, Draco, you – we - should hold off on making promises we might not be able to keep to each other, because one day Katya might be back… and you don’t know how you’ll feel.’

‘Yes I do,’ he said fiercely. ‘I’ll be in love with YOU. And if you don’t want me, well, I’ll just – fucking run off and die somewhere.’

‘God, you’re Such a DIVA!’ she laughed. ‘And I’m not going anywhere,’ she added, staring down at him. ‘The sex is far too good…’

‘Oh. You just want me for my body, is that it?’

‘Well… even when it’s a bit battered and very bruised… It’s a thing of beauty,’ she breathed, slowly easing a hand up his chest. His skin was firm and warm. She lay half across him, wary of his bruised ribs, and teased her hands into his hair and nuzzled his neck; his stubble chafed her skin but she didn’t care. Her heart was suddenly beating very fast…

She swept her lips across his. He tried to capture her mouth with his own but she was trailing her lips across his jawline and softly nipping his ear as she slid a hand down his body, over his hips… further… She lingered over the softer skin of his inner thigh before taking hold of him. He felt burning, silky, and jerked in response to her touch.

‘Do you want to practice colour-magic?’ she asked in teasing tones.

He eased his fingers into her wild, bushy hair, chaotic from sleeping, and bent her face closer to his. ‘You can do whatever the fuck you want with me, beautiful. Any fucking thing at all…’ His breath gusted in sharp, hot pants onto her face.

She gently straddled him, holding herself upright, avoiding pressure on his ribs, and rubbed herself slowly and deliberately against his erection…

‘God,’ he choked, gazing up at her body, pale in the dim light. His hands caressed the sweep of her breasts, her hips, her thighs… ‘Please, please say you’re going to fuck me.’

She grinned at him. ‘This first,’ she said, swooping down closer and holding his head in her hands. ‘Close your eyes.’ She focused hard, summoning a memory: Making love… hard and sweaty… Draco thrusting powerfully into her from behind as she clawed the bedsheets, crying out, pushing back forcefully to meet his body with her own.

‘Jesus fuck!’ Draco gasped. His whiteness was scorching, combusible. ‘That really, really fucking… oh god, it’s working too well… stop, stop it…’ he said desperately. She quickly cleared her mind… aware that both their hearts were racing in the darkness.
‘I almost came,’ he moaned.

She waited for him to calm down a little, then reared up and drove herself onto him, suppressing a blissful groan.

His hands were on her hips and he was trembling. ‘Hermione… Bit of a heads up,’ he said, swallowing hard, ‘I feel I might fucking burst here…’

‘Not yet…’ she said. She clenched herself tightly, trying to stop herself from pounding down repeatedly… and focused hard, pushing more memories inside his head… Thrashing against each other on the hillside above Hogsmeade, followed by his mouth on her body as she rocked against him in the opera box, followed by sweet, slow strokes and their panting breaths ringing in their ears, followed by…

‘NO…’ he said, cutting her off, grabbing her hips… ‘You’re moving… don’t move…’

He was panting hard, trying to contain himself. She could feel his mind desperately screwing itself tighter and tighter, trying to fend her off.

‘And… as fucking amazing and incredibly sexy as this colour-magic thing is, Hermione,’ Draco said, his voice quavering, yet earnest, ‘I want to make new memories with you. Lots and lots of brand-new beautiful memories.’

She bent forwards, her hair falling around their faces – a warm, veiled space. ‘I agree… and we will.’

His hands stroked her side and back and he sighed. ‘And please. Promise me something … never share those with ANYONE else… what’s ours is ours. All ours.’

For some unfathomable reason, the image of a pure, gleaming, vibrant sunflower, standing proud and tall, burst into her mind…

‘Did you do that?’ she asked.

‘Yes… I don’t know why… do you promise?’ he asked in ardent tones.

She smiled. ‘Of course.’

‘I can’t share you … not ever. I honestly think it’d kill me.’

‘Has it ever occurred to you, Draco, that the women who’ve loved you felt like that too?’

She didn’t know why she said it, but she could sense he was thunderstruck, falling into grey, swirling panic. ‘Oh god, Hermione. Please don’t do that to me… I know I’ve been a cunt and I probably deserve it. But please, please don’t.’

He moved his hands to her face and he held her still. His eyes were wide and staring. ‘I’m all in here, beautiful… And I think I’d be all out - out for the count, basically.’

She felt a surge of emotion roll through her; it was so strong she felt her head spin and her stomach tumble and every pore of her body was bursting with white heat… for a moment she felt like crying.

‘So would I,’ she said, kissing him tenderly. She deepened the kiss, quickly lost in the taste of him, his wet warmth… and their bodies closed around each other, joined in rapture, falling into ecstasy,
making love with an urgency and a passion that she realised could never truly be shared or repeated… because the substance and weight of reality was so much greater – would always be greater - than the fleeting flotsam of light.

XXX

‘Hmmm. And it was definitely NEVILLE LONGBOTTOM you wanted to see?’ The duty clerk at the Wizengamot dungeons thumbed through a wad of parchments, a pince-nez perched on the end of her nose.

Panic fluttered in Hermione’s chest. ‘Yes. He was arrested on Sunday.’

‘Neville Longbottom…’ the duty clerk repeated as though these were the strangest two words in the English language.

‘Surely you know who he is?’ Hermione said acerbically. She remembered the duty clerk from Hogwarts… Slytherin.

The Slytherin duty clerk glared at her. ‘Of course I know who he is, Mrs Weasley! He teaches my son!’ But this was followed by a nonchalant shrug. ‘But there’s no record of him. Maybe he was moved?’

MOVED? This could only mean one thing… he’d been shipped to Azkaban.

‘But surely you spoke to Harry yesterday? Harry Potter? Neville was DEFINITELY here.’

The duty clerk pursed her lips; her lipstick shrunk to a purple point. ‘I was off.’

Hermione gazed at the long, lonely corridors to her left and right… fewer people than usual. Staff clocking off early for Beltane…

She spotted a copy of today’s Daily Prophet on a neighbouring desk, featuring an incongruously large portrait picture of Ephraim, alongside a smaller photo of deceased Minister Witchell.

But her eyes were drawn to the small picture of Neville, tucked into the bottom corner of the front page: ‘Foreign Spy Suspect Missing.’

MISSING?

Hermione glanced through the report… Professor Goertner claimed he hadn’t been seen at Hogwarts for almost two weeks. ‘Because you sacked him you invidious toad!’ she snarled, blinking back tears… And no mention of his arrest!

Something terrible had happened…

Hermione whisked away from the dungeons towards the lift station, boiling over with fearful fury.

She impatiently jabbed the button for the main atrium and moved to the back of the lift.

She leaned her forehead against the wall of the lift and tightly closed her eyes.

The doors swung shut behind her.

She summoned her purple… a soft, soothing shade. Desperate to calm down… But tears were streaming down her cheeks.
How could she tell the others? How could she break the news to Hannah?

After a few moments, she realised the lift wasn’t moving.

Instead, there was an eerie quiet, like an expectant hush - except for the occasional clunk and whoosh of lifts surging up and down alongside her. She became aware of the rushing sound of her own blood, circling round and round.

I’m such a fool, she thought coldly.

She could sense him now. A foot, possibly less, directly behind her. A wall of vivid blue…

‘Hermione. Look at me,’ Ephraim said.

‘No…’ She kept her face to the wall. Her cheeks were tear-stained. She didn’t want him to see that!

She could feel heat irradiating off him; a ferocious, clloying, ultramarine heat – searing, scalding.

His hand reached down and felt for hers and he thrust a note into her palm.

‘Once you find him, hide him.’

Hermione spun around, shocked to find Ephraim’s face was inches from her own.

‘WHO?’

Ephraim’s eyes widened in surprise. ‘Your friend! Longbottom… you came here to speak to him.’

Hermione manically wiped her face, twisting away from Ephraim, putting space between them. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Consider it an early Beltane present! Now that the Minister for Magic is dead, the Wizengamot has declared an amnesty for those awaiting trial… those without forthcoming witnesses.’

‘But… but that’s unconstitutional!’ Hermione spluttered, in spite of herself. She should just accept this and run!

Ephraim clearly thought so, too… He knitted his brow, bemused. ‘Would you rather Longbottom was still in custody?’

‘NO! No. Of course not…’

‘Good.’ Ephraim smiled smugly. There were voices beyond the closed lift door. His hand snaked out, slamming a button – keeping the door closed from newcomers. ‘I hope this makes you happy, my love. And it makes me happy too, because – your debt to me, Hermione, is GROWING.’

‘That’s ridiculous…’ she scoffed, looking away. Shit. Shit…

His blue eyes glittered. ‘You’d better go and pick up your friend before he gets himself into more trouble.’

‘Ephraim?’ Hermione asked. ‘Why Rose? Why did you want Rose?’

He looked, at first, like he wanted to brush off what she was saying, but a serious frown slipped onto his face. ‘To keep her safe… it’s rare for a child to have her abilities. She would be much-prized… it was the same with Sylvestra.’
‘What – what sort of abilities?’

‘Oh, come on… you must have noticed? Have FELT it?’ Hermione didn’t dare betray any emotion on her face. ‘She’s like US, Hermione… though, naturally our gifts tend in different directions… Must say, I’m amazed at Draco! I thought the boy was all bark and no bite.’

‘What do you specialise in?’ Hermione demanded.

‘Oh. Getting what I want. I ALWAYS get what I want… in the end.’ He seized her hand and pressed it to his lips, kissing it, and then smashed the lift-button with his fist. The door swung open and he stepped out of view.

XXX

Neville was sitting on a swing – head bowed, disconsolate - in a small scruffy playground, wedged between two main roads at a busy London intersection. Broken glass and litter was strewn across the grass and a tramp was sleeping under nearby dusty bushes, shielded by battered cardboard boxes – a makeshift shelter – and a collection of random plastic bags.

‘Neville?’ Hermione called out.

His head shot up and she ran to him.

‘I was told someone would come and get me,’ he said. ‘I suspect we’re being watched.’

Hermione was more worried he’d been tagged in some way.

‘Our best bet is to go somewhere you can be… processed.’ He looked grey, eyes drooping with fatigue. ‘Are you okay?’

Neville folded his arms tightly. ‘Don’t get why I’m out…’ He screwed up his face. ‘I mean, I’m guilty of everything they accused me of.’

‘A Beltane Bonanza, apparently… Amnesty.’ Hermione didn’t quite believe it herself. ‘We need to hide you overseas.’ Her voice dropped to a whisper.

‘But I want to be useful.’

‘Maybe you can be? The Minister died on Sunday – all very suspect – and Ephraim’s announced an election. Dennis wants to run! He’ll need a clever campaign strategist,’ she smiled.

Neville’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Cool idea! Though YOU should run, actually.’

‘No way—’

‘Hermione… the only person I’ve seen these past few days is Ephraim Golowitz! And all he talks about is YOU… He’d fall apart if you stood against him!’

XXX

Hermione stepped deeper into the bedroom, stooping so she didn’t hit her head on low-hanging beams. The floorboards creaked underfoot and the walls were white-washed, tinged with grey. Roughly-hewn bunkbeds lined the walls.

Hermione’s eyes were drawn to the view from the gabled window. Soft, hazy sunlight danced on a broad band of clear blue sea in the distance, prefaced by a long sandy beach and a forest of reeds.
criss-crossed by wooden walkways.

‘It’s peaceful here,’ she murmured - despite the festive atmosphere, prompted by Neville’s arrival, that could be heard drifting up the stairs.

‘Although we’re getting crowded,’ said Gwen.

‘Do you want us to take you back to England later to see your Dad?’

Gwen blushed. ‘It’s okay. I’m cadging a lift tomorrow with one of our guards, Oleg…’ Gwen’s blush deepened to a burning glow. ‘He’s very kind.’

There was the sound of a football being hoofed up the garden… Draco had arrived with the Folkvangr faction… The children had dashed outside to play.

Teatime was a full-spread in the garden, courtesy of Arlene and Angelina – already vying for household supremacy with Molly Weasley.

Hermione had a chance to meet Oleg properly. He was a lanky Russian with a dimpled chin, rumpled hair and thick, dark-rimmed boxy glasses. He reminded her of Harry… but was loud and affable, prone to telling jokes – not very good ones – although Gwen laughed uproariously.

Dennis Creevey stood up after tea – his diminutive frame shook with excitement as he announced that he’d formally registered as a candidate in the upcoming election. ‘And Ernie’s agreed to be my campaign manager!’

Everybody clapped and cheered and Ernie’s teeth sparkled in the evening sun.

‘Hufflepuff douche,’ whispered Seamus Finnigan, who’d parked himself next to Hermione. He was a world-weary soul; his face pitted and lined, the scars of a life lived less well than hoped. His hand shook when he raised a glass of whiskey to his lips. Maybe his offer of this crumbling, slate-blue house with its long lawns and high stone walls was a silent plea for redemption, Hermione thought?

The air was awash with the fresh, tangy smell of sea-breezes. Far out to sea, thin slices of burnt orange fought the long, navy shadow of the distant horizon as the sun set.

‘I think Hermione should stand,’ Neville said suddenly.

‘No,’ Draco said with a brisk shake of the head. ‘She’d be too exposed… there’s too many other things to be getting on with.’

‘She wouldn’t need to DO anything,’ Neville remonstrated. ‘I’d handle it all!’

But Draco continued to shake his head.

‘You don’t OWN her,’ Angelina said, eyes blazing. ‘If she wants to stand, let her stand!’

‘If Hermione rocks up to hustings, Ephraim will definitely attend,’ Neville insisted. ‘And she'd destroy him!’

‘He’ll turn up for Dennis, too!’ Draco retorted. ‘Because he’s an attention-seeking, narcissistic wanker.’

‘Hermione would unnerve him more. He’s bordering on obsessive, Draco!’
‘I agree,’ Arthur commented, a rueful look on his face.

Hermione cringed, embarrassed. ‘Stop it! Ephraim’s just mad.’

‘Just because he’s in love with you, Hermione, doesn’t make him mad,’ Draco said, ‘quite the contrary.’

A handsome, olive-skinned woman tripped across the lawn and urgently beckoned Arlene inside.

‘Was that Leila?’ Hermione whispered to Gwen on her left.

Gwen nodded. ‘Joyana’s not doing so well.’

‘I don’t understand why you’ve given up on wanting to become Minister for Magic,’ Bill said, watching Hermione over the brim of his glass of beer.

‘Because… I’m not exactly Minister material anymore, am I?’ she said.

‘I’m glad you can see that, Hermione,’ Molly said in tart, though not unkind, tones. ‘You have a good heart and a good brain… But the older generation – MY generation – would never vote for a woman who’d left her husband and children and was living in sin. It’s a question of RESPECTABILITY.’

‘She HASN’T left her children,’ Arthur said in firm tones.

Hermione gave Draco a desperate look…

‘I don’t see why Hermione has to muscle in on this at all!’ Ernie said… his face was florid after a couple too many glasses of butterbeer. ‘Dennis will be an excellent candidate!’

‘Please to speak?’ Tuyen said from the furthest end of the table. ‘Is there reason why BOTH can’t stand for Minister? Is it law in your country?’

Ernie blinked rapidly. ‘No… in fact, we’ve already caught wind of another candidate, Julius Merriman.’

‘I’d have no problem if Hermione stood,’ Dennis said, affecting nonchalance.

‘Well I think Hermione SHOULD stand!’ Tansy Pintucket exclaimed. ‘Three men and no women! That’s a scandal!’

‘I don’t want to,’ Hermione said quietly.

‘But you’d get a free pass to show this bozo up for the cad he is, Hermione,’ Kai said in her broad New Zealand accent.

‘Dennis could do that too! He’s also Muggle-born.’

‘But not in your position,’ Parvati said bluntly. ‘The New Family Act strips away your rights to be a mother to your own children… that’s plain evil.’

Hermione suddenly felt like the walls were closing in on her… and she could see Molly staring at the table, a mournful look on her face.

She looked over at the children. They were playing amongst the trees at the fringe of the property. Henrik was hovering, a vigilant watch-dog, cradling baby Hoang in his arms, chatting to Fleur…
He’d make a wonderful father, she thought. She’d rather hoped his crush on Gwen would lead somewhere – but he’d lost out to the handsome Russian.

The children were playing football. The Cambodian child, Vithu, was displaying some rather impressive dribbling skills – much to the other boys’ dismay, as they were barely able to get a foot in edgeways.

A stumpy chap with a tufty, ginger curl of a beard tottered through the trees towards them… They yelped in fright.

Draco jumped up from his seat. ‘Shit. It’s Niko!... Where the fuck’s Harry?’

XXX

Hermione momentarily tuned out; listening to the distant sound of waves echoing out of the darkness and the occasional thrum of a car engine on the coast road below.

The Blue House was alive with lights and movement… candles perched on window-sills, large, glass lanterns lighting up the porch.

‘Niko says Ziff gave them coordinates for the recently vacated Gilgad site,’ Gunter said, snapping her attention back to the emergency meeting. ‘But they then heard of an even OLDER site called Qalb Min Hijr. There’s rumours that children are being held there in a medical facility. They were heading to where they thought this site was when Harry disappeared…’ He tapped a big cross on the Egypt map, deep into the desert by Abu Simbel at the foot of the country. ‘HERE.’

‘In the middle of fucking NOWHERE,’ Elizaveta said dismally.

‘Heading into the Sahara Desert’s a fool’s errand without incontrovertible proof Harry’s there,’ Arthur said. ‘That ginger lad’s got heat exhaustion… He might be mixed-up.’

Draco’s mouth twisted anxiously. ‘Thing is, we can’t verify anything. His phone’s dead and we can’t even send a Patronus! Could put him in a very awkward position.’

‘Even worse, Draco, the fact magic’s banned in Egypt means we can’t go and find him,’ Thelonious pointed out. ‘Or these kids...’

‘This lake here – it’s a border, isn’t it?’ Neville said, pointing to a large stretch of water south of Aswan.

Bill nodded. ‘The Sudan. There’s a fuck-load of shit going on there, too… And you’d be stuck in the desert; too hot to move after mid-morning.’

‘We’d end up in the desert anyhow,’ Hermione said soberly. A wave of deep depression washed over her.

‘Travel at night,’ Elizaveta suggested. Her shiny metal teeth glinted in the gathering gloom.

‘But unless we leave very soon – unlikely without a way to actually get there – that’d mean waiting until tomorrow night,’ Draco argued. ‘Too late.’

‘Why don’t we ask Percy to sanction some kind of Inter-Ministry transfer?’ Arthur suggested.

‘But that’d be official,’ Bill muttered.

‘Can’t we use the Gringott’s network?’ Hermione asked.
‘Well… we don’t run transporters to Egypt anymore. But maybe I could arrange a one-off favour from Athens?’

‘What sort of transporter?’ Neville asked.

‘Traditional treasure chests… a tight squeeze.’

‘Well, we’ll just have to breathe in,’ said Draco.

XXX

Eight of them set off just before dawn. Hermione, Draco, Neville and Thelonious and three of Troyanda13: Gunter, Maurice - a small, dark-haired Belgian - and his partner, Ottiline. To Hermione’s frustration, Henrik defied Leila’s medical advice and insisted on coming too.

Gringott’s International Transporter Centre was housed in a disused hangar at Glyfada Airport. The treasure chests being dispatched to multiple foreign destinations were rolled along a conveyor belt and fed through a thick black curtain by a trio of sturdy goblins clad in chain-metal cloaks.

Draco approached them, brandishing a piece of parchment, embossed with the Gringott’s crest and instructions written in Gobbledygook.

The goblins crowded around Draco and appeared to sniff him.

‘Our goblins don’t do that, do they?’ Neville muttered.

‘These chaps seem more feral,’ Thelonious said in stately tones, studying them with academic froideur.

Draco passed the sniff test and they were herded into an antechamber. A row of wooden treasure chests awaited them.

‘But they’re tiny!’ Hermione gasped.

Henrik turned a sickly green. ‘I’m big and beefy. I’ll be crushed to a pulp.’

Maurice and Ottiline gave them withering glances and promptly tucked themselves into a box. Gunter folded himself down neatly and the goblins hammered the lid shut with small, silver hammers. The conveyor belt sprang into life and he was whisked out of sight.

XXX

Hermione’s chest was compressed so tightly she could hardly breathe. An odd weighty pressure was bearing down on every pore of her body and she felt her brain might burst through her skull.

She was on the point of passing out when she ground to a sudden halt amidst a raucous, splintering sound. A fierce-looking goblin with a thick bushy mono-brow was staring down at her. He extended a wiry hand and levered her effortlessly from her confinement.

A wave of dry heat instantly engulfed her. She felt winded, dazed.

‘Where are we?’ she asked Thelonious, who was shaking sand from his robes. ‘I thought we were going to Luxor?’

Luxor was a large, bustling town on the banks of the River Nile, but they’d landed in a parched white, rolling landscape of gravelly hills, dominated by a cloudless, azure blue sky. A bus was
chugging along a road in the distance, sending up clouds of dust.

Four goblins pointed to a battered pick-up truck.

‘Can anyone drive?’ Gunter asked.

A goblin pressed the keys into Henrik’s hand and they Disapparated.

‘But this isn’t Luxor!’ Hermione repeated, this time to everyone.

‘As good as,’ Gunter said. ‘We’re in the Valley of the Queens.’

‘Don’t you mean Kings?’ Neville corrected him.

‘No – Queens,’ Gunter said in definitive tones. ‘Luxor is due East.’

‘I had my licence revoked in Denmark,’ Henrik said to Draco under his breath. He looked crumpled and sore from the journey.

‘I’ll drive,’ Draco said.

‘No need!’ Maurice said. ‘There’s a magical transportation office in the city.’

But Draco disagreed. ‘It’s… what? Three hours to drive to Aswan? By the time we’ve got to Luxor, faffed about trying to negotiate a ride while avoiding the Muggle Police, we’d have probably tracked down this Qalb Min Hijr already.’

‘Actually, the drive’s more like five hours,’ Maurice said haughtily.

‘It’s easier we just fly ahead and find a Portkey station,’ said Ottiline.

‘You can! But we’re not animagi,’ Neville whinged, wiping beads of sweat from his forehead.

‘There won’t be Portkeys, Ottiline. And we won’t all fit in that truck,’ Gunter said. His bony features were gaunt and stern, brooking no challenge to his authority. He surveyed the bleak landscape. ‘So WE’LL fly and you should set off. It’s going to get hotter.’

‘I can’t get much hotter,’ Neville grumbled, used to the cool climes of Scotland.

Draco studied his phone. ‘It’s three hours if we take the Western Desert Road… That way we avoid getting snarled up in traffic through town.’

Maurice gave him a beady glare. ‘Tourists aren’t supposed to travel West of the river. There’ll be checkpoints.’

‘Hopefully we’ll be lucky,’ Draco said in cool tones. ‘And this cuts the trip by two hours.’

Thelonious was investigating the pick-up truck. ‘Bit tatty.’ He glanced inside. ‘Full tank of fuel, though. And – that’s nice – there’s big bottles of water.’

‘Which means the goblins knew we were better off driving than fruitlessly looking for a magic carpet or something hugely illegal,’ Hermione said, ignoring the light that flared momentarily in Draco’s eyes at the mention of a magic carpet.

Maurice shook his head. ‘You’re fools! The army might be mobilised.’
‘Perhaps… but if things get hairy we’ll find another way,’ Draco said. He held Maurice’s gaze, unflinching.

‘Okay… we’ll meet in Aswan - or this Qalb Min Hijr,’ Gunter said. ‘We all have our phones.’

And with that he turned to Ottiline and Maurice and raised his arms upwards. The air swirled, enveloping them in a flurry of fine white dust that made Hermione cough and rub her eyes. Moments later, three large, black crows were winging East…

‘Well, that’s them gone,’ said Henrik. ‘Draco - can you really drive? I’m too nervous to try without ID. At least if we get stopped, you can hypnotise the soldiers with some dizzle-dazzle abracadabra.’

‘YOU can drive?’ Neville asked Draco, mouth open in surprise.

‘Get in,’ Draco said abruptly. ‘We need two in the back … we’ll swap people around when it gets too hot.’ He glanced at Hermione. ‘You’re up front with me.’

‘That’s just favouritism,’ Henrik bellyached.

‘Driver’s prerogative,’ Draco said with a smug smirk.

XXX

‘You’re enjoying this,’ Hermione said, watching Draco as he overtook yet another slow agricultural vehicle, whipping up a whirl of dust behind him.

He grinned. ‘I’m trying not to. Speeding probably isn’t a good idea.’ He weaved around a chugging, decrepit saloon car. The road veered between broad and sandy, bordered by miles of flat desert, the colour of vellum, and the occasional stretch of scrub-lined dirt track. At the outset of the journey, the sleek shine of the River Nile had occasionally winked into view behind sprawling villages and farms, but their route had long since diverged.

Henrik was snoozing, his head lolling against the hot glass of the passenger seat window. Hermione leant against his warm bulk. He was a useful cushion when the track encountered the occasional bump.

‘Have we heard anything from the others?’ Draco asked. He had his window down and was leaning his left arm against the sill and steering with his right hand.

Hermione checked their phones. ‘Nothing yet.’

‘They should have found transport by now…’ He sucked his lip thoughtfully. ‘I’m thinking about that Gilgad site … A manufacturing plant would need a water supply, wouldn’t it?’

‘In an area like this? Certainly.’

‘The main body of water south of Aswan is Lake Nasser.’

‘Which fits with the Abu Simbel connection… The monument looks out onto the lake. I’ve seen photos.’

Draco looked at her. His eyes were glowing and the wind had fluffed his hair into a scruffy, silver halo. He suited hot climates, she thought. ‘Yeah, but it’s a resort. Lots of tourists. Posh cruises. Hotels… the whole works.’
‘Too many people.’ The Argentine site was very remote. And by a lake. The site at Wanaka was tucked away in mountains … yet near to a reliable water supply.

‘Have we still got service on our phones?’ Draco asked.

‘Sometimes.’

‘Okay. When we next hit civilisation, I wonder if it’s worth us contacting Ziff to ask if there’s any other bodies of water in that area?’

Hermione glanced at the narrow, letterbox window facing out to the back of the truck. Thelonious was sprawled on his back, basking in the blazing sun. But Neville was red-faced and gabbling what she suspected were cooling charms.

‘The guys in the back deserve a break,’ she said. ‘Hold on. Looks like they’re stopping cars up there…’

A bashed-up blue Cortina had been directed onto a sandy verge by two officials and another truck was easing to a halt.

‘Damn,’ Draco said. There was a turning on their right, heading deeper into the desert. ‘Looks like the scary detour...’

‘But we could end up in Libya or something!’ Hermione said, aghast at the barren landscape that greeted them.

Draco seemed irritatingly calm. ‘I feel we need to move inland anyhow… Don’t know why.’

‘Well, let’s hope that feeling coincides with decent roads and a petrol station.’

XXX

‘Where the hell are we?’ Neville asked, wiping sand from his eyes. He looked wretched, worn-out and unutterably relieved to be taking refuge inside the cabin.

They’d paused in the shade of a crop of palm trees, on the outskirts of a remote oasis featuring little more than a clutch of crumbling, stone houses and a closed mini-mart. The roads were coated in sand.

The sky overhead remained a cloudless, deep searing blue – the sun was riding high now, a throbbing silver disc. A long bank of curvy, grey hills was ranged in the distance and the land as far as the eye could see was undulating, in motion – moving from glaring white to deep golden ochre to slate grey, even the occasional flash of rich, terracotta red.

Draco got out of the car and walked ahead of them; phone pressed to his ear.

‘What’s he doing?’ Neville asked.

‘Calling Ziff. He thinks the Gilgad site might be somewhere else entirely.’

‘Where?’

‘Somewhere easier to hide.’

Neville gave her a long, appraising look. ‘I can’t get my head around this… this thing you have going on here.’
Hermione blushed hotly and reached for a bottle of water to avoid looking at her old friend. ‘Do you want some?’ she asked.

‘Thanks…’ He glugged it greedily. ‘Nice bit of distraction, that, Hermione.’

‘Where did Henrik and Thelonious head to?’ she asked.

‘Comfort break… Your mate Henrik’s a decent chap, isn’t he? Where did you meet him?’

She eyed their surroundings. ‘Argentina. In a place as unlike here as you could possibly imagine.’

Hermione could feel Neville’s eyes on her. ‘So is this a BIG thing or a passing phase?’

Hermione eased out a sigh. ‘Big. But flawed.’

‘A passing fancy then… ultimately.’

‘No,’ Hermione said sharply, aggravated by Neville’s flippancy. ‘It’s the circumstances…’

Neville was looking out of the open window towards the oasis. ‘Maybe the shop was open after all?’ he murmured. He returned his attention to Hermione. ‘I hope you don’t mind me saying this, Hermione, but I don’t think this will work between you two… He’s not the same twat from school and there’s clearly a physical connection - but he’s different to us.’

Hermione felt a deep shadow descend on her. ‘Not especially… And over-blowing historic differences shouldn’t be our priority at the moment.’

‘Guess I’m stuck in the old Hogwarts groove of thinking Gryffindors and Slytherins are fundamentally different species?’ Neville said, almost whimsically.

‘Perhaps,’ Hermione said warmly.

‘It’s just… YOU guys - Harry, Ron – even me – we kind of defined Gryffindor. And Draco was the archetypal Slytherin.’

‘Harry was nearly a Slytherin, actually.’

‘Oh, I can see that,’ Neville said. ‘He used to be all huff, puff and reckless valour. But NOW. More Slytherin than not I’d say.’

Hermione was rendered speechless.

‘Ron, on the other hand - a true Gryffindor.’

Hermione sighed. ‘Frankly, Neville, all this house-crap… who cares? I don’t want to be a lifelong member of some stupid tribe because we supposedly share some personality traits. It’s a bit like bloody star signs…’

She was relieved to see Draco heading back to the car. Neville looked as though he wanted to say something to her but thought better of it.

Draco leant against the open car window. ‘Right, there’s another body of water between Aswan and Abu Simbel. The Toshka Lakes. Man-made and fed by canals. Ziff studied online maps and there are abandoned buildings…’ He looked at Hermione, trying to gauge her response. ‘What do you think?’
‘How far out of our way?’

‘Well, that’s the thing. We’re talking another two hours.’

‘Have we got enough fuel?’

‘And food, we need food,’ Neville cut in.

Draco looked towards the township. ‘I’ll check this place out. Don’t know when we’ll next stop.’

But fortunately, Henrik and Thelonious re-appeared carrying boxes. Henrik was also lugging a large can.

‘You fucking stars,’ Draco grinned broadly. ‘Right, let’s get this show on the road.’ He eased his wand across the windscreen to scourgify the accumulated layer of dust and splattered insects. ‘Can one of you dole out some goodies to keep us going?’

‘It’s my turn to go in the back,’ Hermione said. ‘Which one of you lucky guys is taking my spot?’ she said to Thelonious and Henrik.

‘I’d say it’ll be more refreshing in the open-air,’ Draco remarked. ‘I can pick up more speed now…’

‘Oh. I’ll stay in the back then,’ Thelonious said.

‘Sounds good,’ Henrik concurred, hoisting himself up.

Draco smiled at Hermione.

‘Still a Slytherin…’ Neville muttered, but at least he was smiling.

XXX

Hermione woke up a couple of hours later. She’d fallen against Draco as he drove. His right arm was over her shoulder while he navigated with his left hand.

‘You okay, beautiful?’ he said as she blinked her eyes open.

‘Don’t know what came over me,’ she yawned, feeling she’d failed him by not staying awake. She glanced to her right and was surprised to see Henrik rather than Neville. ‘When did you stop?’

‘About an hour ago. Spoke to Gunter. They were hoping to “catch a thermal” – hopefully we arrive at these lakes around the same time.’

‘How much further?’ Hermione looked ahead at the blank, sand landscape…

Draco pointed to a lumpen, grey smudge. ‘Round the back of those hills.’

Henrik passed her a bottle of water. ‘Freshen up. You look crap.’

‘What’s that?’ Draco asked, peering ahead into the horizon. There was a twirling vortex of sand gyrating at high speed across the desert, kicking up a fierce cloud of dust in its wake.

‘Dust devil,’ Henrik said. ‘Like a mini tornado.’ He glanced upwards. The sky above them was still a bright, dazzling blue, but a few streaks of cloud had begun to coalesce to their right and a larger, purplish mass was hovering in their wake. ‘Draco. We need to pick up a bit of speed, mate.’
‘I’m already flat out.’ He was keeping an eye on the clouds’ approach as he drove and had to swerve to avoid a pair of scraggly-looking camels that had chosen to step out onto the road – although it was more a sandy trail now.

‘I hope you’re right about this place,’ Hermione said. But she could sense a clear, bright certainty about him.

‘I’m more worried about Gunter,’ Draco said. ‘We can weather a sandstorm – it’d be a tight squeeze with us all stuck in the cabin, but at least we’d be sheltered.’ He cast a desultory eye at the skies. They were darkening rapidly…

They soon rounded the grey granite hills that had felt so far away just a short time ago… the truck was grunting and bouncing along a rutted track and Hermione pitied Thelonious and Neville in the back. A spray of harsh, gravelly sand peppered the windscreen as the winds picked up.

Draco screeched the truck to a halt. ‘Got to get the others inside…’ He jumped out of the cab and then Henrik’s door swung open, creaking on its hinges against the wind.

‘Room for a couple of little ones?’ Neville joked. His face was brown with dust. Despite that, he looked oddly invigorated by the brisk winds battering the truck. Draco slid back into the driver’s seat. ‘Okay, everyone in?’

Hermione crushed up against him. She was keenly aware that the gearstick was now between her legs and Draco’s hand kept bumping up against her.

Thelonious collapsed into full-blown giggles as he was now perched on Neville’s lap, his long frame bent double, butting the ceiling with the side of his head and neck. He gave Hermione a desperate, toothy smile, physically unable to look away.

‘Look!’ Henrik said, glee in his voice. Four vast expanses of water swung into view, fed by a long, straight, glistening channel, which receded into the horizon. The road was more clearly marked and the rough ride smoothed to sand-covered asphalt. The truck’s tyres made a sticky hissing sound as they glided along the tarmac. The road veered left, passing the lakes on their right.

A grey-block building was set back from the road, hemmed in by a tall, wire fence and abutted by a settlement of white cuboid rectangular plots.

To their right was a surreal landscape: huge, circular patches of land, stretching for miles. The terrain was a multitude of colours; greens, greys, brick-reds, maroons, rich Prussian blue. Each circle had a tall metal structure standing erect at its centre with a long spindly arm reaching across its radius.

‘They’re trying to green the desert,’ Neville remarked.

‘Then it’s not going well,’ Draco said wryly. The lake was bordered by a thick skein of white, quartz-like sand and the water levels were low.

The buildings they’d seen from afar were miserable and abandoned close up: windows smashed or missing, doors hanging off.

Draco dropped his speed and the truck slunk slowly into a car park and ground to a halt.

The truck was immediately attacked by strong winds, rocking them with unnerving, relentless force. The sound of sand scratching the windows punctuated the roaring thud of thunder looming overhead.
Draco turned to Hermione. ‘Do you think Harry’s here?’

She looked at the desolate building, its walls bleached from the intense sun. She shivered involuntarily.

‘I doubt it,’ she said sombrely. ‘But someone is…’ She had an unerring sensation that they were being watched.

‘Do we go and look?’ Henrik asked, his voice rising uncertainly.

‘Well, we’ve come all this way.’ Draco grabbed his wand from the footwell and muttered an Imperturbable Charm to fend off the worst of the winds. His door was almost blown flat against the bonnet as he stepped out of the truck. Hermione swung her leg over the gearstick, casting a similar charm on herself, and followed, the others close behind.

They circled the Gilgad building – there was no sign of life - and Henrik, Neville and Draco moved inside, Draco holding his wand aloft to light the way. Thelonious had sand in his eye, so Hermione sheltered him behind a concrete buttress and cast a quick Tergeo followed by a gentle, healing charm.

‘Hope we have enough petrol to get to Aswan,’ Hermione mumbled, voicing a niggling concern.

‘We’re closer to Abu Simbel,’ Thelonious said. ‘Strictly speaking, this is Nubia, not Egypt. The land of my ancestors.’

The others returned and Draco shook his head. ‘Just junk.’

‘But there’s footprints in the dust…’ Henrik observed. ‘Recent.’

Draco nodded but his attention was drawn to the settlement of breeze-block buildings a few hundred metres away, behind the fenced perimeter. ‘We’ve got company…’ He stepped back into the shadow of the open doorway behind them.

Hermione squinted through the swirling eddies of dust… the storm was getting closer. There was a distinct shape moving stealthily between the abandoned buildings. She craned her head to glimpse towards the back of the enclosure.

‘Hermione!’ Draco hissed, pulling her back.

‘Look, the medical facility Niko mentioned. It ISN’T here,’ she reasoned. ‘If someone’s out there, they might know where it is.’

‘She’s right,’ Neville said.

‘These buildings were probably constructed to house workers. Someone might have stayed,’ Henrik said. ‘Why don’t we split up to investigate and meet in the middle?’

‘No, best we stay together,’ Hermione said testily.

Draco gazed at the rapidly darkening sky. ‘Where are those blasted crows?’

They moved in close formation towards the deserted village. A large metal sign featuring a scrawl of Arabic writing had fallen to the ground.

‘Qalb Min Hijr,’ Thelonious announced.
‘You read Arabic?’ Hermione asked, impressed.

‘Can’t speak it, though.’

‘What’s it mean?’ Draco asked.

‘Heart of Stone.’

‘A warm, friendly kind of place then,’ Draco mumbled, crossing the perimeter fence towards the first line of decrepit buildings.

Draco and Hermione moved hovel-to-hovel, while the others stood guard. Everything had been stripped out, even doors and windows.

Sad, hollow shells.

‘Hey, guys!’ Henrik called from the doorway…‘Just saw someone - a kid I think.’

They cautiously moved between the buildings, heading deeper into the complex. There was a flicker of movement out of the corner of Hermione’s eye – a small, dark shape weaving between the boxy, white bungalows that comprised the corner plot of the compound.

‘Over there!’ she cried, tripping after the retreating figure.

She could hear a thin, fluting voice floating through the raging whoosh of the winds. Her heart beat a little faster… a child.

‘Wait!’ Draco yelled. She briefly turned to look at him. His face was as stormy as the clouds swishing and tossing in the sky above. There was a distinct gleaming flash on the horizon and the low, rumbling roar of thunder drawing nearer.

A cacophonous series of cracks suddenly erupted to his left and a volley of red and green shots was being fired.

A line of dark-clad wizards wearing raggedy bandanas as face masks and thick, dark goggles were Apparating into the enclosure.

Draco and Neville fired back and then ducked back into the gully between the houses, joined by Henrik, but Thelonious sprinted across the divide between the rows of deserted buildings crashing into Hermione. They flattened themselves against the wall, panting heavily.

‘Shit,’ she muttered. ‘We must have triggered some kind of alarm.’

‘There he is!’ Thelonious cried, pointing to the small shape of a little boy. He couldn’t be more than three years old, Hermione thought with a pang of concern. He’d stopped and his head was turned towards them. He seemed to sniff the air.

‘Poor kid’s blind,’ Thelonious said, hurrying towards him.

‘Careful!’ Hermione screeched as a flash of red speared the gloom, missing Thelonious by a whisker.

It was suddenly very dark. A mountainous bank of dark orange dust was barrelling speedily towards them, glinting forks of lightening crackling within its depths.

A vast haboob – at least a mile long – rolling with ominous intent… there would be no escaping it,
Hermione thought, if they stayed in this place.

She peeked out from behind the house she was hiding behind. It was difficult to see anything through the gathering murk. The sound of shots being fired – including gunshots – was muffled by the eerie groan of the storm and the rushing wind.

Hermione took a deep breath and plunged into the alley between the houses, only exhaling once she was behind a solid wall yet again… Two figures – one small, the other long and rangy – were scurrying through a further passageway before dipping left and out of view. Hermione chased after them, choking now on the squally sand being scooted high into the sky by the surging winds.

‘Hermione!’ Thelonious called out from a dark, open doorway… she skidded to a halt and followed his voice.

She blinked in the dense darkness. Thelonious was kneeling behind an old woman, cradling her in his arms. Her mouth was flopped open and her headscarf had slipped to reveal a mop of scraggly, grey hair.

Hermione heard a shuffle to her left and was relieved to see the child – small and trembling – carrying a jug of water. But the jug was cracked and liquid was slipping through his hands. Was this water why he’d broken cover in the first place?

Thelonious tried to speak in poor, halting Arabic, but the old lady held his face away with her hand.

Hermione knelt beside her.

‘I’m sorry we don’t speak your language,’ she apologised. The old woman inched her eyes open. Her face was a mess of sores and scabs, fighting for space amidst a dense web of deeply-etched wrinkles.

‘Hakim?’ the old lady said in a reedy, quavering voice. She beckoned the child close. She was clearly struggling to breath.

Hermione could now see that the child – Hakim – had a thick, greasy film over his eyes… not completely blind then, not yet. Hermione felt her temper rise hotly inside of her.

‘Take,’ the woman said, concentrating hard to summon the necessary words. ‘Father, Hassan Aktari, with Wahdah… in Sahrah… Sadagh.’

Hermione looked at Thelonious with pleading eyes, silently praying he understood what she was saying. The child began weeping. He felt for the old lady’s hand and clasped it tightly to his cheek.

‘Go – Khatar! Here... Khatar … Danger!’

‘Have you seen a man? With glasses?’ Hermione tried to mime Harry’s glasses.

The old woman nodded emphatically. ‘With children… Alaydaa take… Akhr Makan. Alaydaa... big danger. Aleuyan...’ She imitated Hermione’s mime – but Thelonious shook his head. ‘She means Eyes…’ he explained.

The old lady agreed. ‘Eyes. Eyes of Alsharika…’ She fell into a prolonged bout of phlegmy coughing. ‘Go. Go,’ and she brushed her hand against the weeping child’s face, speaking Arabic, and twisted to face the wall.

The child fell into a loud, plaintive wail that pierced the sound of the thunderous clouds above
them and the creak and snap of the corrugated iron roof being lifted upwards by the snarling wind. The sound of whizzing stunners and the occasional pop of a gun drew inexorably closer and suddenly there was a rushing rampage and voices flooding past their door.

Hermione leapt to the doorway and saw a black hooded figure chasing someone down the alleyway. She couldn’t discern who was being chased but had no doubt the hooded figure was intent on killing them.

Hermione raised her wand and yelled ‘Stupefy!’

She looked back to Thelonious. He was delicately stroking the old woman’s cheek. He looked at Hermione with sad, soft eyes and shook his head.

‘We have to help the others,’ she said.

Thelonious scooped the protesting child into his arms and followed her into the dusty darkness. They stepped over the prone figure at the exit to the alley and saw a number of shadowy figures dueling in what was now a thick, brown fog.

The flash of red that assailed Hermione’s senses alerted her to the welcome realisation that Gunter had arrived and joined them in battle.

They cowered against the wall, then slid around the corner of a building and ran into open space. The wall of dust was almost upon them…

The dark figure Hermione had stupefied had revived and was lumbering with obvious intent towards them.

Hermione could sense he was staring at her through large, bug-eye goggles.

He raised his wand-arm as though set to strike - but retreated into an alley.

A stream of figures was sprinting away from the compound. Hermione made out Henrik’s blonde hair at the rear, shooting with deadly accuracy at a chasing pack of dark-clad Alaydaa.

A small, dark figure - Maurice – was skirting the far reaches of the perimeter fence. There was a sudden, huge explosion and a mass of rocks, rubble and earth mushroomed high into the air… Maurice had disappeared.

‘A minefield…’ squeaked Thelonious. ‘Tread carefully.’

Hermione gave him cover as he ran towards Henrik, carrying the small boy in his arms.

‘Hermione!’ Draco shouted, grabbing her from behind. ‘Where the fuck were you?’

She melted with relief, but then a dark figure – the Alaydaa – charged at Draco, wand outstretched… He flicked his wrist and shouted…

‘NO!’ Hermione screeched, elbowing Draco aside… A shot of fierce blue light exploded from her wand and the shadowy figure flew high into the sky, limbs flailing, consumed by flames - before dropping like a stone.

She'd killed him... She'd gone too strong... Oh god... I’m a killer... A killer... She felt clammy, heady, overtaken by panic... She stared at Draco, mouth contorted in horror.

‘It’s okay,’ Draco soothed, grasping her hand tightly, ‘you’re okay … Let’s get out of here!’
Henrik was waiting in the driver’s seat and the truck was fired up, ready to go.

‘Get a move on!’ he squawked through the open window.

A green flash jumped off the truck’s bonnet followed by a screaming red spell which whistled past Hermione’s ear. A column of flame raged behind them.

Draco threw her into the back of the pickup and almost somersaulted on top of her, sending her crashing into the far side.

‘Drive!’ he bellowed. And the truck rocketed forwards. The truck circled a bend at such speed it pitched rightwards, almost spilling them to the ground.

Hermione clung to Draco, watching the Alaydaa being swallowed up into the cloud of dust churned into the air behind them. Henrik crunched through the gears and the truck spun along the road, away from the Gilgad site.

Neville was lying next to them, groaning and holding his elbow.

‘You okay?’ Hermione gasped.

‘I’ll live,’ he breathed. He was squashed up against Ottiline who was lying flat on her back, her mouth wide open like a parched fish. She was gasping for air. A gaping wound had been ripped into her side.

‘Got her out just in time,’ Neville said.

‘Where’s Gunter?’

Hermione looked ahead at the towering wall of orange dust blotting out the sky for as far as she could see.

There was no escaping their fate. They were driving straight into it…

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“PARADIS” by ALEXIA GREDY

“VIOLENCE” by GRIMES

“CEMALIM” by ALTIN GÜN

“PROFESSIONAL GRIEFERS” by DEADMAU5 (ft. GERARD WAY)

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Finding Harry and Salvedra’s secret lair

53. Akhr Makan

The sandstorm descended and the road ahead was barely visible. They were running blind.

Hermione fired a shield charm over the back of the truck as they left the compound but it wasn’t powerful enough and they were soon drowning in thick, brown dust.

Neville hastily conjured a blanket to keep Ottiline covered. ‘She’s in a really bad way!’ he shouted over the whirling winds.

Hermione focused hard, dredging the recesses of her mind for something that might help fend off the brutality of the sandstorm, but it was almost impossible to think straight as Henrik’s driving grew increasingly erratic and the truck slumped into sweeping dunes. The tyres spun and groaned to release them and hit a hidden rock, jolting them into the air. The truck crunched noisily, its exhaust spluttering loudly, choking on the clogging sand. Henrik ploughed onwards but at this rate the truck was likely to break – marooning them in unsurvivable conditions.

‘We have to stop, take cover,’ Draco said. His face looked like he’d been embalmed in clay. ‘We’re far enough away now from those goggle-eyed fuckers.’

But Hermione was concentrating hard, so hard her head was hurting with the effort and she bit her tongue. Blood swirled into her mouth; hot, metallic, tangy.

She could do this… yes, she could do this… A burst of bright purple blossomed inside of her.

Gunter’s words were swimming around her head: Focus and flow… Focus and flow…

Could she create and sustain a colour-magic shield able to withstand this sandstorm?

‘What are you doing!?’ Draco cried.

She opened her mouth to reply but a gobbet of blood spilled out.

‘Stop!’ Draco shook her with surprising violence. His eyes were graphite grey slits in a caked, white mask. ‘I know what you’re fucking doing!’ he said scathingly, ‘and you can’t do it alone.’

He grabbed her by the wrists and pulled her close. She could sense him feeling for her colour with his mind. His white was blazing, cut through with accelerating whorls of deepening ashy grey – his anxiety, his fear. But it was strong, resonant - much stronger than herself, she realised.

‘We need to do this together, beautiful,’ he said in low tones, his thumb caressed her wrist, ‘or I don’t think we’re going to make it out of here alive.’

‘I killed someone,’ she said suddenly - and tears were blurring what little there was of her vision
amidst the swirling sand. ‘I panicked – I only meant to blast… but I lost control.’

He gave her a crooked, half-smile. ‘You saved my life.’

He leant into her and kissed her, his hand weaving into her hair, which was dancing furiously in the wind. She kissed him back and as she did she assiduously knitted their colours together in her mind’s eye.

An extraordinary surge of magic powered through her veins; hot, molten colour-magic, but there was more… raw, unchannelled leptons, thrusting an explosive course, almost bursting from their bodies. Somehow, they’d combined…

Draco audibly gasped and blinked hard and Hermione felt like her blood was boiling inside of her.

A shimmering veil, like a clear soapy bubble shot through with a gleaming, violet iridescence was taking shape… expanding in a jellied, glutinous arc to encompass the spatial area of the truck in motion. It glowed ultraviolet.

Their eyes lifted to the dazzling white shield, shot through with a gleaming kaleidoscopic tapestry of colours, hovering high above them.

Neville’s face was bathed in pristine, fluorescent white… so bright his teeth and the whites of his eyes were glowing. He burst out laughing, loud and uproarious.

The feeling of combining magic like this was utterly, unexpectedly beautiful, even sensual … the flow of feeling between them was tangible, visceral, exciting… and yet soothing, too.

Hermione and Draco held each other close, bodies intertwined and she sighed onto his shoulder… For a moment she thought if she was to die, if she had to die, then this would be a perfect moment.

Gliding through rooms, down passageways, in one door, out the other… white to lilac to an oddly comforting shade of grey that she knew was also Draco… they wandered through a glittering landscape, floated effortlessly across sparkling vistas… There were glimpses of their pasts, their memories… even things they’d hidden, buried deep within … but with Draco she was fearless – and he with her…

Except… What’s in here? she asked… and here? Forbidding in their glare, so bright it hurt.

Not today… but not never. I promise.

And he was a flare of vivid white beside her, around her… and the movement of his whiteness coursing through her was arousing, potent, ecstatic.

His mouth greedily sought hers and they fell to the floor of the truck – locked together…

What I’d do to make love right now, he sighed… but his voice was within her.

‘If only…’ she replied. He smiled against her mouth… and then they were kissing, open-mouthed, basking in an exquisite wet heat, sighing, moaning… lost in each other.

Anteractivity… unalloyed, untrammeled.

Yes… His body was pulsating, white-hot…

So beautiful…
The Epsilon+ and the Gamma… Searing and extraordinary, the call of their blood burnished into a bright, irradiating, exultant song. This charged flow flooding through her with supernova lustre was one of the most heavenly feelings she’d ever experienced.

Focus and flow…

‘I’m here, guys,’ came Neville’s grinning voice, loud and clear against the pelting sand and dirt and the screech of the wind bouncing off the shield they’d constructed.

The truck sped along, straight and clean, picking up speed, free to fly…

‘Focus and flow,’ Draco murmured.

It felt like hours, days, weeks had passed… time held no meaning. And then suddenly it did. The dense bank of cloud had rolled over and a few random sprays of orange dust were dispersing, scattering, then gone.

The truck chugged hotly. Hermione could hear Henrik grinding through the gears up front and the sudden pealing sobs of a frightened child, clutched into the folds of Thelonious’s robe.

Hermione gasped at the shock of it… and Draco was staring at her with warm, grey eyes the colour of the clouds that were fast scudding over the far horizon.

The truck eased to a halt with a thunk of the brakes and a skid of sand beneath its tyres and Henrik’s door clattered open.

He tramped wearily towards them.

‘I assume that was you guys back here.’ He cast his eye over the three of them. ‘Gotta say a huge thank you. That was fucking miraculous.’

‘Don’t thank me,’ Neville said generously. ‘It was them.’ He nodded at Hermione and Draco. ‘Over two hours I reckon you held that shield… extraordinary.’ He grinned amiably. ‘You seemed to be rather enjoying it…’

Hermione squirmed. ‘Oh lord, we didn’t do anything embarrassing?’

Neville vehemently shook his head. ‘No. Not at all. Everything was … as it should be.’ And he gave her a smile that was clearly meant to say more than simple reassurance. ‘Oh! And you gave off an incredible glow! Like a neon-whitish-purplish sort of corona-thing… hurt the eyes if you stared too long.’

Hermione would have felt more celebratory had it not been for the bone-crunching exhaustion that had swamped her since releasing the shield.

‘Jesus, Hermione, you’re a right fucking mess,’ Draco said tenderly. He tore a strip off the bottom of his shirt, exposing his midriff, and began wiping layers of congealed sand and blood from her face. ‘Have you still got any water up there?’ he asked Henrik.

Henrik dipped from view and returned with a half-full bottle.

‘Don’t waste it,’ Hermione said, but too late. Draco had soaked the material and was scrubbing at the engrained filth on her face.

‘Here, drink the rest,’ he said, giving her the bottle.
She looked at Henrik who nodded. ‘There’s more. Take it.’

‘Where the hell are we?’ Neville asked.

‘Somewhere in the Sahara,’ Henrik grunted in reply. ‘Reckon The Sudan’s about fifty kilometres in that direction.’ He pointed due South. ‘I just drove straight… was scared of screwing up.’

‘We need somewhere called Akhr Makan,’ Hermione said, recalling the old lady at Qalb Min Hjir. ‘They took Harry there.’

Draco pushed sand-crusted hair away from his eyes. He suddenly looked faded, diminished with exhaustion. ‘How do you know this?’

‘The old lady watching over Hakim – the little boy? She told me.’

‘Thelonious says Hakim’s father is with the Wahdah… he thinks that’s a tribe or something, hanging out near the temple in the desert,’ Henrik said. Clearly, Thelonious had understood more than she’d feared, Hermione thought with relief. Henrik eyed Draco with a worried frown. ‘I think you two need to come into the cabin for a bit… You alright with that, mate?’ he asked Neville.

‘Sure. It’s not as hot as it was.’

She hadn’t been imagining that, then. The sky was still overcast and muggy but the faint rosy glow on the horizon, sundown’s herald, was a stark warning that this barren landscape would soon be plunged into chill, impenetrable darkness.

Thelonious stepped out of the cab holding Hakim. He was a beautiful child, Hermione thought. She held out her arms to take him, a rush of warm affection swelling inside of her. He stared up at her with large, glassy, black eyes.

Thelonious hauled himself over the tailgate onto the open truck-bed and knelt next to Ottiline’s unconscious form. He felt for her pulse.

Neville pointed out the bloodied mess in her side. ‘Tried a few healing charms, but nothing’s helped.’

Thelonious laid his hands on her, then drew his wand and cast Vulnera Sanentur.

‘Where did Gunter go?’ Draco asked.

‘Hopefully away from the storm…’ Henrik sighed. ‘If we find Wahdah, there might be folks can tell us how to get to this Akhr Makan?’

‘Means The Last Place,’ Thelonious muttered, a forlorn look on his face.

‘Did you understand what the old lady was saying about the Alaydaa and the Aleuyan?’ Hermione asked Thelonious.

‘The Alaydaa are the soldiers of Alsharika… Gilgad. The Aleuyan are their spies.’

Hermione looked at Hakim, nestled close and dozing in her arms. ‘Hopefully Hassan Aktari will be at Wahdah.’

‘Maybe Wahdah isn’t a place at all?’ Thelonious said ruminatively. ‘It means alone…Maybe it’s how the fugitives from Qalb Min Hjir describe themselves?’
'But how the hell do we find a bunch of runaways?' Draco asked.

'They headed for Abu Simbel.'

'Where’s that?' Henrik asked.

'Lake Nasser – due East,' Draco said. 'Shall I drive for a bit?'

'No. You’re pooped.'

And he was. Moments after getting into the cab alongside Henrik, both Draco and Hermione, with Hakim slumbering in her arms, were fast asleep.

XXX

It was dark when Hermione woke up. The truck’s headlights illuminated a cluster of tents in the desert – but there was the gleam of an impressively large body of water in the distance. The white disc of the moon shone onto the water, its reflection rippling.

A lamp glowed from the dusty canvas of the nearest tent. A man emerged. He had a scarf wrapped around the lower part of his face but the grim set of his dark eyes spoke of suspicion. Hermione noticed he had a roughly-hewn wand protruding from his back pocket. He shone a lantern into Henrik’s face as he climbed out of the truck, shielding his eyes.

Thelonious clambered over the back of the truck to join Henrik and there was a halting conversation in process. Moments later, the man with the scarf approached the front cabin. He peered inside, his eyes flicking from Hermione’s face to the young child in her arms.

He turned and nodded to Thelonious and spoke in a gruff, guttural voice. Hermione strained to hear him.

Draco was still asleep, his head resting against her. His sighing breaths billowed onto her cheek. Hakim’s legs extended onto Draco’s lap.

‘Draco?’ Hermione said in low, hushed tones.

He blinked and stirred.

‘We’re at Wahdah.’

This time he blinked harder and his eyes fluttered open. He slowly rolled his head away from her shoulder and gazed at her blearily. ‘So soon?’

She smiled indulgently. ‘We’ve been driving for some time.’ She nodded to the trio beyond the windscreen, engaged in some kind of negotiation.

A few more orangey glows were lighting up the tents closest to them… clearly Wahdah was waking up, too.

Thelonious and the man in the scarf moved deeper into the camp. Henrik came to the passenger window and gestured to Draco to open it.

‘Thelonious is fetching Hakim’s father,’ Henrik said, keeping his voice low.

Draco shivered at the trickle of cold air wafting through the open window. ‘Hermione, are you able to reach over and dip the headlights? We’re rather over-announcing ourselves.’
She strained to hit the lever without waking up Hakim, plunging them into darkness, bar the soft orange glow from the tents before them. Strange, she thought, once the lights were extinguished she could hear more – the wail of a baby, scuffling feet moving between tents and a goat’s plaintive bleat.

‘How’s Ottiline?’ she asked Henrik. It was very quiet and still at the back.

Henrik briefly disappeared from view. ‘Well. She has a pulse,’ he said grimly, on his return. He scrutinized the camp, a thoughtful expression on his face. ‘Do you think we ask to leave her here? We could come back for her.’

‘She won’t be much use rescuing Harry,’ Draco said, stifling a yawn. He fished his phone out of his pocket. ‘No service.’

‘It’s not far to The Sudan,’ Hermione said, looking between them. ‘There might be a Portkey Office at the border.’

‘She’s too weak for that… Hold on. Looks like we’ve got company,’ Henrik said, stepping into the darkness. A glint of pale light from a low-wattage torch was shuddering across the sands towards them, dark figures coming closer.

A balding man wrapped in a blue woollen cloak accompanied Thelonious.

‘My boy? You have my boy?’ he asked in urgent tones – thankfully in English, Hermione thought. He stared at the child sleeping across Hermione and Draco. ‘We leave very fast. Lost Hakim… Was the worst time.’ His limpid, brown eyes filled with tears. ‘But then I hear he stay with my mother. Very sick.’

Hermione gave him a regretful look and he nodded, disconsolate.

‘We need to get to a place called Akhr Makan,’ Draco said.

Hassan vehemently shook his head. ‘Dark place. Terrible.’

‘No doubt,’ Draco said drily, ‘but we still need to get there. Do you know the way?’

Hassan raised his eyes upwards. ‘God forgive me but I do. I, former Aleuyan. ’Tis why I flee. I vow to save my people. To find safe place.’

An ideal witness for Harry’s prosecution, Hermione thought…

Draco clearly thought the same. ‘We could do with you coming with us, Hassan. We plan to destroy Alsharika for good; hold the guy who ran this shit accountable.’

Hassan gave him an inscrutable smile.

‘Right, let’s wrap this up,’ Henrik muttered. ‘I’m fucking freezing.’

‘We need directions to Akhr Makan, Hassan. Would be just reward for returning your son,’ Draco said pithily. Hermione sensed a swirl of tension.

Thelonious was jogging back to the truck, fresh concern on his face.

‘Couple of guys just Apparated into the camp…’ He pointed towards the furthest tent, lost in the blackness. ‘South-western corner.’
Hassan gave him a puzzled look. ‘But we are alone.’

Hermione strained to hear beyond their immediate environs. The orange lanterns had gradually extinguished while they were talking, throwing them into deeper darkness. Clouds scurried across the face of the moon and there was an ominous stillness. She fancied she could hear a series of further cracks, emanating from the direction Thelonious had pointed and her stomach churned with cold fear.

‘You have Aleuyan,’ she hissed to Hassan.

His lip trembled and his eyes darted nervously towards the slumbering tents.

Thelonious peered into the darkness. ‘Movement…’ He instantly sprang away and levered himself into the back of the truck. ‘Henrik…’ he started to say, but an almighty boom blasted through the camp, knocking Henrik to his knees and violently slamming Hassan against the door. Hakim woke up with a start, gasping for air.

‘HENRIK?’ Hermione screeched. ‘Are you okay?’ Hakim had started to cry…

A fiery maelstrom lit up the night sky; towering flames barreling upwards, wreathed in a voluminous shroud of thick, choking smoke. Shots were now being fired and dark-clad shapes were sprinting through the flames towards them, wands outstretched.

Henrik was making heavy work of clawing himself up from the ground. A volley of red stunners flew over his head and across the bonnet of the truck towards the tents. Thelonious and Neville…

Draco flipped open the passenger door and roughly hauled Hassan into the cabin then jumped out.

‘What are you doing?’ Hermione squeaked in horror.

The Alaydaa were weaving through the burning tents, steadily advancing amidst a constant stream of wandfire. The camp resounded to the heart-stopping wail of agonized screams and desperate cries for help.

Draco hoisted Henrik to his feet and stumbled with him to the back of the truck.

Hassan stared at the camp, mouth agape in horror. Hakim scampered onto his lap and threw his arms around his neck, weeping piteously.

Draco jumped into the driver’s seat, jangling the keys, and the truck grunted into gear and he reversed, wheels spinning, as fast as he could.

An Alaydaa stopped and levelled his wand at the truck. There was a blinding white flash and the windscreen shattered, sending shards of glass flying at them.

Hermione instinctively ducked, relieved that the vehicle was still in motion, spinning backwards at ever greater speed. She dragged her eyes forwards. The windscreen was a jagged, gaping hole but the burning camp was getting smaller…

Draco was staring fixedly at the wing mirror, his hand moving rapidly on the steering wheel, trying to navigate around darkened shapes that she realised, as they passed, were rocks… He spun the truck into a crunching handbrake turn and the truck bounced heavily over pits and furrows in the sand and earth away from the camp.

Hermione tried to block out the bawling cries of the child, clutching onto his father. She frantically
brushed globules of shattered glass from Draco’s clothes and hair, not caring that her fingers were soon bleeding. He gave her a desperate, wordless look and kept on driving into the darkness.

XXX

‘Are we far enough away?’ Hassan asked sometime later. A thin band of dawn light was peeking on the horizon.

Draco had steered the truck far beyond the danger of the desert onto a strip of potholed concrete leading to a lakeside inlet. Lake Nasser rippled before them, a vast, body of indigo water. On the far side the dusty wasteland stretched as far as the eye could see, an endless sea of sand, grit and boulders. Hermione thought it looked like the moon had fallen to earth.

Draco glanced in the mirrors. ‘Should think so.’ He ground the truck to a halt and switched off the engine. ‘Has to be… we’re running on fumes.’

A hot wind was already gusting through the gaping windscreen. Hakim had stopped wailing some time ago and fallen into a sweaty slumber. Hassan had spent the entire journey furtively wiping his eyes and emitting sad little sobs into his beard. He occasionally closed his eyes and muttered in Arabic, rocking gently in an attempt to comfort both himself and the child. Now that the truck had stopped he desultorily creaked open the passenger door and stepped outside, displacing Hakim, who he gently laid out on the seat. He walked a few feet away from the truck and moved behind a large rock where he remained.

Hermione fell against Draco. Her head was pounding and she felt like she had dirt and sand lining her throat, scratching at her eyes. He slung an arm around her shoulder and drew her closer. She could feel the soft thump-thump of his heart pulsing through his whiteness. For a moment it was like taking a warm bath.

He gently kissed her forehead, then said: ‘As soon as Hassan gets back, we’re going to have to get everyone together to talk about what we do next.’

She tucked herself into the crook of Draco’s arm and sighed. She couldn’t remember ever feeling this tired. But she was also strangely happy, despite their dire circumstances, as she watched the sun slowly rise across Lake Nasser.

Part of her wished that this moment could last forever. Life and its feelings stripped to the raw; unadulterated essence.

‘I love you,’ she whispered.

She felt a spike of joy in his white warmth. ‘I love you, too,’ he said, his voice muffled into her hair.

XXX

Hassan, Neville and Thelonious decided to explore the shoreline in the hope that they encountered a stray felucca or a friendly fisherman. Some means of crossing the lake… Akhr Makan, Hassan told them, was located on the opposite banks.

Early morning Saharan heat was just about bearable, although Hermione’s clothes were sticking to her and she was parched. She used this enforced respite to attend to Ottiline, applying a string of healing spells – pretty much everything in her arsenal. At least she’d regained consciousness…

Henrik and Draco ventured a short distance from the truck to ‘dune-slide’ with Hakim, followed by
a swim in the cool, turquoise waters lapping the bank. Hermione marvelled at the uncanny resilience of children as Hakim giggled gleefully.

‘Go on,’ Ottoline said, squeezing her hand. ‘I’ll be fine.’

‘Are you sure?’

Ottoline nodded, her eyes dulled and encircled by a green bruise colour. She was remarkably similar-looking to Maurice – small and wiry with a keen, narrow face. It occurred to Hermione that they weren’t partners, but brother and sister.

Hermione stripped off to her underwear and dived into the water. Draco grabbed her from behind and threw her further out. She squealed in delight, reinvigorated, bubbling with sudden effervescent joy. The sun was beating down now, hard, white and glaring, but the water was cool and refreshing and felt like soft silk over her tired limbs. The terrain was glowing rich russet gold in the sunshine.

They splashed and played like children, taking Hakim for piggyback rides through the shallows. He was remarkably trusting, Hermione thought, considering they were strangers.

She lay down in the water, allowing her wild, bushy hair to flow freely… chill currents ebbed and flowed against her temples and she listened to her soft, sighing breaths.

When she surfaced, something in the atmosphere had changed. There was a repeated barking cough and a choking sound. Henrik was holding Hakim and pointing things out to him on the lake, keeping him distracted.

A bedraggled, thin figure approached the water’s edge… Hermione could sense his reddish-brown gaze.

Gunter…

She turned around and Draco was on the truck-bed with Ottoline, mopping blood from her face and offering her water.

She Apparated to them. ‘Gunter’s here.’

And then he was; battered and bruised with a bleeding sore above his eye.

‘How is she?’ he asked, a tragic look on his face. He already knew...

Hermione gave him a regretful half-smile. She could feel his redness burning.

‘I’ve known her since she was a small child,’ he said sadly. ‘And her brother, too. They’re… family.’ HIS family.

Gunter shook his wrist and his wand appeared in his hand. ‘We have an agreement for such times.’

‘Not necessary, she’s going…’ Draco murmured. He wiped frothing blood from Ottoline's mouth.

‘But we can help ease her pain,’ Hermione said.

Sensing Gunter's presence, Ottoline reached for Gunter and whispered in halting French. Gunter kissed her on the cheek and then held her in his arms, holding back sobs of raw anguish - trying to stay as calm as he could. Hermione found his bravery incredibly distressing and was barely able to act because a powerful sob was constricting her throat.
'Place your hands on her,' Draco said, slipping his arms around her.

Hermione closed her eyes and drew on Draco’s reservoir of white warmth.

She built her purple colour, allowing it to float and sway and gently ease itself into Ottiline… She was a murky smoky-grey - fading fast.

Softly, sinuously, Hermione threaded a path deeper into Ottiline – drawing the sharp edge of pain away. Cleansing. Purifying…

Her smoky-grey was dissipating, becoming ever more translucent, a gauzy wisp that gradually melted away… washing into a vast emptiness, that was suddenly cold, like someone had switched the sun off.

Gunter held Ottiline, pale and peaceful, in his arms. He was crying; large, silent tears spilling onto his cheeks.

‘Thank you,’ he mouthed.

XXX

Gunter whisked Ottiline’s body deep into the dunes before Hakim was aware what had happened… which was just as well as Hassan, Neville and Thelonious returned with a felucca – and two small children.

Draco shook his head. ‘What’s this? What’s going on?’

‘Where’s Ottiline?’ Neville asked and was surprisingly emotional when Henrik whispered what had happened in his ear.

‘Apologies for this intrusion…’ Hassan said, ‘but some of Qalb Min Hijr hide on island, not far from here… I tell them what happens with Wahdah and they cannot shield these poor souls now – not with Alaydaa so close…’ His voice broke with the weight of emotion and loss bearing down on him.

‘We didn’t have a choice, Draco,’ Thelonious said in apologetic tones.

Draco momentarily buried his head in his hands, then snapped to a decision with a heavy sigh.

‘Right… here’s what we do… If Hassan explains precisely where to find Akhr Makan, some of us can take this boat there…’

‘We are too many for Akhr Makan!’ Hassan said, throwing his hands into the air. ‘Is underground. Tiny tunnels. Would be—’ he slapped his hands together, like two large pieces of meat, ’-jammed up.’

Draco acknowledged this with an irritated nod. ‘So four of us take the boat, while the others – including myself – take the truck with Hassan and the kids and head for the border… Hassan, we have a safe house. When we have defeated Alsharika, you can come home.’

‘Yes. That is the best way. Only way…’ Hassan agreed. He rubbed his forehead. ‘We fetch petrol for the van and drive to Sudan.’ He gazed at them with wide, beseeching eyes. ‘I am so very sorry for this trouble that has been brought upon you people… I – I don’t even know all your names. Or anything of you. But you show me great kindness and I will never forget this.’

‘What are the names of the children?’ Hermione asked. She’d been scrabbling to pull on her
clothes, keenly aware that she was still in her bra and knickers.

Hassan introduced them… A boy and a girl. Similar age to Hakim. The boy, Chibale, was round-shouldered, hunched-over. But the girl, Farida, clutched Thelonious’s hand with fierce determination. She wanted to be safe, to survive… and had somehow discerned she had to take advantage of this opportunity.

Henrik looked skyward. ‘Okay, it’s getting very hot, guys, we have to move fast, whatever we’re doing.’ He looked hottest of all with Hakim draped across his back.

Draco turned to Hermione. He looked downcast, anxious.

She mustered a bright smile. ‘I have to find Harry... they need you to drive the truck.’

Henrik stepped forwards. ‘Hey. If there’s a way the truck can avoid the official border, I’ll drive. You two find Harry…’

‘I can get us across at Argeen,’ Hassan said.

‘I’ll go back,’ Thelonious said, looking down at little Farida, who was staring up at him, a pugnacious look on her face.

‘Hassan, we heard the latest attack here involved… a child,’ Draco said hesitantly. ‘Did you hear this, too?’

A look of deep bemusement stole across Hassan’s face. ‘No, no… not a child… a DONKEY… A donkey that blew up!’ He mimed an explosion with his hands and the children laughed, although Hermione didn’t think they’d laugh so hard if they understood what he was saying.

‘Many die,’ he added, and a dark veil fell over his eyes. ‘This is why we HIDE children… We know what they do… I know.’ His face crumpled in regret.

Draco looked at Neville, who was flagging. ‘Stay or go?’ Neville was silent. ‘There’s no shame going,’ Draco added. ‘This isn’t a competitive sport.’

‘Stay,’ Neville said assertively.

Hermione pulled out the Folkvangr rock and gave it to Thelonious. ‘Alert the others you’re coming.’

XXX

Four of them - Hermione, Draco, Neville and Gunter – headed upstream in the boat, following Hassan’s directions.

The water was dappled and bright and the boat surged forwards, leaving a glistening V-shape in its wake.

The sun was beating down on them as they sailed. Neville groaned, chafing at the lack of shelter. Hermione wondered if it would have been better if he’d travelled to The Sudan with the others.

Hermione hung over the edge of the boat and lowered her hand into the water, relishing the cool water spooling through her fingers.

‘Look!’ Draco cried as they passed the colossal statues of Abu Simbel – four renderings of the Pharaoh Ramesses II - carved into a huge flat-topped sandstone rock. One of the statues was
missing a head, but even without this perfect symmetry, the sight was awe-inspiring. A narrow, dark entrance led into the temple; dark, forbidding, exciting.

Even though it was very early, streams of tourists were already parading along the wide sandy apron in front of the temple and there was a buzzy hubbub of traffic approaching the area. A motor-boat speeded noisily past. Their felucca bounced and splashed in the choppy, skidding waters left in the boat’s wake.

To Hermione’s delight, another temple came into view – similarly carved into a soaring sandstone block. Six tall, stately figures, sporting the emblematic, high head-dresses of Ancient Egyptian royalty, were standing in shallow alcoves, facing out to the lake.

‘Dedicated to Ramesses’ wife, Nefertari… a reputed beauty,’ Neville announced in his best professorial voice.

They dreamily watched the glorious temples vanish as they rounded a bend and the parched lunarscape returned.

A few miles further and they navigated between two islands. Gunter then steered the boat towards a small, featureless bay. Stretching back from the bay was a high ridge of grey granite rocks.

‘Where are the buildings?’ Neville asked, a note of concern in his voice.

‘Hassan mentioned tunnels,’ Hermione said.

They were sweating profusely by the time they’d secured the boat. They scampered across the sun-drenched landscape to take shelter in the shade of the lofty rock formation.

The rock was gnarly and jagged, adorned with crudely-cut etchings of a circle with eight straight lines spaced at intervals around its circumference.

‘Are these primitive runes?’ Neville muttered, perplexed.

Hermione scanned the surrounding area, eyes alighting on a hulking, misshapen rock a few hundred metres away, set amidst a pile of broken rubble. There were flat indentations in the sand and shallow ruts leading from the lake.

Something… some things, maybe…had been dragged there from the shore.

She headed purposefully across the scorching sands towards the great rock’s shadow. The air was dusty, dry and searing, scalding her gullet.

One whole side of the rock was smooth. It reminded her of the entrance to the Herb Healing facility in Wanaka. Hassan had given them an access-all-areas password – ‘Kalib Kabir’ – but before she could use it, Draco had joined her.

‘I’d rather I went in with Gunter, in case there’s Dark Flux,’ he said, awkwardly. ‘You and Neville can be look-outs.’

Hermione gave him a firm stare. ‘It has to be me, Draco. I sense Harry’s colour.’

Draco held her gaze, then shook his head in exasperation. ‘The first sign of anything … fatal… you make a run for it. Is that clear?’
Neville and Gunter stayed by the boat. Neville would send a Patronus to warn if any danger was headed their way.

‘We can’t just swagger in through the front door,’ Draco said, hunting for another portal. He circled a further rocky outcrop and beckoned her over, pointing to a metal manhole sealed into the rock. But Hassan’s password didn’t work.

Hermione prodded the metal with the tip of her wand. It sank into the metal, which then reflated. So she drew the shape from the granite rocks into the metal.

The metal instantly swirled and dissolved.

Draco promptly eased himself down and out of sight. She followed, sliding down a thin, slippery tube before landing heavily on a concrete floor.

They’d arrived in a featureless, concrete room, lit by a single dangling, naked lightbulb. Hermione glanced back up the tube - now dark, closed – and a pang of claustrophobic fear throbbed through her.

Draco indicated a door up ahead. ‘That’s our way in.’

Beyond the door was an empty, poorly-lit passageway, cloaked in silence, stretching far from the metallic portal back towards the lake.

‘Hassan said prisoners are kept beyond the medical centre,’ Draco said in low tones. ‘But his directions were from the front door. We’re back-to-front.’

The passageway widened considerably as they walked, arriving at a set of double-doors. Two rooms faced each other: ‘SAHIR’ and ‘SAHIRA’.


Draco raised his eyebrows at a selection of ready-to-wear warrior costumes on hangers. ‘Useful disguise?’

Hermione quickly discarded her sweat-soaked, dusty apparel and donned an Alaydaa suit. The skin-tight, figure-hugging black costume was surprisingly cool and light.

‘That’s pretty fucking hot,’ Draco growled, eyeing her in approval. ‘Nice set of goggles…’ he said, plucking a pair from a box.

‘Pass me that, will you?’ Hermione said, pointing to a black, metallic tunic with a detachable hood and a ragged scarf. ‘And now - the Men’s department.’

XXX

They passed through the double-doors and were met with yet another eerie silence – though Hermione detected a faint whisper of a sound – like a cat mewing.

Her heart suddenly thumped in her chest. There’d been a fleeting trace of Harry...

She stared straight ahead, senses straining to recapture the slightest smidgen of gloomy grey-green.

They jogged onwards with purpose. Empty offices lined the corridor on both sides.

One elongated, darkened room featured a long window extending from the floor to the ceiling.
Hermione peered through the dusty glass. Pictures… lots of pictures… in a long, row.

‘Oh hell,’ she breathed. In the centre of the wall-display was a tall portrait…

‘Salvedra.’

‘Where?!’

‘There!’ she said, jabbing her finger at the glass.

Draco visibly relaxed. ‘Oh… a painting.’ He surveyed it curiously. ‘You know, I’m amazed Ephraim and his ginormous ego tolerates all these bleeding shrines to Salvedra in his company offices… is it the same as the picture in Arcana?’

‘Similar.’ But then she jumped away from the glass, heart pounding…

‘HIS EYES! They moved!’

Draco immediately seized her elbow and steered her away from the painting, deeper into the corridor. ‘I thought it was only landscape paintings that can be seen through!’

‘It is! But there’s something special about those particular paintings. I’m sure of it!’

‘Let’s just get this over with and get out…’

But the corridor only seemed to be getting longer, thinner, and Hermione felt sure the light was flickering, fading… although she couldn’t see where the light actually came from.

‘Draco… When – when you were in America and did that Visual Resonation spell, did you use a particular incantation?’ she asked tremulously.

‘Nothing memorable.’

Hermione needed to be sure… ‘I used a phrase – a Latin phrase - one your father, I think, had written on the back of Salvedra’s photo…’ she shot a furtive glance at Draco as she spoke, ‘– You see Salvedra repeated that phrase – which I don’t want to say out loud – when I was at Arcana, and then at Atalaya, and – and you’ve heard it too – all of you – in Bill’s study.’

Draco looked at her askance. ‘I didn’t say that. I think I’d have remembered.’

They passed multiple darkened rooms and squinted through the glass door or window into each one …

‘You fear it’s a summons, don’t you?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ she said bluntly. ‘I think I invited him in.’

‘Into where? YOU?’ Draco asked in horrified tones. He watched her as she pressed her forehead against the cool glass of a window.

Harry…

She twisted the door-handle… but Draco’s hand clamped down on hers.

‘Answer me, Hermione… do you feel you invited him into you? That he’s somehow marked you?’
She looked at him, a grave expression on her face. ‘I fear I made a mistake…’ The door clicked open.

It was warm and musty and there was the lingering waxy scent of recently extinguished candles.

A chink of faint light emanated from a second door, deeper inside… Draco eased the door open, wand poised to strike, and they found themselves in a small, windowless study, lit by a single, guttering candle.

A large ebony desk dominated one half of the room, piled high with books and parchments and a large, metal globe.

‘Gracious. An Armiliary Sphere!’ Hermione said, spellbound… ‘Extremely rare. Dates from the time of Ptolemy.’

Draco was thumbing through an open book on the desk but then his eyes lifted to the wall.

‘Vitruvian Man,’ he murmured.

Hermione followed his gaze, alighting on a large vellum copy of Leonardo Da Vinci’s famous ink drawing of ‘Vitruvian Man’ – a naked man, who looked, at first glance, like he had eight limbs – four arms and four legs - but in reality the man was striking different poses in simultaneous time; a sort of *holographic* effect.

He was set within a circle overlaid by a square – or was it the other way round?

‘It’s meant to show man at his most perfect,’ Draco said, ‘our *divine proportions*. The text here’s written backwards.’ He pointed to a faded script under the picture. ‘The circle represents the feminine. And the square’s masculine. Symbolic, some say, of the perfect balance between the sexes… no idea if that’s true or not.’

Hermione grinned at him. ‘I didn’t know you were into this stuff, Draco…’

Draco gave a diffident shrug. ‘I kind of like arcane esoterica… like alchemy… and old instruments like these…’ His hand brushed a range of medical equipment - old-fashioned, possibly antique – ranged on a wooden sideboard. He picked up a few strange contraptions, a thoughtful expression on his face. There was a cabinet underneath. Draco threw open the doors releasing an icy breath of air.

Hermione continued to study Vitruvian Man. Someone had written supplementary notes in a sharp, scratchy hand alongside the diagram. It wasn’t a copy of Da Vinci’s handiwork – but the ink was very faded.

Salvedra wrote this… The thought rang loud and true inside of her.

What was it about ‘Vitruvian Man’ that interested him? The perfectibility of the human form?

She impetuously unpinned the picture up and shrunk it, stowing it in her bra.

‘Hermione…’ Draco said in low, worried tones. He was examining a tray of test-tubes – one vial in particular. The glass tube emanated a soft, golden glow but contained a maroon liquid that sloshed from one end of the vial to the other as Draco strained to read the label.

‘This is written in runes – those same blasted runes Canaro used on his Pensieve. I think it’s Harry’s blood.’
‘HARRY’S?’ Hermione instantly reached out to grab the tray… but Draco briskly returned it the cabinet, slamming the doors shut.

Cold dread lurched through her. ‘Maybe they give prisoners a medical before locking them up?’

‘I don’t know… There’s other trays for other people in there. People we know – like Sylvestra.’ He glanced up at the blank wall. ‘You’ve taken Vitruvian Man.’

‘Yes. Someone had written notes on it…’

They locked eyes… both knowing.

‘Keep it safe.’

They returned to the long corridor - still dim, deserted – and ventured deeper into the complex.

Hermione was bewildered that there didn’t seem to be anyone here… and yet her senses were screaming the opposite.

The corridor finally ended with a concrete wall, stained with damp black mould - wet to the touch.

Hermione shivered. ‘We’re under the lake,’ she said, feeling more entombed than ever.

There was a final room with a long window to their left. It was locked.

Her breath fogged the glass. ‘Kalib Kabir…’ she murmured and the glass evaporated.

XXX

A long, thin pool of dense black water bisected the room. The other side, across the water, had a raised, rugged stone floor abutting a black-tiled wall with a wide, metal door decorated with golden spiky oblong shapes, versions of the ‘rune’ they’d used to access the building.

Hermione spotted a transparent sheet floating on the pool. She summoned it and tentatively stepped on board.

‘Where are you going?’ Draco asked.

‘Over there.’ The raft tipped a little and a dribble of black liquid hastened towards her. She sidestepped it and arms aloft, sought her balance. But the raft refused to move… ‘I feel like I’m in one of those computer games the boys like to play,’ Hermione grumbled. ‘Aren’t you coming?’

Draco looked around the shadowy room. ‘There’s no way out of here, Hermione. I think we head back.’

Hermione had been quietly mouthing every single charm she thought might shift the raft across the narrow channel to the opposite side... resorting in the end to colour-magic.

The raft surged softly, smoothly.

She then scooted the raft back to Draco with a flick of her hand. ‘Please don’t leave me to go through on my own, Draco… Harry could be there.’

‘Through WHERE?’

‘The door,’ Hermione said.
‘What door?’

‘The door RIGHT HERE!’ Hermione groaned.

Draco looked at her and his face drained of colour. ‘There isn’t a door, Hermione.’

‘Yes there is.’ Why couldn’t he see it? She tugged it ajar… a soft, whistling sound blew an eddy of stale air towards them. Her head momentarily swam. Claggy greyness… ‘Come on,’ she said, reaching out her hand, but Draco’s face was rigid with fear.

He quickly boarded the raft...

‘Hermione. Your eyes...’ He looked beyond her. ‘Whatever you just did, undo it. Undo it, now.’

‘I did nothing. I opened this blasted door!’

‘THERE’S NO DOOR!’

‘Harry’s in there.’

Draco groaned into his hands. ‘Oh shit. We’re trapped! And… that fucker’s here, isn’t he?’

‘Who? Harry?’

‘No. SALVEDRA.’

Hermione felt nauseous, clammy. ‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because… come on, Hermione! You know he is! And your fucking EYES! They’ve gone BLACK! You said Sylvestra had creepy fucking eyes when she was communing or whatever the fuck it was with his portrait in Arcana. And – and you had black eyes when we went into the picture.’

‘Salvedra wasn’t there, Draco.’ At least she didn’t think he was…

‘Okay...’ he said quietly, reining himself in. ‘Maybe I’m over-reacting? But this blasted EYE thing… Can’t be good.’

She looked back to the door. ‘Or maybe it’s because I’m seeing something you’re not?… Maybe my colour-magic works differently to yours?’

‘You can see okay?’

‘Perfectly...’ Almost TOO perfectly. She could see every strand and fibre, every dust-mote, and the exact dimensions of every pore on Draco’s face and each single drop of saliva that washed through his mouth when he spoke.

‘Please. We need to move,’ she said anxiously.

Draco looked undecided, but he knew he had to.

XXX

Beyond the doors was a vast cavernous space – dark and damp-smelling. High sandstone walls, streaked with rivulets of green and black mould, were adorned with hieroglyphics and a series of intriguing runic symbols.
Draco studied those nearest to him… ‘Could do with better light…’ Aside from their wands, the only lights were tall, streaming torches set into high indents illuminating a train of ghostly figures: Ancient Egyptian gods and goddesses parading in stately formality around the Great Hall.

‘We need to find Harry and get out of here.’

‘These are the same as the test-tube… and Canaro’s pensieve.’

‘The same ones Tony used in his thesis?’

‘Similar, except I can’t get my head around those – but THESE were used in secret communications when Voldemort was active.’ He heaved a sigh. ‘If we ever needed proof that Salvedra was in league with Voldemort – then this is it.’

‘We can’t be sure Salvedra’s responsible for these, Draco. They’re probably historic.’

Draco shook his head. ‘Compared to the reliefs – the gods stuff – these are comparatively fresh… and this place strikes me as a place where Salvedra’s had a free rein to run his own little research projects – with Gilgad’s blessing.’

‘What do they say?’

‘Some bollocks about purity of blood equalling purity of soul…’

‘I don’t remember Voldemort being over-taxed with matters of the SOUL, Draco,’ Hermione said in acid tones, ‘apart from those bloody horcruxes.’

‘You know what? Wouldn’t surprise me if these runes are the origins of the term Mudblood…’ Draco instinctively shot her a pained look… ‘It’s repeated over and over… and Whore-Blood… that’s new.’

‘And makes absolutely no sense.’

‘Well, this is just manic ranting dressed up as words of wisdom, Hermione…’ He visibly recoiled. ‘Fucking hell. Muggles are described as SOULLESS! And it’s all Purity of Blood and Purity of Purpose and Purity of Soul… Some right Messianic-sounding shit going on… Blood and Soul.’

Hermione rubbed her arms, prickling with cold. Her hands flew to her Alaydaa head-dress, ensuring she was sufficiently shielded. ‘Come on,’ she whispered, glancing her hand across his arm. ‘Have my eyes gone back to normal yet?’

Draco pulled his eyes away from the runes to face her. ‘Yeah. Thank god…’

He held her hand tightly in his own as they ventured deeper into the hall. ‘Souls… All very arcane, isn’t it? Almost occultist. The sort of magic Muggles think there’s loads of when there isn’t any…’

‘Unless there is,’ Hermione breathed.

‘But that pre-supposes a whole load of OTHER stuff, doesn’t it?’ Draco looked decidedly uncomfortable. ‘Notions of the occult are grounded in religiosity…’

‘Remember Salvedra comes from another time, when religious discourse was more commonplace.’

‘Yeah… I forget he’s frigging ancient… Do we know where we’re headed by the way?’

Hermione didn’t… They’d been walking for an age and nothing had changed, except the door
they’d used to enter this endless space was long-gone.

She’d almost forgotten why they were here at all…

A soft, shushing sound hovered in the air above them… She glanced up and gasped.

High, high above them, was a whirling scramble of aquamarines and jade greens and a swirling skein of yellow, glinting and weaving, extending rapidly - a shining string. And featureless, dark floating objects, circling round and round…

‘That’s rather lovely, actually,’ Draco murmured, mesmerised.

But Hermione wasn’t listening… Her heart was clattering wildly inside of her…

‘I can sense Harry!’

‘WHERE?’ Draco craned to see, eyes frantically scanning the rolling clouds of colour.

‘Through there!’ Hermione ran ahead to the neighbouring room – another vast hallway, where an undulating green aura gently throbbed from a darkened space overhead. She waded through puddles of black water… at least she hoped it was water; her boots were unnaturally hot…

The light from the torches was barely visible in here… but a glowing, golden string was wound round a tall, dark column that scaled high into the darkness. Behind the column stretched an extensive, densely meshed pattern; glistening gossamer threads traced, with mathematical precision, the contours and lines of what looked like a rose, studded with tightly-bound pod-like packages, like butterfly cocoons.

‘It’s a nest,’ Hermione said.

‘No… It’s a web,’ Draco said in a bitter voice, as though his worst fears had been realised. ‘Which one’s Harry?’

‘There!’ Hermione pointed to a tall, thin cocoon dangling halfway up the web. She raised her wand-arm…

‘No,’ Draco breathed, gently pressing it back down. ‘When you disturb the web it sends vibrations…’

He gave her a piercing look that sent chills darting through her.

‘… like a *summons*. That’s what happens with – with REAL ones.’ He meant spiders…but they both knew they were really talking about Salvedra and the ghastly eight-limbed creature he’d transfigured himself into at Atalaya… the thing Hermione couldn’t bear to think about.

Muted horror - hysteria, even, was brewing inside of her. She could sense Draco’s whiteness – thick, creamy – almost curdling.

‘I’m not leaving Harry,’ she said in a determined voice.

‘But - is he even alive?’

Hermione closed her eyes and felt for Harry’s colour… yes, he was there. Weak. Fearful. But alive. Hermione moved forwards, desperate to be brave. Harry deserved no less.
She extended her wand-arm.

‘Use colour-magic,’ Draco said, ‘works easier here… Get Harry and I’ll – I’ll give us cover.’ He was trying to be brave, too, she thought.

Hermione focused on the pod containing Harry… She summoned her purple thinking how wonderful it would be if she severed the binding that kept the pod connected to the web.

Diffindo… but stronger, brighter, cleaner…

But her magic merely nudged Harry’s pod. When it swayed, she could sense Draco tensing behind her.

She recalled Gunter explaining how he adapted his usual magical technique to the colour-magic ‘network’ – and then used Ventus – the lightest gust, to steady the ball’s movement… But her colour-magic felt slow, unresponsive.

‘Cast a Lumos, Draco. I need more light.’

A warm glow rose up behind her.

She tried to disentangle Harry again and this time the pod disengaged with a sly, quick twist, falling to the floor with a resounding plop that echoed around the shadowy chamber…

Draco immediately summoned the cocoon towards them. It rotated across the vast, empty space; a spinning golden oblong.

Hermione kept her eye on the web… Had it juddered? One of the other cocoons quivered…

‘How the fuck do we get him out?’ Draco asked. He muttered a Cistem Aperio.

‘You said colour-magic works best.’

‘Except I haven’t learned the art of subtlety yet, and I don’t want to hurt him… How about Defodio?’ He wiped sweat from his face. ‘It’s suddenly boiling … do you think they know we’re in here and have decided to cook us?’

‘That’s a thought,’ Hermione said, extending her wand-arm. ‘Glacius!’

Within seconds, a frosty condensation had enveloped the cocoon and a faint flurry of steam arose from the tightly-packed golden strands; a thick skin of ice soon coated the pod and its golden hue transitioned from frosted white to a pale glacier-blue.

Hermione immediately infused heat into the cocoon and the tangled mess of fibres softened and fell away. Harry was now visible… a curled up black-suited figure, his glasses half-hanging off his nose, shivering and wet.

Hermione instantly pulled him from his threaded cage, falling to her knees to embrace him because he was still crunched into an uncomfortable fetal position.

His eyes were wide and staring and there was a sound from inside his chest, but he didn’t speak.

A shrill whine suddenly ripped through the silence and a stampede of feet echoed through the Great Hall towards them.

Hermione maintained focus on Harry… ‘Rennervate,’ she whispered… then placed her hands at
different points on his body, trying to shut out the noise and commotion surrounding her, and repeatedly cast Reparifor.

‘Come on, Harry,’ she begged. ‘We need to move!’

His body convulsed and his leg kicked out. There was a look of searing panic and fear in his eyes that she vaguely remembered from somewhere long buried in their painful past. She tried to raise him off the ground but his legs collapsed, which was as well – because a green Aveda Kedavra was flung in his direction.

Draco instantly cast a Protego followed by a loud ‘Fumos!’ The room instantly filled with choking smoke.

There were shouts and cries – six or seven Alaydaa - and flashes of light spearing the thick, grey haze, narrowly missing Draco, who danced backwards, muttering a charm with fixed concentration.

He fired back with a thunderous Depulso… There was a heavy thump as a couple of attackers hit the deck.

‘Might as well bring the whole fucking thing down!’ Draco bellowed, swivelling to fire at the gleaming web. Bulbous grey shapes tumbled to the ground. Draco shifted into colour-magic, a concentrated frown on his face, and the loosened pods rolled rapidly, then accelerated - a thundering cascade - towards the approaching Alaydaa, crashing into them.

Hermione grabbed Draco’s hand. Harry was lolling against her… ‘Let’s get out of here!’

They ran past the torn web, Harry’s feet dragging along the ground between them, and Hermione briefly dared to look… Yes. There was a distinct shape scuttling across the ceiling, limbs snatching at the tall, dark column… Coal-black eyes staring after them as they ran…

They ran towards a blizzard of noise and fumes – a room packed with huge, clunking machinery and pipework and hissing turbines belching steam. They swerved as a couple of stunners glanced off a series of vast metal vats full of bubbling, hot liquid … Then entered a brightly-lit medical ward, lined with beds.

Draco spun around and brusquely cast Duro - erecting a hard barrier between themselves and the Alaydaa.

‘Child…’ Harry muttered, nodding at a huge darkened pane of glass to their left.

Draco levelled an ear-splitting Finestra at the window, revealing a gleaming white room. A young boy, a toddler, was sat upright in a chair, eyes wide and terrified. Draco swiftly severed the cords binding him and hoisted him over his shoulder.

A door behind him blew off its hinges and a thickset, runtish man with pink eyes, flanked by two Alaydaa, swung into the room.

It took Hermione a brief moment to recognise him: JOSEP…

She instantly cast an Immobulus and the three men were frozen to the spot.

‘Come on!’ she shrieked, lurching down a long corridor towards a set of double-doors - holding Harry upright.
But we’re under the lake! she thought. There was no way out…

Josep and the Alaydaa jumped through the broken window in hot pursuit. Hermione fired a Lacarnum Inflamarae, filling the entire width of the corridor with flame.

‘Stairs…’ Harry said, gesturing at the blank wall opposite.

‘There’s nothing there, Harry.’ Draco remonstrated. They could hear the pounding of feet, fast approaching. They’d soon be in range...

‘Dissendium…’ Harry whispered, his head dropping with the effort. The stone wall creaked back, revealing a thin passageway and a staircase.

‘Take them both!’ Hermione implored, aware they’d soon be swamped by attackers.

‘Impedimenta!’ she cried out, as an Alaydaa broke free from the chasing pack with a sudden quickfire run. He fell forwards, smacking his face into the concrete floor.

She hit a second Alaydaa with a jelly-brain jinx, which had him floundering.

Josep, however, stolidly advanced, unfazed and sporting a broad grin. It was a clown’s grin, she realised. One of those huge fleshy-lipped smiles drawn clumsily by a small child that literally cut across from ear to ear.

Kill him, she thought… But she felt the moment she twitched her wand in his direction, her life would be extinguished. He was immensely powerful. The air crackled with his magical energy… but there was more than that.

There was something, someone else… Something that made her tremble and her stomach felt like it had turned to water… She cast a desperate glance at the staircase; so close.

‘We meet again,’ Josep purred. ‘Sadly, I’m not allowed to kill you.’ His face twisted in sadistic regret. ‘You’ve become an object of interest.’ His tongue lisped when he spoke – slow, snake-like.

Hermione felt immobilised; caught in his stare.

‘We just wanted our friend back,’ she said in loud, ringing tones.

Her temples ached and her mind was fogged…

Josep pursed his lips and furrowed his brow. ‘But you take what is OURS.’

NO… she couldn’t stay here, caught in their trap - she’d never get out! …

She turned – and screamed.

Salvedra was hanging from the ceiling above her… his face gaunt and staring, his mouth open; mocking, deep, fathomless.

‘Quis es?’… echoed through her head. Too loud. Too cold…

Josep was laughing behind her – and now Salvedra was extending a long, gnarled claw-like hand – one of four hands! Why did he have four? Hermione whimpered in fear… frozen, choking… caught in his gaze… Deep, dark, shiny eyes. Too many… Eyes that saw through her, through everything… eyes that penetrated the very fabric of reality.
‘GET AWAY FROM ME!’ she recoiled, focusing with every iota of her being… Colour-magic gushing like fast-flowing running water. Each and every cell of her body bulged with immanence.

She launched a shield, cutting Salvedra and Josep away - affording her a single moment to flee…

She leapt into the cavity Harry had forged in the wall leading to the hidden staircase. There was shoving behind her… An Alaydaa, whining in a high-pitched wail, was scrabbling to catch her… getting closer and closer…

But she was nearly there… Yes! She could see the blazing blue of sky beyond wide open doors. She scaled the last flight at full-pelt and cast a Glisseo behind her. The stairs became a slide and the Alaydaa emitted a blood-curling cry of fury, his voice dwindling as he was swallowed up into the darkness.

Draco was waiting, arm outstretched… he dragged her out of the wide-open metal portal. Somehow they’d looped back to the start.

They ran into the white-hot, blazing sun, Draco holding the child and supporting Harry.

Hermione quickly summoned the blissful moment when her magic had combined with Draco’s – holding the memory tight – and cast a Patronus as she ran, dispatching it to Neville. ‘Coming back. Salvedra’s here!’

To her surprise, a silvery, sleek tiger spiralled high into the air before leaping away.

‘Wow, Hermione…’ Harry grinned. ‘That’s new!’

A stream of howling Alaydaa flowed from the open gate behind them… shots being fired… but a stupendous blast of magic erupted from the rockface to their right.

Gunter, standing on a ledge halfway up the rocky ridge, was pounding the Alaydaa with powerful colour-bombs. They scattered, some falling to the ground, sending chalk-white dust flying into the air.

‘No wand…’ Harry said, helplessly. He looked like he’d been force-fed poison; his face was gaunt and grey and his eyes were sunken.

A blood-curdling caterwauling erupted in the skies above them. The air was thick with a multitude of colours; fat lumpen birds, screeching and crying… The sound rang inside Hermione’s head, clawing at the insides of her skull, crushing her mind… Fwoofers, she thought – their cry could drive a man mad…

She looked at Draco and his face was paralysed with pain… the child he was carrying was thrashing and kicking…

Hermione instantly grabbed the child, enabling Draco to unleash a blazing, incandescent blast of power high into the sky, targeting the Fwoofers, smashing them into each other. They fell to the ground where they mulched into a sickly, feathered stew…

Hermione’s eyes were drawn by a movement to her right… Neville picked his way cautiously around the edge of the rocks. ‘There’ll be more!’ he croaked. ‘We’ve been under constant attack since you left.’

A crackle of lightning suddenly lashed through the skies followed by a cacophonous roar of thunder that seemed to rip the sky apart… A black shape shot high into the firmament, twisting
and twirling … like a dust-devil in black.

A dazzling bolt of luminous colour-magic careened across the skies, plummeting to the ground, tearing through the sands - and a monstrous, towering shape, mouth wide and distended… gaping, yawning, trying to swallow them whole, surged towards them, threatening to engulf them in the dry, desert sands forever.

Draco and Gunter unleashed bolt after bolt of fierce colour-magic; one of Draco’s blasts disintegrated the sand-monster, dissipating it in a spray of grit which showered down on them; choking, stinging. A second blast knocked the rocks that loomed high above the main entrance point to Akhr Makan onto a parting pack of Alaydaa, crushing them.

Josep strode out after them – bristling with colour.

‘El es mio!’ proclaimed a loud, booming voice. It rumbled through them…

Salvedra, high on a rock, was summoning a storm… clouds were darkening, coagulating into something monstrous, black, oppressive – blotting out the sun.

He was pale and spindly, but even from this distance, his rage and frustration was palpable… He faced Gunter across the sandy chasm between the rocks.

‘Serás mio!’ he screeched. The curse… Anna’s curse. He was staking a claim.

Draco fired off a flurry of sparking waves of light… One snatched at Salvedra, but he intercepted it, shooting back - a gleaming spear, incendiary and scalding - with venomous rebuke. Draco dodged it and the sand creaked and crackled, becoming glass that fractured underfoot.

‘We’re so FUCKED,’ Draco grunted.

‘Get behind the rock!’ Gunter shouted.

He descended from his lofty perch and they swiftly scooted to the other side of the rock where the sun was fiercest, the heat blistering.

‘We can't win. Not today!’ Gunter barked. ‘We have to Apparate out. Sod this magic ban… ’

‘We’ve not exactly been policed, have we?’ Draco snarled. ‘Was a load of crap if you ask me!’

‘You need a wand,’ Hermione said to Harry, passing the fretful toddler to Neville.

She dashed to a nearby acacia tree and snapped off a robust-looking twig. She frantically scraped away the outer skin at one end with her wand.

‘There isn’t time for WHITTLING!’ Neville shrilled.

She grabbed one of the fallen Fwoofer feathers that had drifted towards them and focused hard, feeding it through the wood, muttering enchantments over and over. A tuft of jade-green feathers still protruded from one end, but to all intents and purposes it was a makeshift wand for Harry and would do for now.

Harry flicked his wrist in a blur of green and a shovelful of sand flew upwards… He looked stunned and grateful.

‘We Apparate in two groups – arrange a meeting place,’ Gunter asserted, sweating profusely.
‘The temples,’ Draco said. ‘Not the big one… the wife’s. Fewer people.’

He wrapped his arm around Hermione and held onto Harry and the next moment they were standing a stone’s throw from a gaggle of surprised-looking tourists. Nefertari’s temple loomed large and magnificent beside them.

‘Where the hell did they come from?’ a loud voice hollered to his friends.

Gunter sprinted towards them from the lake, followed by Neville - soaked to the skin, crooked with pain.

‘Got that all wrong,’ Gunter said apologetically to Neville. ‘We crashed into a boat.’

‘It’s okay,’ Neville scowled, clutching his side.

‘Take the kid… I think he’s called Kek,’ Harry commanded. ‘Get to safety. Leave us to deal with this…’

‘But Harry,’ Hermione remonstrated, ‘you need rest.’

Harry vehemently shook his head. ‘Too much to do.’

There were sudden shrieks and cries and a horde of panic-stricken people ran from the temple… Josep and a team of Alaydaa exploded into view.

Gunter stopped stock-still and momentarily closed his eyes… the air shimmered and shook.

‘They can’t see us now…I can hold it for thirty seconds, no more,’ he said. ‘Get to the border and portkey out of The Sudan… There’s a small village not far from Wadi Hald. Be vigilant! This event will likely alert the army.’

Draco nodded. ‘We’ll call when we get across. Tell you where we are.’

‘We’re not invisible,’ Harry said in droll tones.

Hermione raised her eyes to Josep. He was watching them, grinning from ear to ear. His eyes were dense-black…

‘He can see us,’ Hermione said to Gunter in panic.

‘Black eyes… that’s it! You were right, Hermione. They see THROUGH colour-magic,’ Draco exclaimed. ‘But he daren’t attack us. Too many people.’

‘Go… go now,’ Gunter said. He turned to Neville and the child - and they were gone.

‘Now what?’ Hermione whined. ‘We don’t know anywhere near enough to get to… and none of us have been to the fucking Sudan!’

Josep stomped purposefully towards them. This was it!

One of the Alaydaa raised his arm. ‘He’s going to BLAST!’ Hermione yelled.

Draco grabbed Hermione and Harry tight and Apparated…

They landed in a dusty field, frightening a herd of cows.
A smudgy brown cloud hovered hazily over a nearby town; the ocean shimmered white beyond.

‘Where are we?’ Hermione gasped.

‘Hurghada…’ Draco said. ‘Godawful lads’ diving trip some years back.’

‘You okay, Harry?’ Hermione asked. He looked like he might throw up.

He tottered and grabbed hold of her. ‘Thank you. Thank you for coming. What happened… what they did… was unbearable…’

Hermione prickled with anxiety - thinking about the mysterious test-tubes.

‘What – what sort of things, Harry?’

He held her tight, his nails digging deep into her skin. A sense of deep humiliation washed through her…

‘Salvedra’s pet project…’ he rasped. ‘He wants to design the perfect wizard.’

‘Vitruvian Man,’ Draco murmured, exchanging a worried look with Hermione.

‘There were others…’ Harry said, ‘but I’m Epsilon+ and – and they know my history. That I survived the killing curse… This mattered a great deal to them. To him.’

‘Him being Salvedra,’ Draco said.

Harry looked repulsed at the mere mention of his name. ‘But also Selwyn and Josep… Josep’s closest to Salvedra I’d say.’

‘Is Ephraim behind this, too?’ Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head… ‘It’s Salvedra… Salvedra’s plan.’

Draco chewed his lip nervously, thinking… ‘This is going to sound wild, but - I think this is what we’re dealing with. What’s happened… Salvedra hates Muggles. They persecuted him. So he wants a way to destroy them. Enter Ephraim – narcissistic dope with delusions of grandeur, who Salvedra promises the earth to… Ephraim has wealth, power, status – and everything gets put at Salvedra’s disposal, including his fuck-off massive pharmaceutical company and its ability to research Dark Flux. But what Salvedra really wants is to use Dark Flux to weaken, threaten the Muggle population, and for some kind of fucking wizarding Übermensch to rule over them… to keep the Muggles under control.’

‘What the fuck’s an Übermensch?’ Harry asked.

‘Supermen… Hypermens… What Nietzsche called Superior Beings. The type of stuff that got hijacked by the likes of Mussolini and Hitler.’

‘And Voldemort,’ Harry said plaintively.

‘… Which means Salvedra particularly values pure-bloods,’ Hermione said, thinking of the runic mantra in the Great Hall.

Harry vehemently shook his head. ‘No, Hermione… I’d say he’s more interested in half-bloods like me and Draco – Epsilon+ - or anyone who demonstrates outstanding magical abilities….’ He gave her a meaningful look. ‘Which explains why he’s so interested in YOU.’
'But I’m a Muggle-born? A Gamma?'

‘And a brilliant witch,’ Draco said, looking queasy. ‘You’re half of what makes up Anteractivity, Hermione.’

Hermione blinked back tears. ‘This is literally painful to think about.’

‘But sadly we DO have to think about it.’

Harry heaved an exhausted sigh. ‘This endless cycle of cruelty… It never fucking dies.’ He grappled for Hermione’s hands, forcing her to look at him. There were tears in his eyes. ‘Feels like we’re fucked forever.’ He gently kissed her on the forehead, eyelids fluttering as he did so. ‘All I know is I’ve never been so happy as when I saw your face today, Hermione… Strong and beautiful and pure.’ He looked at Draco, who was shielding his eyes from the burning rays of the sun with his arm. ‘And you too, Draco.’

‘Well. I’ve never been described as strong, beautiful and pure,’ Draco smiled. ‘Definitely not pure.’

Harry’s sudden laughter counted as one of the happiest sounds Hermione had ever heard. But their attention was immediately drawn by a series of loud cracks.

The herd of cows whinnied and scuffed the ground and charged towards them as Josep and the Alaydaa, in their eagerness to cross the field, pushed the cows out of their way.

‘Fucking SHIT!’ Draco cried, curling his arms around the other two. ‘Right. Hold on!’

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"MOVIES" by WEYES BLOOD

"SALTWATER" by CHICANE

"TEMPLE OF LOVE" by SISTERS OF MERCY

"THE VULTURE" by PENDULUM

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Chapter Summary

A cross-continent chase leads to an unexpected foe from the past. Hermione learns Sylvestra’s plan...

54. The Primrose Path

‘Where the hell are we?’ Harry asked, blinking tired eyes at a sun-beat, scrubby landscape, strewn with the charred ruins of a burnt-out building.

‘Gilgad. Israel,’ Draco replied. He looked drained by the effort of Apparating them three times in quick succession and cast a bleary glance at the ugly, blackened wreckage of the Gilgad facility, destroyed by Troyanda13 a month ago.

‘Sorry, Harry. But it’s probably you,’ Hermione said, voicing the obvious. ‘They’ve cast a tracking spell.’ She quickly ran through every counter-spell she hoped could release him, but nothing worked. She sensed he’d been bound with something dark and complex. ‘I need more time,’ she said plaintively.

‘Which we don't have,’ Harry sighed, 'that bastard, Josep, will be along any minute…'

'We've got to go,' Draco said, pacing impatiently.

‘Sorry, Draco. I don’t know this area.’

‘Lucky for you, I’ve had a misspent life... Hold on tight!’ And Draco grabbed them...

The gut-churning tug and pull of Apparition surged through Hermione and she stumbled onto the floor of a bar beside a gleaming, blue swimming-pool. The water looked cool and inviting. A woman in a skimpy bikini was gawping at them from a recliner, a long glass of something alcoholic and refreshing paused halfway to her lips.

Hermione instantly felt Draco’s hand tighten on her arm and they were whipped away in a head-swirling flash, landing with a bump on a clay tennis court. Their Alaydaa costumes were instantly coated in sticky orange dust.

Harry crawled on his hands and knees to the edge of the court and threw up.

Hermione looked around… Fortunately, no one was here. ‘Do you think we’ve lost them?’ she asked Draco. She was feeling bilious herself and the sound of Harry retching wasn’t helping matters. ‘We need to rest.’

Draco wiped a slurry of perspiration from his forehead with his arm. A thick smear of clay was now streaked across his face. 'No time for that...'

Harry was lying on his back gazing up at the sky. ‘We need a safe space to fix whatever the fuck they’ve done to me,’ he groaned. ‘We can’t run forever.’ He inched himself off the ground, wincing uncomfortably. ‘And I could really do with a toilet.'
‘What’s that?’ Hermione asked Draco, nodding to a large, glass building a few hundred yards away.

‘A hotel - not the five star it pretends to be but there’s decent toilets in the lobby.’ He scrambled to his feet. ‘We’re in Nicosia. Cyprus.’

‘Rhodes is reasonably close.’ Hermione recalled a family holiday to Lindos. An Acropolis overlooking a broad stretch of glistening sea sprang to mind… ‘Maybe we Apparate there next, and then try and get back to the goblins in Athens?’

Draco’s mouth tightened in irritation. ‘I’ve lost that damned Gringott’s letter Bill gave us … can’t be sure those nasty little fuckers will give us a free ride.’

‘It’s still worth a try,’ Hermione reasoned.

XXX

From the outside the hotel was a plain glass monolith, but inside it was a light-soaked atrium with an elaborate rockery and a gushing waterfall at its heart. The gun-toting security guard gave them a shifty side-glance as they limped past, bedraggled and soiled.

‘We could all do with freshening up,’ Hermione muttered, and she split off from Harry and Draco to take advantage of the floral-smelling restrooms, liberally splashing her face with warm soapy water and using a hand towel to mop the thick orange dirt from her skin-tight black costume. She ditched the Alaydaa metallic tunic into a bin and conjured a hair band to tie back her hair.

The first person she saw when she headed back into the atrium was Josep. He was staring intently at the Men’s Lavatories, his hand jigging impatiently against his thigh.

She instinctively drew her wand – there was no time for niceties – and was about to zing a stunner in his direction when a powerful Expelliarmus sent her flying into the wall and her wand shot from her grasp. She screamed as loudly as she possibly could to alert Draco and Harry and flailed across the floor to grab her wand, twisting and rolling to avoid a puttering round of explosive spells from an advancing line of Alaydaa. The tiles on the wall behind her shattered, spraying shards of sharp porcelain through the air.

A couple of suited businessmen turned and ran and a receptionist ducked behind her desk. A piercing alarm resounded through the atrium.

The surly security guard strode into the building and fired his gun at her attackers but Josep spun around and a jet of lethal green levelled the guard in a single shot.

Hermione fired back a series of stunners at the Alaydaa, but one of them had raised his goggles and she could see he was smiling as he sauntered towards her with frustrating casualness. She targeted him with her wand but a red flash exploded inside of her… she writhed and gnashed her teeth, quaking at the searing pain that suddenly seemed to be scorching her from the inside out. It felt like a vast hot stone was being squeezed through her abdomen and her blood was on fire. She could barely think let alone react… She dragged her eyes to the source of the pain. Another Alaydaa, closing in…

A green flash felled him and the pain that had kept Hermione pinned to the floor abruptly stopped amidst wild commotion: the sound of stampeding feet and screams and a continual barrage of spells, so bright, Hermione had to avert her eyes. The rockery suddenly exploded with a deafening crash. Huge chunks of rock smashed to the ground or hurtled with venomous velocity through the glass walls of the atrium.
The goggle-less Alaydaa was struck down by a rebounding boulder and was stretched out on the floor, eyes wide and glassy, blood convulsing from a messy gash in his head.

Scampering feet and a hand grabbed Hermione by the arm, roughly levering her off the floor. ‘Come on!’ Harry yelled, dragging her towards the exit.

‘What about Draco?’

But Harry wasn’t listening. He flourished his feathered wand and unleashed a powerful curse at an Alaydaa who was charging towards them, wand ahoy. The Alaydaa was flung off his feet, somersaulting backwards, his metallic tunic sundering into a tangled, bloodied mess, before he splattered onto the floor.

‘What was THAT?’ Hermione gasped.

Draco was trading bursts of ferocious, scalding colour-magic with Josep.

The two wizards chased each other – swerving, leaping over furniture and bodies, dodging curses, throwing up luminous shields. Hermione watched in lurid fascination as they cast a succession of shimmering blasts, pounding the atrium to a dusty pulp. Scorching streaks of colour ricocheted across the room, tearing up the ground beneath their feet.

To her astonishment, Draco was bristling with vitality, electrified, eyes dark with focus.

He likes this, she thought sadly. He’s a warrior… His colour-magic was designed to do this because it was expressing HIM, some part of himself he’d suppressed when using their usual magic, living their usual lives.

But he was gradually being pushed back and three surviving Alaydaa had stumbled to their feet and were snapping their wands into their hands with deadly intent.

Draco instantly Apparated to her side and she clutched both men and focused hard.

The glorious ruins of the Acropolis at Lindos stretched into the sky above them. There was an audible screech and the frantic scampering of feet, but Hermione didn’t pause… no time for that. She gritted her teeth and maintained a firm grip on Draco and Harry and recalled the shabby hangar at Glyfada Airport. Was it too far? she worried, but instantly banished the thought – there could be no room for doubt. Not now… she couldn’t risk Splinching them; the thought was unbearable, unthinkable.

‘Fucking brilliant,’ Draco said, encircling her in his arms. ‘We made it.’

His heart was still racing from the showdown in the Nicosia hotel and his neck was slippery with sweat. But she didn’t care and buried her face into his warmth, if only for a moment’s respite.

‘They don’t look happy,’ Harry grumbled.

Sure enough, a posse of disgruntled goblins were eyeing them with heavy-browed suspicion.

‘Hopefully they’ll remember us?’ Draco said, slapping a toothy smile onto his face. He moved closer and waved at them. But an unseen force propelled him backwards and he cried out, stung by an invisible barrier that the goblins had hastily thrown into his path. ‘This is going to be tricky,’ he groused.

Harry tried to argue their cause with the goblins … but there was no point, Hermione thought.
Goblins were notoriously intransigent bastards. She fumbled her phone out of her bra where she’d secreted it and immediately hunted for Gunter’s number.

To her relief, he answered immediately.

‘We’ve got a situation,’ she gabbled, quickly telling him where they were and how Josep and his henchmen were chasing them down.

‘Get to Geneva,’ Gunter said curtly. ‘I’ll make sure someone’s there to let you in-’ She knew he meant the Troyanda13 headquarters. ‘You’ll be safe for long enough to kill off this tracker on Harry.’

‘Where are you?’

‘We’ve made it across the border.’

Hermione’s relief was short-lived… a series of sharp cracks echoed around the building. ‘Gotta go!’ she yelped. She sprinted across the hangar, narrowly avoiding a surge of incendiary colour-magic that evaporated the air behind her, and grabbed Draco and Harry from behind, instantly Apparating to the first place she could think of in Greece… silently blessing her parents for their dedication to the ethos of family holidays.

The sand was hot beneath their feet and their black Alaydaa costumes were suddenly stifling.

‘Aegina,’ Hermione said, barely pausing for breath. ‘There might be a Portkey Transit Station here. We’re right by the main town.’

Draco shook his head. ‘No. We need to keep moving.’ He gave Hermione a concerned look. ‘You look pale. Let me handle the next move.’

‘Where’s Aegina?’ Harry asked, but Draco didn’t answer because he’d shifted them in a spinning whirl away from the beach... and to Hermione's horror, a woman was screaming into her ear.

They’d landed somewhere soft and bouncy. Hermione was entangled in a sheet and a woman’s naked breasts were bearing down on her.

Hermione squealed and shimmied to the end of the bed, falling against Draco, who was red-faced with embarrassment.

A naked man shouting in a foreign language, threw a punch at Harry, who ducked and fell off the bed, slamming onto the floor. The woman screamed and curled herself into a tight little ball against the pillows.

Hermione instinctively hit the woman with a memory charm and slapped her partner with a tickling hex. He squirmed and wriggled, spluttering with uncontrollable laughter.

Harry seized the bed-frame and dragged himself to a standing position. ‘What the fuck were you thinking?’ he bellowed at Draco, incensed.

‘Corfu,’ Draco explained sheepishly. ‘Dirty weekend.’

Hermione swiftly Obliviated the man she’d hexed. He looked at them vacantly, as if waking from a perplexing dream.

‘Where now?’ she gasped. ‘There has to be a Portkey station nearby. We can’t keep Apparating!’
It’s getting dangerous.’ She cast an eye at the dazed couple. ‘And we definitely don’t want Josep to come HERE.’

‘Look, let me help out,’ Harry argued. ‘I can handle a few bursts of side-Apparition! Particularly with this wand you made me, Hermione. It’s fucking awesome.’ He gaped at it in starry-eyed amazement.

He held their arms and whisked them to a bleak, stony hillside. The sun had faded to a pale primrose overladen with thick, grey cloud. There was nothing in sight, except a herd of goats, scurrying away, hooves kicking up soft, brown earth as they headed downhill.

Up ahead was a yawning, black cave set into a lumpish stone cliff.

‘I was tracking a dark wizard some years back. He hived off here and I camped out on this very spot,’ Harry said almost wistfully. ‘That’s what a lot of my job involves, actually… waiting.’

‘I think we keep moving,’ Draco said regretfully.

‘We can’t keep—’

‘We have to,’ he said firmly.

‘I spoke to Gunter. He says get to Geneva. There’ll be someone waiting for us at Les Treize Portes Fermées.’

‘Well, that’s the best thing I’ve heard for days,’ Draco mumbled.

‘They’re here,’ Harry said, clapping them close. Hermione didn’t have time to think how he knew this because the all-too-familiar jerk of Apparition shuddered through her.

‘Kotor,’ Harry said, as they crumpled onto a grassy verge close to an ornate stone gate arching over a cobbled pathway. Luckily they’d landed behind a bush, as a seething mass of tourists thronged past them and through the gate heading towards a medieval town square.

‘Fuck’s sake,’ Draco cursed, staring with hard eyes at Josep, who was already on the other side of the street grinning maniacally. A coach drove past, momentarily blocking them from view.

‘My turn,’ Hermione said… Kotor was a short trip from Dubrovnik.

Moments later, the smooth, pale streets and sun-bleached stone walls of Dubrovnik’s old town reared into view. They tried to weave their way through a teeming crowd of sightseers until Hermione took evasive action, tripping up a set of steps into an open doorway.

They entered a church, converted into an art exhibition. The walls were festooned with sumptuous paintings - a bewildering feast of colour for Hermione’s exhausted eyes.

Draco grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back towards the open doorway. ‘This is too confined a space. Let’s get back outside.’ But it was too late; a blizzard of colours crisscrossed Hermione’s vision and Josep and the three Alaydaa were shooting the paintings into tattered shreds and a woman was slumped on the floor, mouth lolling open…

Hermione shrieked and grasped Draco and Harry, Apparating.

A busy waterfront and the chug-chug of boats and the trumpeting of a ferry’s horn… Motorbikes charged past and a truck was belching out noxious, black smoke. They’d landed in a pop-up t-shirt
shop ranged across a narrow, trafficked street from a long, greystone building with arched windows and blanched grey shutters. Stalls and shops occupied a string of archways that stretched along the length of the building.

Draco glanced beyond the stalls to the busy promenade, fringed by elegant palm trees, facing out to sea.

‘Split,’ he said. ‘Okay, we’re not too far from Venice… Damn! We’ve got company. They’re getting quicker.’

They slunk through the lines of t-shirts, surprising a gangly youth who’d clearly not been expecting customers from their direction, and dashed across the road, heading into a darkened doorway…

‘I thought you said not to go inside!’ Hermione remonstrated.

But Draco grabbed her hand and pulled her past the harried-looking staff, ignoring their pleas for payment, deep into a shadowy labyrinth. Harry laboured behind them, looking worn-out. The Apparition had taken its toll.

Draco wound them further into the bowels of the building – the ancient Roman palace of Emperor Diocletian, Hermione recalled from that particular summer holiday. It was cool and smelled old and damp. A soft, glowing green light illuminated their route.

They arrived at a dead-end.

‘Okay. *Now,*’ Draco murmured, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. His hand tightened its grasp and they were spiralling and twisting and then holding onto an elaborate white railing gazing out at the sludge-green depths of a broad canal, plied by a long line of gondolas and vaporetti. Hermione lifted her eyes to the other side of the canal; a feast of decorous, coloured mansions… and to their left, across the water, an imposing domed church.

She swung around to check out where Draco had taken them. A verandah, bustling with the clink of cutlery on fine china and high fluting laughter. A flustered waiter in a smart black waistcoat with starched white shirt-sleeves and collar was advancing towards them, a puzzled expression on his face.

He spoke rapidly in Italian but Draco muttered under his breath and the man was smiling like they were old friends and ushering them towards a table, batting away an elderly couple trussed into fur and pearls who had just sat down.

‘We haven’t time to eat!’ Harry said, his face crumpling with envy at the mouth-watering platters of food being carried from the restaurant to the neighbouring table.

‘Just – sit down, Harry,’ Draco commanded, pouring them all a glass of iced water. ‘We need a minute. That bastard can’t take out the Gritti Palace Hotel, for fuck’s sake.’

‘Too late,’ Hermione said, almost choking on her water… Josep’s face, alive with twinkling menace, had appeared at the top of a series of steps leading from the canalside to the terrace.

‘Allow me,’ Harry sighed, and he wearily slapped his hands on their arms and they were tumbled into a cold, wet slush that had Hermione screaming in shock and pain.

‘SORRY!’ Harry cried, but his voice was then muffled as he fell deeper into a snow-drift.

Hermione was trembling with fear. She was flat on her back, staring up at a dazzling white sky. A
steep, precipitous rock-face loomed over her. Her limbs were frozen, buffeted by a harsh, chill wind that whistled across her body.

Draco rolled towards her and clasped her close. ‘We’re up a fucking mountain,’ he shrilled, his voice almost carried away into the wild, windswept wastes.

Harry’s hand reached out, pink, wet and frozen, and clutched them tightly… Hermione had never felt so relieved to fall into the nausea-inducing swirl of Apparition and the soft, rippling waters of a vast blue lake with lush, green foliage nestling at its shores was a welcome sight.

Another restaurant, another terrace…

‘Blimey. I’ve lived such a soft life,’ Draco said with a nostalgic sigh.

‘It’s lovely here,’ Hermione whimpered, sad that they were about to leave.

‘Lake Como. We’ll come back. I promise.’

‘We can make Geneva,’ Harry asserted. ‘I’m sure of it.’

‘No, Harry, it’s too far,’ Hermione retorted. ‘We need another stop in-between. There’s an entire mountain range—’

But Harry had thrown his arms around both of them and they juddered to a halt moments later outside Les Treize Portes Fermées. He almost collapsed to the pavement, Draco catching him as his legs wobbled and gave way.

Hermione flung Harry’s arm around her shoulder and they staggered through the bright, modern café and a passageway leading to a steel door. Hermione jabbed the doorbell repeatedly but there was no reply. She tried again and again… and then the door swung open and a man with a trimmed black beard but wild, scraggly hair was pulling them inside, slamming the door behind them and locking it with a complicated spell.

‘Hi. I’m Yuri,’ he said. ‘We just got here. You made good time.’

‘WE?’

The statuesque, handsome woman Hermione had briefly met at The Blue House was waiting at the entrance to Troyanda13’s common-room. Leila, their healer… and she was already studying Harry with concern.

XXX

Hermione had never been so happy to shower and slip on fresh clothes – a spare black t-shirt and jeans that Leila rooted out for her from Troyanda13’s supplies.

She made everyone a cup of herbal tea in the pokey kitchen tucked around the corner from the main common-room. It was the least she could do… Harry had already been subjected to a series of gruelling tests and investigations by Leila and was looking distinctly ashen. ‘Looks like I’ll just have to live here,’ he said with a cheerless smile.

Leila had given Draco an envelope. He was puzzling over its contents, a sombre look on his face when Hermione returned to the common-room.

She sat down opposite him and nudged a cup of steaming tea his way.
‘You okay?’

He sighed. ‘Arthur Weasley’s a very kind man, isn’t he?’

Hermione hadn’t expected that. ‘Yes… very.’ Her eyes dropped to a small, silver rose-charm glinting in the fading spears of evening light shining through a glass skylight set high into the ceiling. ‘Why do you say that?’

‘He wrote to my mother and she’s written back...’ Draco pushed a note written on scented, sky-blue tissue paper towards her. Narcissa’s hand was less assured, less bold than before; more a cramped scrawl – large, childish letters crashing into each other - and yet the ink was almost translucent, barely making an impression on the paper, as though she feared committing her thoughts to posterity.

‘Dearest darling Draco,

Arthur Weasley has generously written to tell me how well you are and how you and Scorpius are moving on in your lives. Arthur says he’s a fine boy.

I have nothing but happiness for you, darling.

I have an inkling, you know... I think I always did. A mother's instinct, perhaps? But then I have such strange and random thoughts these days. They descend on me. Like cloaked battalions. Often parading as memories, or queer morbid inflections – once buried deep inside.

So many thoughts and feelings... they weigh heavily. Sometimes they rob me of breathe and I can barely see. Though you must not worry. Milton is my guardian, a truly loyal servant – my dearest, dearest friend.

I ask for forgiveness, my darling, but you have escaped and I am assured that out of the darkness comes the light. May it shine on you all the days of your life, Draco. Live like you deserve it; and ensure that you do.

With much love,

Mother

PS: I enclose an envelope that arrived for you the day before Beltane.’

Hermione read the letter and wiped tears from her eyes, fearing they might fall and stain the paper.

‘She’s not well, is she?’ Draco said low tones. He pressed the rose-charm into her hand. ‘Keep this safe.’

She nodded mutely.

‘She truly liked you... it wasn’t just guilt,’ Draco said. He gazed at her with clear, grey eyes. ‘I think she was wise in her silly old way... She reeled you in and kept you close.’

‘She’s not GONE, Draco,’ Hermione reprimanded, but she swallowed back tears. There was something of a valedictory tone in her letter that couldn’t be ignored.

‘Not yet.’ His hand closed around hers.

‘MERDE!’ Leila exclaimed, startling them. ‘I can’t do this!’ she said with a frustrated grimace as she tried yet another spell on Harry. ‘This is very dark magic. We need a Rectificator!’
Harry closed his eyes and groaned. ‘You haven’t got one here I take it? Whatever that is…’

‘They’re very rare,’ Yuri remarked.

Draco sprang to his feet. ‘Actually, there might be a place—’

But at that same moment an almighty blast shook the door leading into the Common-Room, ripping it off its hinges. The door flew towards them, slicing into Yuri who keeled over, eyes bulging, gagging and choking.

Draco instantly pushed Hermione to the floor.

A further explosion threw the tables and chairs and various computers and random pieces of hardware strewn around the room high into the air before they crashed to the ground with a violent clatter.

‘Accio wand!’ Harry yelped and the fwoofer feathers flashed into view. He was about to return fire as a rally of screaming spells spun across the room, but Draco snatched his ankle pulling him over and out of shot, as a string of killing curses were unloaded by their invaders. Leila tumbled to the floor like a puppet shorn of its strings. Her face was petrified; a rigid mask of shock.

‘Shit,’ Hermione cried, horrorstruck.

‘Take my hand!’ Draco barked - and they were gone.

XXX

‘Where are we?’ Harry asked.

A tall canopy of trees blocked the dusky sky from sight but Hermione could see a sprinkling of early evening stars. An imposing manor house loomed across undulating lawns, shadowy blue in the fading light.

‘The old holiday cottage,’ Draco grimaced. He wearily rubbed his eyes … ‘Hell. Those poor fucking bastards… How do we break the news to Troyanda13? They’ve lost Maurice, Ottoline. And Pyotr before that… We've ruined their bloody lives.’

'I shouldn't have called Gunter,' Hermione said, feeling hollow inside, feeling like she’d lured them to die…

'No, Hermione,' Harry said in firm tones. 'You had to make that call.'

'We were in trouble. We'd run out of road,' Draco said in support.

'And they'd have known the risks because everything they did was a fucking risk,' Harry added. 'They were raised to be heroes. That was Jeroboam's main contribution to parenthood as far as I can tell.'

'Gryffindors-on-speed,' Draco murmured. 'Well, we all have to be brave now. It's become our duty.'

'Leila was a fine healer,' Harry said soberly.

But unable to disarm Harry’s tracker, Hermione remembered with a sudden pang of alarm. She quickly scanned their surroundings... Any moment now…

Draco clearly had the same thought. ‘Come on,’ he said brusquely, ‘we've no time to lose.’
He stumbled into the trees, groping amongst thickets and gnarly tree-trunks.

‘What you looking for?’ Harry shouted after him.

‘Need a hand!’ Draco called back...

Despite a series of unlocking spells, they strained to lever open a large, wooden trapdoor - but it eventually swung back, slapping heavily onto the mossy ground.

A ladder led downwards, into the darkness.

‘Let’s hope the smuggling gang I gifted this to haven’t totally trashed the place,’ Draco said, illuminating his wand and leading them down the steps. ‘I’m sure there was a Rectificator down here somewhere…’

Hermione was last to follow, pulling the heavy door back into place with a flick of her wand, muttering protection charms.

The air was bitter, acrid – foul-tasting.

Draco was plundering a pile of metallic objects. He shot her a warning look.

‘Don’t touch anything! Dark magic artefacts have a nasty habit of not liking Muggle-borns.’

‘They’ve pretty much gutted the joint,’ Harry said dismally, but Draco whooped victoriously, brandishing a long, cylindrical metal instrument, hollow at one end with a plunger at the other. It looked like a cast-off instrument from an outsized chemistry set.

Harry’s face was pale with dread in the wand-light as he gazed at the instrument in Draco’s hand. ‘Great… what does it do?’

‘It draws out any bad magic planted inside of you,’ Draco explained. ‘A versatile wee thing… we should keep hold of it.’

‘There’s nothing WEE about it,’ Harry said, gulping fearfully. ‘Exactly how does it work?’

Draco studied the Rectificator, a quizzical look on his face. ‘I’m not entirely sure.’

‘I’ve got an idea… and I don’t like it,’ Harry said, pursing his lips tightly.

Hermione couldn’t help but smile at Draco’s appalled expression when he caught on to Harry’s inference. ‘Yeah… we can’t do that!’ He threw her a desperate look. ‘Any thoughts?’

‘Orally? But whatever you do… you need to act fast.’

‘Right. Give it here,’ Harry growled. He snatched the Rectificator and threw back his head, mouth wide open.

‘STOP!’ Draco roared. ‘What – what if it’s been used before?’

‘You mean...?’ Harry turned a shade of green. ‘Oh lord... Guess I’ll have to bite the bullet then. Hermione... I’d - I’d rather you didn’t watch this…’

‘No, Harry. We’re not sticking it up your arse! And that’s that.’ Draco’s mouth twitched involuntarily with amusement.
‘I’m not sure what else I can do?’ Harry said desperately. The two men gazed at each other. ‘How did we get to this? I should have finished you off in that fucking bathroom... Would have saved me a world of shame.’

Draco’s eyes hardened momentarily – the briefest flash. ‘Well, if it wasn’t for the fact that Josep fucker could show up at any moment and smash us to smithereens, this could be a tale for the grandchildren, Potter.’

‘I’d have to censor it,’ Harry said disconsolately.

‘There’s got to be another way... Hey. How about your navel?’

Harry’s lip curled in horror. ‘Is that actually a hole?’

‘No – more a scar, but we could make a small incision and—’

‘Too complicated. There’s muscles and nerves and lord knows what,’ Hermione said tersely. ‘Look, Harry. It’s obvious. You need to insert this device SOMEWHERE and suck out this tracking magic with the plunger.’ She examined the Rectificator. ‘We can scourgify it if it helps and then leave you alone to do what you have to do in whatever way you choose to do it.’

Harry nodded emphatically. ‘Whatever happens, it’s not going to be pleasant. I’m already feeling sick as a dog.’ He took hold of the Rectificator. ‘I’ll meet you up top in a jiffy.’ He threw Hermione a soulful glance. ‘Wish me luck.’

XXX

‘What did Harry mean by the BATHROOM?’ Hermione asked Draco. They were sitting on the damp moss in the dark… A light shower was peppering them with cool flecks of water, but after the dark chaos of Akhr Makan, the heat of the Egyptian desert, their frantic flight across Europe and the attack in Geneva it felt like gentle respite.

‘He was referring to a fight we had when we were boys. He used Sectumsempra on me… hurt like fuck,’ Draco said in a low, gravelly voice.

‘Ah, yes… You tried to cast a Cruciatius Curse, if I remember rightly? He acted in self-defence.’

Hermione could feel Draco’s cool, grey gaze roving her face.

‘You know, Draco... there’s probably a load of stuff Harry knows about... about what happened back then, that – that you should maybe talk about sometime,’ Hermione said hesitantly.

Draco blinked rapidly. ‘Why?’

‘Because... some things probably need to be said.’

‘Time’s moved on,’ Draco said with a nonchalant shrug, but there was tension in his face.

‘Yes, it has,’ she agreed. ‘In fact... today’s the fifteenth anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts.’

‘Is it? Oh.’

‘I always envisaged a grand day of celebration. But so many from that time have died or left the wizarding world altogether… and here we are, deep in the midst of another full-blown crisis and it feels like the past has been forgotten.’
Draco folded his arms and looked away, staring into the trees. ‘Maybe it’s best it stays that way.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well…’ Draco shuffled uncomfortably. ‘It’d be kind of like rubbing our noses in our own shit, wouldn’t it? We weren’t all fucking heroes, saving the wizarding world.’

‘But it’d be a day of reconciliation.’

‘For you maybe… But for someone like me, it’d be embarrassing as hell. The whole fucking world knows what an utter tool I was. Harry more than most…’

‘He doesn’t hold it against you. Not now.’

‘Bollocks… it’s always there… The total fucking humiliation of it all.’

‘But you were a boy!’

‘Yeah… the fucking golden boy, the crown fucking prince - or so I thought. Turned out I was a nothing, a nobody. Expendable… Voldemort certainly thought so!’

‘But Dumbledore didn’t…’

Draco snapped his head in her direction and there was a fathomless look in his eyes that shook her.

‘…and neither did Snape,’ she continued. ‘He was even prepared to die for you. As for Harry…’

‘Yes, yes, I know… and I’m eternally fucking grateful,’ Draco said, his voice laced with bitterness - but this was immediately succeeded by a heavy sigh. ‘I am, actually… which kind of makes it worse… this big bloody difference between us. I can’t compete.’

Hermione laughed and shook her head. ‘But you’re not COMPETING over anything. In fact. You never were.’

Draco smiled thinly. ‘Oh I realise the fucking irony of it, Hermione… and there’s nothing more galling, believe me, than wasting your life desperately comparing yourself to someone who doesn’t actually give a crap.’

‘He had bigger things to worry about…’

‘You’re not helping!’ Draco said with a fixed grin – although she wasn’t fooled; she could see his whiteness visibly darkening as they spoke. ‘It’s just… well, old habits die hard I guess.’

‘Seriously, though, Draco. You’ve nothing to compete over NOW. It’s done. Finished.’

‘Oh. I agree with you…’ Draco said in an offhand manner. ‘Because there’s simply no competition! I mean - the man’s so fucking effortlessly superior to me in every way… He’s good and honourable and fucking ridiculously brave. If he’d been a snivelling shit like me – well, fuck knows what would have happened… It doesn't bear thinking about, does it?’ Draco’s face fell into darkness. ‘I mean, it makes no fucking sense whatsoever how a wonderful woman like you is with someone like me; someone who abused you for fun. You should be with someone like him. Like Harry. Even Ron, actually. He was a fuck sight better and braver than I ever was.’

He held her gaze and a powerful sense of melancholy, hopelessness washed over her.

‘And yet...’ she breathed, edging closer and straddling his lap, ‘I want you. Only you… How do you
fathom *that*, Draco Malfoy?*

She could feel him trembling – whether it was emotion or cold, she couldn’t be sure.

‘I honestly don’t know… it scares me sometimes.’ His arms snaked around her, holding her tight against him. ‘But your ability to continually forgive my total inept fucking *twattitude* is one of the many billion things I love about you, Hermione. It’s why I’m terrified of it all going wrong, of fucking it up… You’ve fucking ruined me.’

She entwined her arms around his neck and laughed. ‘I think we’ve ruined each other, actually.’ She brushed her lips against his, unable to resist his closeness… not caring if Josep suddenly jumped out of the shadows and did his worst. ‘And I *love* being ruined by you - and you ARE brave, Draco. Incredibly brave. And a fuck sight better than you think you are. Sure, you haven’t been the best version of yourself for your entire bloody life, but you did one thing that was truly remarkable and rarely achieved. You changed.’

Draco stared at her, his eyes sparkling in the starlight… ‘Come here,’ he grunted, sinking his hand deep into her hair, urging her closer. His lips captured hers greedily, drawing her into a fierce, passionate kiss, making her moan with longing, making her forget where they were and why…

‘For fuck’s sake,’ Harry muttered mulishly, ‘I’m gone five minutes and you can’t keep your hands off each other. It’s like being with lovesick teenagers.’

Hermione reluctantly pulled away from Draco’s grasp. ‘Did – did it *work*?’

‘Well. Have we been invaded by that black-eyed freak?’ Harry rejoined.

Hermione and Draco quickly looked around. The WORST look-outs, Hermione thought dolefully… The trees stood tall and silent.

‘Doesn’t look like it,’ Draco asserted. ‘Whatever you did… it did the trick.’

Harry rolled his eyes. ‘I didn’t shove it where the sun don’t shine, if that’s what you’re implying.’

‘Nope. I wasn’t. Not at all… So, what DID you do?’

‘Actually… we’re NOT alone,’ Hermione interjected in a harsh whisper. She discerned a presence… Long and willowy. A thin grey shadow… hovering at the back of the trees on the edge of the lawn between this grove and the house.

Hermione could sense eyes staring fixedly out of the darkness; two black jewels.

‘Is it Josep?’ Harry asked, face contorted with deep loathing.

‘No… a woman.’ Hermione shivered involuntarily. ‘Draco. Who did your family sell this house to?’

‘Don’t know. My father handled it all. I rarely came here … place gave me the creeps.’ His eyes had followed Hermione’s towards the thick crush of trees bordering the lawns, wreathed in a low-hanging, grey mist.

‘Where did you say you could see someone?’

An eerie stillness descended on them… expectant.

Hermione saw that the dark figure was rapidly beating a retreat, back across the lawns, her long,
dark hair fanning out behind her as she walked in long, loping strides…

‘She’s heading back to the house.’

They stood up and moved towards the trees. ‘Maybe you mistook a tree for a person?’

‘No, Draco… she was standing a few feet from where you are now,’ Hermione said. ‘Look! She’s gone inside.’

The candle blowing in the downstairs window moved and was gone - plunging the place into darkness.

She spotted Draco and Harry exchange worried looks.

‘I haven’t gone mad you know!’ Hermione complained, pushing beyond the trees to the starlit stretch of misty grass.

‘Hermione. Come back here!’ There was a steely urgency in Draco’s voice.

‘It was probably a nosy Muggle,’ Hermione said, entering the soft, grey mist. It swirled around her, strangely warm and inviting. ‘But if it wasn’t, it’s better we know, don’t you think?’

The house was closer than she’d thought and she was soon climbing stone steps leading to a large wooden door – slightly ajar.

‘We can cast Disillusionment Charms if you’re worried,’ she added. But they didn’t reply... She spun around, her heart beating loudly… but the fog was too thick for her to see beyond the length of her own arm.

Should she head back towards the trees? Except she couldn’t see the trees anymore. She was marooned on her own little island… A set of steps and a wedge of darkness between the open door and the door-frame, summoning her attention like a bold, black klaxon bellowing in her brain.

*We have to know*… she said to herself. *Be brave.*

She stepped forwards, catching a glimpse of her eyes in the window. Deep, black pools…

Would she be waiting for her?

*One way to find out,* Hermione thought. But she had to be sure Draco and Harry could find her. She thrust her hand into the pocket of her borrowed jeans, closing over the small, silver charm.

She gazed at it, nestling in her palm, then cast a doubling charm and slipped the original back into her pocket.

She needed lots… so she muttered the incantation over and over until her hands were overflowing with small, silver roses.

She moved into the darkness, dropping charms to the floor … a long line of silver roses leading from the open door to herself as she pressed through a kitchen into a long, thin living room lined with paintings of all shapes and sizes. Portraits, landscapes, abstracts, florid expressions of mood and mind…

There was a sound to her left. Footsteps mounting a staircase.

She cast a Disillusionment Charm and followed, ascending a wide, wooden staircase situated at the
heart of the house. The darkness was closing in on her – a thick, granulated grey. She was close enough now to hear her breaths – long, drawn-out, urgent.

She arrived at a gallery… she knew she would. And the woman was waiting.

She was standing at the far end of the gallery and had her back to her. Or at least Hermione presumed that was the case, because all she could see was a woman wearing a long black dress with a flood of black hair stretching down to her waist – except… she was back to front, because her feet were pointing at Hermione. And her arms hung loose at her sides, hands slightly before her. And her head was bowed.

Hermione felt frozen… too scared to move either forwards or backwards. She prayed her Disillusionment Charm had been successful because she could now make out the pale contours of the woman’s face beneath the hair. Her mouth was pulled into a deep, fretful frown, and her eyes were like gaping, black holes...

Dolores…

Dolores cocked her head rightwards and stared at the pictures on the wall.

Hermione instinctively slunk into the shadows and watched as Dolores laid her hands on a picture and leant forwards. Half her body tilted into the picture and then the rest of her shifted upwards and vanished. Her boot briefly lingered outside the picture-frame, before being swallowed into the darkness.

A panicky whine chimed through Hermione’s head. What should she do?

She felt certain she could follow Dolores if she wanted – but was it wise?

She gazed at the few remaining charms in her hand. If she made more and trailed them behind her would they act as an anchor ensuring she could come back?

She had to decide quickly…

XXX

The picture she entered was a blustery seascape. Grey sand, pitted with Dolores’s footprints… Frothing waves surging across the sands towards her.

A sharp breeze whisked her hair into a tousled weave. She glanced left… a long line of dunes drifted into blank, creamy skies. In the far distance was a single, black figure… her flowing cape fluttering in the cold wind.

And then she was gone.

Hermione pushed forward; faster, a blur of motion… Except this was her own body, not just her mind - something she found both exhilarating and unsettling.

Dolores… she thought. And there she was... slipping effortlessly through a slick, green jungle; emerald, juicy tendrils dangling from twisted trees… Then a red, rutted field – a single, ramshackle hut set far in the distance… followed by a winding collection of dark, overhung lanes, a maze, writhing between wooden houses, their roofs almost touching, framing a rough, dusty path, strewn with clods of dirt and rubbish.

This isn’t usual, Hermione thought. It wasn’t a landscape.
She encountered a mountain path, curving round and round…

She paused to make more roses, careful to ensure the charms were distributed at regular intervals. She didn’t dare break the chain.

Dolores entered a gate set into a black stone wall. Was it the entrance to a keep? Crenellated towers reared up ahead; vast flying buttresses…

Hermione followed, immediately encountering a grey, filmy haze. She’d arrived at the edge of a painting… the threshold from this world into reality.

She tiptoed forwards and a room came into view; large and stone-walled with dark wooden shutters hanging at the windows and a high-beamed ceiling. A black metal chandelier loomed over a long, oak dining-table, with an array of candles casting long, flickering shadows.

Hermione was shocked to see Sylvestra seated at the dining table, facing Dolores. Selwyn Haast loitered at a side-table pouring three glasses of red wine. His hand shook uncontrollably as he passed a glass to Dolores.

‘I’m obviously disappointed…’ Sylvestra was saying. ‘I was looking forward to receiving him as my guest.’

‘Oh. You still will!’ Dolores assured her. ‘But not tonight…’

Sylvestra’s golden mane of hair shimmered with a reddish hue in the candlelight, and there was a peculiarly hawkish sharpness to her features, which seemed to absorb the wavering shadows. Her eyes were veiled, her mouth taut. ‘I hope I haven’t done anything to displease the Grandmaster.’

‘Al contrario,’ Dolores said in her thick, Spanish accent. ‘He is eager to see you. You have proved most dutiful.’ She gave Sylvestra a cautious smile.

Sylvestra seemed pleased to hear this. ‘That’s good to know.’ She circled the rim of her wine-glass with her index finger, momentarily lost in thought, and then raised her eyes to Dolores. ‘Actually – there’s something I’d like to discuss with you, if I may? Something of deep personal interest to me…’

Dolores’s dark eyes fired with curiosity, then alighted on Selwyn, whose plump features quavered under her scrutiny.

Sylvestra gave her a thin, reedy smile. ‘Selwyn knows my thinking on this matter… It regards my sister.’ Was it Hermione’s imagination or did the shadows darken around her face as she spoke? ‘I want her released from prison. Her incarceration is unjust. Undeserved.’

Dolores raised her goblet of wine to her lips and gazed at Sylvestra, a coolly contemplative expression on her face. ‘Believe me, Sylvestra. I share your impatience. Your sister’s become horribly dependent on me… Her constant whining and crying is unbearable!’ Sylvestra couldn’t withhold the smile that creased her face, but it soon fell. ‘However… I am powerless to assist you. It is the Grandmaster who ordained the terms of Katya’s arrangement. Any fresh proposals must be submitted to him – not me.’

‘But you’re The Keeper, Dolores,’ Sylvestra said sourly. ‘You’re the only person who has access to her.’

Dolores looked astonished. ‘I hope you're not asking me to release her WITHOUT Salvedra’s permission?’
'No, not at all!' Sylvestra said hastily. 'That - that would be reckless.'

'It wouldn't be survived,' Dolores smirked, and her eyes glowed with ink-black lustre. 'Salvedra’s wishes must be honoured.'

‘But what if a substitute could be found?’ Sylvestra's voice rang out, high-pitched and querulous - and was greeted with silence.

Selwyn shot Sylvestra an anxious frown but Dolores glared at him and tapped her wine-glass, demanding a top-up. He leapt from the table with eager alacrity to do her bidding.

‘Explain,’ Dolores commanded.

‘I’m thinking someone else could take Katya’s place in her prison,’ Sylvestra said, with a petulant toss of her head. ‘Perhaps someone my father cares for, loves even… or, possibly someone who shares his blood?’

Dolores emitted a loud, braying laugh. ‘Dios mio! Are you suggesting yourself?!’

Sylvestra vehemently shook her head. ‘There are other possibilities…’

Both women stared at each other wordlessly.

‘I’m sorry, Sylvestra, but any new terms would have to be approved by Salvedra,’ Dolores said crisply, accepting her freshly-refilled glass of wine from Selwyn. ‘Remember he’s been more than generous with your father’s feelings regarding this matter. Katya’s fate could have been much, much worse.’

‘I’m perfectly aware of that,’ Sylvestra said in cold, trenchant tones, drumming her finger-nails impatiently on the table. ‘Maybe you – as her Keeper - could appeal to Salvedra on my behalf? Katya’s absence has become hugely… inconvenient.’

Dolores sipped her wine pensively. ‘As a related side-note, I have some interesting news. The Muggle Witch was at Akhr Makan today,’ she announced. ‘With Draco. Naturally.’

Sylvestra’s face froze. ‘Why?’

‘Their interfering friend, Harry Potter, was captured in Egypt and taken to Akhr Makan - from where they rescued him.’ Dolores smiled, enjoying Sylvestra’s shocked reaction. ‘Yes… quite the feat, I think you’d agree… Nobody has ever escaped that place! I must say, Draco’s become really rather dangerous. He’s certainly caught Salvedra’s attention... As for the Muggle Witch, well, Salvedra has bold designs. So if you plan to exchange Katya for HER, I warn you now - he’ll say no.’

Sylvestra stared at her stormily.

But Dolores ignored her, switching attention to Selwyn. ‘They also stole a young boy – one of your subjects, I believe. Salvedra intends to speak to you about this in person.’

Selwyn’s eyes were round with trepidation.

‘Is – is there anything I can do to earn your support for my proposal?’ Sylvestra pleaded. ‘I would hugely appreciate it.’

Dolores wrapped her fingers around the slender stem of her wine-goblet and studied Sylvestra, her
large, dark eyes glinting in the candlelight... ‘I promise I will reflect on it… I suppose a bit of *quid pro quo* isn’t completely out of the question; not if it helps advance our cause.’

‘It would, undoubtedly,’ Sylvestra enthused.

Dolores heaved a dramatic sigh. ‘In truth – and this is difficult for me to say - Grandmaster is increasingly *displeased* with the comportment of your father. He’s made some serious miscalculations…’

‘He’s a fool,’ Sylvestra sneered. Hermione was shocked by the dark malice in her voice.

But Dolores smiled.

XXX

Hermione retraced her steps using the silver charms – a long line leading away from the picture back, she hoped, to Draco and Harry.

She muttered a spell, vanquishing each rose as she passed.

However, as she tripped down the mountain path towards the painting with the cramped streets thronged with wooden houses, she was disturbed to notice that the colours in the picture were fading to a pallid grey… as though the colour was being leached out by a powerful force.

Sensing someone close behind, Hermione hastened to the first house in the townscape and crouched low in its doorway.

She was mesmerised as Sylvestra strode past and the colours seemed to spring away in her wake - sliding back once she’d passed – and the light seemed to shudder and recoil, bending around her.

But of course… Hermione thought. Sylvestra was *devoid* of colour. Blacker than black.

Impervious to light.

Hermione crept behind her, ducking at regular intervals into doorways, praying Sylvestra wouldn’t look back.

A hand suddenly reached out from a doorway and Draco spun her around to face him.

To Hermione’s surprise, Harry was standing alongside him, looking astonished to be there at all.

‘You followed the roses!’ she whispered, relieved.

Draco smiled.

‘I used them to anchor me… What are YOU using?’ she asked.

Their silence spoke volumes… ‘I think we just fuck off out of this place at the first available opportunity,’ Harry said, clearly discomforted by the whole experience.

‘I’m following Sylvestra. I want to see where she goes,’ Hermione explained.

She peered around the doorway. Sylvestra was already fading out of this particular picture…

‘Come on!’ she said, ‘we’re losing her.’

Draco squinted into the distance. ‘*Sylvestra’s* here?’
‘She passed you… Isn’t that why you’re hiding?’

‘No. We heard someone coming - and that someone turned out to be you,’ Draco said, a perplexed frown on his face.

‘She’s crossed into the next picture, come on!’ Hermione said impatiently, tugging his hand to follow.

Sylvestra was slowly trudging across the rutted field – now dull grey and lifeless - moving towards a smudginess on the far horizon. She glanced behind her and paused, a stern look on her face. Her eyes studied the ground… the thin line of twinkling silver charms leading back towards the picture of the town.

‘Bugger. She’s seen them,’ Hermione said, pulling Draco and Harry towards the ruined shack, away from the rose path.

Sylvestra quickly retraced her steps, her nose twitching as she gathered up the roses. She stopped to examine one and her face clouded. She twisted one way, then the next… clearly desperate to spot whoever had left this trail, then stomped furiously past, her feet pounding the thick, red earth.

‘We need to move fast,’ Hermione said to the others. ‘Head for that grey mushy horizon!’

Harry gave her a pained look. ‘This is just so fucking weird. You’re the only one who can actually SEE her, Hermione.’

‘It’s this thing you can do that we can’t,’ Draco added, ‘seeing through colour-magic. Maybe she’s disguised herself?’

‘How are you even HERE?’ Hermione asked, rounding on Harry.

He shook his head in wonder. ‘I’ve no idea! There was no stopping Draco and he just sort of grabbed me and I followed! I’m just hoping I can get out again… I’m worried it’s only you lot who can.’

‘Unless you’ve got colour-magic,’ Hermione murmured glumly… brought on by whatever had happened to him at Akhr Makan; something so traumatic, she suspected she’d never know the truth of it.

‘There’s not much out here,’ Draco said, gazing out at a bare room with a window looking onto a row of closed shops and an empty late-night bar – ‘Le Vieux Fou.’

‘That road – it’s sort of familiar…’ Hermione said.

‘It’s Foret-la-Folie!’ Harry cried. ‘We can get to Paris from here!’

And he joyously stepped out of the picture, Hermione and Draco behind.

‘But surely this has to be a wizarding house?’ Draco said.

Harry pondered a moment. ‘Stay here a sec.’ And he quickly slipped out of the empty room, returning a few moments later.

‘It’s not a house. It’s a bakery. There’s no one here. Let’s Apparate… What are you doing?’ he asked Hermione tetchily. She was fiddling with the painting, pulling it away from the wall to inspect the back of the canvas.
It was plain. Untouched. ‘I think I know why you can physically pass through some pictures but not others,’ she mused. ‘The two we have at Folkvangr – their backs are painted black. I think that secures them – kind of like jamming up the Floo to prevent unwanted visitors.’

‘Good to know,’ Draco muttered. ‘But we need to get out of here pronto, in case Sylvestra crawls out and joins us!’

Hermione agreed and they all held hands.

‘Hotel de Crapville?’ Draco suggested. ‘For old time’s sake…’

Moments later they were staring up at the sign for the Hotel Danemark in Paris.

For a fleeting moment, Hermione felt she’d come home.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"HYMN 2.0" by SANDER VAN DOORN

"LARK" by ANGEL OLSEN

"CLEAN" by ADIA VICTORIA

"PAINT IT BLACK" by THE ROLLING STONES

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Hermione and Draco reflect on their relationship; truths are told as major change looms…

55. **Magda Malfoy**

‘You’ve no idea how many times I imagined fucking you while I was staying here,’ Draco said dreamily. ‘The air in this squalid little place was thick with unrequited lust.’

It was late morning and Paris was bathed in warm spring sunshine. Hermione and Draco had woken up late at the Hotel Danemark, slightly hungover from an impromptu whisky-sodden wake. Gunter and Niko had stopped by on their way to Geneva to handle the aftermath of the attack that killed their friends...

‘You make it sound as though our relationship was one-sided, Draco!’ Hermione exclaimed. ‘I definitely lusted after you, too.’

‘Yeah. But not as a full-time active profession I bet!’ Draco turned to face her, twisting her into his arms. ‘I was wanking for Britain in here. If wanking was an Olympic sport, I’d have taken triple gold!’

She burst out laughing, gazing up at him as she lay naked in his arms.

‘You being here's kind of surreal, actually,’ he said, sliding his hand down her body. ‘The reality is SO much better than the fantasy…’

‘Good,’ she murmured, drawing him into a heated kiss, remembering with a melancholic pang that reality also meant heading back to Britain later; half-drowning in a sea of troubles.

‘I'd like to do something nice today,’ she said wistfully. 'Just the two of us.’

‘We already are,’ he said with an impish grin.

‘You know what I mean… Something special. Something PARIS.’

‘The calm before the shitstorm…’

‘Well… we need to talk about Katya at some point. You know that, don’t you?’ she said tentatively.

Hermione had told everyone last night that overhearing Sylvestra and Dolores’s conversation had all but confirmed her fears that Katya was trapped in a painting at Malfoy Manor...

Draco gazed at her, his eyes a soft, smoky grey – but there was a new seriousness in his expression. ‘Not right now, though,’ he murmured.

'No, not now.. maybe not even today. But soon...'
She stared up at him and her breathing hitched in her chest. His skin glowed gold and his tousled hair was a burnished halo – silvery strands quivering and glinting in the soft sunlight streaming through the open window.

‘You look beautiful,’ she smiled, pulling him close. She buried her face in his neck and breathed in the smell of him. She could feel his pulse beating against his warm skin.

He locked his arms tightly around her and his mouth sought hers and they were lost in each other. A heavy, aching pleasure blossomed deep inside of her as his hands caressed her slowly and deliberately, as though committing the moment to memory...

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‘Of course I was completely bonkers about you by the time I got to Paris, and had been for a long time,’ Draco said, harking back to their earlier conversation. ‘Probably before Argentina!’

They were walking down a shady, tree-lined avenue through the Tuileries gardens heading to The Orangerie – a small art gallery in the park, famous for Monet’s Water Lilies. Hermione’s ‘Paris’ day had already included a spot of shopping, a browse at a funky English-language bookstore by the Seine and a late, lazy lunch.

‘Nonsense!’ Hermione laughed. ‘You loathed me. Don’t pretend otherwise.’

‘It’s completely possible, you know, to not particularly value somebody’s personality and still want to boff their brains out…’ Draco said with a winning, radiant smile. ‘I’ll always remember that time we bumped into each other at that goddawful Ministry dinner and you got all pissed-up and deliciously vulnerable…’

‘Le Bonheur? I wasn't PISSED, Draco. I was jinxed!’

Draco gave her a wry, sidelong smile. ‘Well, that night I realised I wanted to know you more - and not just in the carnal sense. I found you interesting.’

They swerved to avoid a pack of pram-pushing mothers who had occupied almost the entire width of the path.

‘You hid it well then, because you were VILE!’

Draco’s hands suddenly danced around her waist and he spun her around to face him. ‘And then when you turned up at Heathrow Airport, I was thrilled…’

‘No you weren't. You were a right stroppy git!’

‘Sure... but I had a massive hard-on…’ Draco closed his eyes in rapturous reverie. ‘You looked gorgeous! All hot and damp and windswept... And then in Argentina, I could barely look at you without wanting to snog your face off.'

‘And yet still… you really weren’t that nice to me,’ she said tartly as they strolled on, heads bent close to each other. But as she spoke, she recalled the Argentine Memories - the way Draco’s face softened when he looked at her.

‘I was all over the place,’ he admitted, ‘because I'd fallen in love with you.’

‘But you hardly knew me!'
'I knew enough. I knew you were strong and good and beautiful and brilliantly clever.'

'But... When? How?'

'I've kind of told you this before actually, but it was that night at Villa Ofelia – that was the clincher. That was when I knew for sure.'

'But we argued!' she shrilled, spluttering with laughter. 'You said some very hurtful things.'

'I was fucking dreadful... and realising I was in love with you comes across as a really pathetic excuse, I can see that...'

'You even Slept with someone!' she cried. 'That tarty girl you thought was dead.'

'An act of desperation!' he groaned. 'Trying to override my horror at my feelings for you by being a gutter-skank... but it made it worse. I still loved you and now I hated myself, too.'

He came to a halt and his face was inches from her own. 'But seriously, Hermione, I didn't know what to do! I was a mass of complication – and I'm not good at handling complicated I'm afraid. I just knew I wanted you more than anything in the world...' His eyes were warm and earnest. 'It was like all the lights had suddenly lit up as one on the display unit! No stuttering into life or false starts... Just THERE! Dazzling me... And I couldn't handle it.'

Hermione sighed deeply and a strange euphoria swept through her. 'The truth is... despite the fact you were a total prick, I missed you so much when I left Argentina... You'd got under my skin...'

'Something huge had happened... but there was our fucked-up history - and you being married.'

She gave him a sharp look. 'Not just ME, Draco! YOU too!'

'Ron was – is - a more immediate issue, Hermione.'

'But at least I've left him, whereas you and Katya are just apart.'

'My marriage is over.'

'She doesn't know that...'

'No, she doesn't,' he said, chewing his lower lip pensively, 'but it's still true.'

They continued walking.

'She might still love you. Have you thought about that?' Hermione’s words hung between them... 'And you loved her, too.'

He raised his eyes to the clear blue sky. 'I thought we weren’t talking about this today?'

'You DID love her, Draco,' Hermione insisted. 'That night when you showed me the roses in her room; I could see it.'

'I honestly think I loved her more once she’d left!' Draco declared. 'I felt guilty as hell for being such a shitty husband. Convinced I’d driven her away...'

'No! Don’t rewrite history... That’s unhealthy!'

'I’m not! I can see the difference now. I loved her in a sort of grateful-she-wasn’t-her-crazy-sister
kind of way… but I wasn’t IN love with her. Truth is, my opinion of her has changed dramatically -
because things have changed. The FACTS have changed. I have doubts... grave doubts about so
many things.'

Hermione stopped walking and encircled his waist with her arms and looked up at him. His
whiteness was clean, bright – truthful. But there was anger, too...

‘I always assumed you and Katya had this incredible, whirlwind romance, Draco.’

Draco gave her a thin smile. ‘Not quite... She came to Malfoy Manor for Beltane and within a
week I'd proposed. We married a month later.’

‘That definitely qualifies as whirlwind!’

‘But it was less a romance, than a marriage of convenience... And I’m lying if I say otherwise.’ His
face darkened. ‘I desperately wanted away from Sylvestra, but the Malfoy fortune, our businesses,
my father’s medical needs, even our home were in hock to Ephraim and I feared he might pull the
plug. So I figured I should SWAP sister.’

‘That's so… cold.’

‘It was. I was a total bastard. I vaguely remembered this sweet girl I’d met years before in Spain.
So when Ephraim invited her to stay I played the part - her Prince Charming… and that was that.’

Hermione stared at him, dumbfounded.

‘I’m not proud of myself,’ Draco admitted, a rueful look on his face. ‘And I knew, in my heart, that
I was the fucking villain of the story. It was a totally cuntish thing to do.’

‘It was.’ Hermione reflected a moment. ‘But you must have had feelings for her?’

‘She was the Anti-Sylvestra! Pretty as porcelain with a tinkling laugh. Docile. Gentle. Kind…’

‘Not THAT kind!’ Hermione laughed. ‘She stole her sister’s boyfriend! I mean, Sylvestra’s
obviously a bitch, but even so…’

Draco gave her a shrewd look. ‘Yes. I’ve wondered about that… I just assumed, back then, that she
was a bit of a blank and oblivious to the Sylvestra situation.’

‘A bit of a blank?’ Hermione said, incredulous. ‘That’s not nice.’

‘No… it’s not,’ he said looking uncomfortable. ‘But she was very unknowable, Hermione… She
was sweet, sedate, said the right thing... Ideal if you're the type of guy who wants their wife to shut
up and look pretty. But I honestly can’t remember her opinion on anything! Looking back, I was
bored out of my skull.’

‘That's... harsh, Draco,’ Hermione said, a bit taken aback.

‘Well. I don't like thinking about it much, but when I do, I have to be honest with myself.’

‘Wasn’t Ephraim upset when you suddenly switched daughter? It’s hardly a sign of constancy in a
potential son-in-law.’

Draco gave her a strange, lopsided smile. ‘He was overjoyed, actually… She was secretly his
favourite. And I’m pretty sure he warned Sylvestra not to kick up a fuss. The Malfoys were his
entry point into society. And we now know how much he needed Herb Healing…'
'And by you marrying Katya, he could lock you in...'

'Exactly. A mutually beneficial transaction... And Sylvestra tolerated the situation because she could still live at Malfoy Manor. Being a big-headed twat I thought that was all about me... turns out it was my son she still wanted access to, for Dark Flux.' He gave Hermione a despairing, sardonic grin. 'I thought I was such a fucking player... turns out I was a bit of a clot.'

Hermione studied his face carefully. 'It can’t all have been unhappy. You and Katya were having a child together.'

'I hoped that would fix things... And for a while I truly tried, played the part... you know.' He gazed at her and his soft grey eyes glistened in the sunlight. 'But I can now see my marriage was all kinds of wrong; an empty fucking waiting-room, begging something to turn up, because the sound of my own voice in my head was deafening me... I thought I’d been so very, very clever plotting my way out of hell, but got stuck in fucking purgatory... desperate to escape.'

'You could have spoken to Katya?' Hermione suggested. 'Maybe she was lonely, too?'

'Well, if only you’d been on hand to give me marriage guidance...’ he said in ironic tones. ‘But the truth is we had no real conversation beyond the here-and-now or the fucking furniture or my latest bloody business trip, and however much I tried I couldn't feel...’ he hesitated, framing his words carefully, ‘passionate about her... I mean, she was very beautiful – but like a painting more than a person... Or a beautiful child.'

Hermione instinctively recoiled.

'I mean, this isn't honourable of me... but I can't help but compare with you ... When we have sex it feels honest and real and gloriously intimate. Just heart-pounding, head-spinning joy. It’s like being free together... And that’s how it should be.'

He held her face in his hands and she could sense his whiteness pulsating in fierce, silvery bursts. The busy park and the bright spring sunshine and the long shadows cast by the trees bordering the path fell away.

'I’ve never said any of that out loud before,’ he said, his breath warm on her face. ‘It’s been stuck in my head... But with you I feel opened out, like I can breathe for the first time. Put thoughts into words... It feels amazing.’

She gazed at him, pink-cheeked. ‘I don’t know when I fell in love with you, Draco, or how... I realised it at your mother’s wedding. But I already loved you so, so much, because when I was with you I had this palpable, crazy, wonderful feeling of being both at home and on a grand journey - all at the same time...’ She grinned. ‘I think that might be what love is.’

He brushed his lips against hers, like a splash of soft, warm rain... and she suddenly yearned to be closer.

‘Do – do you want to go back to the hotel?’

‘Yes,’ he replied instantaneously, ‘but...you wanted to do something PARIS. You wanted to see the Monets.’ He glanced at The Orangerie to their right. ‘And here they are... We’ll go back afterwards.’

‘Straight away.’

‘Absolutely... No fannying around in the gift shop.’
‘It’s like a dream…’ Hermione sighed as they wandered around the blindingly white oval rooms of The Orangerie. Enormous rectangular slabs of luminous colour… vivid, hallucinatory, sensual… travelled in a seamless parade around the walls, encircling them. The same scene – Water Lilies in a verdant, indigo pond – were repeated over and over; each time a little different, a little hazier, mesmerising.

Hermione was entranced. ‘Oh to go into one of THESE… it’d be like walking through heaven itself,’ she groaned. ‘Imagine it, Draco… This is what ecstasy looks like.’

Draco clasped her hand in his own and gazed at the paintings. ‘It feels pure.’

Hermione could sense a peculiar, fluttering shift in the pit of her stomach when he touched her and a warm vibration surged up her spine, oozing like clean, silvery fluid throughout her body. She felt transported into a soothing, heady white bliss, humming in her mind.

She turned to Draco and he was flushed, slightly breathless.

‘Our magic…’ he whispered. ‘It’s combined.’

She wanted to sink into his eyes – lustrous, velvet-grey - and could almost feel herself slipping and her heart suddenly raced inside of her.

‘We have to go,’ she breathed, sad that this oddly hypnotic trance had to end.

As they left the gallery she noticed passers-by staring…

‘Were we glowing?’ she asked, once they reached the fresh air and the feel of the sun on their skin and the rushing onslaught of sounds – traffic and people and car horns tooting impatiently at La Place de la Concorde.

‘I think so,’ Draco grinned. ‘That was fucking incredible. Felt like an orgasm in my head!’

‘It was the magic. Both types.’

Draco raised his eyebrows. ‘We Anteracted?’ He took her by the hand and led her away from the gallery.

‘I guess so…’ She couldn’t stop smiling. ‘We need to work out what triggered it.’

XXX

‘There’s been another bloody Dark Flux attack,’ Harry said, ushering Hermione and Draco into his living-room. ‘Even made the French news…’

‘Oh no,’ Hermione said, lowering herself onto the Potter’s stylish yet uncomfortable sofa. The day’s sunshine was suddenly extinguished. ‘What happened?’

‘Four victims. Some kind of street fair in a town called Spalding. Gunter and Niko are heading there from Geneva to investigate further.’

‘Is that in one of Ephraim’s Domains?’

‘Great Fen… always puzzled me, that one. There’s no wizarding population. Based on the corundum communications, Thelonious thinks that Argentine chap, Asusto, carried it out.’
‘Fuck’s sake,’ Draco muttered darkly. ‘We need to find this guy and kill him.’

Harry nodded vigorously. Hermione could see her face reflected in his glasses – surprised, even disappointed. ‘Isn’t it better to put him on trial, Harry?’

‘I want Ephraim on trial,’ Harry said, ‘but I couldn’t give a stuff if someone takes out this murdering bastard…and that Josep creep, too,’ he added in acid tones.

‘Do you want to put Salvedra on trial?’ Draco asked. ‘He’s the crux of all this shit.’

‘We’d have to catch him first,’ Hermione said sourly, which struck her as a very tall order.

‘And killing someone like that – someone who’s lived for fucking ever could be really difficult,’ Harry sighed.

‘Maybe Jeroboam had the right idea?’ Draco mused. ‘Lock him up.’

‘Somewhere the sun don’t shine…’ Hermione said, echoing a famous saying… ‘That’s it! We need to trap him in a place where there’s no light! Darkness kills colour-magic.’

Draco gave her an appraising look. ‘That might work, actually – would neutralise him. But where the hell has NO light?’

‘A cave?’ Harry suggested.

‘Or a picture,’ Hermione said, a thought forming at the back of her mind. ‘A picture with all the light taken out. A picture that was sealed…’

Harry and Draco gave her a curious look.

‘We’ll have to discuss this with everybody when we get back,’ Harry said.

‘Oh, for sure!’ Hermione said, ‘it’d be a big operation. We’d need a lot of magic to pull it off.’ She could faintly discern the idea in her mind’s eye, twisting and turning reflectively. ‘Who ordered this attack? Ephraim or Salvedra?’

‘Thelonious thinks Ephraim - and our spook friend, Tim, contacted me. Apparently, Ephraim’s offered the Prime Minister magical specialists to move into areas of concern to fend off future attacks.’

‘That’s clever,’ Hermione frowned. ‘Generate a magical catastrophe, send in your own troops to clean up the mess and establish a presence.’

‘Have you seen Tim’s messages?’ Harry asked Draco. ‘He says he’s texted you a few times today.’

Draco scrolled through his phone, then paused. ‘Ah, yes…’

‘You should talk to him tomorrow when we get back,’ Harry said.

‘TOMORROW?’ Hermione exclaimed.

‘Yes. Tomorrow,’ Harry said. ‘Something’s come up.’

‘Have you told him?’ Ginny said, sweeping into the living-room. She was rather glamorously-attired, Hermione thought… obviously the Potters had social plans.
‘I was just getting to that…’ Harry said. He clenched his lips in mild irritation. ‘Draco… Briek and Gabrielle have been looking into the whereabouts of the Muggle who married Katya’s mother. They think they’ve found him.’

‘Okay…’ Draco said coolly, ‘and what – what does this mean?’

‘Well, we’re meeting them tonight to learn more, but it probably means we’ve found your daughter.’

XXX

China Club was strikingly atmospheric, its décor inspired by colonial 1930s Shanghai; dark-wood décor, red lanterns, a black and white checkered floor and sumptuous Chesterfield sofas. A plump, dark-eyed woman was singing on a small stage adorned with rich, red drapes, accompanied by a small jazz band. Her husky, sensual voice soared above the chattering buzz of diners.

The food was delicious and the wine excellent - and plentiful. But conversation was stilted, not helped by Ginny's refusal to even look at Draco. Hermione understood that she was angry, but part of her wondered why Ginny had even bothered to come...

Hermione found herself listening to the singer. There was something soulful and sad about her, even when she was smiling or belting out a happy tune, that felt like she was crying inside.

After dinner, they headed upstairs to a softly-lit cocktail bar stuffed with vintage bric-a-brac and tall feathered pot plants and collapsed onto three leather sofas ranged around a low table.

Briek updated them on Bernard Machon - the man he believed to be Anna’s Muggle husband and Katya’s stepfather.

Machon, formerly known as Bernard Gagnon and Henri LeBerre, was in a nursing home in Normandy. As a man of considerable independent wealth, he'd effectively bought anonymity by having several identities.

‘So what’s his REAL name?’ Harry asked.

Briek shrugged. ‘We might never know. But one thing's certain, his wife was always Fayana - that was ANNA. And they had a daughter, Rozella. But there's no record of Rozella attending Magical School... so she was probably a Squib.’

‘We couldn't speak much to Bernard, unfortunately,’ Gabrielle told the group while her husband wrestled open a bottle of champagne. ‘The nurses said he has good days and bad days and to try another time.’

‘He’s often visited by his daughter and grand-daughter,’ Briek added.

‘And the daughter definitely matches Rozella’s description?’ Harry checked, accepting a flute of champagne.

‘Tall, gorgeous redhead?’ He winked at Ginny next to him. ‘There’s a Muggle photograph on his bedside table…’

‘Where’s this nursing home?’ Hermione asked.

‘Foret-la-Folie.’
'That's where Rozella's boat business was based,' Harry said. 'Sounds promising.'

'Or worrying...’ Hermione muttered.

Draco arched a quizzical eyebrow. ‘You’re thinking Sylvestra?’

‘It looked like she was heading towards that picture we used to get into the bakery. But then she turned back, so—’

'We'll go tomorrow.'

Gabrielle turned to Draco beside her. 'Hopefully your daughter will be there. I imagine you're longing to meet her.'

Draco nodded, but judging by his hangdog demeanour she might as well have been inviting him to his own funeral, Hermione thought.

‘Do you think Bernard would be well enough to testify in a prosecution?’ Harry asked Briek.

Briek vehemently shook his head.

Harry hid his disappointment by slurping back his flute of champagne before requesting a refill. Briek went one better and ordered a decanter of cognac. ‘Delamain de Voyage – one of the very best.’ He passed a brimming glass across the table to Draco. ‘Here’s to hoping we’ve found your long-lost child!’

‘But he’s miserable as sin,’ Ginny remarked after knocking back her cognac with surprising gusto. ‘You do WANT your daughter, don’t you, Malfoy?’ It was the first time she’d properly acknowledged him.

‘Of course I do,’ Draco replied pithily. ‘But Magda’s aunt is the only mother she’s ever known – hardly fair if I just swoop in and nab her, is it?’

‘But don’t you think a child should be with their PARENTS?’

‘The circumstances aren’t exactly ideal, are they?’

‘You mean with her poor mother being banged up in a painting?’ Ginny said breezily.

Harry looked like all the air was deflating from his lungs and he rolled his eyes in exasperation. ‘No, he meant we have a bunch of fucking nutters wanting to start a war with the Muggles, Ginny… Please. Try and be TACTFUL.’

‘Draco really hasn’t got time right now to be raising a toddler,’ Hermione argued.

Ginny’s face hardened into a frown. ‘Then you need to prioritise getting this child’s mother out of the picture she’s stuck in, don’t you?’ She rounded on Harry, eyes blazing. ‘You think this too, Harry… you were telling me earlier.’

Everyone’s eyes darted to Harry. ‘Yes. I did say that, Ginny, but in a different context... Tim, the spy chap,’ he explained, ‘he’s wanting to know when he can send a strike squad to take out Malfoy Manor, but he needs Draco to first secure the site.’ He gave Draco a wary glance. ‘He thinks Draco’s ignoring him.’

‘Destroying your family home isn’t exactly a joyous prospect, is it now?’ Draco retorted, as he
raised his glass of cognac to his lips and downed it in one fell swoop.

‘But one that can’t be avoided forever,’ Harry said. ‘I think the Muggles will do it anyway… Tim’s giving you a chance to get your mother out, Draco. It’s a reasonable offer.’

‘But it’s not just his Mum that Malfoy has to salvage from Malfoy Manor, is it? That’s what you said earlier, Harry.’ Ginny was back to talking about Draco, not to him, Hermione noted. She fervently wished she was seated beside him, instead of marooned in the far corner of the sofa furthest from his own.

‘You’re obviously referring to my wife, Ginny. Just say it as it is,’ Draco grunted.

‘I’m saying your reluctance to talk to this Muggle person is because you don’t want to rescue her painting.’

‘Are you suggesting I want her to go up in flames with the rest of the place?’ Draco protested, a fiery glint in his eye.

‘Yes. I am.’

Draco shook his head in despair. ‘Jesus Christ…’

‘From what Harry’s told me about this curse, it might be safer for your wife NOT to be extracted from this painting,’ Briek suggested, his long fingers stroking his chin as he spoke.

‘Certainly while Salvedra’s still at large,’ Harry agreed.

‘That’s pathetic. Immoral, even,’ Ginny said vituperatively. ‘You can’t have someone trapped in a painting and just LEAVE them there! This woman deserves her life back!’

‘Sure, but we don’t actually know how these fucking prison-paintings work – let alone how to get someone out,’ Draco said crabbily.

‘And until Salvedra’s disposed of, Katya can’t be released without his consent,’ Hermione added.

‘Where there’s a will there’s a way,’ Ginny insisted. ‘And that’s the problem. Do either of you have the will to try and get her out? It’s very convenient for you having her locked away…’

Draco’s face darkened. ‘That’s unfair. Hermione's nothing but kind about my wife!’

'But what about YOU?' Ginny said, wide-eyed. 'Do you want her back? She'll have gone through a terrible trauma, Malfoy... She'll be needing the support of a loving husband…'

'GINNY!' Harry warned, looking exasperated.

But Ginny ignored him. 'It'd be cruel to turn your back on her... Might be kinder to leave her to rot, and that way you won't have to choose…'

'There is no choice,' Draco said, lips tight.

'Not NOW there isn't.'

'I mean I've made my choice. Hermione.' He glared at Ginny, bristling with hostility.

'Easy to say now…' Ginny said in wheedling tones.
'Yes! Yes, it is.'

'Why?'

'Because I hate my wife. I'll never forgive her!'

Hermione felt her insides shrivel. ‘No, Draco… you don’t…’ His anger was getting the better of him...

‘But I do! How can I not?’ His whiteness flared furiously, incandescent. 'Katya knew what was being done to Scorpius and didn’t give a crap!’

‘We don’t know that for sure!'

‘Yes, we do!’ he snarled. 'Look at the facts and it's the only logical conclusion! It explains why she fucked off the way she did... which I get. I'm not a complete monster. I see why she was scared. But what I can't forgive - will NEVER forgive - is the fact she didn't warn me.'

'I don't know your situation well, Draco,' Briek said in kindly tones, 'only what Harry's told me, but she might have been scared about any number of things...things unconnected to what was happening to your poor son. Maybe she found out what your father-in-law was doing and freaked out?'

'Or maybe she just found out you were horribly unfaithful?' Ginny suggested.

'Ooh, I think she knew that already,' Draco sighed. 'Believe me, there's been many times I've thought this whole thing was just a slow revenge - a way to fuck up my head. But the facts have changed... we know more now than we did. We know that my son was enduring shit no child should - to help those cunts make Dark Flux. And as much as I was in denial about the whole fucking thing, he was already sick and his language was fucking up BEFORE she left. Sure, it got a whole lot worse after, but ... that's the baseline reality.'

He stared at the group, white-faced, hollow-eyed...

'You can't assume she KNEW what was happening, Draco,' Briek said.

'No... I - I can't ASSUME,' Draco stammered, 'but something frightened the shit out of her because she begged Bill - was quite desperate about it, actually - to help her open this blasted Matryoshka thing she'd been sent. She found documents inside and a charm... And within days of reading that stuff she'd fucked off! Something confirmed her suspicions.'

'We've no idea what she read!' Hermione said heatedly. 'It might have been a broomstick cleaning manual for all we know! Without FACTS, Draco, we're pissing in the wind.'

'Hermione... that Matryoshka probably came from Svetlana, Anna's sister. We now know Anna stole Salvedra's work on how to make Dark Flux. And those papers are MISSING.'

'You think Katya read about how Dark Flux is made?'

Draco nodded. 'Yes, I do. And there she was... six months pregnant with an Epsilon+ kid, living in a house with a man with Gimlott's disease, no doubt realising her father's up to his eyeballs...'

'And with your Epsilon+ son getting sicker,' Harry cut in, 'yes, it makes sense... I've wondered this myself.' He shot a glance at Hermione. 'And so have you. We've talked about it.'
'Of course I have... because it's a possibility. But it isn't necessarily REALITY,' Hermione shot back.

'I think it is...' Draco said sadly. 'And I think you do, too, Hermione.' He held her gaze until she had to look away. 'It's the unthinkable,' he continued. 'My sweet, lovely wife found out what was happening to my son and rather than say or do anything to help him, she fucked off to avoid any risk of the same thing happening to her child - not giving a damn about mine!'

'Magda's YOUR child too, Draco!'

'But it should never have been a choice! You do what you have to do to save a child. ANY child!' His eyes were suddenly glossy with unshed tears... 'You walked into a room of certain DEATH to save two children in Vietnam you’d never even seen before! Katya lived with Scorpius. Day in, day out. Even if she only suspected something was wrong, she should have told me. But she didn't…'

'Maybe she was scared?' Gabrielle reasoned. 'Not thinking straight.'

Draco shrugged. ‘I’ve no idea what she was thinking…’

'If you rescued her, you could ask,' Ginny said tartly, pouring herself another glass of cognac.

Draco visibly tensed and shot her a venomous look.

‘Ginny’s right,’ Briek said, regarding Draco with droopy, saddened eyes. ‘Your wife has the answers, Draco. And now that it looks like you know where she is, you can find them.’

Draco exhaled deeply... he placed his elbows on his knees and bent over, pushing his hands into his hair. 'I can see that,' he muttered. 'I'm just - I've got myself in a muddle... I want answers, but I can't forgive her... And Tim badgering me for rescue plans isn’t helping matters.'

‘He doesn’t know the full situation,’ Harry pointed out. ‘But decisions have to be made. Even if we don’t enjoy making them.’

‘I just - I just want it to go away.’

‘It's the same for me too,’ Hermione sighed. Better to be honest...'The thought of Katya being back terrifies me! Because I love you... Every fucking shitty little bit of you.’ Draco twisted his face to look at her. 'But when I entered that tower in the picture and heard a woman crying, it was the most pitiful, frightening thing I’ve ever heard. What she’s going through must be terrible. Which means, whatever you feel about her, whatever's happened, we have to do everything we can to set her free... Because it’s the right thing to do.'

Draco slowly nodded. ‘I know,’ he conceded in a harsh, grating voice.

‘Only then can you resolve everything,’ Gabrielle reasoned.

'And move on,' Draco said with a grimace, pouring himself another cognac.

‘Not quite,’ Ginny said. ‘Because with these new laws you CAN’T move on… Hermione can’t be with you and her children at the same time.’

‘Yes she can,’ Harry piped up. ‘They can move here. To Paris.’

But Draco wasn’t listening. He moved to a stool at the bar and cradled his glass of cognac, head bowed.
Moments later, Hermione joined him. She curled her arms around his neck and rested her cheek against his, not caring that his stubble scraped against her skin.

XXX

Briek rented an MPV and they headed into the Normandy countryside. They drove through Foret-la-Folie to a hamlet, comprising little more than a deserted farmhouse and a redbrick, boxy building, Bernard’s nursing home.

‘We can’t all go in,’ Hermione said once they'd parked and got out of the car. She was glad to stretch her legs. ‘Six of us would be rather daunting for an old man.’

‘Doubt we’d all be allowed,’ Ginny said. ‘Anyway, there’s no point me going in. I’ll wait here.’

‘He might not speak very good English,’ Harry pointed out. ‘And even if he does, he’s old and infirm and we can’t have him getting confused.’ He gave Hermione a regretful look. ‘Sorry. That means French-speakers only.’

‘Plus - you look like his dead wife…’ Draco added. ‘I won't go in, either, and neither should you, Harry. We were total arses when we confronted Rozella back in January. She might have told him.’

‘Okay,’ Briek said smoothly, clearly having anticipated this outcome all along. ‘Gabrielle and I can handle this. Now we have to be very clear what we say and what you want us to learn…’

XXX

Draco and Harry stood ‘on guard’ at the main entrance to the car park, staring at their phones and occasionally guffawing at the other in loud celebration. Hermione was grateful to Harry. He’d been up half the night talking with Draco while she slept on the Potters’ uncomfortable sofa.

‘What in Merlin’s hell are they doing?’ Ginny asked, brows knitted in confusion.

‘Oh, it’s some online game thing they’ve got into…’ Hermione cast an anxious glance at Ginny.

Ginny was staring fixedly at Harry, a look of dark incomprehension clouding her handsome features. She shivered a little, rubbing her arms for warmth. ‘It was boiling yesterday.’

Hermione agreed, despairing inside. Was this what they were reduced to? Talking about the weather? She sighed and moved onto another conversational stalwart…

‘What are the kids up to today?’

‘They’re at Arnaud’s. They’ve got a new puppy…’

‘Oh, that’s nice,’ Hermione smiled. ARNAUD? Who the hell was Arnaud? She felt she should recognise the name...

Ginny pulled a tissue from her pocket and blew her nose. The trumpeting sound shocked a tree-full of birds beside them into flight. ‘Hayfever,’ she said apologetically, ‘never used to get it till I had Lily. I’ve tried every potion on the market!’

Hermione, luckily, knew a great deal about potions for various ailments – anything to fill the void…

Ginny listened intently, her rich, brown eyes focusing on Hermione’s face as she spoke... ‘Arnaud
could always teach Rose and Hugo as well,’ she suddenly blurted.

‘What do you mean?’ Hermione stammered. It seemed silly for Arnaud to travel all the way to Ottery St Catchpole…

‘If you’re living in Paris…’ Ginny stumbled to a halt.

‘If I— What?’

‘If you have to live in Paris. Because of these laws.’ Ginny’s mouth shut tight, almost as though she felt she’d said too much.

‘Well… the kids get on I suppose.’

Ginny’s eyes flicked to Harry who was craning to see something on Draco’s phone and laughing. ‘We could share the cost... and some lessons could be held at yours. My lot will still go to Hogwarts, though.’

‘Yes, of course… Mine, too,’ Hermione said with greater gusto than that small sentence was ever intended for. Part of her felt like grabbing Ginny and hugging her but she gave her a small, shy smile instead and looked away. ‘They’ve been a long time.’

Moments later, Briek and Gabrielle were rounding the corner of the building, wreathed in smiles. Draco and Harry jogged towards them.

Briek put his arm around Gabrielle and looked at her with doting fondness. ‘This one could charm the birds from the trees!’ he said proudly.

Gabrielle held out a silver charm. ‘He gave me this to give to YOU, Draco,’ she said. ‘He says it’s their last one. You should already have the others.’

Draco stared at the rose in his hand.

‘But it can't be the last!’ Hermione said. ‘The necklace needs THIRTEEN charms to hear a message. This only makes twelve.’

Draco passed her the rose, looking deflated.

‘We asked Bernard about the time Katya disappeared,’ Briek said, with the sorry air of a man breaking bad news. ‘All he remembers is a bunch of wizards Apparating into the château grounds. He didn’t recognise anybody. To this day he thinks Katya was murdered or kidnapped so was glad to hear she’s still alive… We said she’s in hiding.’

‘But he didn’t see much of what happened because Katya hid him in a tunnel,’ Gabrielle added. ‘It runs underneath the old château.’

‘Why were they even at this château?’ Ginny asked. ‘Isn’t it meant to be ruined?’

‘It’s HIS,’ Briek said. ‘He bought it for Anna, but then she went mad and became rather frightening - so he moved out with Rozella to a cottage on the estate.’

‘We know Rozella got away in a car… but does Bernard know what happened to Magda?’ Harry asked.

‘She was in the car, too. In a car-seat. Wizards wouldn’t think about that, would they?’ Gabrielle said, eyes shining.
‘Sweet wee thing,’ Briek grinned. ‘He showed us her photograph... only lives a few miles from here.’

Draco looked like a thousand and one emotions were rolling through him in the space of a second... He exhaled deeply and for a moment Hermione feared he might fall to the ground. She dashed forwards and let him lean against her and they turned away from the others.

She could feel his whiteness flowing through her – a gushing torrent.

‘Do you want to visit her, Draco?’ came Briek’s voice behind them. ‘Bernard said Rozella won’t mind. She’s been speaking about you quite a lot lately.’

Draco leant over and placed his hands on his knees, as though winded. ‘Yes...’ he whispered to Hermione.

‘YES. Yes, he would,’ Hermione called back.

XXX

‘So did Bernard know Katya well?’ Hermione asked Briek once they’d all crammed into the MPV and were weaving through high-hedged country lanes.

‘I don't think so,’ Briek called back from the driver’s seat. 'Sounds like she was much closer to Rozella and his wife's sister. What was her name again?’ He looked to Gabrielle beside him for prompting.

‘Svetlana...’ Gabrielle twisted around to face Hermione and Draco. ‘Bernard said Anna was close to her sister. Anna had some heirlooms, passed down through the family over many generations. When she started to lose her mind she gave them to her sister for safekeeping - I think they included those rose-charms. But there were others too that he didn't remember....'

'The Matryoshka...' Hermione muttered.

‘He didn't mention one. However, Anna also entrusted some secret documents to Svetlana. Bernard didn’t understand what they were, though – or if he ever did, he’s long since forgotten.’

Draco gave Hermione a meaningful look, but it was far from triumphant; more steeped in sorrow. He was right, she thought... Svetlana had Salvedra's papers on Dark Flux, meaning Katya had probably seen them, too.

Hermione looked out at the green woodlands jumping past their windows. They passed a crossroads and Briek slowed a little, turning into a narrow country lane, bordered by dense woodland.

Gabrielle looked at Draco with wide, blue eyes. ‘Bernard always presumed Katya visited you when she went back to England after her child was born. He said something had spooked her - he didn't know what - and she planned to give you something. He was surprised when we said you hadn’t seen her since the day she left.’

Draco shook his head. ‘I didn’t even know she was in the country! That was when she went to Gringott’s... triggering the trace on her money. It's how she was traced to here.'

Briek took up the narrative, swiping his hands rapidly over the steering wheel to maintain control of the car as it bounced over muddy ruts on the narrowing country track... ‘Looks like Katya visited her aunt in Paris first... because after she’d vanished, Svetlana paid Bernard and Rozella a visit.
She was very nervous, apparently; wanted them to know where she’d stowed Katya's silver rose charms and what to do with them.’

‘Looks like Svetlana was a canny old bird,’ Harry called from the jump-seat tucked up at the rear. ‘Once she realised Ephraim’s lot were onto Katya, she knew she was in danger, too - needed a backup plan.’

Hermione looked ahead… the black, carcass of a once-grand château was coming into view, framed by tall trees.

‘Poor man couldn’t remember any more and there was no point pressing,’ Gabrielle sighed.

‘This place is the Château d’Orgueilleux,’ Briek announced, drawing everyone’s attention to its hulking black skeleton.

‘Such a sad-looking place,’ Ginny murmured.

But Hermione wasn’t looking at the château. Her eyes had been drawn to the small, brackenish lake it overlooked. A lake surrounded by a ring of bulrushes and at its edge a squat stone tower with a conical roof, reflected in the water. The tower was covered in ivy and brambles, covering up a small narrow window nestling under the rafters.

The sky had been mottled with low grey clouds, but rich, golden sunshine was breaking cover, and the surface of the lake trembled, glowing copper-bright.

Draco turned to look at her. His face had drained of colour. ‘Well. There’s no doubt we’re in the right place.’

‘Will Rozella and Magda be at the château?’ Harry asked, raising his voice from the back.

‘No,’ Briek said, screeching the MPV to a halt – facing the lake and the quaint little tower.

It was a classic medieval ‘folly,’ Hermione thought. A decorative feature, more than anything. A place for secret lovers’ trysts, or a prison for a fairytale princess…

‘I think our best bet is to head into the ruins and find this tunnel… it leads straight to the cottage, apparently,’ Briek said.

Everyone was disgorging from the car and the party moved towards the castle… it looked sharp and austere and Hermione blinked back an overpowering sense of blank darkness that emanated from its gutted shell…. She didn’t want to go in there if she could help it.

She looked around, her eyes furtively scanning the woodlands that formed a natural boundary around them.

The space encompassed by the trees resembled a giant teardrop, she thought – the château and the lake capped by the frivolous little tower at its furthest point.

A plume of purplish smoke rose up from the trees stretching rightwards from the tower. ‘The cottage. It's over there!’ she yelped.

Everybody Apparated beyond the lake and the folly to a thick clump of woodland. A path-of-sorts – more trodden leaves and crushed crocuses – wound through the trees to a small, one-storey wooden building. The sun barely penetrated through the thick canopy of trees here and in the dim light it looked like the archetypal woodcutter’s cottage in the storybooks Hermione had read as a
‘You okay?’ she said to Draco, who marched alongside her, head bent, stern-faced.

He blinked in surprise as though jolted from a trance. ‘Yeah… Fine.’ He flexed his hand and she slipped her fingers between his, giving him a brief reassuring squeeze.

Was he regretting this? she wondered. His life was about to change forever…

They stopped outside the cottage. The door was closed and it was silent.

‘I don’t think anyone’s in,’ Harry said peevishly.

Ginny peered through the dusty window. ‘Oh! There’s a little old lady! She just waved…’ And the front door opened and a bent old woman stumbled out, greeting Ginny in a voluble, excitable volley of French.

Briek stepped forwards and shook the lady’s hand and replied.

‘She thinks you’re Rozella!’ Gabrielle giggled. ‘She’s a bit blind.’

Briek beckoned them indoors. It was a tight squeeze once everyone had filed inside. Hermione glanced around the small, low-ceilinged room with the remains of a fire smouldering in the fireplace. It was in a state of considerable disarray and definitely non-magical: designed for Muggle living.

The old lady was offering coffee and hunting down biscuits for her unexpected guests. Everyone was refusing and making polite conversation.

Hermione spotted a mussed-up crown of light brown curls stuck out from under a blue blanket on a couch in the corner. The small body heaved in soft, sighing breaths… fast asleep.

She edged closer and looked down at Magda Malfoy.

Her eyes were scrunched tight and her white cheek was stained with the rosy heat of sleep… Hermione imagined her skin was soft as down. She looked peaceful, clutching a worn, white rabbit toy. A tiny child... Hermione thought. Smaller than Rose at the same age.

Hermione was so busy staring she barely noticed Draco standing next to her. She could feel his whiteness encircling her, trying to grasp onto something…

‘It’s okay,’ she whispered. ‘She’s just a child... And you’re a wonderful father, Draco.’ She wouldn’t have said that a few months ago, but she truly believed that now.

‘She looks very contented,’ he said, and his whole body seemed to sigh with relief.

Hermione smiled warmly and her eyes moved from Draco to the neatly tucked-in child, then back to their disorderly surroundings; a jarring contrast.

Drawers were flung open, contents tipped out and scattered, a cupboard door was hanging loose, a pitcher of water had fallen over, its contents spilling onto a pile of crumpled linens on the floor…

Her face fell. Something violent and angry had happened here.

Hermione looked again at the slumbering child, sleeping very heavily, despite the loud conversation and Briek’s bellowing laughter.
She picked up and smelt an empty, tin beaker on a table beside the couch.

‘What are you doing?’ Draco asked quizzically.

Ginny came over, grinning. ‘She’s lovely!’ she said in hushed tones.

‘No need to whisper. She won’t hear you,’ Hermione said, lips pursed. She passed the beaker to Ginny who recoiled.

‘Blimey! That’s strong!’

‘Isn’t it?’ Hermione said crossly, looking daggers at the old woman. ‘Who IS she?’

‘A lady from the village. Rozella’s been travelling a fair bit these past few days so this old lady’s been babysitting.’ Ginny put down the beaker with a scornful shake of the head. ‘I can’t imagine Rozella would be happy if she thought Magda was being drugged!’

Draco sniffed the beaker and looked alarmed. ‘Should we say something?’

‘No… she’ll be fine. But it’s lazy,’ Ginny sneered. ‘She’s going now…’ And sure enough, the old lady was tripping down the path away from the cottage.

‘She’s an angel,’ Gabrielle said, sitting down at the foot of the couch, gazing soft-eyed at the sleeping child. Magda emitted a little whimper, like a kitten’s mew, and moved onto her back, her little pink mouth open.

‘She’s been given a sleeping draught,’ Hermione said archly to Harry and Briek. ‘A very strong one.’

‘They’re moving house later and Rozella’s been packing… maybe she didn’t want Magda to get upset by it all?’ Briek suggested brightly.

‘So now we’ve found Magda,’ Harry said, businesslike, ‘we don’t all need to hang around waiting for Rozella to get back…’ He looked at Draco. ‘This is a private family matter… so I suggest we all clear out and let Draco… and Hermione get on with it.’

But the moment he stopped talking there was a shrill cry from the woods. Briek and Harry instantly hastened out, followed by Hermione.

They squinted down the pathway towards the dazzling light from the lake that glinted between green mossy tree-trunks further down the path, but there was no sign of the source of the cry.

‘That was a woman,’ Harry said, his face tight with consternation.

‘The old woman…’ Briek added. ‘Maybe she’s fallen?’ He was already sprinting away from the cottage.

‘Hang on,’ Harry said, chasing after him.

‘What was that?’ Draco asked. He looked pale and waxy in the shadows cast by the trees overhanging the cottage.

‘They think the old woman fell…’

Draco grasped her wrist as she turned to go back inside. ‘Hermione…’ he hissed. ‘Something doesn’t feel right.’
His eyes were large and dark. Fearful.

‘What – what do you mean?’ He was right, though… She could sense it.

Draco looked past her towards Ginny and Gabrielle cooing over the sleeping child … then back to Hermione. He licked his lower lip, torn.

‘Why's Rozella moving away?’ he said quietly.

‘Without telling her father…’ Hermione added, filling in the blanks.

‘Something – or someone’s spooked her,’ Draco asserted. ‘So I reckon we take off – with Magda – and then get a message to Rozella and explain what we’ve done.’

‘But isn’t that kidnapping?’

‘I’m her father… And there’s – there’s something we’re not seeing here.’ He pushed his hand through his hair and sighed. ‘I can feel it…’

Hermione placed her hand on his arm and was surprised to feel him vibrating.

His eyes flicked to the lake gleaming below them. ‘Where are they?’

‘They went to help the old lady.’

Draco snapped his eyes back to Hermione… To her surprise, he laid a hand on her shoulder and kissed her on the forehead. ‘I’m going to see where they’ve got to. Stay with Magda, Beautiful.’

Gabrielle looked up. ‘Where’s everyone gone?’

Hermione scanned the small cottage for clues. What was Rozella really up to? This ‘move’ was clearly driven by urgency.

She noticed a picture above the fireplace was askew and moved to fix it, her foot stumbling against the grate. A flurry of hot grey ash flew upwards… she battened it away and in so doing a curled-up photo in the grate caught her attention.

She quickly pulled it from the ashes and scooped it clean… Rozella standing next to a small, plastic slide. Magda beaming at the top, her round cheeks dimpled and her eyes slitted in merriment.

Ginny looked at her, a worried frown on her face. ‘What is it?’

Hermione showed her the photo.

‘There’s a tunnel from here to the château,’ Hermione said, suddenly churning with fear. ‘Take Magda and get to the car… Don’t wait for us.’

Gabrielle stood up slowly from the couch. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I don’t know.’ She locked eyes with Ginny who nodded.

‘Come on, Gabby… let’s find this tunnel,’ she said in commanding tones.

Hermione turned and ran.
Her heart was thumping loudly in her chest and she was panting – short, harsh pants. Yes, something was very wrong… Why had Rozella tried to burn a photo of herself and the child she no doubt loved? What was she trying to hide?

She heard voices by the lake… The three men talking to a woman.

Rozella… Tall and elegant, her red hair gleaming in the sun. Even from this distance, Hermione could see she was as charming as she’d remembered.

But there was something strange about her… a slight glitching shimmer…

Rather than join them, Hermione struck right and scooted around the back of the tower. She was familiar with this terrain. She’d already traversed a version of it in the painting which held Katya captive. The tower was less imposing, a brighter, cleaner proposition in reality – although choked by straggling skeins of ivy, the stones threaded by weaving vines. She jogged to the other side of the lake and faced the men. Rozella had her back to her.

That peculiar shimmer… it was still there… disrupting her reflection… Indeed, it was as though Rozella’s reflection had been transposed from the water into reality.

Staring at her juddering form made Hermione’s eyes ache…

Rozella turned to laugh at something Briek had said… in profile, her features were aquiline-sharp, rather like Gunter’s … But there was a peculiar doubling effect, a hovering overlay, and for a heart-stopping moment Hermione felt like a second face had wheeled around and spotted her…

Draco was gazing across the lake and his face was stiff with concern. He kept rubbing his eye and his hand was gripping his wand. What was he trying to tell her?

Her eyes! That was it! She leaned over to check her reflection in the lake.

Her eyes were a thick, glossy black – and they were looking straight at Rozella, her long, auburn hair entangled in the reeds and the roots of the water lilies that coated much of the lake’s surface. Her face was grey, her eyes staring and her mouth gaped open… likely dead before she hit the water, Hermione thought mournfully.

She lifted her eyes to the opposite bank, cold dread trickling through her.

Sylvestra…

Polyjuice, Hermione thought - and possibly a glamour. But once she’d cut the deal with Dolores – a deal to hand over Magda in exchange for Katya - it wasn't necessary to impersonate Rozella anymore - and now poor Rozella was dead in the lake. Maybe that was why she'd been forced to ‘touch up’ with colour-magic? Their arrival had surprised her.

Hermione could now sense Sylvestra’s cloying blankness… scenting her presence.

She took a deep breath and summoned a powerful surge of colour-magic - and was about to let rip when a violent force suddenly slashed the lake in two and a glistening grey shield sprang up… mounting higher and higher…

Sylvestra flung Harry backwards with a brisk twist of her wrist and Briek crumpled to the ground, clutching his arm and squealing in pain.
The moment the lake’s waters lurched, Draco sprinted towards the château - and then vanished. Maybe he’d Apparated to the cottage to protect Magda?

The shield continued to climb but there was still a gap. Hermione knew she had to attack now, before it sealed... Gritting her teeth, she unleashed a scalding blast of colour-magic in Sylvestra’s direction - but to her surprise the magic slipped off her and slithered away… NOT NORMAL, she thought furiously...

Sylvestra burst into loud, pealing laughter. ‘Is that all you’ve got?’ she shouted. Her voice sounded bubbly, blurred, as though she was yelling underwater.

‘Okay. Let’s do this the old-fashioned way,’ Hermione hissed, drawing her wand – to Sylvestra’s mocking hilarity - and throwing a string of powerful shield-busting spells in Sylvestra’s direction… but the shield was impervious to assault. And Hermione was sweating so hard with the effort and with heart-pumping fear, she could barely hold her wand.

She targeted the shield again and again, growing ever more fraught...

‘Your silly little spells can’t touch me,’ Sylvestra jeered as she rapidly moved towards the tower. Any moment now and she’d Apparate to her side of the lake, Hermione felt sure…

She glanced at Briek, writhing in pain and Harry on the ground beside him, eyes closed. Harry. She needed Harry in play…

Distract her, she thought, and her eyes were drawn to the tower.

Stepping back from the banks of the lake, Hermione levelled a momentous Expulso at the folly, trembling with the effort.

A thunderous explosion tore through the front of the tower and masonry, stone and a heavy steel girder collapsed with a tumultuous splash into the lake. The water unexpectedly surged and Sylvestra shrieked - the shield wavering as her concentration faltered.

‘Rennervate!’ Hermione screeched, targeting Harry.

Harry’s eyes flipped open as he jolted into consciousness.

Hermione targeted the tower again and this time its conical roof shuddered and creaked and a flurry of tiles span through the air, raining down onto the ground like brick-sized bullets from the sky.

Sylvestra scrambled to conjure another shield to resist the hail of projectiles flying towards her – but was thrown backwards by a pounding spell from Harry. She circled high into the air, flailing feet over head, and would have tumbled into the seething water behind her…. but with a guttural roar she managed to upright herself, suspended over the lake, and somersaulted Harry backwards with a wave of her hand.

There was a swirling blur of whitish-grey as she manically retracted her shield, wrapping it around her… but Hermione finally saw her chance – the chink in Sylvestra’s armour - and was about to strike when Draco burst out of the water and scythed the air with a powerful Confringo.

The spell snatched at Sylvestra through a small crack in the shield – not enough to destroy or injure - but her glorious mane of hair burst into flames and she screamed in pain, gyrating wildly.

She lashed out with an almighty burst of colour-magic, transforming the lake beneath her into a
foaming froth. The ground beneath the water reared upwards, mulching the lake into a filthy, muddied stew.

Hermione gaped in horror as Rozella’s body, tangled in weeds and mud, was flung into the broiling swamp…

DRACO… Where was Draco? She felt faint with panic…

‘I’m here,’ he said… soaked but unscathed beside her. They targeted Sylvestra’s shield together, battering it relentlessly until there were discernible cracks opening up as Sylvestra yowled, frantically trying to extinguish the flames engulfing her head.

‘You fucking WHORE!’ she screeched at Hermione, face deranged, her voice booming. ‘You’re DEAD!’

But Harry had clambered to his feet, fwooper wand raised, and his face was consumed by darkness. Sylvestra’s mouth fell open in horror at the sight of him – and she vanished and the shield disintegrated, falling into the lake like fluorescent blue rain.

Hermione instantly Apparated to Briek’s side. He was shaking uncontrollably and drooling from the mouth… a chain of scorching-hot golden scales was creeping up his arm, almost reaching his shoulder.

Hermione grabbed his hand, flinching at the intense heat that met her touch, and speedily pushed her colour inside him… his arm quivered and he screwed up his eyes in agony. But the scales were peeling away… and he gradually calmed.

‘Mon Dieu,’ he moaned, ‘that’s one scary witch … du diable!’

‘I think she IS the devil, actually,’ Draco growled.

They could hear a child crying from the direction of the château.

‘Rozella…’ Hermione murmured, casting a mournful look at her body, strafed with choking weeds and algae, as it gradually sank into the slurried mud…

‘Let me deal with her,’ Harry said. ‘Get to the car.’

XXX

Gabrielle passed Magda to Hermione. The child twisted her arms around Hermione’s neck and lay her head on her shoulder, hiccupping as she sobbed quietly…

‘I think we’ll come back with you to Britain,’ Briek said, trying to muster a smile. ‘I’ve just landed on that crazy woman’s radar and there’s safety in numbers.’

‘But what about poor Bernard?’ Gabrielle said sorrowfully. ‘Someone needs to go and break the news…’

‘Does he have to know his daughter’s dead?’ Briek said tremulously. ‘No parent should ever have to hear something like that… it’s unnatural.’

‘But he’ll notice when she doesn’t visit,’ Ginny said.

‘I’ll speak to him,’ Draco said. He looked at Magda nestling against Hermione and gently stroked her hair. She could sense warm affection coursing through him. Magda’s cheek was wet with tears
against Hermione’s face, but she was quiet now. ‘Will you come with me?’ he asked Hermione, almost timidly.

‘Of course I will.’

‘I won’t say Rozella died… I’ll say she had to go away - somewhere amazing – and she asked me to look after Magda while she’s gone.’

‘He’ll want to see her, too,’ Hermione said. ‘She’s his family.’

‘And he still will…’

‘I’ll come in with you,’ Gabrielle said. ‘I can translate.’

Harry ran towards them with his phone pressed to his ear. He quickly killed the call he’d been on. ‘I’ve got Francoise coming with a team to clear this up,’ he said, looking grey and devastated. ‘Let’s get out of here.’

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“NEVER TEAR US APART” by INXS

“HEROES” by DAVID BOWIE

“FALLEN ALIEN” by FKA TWIGS

“JAG VET EN DEJLIG ROSA” by ROBYN

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Chapter Summary

Katya poses a puzzle...

56. With a Bare Bodkin

‘Okay, I’ve checked her for tracking spells and we’ve nothing to worry about,’ Bill said, bouncing Magda on his knee.

Magda stared around the living-room at the smiley faces gawking at her and promptly burst into tears.

‘Dear, dear!’ Gabrielle cooed, scooping the child into her arms. Magda’s face instantly lightened. She was at ease with Gabrielle, Hermione thought.

Draco was nervous about Scorpius’s reaction to his new sister so the children were staying at The Blue House tonight. Proper introductions (and explanations) would wait until tomorrow.

‘Come on, Draco,’ Harry said, hauling himself off the sofa, ‘let’s get to Tinworth to make those calls.’

‘I’m visiting your parents Monday,’ Bill told Hermione once they’d gone. ‘Beefing up security.’

‘I thought you’d already put in wards?’

‘Not enough for Mr Malfoy’s liking.’

The kitchen door banged and Thelonious and Elizaveta appeared.

‘Hey! Good to see you,’ Thelonious said, embracing Hermione.

‘And you, too. Sounds like we all had a hairy time getting out of Egypt.’

Thelonious blew out his cheeks. ‘We were accused of child-smuggling at the border! But Hassan got us through in the end.’

‘So CUTE!’ Elizaveta cried, advancing on Magda with a huge beaming smile. Magda eyed her curiously, then pointed at Elizaveta’s gleaming silver teeth, spluttering into sweet, tinkling laughter like a wind-chime wafting in the breeze.

‘I’m here to make Portkeys,’ Elizaveta told Hermione.

‘With all the constant tripping about, Portkeys have become a big issue,’ Bill said solemnly. 'And Thelonious is tied up with the corundum.'

Despite her smiley demeanour, Elizaveta’s eyes were pink and bloodshot.

‘Elizaveta… I’m sorry about your friends,’ Hermione said.
'We will avenge them,’ she replied hoarsely.

‘Leila saved that wee baby’s life – Arlene’s child?’ Bill added.

‘Tuyen is excellent healer in her homeland,’ Elizaveta said. ‘She and that kooky Muggle, Ziff, shop for favourite herbs.’ She flashed her silvery smile. ‘All will be well…’

XXX

Hermione and Ginny were making tea in the kitchen when Draco and Harry returned.

‘We were discussing Sylvestra,’ Draco said. ‘All this time she didn’t give a shit about her sister… and suddenly she’s desperate to set her free. Why?’

‘We think this proves Katya knows where Anna’s missing papers are,’ Harry asserted.

Hermione poured everyone a cup of tea, buying a moment to think.

‘There were papers in the Russian doll she opened at Gringott’s,’ said Bill.

‘Exactly,’ said Draco. ‘We need that Matryoshka.’

Hermione gave him a cup of tea. ‘The thirteenth rose-charm might be in there, too.’

‘Wouldn’t be surprised… Would fit this whole fucking farce of drip-feeding me the roses one at a time,’ Draco said acerbically.

‘Maybe she wanted to see if she could trust you?’ Ginny suggested.

‘Control me, more like,’ Draco grumbled.

‘When you think about it… the fact Sylvestra is so desperate to get hold of Anna’s papers is a good sign,’ Hermione mused. ‘The reason all these mad bastards have been desperate to find her work is because she probably found a quick way to make Dark Flux which doesn’t involve child abuse…’

‘Which means they’re running out of supplies,’ Draco said, following her line of thought, ‘because we’ve found and secured their sources – the children.’

‘Although… it’s not all good news…’

‘It never is, Hermione…’ Draco said in droll tones.

‘Because Anna’s methodology would also enable Dark Flux to be mass-produced.’

‘You certain this Matryoshka isn’t at Malfoy Manor, Draco?’ Harry asked.

‘Positive.’

Briek sauntered into the kitchen, stretching and yawning. ‘I’m getting old,’ he moaned.

‘Perfect timing,’ Bill said, handing him a mug of tea.

‘The only Matryoshka I can think of is the one at The Leaky Cauldron,’ Draco chimed in.

‘There’s nothing magical about it,’ Hermione said. ‘It’s just a money box. I’ve checked.’

‘And that’s exactly what I thought about the one Katya brought to Gringott’s,’ Bill said. ‘Until she
did that fancy blood-magic thing.’

‘When Katya came to London to get some money, she brought this Matryoshka to give to Draco,’ Briek said pensively. ‘She probably stayed at The Leaky Cauldron and left it there.’

‘Maybe she knew she was being followed and panicked?’ Hermione suggested.

‘Let’s steal it!’ Briek declared boldly. ‘I’ll do it if you like?’ He gleefully rubbed his hands in anticipation of a jolly adventure, but Ginny hooked her arm around him and pushed him onto a seat at the table.

‘You’re far too well-known. Don’t be silly,’ she said.

‘We’re all a bit nervous visiting Diagon Alley these days,’ Fleur said dismally. ‘Too many Blasters.’

‘What about Ron?’ Ginny cried. ‘He’s not public enemy number one…’

‘I doubt he’d be willing,’ Hermione said.

‘Willing to do WHAT?’ came a familiar voice from the doorway leading into the sitting-room. Hermione spun around to see Ron, leaning against the doorjamb, arms tightly crossed and a frown etched sharply onto his face.

‘Didn’t hear you come in,’ Bill said, looking sheepish.

‘Front door’s open. Didn’t know you were here,’ Ron groused, staring straight at Draco.

‘Well. I am,’ Draco said wearily.

Percy peeled away from his brother’s shadow and nodded to Hermione with chill cordiality. He regarded Draco with unalloyed suspicion.

‘Ron,’ Harry said impatiently, ‘we need a favour, mate.’

‘Who does?’ he asked suspiciously.

‘We all do,’ Harry said. He led Ron away from the kitchen and Ginny followed, popping back into the kitchen a minute later to summon Percy.

Ten minutes later, they reappeared.

‘Right,’ Ron said, still looking surly. ‘Percy and I will pop to The Leaky Cauldron for a quick pint and sneak this bloody money-box thing.’

Percy bit his lip nervously. ‘I hope it doesn’t have a caterwauling charm.’

Ron almost neighed with frustration. ‘You’re either in or you’re out, Percy! This could be the most exciting thing you ever do in your life.’

‘Not if I get caught!’ But he followed Ron out of the kitchen.

XXX

‘Too easy,’ Ron muttered, staring at the brightly-coloured Matryoshka now standing upright on the
kitchen table. ‘It’s like it was waiting for us.’

‘No, it wasn’t,’ Hermione tutted. ‘You’re being paranoid.’

Bill unrolled a cloth onto the table unveiling an array of silver instruments. He proceeded to tap the Matryoshka at various points on its corpulent, china body and then placed his ear against the doll, eyes screwed up in concentration.

The kitchen fell silent in hushed anticipation.

‘Well?’ Fleur asked.

‘It’s just a money-box.’

Gabrielle hovered behind Bill with Magda in her arms.

Magda’s pudgy little hand darted out from Gabrielle’s clasp and knocked the Matryoshka over. She giggled as it rolled rapidly across the table.

The Matryoshka stopped and stared blankly at Draco…

‘Creepy as fuck,’ Draco said under his breath, barely able to look at the doll’s wide-eyed gaze. It looked sorrowful and shocked in equal measure.

‘It wants you,’ Ron said, a taunting expression on his face. He sat down at the table facing Draco with the air of a man settling in for some light entertainment.

Draco threw him a furious glance and picked up the doll, smashing it hard against the table. He instantly yelped in pain, clutching his hand. ‘Fucking Flagrante!’

‘You made it angry!’ Ron smirked.

Draco steeled himself to try again but this time the doll stuck to him. He winced as sizzling white flashes shot up his arm.

‘Jesus fuck!’ he cried, desperately trying to shake it off.

Harry karate-chopped the doll from Draco’s grasp and Hermione frantically flicked the doll away with her wand. It spun wildly, accompanied by a chorus of high-pitched squeals of delight from Magda, before shooting across the table and crashing into Draco’s stomach. He slumped over, winded, and the doll tumbled to the floor.

Hermione bent down to pick it up. ‘No! Don’t touch it!’ Draco shouted, catapulting it onto the table with colour-magic. ‘I - I think I know what it wants… Katya used blood-magic, didn’t she?’

Bill gave Draco a regretful look and plucked a small blade from his tools collection. ‘A pin-prick should do.’

Draco pierced the top of his thumb and a drop of blood fell onto the Matryoshka. For a split second, its mouth twitched.

‘Come on,’ Draco growled in frustration. ‘OPEN!’

‘I think it wants more,’ Briek said in sad tones.

Draco squeezed his thumb and smeared another drop onto its face. Its expression shuddered, then
‘Maybe ANY blood will do,’ Hermione suggested, reaching for the blade, but Draco twisted her arm away and glared.

‘She wants me.’ He turned to Gabrielle. ‘Do you mind taking Magda out of the room?’

The moment she was gone, Draco slashed the blade across his palm. A thick welt of blood exploded into his hand.

‘What are you doing?’ Hermione gasped.

‘Giving it what it wants,’ he said, clenching his fist and trailing blood over the doll. The Matryoshka’s mouth gaped open and shut like a fish.

‘Not enough,’ he murmured.

He looked Hermione in the eye. ‘I’m going to need a healing spell after this…’

‘After wha—? SHIT!’ Hermione shrilled, abruptly standing up, as Draco cut deep into his arm and a sheet of blood flowed downwards, coiling its course to his fingertips and falling onto the Matryoshka. Draco closed his eyes and allowed his blood to spill…

Fleur’s hand flew to her mouth in horror. ‘Oh my god! It’s like it’s eating it!’

Hermione could barely watch and was pacing up and down behind Draco… Even Ron had turned a sickly shade of green.

‘Sorry. Hate blood…’ Briek mumbled and stalked out of the room.

‘Its mouth… it’s getting bigger,’ Bill said.

‘Nope… Mouth closing again…’ Harry groaned.

Draco nodded. ‘Just a little bit more…’

He furtively glanced at Hermione over his shoulder and gouged the knife deeper, flinching in pain… Deep crimson blood flooded down his arm and the Matryoshka’s mouth opened wider and wider, gulping his blood, until its face was a gaping hole.

Draco quickly plunged his hand inside the doll’s cavernous mouth and pulled out a sheet of parchment, flinging it onto the table… ‘That’s it…’ he said, his voice dropping to a disappointed whisper as the hole instantly closed.

He fell back onto his chair, breathing heavily. Almost tearful with fury at the Matryoshka, Hermione wrapped her arms around him, not caring that Ron was watching, hawk-eyed, and then drew her wand to heal his wounds with Vulnera Sanentur.

‘You look a bit… woozy,’ Fleur said, handing him a pumpkin juice. ‘You need this.’

Harry snatched up the parchment. ‘Mind if I see if this was worth it?’

Draco wafted his uninjured arm at him. ‘Go ahead!’ He gazed tenderly at Hermione, her head bent close to his, as she concentrated hard on healing him.

Harry rolled his lips inwards and stared so hard at the parchment in his hand he was cross-eyed.
‘It’s a poem.’

‘A POEM?’ Ron sneered.

‘Read it out then!’ Ginny urged.

Harry actually blushed. ‘I don’t think I can…’ he said, looking pained, passing it to Fleur.

Her eyes widened in surprise when she glanced down.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake!’ Bill said, reaching across Harry and seizing it. ‘What a bunch of fannies.’ He cleared his throat and held the parchment at arm’s length.

‘Fucking hell, Draco! Did your wife write this?’ He was smothering a laugh.

‘Just read the fucker…’

Bill assumed a serious air… and read in a surprisingly lyrical and declamatory baritone.

‘You kissed me at the last
and there I remain.
My soul in your hands
no more will I blame.
Now you have shown me
how the inconstant heart
can change and embrace me
till death us do part.
My words will be spoken
once more in your ears.
The sound of my voice
will move you to tears.
The last place we kissed.
The place we kissed last
such gifts I bestow you
from a long distant past.
Be wise and be well
till we three are one.
Our love to reign brighter
than the hot, soaring sun.

My Prince, my heart, my joy, my song

This fair maid will love you, through all the years long…'

Bill gazed around at everyone's stunned faces and placed the poem on the table. 'And... there you have it.'

'That's DREADFUL!' Ginny eventually said, her voice ringing out into the silent horror.

'It’s not the best poem, but she tried…’ Harry said, trying to be kind.

Hermione was too distraught to speak. Nothing about Anna’s Dark Flux formula or Ephraim’s plans or the thirteenth rose… NOTHING!

‘But what does it mean?’ Percy asked.

‘Absolutely fuck all. It’s just… mush,’ Draco said with a disparaging look at his shredded arm, although Hermione had stopped the bleeding and the skin was beginning to knit together.

‘Strange little couplet-thingy at the end,’ Bill noted. ‘A distinctive change in metre.’

‘It’s obviously referring to Malfoy’s rampant infidelity while they were married,’ Ginny opined. ‘She’s forgiving him because by bleeding all over a china doll he’s shown his true love for her…’ She sniffed loudly. ‘Something like that…’

‘Who’s the three are one?’ Harry asked, jabbing his finger at the text. ‘You guys and Magda?’

‘But not Scorpius,’ Draco scowled.

Briek had crept back into the room now that Draco wasn’t bleeding.

‘My words will be spoken once more in your ears, the sound of my voice will move you to tears,’ he read aloud with dramatic emphasis. ‘Looks like she thinks there’ll be an emotional reunion, Draco,’ he said with a wry smile. ‘Parvati and Henrik have arrived,’ he added by way of information. ‘They’re making friends with Young Madam in the living-room.’

‘Hold on!’ Hermione exclaimed, swooping onto the parchment. ‘This is actually an instruction!’ She turned to Draco. ‘She’s telling you where to find the thirteenth charm! HER voice that will bring you to tears, via the necklace. And you’ll find it in the last place you kissed…Where did you last kiss your wife?’

Draco looked at her in startled panic. ‘I don’t know…’

‘You have to. Think!’

‘I am doing… and I honestly don’t know. I’m not just saying it.’

‘Malfoy Manor?’ Bill said.

‘Too easy,’ Harry muttered.

‘Think what you did the last time you saw her,’ Ginny said staring at Draco with fierce intensity. ‘Where did you go?’
Draco’s eyes darted from side to side. ‘I – I can’t think.’

‘You went to Hogsmeade,’ Hermione said. ‘You told me you went there the day before she left.’

Draco wrinkled his brow in confusion. ‘I DID?’ He thought a moment. ‘Yes. That’s right. I had a meeting. But she came, too… We had afternoon tea at that horrid little teashop.’

‘Madam Puddifoot’s,’ Harry sneered.

‘Didn’t it get burned down?’ Ron said.

‘Unscathed,’ Harry said with an unmistakable tone of regret.

‘Did you kiss her?’ Hermione asked.

There was a peculiar haunted look in Draco’s eyes. ‘I don’t think so. Nothing you’d call a PROPER kiss…’ He considered this a moment. ‘Maybe a quick peck on the cheek? I had to rush off!’

‘Poor kid,’ Briek sighed. ‘So her grand romantic memory is you rushing off to a meeting…’

‘That’s why I doubt it’s that!’

‘Hey!’ Henrik guffawed as he lolloped into the kitchen and pulled Hermione into an all-encompassing bear hug followed by a round of mutual back slaps with Draco and Harry.

He was followed by Parvati, holding Magda aloft. ‘She’s gorgeous,’ she said approvingly to Draco.

Ron had edged his way around the table and was close to the doorway, poised to leave, but Magda reached out and entangled her hand in his hair, jerking him backwards.

‘She must like me,’ he hissed.

‘She likes the colour of your hair,’ Ginny said, ‘don’t think you’re special.’

‘I hear stuff in my job,’ Percy said to Draco as he rose to leave, ‘and I can keep an eye on the Floo Network.’

‘That would be great.’

‘Mr Golowitz is putting a fair few backs up, acting like he owns the place,’ Percy said disapprovingly. ‘He forgets there’s an election to win before he’s officially Minister.’

‘Well, let’s hope he never is.’

‘Go, Go Creevey,’ Harry drawled, pumping the air with sarcastic lassitude.

‘I will help this Creevey chap with his campaign,’ Briek said thoughtfully. ‘Is he a charismatic and interesting fellow?’

Everyone avoided looking at each other.

‘He’s… very nice,’ Hermione said, eventually.

‘Ah... I see…’ Briek remarked, gauging the feeling of the room. ‘Then I will suggest a campaigning roadshow to him. Music, lights and lots of fun!… A bit of PIZZAZZ!’

XXX
'Houblon,' Magda kept saying mournfully.

‘Do you think that’s what she called Rozella?’ Hermione suggested sadly.

Magda was wedged between them in bed and her legs kept thrashing against Draco.

‘She’s a right Bucking Bronco,’ he muttered.

Magda pushed herself up with a heavy sigh and then flopped across them, her head tucked under Hermione’s chin and her legs splayed onto Draco’s stomach.

She immediately fell asleep.

Draco turned to Hermione and started to laugh.

‘What is it?’

‘What Briek called her… Young Madam!’

They gazed at each other, smiling.

XXX

The garden at The Blue House was overrun by teams of children racing to deploy a Portable Swamp while dropping Decoy Detonators in the fastest possible time.

George Weasley had plundered his shop’s stock and devised a ‘game’ codenamed “Castle Keep” to teach the children how to defend The Blue House from potential invaders. He’d enlisted Angelina as his ‘glamorous assistant’.

Hermione was seriously impressed by the organisation and commitment of the children to the cause of “Castle Keep”, up until the moment when George pulled out a box of Wildfire Whizbangs and gifted each child a set of Shieldwear and Alfred accidentally pursued Molly across the lawn with a particularly ferocious Thestral Thrasher.

Luckily the rain came and everyone moved indoors. A picnic-meeting scheduled by Harry was relocated to the large, old-fashioned kitchen.

Draco looked worried leaving Magda in the ‘nursery’ on the top floor, where a thoroughly over-excited Gwen was currently in charge.

‘She’s so damned scrumptious,’ Gwen gushed, bonding quickly with Gabrielle who’d volunteered to share childcare duties.

‘Do you think she’ll be alright on her own?’ Draco asked Hermione.

Hermione smiled indulgently. ‘She’ll be fine. She’s got a band of adoring fans catering to her every whim!’

Rose quickly decided Magda was her new favourite thing in the world but Scorpius was a little nonplussed.

Draco took him aside to gently explain the situation.

‘What did you say?’ Hermione asked.
‘I said Katya was her mother and we were looking after Magda while she was away. But he doesn’t really remember Katya… I think he’s blocked Malfoy Manor and everything about it.’

‘Hardly surprising…’

XXX

Over thirty adults squeezed into the kitchen. Half were tightly jammed around the long table with the remainder parked on any available surface or sitting cross-legged on the flagstone floor.

Ron was perched on the coal-scuttle next to the fireplace. He gave Hermione an icy half-smile when they entered the room...

Harry, Bill and Gunter had come to Folkvangr this morning to discuss ‘core strategies’ as Harry had phrased it in true Auror HQ-speak. He looked keen to kick off proceedings, but Draco was chatting to Ziff… and Neville frantically beckoned Hermione to the kitchen table.

‘We need to talk about this damned election,’ he said in hushed tones. ‘Dennis doesn’t stand a chance.’

‘He doesn’t need to WIN,’ Hermione whispered in return. ‘We just want Ephraim to lose… there’s another candidate, remember? Merriman?’

‘Should be YOU standing. Ephraim’s terrified of you,’ Neville countered. ‘Look!’ He thrust a parchment into her hand.

‘Why did he write to you?’

‘Maybe he thinks we bonded over our little chats while I was in prison?’

‘What’s up?’ Draco asked. He read Ephraim’s note over her shoulder.

‘Make sure Hermione doesn’t stand against me. She has made enemies and would be too exposed. I trust you to keep this confidential.’

Draco scrunched the parchment into a tight little ball. ‘A threat… When did you get this, Neville?’

‘Late last night.’

‘Right! Everybody settle down!’ Harry roared.

There was a general commotion and scuttling of chairs and people hauling themselves onto the worktop at the far end of the kitchen. Ziff was the last one standing and opted to squeeze himself into the sink – his legs dangling over the side.

‘We’ve a lot to talk about…’ Harry said, ‘and we’re here to answer any questions as best we can.’ He turned to Draco. ‘Are you okay doing this?’

‘Sure…’ Draco said, looking a little flustered, ‘but first… Troyanda13 didn’t need to come and help us. But they did, and we’re extremely grateful.’ He nodded to Gunter and Niko standing alongside Harry and then lifted his eyes to Oleg and Elizaveta on the opposite side of the room. ‘And now they’ve lost people they loved… It’s hard to know what to say other than we’re truly sorry this has happened to you…’

‘This is our fight, too, Draco,’ Gunter stoutly declared. ‘We need to make sure they didn’t die in vain.’
Draco nodded. ‘You’re right. And the sad truth is we’ll all suffer losses along the way. Some of us in this room will die…’

Everyone stared at him in stunned silence.

‘And if we ourselves don’t die, then we might have to experience an even greater sorrow… we might survive but lose someone we love and be forced to live with that forever.’

Hermione couldn’t help but look at the Weasleys. Molly was staring fixedly at Draco and George was looking down at his hands on the kitchen table.

‘So, if you want to step back, that’s fine… There’s no shame. No judgement. Because this won’t be easy. Or safe…’

Draco scanned the room as though expecting people to stand up and leave. But nobody did.

‘The problem is we’re facing three enemies – and ALL of them have to be defeated. Most of you here haven’t come across Salvedra – and I hope it stays that way because he’s a fucking abomination.’ Draco’s face darkened as he spoke. ‘This is an extremely powerful, dark wizard - and that alone makes him dangerous. But this is amplified by what he preaches, what he stands for, who he influences. Salvedra is a supremacist who wants to ethnically cleanse Muggles and Muggle-borns. He probably invented the term Mudblood, so it’s hardly surprising that Voldemort was a fan.’

‘Voldemort?’ Molly shrilled.

‘Yes, Mrs Weasley… The fact is, he has to be stopped. His voice has to be silenced... Now Hermione has a few ideas on how we maybe deal with him, which she’ll explain in a bit - so let’s move on to someone who doesn’t need any introduction. And that’s his star pupil and proxy - our very own Mr Golowitz.’

‘Bastard,’ Neville muttered. There was a ripple of laughter around the room.

‘An excellent summary, Neville,’ Draco said, grinning sarcastically. ‘We all of us know him for what he really is... a nasty, bullying shit promoting policies and ideas that are dangerously divisive. He’s the last person who should ever be our Minister for Magic!’ He threw a smile in Dennis’s direction. ‘Which is why we’re grateful to Dennis for having the balls to stand up to him.’

Everyone cheered Dennis until he was scarlet with embarrassment.

‘But of course our concerns about Ephraim go much deeper… Innocent Muggles are being murdered because he’s made it his life’s work to bankroll and develop a racist weapon and build a network of trained killers…’ He gazed around the room as he spoke. ‘And his grand idea - his Right to Exist bullshit - is a fucking suicide note. It would bring us into conflict with the Muggles and we WOULD LOSE… The wizarding community would be wiped out.’

Hermione couldn’t help but notice a few of the witches and wizards in the room looked decidedly uncomfortable at this.

‘I’ve got to admit though, sometimes I see where Ephraim’s coming from. It’s tiring having to hide. To be separate… The older I get, the more I hate that... Because Muggles aren’t our enemy. Fundamentally, we’re the same, wanting to live well and at peace.’

He gestured to Henrik and Ziff. ‘And believe me, without these guys we’d be in a really shit position … They’ve proper fucked Ephraim financially and now he’s in trouble with the Muggle
‘You did that too, Draco,’ Harry said. ‘You destroyed Herb Healing.’

‘But the credit goes to these guys, because this isn’t their fight. They don’t have to be doing this… But I’m glad they are because they’re two of the best blokes I’ve ever known.’

Henrik grinned…

‘But the horrible truth is – magical or Muggle – there’s always going to be dicks who think they’re better than everyone else and want to fuck things up for the sake of their own ego. I should know. I was one of them. And so’s Ephraim and those who follow him.’

Draco paused for breath and regarded everyone suspiciously… ‘Why isn’t anyone interrupting me?’

‘Because we can’t get a word in edgeways,’ Henrik said, prompting laughter.

‘Okay, so I’ve painted a pretty miserable picture of where we’re at,’ Draco rejoined once the laughter had subsided. ‘What the fuck are we doing about it all? How do we kill off Ephraim’s morally corrupt ideas? Well, in addition to Dennis’s election campaign, we also have Sub Rosa…’

Agatha Thrussington, looking remarkably well after her potentially lethal encounter with Hulda, threw her arm into the air… ‘Just so you know, Draco, I’m now editor of Sub Rosa – and Tansy’s my deputy.’

Draco gave her a beaming smile. ‘That’s great, Agatha… You’ll do a fantastic job – particularly if you put all those dirty, little secrets you know about people to good use. It’s not just propaganda we need but persuasion…’

He looked around the room. ‘It’s really important, actually, that those of you who haven’t become social outcasts speak to people you know. Inform them… warn them.’ His eye fell on Percy who was sat at the table beside his wife, Audrey, and then moved onto Hannah.

‘I bet there’s a whole bunch of folks who’d happily listen to their favourite landlady…’

‘It can work both ways!’ she assured him with a smile.

‘That’s great. And we need to be sure that we share anything we learn… the tiniest bit of gossip about these fuckers could make all the difference. We need to know where they are, what they’re doing, who they’re talking to or spending time with… We need to be spies.’ He paused a moment… ‘Now, I’ve got a couple of insiders passing me information and Troyanda13 has someone working with Ephraim. But many of you have ways and means to spy, too.’

To Hermione’s surprise, Draco turned to Ron. The whole room appeared to hold its breath as one.

‘I personally think Ron might be one of the most valuable people in this room because Ephraim and his cronies trust him… Trying to hand me over to the Blasters was fucking inspirational,’ Draco said in a tone of cool detachment. ‘And you’re the only person here with eyeballs on Carmichael and the Humpties and the Blasters and the corrupt-as-fuck Aurors who think the sun shines out of Ephraim’s arse.’

Ron cleared his throat. ‘They know I hate you so they tell me everything now.’

Draco’s lips curled into a smile. ‘Fucking marvellous.’
To Hermione’s surprise, Ron blushed a violent puce.

‘Bennet’s one of them... though you probably already know that. Tana’s close to him and she tells me what he’s up to.’

Draco nodded and then wheeled round to Hassan Aktari at the kitchen table.

‘Hassan. We need you to go back to Egypt.’

Hassan’s face buckled. ‘But my son…’

‘…is safe. Courtesy of everyone here at The Blue House and the fucking incredible work they’re doing protecting our children... But we need someone to keep an eye on what’s going on at Akhr Makan.’

Hassan heaved a despairing sigh. ‘But I have people there who can send me information. People I trust…’

‘More than you trust yourself?... You were Aleuyan, Hassan. You know this work better than anyone. You know what needs to be done and how to do it.’

Hassan stared at Draco, a wild look in his eye. Draco waited…

Eventually, Hassan closed his eyes and sighed. ‘Yes, Draco, I go … I will do this thing. But you must promise to safeguard my child.’

‘With my life,’ Draco replied without hesitation. Hassan slightly bowed his head.

‘We have other means to spy - Ziff keeps an eye on the Muggle world and some of us are able to travel between *paintings* and keep a watch that way… But it’s critical we pool information, to be sure we’re making the right decisions at the right time. We need someone people report to, someone to piece everything together… Who’d like to take this on?’

He gazed around the room expectantly.

Arthur put his hand up. ‘Logically, it should be *you*, Draco.’

‘Yeah. You’re already doing the job,’ Neville said. There was a general murmur of agreement.

Draco cast a nervous glance in Ron’s direction. ‘Well, if everyone’s alright about that?’ To Hermione’s relief, Ron nodded.

‘All of this obviously leads to the man himself – to Ephraim and his network. And their ability to carry out Dark Flux attacks… and the good news is – we’re winning.’

‘Doesn’t bloody feel like it,’ said Seamus Finnigan, glowering from the far end of the kitchen table.

‘But we are. Your house is chock-full of children who’ve escaped abuse, being cared for by a bunch of brilliant witches like Arlene and Tuyen and Fleur and Hermione’s amazing cousin, Gwen - all playing “Castle Keep”, which is a fucking brilliant idea by the way, could save lives -’ he nodded at George and Angelina, ‘while we’re cutting off their supply of Dark Flux... They’re running out!’

Hermione saw this hadn’t properly occurred to people. There was a genuine hubbub of excitement.
‘Even Ephraim’s own people - especially those in thrall to Salvedra like his evil fucking daughter - think he’s gone soft.’

‘Are you suggesting we wait for Salvedra’s people to take Ephraim out?’ Thelonious asked.

‘Far from it… Ephraim will always have his wands-for-hire and the bloody Blasters.’

‘Tim says the Muggles want to blow up Malfoy Manor and kill him?’ Ernie shouted from the table. ‘Is that going to happen?’

‘Possibly,’ Draco said with a nonchalant shrug. ‘Though I suspect Harry would rather put him on trial.’ Harry nodded vehemently. ‘But we have to be prepared to take Ephraim down ourselves – and this includes his terrorist network… We need a specialised Trace and Track squad.’ He looked at Thelonious and Henrik. ‘You guys think Asusto’s responsible for these attacks on Muggles and I agree – but there’s others, too… Grimm, Hulda, Selwyn, Josep, probably Troy. And then there’s Ephraim’s Blasters. The truth is, Ephraim and Salvedra are the heads of the organisation, but these folks are their hands – their weapons. We need to neutralise them.’

‘Oleg and I will do this trace and track,’ Elizaveta chirped up.

‘Me too, Draco,’ Henrik said.

‘But you can’t fly,’ Parvati said peevishly. ‘And you haven’t got magic. How would you defend yourself?’

‘I’m more than capable.’

‘… at getting yourself killed!’ Parvati scoffed.

Draco looked between the two and smiled. ‘Parvati…’ he said in soothing tones. ‘Henrik’s a trained hitman.’

‘But he can’t use a wand.’

‘He can use guns…’

Bill shuffled uneasily. ‘Do we really want to go down that route, Draco?’

‘We need to make use of anything that gives us an advantage.’

Harry nodded at Henrik, Oleg and Elizaveta. ‘I’ll work with you guys, if that’s okay… as well as handle the Auror HQ stuff.’

‘Great,’ Draco said, ‘I’ll hand over to Hermione and then Bill, who’s got a bit of housekeeping to talk about… but I just want to say that the most important thing here is we work together, bury our differences… I know this is a bit rich coming from me, but we simply don’t have the time and energy to waste on our personal bullshit anymore. It can’t be tolerated. There’s too much at stake.’

‘Here, Here,’ Arthur Weasley said, and there was a wave of agreement. Ron threw a heated glance in Draco’s direction but quickly looked away when he caught Hermione’s eye.

Draco beckoned her forwards with a smile.

‘So, very briefly… Salvedra,’ she said. ‘We’re going to need a more imaginative approach to dealing with him because I fear wands and guns won’t be enough… Now, I have an idea about what can be done – it involves these special paintings Draco mentioned and it’s a bit wacky and
there’s a few things still need figuring out - but I need a team to be working on this right away.’

Everyone regarded her with interest…

‘The first thing we need is people prepared to steal a few paintings… mainly in France. Harry says he’s happy to lead a team to do that – so volunteers sign up with him please. We’re also going to need a couple of people brilliant at making potions… These special paintings use something called Stypticus Solution. We need to deconstruct that, analyse it and then remake it using our own special recipe. Ideally we need two people prepared to devote a lot of time and effort to this one job.’

‘I’m good at potions,’ Fleur said, looking a little embarrassed to be announcing herself in this manner.

‘She’s VERY good,’ Bill asserted.

‘Brilliant,’ Hermione smiled. ‘Who else?’

‘Ernie,’ Draco said behind her. Ernie’s head shot up and the tips of his ears had turned pink.

‘Me?’ he choked.

‘Yes. You’re a natural. I remember thinking that when we did NEWTS.’

‘Okay.’ Ernie was still crimson. ‘It’d be an honour.’

‘But what about my campaign?’ Dennis said plaintively. ‘You’re my manager.’

‘Oh, I’ll do it,’ Neville said crabbily. ‘You should have just asked me in the first place!’

‘And I’ll help,’ Hannah said in placatory tones. ‘Sounds fun!’

‘Everyone who can do colour-magic will be needed to handle Salvedra,’ Hermione said, ‘but we’ll also need powerful witches and wizards and a secure space to guard paintings. But … these are things we can talk about later…’ She grinned at Bill who clambered to his feet from the floor by the fireplace where he’d been sitting next to Ron.

‘A few domestic matters. I’m handling security and welfare issues,’ Bill said, ‘so any problems, come to me or Kai – who’s happily agreed to work as my able assistant…’ Kai beamed at everybody. ‘I now have more time, obviously.’

Fleur’s face puckered and her eyes fell.

‘What’s happened?’ Hermione asked, alarmed.

‘Gringott’s…’ Ron made a slashing motion across his neck.

‘Oh no,’ Hermione said… Why hadn’t he said anything yesterday?

‘We’ll cope,’ Fleur sighed.

‘Any financial needs from any quarter,’ Draco butted in, ‘please speak to Ziff or Robert – Hermione’s Dad. They’ll sort you out.’

‘With YOUR money?’ Molly asked.
'I can exchange Muggle money at Gringott’s if necessary,’ Ron pointed out to Draco.

‘I’ve got money, too,’ Harry added.

‘Not as much as Malfoy!’ Ginny exploded, triggering a round of laughter.

But Harry stared at her, an intense expression on his face. ‘Ginny. We’re very wealthy people.’

Bill shook his head. ‘I’d rather not take anyone’s money. One day this will be over and—’

‘It won’t be OVER if we can’t afford to eat,’ Draco said curtly.

Bill didn’t look happy but continued. ‘Other logistical issues to consider are Communications and Transport…’ He looked to Thelonymous and Parvati. ‘You two are good with the corundum?’ They nodded. ‘And Ziff fields Muggle comms… okay, so… Transport. Elizaveta’s offered to be the go-to for Portkeys but she could do with some support.’

Briek cautiously raised his hand. ‘I volunteer my wife… a true talent.’

‘We’ve also lost our healer,’ Molly said soberly. ‘We need a replacement.’

‘We have Tuyen,’ Bill said.

Tuyen bowed timidly.

‘And I can make do, at a scratch…’ Arlene said deferentially to Molly. It definitely looked like Molly had taken control of The Blue House, Hermione noted… while George and Angelina were in charge of defence.

‘Is everyone happy with all of this?’ Harry asked.

‘We can do this,’ Draco said. ‘There’s more than enough of us to make this work. But we need to act fast… And yes, it’s fucking dangerous stuff, but it’s stuff that’s fallen to us to do - and for the sake of our children – and grandchildren…’ he looked at Molly and Arthur, ‘we need to get on with it.’

XXX

‘It’s too quiet,’ Hermione said to Harry. ‘Where is everybody?’

They’d been ambling through paintings for most of the morning. It wasn’t something Harry liked doing. It made him feel uncomfortable.

Hermione had tried to track Ephraim. They’d briefly glimpsed him in Narcissa’s drawing-room talking to Troy. Both men had left in a hurry and Hermione hadn’t seen either since.

There was no sign of Salvedra or Sylvestra…

‘What about Dolores?’ Harry asked.

‘Don’t say her name, Harry!’ Hermione begged. ‘I suspect she spends a lot of time inside paintings and I don’t fancy finding myself nose-to-nose with her... not today.’ She swiftly blanked her mind and gazed at their surroundings. They were currently wandering through long grass – a gauzy, silver sheen…

They headed towards the brow of a hill.
'How’s Young Madam settling in?’ Harry asked.

‘Oh! She’s lovely,’ Hermione said with a strained smile.

Harry looked concerned. ‘The other kids okay?’

‘More or less…’ her voice petered into a sigh. ‘Scorpius… a bit less, unfortunately.’

‘Poor kid’s gone through a lot. Having a new sister’s not the easiest thing on top of that.’

‘No…’ She thought with a sad pang of Scorpius’s downcast face last night. He’d crept into their bedroom – which struck her as interesting in itself, because they’d definitely set up alerts – and sat on the edge of the bed, complaining in an oddly formal fashion that he’d liked things as they were before and that Rose was less interested in him now that ‘Magma’ had arrived.

‘Has Ron said anything about your kids still staying with you?’ Harry asked.

‘Why? Has he said something to YOU?’ Ron’s silence on the matter was deafening…

‘No,’ Harry said, ‘but Ginny mentioned it. Not in a bad way, before you panic!’

Hermione sighed in relief. ‘Good, because I don’t think I could cope with a new family crisis… My uncle’s gone downhill a bit. Everyone’s sort of… holding their breath.’

‘Has he met Draco?’

‘Yesterday… We had a really nice time and Uncle Derek adores Scorpius. But it felt… you know…’ She blinked back tears and looked away.

Harry said nothing but he slipped his arm through hers and they crested the brow of the hill together and stared down into a sweeping, dark blue valley…

‘Shall we head back? I’ve got a meeting with my new crew,’ Harry said, rolling his eyes for comical effect.

‘Which one?’

‘Trace and Track. Asusto’s moaning on the corundum that he’s piss-bored stuck in the middle of nowhere. Mentioned how flat and miserable it was... Not a lot to go on, but… WOAH!’

Harry grabbed hold of Hermione’s arm as they gunned down the valley in a purple haze before tumbling through a veil of dank grey mist… Hermione realised she was floating above a sea of lily-pads stretching over brown, brackenish water. Katya’s tower topped by its conical hat loomed over her.

Hermione flipped backwards towards the tower. Unlike its real-world counterpart it didn’t have a blown-out hole in its front. And the door in its side was wide-open.

Hermione tore her eyes away. She had to find Harry…

There was a faint smudgy green on the glistening, grey barrier between the painting and reality…

Harry looked confused. ‘I thought you said this painting was at Malfoy Manor?’

Hermione craned her head into the grey fog. Katya’s room was gone.
Instead she was staring at a man with pale, pimpled flesh and lank, dark hair. He gazed back with blank, lifeless eyes.

‘It’s Asusto… Where are they?’

‘In a vehicle of some kind.’ Harry squinted to the left of the frame. ‘There’s a window out the back.’

Hermione leant forwards for a better view. They couldn’t fall out… Their bodies were safely stowed in the garden-shed at Folkvangr with ClassicFM on the radio.

She watched an endless stretch of flat, brown fields and a ribbon of grey asphalt road trickle into the distance. They veered left and a grey metal gate swung shut behind them. The vehicle rocked up and down and then stopped.

The painting surged upwards and their view was obscured by a close-up of Asusto’s grey t-shirt – before being released in a single sweeping arc into open air and a glimpse of a concrete courtyard hemmed in by low corrugated-iron buildings.

A heavy jolt and they were staring at the back-end of a Land Rover.

Harry pointed at the gate. ‘Look. A sign. *Nethercross Farm.*’

But she was too distracted by Auror Carmichael walking with Karl across the courtyard. That could only mean one thing.

‘Ephraim’s here.’

XXX

‘A farm?’ George asked. He gazed up at the ceiling and thought for a moment. ‘Possible… It was very stinky.’

‘And you don’t remember how you got there?’ Draco asked.

George shook his head and folded his arms, his sleeve nudging his dinner-plate.

As a double date this would have been disastrous, Hermione thought ruefully, despite Angelina’s best efforts to keep the conversation flowing.

Luckily it was a fact-finding venture. The flat fields had convinced Hermione that Nethercross Farm was where George had been imprisoned.

‘You said there were other prisoners…’

‘Yeah. Poor chap without a tongue… He got taken away and replaced by another chap with a bag over his head. Had very shiny shoes. Pointy…’

‘And there’s the woman who kept screaming,’ Angelina reminded him.

Her husband’s face creased in anguish at the memory. ‘That Troy bastard— he used Crucio on her, again and again. She sobbed so hard I thought she’d break… Ephraim’s fellow stopped him. Said they needed her mind in one piece.’

Hermione and Draco exchanged looks. The sobbing woman clearly had valuable information…
‘Ziff’s going through every bit of data he can get his hands on to find this farm,’ Draco said. ‘Is there anything else you can think of that might help him?’

George scrunched up his eyes. ‘Just boring flat fields… and an occasional smell I suppose. Icky-sweet.’

Draco was already texting Ziff…

Hermione and Angelina cleared the table.

‘Don’t you find it weird not using magic to do this?’ Angelina asked, tottering under the weight of a haphazard pile of dishes.

‘I’m Muggle-born, remember?’

‘But what about Draco? He’s used to an army of slaves…’

Hermione smiled weakly in return. ‘He’s more house-proud than I am…. You and George seem to be getting on well?’

Angelina frowned. ‘We’re trying. His nerves are shot, though… Comes from being stuck in a hole in the ground and treated like shit I guess. Bit freaky you finding this place through a painting where Draco’s wife lives!’

‘She’s a prisoner…’

‘Yeah. Gotta feel for her, haven’t you?’ Angelina said in a blasé manner that set Hermione’s teeth on edge. ‘Still, if she wasn’t in THERE, you wouldn’t be HERE. With him…’ Angelina sidled closer, a naughty smirk on her face. ‘Not gonna lie… I see why you did it. He’s fit as fuck. Takes control. Is he like that all the time?’

Hermione threw on the kitchen taps to soak the pans, avoiding Angelina’s fevered gaze.

‘You know I was probably one of the last people to speak to his wife,’ Angelina continued blithely. ‘Remember our art class at Madam Puddifoot’s? There was an exhibition of our stuff the day she left – or maybe the day before… Draco came but skulked off pretty sharpish.’

Hermione brusquely turned off the taps.

‘Do you remember which painting was Katya’s?’ Hermione asked urgently.

XXX

‘Do you remember if Draco kissed her?’ Hermione asked Angelina the following morning.

They were sitting in Madam Puddifoot’s teashop. Hermione was nursing a cup of tea while Angelina tackled a supersized wedge of cranberry clafoutis, picking out the cranberries one by one until her cake was squidge into scrambled beige.

‘If he did, it wasn’t hot and lusty.’ Angelina’s eyelashes flickered playfully as she looked at Hermione. ‘I bet he’s good at that… hot and lusty.’

Hermione rolled her eyes. ‘Leave it out…’

‘I’m just kidding!’ Angelina chortled.
She wasn’t though…

‘You’re not jealous, are you?’ Angelina said, incredulous. ‘Because there’s really no need! That gorgeous man’s crushing so hard on you it’s almost embarrassing to be around. He wasn’t like that with his wife… Got the feeling there wasn’t much going on in that department, actually … she was kind of… young.’

‘She wasn’t.’

‘It’s how she felt, that’s all. Oh, Madam Puddifoot’s back!’ Angelina sprang up from the table and sashayed over to a plump, bespectacled woman in pink with a violet swoosh of hair like a purple wave teetering on the top of her head.

Hermione sank into her seat and pulled up the hood of her cloak. She’d once represented Madam Puddifoot in a fraud trial. They’d won the case but too much exposure to Madam Puddifoot became a trial in itself…

Angelina and Madam Puddifoot disappeared into a room behind the counter.

Hermione’s eyes drifted towards the frosted glass window facing onto the side-street where Madam Puddifoot’s was tucked away. Unlike the High Street where so many shops remained charred and disfigured, this part of Hogsmeade was unscathed from the fire.

She was lost in thought when a jarring dash of blue sent her heart racing.

Ephraim was walking towards Madam Puddifoot’s with Portia Witchell…

Hermione jumped out of her seat and threw herself onto the floor behind the counter as the doorbell jangled, signalling Ephraim’s entrance.

There was a clatter of chairs and the squeak of a table as they sat down.

‘This is so sweet of you, darling,’ Portia intoned in sweet, cloying tones. ‘It’s been so boring not seeing you.’

‘Been busy,’ Ephraim replied, gruffly monosyllabic. There was the rustling of a newspaper.

‘Campaigning, I suppose…’

‘Nope.’

‘Oh.’ Portia slumped into silence. ‘Well… if you want someone to practice these hustings with—’

‘No need…’

‘But you haven’t got much time.’

‘Yes I have.’ There was a further, testy shake of newspaper.

‘But aren’t they this weekend?’

‘Haven’t decided… There might not be hustings at all.’

‘But what about the other candidates? Won’t THEY want hustings?’

‘No one gives a crap about hustings, Portia…’
‘But you said…’

‘It’s a campaign event. NOT hustings. In honour of the valiant citizens of Hogsmeade – all proceeds to the Hogsmeade Restoration Fund. Blah, blah, blah…’

‘But you’ve told Julius Merriman now. He thinks there’ll be hustings… And he’s such a stickler.’

‘Julius can go to hell,’ Ephraim said snippily. The newspaper crackled as he smacked it onto the table. ‘Why’s there no service in this damned place?’

‘Would you rather we went somewhere else? The Three Broomsticks, perhaps?’

‘Too many people,’ Ephraim groused. As he spoke, the doorbell chimed and there was a chorus of voices greeting their mayor.

Hermione decided there was sufficient commotion to sneak into the back-room, so she crawled on her hands and knees through the gap in the open door.

Madam Puddifoot was waiting, bristling with outrage. ‘Is that horrid man still out there? I won’t serve him you know! He lords it over us, raising rents to pay for the rebuilding of Hogsmeade… and then nothing gets done!’

XXX

Hermione and Angelina stared at Katya’s painting of a spiky pink rosebush wondering what to try next. They’d cast every spell they could think of to try and break in but nothing had worked.

Hermione anxiously twirled her wand between her fingers. ‘Either there’s nothing there or Draco has to do it.’

‘Do what?’ he asked, bowling into the house with a grin on his face.

‘What you so happy about?’ she smiled in return.

‘I just dropped the kids off to The Blue House with Parvati.’ His eyes dropped to the painting.

‘It didn’t work for me.’

Draco sat on the sofa next to Hermione and took hold of her wand. He tapped the picture-frame and placed his hand on the surface of the painting. It instantly sank down. He delved inside, keeping his eyes on Hermione’s face.

‘Bingo,’ he said in a low whisper, tugging free a sheaf of parchment and a small silver rose-charm. The moment he pulled his hand out, the colours swirled back into place and the painting froze.

Hermione gazed at the final charm in his palm. ‘Do we make the necklace now?’

He shook his head. ‘No… Niko believes there’d be a way to hear Katya’s message externally and record it, in case she says something incriminating against Ephraim.’

‘Sensible,’ Angelina remarked.

Hermione greedily browsed the wadge of parchment.

‘Look at you,’ Draco beamed. ‘It’s like all your Christmases came at once… and it’s definitely
Anna’s work.’ He leant into her and pointed to Anna Cornec’s name on the inside cover, his hand glancing against hers.

Hermione’s face fell. ‘It’s in French.’

He read over her shoulder. ‘We can get it translated. Angelina can take it back to The Blue House.’ His face was warm against hers and she shivered involuntarily at the feel of his breath on her cheek.

From midway the pages were old, yellowed and covered in a scratchy, spidery scrawl. Like the Vitruvian Man writing at Akhr Makan.

Hermione pushed the parchment away. ‘Salvedra's funny runes.’

‘I’ll take this then,’ Angelina said, picking it up. ‘And tell Niko you’ve got the last charm.’

‘We’ll be over soon with the rest,’ Draco assured her. Angelina raised a sceptical eyebrow and was off.

Draco instantly locked his arms around Hermione and drew her close. ‘And finally… we’re alone.’

Hermione twisted her arms around his neck and grinned. ‘Aren’t you more excited to find Anna’s papers? And surely completing the charms is a huge relief after all this time?’

Draco buried his face into her neck and breathed deeply. ‘Hermione… I realise this makes me very, very superficial, but the only thing I care about right now - that I’ve been wanting - is to be alone with you…’ His mouth was hot on her face and then her lips… ‘Everything else can wait.’

XXX

‘Ziff’s found this Nethercross Farm,’ Elizaveta said, strapping on what looked alarmingly like a chest-plate.

‘What the hell is THAT?’ Draco asked, bemused.

Elizaveta hooked her long dreadlocked hair over her shoulder and flashed him one of her trademark silver smiles. ‘From George’s special collection… It’s kinda cool.’ She pulled a coal-black woollen cloak off a rack hanging in the hallway at The Blue House, wrapped it around herself, and strode outside – the very image of what Hermione as a child imagined witches should look like, until she found out she was one herself.

‘We should go with them,’ Hermione said to Draco as the Trace and Track Squad, plus George, assembled on the lawn to leave. Their plan was to scout the site for the prison-pits and possibly steal Katya’s painting.

‘Niko's been analysing the rose-charms. Says we should talk...’

‘Can it wait?’

Draco stood, hand on hips, and hung his head.

‘You know my feelings about this.’

‘Mixed. At best,’ she said bluntly.

He looked up at her and she smiled encouragingly. She could sense his struggle.
'So… let’s say the picture’s brought here… what then? Ginny will nag us _endlessly_ to find a way to release Katya. It’ll take over!'

'Then get Ginny to work on it herself,’ Hermione said pithily. ‘She’s a brilliant witch.’

'And if she succeeds?'

'Then she succeeds... and we deal with it.'

Draco stared at her for a long time before answering... 'I fucked up so bad when I was younger, Hermione, I decided never to trust myself again. To not listen to inner inklings... to push them aside. It's kind of how we got into this mess, actually... I stopped listening.'

'What are you trying to say, Draco?'

'You switched me back on again. And I can't hide from my thoughts anymore. I used to think what I thought I should think - but now I'm properly thinking...'

'You're anxious!' she smiled, moving closer. 'That's normal.' But it was more than that. She could sense fear.

'What I had to do to open that fucking doll... that wasn't _normal_, Hermione.'

'No, it wasn't.' She eased out a long, shuddering breath...

There was a burst of laughter from outside. The Trace and Track Squad were sharing a joke.

'I should get a move on,’ she said, rummaging in a bag of George’s Shieldwear. She pulled out a chest-plate. ‘Here, do me up.’

‘Really?’ Draco smiled. ‘It’s a toy. Not armour.’

‘It’s my warrior outfit!’

He stood behind her and fastened the straps, but he didn't move away. He pressed against her, a large, warm, weighty presence - and his hands slunk under the chest-plate, closing in over her breasts. She could feel his breathing quicken. ‘I’ll come with you,’ he whispered.

His mouth dipped to kiss her neck and she closed her eyes and tilted her head, offering him more skin to glide his lips against. His hands fondled her breasts until her nipples were hard and aching and she could feel a knot of desire tightening inside of her. She could barely believe how aroused she felt considering they'd spent the afternoon making love.

‘Coming?’ Angelina’s jocular voice rang out behind them. Draco instantly snapped his hands away from Hermione’s breasts.

‘You’ll need to wear black… Harry’s orders!’

XXX

There were lights on in the farmhouse – a red-brick L-shaped building backing directly onto acres of rutted fields. It was now obvious why Harry had insisted they wear black, because the terrain was flat and exposed.

Fortunately, the sky was blanketed in thick cloud hiding the stars and the moon was a thin, yellow sliver, affording them additional cover.
'Does this place seem familiar, George?' Harry said, casting a Muffliato.

But George was too busy fiddling with his chest-plate. ‘I think there’s a design fault,’ he griped. ‘It shouldn’t itch like this.’

‘Sounds more like a materials issue,’ Oleg weighed-in, sagely.

Hermione tossed her head in frustration. Having decided to embark on this adventure, she was now desperate to get it over with and head back to Folkvangr.

‘Maybe we split into two groups?’ she suggested. ‘One lot finds these prison-pits and that poor woman, while the other group investigates the farmhouse.’

Harry pondered this. ‘Okay… let’s see what Oleg comes up with first.’ There was a flapping whirr of large, black wings and a crow shot into the sky.

They watched him fly into the darkness before circling round and round an area a few hundred metres away behind a long outhouse. He excitedly dived down before surging upwards.

‘He’s found something,’ Elizaveta said.

‘Okay, we’ll split,’ Harry said. ‘Four of us - myself, Draco and the crows - we'll take the house… the rest of you check out those pits.’

‘I'll go with the others,’ Draco said. ‘Four’s too many for the house.’

‘No. You just don’t want to rescue the painting,’ Angelina scowled. ‘I’ll go with Harry instead.’

‘Any problems make for over there,’ Harry said, pointing to a single, crooked tree in a far field. ‘It’s the only bloody landmark for miles.’ He pulled a pencil-sharpener out of his pocket. ‘Lucky I brought two.’ He passed it to Draco.

XXX

‘What the hell’s that?’ Hermione asked Henrik. She pointed to a light hovering in the sky in the near distance, beyond acres of ploughed black earth. It was too low for a star and it flickered – like a candle.

‘A building of some kind,’ Henrik replied.

Strange, Hermione thought, how the light kept blanking out and re-appearing… a rhythmic blip of darkness.

‘There’s some kind of animal over there,’ Draco said in low tones, ‘behind the fence.’

George blinked into the darkness. ‘It’s a guard dog. But not a very good one. It’s asleep.’

Hermione tip-toed towards the paddock’s perimeter fence. It wasn’t a dog, she realised with a sinking heart… it was a wolf! She nudged her wand close to the fence and cast a spell that would keep him snoozing that bit longer.

George and Hermione checked for intruder charms while Henrik hoisted his rifle over his shoulder and scanned the area behind them. Draco tried the main gate on the off-chance it was open and then mumbled a series of unlocking spells.

‘Won’t get in this way,’ he said grudgingly. ‘But this is definitely your prison, George.’
As their eyes grew accustomed to the dense darkness - a darkness so thick, it almost had texture, Hermione thought – they could make out two large black stains on the ground inside the paddock… giant holes.

Hermione gazed at the others. Their faces were faint grey smears peeking out from their black hooded cloaks.

‘We only need one of us to get into the pen and see if this poor woman's here,’ she said.

‘Can’t believe the wolf's their only security,’ Draco said dubiously. ‘Got to be something else.’ He glanced at the farmhouse. More lights were coming on… ‘Shit. They know we’re here…’

‘Ugh! That smell…It's the nasty, sweet one I was telling you about,’ George complained. His voice was muffled by his cloak.

‘There’s a sugarbeet factory close by,’ Hermione said. ‘Helped Ziff find this place online.’

Draco wrinkled his nose in distaste. ‘No, Hermione… it’s a gas of some kind.’

For a brief moment Hermione’s heart skipped a beat, fearing it was a Dark Flux agent…

‘Not feeling too good,’ Henrik groaned… he fell to his knees and vomited.

‘Let’s pull back to the tree!’ Draco said in grating tones, but his words were swallowed up by a hacking cough that seemed to rock through him.

‘Draco? You okay?’ Hermione gasped.

‘Yup… just a bit… fuck…’ He was dry-retching uncontrollably.

In contrast, George was remarkably unfazed.

‘Are you able to Apparate?’ Hermione asked Draco in agonised tones.

Maybe they used the gas to disable intruders? Hermione thought. Her stomach suddenly felt like a washing-machine had exploded inside of her, but she wasn’t anywhere near as bad as Draco and Henrik.

‘It’ll pass,’ Draco assured her, but then he clutched his stomach and his face contorted in pain.

Hot panic bubbled up inside of her. ‘I’m going to get them away from here!’ she said to George.

‘It’s okay, I will,’ he said, grasping both men by the arm.

And they were gone, leaving Hermione alone with only the darkness and a sleeping wolf for companions.

She was sharply aware of a full blaze of lights irradiating from an area close to the farmhouse and there were voices calling out to each other.

Someone screamed… was that Angelina?

BUGGER, she thought, pushing other thoughts aside – she had to do what she could to find and rescue the woman in the pits, but she’d feel stronger if she used colour-magic… it was quicker, more reactive.
She closed her eyes and focused hard on the black pits in the paddock, trying to sense a presence… somebody trapped a long way down… Her mind felt like it was tumbling faster and faster into a depthless space.

Yes... someone was there.

She strained to hear... Small, frightened bleats; barely perceptible…

A wave of sickness shot through her, like a small tornado charging through her digestive system. She hoped it wasn't a delayed reaction to the gas. She could taste it in her mouth now - like molten metal. And hot bile was scorching her gullet. She tried to scotch it by deepening her colour… drawing it into herself. But to her relief, the sickly feeling – like the super-sweet gas - was already passing...

She cast a cautious glance at the wolf… thankfully still asleep. But she had to act fast because she could hear footsteps stampeding into the outbuilding ahead of her.

Who was in the pit? She had to somehow project her mind’s eye… I can do this, she thought.

Two shining orbs peered out of the darkness; like a small rodent hiding in the shadows. Waiting…

She decided to lift them upwards, combining Levicorpus with the strength of her colour-magic to keep the woman upright – conjoining two magical pathways, just like Gunter had instructed.

Beads of sweat broke out on her forehead. The effort was so great it felt like her mind might bleed, but then she felt a surge of relief, a loosening, a flowing ease…

She opened her eyes and a woman was dangling high in the sky, her arms flapping in panic, mouth open in a silent scream… Hermione was so shocked she almost let go.

She quickly mastered herself and reeled her in over the sleeping wolf and the high fence and lowered her to the ground. The woman was shaking with fear.

A blinding green flash whistled past Hermione's ear... And a further round of wand-fire was illuminating the paddock.

Hermione sunk onto the ground beside the woman. 'Don't panic. I'm going to get you out of here... Hold onto me!'

But where to? There were criss-crossing spears of light in the distance, out in the fields by the tree…

‘Hermione!’ Draco hissed from the darkness, sliding to the ground. At that exact same moment, a group of wizards rounded the paddock and a fresh volley of green and red shots pierced the darkness.

A ferocious growl erupted inches from Hermione's face and her heart-rate soared… the wolf was awake.

Draco clapped his hands on her shoulder and all three Apparated to the tree where Harry was firing shots across the field… Hermione didn’t dare count how many attackers were heading their way, but there were too many...

Was this a country retreat for the Blasters? A training centre? She was sure she recognised Jervis Scrimshaw... and was that Edgar Rosier?
Henrik stepped from behind the tree and a thunderous report exploded into her ears... He appeared to track someone who was rounding the back of them and a second powerful shot was unleashed followed by a thump.

A third shot rang out. Hermione glanced back. A choked-off gurgle and a man fell sideways, his wand flying into the air.

‘Here!’ Harry yelled, holding out a small object, indistinguishable in the gloom.

She looked back and saw a large, grey beast running, rapier-speed, towards them...

‘Now!’ Harry bellowed and Hermione corkscrewed with dizzying velocity and fell onto the soft, wet lawns of The Blue House.

The woman they had rescued was yowling and was immediately carried away by George and Oleg.

Arlene, garbed in a white gown, her face illuminated by a candle, ushered them inside.

Katya’s picture lay on the ground beside Hermione. She looked at it – faintly shining in the wispy moonlight, smelling of lacquer and old, dark wood. She could vaguely make out the contours and lines of the stumpy tower and the teardrop lake.

She’s here now... she thought.

Draco was staring down at them. ‘We need to cover it up,’ he said brusquely, 'before anyone sees who or where we are.'

Hermione took her cloak off, realising she was a little slow and dazed, and wrapped it around the painting as best she could.

‘Are you alright?’ she said to Elizaveta who was hunched on the ground close by clutching her chest.

With a throaty groan, Elizaveta ripped off the chest-plate. ‘Got hit by something nasty. This bloody thing saved my life.’ She started to laugh; a creaking, gusty laugh, like a pair of old bellows, and her teeth glinted at Hermione in the darkness.

‘You know what? I think the chest-plates defended us from the gas as well,’ Hermione said, thinking that George had been unaffected and she’d withstood the worst.

Bill and Gunter were pacing purposefully across the lawn.

‘The painting I take it?’ Gunter said. Draco nodded and marched towards The Blue House.

Bill and Gunter carried the painting into the house.

‘Keep it covered at all times,’ Hermione warned.

The woman they’d rescued was sitting at the kitchen table. Arlene had draped a blanket over her shoulders and was mopping her face, urging her to drink some soup.

She was a striking dark-skinned woman, once plump but with hollowed cheeks and large, bright eyes fringed by thick eyelashes. She tried to smile but quickly faltered.

‘What’s your name, love?’ Arlene asked kindly.
'Binta... Binta Koranteng,' the lady said. 'I’ve been in that hole for a very long time… months and months…' Her voice was thin and raspy. She again tried to smile but was too tired to succeed. 'Thank you for helping me.'

Hermione almost jumped for joy because if anyone could make sense of Anna’s papers, it was her… 'So you're the same Binta who worked with Tony Goldstein on Gimlott’s and Dark Flux?'

Binta nodded. 'Yes. And I suspect that’s the main reason I'm still alive.'

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“GOUGE AWAY” by THE PIXIES

“THE ARCHITECT” by PALOMA FAITH

“INSPIRATION!” by W.H. LUNG

“FINAL DAYS” by MICHAEL KIWANUKA

“MACHINE” by THE HORRORS

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
And Recks Not His Own Rede

Chapter Summary

Cutting deals, trading blows and murder; Hermione to the Dark Tower Came …

57. And Recks Not His Own Rede

‘What a fucking beautiful start to the day,’ Draco groaned, his mouth on Hermione’s.

His body was hot and wet against hers and he was still trembling. The shower water bounced off his hair and shoulders in curling loops of light.

‘You look… glazed,’ Hermione sighed, pulsing blissfully and shivering a little at the sound of the water pounding down onto them.

‘If I move, I think my legs might give way…’

‘Then don’t move,’ she murmured, caressing the nape of his neck and kissing his face and throat… she licked the shower water from his lips, wondering what she’d done to deserve this beautiful man…

‘You always brush your teeth before breakfast,’ Hermione said, watching Draco squeeze a neat line of toothpaste onto his toothbrush once the shower had run cold forcing them to leave. ‘My parents say it should be after…’ She draped a towel over her hair and another over her shoulders to stem the drip of cooling water onto her body.

‘What about all the germs that collect in your mouth overnight? You’re feeding them your breakfast and then swallowing them.’

Hermione grinned. ‘Well, I guess you deserve to brush your teeth after where your mouth’s been this morning.’

He smiled at her in the mirror, his eyes sparkling. ‘Could say the same for you, beautiful…’ And he passed her a toothbrush.

They could hear voices and doors slamming, a burst of laughter...

‘Niko… Wants to talk about these charms,’ Draco said, ‘says there’s something funny about them.’

Hugo was squealing down the stairs… ‘He’s taken a shine to Niko,’ Hermione smiled. It had been Hugo’s turn to come into their bedroom last night looking for Captain Magic. In the end they’d found it tucked up with Magda.

She’d begun to think the kids were taking turns…

Clearly Draco was thinking the same thing, adding: ‘How come the kids are just breezing through our lets-pretend-we’re-not-sleeping-together wards? They’re either walking fucking prodigies or we’re really duff at magic.’
Parvati was despairing. ‘She says no to toast, eggs, cereal or porridge…’

Magda was staring at Nico’s luxuriant ginger beard with gobstopper eyes and giggling when he made funny faces.

‘Oh, and Neville wants you to come to The Blue House to talk campaigns. I’m taking Scorpius and Rose if you want to hitch a ride.’

‘Can’t. Shell Cottage. Potions…’ Hermione said crisply.

Draco looked uneasy. ‘Not today. Bit busy.’

‘He was very insistent.’

‘Tough.’

Parvati gave him a knowing smile. ‘They’ve put her in the attic… It’s not like she’s on display or anything!’

‘Should bloody well hope not!’ Draco said aghast.

Henrik was hunched on the sofa looking grumpy.

‘What’s up with HIM?’ Hermione whispered to Draco in the kitchen as they made coffee.

‘You’re kidding right?’ Draco lowered his voice. ‘He doesn’t like Niko.’

‘But he’s lovely!’

‘He thinks he’s hitting on Parvati.’

‘And?’

Draco looked at her, dumbfounded. ‘Are you telling me I’ve noticed something you haven’t?’ He looked far too excited about this… ‘Henrik’s got a big thing for her.’

‘No, he hasn’t… he likes Gwen.’

‘Maybe he DID … not now.’

Hermione nabbed milk from the fridge mulling this… ‘Is it mutual?’

‘Bloody hope so, boy’s bitten bad.’

‘Has he said anything?’

‘No… it’s just THERE. Right in front of our eyes.’

After that, Hermione could hardly concentrate on Niko’s complicated explanation about the various tests he’d run on the rose-charms because her eyes kept moving between Henrik and Parvati… they were very close. That much was obvious…

And yes, Draco was right. Every time Niko cracked a joke and caught Parvati’s attention Henrik was quietly fuming. How had she not noticed? Henrik didn’t just fancy her, he adored her and was desperately pretending otherwise.
‘Pretty,’ Rose said, running a handful of roses through her fingers.

Draco took hold of her hand. ‘No, Rose... These aren’t to be touched I’m afraid.’

‘They feel funny,’ she sniffed.

Niko eyed her curiously. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You know when things jump and move sideways and then right themselves again?’

Niko continued to give her a penetrating stare. ‘I do, Rose. What did you see?’

Rose wrinkled her nose. ‘Dunno... like a wall of tears…’

‘Do you see other things?’ Niko asked gently.

‘Sometimes. People, mainly.’ She looked at Draco, a huge grin plastered on her face. ‘You’re all shiny.’

Draco still held her hand in his own. ‘Is that a good thing?’ he asked in worried tones.

She nodded enthusiastically. ‘Very.’

Hermione could see Draco’s whiteness swirling with emotion. And relief.

‘Your daughter has La Luz,’ Niko said the moment Rose moved away.

‘I know…’ Hermione murmured, remembering her encounter with Ephraim.

‘Sounds like she has what YOU have,’ Draco said. ‘Associating people with colours.’

‘More than that!’ Niko scoffed. ‘She’s a fucking seer.’

Hermione pinched her lips tightly together. ‘There’s no such thing.’

Niko gave her a curious look and then scooped the roses with a piece of paper into the centre of the table. ‘Let’s talk about these... They’re bonded with something. A very powerful spell.’

‘Well, yes... they’re a traditional communication device from an ancient wizarding community…’ Hermione began, but Niko abruptly shook his head.

‘But there’s another spell layered on top.’ His small, blue eyes drilled into Hermione as he spoke. ‘Whoever wears this necklace is bonded in perpetuity with the caster.’

‘A love charm,’ Parvati said airily. ‘That’s not so shocking, Niko!’

‘Oh it is! Because if the person refuses to be bonded – they die.’

‘Fucking madwoman in the attic…’ Draco groused as Hermione left for Shell Cottage with Hugo and Magda in tow. Hugo had allowed Magda to ‘borrow’ Captain Magic but was accompanying her in a supervisory capacity. Hermione rather suspected he enjoyed playing with her more than he wanted to admit.

XXX

‘Fleur’s with Melissa... she won’t be a minute,’ Bill explained, propping up a painting on the desk in his study. Harry, Bill and Kai had ventured during the night to Foret-la-Folie and swiped the
painting from the bakery.

It was pleasantly sunny outside but the sea below was wild and thrashing due to a stiff breeze.

Gabrielle skipped past with Magda and Hugo. They were heading for Hermione’s field of purple flowers on the cliff-top. Magda was effervescent with joy clutching ‘Houblon’ – her cuddly bunny that she’d left at Shell Cottage when they first arrived from France. Her wavy brown hair bounced in the wind.

Fleur was stowed inside Melissa’s flower-strewn shelter, drinking a cup of tea and chatting. She stopped the moment Hermione’s shadow fell across the entrance.

‘Sorry, I didn’t meant to disturb you.’

Fleur blushed. ‘I come here most mornings… tell her what’s going on.’

‘That’s nice.’ Hermione braved a glance... Melissa seemed so peaceful; almost a hint of a smile on her lips.

She hazarded a glancing touch of her hand. It always surprised – and pleased her - that she stayed warm. One day she feared her skin would be cold - before she’d worked out how to bring her back.

The French painting made Hermione nervous. ANYONE could come through at any time. A rudimentary sackcloth-covering didn’t feel adequate…

‘Pop inside and check it out if it’s worrying you,’ Bill said. ‘But really all we need is a sample of the paintwork and I’ll secure it in the old tin mine. If anyone dared venture through there, they’d be trapped! I’ve made sure of it.’

Ernie did the honours and a sample was soon at their disposal.

‘I’ve already done some research,’ Fleur enthused. ‘I found an old grimoire that shows how Stypticus Solution’s made.’

‘That’s the bonding agent in the paint, isn’t it?’ Ernie asked.

‘Yes,’ Hermione said. ‘Makes the painting magical. But not all magical paintings can be moved through so we need to analyse this sample to see what’s different.’

‘Once we know that, what’s the plan?’ Ernie said.

‘Well… I’ve got a theory that there’s some kind of spell or alteration to the usual recipe for Stypticus Solution that enables a constant backlight within the painting,’ Hermione said. ‘You see, colour-magic only works with light… so there has to be a SOURCE of light. And seeing as we can move through paintings at any time, logically, this means the source of light comes from the paintings themselves.’

‘So you want to make a painting that BLOCKS light.’

‘Pretty much. We have to lure Salvedra into a painting and then switch that light-source off once he enters. If we then bind him inside using colour-magic, I’m thinking mirrors, all light will be blocked - and hopefully he’ll be too weak to escape... We’d then destroy the painting.’

‘So we make a new painting or refurb an existing painting with a new solution that can change
opacity… what would trigger the change?’ Ernie asked.

‘Movement?’ Fleur suggested.

‘Possibly…’ Hermione mused. ‘It has to be Salvedra in his physical form, that’s for sure.’ She thought of Melissa’s hands… ‘Maybe warmth?’

Ernie nodded to Fleur. ‘We can do this.’

‘What if we mix in gold or silver that is then triggered by heat into a surface shield?’ Fleur said.

‘Or graphite? That’s opaque…’ Ernie said.

Hermione smiled to herself. They were going to be just fine…

XXX

‘Both Milton and Igor have confirmed what I thought,’ Draco said over lunch. ‘Ephraim’s moving stuff out of Malfoy Manor.’

‘Oh…’ Hermione said. ‘That’s a good thing, isn’t it?’

‘In terms of its structural longevity? Perhaps… I’ve asked Tim not to deal a death-blow to the old place just yet.’

‘Well, that explains why Katya’s painting was shifted to this farm,’ Hermione said pensively. ‘If that’s his new HQ we should target there instead… Does this mean he knew what the Muggles were planning?’

‘That American guy, Decimus Clemans… probably tipped him off.’

Kai swung through the kitchen door and froze a little finding herself alone with them.

‘Ahh… Hi… Sorry…’

‘We’re just having lunch, Kai,’ Hermione said with a broad smile, hoping to put the girl at ease. ‘Fleur made soup this morning. Would you like some?’

Kai’s normally pale features glowed bright pink. ‘I – is Bill here?’

‘The old mine,’ Draco said in staccato tones. He was engrossed in Agatha’s latest issue of *Sub Rosa*.

‘How’s Binta?’ Hermione asked Kai, ladling a spoonful of soup into a bowl for her.

‘Sleeping.’

‘Well. She must be very tired,’ Hermione said, tearing off a hunk of bread.

‘Thank you,’ Kai said politely accepting it. ‘Arthur took your kids home. Scorpius was crying.’

Draco looked up and Kai noticeably flinched at Draco’s sudden attention.

‘Did he say why?’

XXX
The chimneys of The Burrow peeking over the trees looked stumpy and forlorn as Hermione and Draco walked across the field.

As they rounded the hedges into the driveway they could hear squeals of laughter.

Both Scorpius and Rose were sitting inside a pewter vintage car, its hood down, while Rose pretended to drive an outsized steering-wheel and Scorpius made loud vroomy noises. Arthur was busily buffing the car’s gleaming bodywork with a chamois cloth.

Draco approached, mouth hanging open, and gazed at the car with a look that Hermione had rather hoped was only reserved for their most intimate moments.

‘THAT is a thing of beauty,’ he groaned, almost falling to his knees in rapture.

Arthur stopped polishing and burst out laughing. He was wearing a jaunty cap, set askew, and had the look of a proud father presenting his baby.

‘It’s a Jaguar E-Type S1 Coupé,’ Draco said in reverent tones to Hermione.

‘1961,’ Arthur said proudly.

‘When did you get this?’ Hermione asked.

‘Oh, about twelve years ago,’ Arthur said. He shuffled uneasily, even guiltily. ‘It was a wreck. Been locked up in the shed.’

Draco was being given an over-excited guided tour of the car by the kids who were speaking over each other in their eagerness to point out the plush red leather seats and the shiny chrome.

Arthur reached into the car, switched on the ignition and then hunted through the radio channels eventually hitting something he liked… The dulcet tones of Louis Armstrong rolled around them and for a brief moment it felt like they were bathed in a sunny balm.

Draco’s eyes lifted to the wreck of The Burrow.

‘We’ll get started on this place, Arthur… as soon as everything’s calmed down.’

‘Oh, I’ve done a few bits and pieces…’

Draco shook his head. ‘I was terrified coming here that day… and not for the reason you think. When I was growing up this was the home of the enemy…’ He raised his eyebrows ironically as he spoke. ‘ Seems surreal now.’

‘Well, Malfoy Manor was the same for me,’ Hermione said. It still was… deep down.

‘Except, that was true … Particularly for you, Hermione.’ Draco looked at her with such tender feeling if they’d been alone Hermione would have hugged him close.

‘What happened that made you want to leave The Blue House so early,’ Draco asked his son.

Scorpius shrugged and looked down.

‘Scorpius got lost and something feels different,’ Rose said succinctly.

Scorpius looked at his father and shrugged again.
'How about you, Rose?'

And now she was shrugging, too.

He wasn’t getting an answer. Not today at any rate…

XXX

Hermione determined to talk to Scorpius at the first viable opportunity. Her chance came the following evening at The Blue House.

Dennis’s campaign team had convened a meeting to discuss strategies to take advantage of Ephraim’s rally in Hogsmeade this coming Sunday.

They planned to hijack the event with a street party and Neville wanted to designate everyone a role. Hermione envied Harry for being absent.

‘Can I come?’ Gwen asked, looking excited. ‘I’d love to see this Hogsmeade you’re always going on about.’

‘I don’t see why not?’ Briek said. ‘It’ll be like a campaign carnival.’

‘Jolly fucking japes,’ Draco said sarcastically under his breath. He was constantly checking his watch. ‘Got a message from Hassan… He wants me to contact him.’

‘Is Salvedra still at Akhr Makan?’

‘He thinks so. Would be good to find out for sure rather than sit through this shit.’

Hermione was worrying more about Scorpius… He’d been reluctant to come here tonight; much like his father, who was now conducting all business at Folkvangr and Shell Cottage.

‘I’ll go round up the kids,’ she whispered in Draco’s ear.

The children were hemmed into the top floor but there was no sign of Scorpius.

Hermione’s eyes drifted to the narrow wooden staircase leading to the attic…

She inched through the narrow door into the attic and bent down to avoid head-butting the rafters. She could sense Katya’s painting – propped up against the wall to her left - facing a mouldy couch with half the stuffing bursting from its decaying seams.

Scorpius was sat bolt upright, eyes fixed on the painting.

‘The sad woman’s here,’ he said.

He shuffled in such a way that she knew he expected her to sit down. He leant against her and she wrapped her arm around his shoulders.

‘Do you remember when we looked at this painting before, Scorpius?’ she asked. There’d been this same sense of brooding melancholia. That’s when she’d felt the ‘pinkness’ she’d always known in her heart was Katya. She could feel it now…

‘I wanted you to come back. Every day, I wished it—’

She gently squeezed his shoulder. ‘Well, I did… of sorts.’
She could feel him smiling. ‘Why do you like looking at this painting?’ she whispered. ‘Does it make you happy?’

He shrugged. ‘It did. Sort of. In a sad way… but not now.’

‘Can you see her?’

He nodded.

‘Is she looking at us?’

He nodded again and Hermione felt a stab of cold alarm. But she couldn’t show it. At least Katya couldn’t HEAR them. Although Katya had no idea who she was of course…

‘Do you know who she is?’

‘I think so.’ He wriggled uncomfortably. ‘You – you won’t make me go back, will you? I like it with you and Daddy. And Rose and Hugo… Even, Magda.’

‘No, Scorpius, you aren’t going back.’ She smiled down at him and he gazed back, eyes wide and blue. ‘Do – do you remember anything about… the other place?’

‘Bits.’ His cheek twitched. Damn… He did. But he’d learned to hide his feelings. To compartmentalise.

A cold, plunging sensation descended into the pits of her stomach. She hated that he had to remember anything that had hurt him, ever.

‘I’ll get used to Magda, I promise,’ he said. ‘She’s just a bit annoying.’

Hermione’s face cracked into a big grin. ‘She’s very young.’

Scorpius sighed in agreement. ‘Hugo thinks she’s funny.’

‘Well… she is a bit,’ Hermione said, considering this. There was something about her comical snub of a nose and the way she was so very, very certain about herself and what she wanted that couldn’t help but amuse. Young Madam, indeed…

Scorpius smiled and he tucked himself in closer.

Hermione’s eyes flicked to the painting. ‘How can you see her when she’s inside the tower?’

‘She looks out the window.’ Scorpius paused and sat up straight. He squinted at the painting.

‘Is somebody else there?’ Hermione said, unable to extinguish the note of alarm that had crept into her voice.

‘No. Just her face; it’s all different…’

‘In what way?’

He clutched Hermione’s hand tightly. ‘Can we go now?’

XXX

Draco’s eyes were bullet-hard with frustration when she eventually came downstairs with Scorpius.
'We’ve held the Portkey for you,’ he griped. She could sense his anxiety. He knew where they’d been.

Everyone was ready to roll when Neville slipped into the hallway… ‘I need a quick word.’

Hermione turned an apologetic face to Draco who ushered the kids outside.

‘I’ve heard from Ephraim again,’ Neville said under his breath.

‘Really?’ Hermione ground her teeth. Did he ever give up?

‘This is serious. He knows you’ve got Katya… He wants to talk with you.’

Hermione thought about this. The consequences. ‘Like… negotiate?’

‘Maybe? After all, you have something he wants.’ His face was dark and serious. ‘He wants to see you alone,’ he added, dropping his voice so low he was almost hoarse with the effort.

‘I’d want someone with me.’ Preferably, Draco.

‘I can try.’

Draco came back in. ‘Are you coming or what? Hugo’s half-asleep on his feet, poor kid.’

XXX

‘Fucking disaster,’ Harry grouched. He was lying on the couch at Folkvangr with a glass of red wine dangling precariously from his hand over the cream carpet.

‘At least you and Gunter got out of last night’s bloody party planning,’ Draco said. ‘Dunno know why we ALL had to go. Total waste of time.’

‘You were all pumped up and positive the other day,’ Henrik laughed. Hermione looked at him and blinked… Had he SHAVED?

‘Yeah, but Ruddy Krenzel breaking out of Auror HQ isn’t exactly the excuse I’d have wanted to get out of it, unfortunately,’ Harry grumbled. ‘I’d rather listen to Dennis’s stump speech on a loop than suffer the shit I got last night.’

‘It had to be Sylvestra,’ Hermione said. ‘But why go to such trouble for RUDDY KRENZEL? I doubt it’s easy breaking into Auror HQ…’

‘She more seduced her way in,’ Harry said… ‘if it was her, that is. Tall and beautiful, they said. Brunette.’

‘Her hair wouldn’t be real, Harry… Draco burnt it off.’

‘I honestly can’t remember her ever speaking two words to him,’ Draco muttered, nonplussed. ‘But our problem is he knows A LOT about us.’ He poured himself another glass of wine, emptying the bottle. ‘Bugger! He knows about Ron! He’ll have to rein in… shame, because he’s been feeding me great intel.’

‘Has he?’ Hermione hadn’t noticed any communication between them.

‘Full list of Blasters and Aurors to worry about.’ Draco sighed. ‘It’s a long list.’
‘Shall I open another?’ Parvati said, already tripping into the living room with a fresh bottle in hand.

The French doors slid open and Neville walked in. ‘Great timing!’ he said as Parvati poured him a glass of wine.

Draco put his hand up to stop him. ‘Don’t even think about it, Longbottom! You need a clear head!’

Neville’s face puckered and he reluctantly pushed the brimming glass away. ‘Our great and glorious leader has spoken, Parvati… deliver me not into temptation.’

Draco eyed him with peevish coldness. ‘You’re Hermione’s chief bodyguard in this fucking nonsense you’ve cooked up with Ephraim. Harry and I have to lurk… like useless fucking lurking things…’ Hermione had to smile. He’d already had a few glasses of wine himself. ‘Which is wank, because you can bet Ephraim will have a full-scale fucking army as back-up.’

‘He’s bringing Karl,’ Hermione pointed out.

‘And you’ve got Neville Longbottom.’

Hermione blushed with embarrassment. ‘He forgets you trained as an Auror,’ she said to Neville.

‘No I haven’t,’ Draco said snippily. ‘But I’m not too chuffed with him right now and he knows it. Setting up a little chit-chat like this is a fucking game! We’d be better off sticking a wand in Ephraim’s guts and having done with it.’

‘Doubt that would go well for Narcissa…she’s a hostage to fortune in all of this,’ Neville said sardonically. ‘I happen to like your mother.’ He nodded to Hermione. ‘We going then?’

‘Got ten minutes,’ Harry said lazily. ‘This fucking carnival crap, Draco. Do we try and steal her?’

‘I’ve thought about it,’ Draco sighed. ‘But there’ll be eyes on her all the bloody time.’

‘I think we just go for it,’ Harry said gulping back his wine and wiping his mouth with his hand. ‘We might not get another chance.’

XXX

Hermione and Neville entered the park from the ‘Wisteria Cottage’ end of Ottery St Catchpole; opposite to Folkvangr.

The sky was sprinkled with stars and away from the streetlights the park at Ottery St Catchpole was a rapidly darkening expanse.

‘He’s over there,’ Neville said. ‘I’ll wait here. Any problems, light a bluebell flame.’

Hermione could feel Ephraim’s eyes burning into her as she walked towards him.

He jumped up from the park bench as she approached and for a ghastly moment she feared he might try and kiss her in greeting. She quickly swerved and sat down on the bench.

He grinned at her, his teeth glinting white out of the gloom.

‘Lovely to see you, Hermione,’ he said, sinking onto the bench beside her. ‘Where’ve you got your boys hidden?’ She gave him a cursory glance and looked away. ‘Come on, now. There’s no way
either would let you out of their sight.’

‘Where are YOUR people?’ she retorted.

‘Just Karl. Fifty metres from Neville.’

‘What do you want?’

She could feel him staring at her so she looked fixedly ahead at the small children’s playground. The swings swayed nonchalantly in the breeze and the peeling paint on the roundabout gleamed in the faint moonlight.

‘To talk to you.’

‘I realise that! I wouldn’t be here, otherwise, would I?’ she said irritably.

‘As a parent…’

‘We always talk as parents,’ Hermione said in scoffing tones. ‘We ARE parents. The amount of times you’ve made veiled threats against my children testifies to that.’

Ephraim’s eyes glowed a peculiar luminous blue in the dark.

‘Please, Hermione… Can we just have one conversation that’s real? No coy pretence. We already know that we both know everything – although I’ll admit I don’t know where you are at the moment – but I still have a fairly clear understanding of what you have planned for me - the battle we’re engaged in.’

Hermione could sense him pulsing with anxiety and anger but there was a weightiness to him that she couldn’t ignore.

‘And afterwards you can go back to wanting to kill me or imprison me or whatever jumped-up plot you and your little friends have in store… and I’ll continue being the monster you think me…’

‘You don’t have to be…’ she muttered, turning her head to face him.

‘We’re too far gone to row back,’ he said solemnly, ‘and it’s because of that, because this is the road we’ve chosen to travel down, and because we have people on both sides who will stop at nothing to try and destroy what we each stand for, this might be the only moment we have left to at least do one right thing.’

Hermione couldn’t stop a rising sense of emotion and hated herself for it.

Better to be honest…

‘Ephraim… We’re not giving her back.’ How could they? Wherever Ephraim holed-up, the Muggles still wanted to attack…

‘No, no… Don’t say that! Not yet. Not without hearing me out…’ he said in beseeching tones, and for a moment he sounded broken. ‘I just want my daughter back.’

‘I’m sorry, but no.’

‘Why not? You don’t care about her and her husband certainly doesn’t – if indeed he ever did…’ He trailed off a moment. ‘Might have been a mistake, that, from the off, actually,’ he murmured. ‘Draco made a calculation… not an entirely stupid one in the circumstances.’
‘Well, circumstances change…’

‘They certainly do,’ Ephraim said, gazing at her with a look that confused her.

‘I can’t give you Katya. As you well know, that’s somebody else’s decision,’ Hermione said coolly. ‘Something you agreed to.

‘I had no choice! The alternative was—’

‘You always have a choice, Ephraim! This was your CHILD for god’s sake! What could be more important? You could have chosen to fight for her, to defy Salvedra and his stupid narcissistic vengeance-driven crap,’ Hermione remonstrated forcefully.

Ephraim blinked rapidly and looked down.

‘But when presented with choices you always make the wrong call, don’t you?’ Hermione continued. ‘You didn’t need to throw your lot in with Salvedra, you CHOSE to - again and again. Even though you don’t really want the same thing – your pathetic efforts to dress up your crap as somehow honourable or politically brilliant is proof of that. You’re a bloody hypocrite, and a doomed one, because Salvedra will come for you, and you know it…’

Hermione felt a little shaken saying this, but at heart, it was what she truly believed...

‘Where’s that lifetime sucking up to evil actually got you? The Muggles are sick of your bullshit, you’re haemorrhaging money, you’ve lost everyone you ever loved and you’ve killed your soul.’

She could sense a rising crest of emotion inside of him, a barbarous, blazing blue that he wasn’t even attempting to hide from her.

‘Some or even all of that might be true, but PLEASE, Hermione, I’m begging you… Please give me her to me. Her painting…’ Ephraim urgently grabbed her hand but she quickly shook him off, revolted. He heaved a sigh and looked away. ‘If she’s with me at least I’ll know she’s safe…’

‘Just because she’s in a pretty painting doesn’t make her SAFE!’ Hermione said scornfully. ‘Have you heard her crying?’

‘I don’t visit the tower anymore…’ Ephraim said mournfully. But then he collected himself and his eyes hardened. ‘You’re not going to give me the painting, are you?’

‘No.’

She could sense his emotions tumbling downwards inside of him, a cascade of deepening blue.

‘Can – can you at least promise me that you’ll look after it? Make sure it isn’t harmed or… worse.’

Hermione sensed an opening here… it was unscrupulous, but… ‘Why should I?’


‘You made those problems yourself!’

‘I’ve also promised never to hurt your children—’

‘Oh, how very BIG of you!’

And I mean it!’ he said, raising his voice. ‘I’d protect them if I had to!’
‘You didn’t protect Scorpius!’

‘I wasn’t in control of that programme,’ he said off-handedly, twisting away from her gaze.

‘But you knew about it and paid for it. And—’ Her voice quavered with sudden emotion. ‘You allowed Scorpius to be tortured in your own home… And there’s the other children, too. So many wonderful bloody children! And THEY all have parents, too – just like you and me. And Draco…’

Ephraim gave her a sharp look.

‘You’re lucky to be alive, you know that?’ Hermione sneered. ‘He’s got the forbearance of a fucking saint! Once he knew the truth, Draco still had to live with you and work with you, day after day, hiding his feelings as he tried to destroy you from the inside…’ She surged towards him, raw emotion getting the better of her, until her face was inches from his. ‘I’d have torn you and Sylvestra limb from limb! And frankly, Katya deserves no better! She allowed it to happen - to her own stepson.’

‘It wasn’t Katya’s fault.’ He looked scared now.

‘She did NOTHING to protect him!’

‘How could she? She hardly knew what goddamned day of the week it was half the time!’ he bellowed.

‘She KNEW! And she knew what a monster her Daddy was, too, I’ve no doubt.’

Ephraim looked winded…

‘She can’t have done! She wasn’t capable…’ He stopped short and his breathing deepened, panicked… ‘Unless… when she fell pregnant…’

‘When she… What?’ Hermione asked, urgently. He was scaring her.

Ephraim gave her a pained look. ‘You’ve got to understand, Hermione… She’s a damaged person. She’s my daughter and I love her very much but she’s always had periods when she’s – not quite stable…’

‘What are you saying? That she’s unwell?’

‘Completely controllable!’ he said hastily.

‘CONTROLLABLE?’ Hermione thought back to her conversation with Draco in the Tuileries gardens. A bit of a blank… he’d called her. Unknowable… Was it any wonder? He’d never really met her, until the end, when she was plotting and planning and running away…

‘I guess it helps that you run a pharmaceutical company with a Medimagic business on the side, doesn’t it?’

Ephraim didn’t reply.

‘Did Draco know about this when he married her?’

Ephraim looked a little sheepish. ‘Would it have made a difference?’

Probably not. It was a marriage of convenience. On all sides…
'So, you see, Hermione… she can't be blamed. Not really. Blame me all you like, I gave her a loveless childhood and my wife despised her… but don’t seek revenge.'

Hermione looked towards Neville. His silhouette was sharply defined by the light cast by a streetlamp on the roadside. He was stamping his feet impatiently; possibly cold.

She didn’t feel cold at all. She could feel Ephraim’s broiling emotions and tension like a furnace beside her.

Play your next move, she told herself… Even though using people as bargaining chips didn’t come easily.

‘I promise to safeguard the painting if you give me something in return.’

Ephraim groaned – but he was half-smiling, too. ‘Nothing worse than seeing someone fulfil their potential…’

Go big first, she told herself…

‘I want you to stand down your stupid, dangerous Right to Exist crap and your nasty marriage laws – and don’t’ tell me they weren’t YOUR doing! – and then hand yourself over to Harry to be tried by Auror HQ.’

‘Well now you just sound naive, Hermione. Wild!’

Hermione stood up and smoothed down her clothes. ‘Then we’re done here.’

‘What do you mean we’re DONE?’

‘A gesture of mutual goodwill would have been appreciated… that’s all.’

‘Giving up everything I’ve worked for all my life is more than a GESTURE; it’s total capitulation!’

‘So you agree with these new laws? The ones that outlaw me from being with my own children because I’m Muggle-born?’

‘No, of course I don’t! But there’s many who DO. And in politics you have to bring together a coalition of all sorts!’

‘Say you’ll revoke the New Family Act if you become Minister for Magic. Tell the people of Hogsmeade tomorrow.’

‘But I’ll lose key support.’

‘Lose it… Do what’s right… for once.’

Ephraim rolled his eyes and sighed.

‘And Narcissa.’

‘What of her?’

‘She’s not well. And you don’t love her.’

‘She’s my WIFE,’ Ephraim countered.
'I want her to come and stay with us.'

'With you and Draco…' He smiled nastily. ‘One big happy family, eh? Well… She’s a free agent.’

'Good. We’ll look forward to hosting her from tomorrow.’

'She’ll be at my campaign event.’

'Tell her to meet us afterwards at Madam Puddifoot’s.’ It was the first place she could think of…

‘Not YOU, Hermione. Too many Blasters … Have someone else meet her.’

‘Your concern for my welfare is always touching, Ephraim, but you have no veto over where I go and what I do with my life…’

‘Or Draco…’ he added quickly.

‘Don’t pretend you care about him, too!’

‘I don’t want to! The fact I do is an eternal inconvenience to me,’ he said churlishly.

‘Dear me, Ephraim… You and your big bleeding heart… how do you cope?’ she snapped. She reached out her hand. ‘I promise I’ll make sure nothing happens to Katya’s painting. And I want you to publicly disavow the New Family Act and deliver Narcissa into our care.’

He stood up and took her hand in his. She could now feel his blueness burgeoning. Surging towards her. Up to now he'd been restrained, but his composure was slipping.

‘I can’t vouch for anything that happens to Katya INSIDE the painting. I want that crystal clear between us,’ she said.

‘None of us can reach her, Hermione. We have our limits,’ he said wearily. She tried to pull her hand away but his firm grasp tightened. ‘We should do this more often…’

‘Argue in parks?’ She remembered their encounter in Golden Square in London. ‘I’d rather not.’

‘I mean, work things out… together.’

She leant closer and he bent his ear towards her. ‘You’re a murderer. And you’ve hurt people I love. You deserve to go to jail… and one day soon, you will.’

XXX

‘Oh my god! This place is amazing!’ Gwen exclaimed. She was holding Oleg’s hand so tightly he was grimacing. ‘And everyone’s dressed so funny! Sort of fuddy-duddy.’

Of all the days that Gwen could have ventured into Hogsmeade – her first taste of what the real magical world looked like – it was the one time when witches and wizards had rocked up in elaborate, old-fashioned robes and the High Street leading through the village was a sea of traditional pointy hats.

Hogsmeade had always skewed ‘conservative’, Hermione thought, but today felt like an Historical Re-enactment. After all, a core message in Ephraim’s election campaign was the ‘preservation of their magical heritage.’

Oddly, the movement’s leader was wearing a Muggle suit and tie.
Hermione spotted Ephraim talking with Torquil as they headed towards the park opposite the Post Office. From their vantage point at the junction by Scrivenshaft’s, she could see the stage from where Ephraim would address the sizeable crowd waiting for him.

‘Wish I’d seen this place before the fire,’ Gwen said sorrowfully.

Hogsmeade’s thatched roofs had been patched up with wooden bric-a-brac and canvas and the timbers above the shop-fronts were blackened and broken. Ephraim’s campaign team had strewn brightly-coloured banners along the High Street and pennants adorned with Ephraim’s smiling features rippled in the breeze - but nothing could disguise Hogsmeade’s dishevelled state of disrepair. A few shops were open but most were boarded-up. Instead, a line of market stalls choking the main commercial artery threaded through the village.

Hermione could see why Madam Puddifoot had been so annoyed with Ephraim. He was Mayor but not much had been done…

‘Right, guys!’ Briek declared, rubbing his hands with mischievous glee. ‘Ephraim’s on stage… I’ll strike up the band the moment he starts talking!’

‘Everyone got leaflets and badges at the ready?’ Tansy Pintucket shouted, jumping up and down like an over-excited leprechaun.

Dennis looked small and pale… Briek was promising a grand finale – some kind of stunt. He looked like he was having second thoughts.

Neville – almost unrecognisable under his heavy disguise - shuffled past and stuffed a wadge of ‘Creevey: A Class Act!’ flyers into Hermione’s hands with an apologetic smile. Hermione ran after him and shoved the leaflets back… ‘No, Neville… I’m doing something with Draco and Harry!’

Neville shook his head irritably. ‘Why’s everyone got a bloody excuse?’

‘I actually DO,’ she said, lowering her voice. ‘We’re meeting Narcissa at Madam Puddifoot’s.’

‘Think I might go and listen to Ephraim,’ Agatha said, vanishing her pile of leaflets with a flick of her wand. ‘I’ll write a stinging review of his speech in *Sub Rosa*!’ She tripped down the road to the surging mass streaming into the park. Hermione thought – fuchsia-pink hair, an excessively pointed nose and a pair of orange floral dungarees. Hardly subtle… Hermione had decided on the less is more approach, taming her trademark wild hair and covering it with an emerald green bandana. She had no intention of mixing with Ephraim and the Blasters anyway.

‘Where’s Bill got to?’ Neville asked Ginny irritably.

‘Oh, he’s working with Fleur and Ernie on the *Big P*.’ Somehow, this had become code for Project Salvedra…

‘And Gunter?’

‘Doing stuff with Niko,’ Elizaveta drawled. ‘Important stuff.’

Neville opened his mouth to reply but the fierce opening chords from Briek on his ‘electric’ guitar drowned him out…

Hermione could hear Ephraim’s voice booming from the park and a chorus of whoops and cheers… followed by a rhythmic chant: ‘WE HAVE A RIGHT TO EXIST!’ repeated over and
‘Let battle commence!’ Ginny declared.

‘I’ve got a headache,’ Gwen said five minutes later. Briek had already drawn quite a crowd, but Ephraim still had the lion’s share – although there had been bursts of booing from time to time and a peculiar-sounding drumbeat.

‘Pots and pans,’ Hannah explained. ‘Bunch of shopkeepers are really pissed that Ephraim’s barely been here since the fire… They’re staging a protest.’

‘Excellent,’ Hermione beamed. She checked her watch. Draco and Harry had been ‘planning’ their rescue of Narcissa in the Hog’s Head Inn for over an hour now…

‘Can we go for a walk?’ Gwen asked. Hermione could see that Oleg was busy doling out leaflets and engaging some middle-aged witches in twinkly-eyed banter.

‘Draco will be here soon…’ But Gwen was looking a little pasty. ‘Okay. Come on.’

Hermione turned her head away as they walked past a pack of Blasters in full ‘Knight’ regalia standing outside the entrance to the park. They watched Briek’s pop-up concert with derisory sneers. Briek’s audience was now dancing and he was conjuring balloons and birds. More and more of Ephraim’s crowd filtered past the Blasters, keen to see what was going on.

A couple of Blasters slowed as Hermione passed them on the hill. Charlie Dowson – Ron’s erstwhile ‘Clifftopping’ buddy – soon strode past, but Cormac McCaggen squinted after her as they wound their way through the market stalls, past The Three Broomsticks.

Hermione and Gwen soon reached the edge of the village and the crowds had dissipated, although the competing noise of Ephraim’s declamatory tones and Briek’s raucous guitar echoed off the mountains surrounding Hogsmeade.

Hermione looked towards the rough, scrubby fields and hedgerows and the twisting country lane leading into the mountains.

‘What the hell is that?’ Gwen asked. She pointed to a gnarled-looking, wooden building.

‘Oh! The Shrieking Shack. Do you want to take a look?’

Gwen blinked rapidly. ‘It’s like a blurry tapestry… all browns and greens.’

Hermione regarded her with concern. ‘Can you see the road leading round the village?’

‘Sort of…’ Gwen looked back into Hogsmeade. ‘It’s clearer there.’ She walked towards it but stumbled.

Hermione quickly slipped her arm around her waist. ‘Are you alright?’

‘I’m good,’ she said, but there was a blood-smear under her nose.

‘Gwen… you’ve got a nose-bleed.’

Gwen rubbed her nose and a slick trail of blood stained her hand. ‘Bit dizzy, actually.’

‘Come on, let’s get you sat down,’ Hermione said, easing her through the crowd spilling out of the park towards The Three Broomsticks.
It had to be the anti-Muggle charms, Hermione thought despondently. They’d been souped-up to an unpleasant degree.

The bar and lounge were already heaving and it was very noisy, so Hermione coaxed Gwen onto a chair at the edge of The Three Broomsticks beer garden.

At that same moment a band garbed as minstrels with long snowy white beards that curled to the floor struck up.

‘Oh god,’ Gwen groaned. ‘I’m allergic to folk music.’

‘Okay… let’s go find Oleg…’

Gwen shook her head. ‘Can I just rest a minute?’

‘Of course.’ Except Hermione was also due to meet Draco and Harry at Madam Puddifoot’s. ‘I’ll go to the bar.’

Hermione could barely hear herself think over the din of the folk band and the high-spirited braying crowd now streaming inside… but then another noise sent her heart-rate soaring. A screech of bagpipes and a ferocious roaring… followed by piercing cries.

There was a stampede of people charging past The Three Broomsticks… but this was followed by hearty laughter and a crowd, six-deep, was now blocking the main entrance to the pub.

Hermione hastened to the door.

A blaze of colour was fast approaching… an elaborately conjured dragon, snapping and snarling with giant golden teeth. The dragon danced to the piper’s discordant tune and blew puffs of scarlet smoke towards the crowd of onlookers.

As the dragon hooved into view, Hermione was horrified to see a small, blonde figure astride the dragon waving a banner: ‘Creevey: A Class Act!’

Dennis was shouting in a high, pipsqueak voice to a mixture of cheers and jeers. Hermione flushed with second-hand embarrassment and had to turn away.

‘THIS IS A FREE COUNTRY!’ Dennis shrilled in defiance as a line of Blasters quickly took up positions in front of the crowd, halting the dragon’s progress.

‘Is that him?’ Gwen said, nudging Hermione in the ribs and pointing into the crowd.

‘Why aren’t you sitting down?’ Hermione asked, aghast. Gwen had so much blood on her face it looked like her nose had exploded. Hermione instantly conjured a handkerchief.

‘The bloody band…’ Gwen said. She tottered a little…. But a fast approaching blaze of blue had caught Hermione’s attention.

‘Take this!’ Hermione said, instantly pulling off her bandana. The ONE person she didn’t want to see Gwen had sauntered through the crowd and was just a few feet away.

‘Your drink, sir,’ said a voice Hermione recognised as Hilary Osgood. He handed Ephraim a pint of ale.

‘Quick. Let’s get back inside,’ Hermione hissed.
'Yeah… but that's him, isn't it? The bad guy,' Gwen said, slurring her words.

Hermione noticed a tall figure peeling away from the line of Blasters. ‘The guitar-man. Briek Bertel… Not licensed, sir,’ Carmichael said in officious tones.

‘Oh, it’s just a bit of fun,’ Ephraim said, seemingly jocular, although Hermione could sense he was seething.

‘And there’s rumours Longbottom’s been spotted, too…’

‘MR GOLOWITZ!’ Dennis yelped in a squeaky falsetto from his dragon… It had stopped jigging up and down and was drooping a little. ‘I demand hustings! A chance for us to debate the issues, not least your disgusting views on Muggle-borns and equal rights! Do you accept my challenge?’

The crowd fell silent awaiting Ephraim’s response.

‘You're labouring under a serious misapprehension, Mr Creevey,’ Ephraim beamed. ‘My first task as Minister will be to revoke these ghastly, inhumane laws that our former Minister imposed on us…’

Dennis shuffled uncomfortably on his dragon as a murmur of excited chatter and mocking laughter rippled through the crowd.

‘And I’ll abolish the Deviants Register, too! It’s a blot on our common humanity…’ Ephraim continued.

Hermione noticed some of the Blasters looking disgruntled to hear this.

‘But what of your slaughter of innocent Muggles? The evil that is Dark Flux? Muggles, today… Muggle-borns, tomorrow! You are a man without morals!’ Dennis persisted bravely. Too brave, Hermione thought, judging by the way the Blasters were now consulting with each other and wands were being twitched into itching palms.

Better he stopped now… and she summoned a wisp of colour-magic. Dennis opened his mouth to speak but a puzzled look stole over his face… He looked abashed and incongruous on his dragon, its tail thrashing, curling eddies of crimson smoke swirling into the sky, blood-red threads gyrating higher and higher…

Hermione sensed Ephraim glance in her direction, so she ducked behind a beefy-looking wizard in an oversized hat…

‘These allegations are an abomination!’ Ephraim bellowed back.

Some in the crowd applauded… but there were also voices of dissent, getting louder, more strident. An ugly row was breaking out.

A clip-clop of metallic heels resounded as the Blasters filed into position; some faced Dennis, while others formed a line of defence against the heaving crowd.

‘This could turn nasty,’ Hermione said to Gwen… but there was no reply. She’d vanished…

Hermione ran through the bar to the Beer Garden. The folk band was still gurning and wailing with an unwieldy mechanical instrument wheezing in accompaniment.

She wasn’t here…
Hermione scampered back inside, almost knocking over Portia Witchell, screeching with laughter with a gaggle of witches at the bar.

Back to the open doorway…

‘Do we arrest him, sir?’ someone in full Blaster apparel was asking. It was Edgar Rosier – Angelina’s ex-lover.

‘Can’t you see I’m busy?’ Ephraim said in reproachful tones.

‘Sorry, sir.’

‘Manage the crowd… Creevey’s retreating.’

Hermione looked left and down and felt physically sick. Gwen was slumped on the ground, blood splattered across her cheeks and jaw, being held upright by Ephraim. He was dabbing her face with a blood-soaked handkerchief.

‘Do we get a healer?’ asked another Blaster.

‘No! No need!’

Hermione held back, lurking behind the beefy wizard who was watching this scene with round-eyed fascination.

A troupe of Blasters marched past, faces rigid with grim intent.

There was a sudden commotion and a group of people surged towards The Three Broomsticks. Blasters immediately formed a barrier between the pub and the street.

‘Where is he?’ screamed a woman who Hermione recognised as the owner of Honeydukes. ‘We demand to speak to Golowitz!’

‘Seeing as he won’t come and see us, we’ve come to HIM,’ added another.

It was now the turn of a man who usually worked at the Post Office. ‘Paid loads into a bloody restoration fund… and not a single sickle spent!’ He turned to the crowd and cracked a joke – greeted by hoots of laughter, but also outraged cries. ‘Gerroff me!’ he squealed, as a Blaster, hidden under his helmet, hoisted him by the elbow and threw him to the ground.

‘Sir! What do we do?’ Rosier asked urgently…

‘Move this woman indoors,’ Ephraim said. ‘Then shut them up…’

Hermione cringed as Rosier and another Blaster – Jervis Scrimshaw - pulled Gwen from the ground and moved her inside.

‘Where’s our money? What you done with it?’ a woman was shrieking. She started to bang two saucepans together – loud, clamorous, jarring – and others followed suit…

Hermione took a deep breath, trying to stem a surge of rising panic inside of her.

Head down, she darted into The Three Broomsticks. But she could sense Ephraim was in close pursuit behind her… She pushed through the horde of revellers milling at the bar but her access to the garden was closed off by a gang of Ephraim’s supporters waving pennants and cheering with gusto as the man himself advanced towards them.
‘Excuse me… please… sorry, do you mind?…’ Hermione twisted herself into the thinnest version of herself possible and squeezed between the posse of whooping fans and the doorpost into the fresh air outside.

Gwen was draped across a bench. ‘This fucking music,’ she groaned.

High-pitched screaming echoed from the High Street, roars of anger, the fizz and wallop of spells, stunners whumping into buildings. Pandemonium…

‘Oh no,’ Hermione sighed, feeling like her heart might fall through her feet. It had kicked off…

Gwen tried to sit up but flopped forwards, caught in the nick of time as Hermione fell to her knees. ‘I’m so sorry…’ Hermione said, trying to sound calm even though she was shaking. ‘Are you okay to side-Apparate?’

Who had the Portkeys? It had to be Elizaveta, but there’d be a spare. Draco….

And the moment she thought that, she remembered Narcissa...

The ruckus from the street had spilled into the bar. Thrashing pans and scuffling, shattered glass, repeated thuds and furniture being scraped across the floor, followed by a blood-curdling cry.

‘Bugger,’ Gwen said, trying to smile as she wiped blood from her face. ‘Looks like I’m allergic to magic, too…’

‘No… it’s a spell. But it’s been—’ But Hermione couldn’t finish her sentence because Gwen lurched forwards and vomited…

A gush of blood shot onto Hermione, the rest landing on a pair of highly polished shoes.

‘No. Not you,’ Hermione moaned.

Ephraim crouched down beside her. ‘Looks like you need some help.’

Hermione’s face contorted in fury. ‘Just… Fuck off!’

Ephraim smirked. ‘You really shouldn’t bring Muggles here… International Statute and all that…’

As if in response, Gwen vomited again. Hermione frantically tried to clean her up but it was a losing battle.

‘Let me…’ Ephraim said. And he breezed his hand through the air. It crackled blue and Hermione’s clothes were clean and Gwen was sat upright, blinking rapidly and breathing hard. Ephraim narrowed his eyes as he looked at her and she knew in that instance he’d spotted Gwen’s resemblance to Anna.

He cocked his head at Hermione. ‘Related?’

A violent burst of anger exploded inside of her.

‘She’s my cousin… And if your meddling with the anti-Muggle protection charms here has hurt her in ANY way I will fucking kill you!’

‘How many times do I have to tell you, my love,’ Ephraim said, looking like he was enjoying himself, ‘I would never hurt someone you care about.’
‘But you just have! Like all these things… whether it’s a charm or a deadly fucking weapon, they
don’t discriminate! She should be fine in Hogsmeade if she’s with someone magical. She certainly
shouldn’t be dizzy and vomiting blood… something’s changed!’ She glared daggers at him. ‘Or
maybe being with a measly Muggle-born doesn’t qualify as magical enough… is that it?’

‘I did what you asked of me!’ Ephraim retorted, his eyes blazing blue. ‘I said I’d revoke those
laws.’

‘But did you mean it?’

‘Why else would I say it?’

‘You say a lot of shit, let’s face it!’ came Draco’s voice behind them. Hermione almost fainted
with relief, but then remembered that the Blasters were looking for him. ‘You said my mother
would be here! Where the fuck is she?’

Ephraim stood up to face him. His blueness was irradiating off him… His eyes burned
dangerously.

‘Blimey, Gwen,’ Oleg said in a concerned voice, folding her into his arms. ‘What happened here?’

‘The anti-Muggle charms appear to have gone nuclear,’ Hermione said abrasively with a savage
look at the Mayor of Hogsmeade.

‘Where’s my fucking mother?’ Draco repeated, prodding Ephraim in the chest. ‘We had a deal.’

Hermione could see Karl had slipped out of the pub and was watching them, wand in hand.

‘I haven’t seen her for two days.’

‘Why didn’t you say that last night?’ Hermione asked tetchily.

‘I hadn’t seen her yesterday… or the day before, actually. That can sometimes happen...’

Draco snorted in disgust. ‘The loving husband, eh?’

A piercing cry penetrated through the raucous mayhem…

Draco nodded towards the sound. ‘Your world’s about to go to shit, Mister Mayor,’ he said
scathingly. ‘You’d better shape up.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Ephraim asked, bristling with indignation.

‘Poor ole Madam Puddifoot. Sliced into pieces and her teashop trashed – every last fucking inch of
it!’ Draco yelled in his stepfather’s face.

‘What the hell happened?’ Ephraim asked, mouth was tight with tension.

‘No fucking idea, but I bet YOU do!’

‘Why WOULD I?’

‘Draco…’ Hermione said, putting her hand on his arm.

The cacophony of voices in the street suddenly began to crescendo and a further rally of shots was
being fired; crowds screaming, scattering…
There was a spluttering and a racking cough from the bench behind them.

Ephraim snapped his eyes to Gwen and then to Hermione. ‘You’d better get out of here.’

‘Where’s Harry?’ Hermione asked Draco urgently.

‘Outside… trying to calm things down.’

Hermione looked towards the exit. ‘Don’t even think about it!’ Ephraim warned. ‘The Blasters are in a mood for sparring and will arrest Draco given half a chance. I’ll give you five minutes head—’

But Hermione sprinted into the bar and pushed through the scrummage to the front door.

She could see Harry in the thick of the crowd, arguing with the Blasters.

She ran towards him, but the crowd was suddenly in full motion, flailing and shoving, and Dennis’s dragon – without its rider – was launching itself at them. There were shouts and screams and fists were flying and a burst of magic whizzed across the top of the crowd. More wands were drawn…

‘Harry!’ Hermione yelled.

But he didn’t hear her.

Hermione felt herself being lifted up by the pulsating crowd and then dashed to the ground. She looked up at the blur of faces and limbs - faces she recognised, faces distorted with fear and fury.

A white streak crashed into her vision and Draco was scooping her into his arms as boots struck her on all sides, knees jammed into her face and bodies fell across her…

‘STOP!’

A voice thundering through the madness.

‘STOP FIGHTING!’

It was Harry.

They had to hear him. To listen…. Hermione thought, and she imagined a soft damask rose and a field of violets – like the field on the clifftops at Shell Cottage … She closed her eyes and exhaled… and when she flipped her eyes open again, a sea of flowers was falling from the sky like rain.

She could feel Draco’s arms around her and Harry close by, and every sinew and cell of her body was bursting with magic. She breathed it in and the heavens were falling… flowers of every size, shape and hue. Sweet-smelling fragrance filling the air... Roses, peonies, tulips, violets, sunflowers… soft and cool against her cheek and forehead.

Draco laughed and the flowers fell thicker and faster.

The crowd gazed upwards, silent, enraptured.

‘Hey!’ Harry called out and his voice rang out loud and clear. ‘Everybody! Put your wands down…’

‘Is it true about Madam Puddifoot, Harry?’ came an anguished cry.
'Yes, I’m afraid it is. She’s been murdered.'

An audible hiss of fear and anxiety swept through the crowd.

‘No one knows what’s happened yet… so the best thing to do is stay calm. Let the Aurors do their job.’

There was a click of heels and movement. Hermione dragged her eyes away from Harry – who was standing a few feet away, his back to her. She could sense Ephraim was by the door of The Three Broomsticks. A troupe of Blasters had peeled off and was now marching through Hogsmeade – no doubt to check out Madam Puddifoot’s on his instruction.

‘Fighting between yourselves is never the way,’ Harry said quietly. ‘If you have grievances – as many of you do – and if you fear things you’ve read in *Sub Rosa*, things I know to be true, then you know what to do. You VOTE. The best way to ensure justice is done is to have a peaceful, fair election.’

Harry gradually inched backwards towards them but was struggling to make headway as so many people were asking him questions.

Hermione could see Ephraim watching Harry. His face was white with cold-blooded fury and his eyes gleamed fierce cobalt-blue.

‘Come on… let’s get out of here,’ Harry said gruffly, sinking to his knees. Draco pulled out his Portkey and they were gone.

XXX

‘What the hell were you thinking with the fucking dragon?’ Harry yelled at Briek when they got back to The Blue House.

‘It was meant to be fun and festive… it’s not our fault there was a terrible murder and the shopkeepers were in revolt!’

‘Briek’s right,’ Hermione murmured, even though she agreed the dancing dragon was ludicrous...

Gwen, thankfully, had recovered the moment she left Hogsmeade.

‘Do you think what happened will affect things with me and Oleg?’ she asked Hermione once they were alone in the kitchen.

‘No! Why should it?’

‘Because… Alfred and I, well, we love your world. But it’s kind of… exclusive, isn’t it?’ She looked so sad and crumpled Hermione felt like bursting into tears.

‘Listen. If you and Oleg get on, stick with it. Find a way!’ She threw her arms around her cousin and held on tight. ‘Don’t give up.’

‘On the bright side… at least I’d avoid those HIDEOUS clothes,’ Gwen smiled with a shudder.

Draco came in. ‘Wouldn’t mind heading back soon.’

‘Tuyen’s outside with the kids,’ Gwen smiled. ‘You okay, Draco?’

Draco gave her a defeated look. ‘If my mother’s seriously gone AWOL I haven’t a clue where to
We’ll find her,’ Hermione said in soothing tones. She pushed his hair off his forehead and kissed him.

And she’s not well…’

Which means we have to find her quickly… let’s get home, get ourselves sorted, and get started.’

Anyone seen Scorpius?’ Arlene said, moving from room to room with a worried frown.

Hermione’s stomach instantly turned over.

Don’t panic,’ she advised Draco. ‘I think I know where he is…’

XXX

Scorpius was staring at the painting with a perplexed expression.

How’s your day been?’ Hermione smiled, sitting down beside him.

Bit weird,’ he said. He tried to smile but his mouth drooped down instead. ‘Are we going home now?’

Yes. It’s been a long day.’

You look tired,’ he said, laying his head against her. She gently smoothed her fingers through his hair and sighed contentedly.

There’s no one there anymore… She’s gone.’

A spasm of alarm rocked through her…

Scorpius jolted upright. ‘What did I say? What happened?’

Hermione turned and stared at the painting. ‘Have you seen Magda?’

She’s with Kek and Tien… they’re in the nursery.’

Good…’ A thought occurred to her. ‘Scorpius. Can you do me a favour?’

She explained what she wanted him to do in as calm a way as possible.

This might help,’ he said, showing her a music-box. ‘I found it in the eaves.’

Perfect! I’ll only be five minutes.’

Okay,’ he said coolly.

Scorpius turned the handle on the music-box and a sweet, tinkling little chime struck up.

Hermione entered the painting.

XXX

Compared to the day she’d had the tear-shaped lake with its pretty little tower was blissfully serene. She couldn’t remember if it had always been so hazily beautiful… the soft veil of drizzle
that dappled her cheeks was oddly comforting.

The tower looked still and quiet.

Hermione inched her head inside the open side-door … Nothing. No crying. No plaintive sobbing… And neither was there a feeling of depthless gloom or a sense that if she ventured up the dark, spiral staircase she wouldn’t ever leave again.

So, she walked up, surprised how cold she felt considering she didn’t actually have a physical body.

She entered a small circular room and gazed around at pale stone walls, blank and featureless. A low, pine-framed bed was pushed against the wall. The bed was neatly made with white, lace-trimmed covers. There was a narrow, lead-latticed window framed by two plain white curtains. A chair was placed nearby, overlooking the lake and the grey haze beyond.

There was nobody here. No sign that anyone had ever been here… even so, an icy trickling sensation shuddered through her, as though somebody was silently watching…

‘Where are you?’ she said out loud, almost to dispel the sensation.

‘She’s not here,’ came a familiar voice from behind her. The room fell into shadow, blocked by a figure in the doorway.

Hermione spun around to face Dolores.

‘Oh, no,’ she gasped, tears pricking her eyelids. It had been her, all along… this was her destiny, her doom. Dolores was here to trap her.

Dolores’s darkly handsome features creased into a smile and her large, black eyes glinted in amusement.

‘No, Hermione, you must not be fearful,’ she said in her rich, guttural voice. ‘Katya has gone. It is true. She is now of your world… I am here to prepare for her replacement.’

Hermione was so frightened she was unable to speak. Her insides felt like they had dissolved and her lips were quivering. ‘Please, Dolores… I have people I love.’

Dolores moved deeper into the room. ‘I always knew… I see things…’ She arched a thin, dark eyebrow and gave Hermione a penetrating look. ‘You refuse to believe but you should… you truly should.’

Hermione defiantly shook her head. ‘No. I believe we fight our fate. We work it to our own ends.’

‘Perhaps… but just think, Hermione, when you and Draco came to my house in Santa Maria… if you’d fought the fate I foresaw for you back then, for you BOTH, you’d have lost incalculable happiness… I knew to say nothing.’ She gazed down at Hermione… and yes, Hermione realised it was definitely down, because Dolores seemed to have grown in stature, in magnitude, swelling with power.

‘And now you want to divide us? Did you always see that, too?’

Dolores burst into loud, ribald laughter that seemed to bounce off the walls and swirl around the room. ‘This is not your fate, Hermione… we found another. Although you would be a loss to Ephraim, that is true. He has become dangerously dependent on seeking your good opinion… you
are the ruin of him.’

‘But – who then?’ Even as she said it, Hermione knew…

‘A man’s wife is something to be cherished. Someone to be missed.’

‘No… you see Ephraim doesn’t LOVE Narcissa. He used her! Please…. Dolores. I beg you!’ Hermione pleaded. ‘She hasn’t been feeling well and she lost the man she loves… the man she truly loves. And she has grandchildren and Draco… And he loves her very much!’

Dolores shook her head sadly. ‘You have a big heart, Hermione. It’s both the best and the worst of you. But Grandmaster has made his decision. And we will abide by it.’

‘Where is she?’

Dolores gave her an arch look. ‘I cannot answer such a thing! That would be foolish. But she is safe. In a liminal space. The place between. She will be prepared for the next phase of her existence… There’s no point trying to find her, Hermione! She can never leave this place… She’s not like you or I who can come and go as we please.’

‘It’s not fair. She’s done nothing wrong.’

‘But it is her destiny…’ Dolores smiled. ‘There are other plans for you, Hermione. Grandmaster has high hopes… He will come and take you. And there will be no denying him… there usually never is.’ Dolores heaved a regretful sigh and tossed her lustrous black hair.

This felt worse… ‘Are you here to take me to him? Because he can’t have me! That is NOT my fate, Dolores!’ A large tear rolled slowly down Hermione’s cheek and she thought of Scorpius sitting alone in the attic, studiously turning the handle on the music-box. Its mouse-like jingles seemed to fill the room…

Dolores looked her up and down, a slight taint of disapproval curling her lips. ‘You are not real, today… He will want you body and soul.’

‘Your child… Paco. Was he real?’

A shadow fell across Dolores’s face… ‘Not now… Not anymore. La Luz, Hermione… La Luz…’

XXX

Hermione opened her eyes and gasped and the chimes of the music-box faded away.

‘Your eyes are black,’ Scorpius said. He gently brushed her cheeks. ‘And you’ve been crying.’

She turned to him and hugged him tight. ‘Thank you.’

‘I wondered where you two were…’ Draco said tenderly. He was bowing his head to get through the door.

His face sagged when he saw the tears on Hermione’s face. In two steps he was with her. She could feel his whiteness spinning round and round – and yet he was somehow calming, too.

‘There you are!’ Rose cried to Scorpius, straight after. He instantly leapt off the sofa and they were gone, leaving Draco gazing at Hermione, his eyes a soft warm grey, and her heart turned over…

He cast a cursory side-glance at the painting. ‘She’s gone hasn’t she?’ he said in low tones. ‘I can
feel it.’

‘Yes…’

He chewed his lower lip, worried. ‘Meaning she’s… back. And…’

She rested her hand on his and held his gaze and he closed his eyes as the truth dawned… and when he opened them again, they were glistening with unshed tears.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“RADIATE" by MARANTA

“WHAT A WONDERFUL WORLD" by LOUIS ARMSTRONG

“BEGGIN’" by FRANKIE VALLI

“FREE MONEY” by PATTI SMITH

"SHE’S IN PARTIES" by BAUHAUS

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
The Pig

Chapter Summary

Smoked… and Mirrors

58. The Pig

Ron had the latest Ministry update on Madam Puddifoot’s murder and had called an emergency meeting at The Blue House.

‘Carmichael says she was definitely murdered BEFORE Ephraim’s rally. Early hours of Sunday morning…’

‘Who do they think did it?’ Harry asked, snaffling one of Arlene’s famous cookies from a heaped plate on the kitchen table.

‘Usual bullshit. Foreign agents… One thing’s for sure, it was brutal. Scrimshaw said he’d never seen anything like it.’

‘Yeah, it was fucked-up,’ Draco frowned. ‘Place was shredded. And… bits scattered everywhere.’

This didn’t sit well with Hermione’s breakfast from a few hours ago.

Molly blanched. ‘Are you suggesting she was dismem—?’

‘Yes,’ Ron said abruptly.

‘If the place was shredded… it sounds like her attackers were looking for something,’ Hermione said, looking at Draco.

‘You’re thinking Sylvestra, aren’t you?’

‘It’s logical… If Sylvestra wanted Anna’s papers, Katya knew where they are - hidden in a painting at Madam Puddifoot’s.’

‘Are you saying Draco’s wife TOLD Sylvestra where to find this picture?’ Neville asked.

‘She wouldn’t need to. Sylvestra’s a brilliant Legilimens…’

‘Assuming Madam Puddifoot was tortured, let’s hope she didn’t tell Sylvestra that she gave Katya’s painting to Angelina and Hermione,’ Harry said ominously.

A sullen silence descended on the table.

‘This is a rather grisly line of thought,’ Thelonious said, gently prefacing what he was about to say… ‘but it sounds like Madam Puddifoot died DURING torture, so it’s unlikely she revealed anything.’

‘S’pose there’s no point chopping someone up once they’re dead,’ Ron said dismally.
‘As a precaution I think we move Binta and Anna’s papers out of The Blue House,’ Hermione said to Bill.

‘I agree – but we’re a bit tight on space here.’

‘She could stay at my parents’ house? It’s quiet and there’s a spare room.’

Bill nodded in agreement.

‘Has Sylvestra said anything on the Corundum?’ Harry asked Thelonious.

‘Not a dicky bird.’

‘What about Selwyn Haast?’ Hermione asked. He'd been present when Sylvestra negotiated Katya's release with Dolores.

‘Nothing. In fact it’s gone rather quiet… suspiciously so. There was something a few days ago from that guy in Egypt. Josep. Something about shipping…’

‘The Alaydaa…’ Draco said gloomily. ‘Hassan says they’ve been leaving Akhr Makan.’

‘What’s Alaydaa?’ Molly asked querulously.

‘A militia unit. Josep’s commander-in-chief.’

‘I wonder where they’re going?’ Hermione fretted.

‘We shouldn’t rule out Ephraim as a suspect in Madam Puddifoot’s murder,’ Neville said, rowing back. ‘She gave him grief over this restoration business.’

‘Tad extreme to torture her to death though,’ Bill said, looking sickened.

‘This wasn’t Ephraim,’ Hermione said. ‘He was shocked Madam Puddifoot was murdered.’

‘He didn’t know,’ Draco agreed reluctantly.

‘Seems like Ephraim doesn’t know a lot of things these days,’ Neville said, a bemused expression on his face.

‘He’s being cut out of the loop,’ Hermione said definitively. ‘I chose not to tell Ephraim that Sylvestra’s traded Katya behind his back. I didn't want him working out we have Magda… and Anna’s papers. But if he knows Sylvestra's freelancing, he'll question her loyalty… any bust-up and this lot could tear themselves apart.’

‘Do you want me to set something up?’ Neville asked.

Draco folded his arms and glared.

‘I’ll meet him in the pictures…’ Hermione decided.

XXX

Ephraim stood at the entrance to Katya’s tower and listened.

‘Nothing…’ he said soberly. ‘She’s gone.’

‘Dolores said Narcissa will take her place. But the tower’s still empty…’
Ephraim wandered away from the tower to the lakeside. ‘Well, she hasn’t been fixed yet.’ He gazed into the murky, brown water. Rain pitter-pattered onto the lily-pads and the surface of the water was a swirl of widening concentric circles. ‘There’s an in-between stage. A sort of… limbo.’

‘A blank canvas…’

Ephraim swivelled to look at her. ‘How do you know that?’

‘Salvedra tried to put me in a picture.’ Hermione chilled at the memory.

Ephraim regarded her curiously. ‘I guess you’d be quite the prize. A powerful Muggle-born with colour-magic. That’s unusual.’

‘I doubt it,’ Hermione retorted, irritated by his inference. ‘Anyway. Dolores says he wants me. But not to frame me. Not anymore.’

Ephraim’s colour throbbed to such a degree Hermione could barely see him beyond a foggy blue miasma.

‘Do you know about the work he’s doing at Akhr Makan?’ she asked.

‘He’s had a presence there for many years … since before we were born. But Gilgad modernised the site, I suppose. It’s a Centre for Excellence.’

‘Excellence… Is that what you call it?’ Hermione said sniffily. ‘They ran tests on Harry. He’s never said what they did.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ Ephraim muttered darkly.

‘There were samples from Sylvestra, too.’

‘She’d have volunteered! She passionately supports his cause.’ Ephraim stared at the lake. ‘It’s best you don’t come into the pictures ALONE anymore, Hermione… it’s not safe.’

‘Oh, I’m fine like THIS… when I’m not actually real.’

Ephraim looked sceptical.

‘Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that Katya’s in OUR world and Narcissa is HERE.’ Hermione turned as if intending to go…

‘Wherever they’ve put Narcissa will be shielded,’ Ephraim said, drawing her back in. ‘Probably colour-magic… I’ll look for her. It’s important she’s found before she’s fixed.’

‘What difference will it make? Dolores says only those with colour-magic can pass between worlds, which means she’s stuck.’

‘Dolores lied…’ Ephraim said acerbically. ‘If Narcissa ends up in the tower then yes, she’s fixed. But not before.’ He gave her a shrewd look. ‘Which is why it’s incredible Katya’s been released. Only Salvedra could enable that… I’m guessing someone cut a deal? Katya in exchange for Narcissa?’

Hermione said nothing.

‘… which has me wondering how you knew about this, Hermione.’ He laughed, seemingly innocuous, but with an edge. ‘I suspect you want to tell me and this is the main reason I heard from
Neville.

‘It was Sylvestra.’

Ephraim raised his eyebrows and looked back to the lake, digesting this.

‘So you’ll probably be seeing Katya very soon, Ephraim.’

‘Not if she’s with Sylvestra,’ he said ruefully. ‘We’ve fallen out.’

‘Oh…’

‘Over a number of things, but mainly YOU.’

‘Me?’

‘She wants me to arrest you for treason.’

Hermione froze. ‘I hope you said no.’

‘Of course. Though I’m probably foolish not to.’ He gave her a regretful look. ‘There’s something you should tell Draco… It’s Milton. The gardeners at Malfoy Manor found his body… Most of it, anyway. He probably tried to defend Narcissa…’

‘I’ll tell him…’ Poor Scorpius, she thought… ‘Thanks…’

Hermione moved away but Ephraim stayed at her side as she drifted through the paintings.

‘When Salvedra tried to take you, how did you get out?’

‘Draco… don’t know how.’

‘Because he really wanted it.’ A smile flickered on Ephraim’s lips. ‘My stepson’s found himself through love… It’s peculiar. I feel both happy for him and furious all at the same time.’

‘Well, I’ll leave you to your psychological wrangling.’

But he continued to shadow her…

This was the flaw in the plan… Telling him to turn around and count to ten like they were in a game of hide ‘n’ seek wouldn’t cut it.

‘I’d like to meet again,’ Ephraim said.

‘If you find Narcissa…’

‘To talk.’

‘If I say yes, will you go away?’ she asked, exasperated.

‘If you promise…’

‘Okay – but I choose when!’

Ephraim beamed. ‘Good… Oh, how’s Gwen?’

‘Fine…’
‘She looks like Anna.’ His eyes twinkled. ‘Though her greatest attribute is her resemblance to yourself.’

XXX

‘Why promise him anything? The man’s a cunt.’

‘He’s looking for your mother. It’s good to encourage him.’

‘ENCOURAGE HIM? Ephraim doesn’t need fucking encouragement. He’s a sick bastard and he’s reeling you in!’

‘Not THAT type of encouragement…’

‘Should fucking hope not.’ Draco twisted around in bed and glared at her. ‘This whole thing - it’s making me mad as hell! I don’t want you sneaking into pictures being chummy with him! Is that clear?’

‘He had a right to know what’s happened. Katya and Sylvestra are his daughters!’

But Draco’s blood was up. He loomed over her.

‘Ephraim doesn’t have a right to ANYTHING! Let alone spending time with you.’

‘You’re being stupid!’ she hissed. ‘And don’t tell me what to do!’ She pushed him away.

Draco grabbed hold of her legs and held them still. ‘So you’re saying you WANT to spend time with him! Is that it?’ He stared at her, wild-eyed, face flushed. ‘Go ahead then! Fuck off to Ephraim!’

Hermione wriggled free and sat up. ‘How dare you!’

His eyes dropped to her body and Hermione blushed with sudden self-consciousness and folded her arms over her naked breasts.

‘I can’t stand the man! He makes me want to itch my skin off.’

‘Fucking crap way of showing it…’ Draco sneered peevishly. ‘You held hands with him the other night for two minutes and thirty-four seconds!’

‘I… WHAT?’ Hermione gaped at him. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘In the park. Your cozy chat.’

Hermione’s mouth dropped open. ‘You’re fucking mad! Delusional! You TIMED a handshake?’

She swung her legs off the bed…

‘Where are you going?’ he said, wrestling her back on.

‘There’s no point us talking about this, Draco…’ she said, feeling winded, and yet all too alive to the feeling of his hot skin against hers. ‘You’re paranoid. And that’s an end to it.’

‘I just… sense something,’ he said through gritted teeth, pushing her deeper onto the bed. She tried to sit up but he pinned her arms back, flat against the pillows and stared down at her.

She couldn’t stop gazing at his mouth. It was open, inviting.
'I don’t want you near him,’ he said.

‘It could be useful.’

‘You have a connection… And you don’t hate him enough,’ he said bitterly. ‘I can see your feelings, remember?’

‘And I can see yours…’ she sighed longingly. She trailed her eyes down his body. For all his fire and fury he was very aroused… ‘And I think we just fuck this one out…’

They locked eyes and a heated glow rose up his body into his face. ‘This is a real thing, Hermione. And it keeps happening… You can’t just SEDUCE me and it’s all okay. It doesn’t work like that.’

He looked down at her body beneath him and blew out his cheeks. ‘Actually… who am I fucking kidding?’ he groaned, ‘you fucking can…I’m so turned on here I can’t see straight.’

They fell into each other’s arms, clinging to each other desperately. His hands were strong on her body; a brutish strength that made her want to bite down on him… and he muscled his way between her legs and his mouth was on her neck.

She could still feel his anger pulsing, his whiteness bursting… a torrent of feeling. It rolled through him as he devoured her body with his mouth, raking his fingers through her hair, kissing her with intense, blinding passion. He grabbed her buttocks and thrust into her, battering her with hard-eyed rage and desire until she was moaning deliriously.

‘Oh god… you really are mad,’ she gasped in helpless exhilaration, feeling like she was melting from the inside out, barely able to catch her breath.

Something jolted within her. A dazzling, blinding whiteness… bathing them in light… They’d combined – BOTH their magic types shadowing and inflecting their every move, thought and feeling… notching up the intensity.

She was surprised the bed didn’t burst into flames and they didn’t leave scotch-marks on the sheets.

‘That was… primal,’ she panted afterwards - bodies intertwined, glistening with sweat.

‘What triggered us combining?’

‘I guess it was a super-charged moment of intensity? I don’t know…’

‘I’d like to,’ Draco said, a quizzical look on his face. ‘Because it’s not just colour-magic bonding. And it isn’t just sensory overload, or we’d be lighting up like fucking Christmas Trees every time we screwed.’

She nestled against his arm stretched out behind her on the pillow. They faced each other, just a few inches apart.

She could sense something else – uncertainty, insecurity.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, eventually.

‘For what?’

‘For being such a prick…’
'It’s okay,’ she smiled. ‘At least you know you WERE one.’

‘But… after, too. Having sex… I - I lost my head a bit… Worried I hurt you…’

She smiled, eyes glistening. ‘If you did, I’d have said.’ She stroked his cheek and hair and he momentarily closed his eyes, sighing in relief.

‘I’m just feeling a bit f*cked-up with everything… Like I want to kill the world…’ His eyes darkened. ‘It’s not fair for me to take that out on you.’

‘Well, you’ve good reason to feel angry. Your mother’s stuck in weirdo-land, and your son was abused, and deep down you think Ephraim killed your father… and… you’ve just lost a friend…’ she added in softer tones.

And his wife was back, but she didn’t want to get into that right now…

Draco turned and stared at the ceiling. A wave of sadness washed over him.

‘Milton. He was always - there.’

‘I know… And you’re allowed to be sad, Draco. You can’t be Mr Fucking Sort-it all the time… You can be whatever you want with me… I promise.’

XXX

Hermione found it hard to concentrate… her mind kept drifting to Draco.

Last night had turned into one of those nights…

At some point in the early hours their magic had combined AGAIN and they’d glowed so brightly she’d had to screw her eyes shut to ward off the glare.

‘Hermione!’ Ernie laughed. ‘We’ve asked you the same question FIVE times…’

Hermione jolted back to reality and Bill’s study, which was increasingly looking and smelling like a potions lab..

‘Sorry, was away with the fairies…’

‘Oh, is that what they call Draco these days,’ Fleur said with a sly smile.

‘What do you mean?’ Had she unconsciously said his name?

Fleur’s eyes sparkled mischievously. ‘You’re dog-tired and you keep sighing… and you’ve got a massive love-bite on your neck.’

Hermione’s hand shot to her neck in horror. She’d always HATED hickeys on other people…

‘Thought we were testing the Stypticon?’ Bill groused in abrupt tones behind them. He gave Hermione an unforgiving glare.

‘Mummy,’ came Hugo’s voice from the doorway. ‘Can we play in the pretty flower field? Magda likes the colours.’

‘Better you keep to the garden, dear.’
'It’s okay,’ Fleur said cheerfully, unfastening her apron. ‘I could do with a break. Where’s Aunty Gabby?’

‘She’s coming, too.’

Hermione slipped into Fleur’s place while Ernie carefully applied a spatula loaded with Stypicon Solution to a small blank canvas. Hermione cast a series of quick drying spells.

‘Might have gone a bit too thick…’ Ernie murmured, demonstrating his usual diligence, something that had impressed Hermione.

‘I’m popping up the village to make a few calls,’ Bill muttered.

Ten minutes later there was a loud bang from the kitchen and a shrill wail…

‘Mummy!’ screeched Hugo.

Hermione and Ernie dashed from the study almost colliding with Hugo. Magda was upside-down in his arms, wriggling like an eel, her hair grazing the floor.

Hermione scooped Magda out of harm’s way and clutched Hugo to her breast. ‘What’s happened? Where’s Aunty Fleur?’

Hugo was too convulsed to speak properly. His eyes were red and swollen and his face was awash with tears and mucus… ‘The men in things… they came…’

‘Where?’

‘Field.’

Hermione’s head felt hot and clouded – a whining sound echoed in her ears. Fleur and Gabrielle were out there and someone had come for them…

‘I’ll go!’ Ernie declared boldly.

‘No…’ I have colour-magic, she almost said… She planted a kiss on Hugo’s forehead. ‘Promise to stay with Ernie. Indoors.’ She mustered a smile, even though her heart was turning over.

She ran with a speed that made her sides ache even before she reached the boundary… She was gulping for air, screaming inside.

They’d been found – somehow they’d been found - and Hugo had run with Magda.

My boy. A hero, she thought.

She vaulted over the boundary wall, wand aloft, brimming with colour-magic…

Six Alaydaa in their metallic costumes and bug-eyed masks… two dead. And Gabrielle stretched out on the ground.

Four Alaydaa were charging at Fleur, pushing her towards the cliff-edge. She let off a sneaky Stupefy, knocking one to the ground, but without help she’d be a goner.

Go, Hermione whispered, imagining an Alaydaa falling through the sky…

Focus and flow…
With a blood-curdling yelp, two Alaydaa accelerated then lost their footing, screaming in fear as their feet skidded across the grass and their legs and arms cycled manically into empty space before gravity took over and they tumbled to the rocks and sea below.

‘Watch out!’ Fleur yelled as an Alaydaa fired a killing curse in her direction.

Hermione swerved and struck back, a ball of fire bursting from her wand, blasting the Alaydaa with such force his metallic smock smouldered. He screeched, a high-pitched whistling sound, but hit back immediately with a string of stunners that had her zig-zagging across the field to avoid them.

Fleur ran towards her but the Alaydaa she’d stunned grabbed her ankle.

Hermione was stuck. Should she defend Fleur or evade attack?

The Alaydaa didn’t give her a choice as he fell to one knee and aimed. A flurry of metal arrows arced over the field towards her…

Hermione immediately threw up a translucent shield and the arrows bounced noisily like fist-sized hailstones and clattered to the ground.

But the Alaydaa was determined. A second bout of arrows hurtled through the sky. And then another…

This was clearly a seasoned warrior, she thought… Power, stamina, skill…

She glanced at Fleur who was screaming at the top of her lungs and fighting with bare-teethed ferocity. Spell after spell slashing in a blizzard of light…

Hermione closed her eyes and imagined a wall, a cage… anything to fend off the Alaydaa who had his arm raised, ready to strike again… She dropped her shield, luring him in, and heard him muttering - a dark, bubbling sound.

An incipient shard of green sprang forth, unfurling in slow-motion… She slammed down hard in her head, like a guillotine, snapping the light from the world. A tunnelling blast smashed the green shoot into a pale puff of smoke and ripped into the Alaydaa, splintering him into thousands of pieces, like a smashed jar – glinting and dying in the sunlight.

Hermione stared ahead, panting loudly, barely able to believe what she’d done.

But there wasn’t time to think. Fleur had fallen to the floor and the Alaydaa threw himself at her, like a large, leaping locust. Fleur rolled sideways and the Alaydaa crashed to the ground but her wand was pointing straight at the Alaydaa and she cast a spell that had him thrashing and screaming – and then he stilled.

Fleur looked up, bereft, and stumbled towards her sister, tears streaming down her face.

Hermione joined them, fervently wishing her heart-rate would slow… sharply aware that the pretty, purple flowers were scuffed and ruined and that her body was aching terribly from the peculiar spell she’d unleashed to finish off her attacker.

Three men dead… What have I become?

‘Is she—?’

‘Not yet,’ Gabrielle groaned. Her gown was tattered and bloodied – a slashing spell of sorts had
done this to her, Hermione thought glumly. Fleur peppered her sister’s face with kisses and whispered in French.

Hermione quickly scanned the other Alaydaa for signs of life. Clean kills…

‘That was me,’ Gabrielle said. ‘Azkaban here I come.’

‘No,’ Fleur said, laughing and crying at the same time. ‘We’re French… we’d get posted back to Vendome… but they’d be too pissed to care.’

‘Where did they come from?’ Hermione asked, still shocked.

‘Nowhere!’ Fleur cried. ‘Literally nowhere!’ She picked up Magda’s white rabbit, ‘Houblon’, trodden into the ground. ‘Poor Magda. She’ll be wondering what the hell’s going on.’

XXX

‘I’ll have Rose and Hugo at Wisteria Cottage for a bit,’ Ron said. ‘For a bit of boring normality.’

Hermione didn’t feel emotionally equipped to argue. If that was best for the kids then so be it. On top of this, she was feeling exhausted...

But Rose surprised everybody by falling into loud paroxysms when the moment came to leave, throwing everything packed in her suitcase around the living-room.

Hermione tried to restrain her usually mild-mannered child but Rose was screaming in her face. This then triggered Magda who clearly felt crying was the ‘thing’ to do. She’d barely recovered from an earlier tantrum because she’d left poor Houblon, yet again, at Shell Cottage.

Scorpius watched from the sofa; silent, surly.

Draco quietly scurried around the room picking up Rose’s treasures, folding her clothes.

‘It’ll be nice,’ Parvati argued, a sweet smile on her face, but Rose wasn’t having it…

‘Scorpius and Magda come too,’ she sniffed.

Ron gave Hermione a desperate shake of the head… The ‘adults’ had already had this debate. Ron didn’t want to be responsible for somebody else’s children, especially those requiring a higher level of protection. Hermione saw his point…

‘You don’t want me,’ Rose whimpered.

‘Of course I do,’ Hermione said fighting tears.

‘But I can’t see what’s happening if I’m not here.’

‘That – that’s probably a good thing,’ Hermione said earnestly, shooting a glance at Ron who was holding Hugo’s hand.

‘Rose,’ Draco said in firmer tones. He knelt down and took her in his arms. ‘Everything here will be FINE. Scorpius is going to have a nice time and you’ll see each other in a few days…’ He looked up at Ron, arching his eyebrow, slightly antagonistic. ‘Won’t they? It’s a few days, that’s all.’

Arthur stepped forwards and replied for his son. ‘Yes. Definitely, Sunday…’
'Picnic on the beach at The Blue House,' Ron said cheerily to Rose and Hugo. ‘And we’re going to the Quidditch – Chudleigh Cannons are playing Kenmare Kestrels.’ He gave Draco an icy stare. ‘We can all go I suppose.’

But Rose vehemently shook her head. ‘Nope. Not The Blue House.’

‘The thing you’re scared of has gone…’ Draco said.

But she was adamant. ‘Worse thing.’

Draco looked unnerved. Maybe he actually believed Niko’s rubbish about Rose being a seer? Rose bent her mouth to Draco’s ear and whispered.

‘I’ll look after them, I promise,’ he said tenderly. He looked at Ron. ‘Should we give you our corundum so it’s easier to keep in touch?’

‘Got a better idea,’ Ron said, pulling something out of his pocket. Hermione recognised it as their two-way mirror. He sat next to Scorpius and put one half in his hand. ‘Now look at that…’ He gave the other half to Rose. ‘Okay, Munchkin. Say something.’

Rose looked in the mirror and pointed at Scorpius’s face. ‘I can see you!’ she squealed.

Scorpius fell about laughing and was sticking his tongue out and pulling faces into the mirror for the rest of the evening until Ron had taken the mirror from Rose’s hands when she climbed into her old bed at Wisteria Cottage and Scorpius was tucked up in his at Folkvangr.

XXX

Ernie raised his glass of wine and declared a toast, celebrating the ‘Big P.’

‘Does this mean you’ve - what was it again? – made an opaque picture?’ Agatha asked, wrinkling her nose in confusion. ‘Aren’t ALL pictures opaque?’

Fleur heaved an impatient sigh. ‘I’ve already explained this, Agatha…’

The sea was too chilly to swim but the sand was a firm butter-yellow – perfect for a game of football to burn off lunch. They had the beach to themselves courtesy of Muggle-repellent charms. Almost everyone was here – except Gunter and Elizaveta who were in Geneva. Even Harry’s children had come for the Quidditch match.

Seamus had scored tickets for most adults and the older children, but only five for the Kenmare home stand.

‘One of these is for me and one’s for Draco – there’s no way you can go in the Chudleigh end,’ he told Draco. ‘If your disguise slips, you’ll get torn to pieces…’

Molly reminded everyone not to get too engrossed in football as the Quidditch kicked off at five.

Most of the kids and half the adults were playing football. It was a warm afternoon and many of the men went topless; something Hermione found disorienting. Niko, for example, was almost impossible to talk to normally once she’d discovered that under his clothes he was the hairiest man she’d ever seen.

Hermione settled on the sand with a glass of wine but the wine made her feel queasy so she tipped it away.
‘When do you think Henrik and Parvati will get it on?’ Hannah asked. ‘I mean, look at them…’

Yet again Hermione felt a little chastened that she hadn’t noticed their obvious connection.

Angelina was scrutinising Henrik with fresh interest. ‘Got to say, that guy’s actually better-looking with his clothes off.’

Agatha side-eyed Hermione. ‘You’ve bagged the best bod, Hermione… you lucky thing.’

Her eyes followed Draco as he dribbled a ball along the shoreline…

‘I haven’t BAGGED anyone,’ Hermione said prissily, aware that Ron was just a few feet away chatting to Gwen.

‘Sounds like you’re having a lot of fun, though.’ Agatha flashed her a saccharine smile. ‘Parvati says your house isn’t very soundproofed…’

Hermione flushed scarlet, feeling a bit betrayed.

‘No one’s blaming you!’ Angelina chirped up. ‘He’s fit as fuck…’

‘Strange… because he was NOTHING at school,’ Hannah agreed in casual tones.

‘May I remind you? Hermione’s still married to my BROTHER,’ Ginny said tartly.

There was a scuff of hot sand and Draco slid to a stop in front of Hermione. He reached out his hand… ‘We’re swapping ends. Do you want to play?’

‘I’m wearing a dress! And I can’t do sports!’

‘Yes, you can… ’ he grinned. His hair was already brighter in the hot sun and his skin glowed. She’d thought it before, but warmth really suited him.

They walked towards the sea, hands bumping against each other.

He was holding a ball in the other hand and kept twirling it on his finger.

‘Show-off,’ she teased. He threw the ball at her and she batted it back catching him in the stomach. He fell to his knees and keeled over.

‘Oh god, I’m so sorry.’ And she knelt beside him, but he burst out laughing and dragged her onto the sand.

‘Draco, everybody’s here,’ she hissed as he gazed down at her.

‘Then let’s go somewhere they aren’t.’ He grabbed her hand and they ran along the water’s edge towards the neighbouring cove behind a length of rock, kicking up sand and splashing each other…

They were barely around the corner when he backed her up against the rocks and kissed her. The sun was warm on his bare back and she felt bubbly with excitement.

She fervently wished they were alone…

‘Sadly we’re not,’ he murmured.

‘Did you read my mind?’
He gave her a curious look. ‘Perhaps?’

‘Maybe that’s your particular colour-magic skill?’ she joked, ‘besides kicking the shit out of stuff.’

She snaked her arms around his neck and kissed him hard. His hands slipped under her dress and a warm, white balm wrapped itself tightly around them as they savoured their moment in the sun, reluctant to leave it.

‘We’re going!’ Harry called.

‘Where did you go?’ Ron asked as they strode up the beach. He was weighed down with blankets.

‘For a walk – it’s pretty here,’ Hermione said brightly.

‘Something’s up with Rose.’ Ron nodded to the far side of the beach. ‘Refuses to go back.’

‘What’s happened?’

‘Won’t say… won’t come to the Quidditch, either… Oi, Malfoy!’ Ron shouted at Draco as he walked towards Rose, ‘maybe you can talk some sense into her? … She’s taken a shine to him for some reason,’ Hermione heard Ron say to Ginny as they walked up the beach. ‘To be fair, Scorpius is a nice kid… What’s that bloody noise?’

A pealing, sing-song siren echoed along the coast road and an ice-cream van headed past, chiming tunelessly.

‘Better get a move on,’ Ron said. ‘The charms must have expired.’

XXX

‘Why’s there a PIG in the garden?’ Hermione cried when they got back to The Blue House.

The children were squealing hysterically as a runty pig cantered around the lawn, desperate to escape their attentions.

‘It was crying outside,’ Audrey sighed. ‘Seamus thinks it’s escaped from the pig farm over the hill. He’ll take it back later.’

Seamus was waving a voluminous, green hat shaped like a shamrock. ‘Draco! Got a hat for you!’

Hermione’s face cracked into a smile. ‘It can be part of your disguise.’

‘It’ll BE my disguise.’

Henrik was less keen to wear his shamrock hat and Scorpius and Alfred were barely visible under theirs. Everybody else was decked out in Chudleigh Cannons regalia. Henrik looked crestfallen when Audrey was a last-minute drop-out and gave Niko her ticket.

‘Get some rest, beautiful,’ Draco said as they left.

Rose heaved a sorry sigh and retired to the kitchen with a book.

Rose had asked Draco not to go to the Quidditch, wanting them all to return to Folkvangr. But Draco didn’t feel he could disappoint Scorpius and Hugo.

‘Arlene and Tuyen are putting up a paddling pool for the little ones if you want to join them?’
Hermione asked tentatively.

‘I’m fine.’

‘Are you coming outside?’ Dennis asked Hermione in buoyant tones. He was collecting butterbeers for his ‘campaign strategy’ meeting with Brick, Tansy, Neville and Ziff.

‘I might pop upstairs for a nap if that’s okay?’ Hermione yawned. ‘You going to be okay?’ she asked Rose, half-wondering if she should take Rose and Magda home. But Magda was happily splashing in the pool with the other toddlers.

‘I’ll be fine, Mummy. Go rest.’

XXX

Hermione jolted awake. There was a sharp, cracking sound followed by a long, rolling rumble and the net curtain twisted and swung as a strong gust of wind blew through the open window.

Hermione stumbled from Gwen’s bed to close the window and glimpsed Dennis heading into the wooded wilderness that occupied much of the right side of the garden.

Heavy grey dusk had fallen and the weather was worsening… She worried about Draco and the boys at the Quidditch.

The door swung open. It was Rose, her eyes large and wary.

‘The pig’s gone.’

‘THE PIG?’ Hermione asked, still half-asleep. ‘Well… no one’s taken it, dear. The gate’s warded.’

‘Uncle Neville and Dennis are checking for holes in the wall.’

‘It’s probably snuggled under a bush. Hiding from the storm,’ Hermione said in soothing tones.

But Rose sat on the bed and crossed her arms. ‘I don’t feel good, Mummy.’

Hermione folded her into her arms and sighed.

There was a nervous tap at the door… It was Kai, looking ghostly pale in the gathering gloom.

‘They’re taking too long.’

‘It’s only been a couple of hours…’

‘Not the quidditch… Neville and Dennis. Ziff thinks so too.’

Hermione eased Rose away and returned to the window. Dark shadows were falling across the lawn, black clumps of scrubby thicket lined the wall by the gate. But it was still, lifeless…

‘Where’s Ziff now?’

‘Downstairs with Brick and Tansy… Audrey’s in the kitchen. Molly’s having a bath.’

‘The kids?’

‘In the nursery with Arlene and Tuyen.’
'Okay…' Hermione quickly processed the geography of this. ‘Is there a cellar here?’

Kai hesitated before answering. ‘Through the kitchen pantry.’

‘… Okay… I think we move the children.’

‘To the cellar?’

Something was wrong. She could sense it now…

That pig wasn’t a pig at all…

‘I told you, Mummy,’ Rose whispered.

‘Rose, darling, stay with Kai. I won’t be long.’

The nursery was at the end of the corridor. Arlene and Tuyen were singing to the toddlers while Joyana and Hoang slumbered in Moses baskets. Magda’s face lit up when Hermione walked in.

‘What’s wrong?’ Tuyen asked.

XXX

‘Weather’s turned,’ Molly shivered, rubbing her arms. She looked out at the sky as she tightened the cord on her dressing-gown.

‘The pig’s gone.’

Molly shot her a baffled look.

‘Neville and Dennis are looking for it. They haven’t come back.’

Molly stared at her, eyes flint-sharp. Her face sagged.

‘You don’t think it was a pig, do you?’

‘No.’

Molly exhaled deeply. ‘Where are the children?’

‘Getting dressed. There’s a cellar.’

Molly nodded but her attention was drawn to the view outside.

She jerked open the window. Strong winds howled, sounding like the sea had come ashore and was crashing against the house.

‘Neville?!’ she shouted against the storm. ‘Everything alright?’

Hermione could hear his voice carried back on the wind. ‘Can’t find Dennis!’

Hermione’s chest tightened in panic. She tried to Apparate… just to see if she could.

She couldn’t…

‘Meet me downstairs,’ she said to Molly and hurried away.
Arlene and Tuyen were fitting George’s shield-wear to the children in the hallway.

‘Ziff,’ Hermione said urgently. ‘Take a jug of water and the bag of buns on the kitchen table into the cellar and hide with the kids. I’ll seal you in.’

‘He needs someone magical with him,’ Molly muttered.

‘Tuyen…’ Hermione said. ‘Take these and join him.’ She thrust some fireworks from George’s barrel of joke shop goodies into her arms. She spotted a spool of diaphanous fabric - Saunders’ Invisible Silk – and bundled this on top. ‘You could try this to hide the kids If necessary.’

Audrey padded into the hallway from the kitchen. She gazed at Hermione with protuberant pale eyes. ‘Is there any way we can contact Percy? The others?’

Hermione shook her head. ‘Phones won’t work.’

Briek and Tansy wandered in from the garden, alarm etched onto their faces.

‘We can’t find Neville now,’ Tansy said plaintively. She looked mousy and scared.

Hermione’s stomach turned over but she knew she had to stay calm.

‘I’ll search the garden, but we need something – an alarm – in case an intruder comes into the house…’ She pulled out one of George’s most impressive creations - Thor’s Thunder Cracker. ‘If someone stays in the living-room they’ll see both the front door and out the back.’ She automatically looked at Molly, who nodded.

Arlene grabbed a handful of firecrackers. ‘I’ll stick in the kitchen and set these off if anyone comes in.’

‘There’s also some decoy detonators,’ Hermione said. ‘Could help us look like there’s more of us than we actually are.’

Everybody stared at each other…

‘Whatever happens, whoever’s here… we need to buy time until the others return,’ she added.

‘I’ll go upstairs and keep watch,’ Briek said, his long, gangly limbs climbing the stairs two at a time.

‘Lock all windows and doors - except the front door, which has to be watched at all times.’ She thought a moment. ‘Does the downstairs toilet have a window?’

‘It’s closed,’ Arlene said firmly.

‘No, it’s open,’ Audrey said, ‘I’ll lock it.’

Hermione looked outside. The garden was still and dark. In contrast, The Blue House was lit up like a shop display window.

‘No lights,’ she said, dropping her voice. ‘We have to make it difficult for anyone to see us or find the children.’

A single candle remained - in the living-room - guttering in the breeze.
As soon as Hermione stepped outside she could sense colour-magic. Someone powerful – the pig-person - was in this garden... But where?

‘Let’s do a perimeter check,’ she said to Tansy and Kai.

‘The gate’s open,’ Tansy said, looking like she might burst into tears.

Hermione’s heart sank but a furtive rustling from the trees opposite caught her attention. She sealed the gate then hurried across the garden, Tansy and Kai close behind.

She could see a dark figure crouched over someone lying on the ground.

It was Neville, frantically trying to revive Dennis who had an ugly gash on his neck.

Neville turned helpless eyes to Hermione and her insides clenched... Pig-person meant business.

Neville hoisted Dennis over his shoulder. ‘I’ll take him indoors.’

Hermione saw that her friend’s eyes were wet with tears. ‘Good idea,’ she said softly, uncomfortably aware that they were being watched... She whispered a Homenum Revelio.

Not human then. Not right now.... Which meant this was an animagus.

She decided against unveiling them with the Homorphous Charm. That would provoke a confrontation and they weren’t ready.

She quickly ushered the girls back towards the house.

‘Is Dennis dead?’ Tansy asked.

‘Looks like it... but - right now we've got to focus on other things I'm afraid...’ Like surviving...

Tansy looked stricken. ‘When I said before I was a bit of a squib, I meant it.’

‘No one’s expecting you to be a Defence expert, Tansy. But you two can be our early warning system,’ Hermione said, hoping she sounded positive. ‘And there’s always something you’re good at.’

‘I can manage a tickling hex? And my brother used to like doing that wobbly-legs jinx on me when we were kids.’

‘Perfect,’ Hermione grinned. ‘Your job is to slow intruders down and, if safe, send an alert – purple firecrackers should do it…’

‘I nicked one of these…’ Tansy brandished a portable swamp. ‘Last one I think.’

‘That should go by the gate.’

‘I’ll go do that if you like,’ Kai said, and Tansy handed it over.

‘Okay, Tansy, you take this side. Hide in the trees close to the house. Use the decoy detonators to distract.’

Tansy tried to smile. ‘I’ll try.’ And she went on her way, tiptoeing through the trees.
'I’ll sneak round the woods to the gate,’ Kai said, face stiff with determination.

‘No. The pig-person’s over there…’ A big gun… Biding his time… ‘I’ll cast a Disillusionment Charm on you. Should get you across the lawn…’

‘I’ve never killed anyone,’ Kai said plainly.

‘And you’re too young to try. Your job is the same as Tansy’s. Alert and delay.’

‘I’m alright for a leg-locker curse. And I know this really mean jinx where you make someone’s eyes jam up…’ Kai said feistily.

‘Cool. Most important though, stay safe.’ Hermione cast the Disillusionment Charm and Kai was good to go.

While they were talking, Neville exited the house and slipped into the shadows, out of sight, and Hermione noticed a small light wink from Briek’s upstairs window… followed by another, then another… and another.

A thunderous explosion suddenly rocked the house and a flaring orange and indigo blast illuminated the hallway.

Molly had detonated Thor’s Thunder Cracker…

A volley of rockets fired across the landing and now there was an exchange of wand-fire and a furious scream rent the air…

Arlene?

Hermione’s heart leapt. Kitchen. Someone in the kitchen… She darted forwards but sensed someone close behind. A bug-eyed Alaydaa…

‘Stupefy!’ she hissed, sending him flying.

More lights flashed from Briek’s window. She soon lost count, distracted by shouts of pain from the gate and a frantic rustling through the bushes … voices shouting in frustration… The swamp? she wondered. There was a yelled curse in a foreign language and a thumping crash.

She had to ignore this for now… get to the house. Stop any intruders finding the children.

She didn’t dare enter via the front door so wormed her way between the house and side-wall.

The window to the downstairs toilet was wide open. She gingerly reached inside to pull it closed and saw the dark shape of a body on the floor… Hot bile surged into her gullet.

Audrey…

Why was it so peculiarly dark beyond the toilet door? Arlene had pocketed a stash of Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder for emergencies… Had that time already come?

There was a short scrubby patch of garden at the back of the property. Had Alaydaa entered this way? It seemed unlikely… the wall was very high with jagged glass.

She inched around the back of the house and unlocked the kitchen door.

‘Lumos,’ she muttered, shielding her wand under her dress to smother the light as she entered.
Arlene was crouched under the table with her finger to her lips.

Hermione nodded, closing the door behind her. No sound from the pantry. The spell she’d cast was holding… or Tuyen and Ziff were the most amazing babysitters in history.

Hermione could see leaping lights and colours reflected on the wall leading from the kitchen to the living-room. But then, quiet…

Hermione peeked inside the living-room. Dennis was laid out on the sofa, chalk-white, lips parted. But no Molly…

The front door was half-open.

A huge white rabbit hopped across the lawn, confounding a couple of Alaydaa who swerved to avoid it. In any other circumstances, Hermione would have laughed… but a sour-tasting thought struck her.

_Houblon_ - Magda’s white bunny – lying on the purple flowers outside Shell Cottage… Bill’s rock-solid security measures had prevented the cottage’s detection so the Alaydaa struck when Houblon ventured beyond the boundary…

But Houblon had transferred from Shell Cottage to here a couple of days ago and - typically - got left behind. And now Houblon had led their attackers here.

Only one person had the time and opportunity to cast a tracker on Magda’s precious toy… Sylvestra.

A series of stunners were traded across the lawn – Neville, she suspected. And a tall, hulking figure came into view… Hulda, looking healthier than hoped after her defenestration at The Burrow.

‘Hermione…’ hissed a voice to her left.

Molly slunk out of the shadows. ‘Nasty-looking wizard came charging through here. Think I scared him off... He headed upstairs.’

‘Upstairs?’ Briek was alone and she couldn’t hear anyone else moving about. ‘Are you sure?’

But as she spoke, Hermione realised they had company. A tall shadow that she’d mistook for part of the grandfather clock shifted. Whoever had gone upstairs had rendered themselves invisible - and come back down…

She quickly pulled Molly onto the verandah outside.

A decoy detonator erupted a few feet away… Tansy… followed by a blazing trail of Diabolic Daredevils, amongst George’s bestsellers, knocking a trio of Alaydaa to the ground.

A retaliatory barrage of blasting spells tore through the thicket followed by a sharp screech of pain… An over-curious Alaydaa screeched with laughter and then toppled over, victim to Tansy’s tickling hex.

Hermione slipped back inside… but the shadow had gone.

She looked left to the kitchen… Dark and silent... then moved to the living-room.

A pencil-thin figure was looking out of the window, speaking in hushed tones to a piece of
corundum.

Hermione chilled when she saw his face – gaunt, vulpine - reflected in the glass.

Asusto…

Icy terror crept up her spine when she realized he could see her, too. And he was watching her with a thin-lipped smile.

She instinctively switched to colour-magic and imagined a hurricane-force wind hurtling across the living-room, smashing Asusto through the window...

The glass cracked but Asusto spun around with a raw magic block and counter-punch. Hermione swerved and powered a blast straight back, hitting him in the chest. He reeled… but then a strange, sickly scent stung Hermione’s nostrils. She shrieked as a profusion of monstrous green vines, the width of a man, with huge orange flowers like gaping mouths burst out off the walls, swallowing everything in their path.

‘Oh dear!... Your friend’s being eaten!’ Asusto laughed in droll tones – and he was gone... But where to? She frantically looked around but then saw that Dennis was encased in vines. She slashed at the thick, green tendrils but they tightened their grip.

‘Diffindo!’ she yelled, sickened by the sloshing, slobbering sound as her wand severed the plant. The plant leaked a gooey, red resin, but Dennis had been freed.

She levitated Dennis up the stairs, bursting into the room where Briek was throwing spell after spell at the garden, and lay him on the bed.

‘They’re everywhere,’ Briek said, a desperate gleam in his eye. Sweat dripped from his forehead as he waved his wand like a crazed conductor trying to tame the winds… ironically, a dramatic downpour suddenly tumbled from the skies, accompanied by an electrifying fork of lightning and an ear-splitting crack of thunder.

A ferocious trumpeting echoed across the garden and a colossal, lumbering mammoth thudded across the lawns, swinging to and fro, knocking Alaydaa into the undergrowth.

Briek cackled with laughter. Wand-arm jerking with the effort he unleashed a second beast… a hissing blue lizard that shot between the legs of the mammoth targeting a shadowy figure skulking at the back of the garden.

‘Come out and play you fucking *pigman*!’ Briek yelled, excitedly. ‘He stands and watches… that is all…’

Hermione held her breath as a runtish man stepped deeper into the garden, irradiating colour-magic.

He smiled at Briek with his floppy clown’s smile and his piggy eyes glowed black.

Josep…

‘I think you should pull back, Briek…’ Hermione said, churning with trepidation as Josep lifted his arm. He thumped the air and the rain parted and a whirling vortex of dark, magical energy screeched across the garden, striking the house with earth-shattering force.

‘*Merde!*’ Briek barked, falling from his perch at the window. He brushed off Hermione’s efforts to
drag him away.

‘I kill this man!’ Briek screeched as another thunderbolt struck home and the house was swaying, creaking, the window rattling in its frame.

Briek swished his wand and the blue lizard flew at Josep - but Josep flicked his wrist and the lizard evaporated… followed by the mammoth, its bulk dissolving in the driving rain.

Briek breathed hard. ‘No… that cannot be.’

He steeled himself to rejoin battle but the front of the house was rocking as it bore the brunt of Josep’s violent blows.

Briek looked very disgruntled. ‘I cannot let this PIG defeat me!’

Where was Neville? Hermione frantically thought, looking down. The only person she could see was Hulda stomping across the lawn - only to stop as though stunned and keel over.

Kai’s Leg-locker curse… but Hulda was already levering herself off the ground.

Suddenly Hermione sensed Josep’s eyes had turned to her… she instinctively recoiled.

Her attention was drawn by a fierce rumpus downstairs. A series of explosions ricocheted around the house and plaster-dust flaked onto her shoulders.

Josep unleashed an almighty blast, truly testing the house’s ability to remain standing...

‘Briek—’

‘Go!’ he said firmly, his eyes bright and feverish as he locked eyes with his adversary.

Hermione retreated to the landing above the stairs. The ceiling was a feast of jousting colours and shadows and Molly was screeching curses at the top of her voice. A ferocious white blast erupted, blanking her mind, and a chorus of anguished cries filled the air as a hefty thump smashed with the weight of a bomb into the house.

Hermione felt the floor beneath her feet shaking, floorboards splintering. A rumbling snarl assailed her from both sides as the floor curled upwards, chasing towards her at high speed - a tsunami of wood and nails and concrete. She skidded to the stairs as the joists cracked and snapped.

She grabbed the banister and her stomach lurched as it fell into empty space and the steps exploded beneath her feet… and she was falling into black… purple spangly stars twirling in slow-motion inside her head… before accelerating towards a bright, glowing whiteness…

‘It’s okay, beautiful… I’ve got you!’

Draco’s arms were tight around her … and her heart was skipping beats with relief and joy.

‘The children… we’ve got to get them out of here,’ she said breathlessly. They’d pulled apart but were still holding hands, and she was trying to stem the adrenaline shaking of her legs.

‘Where are they?’ he asked, urgently.

‘Cellar,’ Molly said. Hermione hadn’t seen her at first. ‘This place is about to come down around our ears…’
In perfect riposte, the house shook, pummelled by another blast.

‘Seamus says there’s a secret gate out the back. He’s waiting,’ Draco said.

But Molly had snapped her wand into her hand and was firing across them…

A tall, hulking figure – Hulda - plodded stiffly into the hallway, stomping through rubble and bodies to get to them.

A sleek, red skein of magic… then another and another… and Hermione and Draco were spun apart, Molly flailing on the floor.

Hermione squinted through the choking dust and realised a second figure, Grimm, was behind Hulda - wand in hand.

Hermione released a dazzling array of lights that splatted and bounced like lava bursts and then threw up a translucent shield, chiefly for Molly.

Molly clawed at Hermione’s leg to drag herself up, panting hard.

‘Go do what you have to do!’ Draco bellowed… He threw a curling white colour-bomb at Grimm who skated across the tiled floor into the grandfather clock. The clock teetered and fell on top of him with a heavy chiming clank.

Hulda bore down on them, face distorted with rage. Draco battered her with wave after wave of searing white magic until she was squealing and squirming, a flaming pillar of scorching white whirling around in the middle of the hallway.

Arlene screamed…

Hermione didn’t have time to pick Molly up from the floor where she was circling on her hands and knees as she ran towards the kitchen.

The kitchen was cloaked in thick darkness. Hermione could hear Arlene whimpering, could scent her blood – a dark, slick pool shading the floor.

‘He’s still here!’ Arlene sobbed.

A dark shape skittered across the ceiling and a bug-eyed Alaydaa dropped to the floor and a glowing whip swiped Hermione’s face. She stumbled backwards in shock, grabbing at thin air as she fell.

‘Stupefy!’ Molly screeched from behind her… and there was a flash of red targeting the Alaydaa - but he bent backwards, inhumanly flexible, and the spell whizzed over him.

He reared back and slashed his whip, catching Hermione around the neck and yanking her towards him. She whimpered as the rope tightened, choking. She tried to focus and flow… but before she’d even completed the thought the rope had loosened and there was a loud crunch and thud.

Draco was running towards her, shimmering white. She’d never seen him as blindingly bright as this…

She looked beyond him and Hulda was lying on the floor, eyes still and staring, blood oozing from her mouth.

Draco hauled Molly to her feet and kicked aside the body of the Alaydaa.
‘The other one. The creepster,’ Arlene shivered, ‘he came back… but now he’s gone!’

Hermione dashed to the toilet… the window was wide open again! She sealed it and only now dared to look down.

Audrey was splayed on the floor, cold and rigid. Hermione re-arranged her body into a more dignified position.

She heard a gasp behind her. ‘Oh no!’ Molly cried. ‘Poor Percy.’

The room shook and dust fluttered onto their heads and a penetrating, high-pitched cry – shock, frustration - suddenly ripped through the house and then stilled.

Tears flooded Hermione’s eyes. ‘Briek…’

Molly squeezed her arm, eyes shining. ‘Come on, love… We’ve got the living to think of. Draco’s getting the children.’

‘Where are they?’ Hermione asked.

Arlene’s wand softly glowed in the darkness - but no children.

But then Hakim flipped down his silk and grinned. ‘No, little man…’ Draco said fondly. He ruffled his hair. ‘You need to keep this up.’ He turned to Tuyen. ‘His eyes aren’t so good, can you make sure you hold his hand as he goes through the fields?’

‘Of course.’

‘Seamus is waiting by the back wall. He’ll guide you to shelter…’

‘Hang on guys,’ Arlene said. Molly was quickly winding bandage around her torso.

‘Draco?’ came Rose’s voice. A blurry covering flipped back and she threw her arms around him. ‘Thank you for coming.’

He hugged her tightly and his voice was lost in her hair.

‘Scorpius is home now,’ Rose said. ‘The others are coming.’

‘How do you know?’ Hermione asked.

‘Because she’s a goddamn pocket genius,’ Draco enthused. ‘She used the two-way mirror to talk to me at the Quidditch. Seamus and I portkeyed direct while Henrik took the boys across the stadium to tell the others.’

‘Remember you’re shiny... Both of you…’ Rose said. ‘I’ll look after Magda, don’t worry.’

Magda gazed at Hermione with large, soulful eyes and a fat bottom lip that trembled. Hermione’s heart ached, knowing what she had to do. She held her close.

‘Hey,’ she said tenderly, ‘I’m afraid Houblon stays here, darling… he’s a bit poorly.’ She gently eased the bunny from the child’s grasp. Draco quickly fashioned a small, orange bird from a kitchen duster and pressed it into Magda’s hands instead.

Ziff hustled them outside. Hermione’s face fell to see a sheet of rain slashing down from the dark skies above.
‘Impervious charms!’ she hissed to Arlene as they were swallowed into the darkness.

‘What’s up with Houblon?’ Draco asked.

‘I think Sylvestra planted something.’

Draco sighed…

He grabbed the corundum, kept on the kitchen table, then shrank the stone and pocketed it.

XXX

The rain was beating down so hard Hermione felt she was being pushed backwards.

There was the occasional whip and whoosh of wand-fire from the front of the house, but this faded into an eerie silence.

‘We need to help the others,’ she said in beseeching tones to Draco and Molly.

Molly looked careworn and exhausted. ‘There’s too many, Hermione. And I’m not much use. Getting too old for this caper…’

‘Rubbish, Mrs Weasley,’ said Draco. ‘The way you held off Hulda and those Alaydaa would put most wizards to shame.’

Molly’s eyes crinkled into a satisfied smile.

They edged towards the main garden along the side of the house.

The window to the lavatory was open again… Hermione ground to a halt.

‘We closed this, didn’t we?’

A cold frisson of fear washed over her. ‘SHIT… Asusto… He was invisible earlier.’

Hermione sensed a bolt of panic surge through Draco, stronger than anything she’d ever felt from him. ‘Do you think he could hear us in the kitchen?’

‘They know the kids are outside!’ she sobbed, holding onto him.

‘Mrs Weasley… can – can you find a way to tell Neville and whoever else, that we’re heading to … where – where are we going, Hermione?’

They’d need a place to organise… a shelter. The only building nearby was… ‘The pig farm!’

Molly held her wand aloft and fired three red plumes into the air… ‘Hopefully they’ll make their way to me … it’s deathly quiet out there.’

XXX

‘Why can’t we hear them?’ Hermione croaked, tears streaming down her face…

All these young lives in their hands and they’d released them into the path of wolves.

Draco gazed back at The Blue House, now plunged into darkness, and to the rolling downs leading to the beach. The soft surge of the sea echoed towards them, despite the wet wind slapping into their faces. The rain, however, was easing.
‘The pig farm is on the other side of that hill.’ Draco pointed across bleak, muddy fields. A country lane weaved to their right and skirted round the hill, out of sight.

Draco scrabbled in his pocket for his phone. ‘At last. We’ve got service.’

XXX

‘Look!’ Hermione said, pointing to an ice-cream van parked up the lane. It skulked in the shadows of a high hedge ranged behind a long brick outhouse. Judging by the stench and the snuffle and grunt of livestock, this was clearly the piggery.

A baby was crying… a thin, reedy wail. They were in the right place…

A door opened and a rectangle of light fell across the path leading to the ice-cream van.

Grimm closed the door and the orange glow of a cigarette flickered into life.

‘He’s limping,’ Draco observed.

‘Didn’t the clock fall on him?’

‘Played dead... Didn’t want a fight.’

Hermione considered this. ‘They were manipulating us… They wanted to force us into moving the kids into the open. Once the house started falling down, we had no choice.’

Draco heaved a sigh. ‘Josep was their joker. Breaching the wards as a fucking pig and then fucking the place up.’

‘Thing is… he came up against OUR Joker,’ Hermione said with a heavy heart. ‘Briek bought us time.’

Hermione almost squealed with joy to see Harry flying on a broomstick towards them with Henrik behind him. Harry jumped off the broom and pulled her into a hug.

‘We should never have left you unprotected like that… I’m so sorry.’

‘How is everyone?’

‘Parvati’s taken Tansy to Folkvangr. She’s hurt.’ Harry bit his lip. ‘Percy’s… not great. He’s with Molly and Neville. Arthur’s gone to Shell Cottage… to break the news to Gabby…’

Draco had crept closer to the building and found a spy-hole. He jogged back.

‘Is that the ice-cream van from the beach?’ Henrik said curiously.

‘I reckon they’re moving the kids into it,’ Draco said. ‘Okay, we’ve got a bunch of Alaydaa. Some in the farmyard, some in the piggery. Josep and Asusto are inside with fucking Sylvestra and Tom Bennet—’

‘Bet that’s who she was shagging…’ Hermione thought out loud earning her a puzzled look from Harry.

‘Selwyn’s going through the kids.’ Draco gave Hermione a meaningful stare, ‘Rose and Magda are being moved to a pen at the back…’
Hermione felt sick. Salvedra would want Rose…

‘I think we take out fucking Frankenstein by the backdoor… panic them a bit,’ Henrik said, wanting to act quickly. ‘Can I have my bag, Harry?’

Harry pulled a tiny duffle bag from his pocket and tapped it with his wand, returning it to its normal size. It was full of guns. Henrik assembled a rifle, adding a silencer, and tucked a hand-gun into his belt.

Draco picked up a gun.

‘You don’t need it,’ Hermione said disapprovingly.

‘Have you used one?’ Henrik asked.

‘I’ve seen movies…’ Draco said with a crooked grin.

Henrik was cold-eyed. ‘They’re not fucking toys.’

Draco pushed a gun into his belt all the same.

Harry was texting. ‘I think we wait until the kids are in the van and stage an ambush… Bill, George and Angelina are on broomsticks and can target the van once it’s on the move… Henrik? Are you listening?’

But Henrik was trailing Grimm’s movements with the sight on his rifle. ‘Frankenstein’s got the keys … He’s the driver. Can you guys use your funny magic to make one of US look like that fucking freak down there?’

‘Without Polyjuice, no,’ Hermione said huffily.

‘Hold on.’ Harry texted again.

Moments later, Niko crested the brow of the hill… ‘I can do it, but it’s a tight window - five-minutes!’ he said.

Ron, Ernie and Kai joined them.

‘Where’s Oleg?’ Draco asked.

‘Bad pie at the Quidditch. Chucked up on your nice cream carpet,’ Ron grinned.

Harry quickly explained what was going on.

‘Right, this is what we’re going to do,’ Draco said. ‘Once Niko becomes Grimm, we’ll have five minutes tops to storm the building and panic them into moving the kids out. Henrik. You’re the sniper on the hill… Pick off Alaydaa… sow chaos. Harry, Ron, Ernie and I will move straight into the hanger. We need to act FAST. Once they’ve secured the kids, they won’t give a crap about the spares…’

He turned to Ernie and Ron. ‘Your job is to save the adults! They won’t have wands so… here… take mine. I’ll use colour-magic. Give this to Seamus.’

Harry passed his over too, but Draco shook his head when Hermione offered.

‘Harry and I will fuck things up… massive show of strength… Niko. As soon as you’ve got the
kids signal Bill, say you’re on your way… You’ll have company in that van. Take them out.’

Draco looked at Kai. ‘You’re too young for this. Why are you here?’

Kai flushed hot crimson.

‘She can go with Niko; comfort the children,’ Hermione said quickly. ‘What do I do?’

‘Rescue our children.’

‘I think I should be doing that,’ Ron said snippily.

‘Only needs one person,’ Draco said firmly. ‘There’s a door at the back. Knock out whoever’s on guard and Apparate… that’s why you need your wand.’ Draco swallowed hard. ‘You okay with that?’

‘Of course.’

‘When everything’s done, meet at the beach… Is Grimm still smoking?’ Draco asked Henrik.

‘Yup.’

‘Okay. Take your shot.’

XXX

Hermione could hear the pigs bashing themselves against the sides of their pens in panic.

The back door was ajar… She could see Sylvestra – tall and austere-looking in black with a mane of silvery-grey hair. Arlene was kneeling in front of her, sobbing loudly, and a baby’s cry pierced the air.

Selwyn pulled Joyana from Arlene’s arms and she flopped onto the floor, shoulders heaving… Josep came into view and roughly dragged Arlene out of sight. Her knees bounced along the floor and she tried to twist free, but he swiped her hard around the face.

Hermione felt hot anger tremble through her. She shifted angle to get a better view… To her horror, Arlene was joining a line-up with Ziff, Seamus and Tuyen.

They were going to be executed…

Her hand chafed against her wand…but she had to trust the others. Her priorities were Rose and Magda, languishing in a pen just a few feet away, guarded by a single Alaydaa.

A series of gunshots echoed around the farm-yard and a frenzy of activity broke out: screams, shouts, a rolling wave of white, then green… huge pounding blasts that shook the walls and sent the pigs circling round and round their pens, whining fearfully.

Sylvestra quickly dipped from view…

Hermione, cloaked in a disillusionment charm, slipped inside, shielding her eyes from the dazzling whiteness that was blazing from the far end. Draco was on form…

Alaydaa with toddlers and babies hooked under their arms were disapparating. Hermione heard the grunting jolt of the ice-cream van’s engine and its melancholic siren…
The Alaydaa guarding Rose and Magda looked twitchy. She could hear his breathing, harsh and frightened.

She muttered a Stupefy and he fell to the floor.

Rose and Magda were clutching each other. Hermione gathered them into her arms.

‘You can’t see me,’ she whispered, ‘but I’m here to get you out.’

‘I can see you, Mummy,’ Rose smiled.

Hermione lifted Magda into her arms and led Rose by the hand outside… and quickly Apparated.

XXX

The sea was an ink-black expanse streaked with shards of moonlight. The sand was cold and dark.

Magda perched on Hermione’s knee. Rose crouched down them beside them, her face keen and pale…

‘She’s been very good, Mummy.’ She planted a kiss on Magda’s snubby nose. Magda giggled but was trembling with cold. Hermione wrapped her arms around her and muttered a warming charm.

‘She’s lovely,’ she breathed, with a sudden twist of her heart that shocked her.

‘Where’s Draco?’

‘Coming with Daddy… Any minute now.’ She hoped… anxiety was gnawing at her like a small, cold animal in the pits of her stomach.

Sharp cracks and a series of figures loomed into view. Not Draco... His silvery hair would catch the moonbeams…

Ziff bounded over. ‘Ready to head to Folkvangr? Seamus has a Portkey.’

Ernie strode across the sand, cock-a-hoop. ‘That went well!’ he declared. ‘Draco and Harry are checking out The Blue House. Ron, too. Won’t be a minute.’

‘Okay… I’ll wait.’

The ice-cream van, siren twanging jauntily, pulled up. The van’s headlights blinded her - then dimmed. Doors swung open and there were excited cries and the thud of footsteps on the boardwalk leading to the beach.

Henrik lumbered towards Hermione from the shadows.

‘Boys not here yet?’

‘Coming… Make sure everyone gets back safe.’

‘Sure thing.’

‘You coming guys?’ Seamus called.

Hermione kissed Magda. ‘Henrik will look after you,’ she cooed. Her mouth was like Draco’s… she could see that now. ‘You too, Rose.’
Rose kissed her mother. ‘Remember. You’re shiny...’

Hermione smiled, worrying that Rose was getting a bit obsessed with this shiny stuff.

‘Ernie...’ she hissed once the kids were further up the beach. She stood up beating damp sand off her legs. ‘Did anyone get hurt... or...?’

‘The Grimm guy. And Henrik whacked a load of Alaydaa,’ he said with a lopsided grin, ‘but the others Apparated I’m afraid.’

Hermione was left in the darkness... the wind whistling softly through her hair, the sea churning alongside her, its foamy white tendrils fizzing closer...

‘Where are you?’ she moaned.

‘I’m here,’ came a voice behind her.

Hermione swung around to face Sylvestra, her hair twisting in the wind like a nest of silvery snakes.

Sylvestra placed both her hands on Hermione’s arms and an insidious darkness crept through her, snuffing out any light inside... She felt weak, powerless. Unable to move.

She tried to speak but nothing came out – a dry, throaty sound...

Sylvestra advanced closer so that her body was hot against Hermione’s. ‘I’m not going to hurt you,’ she purred. She raked her fingers down Hermione’s body, then paused. She cocked her head and looked at Hermione with narrowed eyes.

A small voice cheeped out of the darkness. Sylvestra raised her hand to her mouth. ‘As I thought... Beach.’

A single crack indicated someone had Apparated close by.

Hermione stared at the bold ruby ring gleaming on Sylvestra’s hand.

Sylvestra looked at it and sighed. ‘Yes. Poor ole Daddy. Getting a bit lost these days... He probably hasn’t even noticed it’s gone.’

Men’s voices ... laughing, banter...

Not now, Hermione begged ... unable to move or speak to warn them.

‘Dunno how we got the wrong fucking beach,’ Ron griped. ‘Who’s that with Hermione?’

There was a whipping sound and a bright flash and both men had crumpled to their knees.

A tall figure was ambling behind them – silvery hair gleaming in the moonlight. He stopped... and vanished.

‘Draco’s coming, isn’t he?’ Sylvestra smiled. ‘I read minds, remember?’

Hermione heaved a soundless sigh.

‘I won’t hurt him. Not if you agree to come with me.’ She was looking over Hermione’s shoulder.
Hermione could sense his whiteness flaring, followed by a thud on the sand as the stranger swiftly joined them and knocked Draco to his knees.

‘Let her go, Sylvester,’ Draco growled.

Sylvestra burst out laughing. ‘Why should I? You don’t NEED her anymore… Your wife’s back, Draco. Waiting for you… My sweet little sister…’ she trilled. ‘Although…’ her voice dropped an octave, ‘I should warn you, darling… she’s in one of her moods… She wasn’t very happy when I told her what you’ve been up to while she was away.’

‘I don’t fucking care! Just – just don’t hurt Hermione! PLEASE! I’m begging you…’

The corners of Sylvestra’s mouth dragged down in a show of disappointment.

‘Honestly, my love, I think it’ll go better for Hermione if she’s tucked up safe with Salvedra…’

She spun Hermione around at dizzying speed to face him.

Selwyn Haast held Draco in an arm-lock, his wand jabbed upward into Draco’s chin, forcing him to watch…

‘Salvedra will be thrilled with her…’ Sylvestra crooned. She slowly slid her hands over Hermione’s body, sucking in her lower lip. Hermione inwardly cringed at the feeling of dark taint that crept down her body… ‘Quite the surprise package…’

Sylvestra raised an eyebrow at Draco and licked Hermione’s neck in a long, wet stroke and her tongue delved into her ear. ‘Even tastes nice…’

Draco jerked violently against Selwyn, his whiteness rising like steam from his body.

Hermione whimpered silently, shivering with fear and revulsion as Sylvestra slunk her hand under her dress, tracing a path with sharp nails from Hermione’s knickers to her breasts before caressing her belly.

‘GET OFF HER!’ Draco snarled, surging forwards. Selwyn screwed his wand tighter against Draco’s neck. Yellow sparks crackled. Draco convulsed and spittle frothed at the corner of his mouth.

‘I have my orders, Draco,’ Sylvestra asserted, tossing her silvery locks. ‘Grandmaster wants her.’

‘Is -is that what you’re reduced to? Salvedra’s skivvy?’ Draco choked hoarsely. His teeth were bloodied… ‘Thought you were stronger than that.’

‘YOU thought NOTHING of me, Draco!’ Sylvestra shrilled in a voice that could shatter glass. ‘I was the shit on your shoe!! That’s all we are to you…. Me AND my sister!… At least Salvedra respects me… I can be my true self. Working for a true cause.’

Hermione could feel Sylvestra’s chest heaving against her back, could feel her breathing, damp and hot, against her neck.

‘You don’t deserve RESPECT,’ Draco retorted. ‘You’re barely human.’

Sylvestra vibrated with fury.

‘Does it make it easier to think that, Draco? To ignore the fact I did everything for you… I managed your home, your life, your parents - while you fucked off round the world being my
Daddy’s favoured child… I was left babysitting my poor, mad sister, making sure your life was never *inconvenienced* by the truth. But you never cared! We were just *currency* in a deal you cut with Daddy!’

‘You used your time *managing* my life to torture my son, you fucking bitch!’ Draco retorted in sardonic tones.

Hermione could feel Sylvestra’s darkness swelling, surging…

‘I was holding your life together, Draco, because I – not Katya - not *anyone*, is the closest to a *wife* you’ve ever had… I was LOYAL! To you *and* my father… Giving up things I wanted. Even you… And I got *nothing* in return… But I will! It’s *my* time now!'

She clutched Hermione’s arms tightly, her finger-nails digging in. ‘And you’re going to pay, Draco!... You’re going to give me something for services rendered…’

Sylvestra sniffed Hermione’s face and smiled. ‘I don’t know whether to steal you or kill you. But you’ve been murdering my joy. Ruining everything…’

‘NO!’ Draco cried urgently, trying to jump up but smacked down by Selwyn. ‘Yes, I was a shitbag… but it’s not Hermione’s fault. It was me. All me. My fault alone…’

Sylvestra opened her eyes wide in surprise. Hermione could sense she was enjoying this… revelling in his pain.

‘I’ll do anything… Give you anything you want, if you let her go,’ Draco asked in beseeching tones.

‘ANYTHING?’ Hermione could feel her glee… ‘It would have to be *a lot* to make up for the Grandmaster’s disappointment… or *MINE*, for that matter.’

‘Take me instead.’

‘Salvedra *IS* interested in you, Draco… but… he’d want what Hermione’s offering much, much more…’ Sylvestra pondered this. ‘Of course I could let him do what he wants with her and THEN kill her…’

‘No! I meant it,’ Draco’s voice was shaking… panicked. Hermione could hear his breathing – harsh, forced. Filling her mind… ‘*Whatever* you want, you can have. But in return, Hermione walks free. And you never hurt her or anyone she loves.’

Hermione’s mouth fell open – a silent scream. She tried to shake her head… Don’t make promises! She won’t honour them. Jammed so close to this woman she had the measure of her…. A viper’s pit of dark confusion, but her soul was bleak and grey.

Sylvestra twisted Hermione’s face, forcing her to look at her. ‘What’s it like to be the golden girl, Hermione? The one *everybody* wants!’ She sighed melodramatically. ‘But your very existence *demeans* Draco. You’ve reduced him to a snivelling shell of a man begging for his MUDBLOOD WHORE like she’s his whole fucking world!’

‘BECAUSE SHE IS!’ Draco bellowed, voice cracking, his cheeks suddenly wet with tears. ‘I love her…’

Sylvestra fell silent and stared at Draco…
A broiling darkness rose inside of Hermione, oozing painfully through her veins… she tried to cry out but felt her heart slowing, her mind clouding over… She closed her eyes…

‘NO!’ Draco shouted… but his voice was fading. She faintly sensed commotion, grit and sand peppering her face, her hair…

And then she was gasping for air.

‘Silly Draco… He chose death,’ Sylvestra said in bored tones… ‘HIS death.’

Selwyn had his knee on the back of Draco’s head and was pressing his face into the sand. Draco’s voice was muffled and his body was spasming…

Hermione was drowning inside, her soul was on fire, her insides were screaming to leave her body… She couldn’t move, couldn’t speak. Her eyes were blinded by tears..

‘Enough…’ Sylvestra’s voice was gravelled, pained.

Selwyn snapped Draco’s head back.

For a brief moment, a cloud scudded past the moon and his face was illuminated… beautiful, agonised… coated with sand and saliva, his eyes burning hot coals.

He gazed at Hermione and tears ran down his face, rivulets through sand… but there was a faint shimmering immanence lurking beneath his skin…

They locked eyes and she felt a zephyr of his magic swirling, a small plume of smoke scattering in a breeze… a faint tremor deep inside. Raw magical power ached through her and they were glowing; bright, nuclear white…

Fierce power surged, her limbs loosened.

Sylvestra jumped backwards, as though scalded. ‘WHAT ARE YOU DOING?’

Throbbing with magic from every pore in her body, Hermione spun around and punched her fist hard into Sylvestra’s face. It landed with a crunch and Sylvestra wobbled, bones jellied, and crumpled onto the sand.

Hermione threw herself at Sylvestra, roaring her fury… power crackling, glowing with such intensity Sylvestra was cowering, shielding her eyes.

‘Don’t EVER touch him again!’ Hermione screamed.

She raised her arm to strike and Sylvestra disapparated…

Selwyn shrieked in horror and stumbled backwards… falling onto his back, legs and arms dangling like a stranded beetle.

‘What do we do with you?’ Draco asked, teeth glinting in the moonlight. He repeatedly kicked Selwyn in the face – fury finally unleashed like a white-hot flame.

Draco wrenched Selwyn’s bloodied face close to his. ‘You fucking hurt my child,’ he hissed. ‘And many others… Harry?’ he called, ‘can you move yet?’

‘Beginning to…’ came a croaky reply.
'Do you want this piece of shit or do I kill him?'

But Selwyn didn’t wait for a reply. He head-butted Draco in the chin and grabbed a handful of sand, throwing it in his eyes, and then seized his wand…

‘Avada Kedav—!’

But a thunderous shot resounded around the beach – catastrophic, deafening…

Hermione’s ears were ringing and Selwyn was limp on the sand.

Draco lay on his back, panting heavily, the gun in his hand… Hermione knelt beside him and tried to smile but she was crying too hard.

Ron tentatively placed his hand on Hermione’s shoulder. ‘You alright?’ He had a pained look on his face. ‘That was… f**ked-up.’

She nodded effusively, swallowing back sobs.

Harry crouched down beside her and squeezed her hand tightly.

‘Thought I’d lost you,’ he murmured. His face was streaked with tears.

He helped Draco sit up and patted his back as Draco coughed up blood and sand.

‘Fucking hell,’ Ron grunted, poking at Selwyn’s body with his foot. ‘You shot him! Right through the heart…’

‘Beginner’s luck,’ Draco groaned. Hermione mopped up his face with the hem of her dress. He gazed at her longingly, but Ron was just a few feet away.

‘And what the fuck’s that weird white glowy thing you two ’ave got going on?’ Ron asked uncertainly.

They were still shiny, though fading.

‘I think it’s what happens when souls speak – as one,’ Harry said.

‘Oh,’ said Ron, and his eyes dimmed.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"REACH OUT" by SLEATER-KINNEY

“BLIND FAITH” by CHASE & STATUS

“Bo Mne (Live)” by ZEMFIRA

"HELTER SKELTER" by THE BEATLES

"ALL MIRRORS" by ANGEL OLSEN
Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
The Play's the Thing

Chapter Summary

The fall of Ephraim Golowitz…

Act 7: "TO BE OR NOT TO BE"

Author’s Note: On to the final (and shortest) Act …

I just wanted to say to the readers of this big baggy beast of a story with its zillion-billion characters… You guys are amazing! I’m genuinely touched and overwhelmed by your incredible stamina! I hope you enjoy what’s still to come as we move towards the end. xxx

59. The Play’s the Thing

After the initial euphoria of saving the children, there was an overwhelming sense of sorrow, anger and confusion. Three funerals – Dennis Creevey, Audrey Weasley and Briek Bertel – and the loss of The Blue House as a refuge took their toll.

Bill and Fleur gave Shell Cottage over to safeguarding the children - it was still the safest option. And within minutes, Bill was back to looking like he wanted to scream in frustration. It was no accident that he was working non-stop at The Burrow to render it vaguely ‘habitable.’

Hermione was working hard on the ’Big P’ project - the plan to trap Salvedra inside a painting - with Ernie and Fleur. Operations were switched to the increasingly cluttered shed at Folkvangr, alongside Katya’s Painting – still unoccupied by Narcissa - which had been salvaged, unscathed, from The Blue House. Having reformulated Stypticus Solution, it was now a question of orchestrating a trial run. Everything had to work seamlessly… Hermione doubted they’d get a second chance…

Draco, Harry, Gunter and Niko were spending long periods inside the paintings hunting for The Blue House attackers - ’to take the bastards out’ as Draco said, not even bothering to hide his motive… Sylvestra was at the top of his hit-list.

On one such foray, Draco and Gunter sighted Sylvestra, Josep, Dolores and Asusto at Sylvestra’s Spanish house, El Sol y Ter. But by the time they’d hotfooted it back to Folkvangr to get backup, they’d moved away. Draco was now in regular contact with Alenka Horvat from the EU’s Intelligence Unit. He’d asked the Muggles to help keep tabs on any comings and goings at Sylvestra’s property.

It was a perverse irony, Hermione thought, that the moment their attention and efforts firmly switched to Salvedra, Sylvestra and their cohorts, their long-standing enemy, Ephraim, suddenly looked ripe for the picking.

It was tragic, really - in life, Dennis Creevey’s election-winning hopes against Ephraim were slim to non-existent. In death, Dennis Creevey would have secured a landslide.
Writing in *Sub Rosa*, Agatha attributed the murders of Dennis Creevey, Audrey Weasley and Briek Bertel 'while peacefully holidaying in Ireland' to a 'vicious gang' sponsored by Ephraim's daughter, Sylvestra. After much discussion it was decided she didn't mention the children they were safeguarding.

Rather than dismiss Agatha's report as malicious tittle-tattle, the *Daily Prophet* shocked everyone by whipping up further suspicions against Ephraim, pointing out that prior to his “brutal assassination” – “much-loved rock legend and passionate Creevey campaigner, Briek Bertel, had been unjustly harassed by Ephraim's pet Blasters” at Hogsmeade on the day Ephraim held his rally.

Angus McCrackle, the *Prophet's* editor, then went further, noting how Creevey’s campaign manager Neville Longbottom had been arrested and falsely charged with treason and endured the 'humiliation' of Cell F (The Bin) before being quietly released. McCrackle bemoaned how Neville's reputation had been savagely traduced as a result - ignoring the fact his own newspaper had been responsible for this.

Even Madam Puddifoot’s murder was discussed as another “likely” hit from the Golowitz team...Torquil Haast held a public meeting in Hogsmeade to refute these allegations on Ephraim’s behalf. But the Hogsmeade Shopkeepers’ Alliance (a new organisation) bombarded Torquil with rotting vegetables and burnt scones – in memory of Madam Puddifoot – and he was forced to escape.

These allegations triggered a political storm... Many Blasters reportedly resigned, donations to Ephraim's election campaign dried up, a petition called for Ephraim’s resignation from the Hogsmeade Mayoralty and the *Daily Prophet* - in conjunction with Ephraim's political rival, Julius Merriman - demanded Ephraim attend a public meeting at the Ministry to answer "pertinent questions".

‘It’s a fucking revolution!’ Ron exclaimed, brandishing the latest list of defections from the Blasters and the Humpties.

‘There’s an awful lot still staying put, though,’ Harry pointed out, reviewing the list of names.

‘You don’t seem happy about all of this,’ Draco said to Hermione, once they were alone.

‘Oh, I am,’ she said. ‘But… none of this is happening for the right reasons…’

‘Or even true reasons,’ Draco added.

‘Yes, that’s what I meant,’ she said with a thin smile. ‘Ephraim deserves to be prosecuted for many crimes – but he’s not actually guilty of what he’s being accused of here. He didn’t murder Dennis, Briek and Audrey. He didn’t kill Madam Puddifoot, either. Though he wrongly imprisoned Neville. That IS true. And it was unjust…’

‘And he developed Dark Flux and tested it on innocent people all around the world… we’ve seen this with our own eyes, Hermione. It doesn’t matter what brings him down, as long as he’s DOWN.’

‘Yes, yes. I can see that. He should pay for what he’s done. But the ideas he promoted. They’re not being challenged here. This isn’t about Dark Flux or Right to Exist. He’s being accused of killing off his political rivals like it’s some kind of personal vendetta. Except it’s not true. And he can probably prove it.’
‘He won’t though, Hermione. That’s the beauty of it. Because if he did, it would mean dumping on his own daughter…’ Draco grinned. ‘Ephraim’s snookered.’

XXX

Jean Granger rang Hermione in fits of tears late that night.

‘Your horrible, evil wizard… that Golowitz man. He’s attacked the Royal Opera House!’

‘What – what’s happened?’

‘Oh, people turning blue… the usual nasty stuff. Can’t seem to get away from it lately. It’s all the news talks about…’

‘Are you sure?’ Hermione felt herself falling into dank depression. Not only because innocent Muggles had died – yet again – but because this meant they hadn’t exhausted their supplies of Dark Flux. ‘What happened?’

‘Well, you know there’s a jug of water on the bar during intervals?’

Hermione didn’t know this but said yes all the same.

‘There was something in that… two people poured themselves a drink and dropped down dead. Both blue. One of them was an MP so there’s a lot of talk on the news that this was a political assassination.’

This likely explained why Tim, freshly urgent, turned up at Folkvangr at an unearthly hour the next morning, flanked by the jowly spymaster, Henry Beaumont, and Gretchen Dedlock from the Serious Organised Crime Agency.

Hermione was embarrassed to let them in because the house was in such a mess. Thelonious had moved from Shell Cottage to make way for refugees from The Blue House and was stretched out on the sofa opposite Henrik, while Niko was snoring loudly in a sleeping bag in an alcove under the stairs.

Draco was straight onto the Corundum to Harry and Bill, and Gunter and Elizaveta idled indoors from the garden shed to join the meeting.

‘It wasn’t just an MP,’ Tim said by way of excuse for this early morning intrusion. ‘It was a Cabinet Minister. And the PM’s furious.’

‘He’s demanding action. And fast,’ Beaumont said, his flabby, florid cheeks quivering with excitement. ‘It looks like your family seat’s been saved – for now,’ he said to Draco, ‘seeing as this Golowitz appears to have relocated his HQ.’

Gretchen flashed Draco a congratulatory smile, which he ignored.

‘Are you sure it was Dark Flux?’ Hermione asked. She was tight-throated and emotional this morning. Everything was getting to her these days… she kept feeling hot and heady, nauseous. Discussing a Muggle military attack on the wizarding community before breakfast made her feel worse…

‘Forensics ran tests overnight. There’s no doubt,’ Gretchen said crisply. She surveyed Hermione’s flyaway hair and dishevelled state in her dressing-gown with cool disapproval.
‘The PM’s deeply perturbed. If we don’t destroy Golowitz’s centre for operations I suspect he’ll suspend all cooperation with your people – possibly even break this statute thingy…’ Tim said.

Hermione felt Draco tense beside her.

‘That’s a little over-zealous, don’t you think?’ Harry said in guarded tones.

‘We have a right to defend ourselves any way we see fit,’ Beaumont said pithily, ‘and an attack on the perpetrator of these crimes is surely the most fitting response of all?’

‘Except Ephraim probably didn’t do this,’ Hermione declared.

Beaumont blinked rapidly and she could feel everyone’s eyes on her, confused, even irritated.

‘Form suggests otherwise,’ Gretchen said in clipped tones.

‘But he loves the opera house. Opera’s his favourite thing!’ Hermione said, realising how pathetic she sounded - like she was defending him! But it was true…

‘So it’s a place he knows well,’ Gretchen said, making a note of this on her phone, her scarlet nails tapping purposefully.

‘Yes, but I can’t see him doing something like this… In fact he isn’t directly responsible for many of these attacks. We mentioned another wizard – Salvedra. Do you remember him? And Ephraim’s daught—’

Henry Beaumont batted this away… ‘The PM wants to target Golowitz… And we will. Tomorrow night.’

‘But that’s when he’s meant to be talking at the Ministry,’ Parvati piped up. She was listening from the dining-table.

‘Then we’ll need a signal from you guys, if that’s okay, to tell us when he’s definitely heading to this Nethercross,’ Tim said, almost apologetic, in stark contrast to his boorish colleague.

‘Do you intend to kill him?’ Parvati asked.

Tim was seated with his back to the table so he had to tilt his head to look at her. ‘No… but it might be a corollary of any military action.’

‘Truth is, we’ve got the fucking yanks breathing down our necks on this. Their attaché grassed us up to the CIA…’ said Beaumont, ‘and now the US authorities want us to hand him over - except we want him tried by our own courts in Britain.’

Harry looked fit to burst. ‘By rights he should be handed to me… I’ve been building a case for the prosecution for months now.’

‘And which government do YOU work for?’ Beaumont asked, perplexed.

‘I work for Auror HQ – it’s a sort of… wizarding Interpol,’ Harry explained. ‘Ephraim’s crimes are international. So we should get first dibs.’

‘But he’s also committed crimes within our own community, Harry,’ Bill argued. ‘It might be better if he faces the British Wizengamot first.’

‘But don’t we have the death penalty now?’ Parvati piped up from the table.
'Well… that’s not necessarily the worst outcome,’ Bill snorted.

Tim looked nonplussed. ‘I’m pretty sure that’s a distinct breach with UK Law, actually… if Ephraim had a hand in introducing capital punishment he’s chalked up yet another crime!’

‘I can’t see anyone having the bottle to actually EXECUTE him,’ Draco said. ‘I mean, he’s still Acting Minister. He’s not going to sentence himself, is he?’

‘It’ll come down to the Chief Warlock presiding at the Wizengamot,’ Hermione pointed out.

Harry threw his hands up in exasperation. ‘You see? All this goes to show that Ephraim can’t POSSIBLY be put on trial in the UK… he's got too much influence. He has to come to Paris.’

‘The way things are moving against him, folks won't be happy till he's locked up in Azkaban!’ Bill warned.

‘Auror HQ has its own prison. Black Soul Mountain… Bulgaria. Nobody’s ever escaped.’

‘I’m pretty certain he’s exempt from Azkaban actually, because he’s American,’ Thelonious said calmly.

‘I believe there’s a bilateral agreement between our Ministries,’ Hermione said huffily. ‘But really… Harry’s right! This is an international case… And for all of your fighting talk, you need to arrest him first. That’s not going to be as easy as you all think it is.’

This didn’t seem to matter because a full-scale row broke out. The Muggles demanding they had him, the wizards claiming he wasn’t theirs to take… Hermione tuned out feeling increasingly queasy and broke away from the group to get dressed upstairs. She could feel Draco’s eyes on her as she moved away.

XXX

Hermione said she was going to her parents’ house but she snuck into the shed instead, turned the radio on, and entered Katya’s painting.

Draco was right. The tower was still lifeless and empty…

NARCISSA, she thought. But nothing. A white blank.

Hermione looked back to the hazy grey leading back to Folkvangr but to her frustration, a powerful image came to mind… one she hadn’t invited in.

Rapier-speed… a whirring purple cloud… almost colliding with an obsidian black rockface… She pulled back and looked up but the summit was hard to make out as a yellow, sulphuric haze and feathery grey flakes swiftly enveloped her.

She was relieved that this was her mind and not her body as the thick, ashy ground undulated, swirled… writhing in thick black ropes. A faint hissing sound and a molten, scarlet glow gurgled to her left… A sizzling ashen stew spat out streaks of orange and crimson.

She shouldn’t feel heat in her current form, but she felt clammy, nevertheless.

A wisp of yellowing white smoke wreathed its way around her. Cloying, choking…

She found herself gazing beyond the grey veil into a large room with a terracotta-tiled floor, dirty batter-beige walls and ancient wooden beams that crisscrossed the ceiling.
A flicker of movement drew her eyes right.

Long, spindly, black-clad limbs… gnarled fingers with hooked, tapering nails… extended far from the wall towards the centre of the room.

Her heart thudded; a strong, single beat in her chest.

She was inches from Salvedra; separated by the thin canvas of a landscape painting.

She slowly eased herself away from the foggy border between this world and the one beyond the frame. She couldn’t possibly handle Salvedra alone…

Despite this, she was curious. Where was this? A room in Sylvestra’s Spanish house?

Someone entered. A man speaking Spanish. A low, insidious voice replied – so close it seemed to rumble through the wall at her.

Salvedra’s body lurched into view… the back of his head. Narrow, egg-shaped. Balding at the back. He wore his collar high, almost touching the bottom of his ears – ears with peculiarly elongated lobes.

He spun around and faced the picture. His face loomed close; cadaverous, sallow-skinned. Eyes like cold, black marble staring straight at her.

Hermione gasped and recoiled - as far as her mind could carry her; traversing at breakneck speed through a spinning blur of colours and shapes…

Was he following? She discerned a dusty shadow on the far horizon…

Who had he been talking to? NO! Don’t think that! Think of nothing!

Think instead of... DAMN! Her mind had changed course... Why couldn’t she keep it reined in?

She landed with a thud on a bed of roses - inside the painting she’d visited with Gunter. She gazed up at the sweetly beatific face of a grey stone statue; eyes blank, mouth slightly parted. The garden was pink and pretty… rose garlands, shady arbours, an arched trellis over a path leading towards the painting’s grey frontier.

Her insides churned nervously… which felt far too real, considering her transient, immaterial state.

The grey barrier here felt thin, almost translucent. The room she gazed out onto was the same spartan bedroom with the bed to one side against a wall and a window gazing out onto fields where she had seen Sylvestra with – she suspected – Tom Bennet.

A woman – Katya Malfoy - was sitting on a chair looking out. Old habits die hard, Hermione thought, surprised at her own flippancy in the circumstances.

She was smaller than she’d imagined. Slightly-built. It was hard to discern much as she was a virtual silhouette, contrasting with the bright light outside. But Hermione could see her hair was wavy and styled - like a 1920s movie star. And shorter than expected, exposing a slim neck. It looked strangely vulnerable.

Katya lifted her hand in greeting to someone beyond the window.

How thin her wrist was! Hermione fancied she could encircle that wrist with her thumb and index finger. A heavy bracelet and it might snap. Her hand was a glancing butterfly, so pale Hermione
fancied the light outside almost shone through.

Her eyes were momentarily drawn to a flash of brown shuddering briefly, metronomically, in the top left-hand corner of the window-frame. A sign flapping in the wind? A loose tile?

Turn around, she begged. Let me see you…

Hermione sensed a presence behind her. Live, whole… A livid blue fast enveloped her.

She sighed inwardly.

‘Hello, Ephraim.’

‘You couldn’t resist.’ She could sense him smiling.

‘And neither could you.’

‘Well. She *is* my daughter,’ he said, drawing level with her.

He was substantial, towering. She felt smaller than usual beside him. His face, though, was marked with grief as he stared at his elfin child.

‘Where is this place?’ she whispered.

‘Wish I knew. I’m often tempted to step through and see…’

‘But not brave enough to do it…’

Ephraim’s sigh resonated. It was answer enough.

‘I saw Sylvestra here once.’

‘Makes sense,’ he muttered.

There was a rustling behind them. Hermione jerked her head away from the veil to the mass of flowers and leaves and tall rose bushes at the edge of the painting. A slither of movement stirred amongst the vines…

Ephraim’s hand clamped onto her arm and in a flurry of blue she was somersaulted out of the picture, alighting on a bleak, barren hill. The murky green landscape was scarred with heavy score-marks and a mound of earth was crowned by a bent, black tree. Leafless, bare, blasted; its trunk had been cracked open by an almighty force. Its branches reached up to a pale, pitiless sky, twigs clasped together in helpless supplication.

Ahead of her was a gleaming white door. It shone - blinding, forbidding…

Hermione tried to approach it but was beaten back by light, forced to shield her eyes.

She sank to the ground, disconsolate.

‘What do you see?’ Ephraim asked. She’d forgotten he was with her, that he’d hurtled her through myriad paintings to this exact spot.

‘A white door…It’s extremely bright.’ It was giving her a headache.

Hermione recalled the endless white corridors she’d been lost in when taken at Abaran and
realised that Narcissa was trapped inside that pristine white light.

Ephraim lowered himself to the ground next to the tree. ‘I see nothing. But I know Narcissa’s there. I’ve looked for her non-stop and yet I still can’t reach her.’

He stared fixedly at Hermione. ‘Sylvestra’s eyes turn black, too… The ability to see through colour-magic is a useful gift.’

‘Did you see who was in the rose garden?’ She feared it was Salvedra…

‘No. But I didn't like the fact they were hiding.’

They fell into silence.

Hermione had to ask… to be sure… ‘Did you know there was a Dark Flux attack at the opera house?’

A muscle twitched in his cheek. ‘I’ve been up all night dealing with it,’ he groused. ‘Every single obliviator at the Ministry’s disposal has been working to resolve the issue.’

‘Did YOU do it?’

Ephraim looked at her, eyelids half-mast over weary eyes. ‘What do you think?’

He looked tired and angry. But there was something defeated about him, too.

‘Well… You’re in big trouble, Ephraim,’ she said. ‘Deservedly…’

His mouth curled into a grimace. ‘When our deep plots do pall… although… I didn’t actually do the things I’ve been accused of. But you know that already.’

‘It was Sylvestra.’

‘Of course…’ His eyelids now slipped down and he leant against the tree and for a moment she thought he’d gone to sleep.

‘Stand down as a candidate,’ Hermione urged him. He was tired of it all, she could sense it.

He smiled. ‘And hand myself over to Potter?’ His eyes snapped open and stared at her. A malevolent streak of blue swirled around her.

‘You can’t win this election,’ Hermione said, trying to keep her voice steady. ‘You’ve lost too much support.’

‘I warned you what would happen once I publicly disavowed the New Family Act. I certainly lost the media. But I presume that was your plan all along? To make me weak... You scored a very palpable hit!’ he added bitterly.

‘Actually, no… I presumed you’d win and hoped you’d be better than I feared. But these are terrible laws, Ephraim! Unfair, unpopular—’

‘Except they’re NOT,’ he said, his voice laced with bile. ‘That’s what you repeatedly fail to understand. You have a very snug view of the wizarding world and its denizens…’

‘Far from it,’ she retorted. ‘I was involved in the war against Voldemort. I know what cruelty can do, how it controls people.’
‘Then you should understand that my quickest route to power was to give people what they wanted… make them feel better about their own inadequacies and give them the God-given right to hate…. To blame others for their failings. It’s a tried and tested tactic,’ he said breezily.

Hermione glared at him. ‘It’s dishonourable. And deep-down you know it! ’

‘And you think forcing me to cow-tow and admit to a bunch of lies would be any better? It’s what’s expected of me with this farce of a public meeting I’m being subjected to!’

‘You’ve committed crimes…’

‘But not these… Shame about poor Creevey. Pumped-up little pipsqueak, but plucky as hell.’

‘Yes, he was,’ Hermione said, her eyes unexpectedly welling-up. ‘And Audrey didn’t deserve to die. Nor, Briek. He was a good man.’

‘Why were they killed?’

‘Because they were... in the way.’

Ephraim looked at her and shook his head. It felt more like a paternalistic gesture rather than the usual throb of heated feeling she sensed from him. ‘You should retreat from further engagement… Sylvestra has become extremely dangerous… It was always going to happen I suppose. Her fate.’

‘I can look after myself.’

He looked crestfallen. ‘But it’s not just yourself you need to care for… and you can’t expect me to tell you how to hurt my own daughter. You realise that, don’t you?’

‘So there’s a way?’

‘Where there’s a will… you should know that by now. You have colour-magic,’ he chortled mirthlessly.

She made to stand up, although she suddenly felt dizzy and had to hold onto the tree. Again, that wasn’t right… She wasn’t actually real here.

Ephraim gave her a piercing look. ‘I’ll escort you back to your picture.’

‘No, I—’

I’m not going to creep out after you like a bogey-man. Accord me some dignity, please.’

‘We’re enemies,’ she said, tilting her face towards him in a forthright fashion. ‘It’s plain stupid to trust you. I’ve learned that.’

Ephraim smiled. ‘You should have learned the opposite by now, Hermione. But you’re someone who revels in being stuck in their ways I’ve noticed. And… in this, we are as one. I know you want me to submit. To surrender. And there’s sense in what you say. Even… dare I say it? Kindness?But I’m not one to falter. I will fight. I’m one of life’s blasted contrarians… And an opportunist. A survivor. So please don’t underestimate me…’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it…’ She closed her eyes as a wave of nausea swept over her.

‘Come on. You need to rest… Where are we going?’ he asked, offering her his hand.
Hermione felt so drained, so exhausted, she slipped her hand into his. She couldn’t exactly feel him… more a warm, blue glow.

‘Stand down,’ she reiterated as they approached Katya’s tower.

‘They’ll arrest me.’

‘Then let them.’

‘And what if I’m sentenced to death?’

Hermione snorted derisively. ‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

He growled with laughter. ‘Let’s hope so. I’m too young to die.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Almost fifty-three… My birthday’s the same as Draco’s. Did he ever tell you that?’

‘No… I doubt it matters to him.’

‘Probably not.’ He fell into silence. ‘I miss Draco. He made me laugh… He probably paints me as evil incarnate. But we had good times, too.’

‘If he’d known what you were really doing I doubt that would have been the case…’

‘Maybe you only truly know how you feel about someone when they’re gone?’ He cast her a sidelong glance. ‘I guess you – Draco, too – will be at this public meeting tomorrow.’

‘I don’t want to be—’

‘I want you there.’

‘Whatever for?’

He grinned. ‘I might need a lawyer…’

XXX

Hermione still didn’t go to her parents’ house. She Apparated instead to her Uncle Derek’s bedside at The Spires hospice.

He was asleep, mouth lolling open. There was a twitch above his right eye that she wished she could smooth away.

His hand was surprisingly small and frail in hers. Had he shrunk? How did that even seem possible?

Despite the circumstances, she found his presence comforting. She leant forwards, resting her head against his scratchy blue bedcover, and closed her eyes.

A gentle thrumming eased through her, like her mind was relaxing… But it was short-lived. The rumble and squeak of the wheels on a trolley, jangling with glass and china, echoed down the corridor and burst through the door.

‘Oh, sorry love. I didn’t know anyone was here,’ said the nurse.
Hermione sprung up and rubbed her eyes, bleary with fatigue.

‘He’s holding on is Derek… a true trooper,’ the nurse said kindly. ‘Is he your Dad?’

‘No. Uncle.’

‘Ah, that’s nice… it’s good to see ‘e’s so much family caring for him. Can’t say I’ve seen you ‘ere before.’ The nurse was busily attaching a device to his finger. He briefly stirred – eyes narrow, glazed – and then his head fell to one side and he was wheezing gently again, sound asleep.

‘There’s not so many of us,’ Hermione remarked. ‘I haven’t been in for a while…’ she added guiltily.

‘Well, I wouldn’t leave it too long between visits if I were you,’ the nurse warned.

Hermione gulped back tears. ‘How long has he?’

‘Well, ‘e’s neither going backwards or forwards, if you know what I mean.’ She shrugged. ‘How long’s a piece of string?’

‘Depends on if it’s straight or curled up in a ball I suppose.’

‘Still works out the same length in the end though, don’t it?’

XXX

‘Thank you for lending me your bedroom,’ Binta Koranteng said to Hermione. ‘I’m comfortable here. Safe.’ She smiled shyly, accepting a cup of bush tea from Jean Granger.

Hermione couldn’t fathom how Binta felt safe. Nowhere felt safe anymore.

‘Must say, I’m getting a bit addicted to this bush tea myself,’ Jean said, face gleaming from the steam rising from her teacup. ‘Are you sure you don’t want one, Hermione?’

‘No. I’d best get home.’ She wasn’t feeling too hot again and constantly being on the verge of tears was getting wearing.

Draco had been at her parents’ when she arrived. She told him she’d been at the hospice. He knew that was only partly true but he didn’t press her – not here, anyway. Robert and Ziff had whisked him away to the garage – she wasn’t sure why – and they’d been locked in conversation ever since.

‘You look peaky,’ Ziff said to her, a look of concern on his face, when they eventually emerged.

‘You do… all the bloody time,’ Draco murmured, pulling her into his arms. She rested her head on his shoulder, exhausted.

Jean was teasing Ziff about how he never ate anything but crisps and cereal and he was wasting away while Robert robustly defended the ‘boy.’ Hermione smiled. It was like they’d adopted him…

‘Draco, make sure she sleeps tonight. I know you’re busy saving the world, but Hermione needs a night off,’ Jean said as they left.

‘She’s right,’ Draco said, back at Folkvangr. ‘You’re worrying the hell out of me.’

XXX
With everything going on – so many people occupying too small a space – it had felt like a long while since Hermione had felt truly alone with Draco. Here, in the dark dusk of their bedroom, she felt herself unravelling.

She tried to wriggle out of her clothes but kept sighing. Every muscle in her body was aching.

‘Do you want a hand?’ Draco asked, handling her as though she was made of the most delicate, precious porcelain. ‘I know you’re knackered, Hermione, but… is there anything else going on? Something I should know?’

‘No… I’m just a bit… down, I s’pose… I thought there wouldn’t be any more Dark Flux attacks now we have the children.’ She suddenly felt tearful as he unfastened her bra. He gently rested his hands on her breasts and leant his chin on her shoulder.

‘Yeah… me too. But they obviously have backup supplies…’

‘KILL while stocks last…’ Hermione said in a triumphalist, sarcastic tone.

He dipped his mouth to her neck and kissed her. She felt infused with a warm, soothing glow. He eased her down onto the bed and unfastened her jeans, sliding them down her legs.

He looked at her with a concentrated expression on his face. ‘Feels like you’ve been avoiding me,’ he said, a note of soft concern in his voice.

‘God, no. If anything, I miss you,’ she said emphatically, pulling him towards her.

He lay down beside her and caressed her cheek and then her neck… subtly checking her glands, she thought with wry amusement. His hand drifted down to her breasts and skirted round to her armpits – and then his hand moved back to cupping her breast and rested there. He had a thoughtful expression on his face.

‘Is something wrong with me?’ she asked in alarm.

‘No…far from it,’ he said, biting his lower lip. He moved his hand away and sat up, looking down at her. He blew out his cheeks and sighed. ‘Fuck it. I’m just going to say it… Is it possible you’re pregnant?’

‘PREGNANT? … No. No, I’m not. You don’t need to worry about that.’

His mouth quirked into a crooked smile. ‘It’s not a case of WORRY, it’s just that – I don’t remember you having a period for…’ His eyes moved from side to side… ‘I dunno. Feels like forever, but then time’s so fucked up these days…’

‘I drink my special tea, Draco,’ Hermione smiled. ‘We’re FINE.’

But Draco didn’t look convinced. ‘Yeah, but…’

‘And I’ve had a period, actually.’

‘An invisible one.’

‘NO. The day we found Magda… that weekend. Short and sweet.’ She shook her head. ‘Everything’s so manic I don’t think I’d have coped with anything else…’

‘Okay,’ Draco said, chewing his lip again. ‘I guess that was a chaotic couple of days…’ She could see his uncertainty shimmering brightly like a quavering halo. ‘I just thought with you getting tired
and sick all the time and… there was something weird with Sylvestra. She sort of implied something… got me thinking, that's all.’

‘EVERYTHING was weird with Sylvestra,’ Hermione sighed. ‘The woman’s hardly normal, is she?... Look, we’ve got so much to think about at the moment we can’t waste energy thinking about hypotheticals.’

‘It can’t be hypothetical if you’ve had a period,’ Draco said bluntly.

‘Well, I HAVE.’ She thought a moment… pulling the duvet over her. ‘So we don’t need to worry, because let’s face it, it’d be fucking TERRIBLE timing… embarrassing.’ She shuddered at the thought.

‘It wouldn't be the best timing, I agree...’ He pulled off his clothes and lay down beside her under the duvet and his hand drifted down, tenderly drawing circles on her belly. ‘Feels like tomorrow's D-Day for Ephraim. I hope he listened to you today, Hermione. I hope he just stands down...’

Draco had already surprised her this evening by not being annoyed that she’d seen Ephraim again – although she hadn’t told him yet about seeing Katya...

‘There’s times you’ve wanted Ephraim dead.’

Draco sighed. ‘I’ve had so many bloodthirsty thoughts, it makes my brain ache… The man’s a narcissistic prick. But... he kept looking for my mother when I didn’t think he would... Guess I have to give him that.’

Hermione turned to face him. ‘Draco… This plan for tomorrow. I think the Muggles are going to kill him.’

Draco regarded her with still, grey eyes. ‘They say different... but... I think you're right. They'll have a military unit waiting at Nethercross. Tim wants me to tell him the moment Ephraim leaves the Ministry so they can nab him BEFORE they bomb the shit out the place, apparently...’

‘Feels like a kill order,’ Hermione muttered. And yet Tim had specifically said that the British Government wasn't in the business of assassinations...

Draco flipped onto his back and stared at the ceiling. ‘Thing is, I trust Tim to do the right thing, but he’s not calling the shots. I reckon it’s the other guy that looks like a fat beetroot.’

‘Beaumont.’

‘He doesn’t like wizards, I can tell, and he wants to make a big fucking point.’ He paused… ‘And the thing is, I shouldn't give a fuck about Ephraim getting taken out, but now we're on the verge, I actually do! I don't want some random Muggle soldier obliterating him. I want him to stand trial for what he's done. And Harry’s done shitloads of work on this case. He deserves to get his man.’

‘Ephraim won't let himself get taken by Harry. He doesn’t like him,’ Hermione murmured, recalling Ephraim’s furious face when Harry was calming the crowds in Hogsmeade.

‘He’s jealous. Harry’s earned his popularity, whereas Ephraim had to buy his... A trial led by Harry would scare the crap out of him... But it's the best outcome.’

‘So what do we do?’ Hermione anguished. ‘Oh god. I can't believe I'm going to say this, Draco, but do we TELL HIM?’
Draco twisted round to look at her. 'Tell him NOT to go to Nethercross?... Jesus. You realise that would go down like a bucket of cold sick with the others, don't you?... After everything that's happened.'

'I know…'

They locked eyes... 'But that's what we're going to do, isn't it?' Draco eventually said with a sigh. He started to laugh. 'What are we like? This man's fucking monstered our lives and we're going to let him off the hook…'

Hermione eased herself into his arms. 'It's the right thing to do, though. And we persuade him - in return - to give himself up to Harry.'

'Good luck with that,' Draco smiled. 'Do we tell Harry?'

'I think so... Because Harry might be able to cut a deal with Ephraim. Make it more palatable for him.'

Draco thought about this for a moment. 'Well if there's one thing Ephraim loves it's cutting a deal... and he's ran out of road here. He’s finished... that list of names Ron showed us? The Blasters have been decimated. Big guns like Carmichael resigning... And guys like Dowson and Rosier and Melissa’s husband, Osgood. Though I doubt they left the Blasters in moral outrage at Ephraim’s supposed crimes.'

'Rats deserting a sinking ship…’

‘Or rats following a new captain and wanting to make sure the old one knows his time’s up.’

‘You mean Sylvestra?’

‘Tom Bennet DIDN’T resign and we know for a fact he’s working with her. I bet he’s persuading the rest that Ephraim’s gone soft… Gunter’s mate who works for Gilgad, Pascal, he says even TROY has quit working for Ephraim. He's mates with Tom…I bet he’s joined up with Sylvestra, too.’

Hermione pondered this a moment. ‘That’s why they hit the Royal Opera House… it was personal. Putting Ephraim in his place.’ She thought about Ephraim’s downcast demeanour. He knew it too. He knew the game was up.

XXX

It felt important. Momentous; like the end of an era.

Julius Merriman and other concerned departmental chiefs at the Ministry had demanded this public meeting. They were backed by the Daily Prophet and aggrieved groups such as the Hogsmeade Shopkeepers Alliance - all “baying for blood” as Agatha’s gleeful Sub Rosa editorial put it. Queue management controls were put in place to cope with the huge crowd expected to flock to the Ministry Atrium to hear Ephraim speak.

Thelonious, Ernie and Tansy had been in touch with the few remaining members of Kickback who’d avoided arrest for ‘subversive activities’ and spent the day painting anti-Golowitz placards. Thelonious, Kai, Bill and Angelina - decked out in varying degrees of disguise - headed to the Ministry to help sow chaos amongst the crowd and pressure Ephraim into stepping down.

However, it was immediately apparent that ‘rabble-rousing’ wasn’t going to be necessary. The
Ministry’s grand Atrium was jam-packed with a sea of placards - ‘Golowitz out!’ – ‘Go Home!’ – ‘Creevey-Killer!’ – and a mammoth banner had been unfurled sporting a saintly image of Dennis Creevey with his campaign slogan - ‘Creevey: A Class Act!’

A line of Blasters, looking distinctly uncomfortable, formed a protective barrier between the crowd and the stage. They were Ephraim’s line of defence but were rendered helpless when a ferocious bout of booing mixed with chants of ‘Get Ephraim out!’ erupted the moment Ephraim swaggered onto the dais, emanating his usual charismatic braggadocio.

‘Nothing like a show of humility, Ephraim…’ Draco muttered sardonically, watching from the sidelines with Hermione and Harry. They’d hoped to speak to him before he took the stage, but there was no way they could push through the pulsating crowd to the dais.

Ephraim could barely contain the contemptuous sneer on his face when he surveyed the screaming horde before him… But there were pockets of support, too - a muffled chant: ‘We have a Right to Exist!’ fading in and out of earshot, eventually drowned out by a rising crescendo of cries – ‘Murderer!’… ‘Creevey-killer!’ … and, ‘Justice for Madame Puddifoot!’

Hermione recognised the ringleader of this particular protest. It was the Hogsmeade Post Office worker who’d been a vocal demonstrator after Ephraim’s Hogsmeade rally. Here, he was levered onto the plinth of the fountain that graced the heart of the Atrium.

Hermione, Draco and Harry skirted the bulk of the crowd as best they could and were soon close to the Blasters. Hermione felt certain that they’d been noticed, despite wearing hooded capes.

Ephraim embarked on a scripted speech refuting all allegations and inviting a full and frank investigation into the death of Dennis Creevey. But his voice was lost amidst the roar of disapproval and then impassioned cheers whenever he mentioned Dennis’s name.

‘You’re a fucking traitor!’ yelped the man from the Post Office.

‘Traitor! Traitor! Traitor!’ went up the cry, accompanied by a discordant crash of spoons on pans, courtesy of the Hogsmeade Shopkeeper’s Alliance that seemed to have swollen its ranks far beyond Hogsmeade. Hermione saw sales assistants from Twilfit and Tatting’s and Quality Quidditch Supplies in Diagon Alley. The owner of Potage’s Cauldron Shop was passing around a variety of cauldrons to be used as drums.

‘Go home!’ screeched an unseen voice from the back of the room.

‘You’ve no bleeding right to be here, let alone tell us what to do! You’re not even BRITISH!’ agreed the Hogsmeade Post Office worker in loud, declamatory tones.

The crowd appeared to have switched from full-blooded support of Ephraim and his bigoted policies just a couple of weeks ago to nationalist fervour.

Ephraim cast a Sonorous charm so his voice could carry over the crowd, but the chorus of drumming cauldrons ratcheted up even higher.

He was joined on-stage by Julius Merriman, looking dapper yet severe in a sleek, dark robe and a traditional wizarding hat. This looked like a staged intervention – Plan B for if the crowd didn’t buy Ephraim’s sales pitch.

Merriman unfurled a piece of parchment and coughed loudly to get the attention of the rowdier elements, who quietened down a notch.
‘Ladies and Gentlemen! Mr Golowitz has vowed to submit to questioning by a Special Committee of the Wizengamot convened for the express purpose of addressing media speculations regarding the unfortunate demise of Mr Dennis Creevey…’ He dropped the parchment. ‘I therefore suggest you hear the man out… That would be the honourable, British approach to this issue. Mr Golowitz has a right to refute these allegations!’

But the audience clearly disagreed.

A kettle flew through the air catching Ephraim on the side of the head. He staggered backwards, reeling. Hermione held her breath expecting him to retaliate, but his hand went to his head and a look of awed wonder and disbelief stole across his face instead.

The kettle appeared to be the opening gambit in an onslaught of mouldering vegetables and fat, squishy tomatoes, hurled by the Hogsmeade Shopkeepers - but then a collective gasp rang out as a jet of lurid scarlet wand-fire shot through the crowd and the man from the Post Office abruptly fell headfirst from the plinth.

The crowd surged forwards, yelling and shoving, pushing into the Blasters.

Hermione strained to see which Blaster had fired this first shot in what felt like a deliberate provocation.

‘No!’ Ephraim bellowed. ‘Put down your wands!’ But the Blasters ignored him and were now jostling between themselves with many turning on the protesters.

Hermione felt eyes burning from the fringes of the dais in their direction… Torquil Haast, targeting Draco with a look of pure venom. She’d never seen him so transported, so animated by ANY emotion. His stiff, pale face was glowering with venal hatred.

Brightly coloured sparks and a blood-curdling shriek and someone had fallen to the ground and was being trampled underfoot. The crowd was now clambering onto the stage… and Merriman hastily ushered Ephraim away.

A Blaster was standing a few feet from her. He pushed back the visor on his helmet. It was Tom Bennet - and his wand was pointing straight at them…

‘Fuck’s sake,’ Draco grunted, pushing Hermione and Harry backwards. ‘We need to get out of this place. Where will Merriman have taken Ephraim?’

‘There’s a sort of antechamber…’ Hermione explained but trailed off as the drumming cauldrons suddenly ramped up in volume. The frantic drumming hurt her ears.

‘You guys go ahead!’ Harry barked. He was anxiously watching a tussle in the crowd. ‘Just saw one of the Blasters – Scrimshaw, I think – smack Thelonious in the chops. And I can’t see Kai… Bugger. She’s gone down… Gonna get them out!’

XXX

A dark, empty corridor stretched out before them.

‘Where do you think YOU’RE going?’ came a wheedling, officious voice that Hermione had hoped to never hear again. The spindly, hobbling form of Mr Jinks emerged into view… She felt a familiar wave of revulsion as he approached.

He was flanked by a tall, imposing figure with a large, leonine head decked out in full Blaster
regalia. Cormac McClaggen.

‘You heard him … Hop it! Only those on official Ministry business are allowed back here!’ Cormac boomed.

‘We need to speak to my stepfather… immediately,’ Draco said curtly.

‘By WE… d’you mean you and your girlfriend?’ Cormac smirked. ‘Who’d ‘ave thought it, eh?’

He sniggered nastily and gave Hermione a long look up and down… but the next moment he was lying on the floor, his body crooked and misshapen, clamouring for breath. His eyes bulged ominously as he desperately clawed at the tightening neck of his robe which was choking the life out of him…

Mr Jinks jumped backwards and scrambled for his wand but it flew out of his hand.

‘We haven’t got time for morons,’ Draco said coldly. ‘We want to see Ephraim.’

Jinks bowed obsequiously. ‘Of course, Mr Malfoy. I’ll let him know that you’re here.’

Cormac emitted a thin, strangulated whine, his face violet.

The tall, dapper figure of Julius Merriman loomed into view. ‘Ah! There you are!’ he said in his crisp, patrician tones. ‘Mr Golowitz is keen to see you. Follow me!’

Almost as an afterthought, Draco flicked his hand and Cormac was released.

XXX

Ephraim was slouched on a chair in the corner of the room. He looked deflated, distracted…

Karl glared at his master with undisguised peevishness but the full focus of his disgust was clearly reserved for Hermione. He roughly shouldered past her as she entered the room, heading outside with a look of dark determination on his face.

There was a scuttling movement to her right… Torquil Haast tossed another look of unadulterated hatred at Draco. Interesting, Hermione thought. Did he know Draco had killed his brother? And if so, how?

Ephraim briefly glanced at Hermione and Draco but a fresh commotion quickly commanded their attention.

Mr Jinks’s unctuous voice was high-pitched and querulous…

He turned to Merriman with a dissatisfied scowl. ‘Potter… Demands entry!’

‘Let him in,’ Ephraim grumbled. Was he going to turn himself over to Auror HQ? Hermione wondered.

‘But it’s highly irregular, sir,’ Jinks said, his smarmy features sweating in indignation. ‘Potter represents a foreign judicature!’

Draco sidled up to Harry. ‘Everything okay?’

‘Madness,’ Harry said under his breath. ‘Half the fucking Blasters have upped and left!’
‘Why?’

Harry’s voice dropped lower. ‘Following Bennet…’

‘What’s this about, Julius?’ came a shrill voice behind Harry. The voice belonged to a witch Hermione barely knew, Loubella Blythe, notoriously one of Witchell’s cronies who Padma used to call ‘ole fishface’. She’d recently been named Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Tana McLaughlin, Ron’s long-time colleague, was at her side.

‘There better be a VERY GOOD reason why I’ve been summoned here,’ Loubella snarled. ‘We have a full-scale riot raging in the Atrium!’

‘Mr Golowitz has decided to withdraw his candidacy for Minister for Magic,’ Merriman said coolly.

Hermione stared at Ephraim. He seemed unfazed, even bored.

‘And what’s this to ME?’ Loubella exclaimed, exasperated.

‘He also wishes to plead guilty to a number of criminal offences, Loubella.’ Merriman broke into a smile. ‘Seeing as Mr Golowitz is our current acting Minister for Magic this involves YOU, I believe, more than me.’

Loubella Blythe was white as a sheet. Once she’d gathered herself, her voice quavered. ‘I see… which offences does he admit to?’

‘Perverting the course of justice, Embracery, Defamatory Libel, Conspiracy to effect a public mischief…’ Ephraim declared boldly. His voice rang out – a resonating, rich-toned baritone. Half of these 'offences' didn't even exist under Common Law anymore, Hermione thought. What was he up to?

‘And... That’s it?’ Loubella asked. Hermione recalled how Sub Rosa had named her as one of the beneficiaries from Guldstern’s money-laundering activities. She was corrupt as hell…

‘Other issues will arise I suspect, Loubella,’ Ephraim said airily; a veiled warning. ‘Although Dennis Creevey's murder most certainly won’t.’

Harry pushed himself into the centre of the room.

‘As a representative of Auror HQ I need to inform you, Ms Blythe, that we have been conducting our own investigation into Mr Golowitz with a view to an international prosecution,’ he said in a tight, furious voice. ‘Under International Wizarding Law I demand access to the prisoner and collaboration at the highest level to ensure that Mr Golowitz faces justice.’

Loubella Blythe didn’t strike Hermione as a particularly collaborative sort… indeed, the more Harry talked, the more resentful she looked. ‘You may submit applications to the Wizengamot in the usual manner, Mr Potter. But Auror HQ has no legal supremacy over British law.’

‘That’s not quite true, actually,’ Harry said archly. ‘It’s our contention that Mr Golowitz has engaged in acts of cross-border terrorism – that trumps EVERYTHING.’

‘The British Wizengamot will hear what the prosecution has to say about these charges being levelled against Mr Golowitz. You may submit witness statements but there’s no guarantee that—’
‘But nobody official has charged him with ANYTHING!’ Harry shouted, increasingly irate. He looked at Hermione, a desperate look in his eye. ‘As far as I can see, Mr Golowitz is currently prosecuting himself!’

‘Why are YOU here, Mrs Weasley?’ Loubella Blythe asked tetchily.

‘I needed some legal advice,’ Ephraim quickly interjected before Hermione even had a chance to open her mouth. ‘And my stepson is here regarding some important family business.’

Loubella sighed and turned to Auror McLaughlin. ‘Read Mr Golowitz his rights and escort him to the interrogation room…. Once you’ve given us a statement, Ephraim, and seeing as these appear to be very minor infractions at best, I’ll waive the custody requirement - but I expect you to return here tomorrow morning for a preliminary hearing in the Wizengamot.’

‘I should explain to everyone waiting for Mr Golowitz to return to the Atrium what’s happened,’ Julius Merriman said making for the door.

‘As our only remaining candidate for Minister for Magic, I suggest you hurry up!’ Loubella said acerbically, ‘come with me Mr Haast,’ she said to Torquil before turning about-heel and hastening out of the room, Jinks close behind.

Harry groaned and sprinted after her. Hermione could hear him cajoling her as her high heels tripped down the corridor.

Tana clamped Ephraim’s wrists together with a magical binding.

‘I’d ask you to be my defence lawyer, Hermione,’ Ephraim said, a gleeful glint in his eyes. She’d never seen a man so happy to be arrested… ‘But I suspect you’d say no.’

‘You need to come with me now,’ Tana said, levering Ephraim off his chair.

‘Not so fast young lady,’ Ephraim said. He fixed a hypnotic blue gaze on her face. Tana’s round brown eyes widened and she nodded. ‘You have one minute, sir. I’ll be outside.’

Draco was leaning against the wall, watching events unfold. ‘Very fucking clever, Ephraim. Get yourself arrested by the Brits - which cuts out Harry and any chance of a real investigation into all the shit you’ve pulled… However, your dream of being Minister for Magic is in the gutter. And you’re going to prison…’

‘Not tonight, though,’ Ephraim said, smacking his lips.

‘Well… if you don’t, you’ll be dead by morning,’ Draco said in cutting tones. ‘Nethercross is under attack and there’s some very determined and highly-trained assassins who will find you and kill you the moment you leave this place.’

‘KILL me?’

‘The Muggles have had enough.’

Ephraim looked at Hermione. ‘Is this true?’

‘Yes.’ She sensed a dimming of the light inside of him. All his cleverness – for nothing.

‘You need to confess to something MEATIER to make sure you’re kept nice and safe in the Ministry dungeons,’ Draco said. ‘Although anything too meaty and you might wind up in
Azkaban…’

‘Not possible… I’m an American!’

‘So you’d rather go back there?’

An array of emotions swept across Ephraim’s face. ‘Sometimes… but not in chains.’

He closed his eyes, pondering his predicament. ‘Looks like I really do need legal advice,’ he said to Hermione.

‘I think you should surrender to Harry.’

‘NEVER.’

Yes. It was definitely more about ‘Harry Potter’ than Auror HQ… ‘Draco’s right. You need to confess to something more SERIOUS to be put into custody… or… you could suffer a sudden, violent mental deterioration that warrants immediate removal to St Mungo’s?’

Ephraim chuckled. ‘Fake madness?’

‘Possibly,’ Hermione said. ‘But I think you’re better off spilling your guts - something like embezzlement of public funds. You could start with the Hogsmeade Restoration Fund and go from there… There’s plenty of angry shopkeepers desperate to denounce you!... You’re best off with the truth, though.’

‘Well… that IS true, actually,’ Ephraim said. ‘I’ll go with that.’

Hermione shook her head in disgust. ‘I’ll call Tana.’

‘Hermione...’ Ephraim said calling her back. ‘There’s something else I want to say…’

There was a peculiar poignancy in his expression that shocked her.

‘I’ve been thinking about Parvati… I didn’t treat her well.’

Hermione stared at him stony-faced. ‘You were a bastard.’

‘Exactly. And I can make it up to her.’ He pondered a moment. ‘Her sister. Padma.’

‘You know where she is?’

‘Yes… She was one of Sylvestra’s test subjects when she was learning the fixing spell… She was fixed into a painting at Malfoy Manor.’

‘Which one?’

‘Oh, a painting of Malfoy Manor itself… Very mediocre.’

‘View from Folborough Hill...’ Hermione was both stunned and relieved to hear this.

‘That’s the one.’ A sudden burst of sadness seemed to explode from deep within him.

‘What about Padma’s boyfriend? Tony Goldstein?’ Hermione asked urgently. ‘Is he with her?’

Ephraim shook his head. ‘His fate was more complicated I’m afraid. He was securely bound into a painting by Dolores that was then sold at auction… a Samuel Palmer… Nice piece.’
'Your US CEO bought it.'

'It was shipped to the States.' His face sank and he looked burdened with a world of woes. 'I know Padma was your friend, Hermione. I hope you can find a way to set her free. But … I believe she was moved to Nethercross when I vacated Malfoy Manor.'

'We better go,' Draco said to Hermione, urgently tugging her arm. He was pulling his phone out of his pocket. 'Gunter’s already there with Niko and Oleg. I’ll warn them!'

'DRACO!' Ephraim called after him… but he didn’t turn back.

XXX

'What do you mean he’s not coming?' Tim demanded. He was dressed from head to toe in skin-tight black and looked slightly incongruous.

'He’s been arrested,' Draco said.

'What do I do now?' Tim threw a worried glance at the three armoured trucks and rocket-launcher barely hidden in a wooded copse. 'The PM will be furious.'

Beaumont was skulking close by, eavesdropping. ‘Let’s take the place out and say we can’t identify the body.’

Tim’s face puckered at this. ‘That’s hardly _honourable_, Beaumont!’

‘Are you going to pursue him through the wizarding legal system?’

‘Of course not!’ Tim blustered.

‘So he’s not our problem anymore, is he?’

‘There’s something we need to get from the farm before you bomb it to smithereens or whatever it is you brave boys have planned,’ Draco said in laconic tones.

‘Well…I don’t fancy your chances,’ Beaumont said, staring down his nose at Draco, even though they were evenly matched in height. ‘There’s guards.’

‘We can fly-through, find this picture and get it out fast,’ Gunter assured Draco, gesturing at Troyanda13 – poised to transform into crows.

‘Well, the quicker the better,’ Beaumont snapped. ‘I’ve got to report back to JTAC. They’re getting impatient.’ He peered at Nethercross Farm through binoculars. ‘I’ll give you ten minutes to get in and get out – you’ll need to be a good half-mile outside the perimeter once we let rip.’

‘There’s a windmill close to the property. We’ll meet you there,’ said Niko.

XXX

‘I don’t remember a windmill!’ Draco said, once they’d Apparated to the tree that had been their rendezvous point the night they rescued Binta and Katya’s painting.

Hermione vaguely recalled there’d been a light in a window across the fields. Was that the windmill? YES… there it was! She could discern its distinctive bulk and shape. It had been a moonless night before; but tonight, the fields and farm were bathed in soft, silvery light.
Moments later and they were shivering in the windmill’s cool shadow, gazing across the fields to Nethercross Farm.

Hermione gazed up at the windmill towering above them. The sails swept noisily round and round… a constant creaking motion. The window where she’d seen that candle flickering was dark and featureless. Even so, she rubbed her arms to dispel a peculiar prickling sensation.

‘Are you cold?’ asked Draco.

‘A little… where the hell are— OH MY GOD!’ A sudden blinding white flash lit up the night. She grabbed hold of Draco and they stood and watched in horrified silence as an explosive roar rumbled towards them and a huge, rolling cloud billowed high into the sky.

‘Too soon,’ she whimpered, as a second flash, even brighter than the first, lit up their faces.

A movement from the top window caught her attention… a faint shade of pale reflected by the explosion across the fields, but it quickly melted into blackness and was gone.

‘Hey!’ Niko yelled, jogging towards them from the far side of the windmill.

‘Thank god,’ Draco panted in relief.

‘The others are coming…’

Oleg and Gunter were holding a painting between them. ‘When they said ten minutes they actually meant six!’ Gunter frowned. ‘That Beaumont fucker doesn’t like wizards!’

‘Who’s got the Portkey?’

Niko was frantically hunting on his hands and knees in the grass. ‘Fucking hell,’ he complained. He splayed his hand and a beam of light illuminated the sodden turf. ‘Blasted thing was a safety pin! Couldn’t Elizaveta have used a cup or a big fucking brooch or something?’

‘Doesn’t matter. We’ll Apparate,’ Gunter said. ‘Will the painting be okay?’

‘I should think so,’ Hermione said.

XXX

‘We need to paint the back,’ Hermione said urgently, once the painting was installed in the shed alongside the rest of their growing collection. ‘Stops any unwanted visitors.’

‘Well, let’s be quick about it,’ Niko remarked, liberally slapping black paint onto the canvas. ‘Everyone’s heading to The Burrow for a celebratory drink. I could definitely do with one – those Muggle bastards scared the shit out of me.’

Hermione was hunting down a spare rag of some kind to cover the painting. ‘What’s the celebration?’

Niko looked at her, slack-jawed. ‘We’ve been wanting this cretin locked up for years! And now he is!’

‘Oh. Of course…’ Ephraim going down for embezzling the Hogsmeade Restoration Fund hadn’t been quite the dastardly ending she’d always envisaged for him. Still.. it was a start. Harry would be breathing down the Ministry’s neck until he got his way and Ephraim was packed off to Paris.
‘And the Weasleys are moving back into their home. It’s still a wreck but better than it was.’ Niko flashed her a grin. ‘The staircase? That’s me. I did that!’ Niko propped up ‘View from Folborough Hill’ to dry.

‘You two coming?’ Draco and Henrik asked from the open door. Parvati momentarily stepped inside the shed and glanced her hand across the painting of Malfoy Manor, sighing deeply. Both happy and concerned…

They walked across the field towards the twinkling lights of The Burrow behind its high hedges. The grass was damp against Hermione’s calves. The night sky smelled of more rain to come.

She shivered, still chilled from the shadow of the windmill at Nethercross.

‘Mummy,’ Hugo squealed when they walked in, ‘look at what Niko done!’

Hermione lifted her eyes across the kitchen to the staircase. The wooden banister and railings had been shaped to resemble a tree, its branches woven together into a series of hearts and birds ascending out of view… silvery leaves glinted in the warm glow of candlelight.

Hermione smiled at Niko. ‘Very nice.’

It was crowded around the kitchen table but Molly was in hearty form. She served steaming bowls of chicken stew followed by apple pie, although Hermione wasn’t in the mood to eat - or drink, despite Arthur plying everyone with cowslip wine and a home-brewed nettle beer that had Henrik giggling like a schoolboy after he drank – against seasoned advice – three pints in quick succession.

Children were squealing and running from room to room with Parvati and Fleur in full chase while George and Ron appeared to be running what looked suspiciously to Hermione like an ‘Exploding Snap’ gambling table in the living-room, with the older children wagering chocolate frog cards.

Not everyone was there. Arlene and Gabby were still recovering from injuries – both physical and emotional – and had stayed at Shell Cottage with Thelonious who opted out of festivities because he was feeling a bit dizzy after being clobbered at the Ministry – although Hermione reckoned he didn’t really enjoy large social gatherings.

Percy left early with Molly and Lucy. Hardly a surprise, Hermione thought. Their world had fallen apart in the worst possible way and they were putting one hell of a brave face on it.

‘I don’t begrudge any of your happiness,’ Percy said to her quietly when she followed him outside into the dank night air. ‘It’s important to savour the good when it comes… less often than it should, these days.’ His hands shook a little as he spoke.

‘If there’s anything I can do to help…’ Hermione said, hating her own inadequacy.

‘The best thing you – or any of us can do - is stop those bastards who took Audrey,’ Percy said, lowering his voice so his daughters couldn’t hear him. He reached out for his children, one on either side of him, and they walked slowly up the drive.

As Hermione watched them go she could hear the kitchen behind her falling into silence.

‘I think we should drink a toast to our dear departed friends,’ Arthur said and there were muted notes of approval and the burble of sad, troubled conversation and then the sound of a cork being popped from a bottle – glasses clinking, and bit by bit the volume of conversation cranked up; the squeals and cries of children charging through the house resumed with Angelina raising her voice
as someone – Hermione guessed it was Alfred from the surly-sounding response – knocked over a glass.

A violin squeaked into action, accompanied by a flute. She could hear Gwen applauding and whooping so she presumed Oleg was one of the musicians. The music was both jaunty and sad, floating into the night.

A chill hand wrapped itself around hers. ‘Mummy… I think you should come in now.’

It was Rose, staring up at her with large, round eyes.

‘Just getting some fresh air…’ She gazed up the drive. Percy and his daughters had ducked from view into the field.

‘But you should come in… it’s better that you do.’

Hermione shot a glance at her daughter. Her serious expression troubled her more than she wanted to admit. It was rather frightening being unnerved these days by her own daughter.

‘You two okay?’ Draco asked from the open doorway. His eyes were shining and he had a glass of firewhiskey in his hand.

‘All good,’ Hermione smiled.

‘She’s here,’ Rose whispered to her mother, gently nudging her towards Draco.

Hermione’s heart jumped into her throat. ‘Who?’

Her heart was still thumping as she inched her way into the kitchen… the scant floor-space had been taken over by a dancing game that seemed to involve a lot of crossing-over of arms and legs and a fair deal of toppling over while laughing hysterically.

She moved to the sink to pour herself a glass of water and her eyes drifted to the window and the tree-lined drive heading to the field.

A small, elfin figure, like a dark fairy, barely distinguishable in the shadows, was standing at the furthest end of the drive - head bowed.

Hermione’s lips and hands tingled with sudden, acute fear…

She turned around, looking for Draco. He was laughing with Harry as they fiddled with the nozzle on Arthur’s beer-keg. Beer spluttered inexpertly into their glasses before gushing onto the floor.

Please look over, please come here, she silently begged.

‘What’s up?’ Draco asked, his hand warm on her shoulder. ‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

She turned back to the window.

The small, dark figure was staring up at them; her face pale and indistinct.

Draco’s mouth dropped open and his eyes widened in alarm. ‘Shit. It’s Katya…’

His glass of beer almost fell from his hand but between them they caught it.

But when they looked back to the driveway, she was gone.
CHAPTER TRACKS:

"RIVERSIDE" by AGNES OBEL

"ALMA OPPRESSA DA SORTA CRUDELE" from La Fida Ninfa by VIVALDI

"TAKE A BOW" by MUSE

"BOULEVARD OF BROKEN DREAMS" by GREEN DAY

"TILL THE SKY FALLS DOWN" by DASH BERLIN

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Chapter Summary

Reunions and Revelations…

60. An Antic Disposition

Darkness, driving rain… it was unthinkable to leave Katya outside.

‘She couldn’t come any closer because of the wards,’ Bill pointed out. ‘We need to scout the area. She can’t have gone far.’

‘She might have returned to wherever it is she came from?’ suggested Oleg.

‘It’s obvious where she came from,’ Draco muttered. ‘That windmill…’ He threw an accusatory look at Niko. ‘You dropped the portkey. Brings you to the edge of the wards, doesn’t it?’

Niko looked a bit sheepish. ‘We didn’t see anyone there.’

‘There was someone at the window,’ Hermione pointed out. ‘It might have been Katya… Which also means that’s where Tom Bennet’s based,’ she added, almost to herself really – but it was a logical conclusion. It was where she’d seen Sylvandra and Tom together.

Bill was already splitting everyone into smaller groups and they headed out into the rain.

Harry stuck with Draco. ‘Why don’t you get the kids back to Folkvangr?’ he suggested to Hermione. ‘You look beat.’ He side-eyed Draco. ‘I’ll look after him…’

Draco was kicking his shoe into the rain-sodden ground. His expression was a strange blend: frustrated, disconsolate and concerned.

Niko walked Hermione, Parvati and the children to the end of the drive and they Apparated home.

Once the children were in bed Hermione set to making coffee for Niko and Parvati. She fancied it might be a long night. She was thinking about Rose… had she seen Katya lurking in the bushes or was this yet another instance of unexplained prescience?

She had a chance to ask her when she popped downstairs to the kitchen to fetch a glass of water.

‘Are you okay?’ Hermione asked – more tentative than usual.

Rose swept her voluminous red hair from her face. She looked solemn and fragile in her nightgown with her bare feet poking out of the bottom.

‘The little lady… she’s like the rainfall.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

Rose shrugged. ‘It’s how she feels…’
‘She’s Magda’s mummy.’

‘Oh!’ Rose looked surprised. A fierce look scuttled across her face. ‘She won’t take her away, will she?’

‘I – I don’t think so…’ The thought filled her with dread. ‘Did you see her before we did?’

Rose scrunched up her nose, thinking about this… ‘Sort of… the feeling changed.’

‘But did you SEE her?’ Hermione pressed.

‘I always have.’ She sipped her glass of water, gazing at her mother over the top of her glass with wide, watchful eyes.

‘What do you mean by that?’ Hermione asked a little more ardently – and panicked – than she would have liked. ‘How long is ALWAYS?’

Rose thought about it. ‘The way you can have a dream but your eyes are open.’

‘Is there anyone else you see like that? Somebody we don’t all see in the usual way?’

Rose considered this. ‘There were the eyes in our old house… And there’s the lady. The other one.’

‘Which other lady?’ Hermione asked, trying to keep her voice calm.

‘The one with the long, long hair.’

‘What colour hair, Rose?’ Hermione felt like crying. ‘Like… my colour? Brown?’ She flipped a ringlet with her hand. ‘Or blond like Aunty Fleur?’

‘No,’ Rose said firmly shaking her head. ‘Black.’

DOLORES…

‘And where do you see her?’

Rose began to look flustered. Her eyes shifted to the open kitchen door. ‘I’d like to go to bed, Mummy. Parvati’s reading me and Scorpius a story and I don’t want to miss out.’

‘That’s nice…’ Hermione made an effort to smile. She folded Rose into her arms and kissed the top of her head.

But Rose stopped at the doorway. ‘I’m not scaring you, am I, Mummy?’ She looked bereft at the thought.

‘No! Of course not!’ Hermione laughed.

‘But you’re very scared.’

Hermione stared at her. ‘Well… I am. A little. But… everything will work out in the end… The BAD WIZARD got locked up today!’ she added cheerfully.

Rose gave her an enquiring look. ‘But that’s not who scares you, is it?’

Hermione suppressed a shudder. ‘Parvati will be onto the next chapter before you know it!’ she said in jocular tones.
Once she’d left she returned to making coffee, the mugs rattling as she pulled them from the cupboard because her hand was shaking uncontrollably.

‘She’ll be fine,’ Niko said behind her. Odd, Hermione thought. His German accent always seemed so much stronger when she wasn’t actually looking at him. ‘It’s something you get used to.’

‘You have it?’ Hermione finished up making the coffee, her movements quick and brisk. She resented talking about ‘it’ at all… it felt like an unwanted intrusion.

‘Nothing like Rose… I’m not sensitive enough to make use of it, whereas she’s remarkably attuned.’

Hermione spun around and presented Niko with a mug of coffee. ‘Divination is bollocks. Nothing’s happened already. Life is linear. It chugs along from one second to the next.’

Niko grinned. ‘Well, that’s not true, is it? Your personal experience of time is utterly subjective. Entirely different to a blade of grass or a hedgehog or a mayfly… Or a volcano…’

‘But that’s not even ALIVE!’ Hermione scoffed.

‘It evolves. It has movement. It’s subject to forces… over time… a very different time-scale to what we can comprehend.’

Hermione sighed… she had so many other things to be worrying about. What would Draco do when he found Katya? How would he feel?

‘And there’s no such thing as a single point in time that we can call a second, either,’ Niko said, sipping his coffee. ‘Any moment already comprises the past and the future within itself… so to say time is a linear succession of seconds is nonsense, because they’re arbitrary. They don’t really exist.’

‘No, Niko… there are single points in time,’ Hermione said heatedly, annoyed to be wasting time, capacity, having to even think about this. ‘There’s the single moment your heart stops for the last time. One moment it’s alive and beating and the next moment it’s still and dead… and the sun goes up and down every day regardless of who or what you are… And anything that may happen on any of those days that hasn’t happened yet cannot be foreseen.’

‘Oh, I agree!’ Niko said, looking offended that Hermione could have ever attributed such baseless nonsense to him. ‘All that stuff with tea leaves and crystal balls is diddly-shit!… True divination is observation… You already have it with people, Hermione. Your magic is driven by empathy. Rose has that, too. But she has it for places as well. Possibly objects.’

‘Objects?’

Niko seized a spoon that had been left on the counter. He held it in his hand and then passed it to Hermione. ‘See? It’s warm…’

‘Yes, because you were just holding it.’

‘Exactly. I’ve left a trace of myself. I imbued it with energy. It’ll fade… But if I was made of lava, my trace would be different… hotter for longer - possibly transformative. Someone like Rose can sense these traces… even SEE them.’

‘She was scared of going to The Blue House,’ Hermione admitted.
‘I doubt she knew exactly what was going to happen,’ Niko said with a reassuring smile. ‘But she discerned a high probability that something could... Maybe she picked up on all the funny little feelings and undercurrents and magical auras we’re constantly putting out? Maybe something bad happened there before, leaving its own trace? Events have a funny habit of replaying themselves. Her gift is to quickly process multiple layers of information - stuff us mere mortals don't see - and make brilliant, calculated guesses.’

Hermione pondered this a moment. Put like that, Divination was almost interesting! An exercise in predictive analysis.

She studied his face. Was he just saying this to make her feel better?

‘Why does she think Draco’s wife is like rainfall?’ she asked, her voice quavering.

‘Because the rain can spoil a day in the sun?’ Niko suggested brightly. ‘She senses your uncertainty and Draco’s dread.’

That seemed reasonable, Hermione thought. However… ‘She says she’s ALWAYS seen her. And she also says she sees Dolores.’

‘Dolores?’ Niko looked confused. ‘The one who works for Salvedra?’

Hermione nodded. ‘Katya’s keeper.’

Niko’s face darkened. ‘I once had a vision like that… I was a child and I saw a man’s face.’

‘Did you ever find out who he was?’

‘Oh yes! He was the man who killed my father.’

‘So you met him?’

‘For sure,’ Niko said with a peculiar half-smile. ‘He was Saul Jeroboam…’

The sound of footsteps and voices from the living-room drew their attention.

Gunter, Elizaveta and Henrik… Niko joined them and Hermione refilled the kettle.

Draco was right, she thought. Katya had probably found Niko’s portkey. But what if she hadn’t? What if she was deliberately sent here?

The thought niggled inside of her. One way to check was to enter the paintings, she thought. Head to the windmill…

She slipped a coat on from the hallway, abandoning the kettle, and exited the house from the front – she didn’t feel like explaining to the others. She skirted the house and re-entered via the gate that led to the fields. The wind was blowing a wet squall into her face and she was glad to get inside the shed where the paintings gleamed faintly in the darkness.

She flipped the radio on. Brahms Fourth… she thought of her mother.

And then stepped into the paintings, leaving herself sitting on a bench abutting the shed wall.

*Katya*, she thought… but nothing.

She thought about the painting of the Rose Garden. Again…Nothing. For her, it had to be a
Sylvestra… she was immediately hurled through a blizzard of shapes and colours… straight as an arrow… and was standing in front of the thin, grey veil that separated the rose garden from the room Katya had once occupied.

Someone out of shot was pulling the room apart, grunting in frustration…

‘What happened?’ Sylvestra screeched. She moved into the centre of the room. Her face was contorted with rage and Hermione pitied whoever she was venting at. ‘You were meant to be guarding her!’

‘I went to the farm to warn that there were soldiers coming? We saw them in the lane and—’

‘That wasn’t your job!’ Sylvestra shrieked. ‘Your job was to watch my sister.’

‘I’m sorry,’ the voice replied. A young man. A candle flickered on a table scattered with papers and Hermione caught a glimpse of his face. It was Jervis Scrimshaw, the Blaster who’d hit Thelonious in the Atrium. He must have legged it from the Ministry when the riot broke out.

‘It won’t happen again,’ he whimpered.

‘No, it won’t!’ Sylvestra snarled, eyes blazing. She flicked her wrist and Scrimshaw blinked in shock as a deep dark gash ripped across his throat, unzipping his head from his body.

Hermione gasped in horror as blood cascaded down his torso and his head tumbled to the floor with a heavy thud, followed by his body. Despite her incorporeal state, Hermione could feel her gorge rise.

‘What a bitch,’ Niko said beside her.

‘When did YOU get here?’ she asked, heart a-flutter with surprise.

‘We guessed where you’d gone,’ Gunter said on her other side. Revulsion flickered across his face as he looked through the veil and she could feel his redness – a searing, heated scarlet.

‘What’s she looking for?’ Gunter asked, as Sylvestra frenziedly rifled through the papers strewn on the desk.

Sylvestra growled in exasperation and scrunched the papers up.

‘Something she can't find...’ Niko observed smugly. Sylvestra turned to face them, eyes black. Hermione pushed Gunter and Niko downwards…

‘She’ll see us,’ she whispered.

When they looked back the room was empty, still… Hermione’s eyes were drawn to the metronomic movement outside the window - the windmill’s sails journeying round and round.

‘I’m going to go in and get those papers,’ Niko said boldly.

‘Careful,’ Hermione advised. She didn’t imagine Sylvestra had roamed too far, but Niko was already unfurling himself to his true height and gathering up the papers on the table.

‘He’s a hot-head,’ Gunter explained… ‘He’s got company.’
Hermione could see a lean shadow cast on the wall close to Niko… ‘Get back to Folkvangr!’ Gunter instructed - and a large, black crow was flying around the room, squawking manically. Niko spun around and the shadow-man pushed him backwards against the table.

Gunter resumed his human form and hurled a bolt of magic at the shadow... Asusto crumpled to the floor, too shocked to stay invisible. He quickly shoved Scrimshaw’s body into Gunter’s feet tripping him up and then unleashed a spell that whirled Gunter around like a tornado, high into the air, pinning him to the ceiling.

Hermione wondered if she should intervene… Niko had hoisted open the window. He snapped his fingers and Gunter span in the opposite direction, an ever-decreasing blur of black, until he was flying through the open window, Niko close behind.

Asusto looked disoriented and then revolted when he realised he was drenched in Scrimshaw's blood pooling on the floor.

He jumped to his feet and dashed to the open window…

Hermione had a peculiar prickling sensation at the back of her head. Someone, something was watching her…

She furtively glanced at the tall bushes set to the side of the pathways and the statue… A slinking, insidious movement.

She could sense eyes, like jet-black jewels staring out at her… waiting, watching…

Dolores had said he didn’t want her like THIS; unreal, lacking substance… consciousness rendered in light. So there was really no need for the jellied sensation that suddenly robbed her of the power to move or think straight…Except. Part of her WAS real. Something about her was flesh and blood.

MOVE. She told herself. Anywhere. Anyone…

A rustle, a twitch, and the thicket shuddered…

She flung herself forwards – a purple haze, a streak of light – narrowly avoiding a dense, black collision as an almighty, overwhelming burst of dark energy spiraled through the painting, scorching the roses and exploding the glasshouse in its wake.

She felt caught in a rushing wind. Tendrils of smoky-grey looped and whirled around her, trying to capture her in-flight.

Where can I go? she thought.

WHO?

But nothing came to mind.

HELP! She screamed in her head to no one. SOMEBODY! ANYBODY!

She catapulted forwards onto a slick, green lawn and flew headfirst towards a house…

She knew that house.

‘Get in here!’ cried a familiar voice.

She forward-rolled through an open doorway landing beside a towering fireplace. A staircase
loomed behind her and she was facing a door. She looked left and a dark, endless, cavernous room reached into the shadows.

A door slammed shut and feet scampered towards her.

‘Hermione… are you okay?’

‘PADMA?’

XXX

Hermione could barely believe it... Padma. Here... Body and soul.

Padma steered her towards a table and chairs. A corridor stretched right, leading to nowhere.

‘Where IS everywhere?’ Hermione asked, eyes round with wonder… the darkness that pervaded most of this interior was oddly elastic, swooping and shifting. There was a faint light glowing from the landing at the top of the stairs.

‘Oh, it wasn’t properly painted in – just the front bits,’ Padma shrugged. ‘It’s fine. I’m used to it now.’

A fire burned in the imposing fireplace emitting a warm, friendly glow that lit up Padma’s face.

‘Oh my,’ she said, ‘I’ve so much to tell you and I KNOW you have so much to tell me.’ Padma's eyes were brimming with tears.

She told Hermione how Tony had wanted to meet her to discuss some very important news. They met at the Folborough Hotel but were immediately captured... and she wound up in the cellar at Malfoy Manor.

She was chiefly visited by a ‘miserable-looking sod’ as she called him – Karl – and on one occasion by a beefy-looking man who scowled a lot. He worked for Arcana.

Troy… Hermione thought.

And then there was Sylvestra. Padma recoiled mentioning her name.

‘She did this to me,’ she sneered. ‘It was just a game to her. I was her plaything!’

‘Do you know what happened to Tony?’ Hermione asked.

Padma sadly shook her head. Hermione told her that Tony had also been trapped into a picture and was now in America.

Padma told her that Tony had confided he was involved in a secret operation … She was shocked to hear that Hermione already knew all about this operation as it was designed to intimidate her and Draco in Argentina.

Padma was non-plussed by this… ‘So, it’s true? You worked with Draco Malfoy?’ She’d been puzzled by some of the things she’d overheard at Malfoy Manor.

‘It was even more extraordinary watching you DANCE with him! You even seemed to enjoy it!’

‘DANCE?’ But of course. ‘View from Folborough Hill’ had been on display at Ephraim and Narcissa’s wedding.
'Draco’s wee boy. He’s a tragic child,’ Padma sighed softly.

‘He’s not now!’

‘You know him?’

‘Very well…’ Hermione told her how Parvati was involved in caring for Scorpius – almost legally bound after Astoria dumped him - explaining why and how this had happened.

‘I’ve such a lot to tell you,’ Hermione agonised, trying to summarise events as best she could - not dwelling too much on Draco. There was time – she hoped – for that…

‘I once saw you and Draco in this painting,’ Padma told her. ‘I was upstairs… there’s a small area where I can actually move around… I’ve made up a bed-of-sorts and I have a candle. I try to keep hours. A routine.’ Padma petered into self-deprecating laughter. It was then that Hermione sensed her loneliness… palpable, aching. And her heroism for not having gone completely bonkers…

‘Your painting's not too terrible,’ Hermione said cheerfully. ‘Green. Pleasant.’

‘Oh, it’s drab,’ Padma sniffed dismissively. ‘There’s some beauties, though I can’t STAY in them… It’s strange. As long as I know I’m passing through I can travel anywhere I like in this weird picture-world.’

Hermione was amazed. ‘But you’re FIXED, Padma! How do you even leave this house?’

‘I didn’t. I was too frightened.’ Her large, dark eyes fell into shadow. ‘Sylvestra visited me a couple of times - sitting where you are now, wearily looking at her nails. And then she stopped coming and I suppose I got bored – or brave – or a bit of both, and I started to go outside and bit by bit I ventured further.’ She grinned at Hermione. ‘I’ve seen you and I’ve even seen Parvati when I look out…’

‘She misses you terribly.’

‘Can she come and see me?’

Hermione shook her head. ‘I have a certain type of magic. It allows me to come and go—’

She stopped short, realising what she’d just said…

‘I’ve tried to leave. Countless times,’ Padma sighed. ‘But I can’t. I think the caster of my fixing spell has to die first.’

‘We can live in hope…’

‘I’ve seen Harry!’ Padma chirped up. ‘With Draco a couple of times… Are THEY friends now, too?’

Hermione nodded and smiled. ‘They’re looking for those who are trying to hurt us. That includes Sylvestra… but also a rather frightening woman called Dolores and Salvedra… he’s possibly the most frightening of all and he chased me today. You rescued me from him.’

Padma’s face curled into dark loathing. ‘I know him,’ she said in a low hiss. ‘He wanders through my painting sometimes. He takes no interest in me, thankfully… He gives me the creeps.’

A thought occurred to Hermione. ‘Padma…you could really help us here! You can see who comes and goes and you can move around … although I’m still not understanding why. For me to be here
right now I need an anchor. A constant outside of the paintings... I don’t see how-' but then it struck her. ‘Oh Lordy! It’s because you're a TWIN! It’s because of Parvati! You have your very own walking, living, breathing, beautiful anchor... And that gives you freedom you wouldn’t normally have when fixed into a painting.’

She could barely wait to tell Parvati…

Padma blinked at her, dazed. ‘Wow! You’re really super-chuffed about this, Hermione! You’re actually glowing!’

Hermione looked at herself. Draco...

She dashed to the window. There was a sinuous pillar of shimmering white cresting the hill…

She immediately flung open the door. ‘DRACO!’ she cried.

He was at her side in moments. He looked distraught. ‘Fucking hell, Hermione! Where were you? I’ve looked everywhere!’

‘I was in Malfoy Manor,’ she said excitedly. He lifted his eyes to the rather shoddily-painted rendition of his former home, a quizzical expression on his face. ‘Padma saved me from Salvedra… PADMA!’

His face cracked into a smile.

‘Come and say hello… Did Gunter and Niko get back? They had trouble at the windmill.’

‘They got back ages ago... they're fine. They’ll drop by later.’

‘Did – did you find—?’

‘No… We reckon she's scarpered.’ He didn’t look too upset by this she noted.

XXX

Hermione woke up with Draco’s body pressed warm and demanding against her. His mouth was nuzzling her neck and his arm was across her body, his hand stroking between her legs.

She sighed contentedly.

‘Morning, beautiful…’ His voice was husky, ragged in her ear.

She was too turned on to think straight and offer a coherent reply, whimpering as he dragged his lips across her bare skin. He gently nipped and tickled her until she was gasping with laughter.

‘You sod,’ she said, nudging him away playfully, but he levered her leg up and unabashedly stared down at her, a curious glint in his eye that made her blush with self-consciousness.

‘Are you INSPECTING me?’ she giggled.

‘Uh-huh.’

‘What is it? Have I mutated?’

‘No…’ His fingers gently probed and explored her, sending quick lightning bolts of sensation flickering through her. ‘You’re sort of blue…’
‘Blue?’

‘Well… purplish-blue.’ He raised his eyebrows at her, his eyes twinkling. ‘It’s a sign of pregnancy.’

‘NO, Draco!’ she exclaimed, clamping her thighs together onto his hand. But he was a persistent bugger and he nudged her open again, trailing kisses from her knees down her thighs.

Close-up, he studied her intently, his breath blowing hot against her.

‘You’re such a SAD FUCK,’ she grinned. ‘Delusional!’

‘We have to face the fact that your uterus has been literally besieged by sperm on an almost-constant basis,’ he said impishly, ‘… and you really ARE blue.’ He bit his lower lip as he ground his fingers deep inside… ‘In here.’

‘Oh. Well that’s EVIDENCE,’ she said sarcastically, as his fingers gently teased her. ‘Though… I – I’m rather liking your sexy medical exam. Don’t stop…’

‘I’ve no intention of doing so,’ he said hoarsely, swapping his hand for his mouth… Before long she was writhing and biting her pillow…

‘And you taste different… thought that the other day actually…’

‘In a good way?’ she panted, half-dreading…

‘Gorgeous… always gorgeous, but…’ He dipped his head for further evidence, ‘…sweeter,’ he sighed, his voice tremulous with longing. He gazed at her, his whiteness irradiating like moonbeams dancing.

‘I think – I think a deeper examination is in order,’ she sighed, her insides turning over.

He didn’t need further encouragement, surging towards her, swamping her with his warmth. She arched in response to the feel of his hands as they glided over her body and when his fingers brushed against her nipples they were instantly hard and aching.

‘You’re VERY sensitive,’ he breathed, his eyes hot and glowing, chest heaving.

His mouth closed over her breast. She sighed as his tongue swept across her nipple; liquid warmth – both soothing and sensual, and then they locked mouths and their bodies were intertwined and he drove into her with a throaty groan and they were making love with impassioned urgency.

He suddenly pulled back, electrified…

‘What is it?’ she gasped.

‘Too turned-on…’

She laughed. ‘Is that what pregnancy talk does to you?’

‘Yeah…’ he grinned, eyes sparkling, ‘just the thought of fucking impregnating you makes me… horny as hell.’

‘You fucking Neanderthal!’ she said, bursting into laughter. ‘And - would you still want me if I was ACTUALLY pregnant?’… voicing a silent fear…
'God, yeah…’ he said between gritted teeth, heat rising. He swiftly rolled her onto her side in a single brisk movement, tilted her leg upward to afford him access, and thrust into her to the hilt, deep and hard - eyes closed, savouring the feel of her.

‘I’d - I’d think you were the sexiest fucking thing in the whole fucking world…’ he stuttered breathlessly… and a blindingly pure white flash of arousal surged through them… She ground herself against him, desperate to relieve the weight of tension built up inside of her.

‘And you ARE pregnant, Hermione.’ His voice was an intense, low whisper. She could feel him trembling. ‘I can sense it…’ She looked back at him and his eyes were glazed with lust - and for a moment their bodies shimmered, a flash of starry white enveloping them. She gasped at the rippling sensation as they combined, the shift of feeling, like a singular, loud chord of music resonating deep within them…

XXX

As was often the case when they made love in the morning, Hermione felt dreamy for some time afterwards. Reality felt like a rude awakening.

‘Picked these up from the windmill… fancy they were drawn by Draco’s wife,’ Niko declared, slapping a wad of papers onto the dining table.

‘They’re very nice,’ Gunter said, studying a drawing of Draco and comparing it with the real, live man as he thumbed through the pictures, a look of concentration on his face.

Parvati and Henrik had taken the older children to the park. There was a vague plan to visit Wisteria Cottage as Scorpius had never been.

Magda was sitting on Hermione’s lap, arms around her neck. She sighed contentedly and rested her head on Hermione’s shoulder, still and watchful.

‘Who’s still a sleepyhead this morning?’ Hermione cooed, holding her close.

The thought of Katya taking her away screwed Hermione’s insides into a tight ball, but she was her mother – it was only right.. but there was no denying it to herself, she was bonding rapidly with Katya’s child.

‘Has anyone looked for Katya this morning?’ she asked.

‘We flew around first thing… no sign of her,’ Gunter said mournfully. He was hoping to meet his sister… ‘I think Draco’s right. She came with the portkey. But then she saw Draco – and took fright.’ He looked at Draco apologetically. ‘I don’t meant that unkindly. But she’s probably nervous… I know I would be!’

Draco maintained focus on the drawings…‘I wonder why she’s drawn some of this stuff?’ he mused. There was a drawing of her painting of a dog that had been left at Madam Puddifoot’s… and even a picture of Madam Puddifoot herself.

‘Detailed guides?’ Hermione suggested - disappointing, if true, as that meant Katya had volunteered information. She’d always presumed Sylvestra would have to use Legilimens.

‘Maybe she was enchanted to draw these?’ Gunter murmured. ‘I mean, there’s something strangely… compulsive about them.’

He looked at Draco uneasily. Most of the pictures were of him… The same look, same pose
Draco pushed the drawings away. ‘The question is – has she now returned to the windmill?’

‘Not this morning,’ Gunter remarked. ‘The room we were in last night’s untouched… they haven’t even bothered to remove that chap’s body. He’s just lying there… in pieces.’

‘Was there anyone else at the windmill last night?’ Draco asked.

’The one you’re all shitting yourselves over.. the pig man!’ Niko replied. ‘He was outside talking to that lawyer guy … skinny chap with greased dark hair.’

Hermione looked at Draco. ‘Torquil… I wonder if Ephraim knows he’s switched sides?’

‘Maybe Katya’s gone back to Malfoy Manor?’ said Gunter.

‘Would be tricky with the wards. Ephraim changed them.’ Draco anxiously chewed his lip. ‘She might try, though. But it’s not good for her to wander about aimlessly. She’s obviously not very well. Vulnerable…’

‘We’ll flyover later,’ Gunter said, ‘but if the wards live up to the legends, any surveillance will be limited.’

‘We should ask Ephraim what the wards are,’ Hermione said to Draco.

‘He’s a bit busy today,’ Draco pointed out. ‘Confessing in the Wizengamot to fictitious crimes…’

The front door banged and the children charged into the living-room.

‘We were in the park and John Cunningham said we could play football,’ Hugo yelped.

‘And Jenny Slater was on the swings,’ Rosa said. ‘They’re on halfterm.’

Hermione was relieved to see Rose animated and - dare she say it – normal.

‘Jenny invited me to her house for a playdate! Is that allowed?’

‘I’d be happy to take her,’ Parvati said. ‘Her mum was nice.’

‘And they’re having a fete and doing a play – a big play in the park, Mummy!’ Hugo said, literally jumping up and down in excitement. ‘Can we go?’ He looked between Hermione and Draco.

‘When is it?’ Draco asked.

‘It’s a summer fete – and we’re in summer now, aren’t we? Even though it’s been raining. So it must be soon.’

‘They’re doing the Rattenfanger… That means The Pied Piper,’ Scorpius said, proud that he knew this.

Magda extended chubby arms to Hugo who hauled her, a little inelegantly, off Hermione’s lap.

‘Well, if all’s well…’ Hermione glanced at Draco and the others – more out of hope than reason, ‘it might be nice to do something summery like that.’

Parvati grinned. Hermione hadn’t seen her this sunny in ages… Even though her sister was trapped in a surreal magical world, the news she was alive – of sorts – and able to communicate, had
cheered her up.

Henrik gazed at Parvati with what Hermione could only think of as rapt adoration. Hermione smiled at Draco… Oh for such harmless, happy moments, she thought, as Hannah and Neville charged into the house with looks on their faces that could only possibly mean disaster had struck yet again to blight their world.

‘Leaky Cauldron… totally fucked-up!’ Hannah announced. Her face was hard and angry.

‘Trashed. Aurors everywhere!’ Neville asserted. ‘Guests traumatised. They even killed the cat!’

‘WHAT? What cat?’ Hermione asked.

‘Billy,’ Hannah sobbed. ‘There was no need…’ Parvati folded her into her arms, while Henrik was shooing the kids into the garden. Rose looked back, a tragic expression on her face.

‘Who did this?’ Draco demanded.

Hannah shrugged. Her face was pink and blotchy. ‘Monsters. Wearing Masks…’

‘Like Deatheaters,’ Neville said. ‘Not sure if that was deliberate or just that creepy-looking masks AWAYS look like Deatheaters, but that’s what was said.’

Draco’s hand instinctively moved to the dark scar on his arm.

Niko plucked a drawing from the pile he’d stolen from Bennet’s windmill. ‘Maybe they were looking for THIS?’ It was Katya’s Matryoshka. At The Leaky Cauldron.

‘If they’re looking for Anna’s papers then it’s possible I suppose,’ Draco agreed, ‘following the same thinking we did.’

‘Except, they already knew the Matryoshka didn't contain the papers - Katya must have told them - otherwise why go to Madame Puddifoot’s to look for the painting, which DID?’ Hermione opined. She followed her own thinking to its logical conclusion… ‘So… either they didn’t believe Katya and thought the Matryoshka was the key – or, they were checking to see if we’d already taken it…’

Everyone looked at her.

‘They were trying to deduce if we worked out Katya's clue,’ Draco said with a sigh...

‘But why trash the joint?’ Neville asked.

‘To double-check… and because they’re cunts,’ Draco griped. He looked at Hermione, his mouth tight with worry. ‘This means they know we got to the papers first… Hermione, Bill and I have talked about a Fidelius charm at your parents’ house.’

Sooner rather than later, she thought… Binta and Anna’s papers were there. They needed the highest possible protection.

XXX

The sky was a peculiar lurid green, Hermione thought. Like the sun had been sick.

‘Right. Not sure how long the weather’s going to hold,’ Gunter said, gawping at the sky, ‘but if we’re going to perfect this colour-magic simulation we need all the practice we can get…’
He looked at Hermione, Draco, Nico and Harry assembled before him on the paddock lawn at the Burrow. They’d drawn spectators. The kids were ogling from the sidelines with Ron and Molly watching on. A smart young man with a clipped blonde beard – the young French assistant who Hermione recognised from a couple of Gilgad corporate events at the opera and Queerditch Marsh – smiled winningly at her. Pascal Loubetier, the missing member of Troyanda13.

‘I’m kind of struggling with this,’ Niko admitted. ‘I know I sound like a barbarian, but rather than ponce about with false pictures to capture Salvedra, couldn’t we just whack him? Together we are very strong!’

‘He’s stupendously powerful. When he challenged me in Egypt, it felt like every bit of me was on fire,’ Gunter retorted.

‘And that place he’d created at Atalaya,’ Harry murmured. ‘One man did that! Beggars belief… To be honest, I don’t think we’ve actually seen what he can do when he fights nasty.’

‘We don’t want to,’ Hermione said. ‘That’s why we have to nullify his colour-magic.’

‘Yeah, but even without colour-magic, I somehow doubt he’s just a bog-standard wizard. And we know he’s behind pretty much all this shit that’s gone on. He has to be destroyed. Decapitated. I’m happy to try and take him out any way that works, frankly,’ Draco said.

‘Decapitated?’ Niko said, eyes like bloated blueberries… ‘So we DO fight mano a mano?’ He looked quite excited about this.

‘No,’ Hermione said snippily. ‘He means as a strategy.’

‘Take out the top man.’

‘Yes. And we have to make sure he’s isolated from his supporters while we’re doing that…’ She shuddered thinking about Josep – he was more powerful than any single one of them… And she sensed immense power in Dolores, too. Something ancient, primordial. ‘I don’t think we’d survive trying to take them all on,’ she continued soberly.

Niko shrugged, insouciant. ‘Colour-magic is whatever you want it to be.’

‘No, Niko,’ Hermione said sternly. ‘It’s still limited by your own personal capability.’

‘You say that because you’re used to thinking small… with your fussy spells and incantations… colour-magic is FREE…’

‘We can still do wandless magic!’ Hermione said defensively. ‘And colour-magic’s a bit… overwhelming, frankly. Less controlled.’

‘I prefer it,’ Draco said.

‘Hey! It’s not a competition!’ Gunter said. ‘As you know… I use both. And you do that as well, Hermione. And this I think is very helpful.’

‘How did you two do the glowing thing at the beach with Sylvestra?’ Ron asked from the sidelines, squinting between Hermione and Draco. ‘Your magic went mad! Was a bit scary, actually.’

‘We’ve talked about this already, Ron,’ Harry hissed in what could only be construed as a note of warning.
'What glowing thing?' Niko asked, eyes bright with curiosity.

Ron lumbered over. Hermione could sense Gunter’s irritation as he looked at the darkening sky with a worried eye.

‘They were being attacked and they glowed white and … to be honest, Hermione, you went apeshit!’ Ron gave her a wary glance as he spoke.

Niko looked very animated. ‘I’ve heard about this sort of thing! It’s very rare! Your magic gets all mixed-up?’

‘Yes,’ Draco said in sullen tones. Like Hermione, he clearly felt this was a private matter…

‘Both your boring magic and colour-magic, together?’

Hermione instantly bridled. ‘It’s not BORING… it’s targeted and—’

‘But it’s not PURE,’ Niko retaliated in taunting tones… ‘When do you have this mixing thing?’

‘I – I don’t really know,’ Hermione said. ‘Various times…it’s unexpected.’ She found herself blushing hard thinking how it sometimes happened when making love. She was horribly aware of Ron – a large, hefty presence beside her – and the children and Molly across the garden.

‘Obviously when under attack,’ Gunter suggested.

‘Yes, this is a protection bond,’ Niko said, ‘protecting yourselves or something, someone you love…’ He looked at Hermione and burst into cackling laughter. ‘And from the look on your face, Hermione, it can also be when you…you know.’ He winked mischievously at Draco and banged his fist hard against his hand. ‘Too strong, Draco!’

‘Oh that’s just… YUCK!’ Ron said, looking outraged.

Hermione felt the same… in fact she genuinely felt like throwing up… ‘Excuse me,’ she said, running into the house.

By the time she emerged from the bathroom everyone was in the kitchen. The front door was open and rain was drumming hard onto the path leading to the house.

Gunter had a face like thunder. He was berating Niko in German.

Draco was talking to Pascal who turned to Hermione. ‘Good to meet you finally – as in, properly.’

‘Pascal’s staying in contact with Ephraim,’ Draco said. ‘Pretending he’s a lawyer.’

‘Oh?’ Hermione said, taken aback. ‘Does Ephraim know this?’

‘Yes,’ Pascal said. ‘He wants me to be a go-between.’

Hermione looked at Draco and could see he was similarly stumped.

‘First thing he could do is tell us the wards for Malfoy Manor,’ Draco said. ‘That’d be useful.’ He fixed Hermione with a worried frown as Pascal was drawn away by the lure of Molly’s Dundee cake. ‘You okay?’ he whispered.

‘Just felt a bit…’
'Sick?' Draco asked, raising a single eyebrow.

'Shut up,' she gently chided, elbowing him. But she couldn’t stop smiling for some reason. ‘Oh dear! Gunter and Niko are really going for it!'

Luckily Molly was to hand and was now snatching their plates of cake away like they were naughty children. ‘If you’re going to make such a row you can do it outside!’ she yelled… much to the actual children’s amusement.

‘Come on,’ Hugo said to the others, looking upstairs, ‘Magda's awake… I just heard her!’

Hermione had to smile. Young Madam had Hugo wrapped round her little finger…

Gunter and Niko mumbled their peace… although Gunter’s eyes flashed a particularly vivid red when he looked at Niko.

‘I just wanted us to practice holding a colour-magic projection – a trial-run before we entrap Salvedra,’ Gunter said testily. ‘Because it's really rather difficult to do and we need to get on with this as soon as possible.’

‘Use the living-room,’ Molly said, pushing them out of her kitchen.

It was a tight squeeze but the five of them who could use colour-magic were soon working on a wrap-around projection, simulating a dark, lightless space.

‘The aim is to ensure there is no light at all creeping in or Salvedra will be able to use colour-magic and spin off someplace else – which is why we need the simulation to be reflective on the inside,’ Gunter said… ‘think black mirrors.’

After a few attempts everyone had to take a breather.

‘We’re all thinking different things!’ Harry complained. ‘I didn’t think there could be so many variants of black nothingness.’

‘It’s kind of difficult to imagine total blankness,’ Draco agreed. ‘It’s like wishing yourself dead.’

‘So it’s best we have one person imagine this black mirrored box, this deadness… and everyone else just feed them their energy to support the simulation,’ Gunter decided.

‘Who?’ Hermione asked.

‘It doesn’t matter… we just want a black mirrored box.’

‘Why does it have to be a black box? Why not a flowery meadow? Or a cabbage field?’ Harry asked. ‘As long as it blocks light…’

‘Because we need to trick him!... Okay…let me explain.’ Hermione grabbed a sheet of parchment and a quill and sat down on the floor and sketched a square labelling it El Sol y Ter. ‘Here we have Sylvestra’s house. I saw Salvedra there the other day.’

Harry nodded.

‘We know of two paintings that are portals between this house and picture-world. One is a volcanic wasteland - seeing as we’ll have to be our physical selves, that’s too dangerous.’ She shuddered at the memory. ‘The other painting is a castle – accessed by a dark, shadowy passageway… no distinguishing features. Which is why a black box works. We need Salvedra to
enter that space and think everything’s normal…that way he won’t have that split second to think
himself OUT of the box.’

She drew a straight line to indicate the crossover-point between the real world and the picture-
world’s thin shaded passageway and drew a big black box, tucked just inside the picture-world.

‘Great,’ Niko said, watching this attentively. ‘But how do we get Salvedra from there,’ he pointed
to the house, ‘to here?’ He jabbed his finger at the black box.

‘We need to smoke him out… I’m talking to Muggles in Europe about launching an attack,’ Draco
said. Hermione drew a stickman with a rocket in his hand outside the house. Draco smiled. ‘It’ll be
more than that…’

‘But if he’s threatened, he’ll just disapparate,’ Harry said in matter-of-fact tones.

‘Obviously we set up anti-Disapparition jinxes first…’ Hermione said in a tone that suggested she
thought Harry was being disappointingly obtuse.

‘He’s the kind of bastard who’ll fight back if attacked,’ Harry murmured. ‘And he’s unlikely to be
alone!’

‘We have to strike when he is… or… as alone as possible…’

‘And how do we do that?’

‘Well. Padma’s agreed to help out… she can travel around the pictures... If she lights a candle in
the window at Malfoy Manor that means Salvedra is at El Sol y Ter. One or two of us then need to
physically enter the house to check who’s there and decide if we’re good to attack. We then rally
the troops..’

‘…including the Muggles,’ Draco added.

Harry looked as queasy as Hermione felt. ‘Right. Well. It’s a tough task… but obviously I’ll go
into El Sol y Ter…’

‘Whys that obvious?’ Gunter asked, genuinely puzzled.

‘I’ve got an invisibility cloak.’

‘But for the plan to work, whoever goes in has to be seen… to lure Salvedra into the picture. It’s a
classic bait and switch,’ Draco said, aware that everyone was looking at him and no one looked
happy. ‘Which means… for Salvedra to be sufficiently provoked to follow someone into the
pictures it has to be someone Salvedra really wants.’

Hermione sighed, thinking about Salvedra’s attempt to grab her. ‘It has to be me.’

‘No it doesn’t,’ Draco remonstrated. He gave Gunter an apologetic look. ‘I was actually thinking of
Gunter! Salvedra’s an arrogant tosspot who’s hung up about this bloody curse he cast on Anna,
wanting her children. Gunter’s the kid who got away.’

The reddish glint in Gunter’s eyes faded. ‘It’s true … so I will be the one who goes into the house
and lures him out.’

‘I’ll be your backup,’ Harry said in stolid tones. ‘If – and this is all scarily dependent on the entire
thing going to plan - we have Salvedra chase Gunter though the portal, how does Gunter then help
everyone else sustain the blasted box we're using to catch him? Even with all of us trying, we're struggling to hold it... And how does Gunter then get out once he’s led Salvedra inside? He won’t be able to use colour-magic. He could get trapped!

Gunter thought a moment. ‘I would need to make a copy of myself - like a hologram - that Salvedra follows while I stay back...problem is... I can’t do that. We did it with Saul using a hybrid tech solution but I doubt that'd work in picture-world.’

‘I can do it!’ Niko announced boldly. ‘I can pretend to be you - for a few minutes at best - and then project a copy of myself running through the picture into this box – a bit like one of your patronuses, but in full-blown technicolour. Catch is... that projection's fairly fleeting... but it’s better than nothing.’

‘But it’d mean you have to be in the house too, Niko! At this rate that’s THREE of you in the real world leaving me and Draco to produce and hold this damned box on our own! I'm not sure we can do that!’ Hermione cried. She was feeling annoyed with herself for not foreseeing this potential problem.

‘You CAN hold the box,’ Harry said thoughtfully. ‘You can combine magic.’

‘I – I don’t feel secure doing that, Harry. We’ve only really done it deliberately that time in Egypt...’

‘Then we have to practice,’ Draco said, accepting their fate with an encouraging smile.

‘As soon as Salvedra’s in the box, the rest of us can help to collapse the projection into Ernie and Fleur's picture,’ Gunter assured them.

‘And then the fucker's sealed in, good and proper,’ Draco sneered, relishing the thought.

XXX

Seeing as the kids were in safe hands, Hermione decided to leave everyone to work through the plans while she headed back to Folkvangr for a rest.

‘I'll walk back with you,’ Ron said, jumping up from the kitchen table where for a worrying moment Hermione felt he’d been waiting for her.

‘Hermione,’ Molly clucked, a concerned look on her face. ‘You didn’t eat any lunch.’

Hermione smiled weakly even though she was genuinely touched that Molly still cared to say this. Her forbearance was remarkable - but then she’d noticed that Molly was much friendlier to both herself and Draco since the attack on The Blue House. Brothers and Sisters-in-arms, she thought wryly.

‘I’m just not that hungry,’ she said apologetically. She glanced outside where a shard of golden sun – the prelude to sunset – was striving to break through stormy grey clouds overhead. ‘The rain’s stopped so I’ll make a move.’

She walked as quickly as she could, Ron at her side, and they swiftly cut into the fields stretching between The Burrow and Weeping Brook Lane where Folkvangr was located.

She felt a certain dread when he began to slow a little once the roof of Folkvangr and the top half of her bedroom window came into view.
‘Hermione…’ he said, ‘hold up a sec… we need to talk.’

She desperately wanted a lie-down but there was a slightly fearful look in his eyes that made her regret thinking that. He deserved her attention…

‘Of course,’ she said, slowing her pace.

‘I know it’s not commonly done in our world… less so than yours…’ Interesting, she thought. He saw them as separate… ‘But I think it’s best we look for a way to divorce.’

She ground to a halt and looked at him. She hadn’t expected that…

He narrowed his eyes, scrutinising her face. ‘I need to know that’s what you want before – before I talk to people.’

‘A lawyer.’

Ron shrugged helplessly. ‘Guess so… We never had an unbreakable vow, so…’

‘That makes it easier.’

‘Definitely,’ he asserted.

‘I – I’ll take any blame… Because it’s all my fault. You haven’t deserved any of this,’ she babbled.

To her surprise, Ron blushed. ‘If that’s okay with you? There’s no point my waiting to see if you’ll change your mind and see that you’ve made a huge mistake because… well, I’m not sure you’re going to do that. And – even though I still love you, Hermione, I don’t want to be married to you anymore. I realised that almost as soon - as soon as it happened.’

To Hermione’s surprise her eyes welled up and a rush of hot bile shot through her gullet into her throat. ‘Ron… sorry but…’ She turned away trying not to be sick, but dry-retched all the same, before sinking into the damp grass. It was so high, she was almost hidden from view.

Ron’s knees and the bottom of his jeans were splattered with wet streaks and the bulging heads of overgrown grass gave way as he sat down in front of her.

He reached out and took hold of both her hands.

‘And that’s the other reason I think we need to divorce…’ he said, his voice gruff as though he had phlegm trapped in his throat.

‘What is?’ She braved a smile.

‘You being sick.’

‘Sorry, I’m not following… but then I’m not following much these days. Feels like my brain’s gone to mush.’

‘Yes, it does that when you’re pregnant.’

She stared at him. ‘I’m not… at least I don’t think I am. I’ve been drinking tea.’

Ron looked at her in utter confusion. ‘Hermione, even you yourself have said that all these lotions and potions don’t always work… We might be MAGIC but our body bits still work like bodies.’
‘Well, these potions DO work, Ron. We only have two children and we weren’t exactly shy in the bedroom… at least not in the early years of our marriage.’

‘Yeah… And we also lost two… Our having ridiculously good immune systems has its downside – you told me that at the time, remember?’ He pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows.

‘I’ve also bled,’ she said bluntly.

‘Bled or… proper period?’ Ron asked. He was uncomfortable talking like this, she knew. ‘Because you also had that with Rose… We went to Luna’s wedding and you thought you were off the hook and okay to drink and then you felt guilty for bloody months afterwards! Convinced yourself Rose would have two heads or something…’

He was right. She had bled early on… it had been similar. Even so… ‘What makes you think I’m pregnant?’

‘You mean other than you looking shattered and being sick a lot?’

‘Yes,’ she said softly.

‘Well… you turned down mum’s chicken stew. You always went right off poultry the moment you fell pregnant.’

‘Maybe I wasn’t hungry?’

He smiled and stared at their hands. When he bent his neck, the grass was so long only the top of his red hair was visible. It was strangely quiet down here with just the sounds of a bee idling by, a blackbird fluting on a tree and the distant chug of a lorry accelerating out of the village.

‘Go ahead and get all verified and checked-out and whatever, but I know you are, Hermione. And mum does, too… she’s got an eye for that sort of thing… You forget I’ve known you FOREVER. And I plan to know you forever more. And… the guy who’s known you forever KNOWS.’

She put her hand to her forehead and burst into tears but was laughing, too. Ron handed her a handkerchief because she’d blown her nose all over her face in confusion.

‘Oh god. Maybe I am.’ Draco was right… ‘There was an… accident, I suppose.’ She thought back to the time in her parents’ house when she was ‘between’ solutions… ‘But I thought I’d recovered it in time.’

‘With a bloody cup of tea?’ Ron shook his head and his mouth twitched.

‘Draco thinks I am.’

‘Bet he’s in a right lather,’ Ron said warmly, snorting with laughter. ‘It’s both painful and delicious to see how he is around you. It’s almost tragic how much he’s in love with you, Hermione. You could destroy the man.’

She looked him in the eye. ‘I won’t, though.’

Ron’s exuberance faltered. ‘So why are you in denial about the fact you’ve brewing a baby Malfoy?’

‘I just – I can’t believe it, really…’ She looked away. It was suddenly warm and the grass and the hedges were steaming like a mirage and there was a sheen of sticky sweat on her face and pooling
at her armpits. Even so, she could sense a churning sky above them, ready to switch back to rain and clouds at any moment.

‘You must hate me,’ she sighed.

‘No. I hate Draco…. But I can see you’re in love with him. Just the fact of WHO he is and what you’ve still gone and done proves that!’ He winced in advance of what he was about to say. ‘And… I mean it when I say I love you, Hermione, but even if it went wrong with you two, I wouldn’t want you back. Because I think you’d still love him, and I don’t want to be Malfoy’s sloppy seconds.’

‘Well that makes it easier for me to be honest back, Ron… I’ll always love you too. You’re the father of our beautiful children and you’re a good man. And – and you were my best friend…’ she could feel her cheeks were wet with tears again and was relieved that his were too. ‘We did so much together…But even if something went wrong with me and Draco, I wouldn’t want to be married to you anymore, Ron. That’s not what we are now.’

Ron held her hands again and proceeded to push down the top part of her fingers one by one. ‘I know…’

‘You’re being so COOL about this,’ she said, her voice thick with tears.

‘We’ve got a dangerous thing going on and I can’t let this ruin how we respond to it… And the kids are amazingly adjusted about it all.’

‘For now…’ she warned. ‘They’ll grow up and see things – see me differently.’

Ron shook his head. ‘No they won’t. They love you. And they know I love them. And nothing changes that, not ever - except we don’t live together. And it was probably a bit shit between us for a while when I’ve thought about it… Kids probably pick up on stuff like that.’

‘It’s worried me that Draco being around would upset and confuse them… but everything’s so fucked-up anyway, and there’s Scorpius and Magda, I don’t think they’ve had a moment to work out what’s actually happened yet,’ she sighed.

‘Rose knows. We spoke about it.’

‘You did?’

‘Yeah… it was weird, actually. She kind of helped me get my head round it all.’

‘She’s special.’

‘Sure is… Anyway. You better tell Draco he’s going to have his third child by a different woman.’

She smiled and shook her head. ‘You make him sound such a man-whore.’

‘He is… But he loves you. I wish he didn’t. I wish none of this had happened. But he does. And it has. And – and I think he’d do anything to look out for our children. So I’m not worried he’d ever hurt them.’

‘No, he wouldn’t…’ And she started crying again. ‘I don’t deserve you, Ron, I don’t. I’m so sorry. So, so sorry.’

‘Your glowing thing…’ Ron said quickly. ‘It’s because you’re having a baby.’
‘It’s – what?’

‘It’s what Niko said - a protection thing. YOU might be in denial, but your body isn’t… and you and him ’ave got that weird magic thing going on together.’

‘Please don’t tell anyone till I’m sure,’ she begged.

‘No… I won’t…’ but he was distracted. He silently put his finger to his lips. ‘I think there’s someone here…’

Hermione could hear a small reedy voice, softly warbling, and the damp brush of feet trudging laboriously through the grass. She craned to hear the words… but no words, just a plaintive tune. Ron peered above the grass tops.

‘It’s Draco’s wife!’ he hissed.

Hermione’s heart thudded in her chest. She peeked out… A short woman in a long, black cape was wandering through the grass, occasionally pausing to look up at The Burrow through the trees. She spluttered with childlike laughter and then carried on, past the house into open countryside.

Ron’s eyes widened. ‘Blimey. Mad as a box of frogs that one…’ He gave Hermione a sidelong look. ‘We should follow her. See where she goes. She might be spying for her loathsome sister.’

No sooner had they rounded the hedges at the back of The Burrow than a blinding flash of lightning lit up the fields. Purplish, bruise-coloured clouds scudded rapidly across the sky and a low rumble of thunder rolled around them.

The black-caped figure of Katya Malfoy disappeared into a clump of trees – a thin stretch of woodland fringing the river that wound around the village. The moment she vanished from view thick globs of rain fired down onto them. Hermione threw up impervious charms and they headed into the woods.

‘Blimey, this is creepy,’ Ron murmured, looking up at the tall, foliage-heavy crowns of the trees swaying in an increasingly agitated wind. The rustling of the leaves sounded like a chorus of angry whispers and the woods were shrouded in almost impenetrable darkness as daylight struggled to break through the clouds.

A flurry of leaves brushed up from the ground into Ron's face and his red hair was flopping over his eyes.

‘I don’t think it’s magic,’ she said, her voice suddenly hoarse and gravelly.

But Ron was blinking hard into the distance. ‘There she is!’

He pointed to what looked like a black sail bulging with wind, rippling against the tide. Katya weaved unsteadily between the trees and for a moment her high-pitched singsong tune carried towards them.

Ron moved forwards, a determined look on his face. ‘I’ve lost sight of her… Stay here.’

She watched as he pushed through the wind, shielding his face with his arm, and then he slipped from view.

Where was he? she wondered. Hermione craned to see through the trees but the black cloak was gone… Had Katya ever been here at all? Was she even real? Or was she some kind of sprite or
nymph luring Ron to the river?

Hermione ran to the riverside, suddenly panicked. It was gushing and frothing with what seemed like unnatural energy… the water was black, strangely depthless. She peered beyond the trees upriver. But there was still no sign of them…

She told herself to say calm but her teeth were chattering with fear and sudden cold. She looked behind her… for a moment she’d felt watched, but there was nothing there.

She trudged upstream… nothing. They were gone…

The rain was slashing down now, a thick, grey sheet from the sky, and the thunder continued to creak and groan… a faint stirring of electricity and the air tasted tangy… Maybe there was some magic at play here?

Hermione instantly turned and ran to The Burrow.

She sprinted down the driveway and pushed open the kitchen door… and could barely believe her eyes.

Harry was sat at the kitchen table next to Pascal and Gunter. They stared at her in tense silence as she walked in. Niko was standing by the sink with Bill – when had he arrived? she wondered.

And Ron was sitting next to Katya Malfoy, looking small and wet, her face pale eggshell-blue with cold.

She was gazing fixedly at Draco, who was standing, tall and angular, by the oven. His hand tapped the surface and his entire body softened in relief when Hermione walked in.

Molly came fussing downstairs with a blanket.

‘I’ve got this… should help,’ she muttered. She stopped stock-still and her eyes locked with Hermione’s. ‘Ron found her in the river…’

‘Where did you get to?’ Ron cried. ‘You completely disappeared!’

‘No, I was there… you didn’t come back so I looked for you.’ Her voice sounded shriller than she’d have liked. It seemed louder now the kitchen was cast in shadow by the thunderous clouds clotting the sky outside.

She could feel Katya’s eyes on her and didn’t like it. It made her want to itch her skin…

‘I think the kids want to go home,’ Molly said, enunciating every word with more care than usual it felt.

‘Okay…’ Hermione could feel hysteria bubbling inside of her, like she was on stage and had forgotten her lines.

She chanced a glance at Katya. She was back to staring at Draco, but he was studying his mug of tea with devout concentration. She could see his whiteness shrinking as though it wanted to slither along the back wall and hide down the back of the stove.

Molly draped the blanket over Katya’s shoulders. ‘Come into the living-room, Hermione.’ She glanced at Draco too. He quickly followed. Hermione saw that Katya’s little finger curled around the handle of her tea-mug extended towards him as he passed… desperately reaching…
But then why wouldn’t she? He was her husband. Her HUSBAND!

The thought struck her like an anvil in the chest. And Magda was going to turn up. She could hear light laughs and chatter followed by Scorpius’s throatier, deeper voice on the landing upstairs.

‘Who is it?’ she heard Hugo ask in a dramatic stage-whisper.

‘In here,’ Molly said, brusquely closing the door.

‘What the fuck happened?’ Draco asked Hermione the moment they were standing in the gloom, curtains half-closed, the sound of rain pelting like bullets. His desperation was almost screaming.

‘She passed me and Ron in the field,’ Hermione explained, her voice rising. ‘Ron thought she might be meeting someone... he wanted to see where she was hanging out.’

‘Well it’s bloody odd. No sign of her ANYWHERE this morning. Gunter and Niko said they checked the river.’ His hand went to his forehead and he closed his eyes and blew out his cheeks.

‘We had to follow her. She was a bit... out of it.’

'Of course,' he grunted, in reluctant agreement.

‘What do we do with her?’ Molly cut in. Her mouth was a hard, straight line. ‘We can’t release her into the storm.’

‘No...’ Draco said. ‘But I guess she - she's my responsibility. Obviously I'd rather she didn't come to Folkvangr - but we don't have a choice.’ He gave Hermione a remorseful look.

‘Don't be ridiculous!’ Molly scolded. 'She can't stay with YOU! Not how things are... and you can't afford to lose focus! It's too important!' She looked at the old clock on the wall. ‘Arthur will be back soon. I’ll see what he has to say, but I suggest you get the children and go home... And she'll have to stay here.’ She didn’t look overjoyed by this. ‘And seeing as Ron’s brought her through the wards we have to keep her really...’

‘I’m so sorry about this,’ Hermione said, feeling overwhelmed, ‘... about everything.’

Molly’s lips snapped into a thin, hard line again. ‘Well...it can’t be helped. And Gunter can help me out. She's his sister after all.’ She looked at Draco, a curious expression on her face. ‘Was she always so... QUIET?’

‘She wasn’t a great talker.’

‘But not a single word!’

He thought about it. ‘Yeah... When I spoke to her she was just sort of... blank. Almost like she didn't hear me. She just stared... I guess coming out of the painting's traumatised her...’

'I'll be gentle,' Molly said.

The children were clattering down the stairs and Hermione flew into a panic. ‘Oh god, Magda! She should meet her...’

'Not today...' Molly said determinedly.

'But she has a right-'
'Only once we know more about what's happened,' Molly said in clipped, businesslike tones.

They hastened out and Draco braved a sort-of half-smile at Katya while gathering up the children and moving towards the door. Scorpius stared at Katya, a look of dark consternation on his face.

Harry jumped up. ‘We’ve got things to work out…’ he said. ‘I’ll come too.’

Hermione smiled and nodded at Katya, desperate to seem friendly and elicit some kind of reaction, but Katya was distracted by someone other than Draco for once.

Her face lit up when she saw Rose. She gazed at her greedily.

Hermione could sense Draco bristling beside her.

‘Come on,’ he said to Rose, reaching out his hand. Rose grabbed it eagerly, a pained look on her face, and they headed into the rain, forgetting in their haste to apply impervius charms.

‘Bollocks,’ Draco muttered once they were halfway up the drive and soaked.

Everyone ran to the field, rain sloshing against their ankles. The children started giggling, catching on to the adults’ muted hysteria.

XXX

The Fidelius charm was finalised on the Grangers' house. Bill did the honours and cast the spell and Ziff was secret-keeper, something that had him glowing with pride.

Jean insisted everyone stay for refreshments and as it was her famous lasagna nobody was complaining. Draco, however, disappeared the moment the plates were cleared and Robert was topping-up drinks and talking up dessert.

He returned minutes later and summoned Hermione with a nod of the head.

‘What are we doing in here?’ she asked, once they were in her parents’ upstairs bathroom.

‘You know what we’re doing,’ he said, presenting her with a pregnancy test. ‘We have to know.’

‘But there’s a spell I can do that—’

‘No. We need hard, medical fact.’

‘Oh lord.’ She looked at the shiny plastic-wrapped box and quickly cast a Colloportus and a Muffliato.

She did the test and handed it to Draco with a shaking hand.

‘I can’t look,’ she said, facing the wall.

But she didn’t need to. She could feel his reaction burning through her.

She immediately burst into tears…

‘But it’s the worst time,’ she sobbed. ‘The very, very worst…’

Draco gently moved her away from the wall and into his arms. They sank to the floor and he pulled her onto his lap.
‘It’s not the best – but… we can cope…’

‘You’ll be overbearing and terrible,’ she said, not caring if she wounded – ‘you’ll not let me do anything and we have so much to do! So much we’ve got to do. There’s no choice, no backing away!’

He grinned. ‘You couldn’t be more wrong. We – I need you. Because you’re the most powerful witch I know! And definitely the cleverest. You’re needed more than ever… So, I won’t coddle. Even if I’m tempted. I promise. I’ll give myself a talking to.’

‘Just because I’m pregnant doesn’t mean I’m disabled! Far from it!’ she warned in sharp tones.

‘I know that,’ he laughed.

‘And our glowy thing… it’s the baby… It can help me. Help us…Oh my. That sounds so WEIRD,’ she choked. ‘But it’s a protection. I’m sure… Oh god…’ she started to cry hard now, thinking she loved him and it was all going to go to hell…. ‘And Katya’s back and you’ll probably leave me up the duff,’ she shrilled. ‘The ultimate revenge!’

‘Revenge for what?’ he asked, looking genuinely alarmed. ‘For being fucking fantastic? For being the best thing that’s ever happened to me? Sorry but you’ve lost me…’

‘She’s very pretty… and you have Magda… and we did a bad thing. We hurt people…’

‘Hermione. You’ve lost the plot. I want you, not her. Not anyone, actually… And yes we did a bad thing. I know we did. I feel bad everyday – particularly now that Ron’s hanging around us all the fucking time.’ He gave her a bitter smile. ‘Like THAT’s normal!’

‘He’s helping. He’s been kind. He said he’ll divorce me. He knows I’m pregnant.’

Draco made a great show of looking around the bathroom… ‘HOW? Is he HERE?... Wouldn’t surprise me ‘cos he usually fucking is…’

‘No… because I didn’t eat the chicken stew… and I bled with Rose. I’d forgot.’

‘God, you talked about that? And you’re the one who’s jealous?’

‘I’m just… I can’t help it. My brain’s gone all poppity…’ She clutched the collar on his shirt and gazed at him. ‘Thing is, we hardly know each other, Draco.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘No, it’s not… I’m talking rubbish,’ and her tone lowered. ‘Because I do know you… I just can’t BELIEVE I do sometimes. How did we even get here? What the hell happened? …. And I wasn’t even sure I wanted children. Ever. ANY children. And then Rose came and I felt I had to make it symmetrical… And now I’ve got so many children. All these children, just – just mushrooming. And I actually love them. I love them all.’ Tears flooded down her cheeks as she spoke. ‘But HOW? How has that happened? TO ME? Oh god…’ She wiped the tears from her face. ‘And – and I hated you SO, SO, SO much… you were so awful! And then I saw the world as you do and… and… god. it’s almost too intense, isn’t it? it’s too much - WE’RE too much! All this feeling, it’s quite awful, really. Sometimes I think I’m going to blow up from the inside… and we’ve hurt people - selfish, SELFFISH - and we carry on doing it and we can’t stop because… because I couldn’t bear it if we did and…’

Draco hadn’t stopped laughing throughout her ranting speech. He twisted his arms around her.
‘Jesus fucking god but I love you… Just… just carry on blithering, beautiful…’ He kissed her on the mouth… ‘because it’s like the sweetest fucking music.’

She looked at him and could barely breathe, as a wave of pure excitement throbbed through her. In spite of everything, it was joy, unadulterated joy…

‘I’m – oh god… I really am… I’m so happy,’ she cried, marvelling at the rush of feeling… like a wild wave, a permissible release… flowing between them, flowing through her.

‘Me too,’ he whispered gruffly, and his mouth was on hers and they were falling to the floor.

‘Parents’ bathroom,’ she croaked.

‘I don’t care.’

*Good*, she thought.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“FOR EVERYTHING” by THE MURDER CAPITAL

“SEA WITHIN A SEA” by THE HORRORS

“BACK TO BLACK” by AMY WINEHOUSE

“JUST LIKE HEAVEN” by THE CURE

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
Now Cracks A Noble Heart

Chapter Summary

From debt trap to death trap…

61. Now Cracks A Noble Heart

It was a painting of a beautiful black rose, petals like velveteen gloss, set against a dark sepia backdrop…

‘I didn’t know you were so talented, Fleur!’ Hermione enthused.

‘Oh, it wasn’t me…’ Fleur turned her head towards the open door and smiled at her sister who was sitting on a garden bench overlooking the sea.

‘Does she know we have to destroy it once Salvedra’s trapped inside?’

‘She’s happy to see it burn – or whatever it is we do.’

‘…I’ve been thinking about that!’ Bill said, ambling in from the garden to join them in the kitchen. He brought with him the smell of freshly-cut grass and the sound of children’s high-pitched squeals of excitement as they played on the lawn with Tuyen and Arlene.

‘We’ll seal the painting in the old tin mine, but I’m also working on a spell – a super-ramped-up Reducto.’

Hermione pondered this. ‘Maybe we should think of this painting like a horcrux – and treat it as such? We’re can’t get hold of a basilisk fang at short notice so maybe we should consider fiendfyre?’

Bill recoiled. ‘But that’d destroy the old mine!’

‘Does it matter?’ Hermione asked archly.

‘The mine would contain the fire, actually,’ Fleur said thoughtfully. ‘I think that’d work.’

‘Okay… I’ll get everything in place and the moment the operation kicks off, we’ll be ready,’ Bill decided.

‘I’m sick of waiting,’ Hermione grumbled. ‘We’re regularly sweeping the pictures… taking shifts… And Padma’s on the look-out. As soon as she spots Salvedra at El Sol y Ter she’ll alert us by lighting a candle in the window of Malfoy Manor… the painted version… But it feels to me like Salvedra’s gone to ground!’

‘We need to be patient,’ Bill said sagely.

‘Says YOU of all people!’ laughed his wife.

‘Is – Is it quieter here today than usual?’ Hermione asked. She could barely remember the last time
she’d had a civil conversation at Shell Cottage without umpteen people interrupting.

‘Now Ephraim’s in prison many of our guests are moving on…’ Fleur said bending down to pull a large sponge cake from the oven. The room was instantly alive with the delicious smell of fresh bakery. Finally! A smell that didn’t trigger instant nausea, Hermione thought, salivating… Baby must have a sweet tooth.

‘Agatha’s gone home,’ Fleur continued, ‘but we’ll still see her as Tansy’s staying and they’re continuing Sub Rosa.’

This pleased Hermione… Agatha was fast becoming a fearless investigative journalist – a far cry from her tittle-tattling days at the Daily Prophet.

‘Neville and Hannah are staying with Ron for a bit,’ Fleur said, moving the cake onto a plate and covering it with a cloth.

‘It’ll be good for Ron to have company,’ Hermione mused.

‘And this morning Gwen and Oleg moved to her house in Borehamwood,’ Bill said, ‘… though Alfred’s staying with us a bit longer. Him and Louis are inseparable.’

‘But what about Aunt Rita? Oleg won’t know what’s hit him!’

‘She’s gone on a cruise with her sister,’ Fleur said.

‘Doesn’t she care that her husband could die any day!?’ Hermione cried, bursting with indignation.

‘I think that’s partly why Gwen’s going home, actually,’ Bill said softly.

‘And why you’re keeping Alfred…’

Bill nodded curtly. ‘He’s better-off here.’

Hermione’s eyes were drawn to Gabrielle looking out to sea. She was wearing a trimmed straw bonnet with a frivolous pink ribbon that flapped in the breeze.

Hermione brought her a cup of tea and sat down to watch the grey-blue waves parading in an endless dance between the two headlands that anchored either side of the bay.

Gabby smiled appreciatively. Her rosy cheeks were pink and raw-looking. In her straw bonnet and with warm sunlight dappling her face she looked like a bonny maid in an Impressionist painting.

Hermione noted the jagged edges of blonde hair peeking out from the bottom of her bonnet. Fleur had mentioned how Gabby had suddenly decided to cut her abundant hair short… her beautiful thick blonde tresses – all gone.

‘Your painting’s beautiful,’ Hermione said. ‘Thank you.’

‘I hope it helps.’

‘It’ll be ruined, you know… Fiendfyre.’

Gabby gave her a curious smile. ‘That’s okay… Most beautiful things are…’

The light shifted in her clear blue eyes and she seemed to be looking beyond Hermione to the far
‘I’m having a baby.’ Hermione spoke the words before she could stop herself…

Gabby’s gaze moved to Hermione’s face. She blinked rapidly… ‘That’s wonderful, Hermione.’ A film of tears sprung into her eyes. ‘Truly.’ She smiled and dimples dented her cheeks. ‘Briek was fond of Ron, but he thought you and Draco were better-suited.’ She reached out and clasped Hermione’s hand. ‘And now we’ve even more to fight for, don’t we?’

‘Yes.’

‘And it’ll be nice for Magda to have a sibling closer to her own age.’

‘Hugo’s already very good with her…’

‘Yes. He has a big heart…’ Gabby smiled fondly. ‘And in time the older children will love her too – and their new brothers and sisters, because – and forgive me if I can’t find the right words here, Hermione – I feel there’s a fecundity, a sort of ripeness between you and Draco… And you’ve changed too. You were desiccated… dry like – like dusty parchment and quick to flame. But now there’s a sort of… humidité luxuriante… comme une femme de la terre…’

‘You mean I shag a lot!’

Gabrielle laughed and her cheeks glowed. ‘Pour la bonne santé!’

‘I’ve never seen myself as someone who’d have a big family,’ Hermione admitted. ‘I’m an only child – like Draco – but I fantasised about having a brother or sister. I even invented imaginary ones in my head, although I made so many rules up for how they should be if I’d ever had one they’d probably have despised me!’

‘Well, you’ve made your own family. Friends and people you care for…’ Gabrielle eyed her thoughtfully. ‘Maybe when you married Ron – as much as you loved him for the man he was – you also wished to be part of something bigger than yourself? His family… you’ll always have them, but perhaps it’s time to move beyond those limits and create your own, without others’ expectations.’

‘You’ll always be family to me, too, Gabby.’

Gabrielle smiled. ‘And you to me, Hermione. You and ALL your children.’

Hermione’s attention was drawn to the children on the lawn. They were sitting in a circle singing a song with Arlene and Tuyen – it wasn’t in English, more a mixture of melodic sounds and laughter.

Little Hakim was poking Vithu with an insistent finger, demanding attention - very much looking like the younger brother! Vithu swatted him away, a surly look on his face, but it wasn’t unkind; more born of the familiar … these strays and runaways were forming their own kind of family.

Where would they all go? They couldn’t live here forever…

‘Harry’s here,’ Gabby said, twisting around to wave. But then her attention returned to the sea, though she seemed less melancholic than before.

‘Did you find anyone in the paintings?’ Hermione asked eagerly, skipping towards him.

He shook his head. ‘Nothing.’ He’d been ‘touring’ with Draco. ‘Draco’s at home. The new
Minister for Magic’s come to see him.’ He raised his eyebrows.

‘Julius Merriman? Did he say why?’

‘No… I left them to it and came to get you… We were actually heading to The Burrow. Arthur needs help rebuilding his chicken coop. It blew over in the storm.’

‘Haven’t we got other things to be thinking about?’

‘Small chinks of normality, Hermione… it’s not such a bad thing,’ Harry smiled. ‘And Draco’s going to take another stab at getting Katya to talk…’ Any buoyancy in his tone ebbed away, like a punctured balloon.

‘He’s trying his hardest,’ Hermione said defensively. ‘But she’s incapable - or unwilling.’

‘She’s just WEIRD,’ Harry said with dark lugubrious relish. ‘Not a single fucking word to anyone!’

‘Maybe I should try?’ Hermione thought out loud.

‘Really?’

‘She needs to know we don’t want to hurt her.’

‘But you’ve already hurt her. Your very existence hurts her. You’re forgetting Sylvestra said she’d told Katya everything! And Draco’s told her, too – he didn’t want any misunderstandings.’

‘Even more reason for me to try…’

‘Oh… I wouldn’t bother,’ Harry sniffed. ‘She’s just rude.’

His belligerence surprised her. ‘No. She’s not well. She lost two years of her life!’

‘I realise that, but – Hell. I’m thinking of you, Hermione, not her. I don’t give a stuff about Katya Malfoy’s feelings if I’m being honest.. And she looks at Draco like she’s trying to pull his brain out with her eyes. Gives me the creeps…’ He sighed. ‘And poor Gunter… He’s desperate to connect with his new sister but gets nowhere. She just stares like a lifeless golem. Except…’ He paused. ‘I don’t know… there’s something going on in there and I don’t feel good about it.’

Hermione repressed a shudder. Katya scared her too… but she was trying not to think about it and focus instead on being KIND. As the woman who was sleeping with her husband and bearing his child, it was the least she could do.

‘You can’t rescue this one, Hermione,’ Harry said ardently. ‘I think you should stay away. Particularly… particularly now.’

‘What do you mean NOW?’ she asked suspiciously. And then - ‘Oh… Draco. He’s told you.’

‘THIRTY SECONDS was all it took before he spilled the beans,’ Harry grinned.

‘Oh dear, is he telling everyone?’

Harry shook his head. ‘No… he just wanted me to know, seeing as we work together so closely… and because the man’s almost bursting and had to tell someone in case he exploded.’

Hermione covered her face with her hands, hiding the fact she was both smiling and strangely
tearful. Bloody hormones, she thought to herself.

Harry gently pulled her around the back of Shell Cottage so they were facing out to sea and only Gabby – who was looking the other way – could see them.

‘I’m going to tell you what I told Draco,’ Harry said weaving his arms around her waist and pulling her close. ‘It wasn’t the most tactful I’ve ever been but the guy took it well – in fact it wasn’t one of our MANLIEST moments... Tears were shed.’

‘Oh god, Harry! What did you do?’

‘I said that if anything happens to him but I – I survive, I’ll look after you and his children like you’re my own... His children would be provided for and loved.’

Hermione wasn’t sure what to say. Harry’s face shone with sincerity and emotion.

‘So your prognosis for all of us getting through this unscathed isn’t great?’ she laughed, though it felt like she was choking back a sob at the same time.

‘I meant it, though... Draco worries more than he lets on. He’s still got a bit of that boyish bravado about him.’ To her surprise, he smiled fondly. ‘But he’s alone, Hermione. Apart from us. He’s all alone… which is why I also promised I’d do everything in my power to bring his mother back and make sure she was looked after properly.’

Hermione was speechless. A swirl of unexpected emotion washed through her.

Yes, Draco had no one left. No one he could trust… The only child.

But unlike her, he hadn’t stayed close to anyone from his past.

‘I want us all to survive and be happy,’ she said, with a tearful smile.

Harry leant forwards and kissed her forehead. ‘Me, too.’

XXX

The Minister was sitting on the sofa in the living-room at Folkvangr when they arrived. Cordial greetings were exchanged but Hermione noticed that Draco looked very glum indeed.

Harry quietly seethed. His repeated requests to have Ephraim move to Paris had – so far - fallen on deaf ears.

Hermione sat next to Draco, facing Julius. Draco was thumbing through a fat wad of parchments, a brooding, resentful look on his face.

‘The Minister’s brought me these bills – what I owe for invoking Feinsnapp and getting released by Vendôme.’

Harry leant forward in his seat. ‘Why haven’t I been told about this? Draco was in MY custody!’ he demanded.

‘Feinsnapp is strictly Ministry-to-Ministry; nothing to do with Auror HQ,’ Julius said crisply. ‘In any case, these charges relate to the particular agreement struck between Mr Malfoy and the British Ministry.’

‘But I thought that was all settled?’ Hermione said to Draco. ‘Didn’t you give the Ministry shares
and a piece of Malfoy Manor?’

‘Thing is… Ephraim screwed up… He promised the Ministry a binload of shares in Malfoy Manor: my share and most of his own. Turns out Ephraim mortgaged the whole of Malfoy Manor to an American hedge fund.’

Julius sucked in his teeth, looking distinctly awkward. ‘Ephraim wasn’t quite as wealthy as we thought. We’ve heard from numerous creditors.’

‘But that’s Ephraim’s problem, not Draco’s!’ Hermione said sharply.

‘Not with regards to this particular contract. It was drawn up by Mr Malfoy’s lawyer – Mr Haast. And it’s watertight. We’ve taken some monies owed - a few dribs and drabs at Gringott’s - and Mr Haast had the presence of mind to remove and liquidate all furnishings and valuables from Malfoy Manor, but we still have a rather sizeable sum outstanding.’

‘Malfoy Manor’s EMPTY?’ Hermione shrilled. Draco nodded, hollow-eyed…

‘Are you saying Draco still owes the Ministry shitloads of money for a house he doesn’t even own?’ Harry fumed.

‘The problem is, Mr Potter, the Ministry NEEDS this money. Since coming to power I’ve discovered a rather large hole in our budget.’

‘What sort of money are we talking about?’

Draco told them.

A stunned silence fell on the room.

‘That’s nuts!’ Harry said tersely. ‘How did the Ministry lawyers miss this when the contract was first drawn up?’

Julius shrugged. ‘The old regime was rather cozy with Ephraim… somewhat beholden you could say. But the fact remains, Draco has to pay off this mortgage and effectively give us the property or equivalent cash… We would accept monthly installments.’

‘But it’d take a lifetime to repay such a sum!’ Hermione argued.

‘What happens if I can’t pay?’ Draco asked.

Julius heaved a heartfelt sigh. ‘My advice is to avoid a default.’ He frowned deeply. ‘Since becoming Minister I’ve vowed to restore a sense of tradition and legitimacy to our politics. This means due diligence and proper scrutiny at every level… without exceptions. It means restoring true justice – our system has become so corroded, so arbitrary… our traditions and laws so elastic they barely mean anything at all! Take Unforgivables, for example. They used to incur automatic banishment, but I can’t even remember the last time someone was sent to Azkaban for performing an Imperius! And we now have a slew of highly irregular laws clogging up our statute books which lead to nothing but complication and corruption… I want those ditched.’

‘Including the New Family Act I presume?’ Hermione said tartly.

‘It will take time to legally overturn, but it will be. There are clearly some very different-shaped families in our community.’ Julius's lip twitched uncomfortably.
As if on cue, Ron swept into the house with Hugo and Scorpius who ran straight into the garden.

Ron was shiny-faced with sweat and wearing an unflattering tracksuit ensemble. Hermione wondered if he was finally embarking on the much-vaunted ‘jogging’ drive he’d threatened for the past decade and the boys had gone along to encourage him…

‘Where’s Rose and Magda?’ Hermione asked in querulous tones. He’d offered to take the children this morning as Tana was coming over for brunch. Hermione had a hunch that Ron’s relationship with his work-partner might be ‘evolving’ somewhat as she’d been keen to meet ALL the children!

‘Hannah and Tana are taking them swimming…’ but he wasn’t able to explain further as Julius stood up to shake his hand.

‘How hugely fortuitous, Mr Weasley,’ Julius smiled. ‘You’ve saved an owl a good deal of bother!’

‘Oh? How so?’ Ron was still a bit out of breath.

‘You’re probably aware of our planned restructuring at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement… well, your name has cropped up in relation to a rather interesting employment opportunity - to head up the Office for the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts! We’re amalgamating it into Section C – now known as the Department for the Misuse and Misapplication of Magic.’

Ron looked utterly flummoxed…

‘That’s – that’s great, but if I stick at Section A I can get on with nailing the corrupt bastards who used to work there… I’ve got a full list!’

Julius flinched a little. ‘A laudable aim… but I suspect most have resigned their posts already. Internal Affairs will investigate any troubling behaviour… and any criminal conduct will be dealt with in the usual way.’

‘So you’re letting them off scot-free?’ Harry snorted derisively.

‘Sounds like it,’ Draco agreed.

‘Gracious me, no!’ Julius exclaimed. ‘But it’s a question of PROOF.’ He returned his focus to Ron. ‘Ms Blythe says you’ll be an excellent candidate and Auror McLaughlin has happily sponsored your application – a most fortunate recommendation as it turns out. We’re set to name her Head Auror tomorrow.’

‘TANA? But she hasn’t said a thing!’ Ron expostulated. ‘I was talking to her just ten minutes ago!’

Not a LONG jog then, Hermione thought…

‘Maybe she wanted it to be a nice surprise?’ Julius said with a sunny smile.

Molly wandered in from the kitchen, flour coating her hands to her elbows. She’d been using Folkvangr’s kitchen as a spillover from her more cramped quarters at The Burrow. Tansy had become her chief culinary assistant.

She’d clearly been eavesdropping and looked desperate to intervene, but Julius Merriman unfurled himself from the sofa to leave.

‘And what if I don’t take the job?’ Ron asked to everyone’s surprise.

‘Well… there’s a potential opening in Section B… Tom Bennet’s old job – but there’d be
extremely stiff competition. I wouldn’t recommend it.’

‘Can’t I just stay where I am?’

Julius wavered. ‘I’m afraid not… A plaintiff has come forward with some rather unfortunate allegations - fully-costed and corroborated - regarding your comportment during the Quidditch case you were working on. Sadly, I can’t give you further details.’

Ron looked desperate. ‘What allegations? I worked that case with Tana… she can vouch for me.’

‘She already has. Hence the job offer, Mr Weasley.’ Julius gave him a pitying smile. ‘We’re working in your best interests to make this go away, believe me.’

Draco saw Julius to the door.

‘George has suggested Ron join him in the business,’ Molly said wistfully.

‘But do you really see yourself as a shopkeeper?’ Harry asked Ron.

‘I’d rather be an Auror!’ Ron said fiercely, his dreams crashing.

‘You’ve got to take the new job. You haven’t got a choice,’ Draco said, returning from the hallway. ‘Fully-costed was code. Someone’s accused you of taking bribes.’

‘But I haven’t!’ Ron cried. ‘I’m clean! Unlike the other fuckers in that department.’

‘It’s a good deal, all considered,’ Hermione said quietly, although she was stewing inside. Who was the plaintiff? She suspected Ruddy Krenzel…

Ron looked miserable. ‘Misuse of Muggle Artefacts…That’s Dad’s old turf, isn’t it?’

‘No shame in that,’ Molly said beadily.

Ron shuffled uncomfortably… ‘You’re right… he can give me a few tips… Truth is, I HAVE to take the job because I owe a bit for what I paid on top for this place…’ He gazed around the living-room of Folkvangr.

‘Who did you borrow from, Ron?’ Hermione asked waspishly.

Ron visibly flinched. ‘In light of everything it seems really foolish…’

Hermione stared at him, demanding an answer.

‘Tom Bennet,’ he admitted. ‘He hasn’t DEMANDED repayment but he sent me a rather cryptic note – it’s inferred.’

Hermione groaned. Tom bloody Bennet. Of all people… None of this was a coincidence.

‘A note you can ignore… he’s just taking the piss. He knows we’re after him…’ Draco growled.

‘But I borrowed A LOT. And – and from others, too. Not just Tom…’ Ron said, almost shrinking as he spoke. ‘I’ve run into a bit of trouble, actually.’ He looked directly at Draco. ‘I was rather hoping you could sub me a bit…’

‘Draco’s skint,’ Harry said baldly.
‘SKINT? But you’re paying for EVERYTHING, Draco,’ Molly said heatedly. ‘How are you managing?’

‘Muggle investments… it’s fine.’ He didn’t sound convincing.

‘I’ll tell Tansy to go easy on the butter…’ Molly said, dashing to the kitchen.

‘You’re going to need a job… after everything,’ Harry said to Draco. ‘I can probably sort you out something at Auror HQ. You could work with me.’

Hermione looked at Ron. This was hardly tactful!

‘I’m not exactly Auror material,’ Draco laughed.

‘You damn well are. You BOTH are, actually.’

‘I’d hate it,’ Hermione said with feeling.

‘After all this crap? I’ll want a quiet life,’ Draco grinned. ‘There's this tech start-up Ziff and I have been working on. Hopefully I’ll have enough cash left to fund it.’

XXX

It felt strange being back at Wisteria Cottage.

Hermione had brought swimming costumes for Rose and Magda. Hannah and Tana were taking the girls to a sports centre in the neighbouring town.

‘It’s good to see you,’ Tana beamed. She was tanned and freckled, looking even more wholesome and outdoorsy than usual. They were sitting in the garden with glasses of lemonade and the girls were so engrossed playing in Hugo’s old sandpit they didn’t even look up when Hermione arrived.

Hermione sat down for a few moments and closed her eyes, reveling in the warmth of the sun on her face. It felt so familiar here - and yet different. Had it always been this quiet? Even the light breeze as it shook the tall trees surrounding the garden was softer, even soothing. The cottage was old and crumbling but characterful – unlike the cold, slick modernity of Folkvangr with its high fence and hemmed-in lawn. Here there were bushes and weedy undergrowth and a sense that nature still roamed free.

‘I hope you don’t mind me and Neville stopping here,’ Hannah said in timorous tones.

‘God, no. It’s nice for Ron.’ Hermione could feel Tana’s nutbrown eyes watching her as she spoke… ‘Thanks for recommending Ron for this new job,’ she said. ‘Looks like he’s run out of road at Section A.’

‘I think he’ll like it,’ Tana said brightly.

‘It’s a terrible load of rubbish he’s been accused of,’ Hermione said, watching Tana closely. ‘Who accused him?’

Tana looked at her hands on the table. ‘I’m not privy to those details, unfortunately.’

‘When are we going to the pool?’ Rose called. She looked up and saw her mother and came running over, Magda toddling behind.

Once they were kitted out in their new swimsuits Hermione let herself out, but a scrap of parchment
on the coffee table in the living-room caught her attention. It had been scrunched-up in anger.

She smoothed it out and read:

‘Bit short on the old readies so hoping you made good on that investment you were telling me about… Time to cash in, mate. Though I’ll cry me a river if you haven’t made a killing! I need that dosh. Tom.’

The note was far from cryptic and nothing was inferred… it was a DEMAND for repayment.

And there was something weird… something underhand, but she couldn’t put her finger on it.

She let herself out and sped towards The Burrow. She passed the kids’ school on her left with the park on her right and then cut through the estate where she now lived.

It seemed so dull and torpid and claustrophobic after Wisteria Cottage… beige, blocky houses, hot, steaming roads. She traversed Willowbank Avenue, skirted Valhalla Crescent and headed down Weeping Brook Lane, past Folkvangr, to the fields stretching towards The Burrow.

She was still thinking about Tom’s note. Ron had presumably invented some cock-and-bull investment opportunity rather than a house when he’d asked for money. Otherwise how could Tom expect him to quickly cash in?

The Burrow was busy. She could hear the thudded chock of a football being struck - children playing in the paddock - and Gwen was hurrying from the kitchen with a pitcher and glasses on a tray.

‘I need to pick up a few bits from your place later, if that’s okay?’ Gwen said, greeting her cousin with a kiss on the cheek. ‘You heard we’ve moved back to Mum’s?’

‘A sanity break?’ Hermione laughed. She wanted to tell Gwen she was pregnant but she could sense eyes on her, raking her skin, as though trying to peer underneath.

Hermione glanced at a hodge-podge collection of tables and chairs at the edge of the lawn. Katya was watching her, completely ignoring Gunter’s best efforts to make conversation as he plied her with elderflower cordial and a batch of Molly’s cauldron cakes.

Arthur had recruited quite a band to re-build the chicken-coop. Draco was astride the roof being passed planks of wood and banging in nails with an air of barely contained violence. It was hot work and his shirt was open.

He was enjoying himself, Hermione thought with a smile. If Ziff’s tech adventure failed to take off, he could always be a carpenter or builder. He liked making things…

She smiled again and her hand automatically rested on her belly.

‘Do you think he’s gone into hiding?’ Ginny said once Gwen had moved on.

‘Salvedra? I hope not.’

Her eyes moved to the children playing football. Albus had been tackled hard by Alfred and was clutching his ankle. Ginny rolled her eyes in exasperation.

‘Kids, eh?’ she groaned. ‘Who’d have ‘em? Let alone more.’ She smirked at Hermione, her eyes twinkling. ‘Quick work…’
Hermione blushed heatedly. ‘Not planned.’

‘Merlin’s pants!… This means I’ll have to be an aunt to a bloody Malfoy…’

Hermione gave her a quizzical look. ‘We’re – we’re not actually related you know.’

‘As good as,’ Ginny said airily. ‘Scorpius called me Aunty Ginny earlier… he was only copying what he’s heard Rose and Hugo call me, but it’s not fair to exclude the wee chap just because of the unfortunate circumstances of his birth, is it now?’

Hermione’s mouth twitched in amusement. ‘Well, you’re welcome to be aunt to whoever arrives from this very fortunate circumstance…’

Ginny looked her up and down. ‘Doesn’t show.’

‘Won’t yet… though my bra’s tight.’

Ginny’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Bet Draco loves that.’

‘He – he is rather captivated by my anatomy at the moment, actually…’ Her eyes were drawn back to him on the roof of the chicken-coop and she sighed.

Ginny leant in closer. ‘We finally coaxed Mrs Malfoy out of the living-room into the sunshine… Bill rather cruelly nicked her notepad and pencil and took them outside… it was the first response we’ve had from her! Total freak-out!’

‘Did she speak?’

Ginny brusquely shook her head. ‘Oh no! That’d be far too normal! She sort of… keened. And she’s been outside ever since. Drawing away… in her own little world.’

Hermione tried not to laugh at the tragi-comedy of it all. The poor woman needed help. But there was no way she could go to St Mungo’s in the current circumstances.

Katya was staring fixedly at Draco… and then her eyes would drop to the drawing-pad in front of her and she feverishly worked her pencil across the page.

‘Well, it’s nice that someone gave her paper,’ she murmured. ‘Drawing obviously comforts her.’

‘Yeah, Mum found her a sketchpad when she started drawing on the tablecloth. She draws that tower-place she was stuck in LOADS. That’s why Ron and George got the painting. They’re setting it up in the living-room right now…’

‘WHAT?’ Hermione cried. ‘Someone could spy on us!’

The hammering at the chicken-coop stopped. Draco quickly descended and hurried over.

‘Oh, they’re making it all blank-looking and mysterious!’ Ginny said defensively. ‘You don’t need to worry about that!’

‘When did you get here?’ Draco asked. He almost kissed her but remembered himself and drew back…

‘A few minutes ago… Did you know the tower painting’s been moved here?’

‘Why? That's bonkers!’
‘To comfort Katya,’ Hermione said sardonically.

‘The best thing would be to find out what potions and pills she was taking! Ephraim would know,’ he hissed in low tones. ‘Have you heard from Pascal?’

‘No, but when I do, I’ll get him to ask…’

Harry had wandered over. ‘Did I hear you say that painting’s here?’

Hermione nodded, a dark look in her eye.

‘Is it blacked-out at the back? We don’t want any Tom, Dick or Harry creeping into The Burrow.’

TOM… That reminded her. That note… Why did it make her so uneasy?

She was about to say something but was distracted by Katya moving purposefully towards the house, closely shadowed by Kai who seemed to have taken it on herself to keep a watchful eye at all times.

She’d left her drawing pad on the table…

‘Excuse me,’ Hermione said, tripping over to take a quick look at what she was doing. It was intrusive… but she wanted to see what and who Katya had been sketching.

Draco looked over her shoulder as she thumbed through page after page.

The Tower. Again and again... And here was The Burrow… ramshackle and crudely patched-up. Three or four different sketches, one after the other… and from different angles.

The paddock, too, and the driveway.


She almost closed the pad but Draco stayed her hand. ‘There’s more at the back…’

‘Oh yes.’

‘Scorpius,’ Draco said dolefully. An angry-looking Scorpius. Harsh, dark lines etched onto his face, crows feet that aged him and a contemptuous sneer.

‘He doesn’t look like this!’

‘Maybe he does when he looks at her?’

A loud clattering from the chicken-coop and a furious cry… Henrik had accidentally dropped a plank onto Bill’s foot. Draco grunted and went to help out.

Hermione flicked through the remaining sketches feeling distinctly queasy. She wasn’t sure if this was morning sickness or a flash of foreboding.

There were numerous sketches of Draco – lovingly rendered in minute detail. Many were clearly fantasy.

And then herself. Just one drawing. Her eyes were black… And she was holding Magda…
Hermione almost dropped the sketchpad… but her sudden breathless fear ratcheted up moments later… ROSE. Three, no, four double-sided portraits.

There really was some lovely drawing here... She’d captured Rose beautifully – but she’d only seen her once! Here. In the kitchen. Yet Rose was pictured in the garden… yes, that was the arching bough of the old apple tree.

‘Bloody peculiar,’ Hermione whispered to herself, her hand trembling as she turned the pages.

Strange… she thought. Where both sides had been used, the pencil-marks differed slightly. Heavier. Angry…

More sketches… Ah, there was Kai! She hadn’t seen that before… Elizaveta. Niko… Was that Pascal? Yes. He’d also been in the kitchen that day.

Hermione dashed over to the chicken-coop.

‘Come to see our Chicken-Palace?’ Henrik chortled.

‘She’s drawing everybody!’ Hermione interjected. ‘LOOK!’ She flicked through the drawing-pad…

Bill looked perturbed. ‘Why ME?’

‘Why ROSE? Here. In the garden?’ Hermione asked… ‘And look. I’ve got black eyes…’

Arthur had a worried frown on his face. ‘Feels like we’re being spied on.’

‘No, Arthur. She picked up a portkey… she was following Draco,’ Hermione said reluctantly. ‘This isn’t a ploy.’

‘Maybe… but she’s scaring the life out of Molly. It’s why she’s at Folkvangr half the time.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, I truly am!’ Hermione’s insides twisted in guilty anguish. ‘We should move her.’

‘Better she’s with us than you,’ Arthur said, grimacing at the picture of Rose in Hermione’s hands. ‘But we need to get her to talk! Find out what’s really going on.’

‘I’m trying,’ Draco remonstrated. ‘But… It’s like she’s been brought back to life but isn’t actually alive.’

‘Oh, she’s alive alright. The same as any of us… and I realise she’s suffered, but that’s no excuse for discourtesy.’ Hermione was surprised by Arthur's hardline attitude.

‘Do you feel she’s malevolent?’ Hermione asked. Her voice seemed to resound amongst them… the unspoken fear.

Arthur didn’t reply. He dipped his paintbrush into a pail of whitewash and started applying paint in furious strokes.

‘I reckon it's classic Stockholm Syndrome,’ Henrik said. ‘Locked up for years, gets cozy but paranoid.’

‘She’s ill,’ Draco sighed, seemingly in sympathy, except he didn’t forgive her. Hermione could feel his fury, bristling.
‘I think she needs to know you still care,’ Bill advised Draco. ‘She still loves you.’

‘Strange kind of love,’ Harry said with an acid smile. ‘The wild-goose-chase with the necklace and then that bloody Matryoshka… It’s not exactly balanced, Bill. Nothing like love. More like ownership.’

‘I sometimes think she’s SMELLING you, Draco,’ Arthur said, stolidly focusing on painting.

Hermione looked at Arthur with wide, terrified eyes. ‘SMELLING? As in SNIFFS?’

‘And then there’s the staring…’ Harry added.

Draco buried his face in his hands. ‘What a fine fucking mess.’

‘Has she done any magic?’ Hermione asked Arthur urgently.

‘She hasn’t got a wand.’

And she didn’t have colour-magic. She’d have sensed it by now…

Their conversation was interrupted by Hugo urging Draco to come and play football. ‘I will do. I promise… in a couple of minutes.’

But Hugo decided to sit next to Draco and wait it out. ‘Why can’t Muggles do magic?’ he asked out of the blue.

‘But they sort of do,’ Draco said. ‘Just… different. Not spells and things… but stuff that makes people happy. You know. Like music… One moment there’s silence and the next there’s something amazing and meaningful.’

Hugo looked a little perplexed. ‘Is football magic?’

‘I guess it can be… if played well enough.’

‘So… if magic is stuff that makes you happy and football is ALSO magic, then being good to people and making them happy by playing football with them is the best magic of all!’ Hugo said persuasively.

Draco burst out laughing. ‘A flawless argument, Hugo. Come on, then!’ He jumped to his feet and they joined the others.

Henrik regarded them enviously. ‘Can I have some time off?’ he asked Arthur.

‘We’re almost done here anyway.’

Ron and George were striding across the lawn towards them.

‘The painting! Was that really the BEST idea?’ Hermione asked them in withering tones.

‘She’s happy as Larry now,’ George said, smacking his lips triumphantly. ‘We’ve made the room all dark and gloomy. Can’t see a bloomin’ thing. And there’s a black curtain-thingy you can flip over the painting whenever you want.’ He looked at his brother proudly. ‘We’ve thought of everything.’

‘She’ll want her little book though… Kai said she’s always got it,’ Ron added, pointing to the sketchpad in Hermione’s hands.
'Tell you what? We should bring Magda over?’ George said in ebullient tones. ‘That might cheer her up!’

‘She’s a child, not a bloody support animal,’ Harry said pithily.

‘I’ll take this to her,’ Hermione said looking at the pad in her hands. She shot a quick glance at Draco. He was splitting the boys into teams – Louis to Captain one team, Vithu the other.

XXX

The living-room, devoid of furniture and clutter, looked much bigger than before. All that remained was a small, low couch and a rocking-chair. The curtains were drawn and the room’s walls had been draped in grey sackcloth. An oil-lamp on a small table cast cold light. Hermione’s shadow loomed large and imposing as she entered the room.

She was immediately struck by Katya’s rapt expression as she sat on the sofa staring longingly at the tall gleaming painting on a makeshift easel at the back of the room.

‘You left this in the garden,’ Hermione said, keeping her voice as level as possible.

Katya didn’t respond, though her face flickered a little.

Hermione eyed her with growing frustration. She needed answers…

She flipped the cover on the painting and sat down beside her. She thumbed through the book alighting on a picture of Rose.

‘Why have you drawn my daughter?’

Katya kept her face averted. Her small, elfin features seemed to slightly sniff the air.

‘You’ve only met her once and yet you’ve drawn her many times. I’d like to know why.’

Katya tilted her face towards Hermione. A sharp, diagonal shadow cut across her features, rendering one eye a clear, artless blue, whilst the other was dark and impenetrable.

Hermione’s scalp crawled icy-cold but she bent her face closer… This was a young, troubled woman with no recourse to magic. Harmless.

‘You drew me, too – but with black eyes.’ She wasn’t going to mention Magda… ‘But I don’t have black eyes - so why did you do that?’

Katya regarded her in silence.

Hermione had expected Katya’s ‘colour’ to be rosy pink… but she was more an ashen rosy-grey…


cenizas de rosas…

‘You need to talk to us, Katya… we might be able to help you,’ Hermione said in quiet tones, maintaining eye contact as best she could. ‘We know you’ve suffered and I’m sorry that you’re suffering still… I’m sorry that we – that Draco and I – have hurt you. I truly am.’

Katya blinked rapidly. A response. At last…

‘But I’d rather we were honest about this… Because I want you to know that we never intended to hurt you. Far from it… But things happen. Life changes when we least expect it to. It is what it is.’
Hermione edged even closer. If she touched her she might be able to peek beneath the surface… The ashen rose was swirling in her mind; thick and oppressive. She summoned her purple - a robust defence, but simultaneously eased it into Katya… seeking, searching, trying to scope out a sense of the woman.

She was shockingly blank! A barren grey. But there were flashes of black, coiled shiny threads, spiraling and tumbling…. Hermione resisted her natural instinct - rapid retreat – and pressed on. No one could be this blank. No one human… and Katya was definitely human. She could almost sense the weight and warmth of her organs, her innards pressing in on the hollow kernel at her core.

Is this what a certain kind of madness feels like? she wondered. A muted scream…

There was something else, though. A fuzziness, like static on a television, tucked into the far corner of her mind… It made a noise. A harsh buzz that was getting louder and louder… like a hornet’s nest that had been kicked open.

A woman was crying… or was it laughter? Hermione couldn’t tell.

Talk to me, she said in loud, declamatory tones that seemed to echo around the blank, grey space…. A rushing sound like water seemed to come from her right… She turned to look.

And it was black. Deep-void BLACK.

Hermione gasped and pulled back. And a voice rang out loud in her head… But she couldn’t make out what they were saying or even who it was… She presumed it was a woman, but the moment she tried to catch hold of it, it slipped through her mind, like dark rain.

She tried to focus, fighting a dank, grey blurriness… and white flashed at the corner of her eyes…

Draco.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked urgently, pulling her up from the couch.

Hermione’s ears were still ringing. Katya was staring ahead, ignoring them – but Hermione felt sure her lips curled upwards, ever-so-slightly.

Malevolent, indeed…

XXX

‘Please, Hermione. Don’t ever try that again,’ Draco begged, almost frog-marching her out of The Burrow.

‘I had to know - and she’s all grey; but there’s black, too.’

She could sense blackness in him at the moment! He was angry and scared – more than he was letting her know in the usual course of things.

‘It’s getting late. Best we head back to Folkvangr. Harry and I are going to have another scoot-around picture-world…’

‘I think it’s my shift.’

‘You look tired.’
'You said you wouldn’t coddle me!’ she said, raising her voice. 

‘I’m not! You look tired… that’s all…’ He tenderly squeezed her arm. 

Hermione set out across the fields with Gwen. Draco and Harry would follow with the kids. 

Gwen hooked her arm through hers and they walked in companionable silence. Eventually Gwen said: ‘It’s going to be weird being back in Muggleland.’ 

Hermione looked ahead to Folkvangr and the other modern houses on Weeping Brook Lane. ‘Well, this is Muggleland… devices work at Folkvangr.’ 

‘But The Burrow and Shell Cottage and The Blue House… they’ve been extraordinary experiences… I’m a bit worried Oleg’s going to find it all a bit dull in comparison.’ 

‘As long as you’re there, I’m sure he’ll love it.’ 

A burnt orange sunset streaked across the fields behind them, fading rapidly to a broadening purple horizon. Many of the houses on Weeping Brook Lane already had lights on and deeper into the estate a blue light spiraled slowly round and round. 

*Weeping Brook Lane…* 

The words repeated in her head… 

*I’m going mad,* Hermione thought. Venturing inside ‘Katya’ had screwed with her mind. 

They stepped into the house and Thelonious offered to make them tea. 

‘That’d be lovely,’ Hermione said, sinking onto the sofa … Draco would be back soon. And the boys. Parvati was picking up the girls from Ron’s. 

A few minutes’ shut-eye would be welcome… 

*Cry me a River… Cry me a River…* 

What the hell did that even mean? 

‘What’s *Cry me a River*?’ she asked Gwen… that was what had puzzled her about Tom’s note, she realised. Such a strange phrase to use. 

‘Oh. It’s sort of sarcastic when someone’s being a bit of a drama queen… And there’s the song… you know…’ And Gwen hummed it. 

Yes, yes, she did know… and it continued in her head. 

*Cry me a River.* 

Crying LIKE a river – or a river that cries?A *crying river*… like a brook, Hermione thought… suddenly feeling winded… A *weeping brook*… 

WEEPING BROOK LANE…

She jumped up, almost colliding with Thelonious who was passing her a cup of tea. 

‘What’s wrong?’ he cried.
‘Tom Bennet knows where we are!’

But did he know WHERE EXACTLY? Ron might’ve told him he was buying a house and he worked out where that house was… but that didn’t mean he knew the exact address.

‘Who’s Tom Bennet?’ Gwen exclaimed, infected by Hermione’s fear. Her eyes shone white in the glare of the ceiling spotlights.

‘What’s going on outside?’ Thelonious said.

More whirling blue lights… Darkness was falling and the blue lights blended with the red glow of tail-lights on the back of vehicles taking up most of the road outside.

Thelonious peered through the kitchen window. ‘Quite a crowd.’

Hermione craned to see over the hedge – she could make out the top of an ambulance and another emergency vehicle, a police car.

She heard the front door click open and moments later the slim form of Gwen passed the nose of the police-car and disappeared from view.

‘I’ll go take a look,’ Hermione said. Thelonious stood at the open door, an anxious frown on his face.

A high-pitched scream rent the air… Hermione felt a surge of panic rising inside of her. GWEN. That sounded like Gwen…

Police tried to push her back and she was jostled by silent onlookers and a child was crying… and she could barely make out a heated exchange above the non-stop fizz and burble of walkie-talkies, tinny and distant, clicking on and off.

‘Let me through,’ she said in urgent tones to the young policeman trying to block her from moving forward. ‘That’s my cousin.’

She impatiently elbowed him aside and ran to Gwen who was kneeling in a pool of blood surrounded by paramedics, police… A body was being zipped into a long, black bag.

Hermione briefly glimpsed a bulky woman, a mess of blood… And Gwen’s shoulders heaving.

A young policewoman knelt beside her, a glare of fluorescent yellow, but Gwen brusquely turned away.

‘Gwen…’ Hermione breathed, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Gwen snapped round to look at her. She was pale and shaking. ‘She’s meant to be on a cruise! Why’s she here? Like this?’

Hermione felt like fainting… like her head might explode.

AUNT RITA?

There was no point asking if she was dead when she’d already heard the sweeping zip of the body bag close around her.

Aunt Rita. Gwen’s mum… A bloodied corpse… Dead on Weeping Brook Lane.
‘We have to get back to the house,’ she whispered.

But Gwen shook her head.

‘Come on…’ Hermione said a little more forcefully. ‘She feels sick,’ she said to the policewoman. ‘I’m just taking her to the loo!’

She threw her arm around Gwen’s waist and pushed through the crowd.

‘But Mum…’ Gwen said in a soft, girlish voice. Her lips were white with shock. ‘She’s in the ambulance.’

Thelonious was waiting at the end of the path.

‘What’s happened?’

‘Get her inside,’ Hermione hissed.

She could sense she was being watched. No, that wouldn’t do!

‘Look after her! I have to do something!’

She momentarily stepped aside and rubbed her hand across her eyes, stifling an urge to vomit… No time for that, she thought. No time.

She scanned the street… A figure in the crowd. A mud-brown hoodie. YES! There you are!

She weaved through the milling spectators – the police car was reversing and some onlookers were scattering - but Hermione didn’t let him out of her sight.

He knew… he knew they lived on Weeping Brook Lane! He’d killed Gwen’s mother. Her aunt. And left her body to lure them out. To see where they lived…

He slipped beyond the crowd and rounded the corner onto Valhalla Crescent where there was another pathway leading to the far corner of fields.

Hermione speeded up and was onto him… She grabbed hold of his hoodie and then fell into a breathless whirl, a dark roiling sensation ripping through her.

She landed heavily on hard grass; the sky was dark and studded with stars overhead..

‘Came along for the ride, did you?’ snarled Tom Bennet. He flung his arm into her face and for a brief moment she saw red, but she couldn’t afford to loosen her grip on him.

HE KNEW WHERE THEY LIVED! Her children, Draco… people she loved. He knew it all… She couldn’t afford him telling Sylvestra - or anyone else for that matter.

The windmill loomed to her left, a tall shadow against the night sky, its downstairs windows ablaze with light.

‘I reckon you’ll be quite the prize,’ Tom Bennet leered. He grabbed her by the shoulders and tried to haul her off the ground but she focused hard – pulsating with purple until she glowed – making herself as heavy as possible, heavy as lead, rooted to the ground…

‘Hell’s bells…One of those are you?’ he panted, before collapsing on top of her. She instantly jerked upwards, throwing him backwards, but he was lightning-quick, rolling her over and
pinioning her arms behind her head. An unnerving light gleamed in his eye as she struggled and flailed beneath him.

‘Draco got himself a bit of a wild cat, didn’t ‘e?’ He raised his eyebrows cockily. ‘Lucky fucker…’

Hermione grunted in fury and summoned every ounce of strength inside of her… She freed her arms from his grip and smashed her fists into his chest pushing him over and straddling him, forcing her knees into the crook of his arms until he was gasping in pain.

‘Who knows where you were today?’ she rasped, sweat pouring down her face with the effort of pushing him deeper into the ground… she could feel the crunch of his body beneath the sharp bone of her knees.

‘TELL ME!’ she said, bursting with desperation and a strange sort of sorrow…

She pressed her hands down onto his chest and he opened his mouth to cry out. His eyes were wild and staring. Shocked at her strength and power.

‘No one,’ he gurgled, pleading. She stared at him… eyes boring into his face. What now? Take him prisoner?

His eyes flicked towards the windmill. Somebody had come outside…

She raised her wand to Stupefy him but he swung his elbow into her jaw and she gasped as his wand poked her stomach uncomfortably… ‘Sylvestra told me about your bonny wee surprise…you and Draco have been busy!’ He laughed nastily. ‘Can’t stand the critters meself… one less won’t matter…’

He opened his mouth – but before any words could possibly tumble out Hermione twisted his wand-hand away and pushed a violent, seething, incandescent surge of magic into him…her heart racing, blood pumping, teeth gritted… ‘Blood to stone!’ she rasped – the first thing that came to mind, that could end this… and was horrified as his face slowly froze into a ghastly rictus grin and his eyes stilled grey.

She’d killed before, but this felt different. Too close. Repellent…

_Can’t think about it_, she thought to herself. Once we’re safe… maybe then… but not now, not today.

‘Tom?’ came a voice from the open doorway. ‘Is that you?’ Sylvestra…

Hermione held her breath…

‘Where did he go, do you know? He’s been gone for hours,’ Sylvestra said to a long shadowy figure who’d joined her at the windmill’s threshold.

‘He promised us a surprise…’ her companion said, snorting in derision. Hermione recognised that voice… It was Troy. ‘Ruddy’s out of patience. He’s cut the cards already. We’re starting without him.’

Hermione could hear men’s voices laughing; Krenzel’s South African accent was particularly prominent.

Both figures wandered back inside.
She could see Sylvestra sitting at a table beside Ruddy Krenzel with his curly mop of hair. Troy stood behind her - a protective stance. And around the table were a handful of Aurors she vaguely recognised – Nesbitt, Cairns, Toffitt and Charlie Dowson.

She could disappear and leave Tom as a parting gift or… they were sitting ducks. She could get backup and attack. Take out their HQ.

The rose garden painting… upstairs. Might be worth stealing, but first - a Patronus.

Everyone was engrossed in the game – there was ribald laughter and the clink of glasses and someone shouted angrily.

She sent a message to Draco with a bold flourish of her wand and a sleek, silver tiger was let loose, leaping into the darkened fields… Would he still see that in picture-world?

In the meantime, she had to think of a way to dispose of Tom’s body… how much effort would it take to Evanesco?

XXX

Bill and Angelina almost passed her in the darkness.

‘Over here,’ she whispered.

Gunter and Elizaveta followed.

‘Harry sent a Patronus… They’re still in the paintings with Niko,’ said Gunter.

‘There’s a painting here, isn’t there?’ Elizaveta said. ‘They might arrive THAT way.’

‘Do we wait to hear from the others or just steam in and hope for the best?’ Bill asked.

‘A shooting match inside could get messy very fast,’ Gunter said. He pulled a ball of GX61 out of this pocket. ‘I suggest we chuck this into the windmill… fry their magic and force them outside. We lie in wait at a safe distance and ambush them…’

‘Is it our objective to kill them?’ Elizaveta asked coolly. Hermione shuddered… Troyanda13 had no qualms killing to achieve an aim. She’d forgotten that. But then the same could now be said for her…

‘Who are the key players here?’ Gunter asked Hermione.

‘Sylvestra, for sure… And Troy’s dangerous. Possibly, Krenzel.’

‘Okay. So our mission is to terminate the danger they pose to us… I don’t care how. And destroy that windmill, removing their base.’

Bill was keen to practice Fiendfyre as it wasn’t a spell he’d ever performed. It wasn’t the kind of magic decent wizards usually indulged in… but these were different times calling for different measures…

Hails of hearty laughter and a furious slap on the table emanated from the windmill. Someone HATED losing, Hermione thought. From the scrunched-up, pouty cat-look on Sylvestra’s face, it was her.

‘But what if Elizaveta’s right and Draco and the others come through the painting upstairs?’
Hermione worried. ‘They could walk straight into Fiendfyre.’

‘Okay, Hermione… you get inside and take the painting… We need to make a move or they’ll be on to us.’ He took a deep breath. ‘Right… let’s go.’

Minutes later and a blue cloud was floating above the gaming table and there were outraged yelps and a frenzied commotion… Sylvestra was peering through the window into the darkness, eyes slitted – her resemblance to an angry cat even more striking.

Hermione shrank into the shadows beside the open doorway as everyone – including Sylvestra - filed past her.

She tripped up the stairs as quietly as possible as a volley of spells cracked and fizzed behind her – lighting up the sky with brash flashes of colour.

Katya’s room was still and quiet, lit only by the panoply of lights and colours reflected on the window from the wand-fight below. Scrimshaw’s body was gone but the floor was bloodstained – even a little tacky. Hermione glimpsed a screwed-up ball of paper – Katya’s drawings - under the table and stuffed it into her pocket.

She put her hands on the painting and summoned colour-magic to make it light and portable but a cold lick of magic curled its way around her… dark, fathomless.

She shivered in fear, her hands dropping from the picture-frame, eyes drawn upwards. How the hell had SHE got here?

Sylvestra was flat against the ceiling, like a giant bat…

‘Always good to see you, Hermione,’ she said smoothly, and in that same instant a glistening silvery gloop tumbled downwards, thick, glutinous skeins of silver entangling themselves around Hermione’s limbs… but she clenched her fists and fought herself free and darted onto the landing.

‘Not so fast!’ Sylvestra yelled, leaping to the floor with sinewy, acrobatic grace to block Hermione’s path. ‘Why the hurry?’ she puckered artlessly. ‘You’re not SCARED of me, are you?’

In truth, Hermione was… Sylvestra was resistant to colour-magic and the GX61 meant she couldn’t use wand-magic either.

Hermione said nothing… inwardly praying that Draco and Harry would come through the painting and distract her.

Sylvestra cocked her head and laughed. ‘Everyone RAVES about how powerful you are for a Muggle-born… so very CLEVER they say… but in my opinion, you’re nothing special!’

‘I’m not trying to be,’ Hermione retorted. I’m trying to survive, she thought.

‘Good…’ Sylvestra smirked, ‘because you’re no match for me! I’ve been using our magic for years - and this time, you haven’t got Draco to make you stronger…’ Sylvestra stepped closer, holding Hermione in her gaze, like a black-eyed snake eyeing up its prey. ‘There is one thing I DO admire about you, though. You have a gift for convincing people to do what you want – like making my father humiliate himself and our family.’ Her mouth tightened in fury. ‘Rather than all this unnecessary nastiness between us, I think we could work together.’

‘I’ve no intention of working with you on anything,’ Hermione said in a tight, choked voice.
‘Maybe you’ll reconsider when you see your children about to die… because I can arrange that all
too easily,’ Sylvestra said with a sorry smile. ‘Losing people you love can focus the mind… which
reminds me, can I have my sister back?’

‘I don’t have your sister! Why would I want HER?’ Hermione lied. ‘I’m sleeping with her husband,
remember?’

Sylvestra’s eyes glowed venomously. ‘I know you have her. And… possibly something else.
Something she foolishly mislaid…’

Anna’s papers…

‘You KNOW nothing,’ Hermione snarled.

Someone, anyone, please come… Hermione silently begged. She blanked her mind, aware that
Sylvestra’s magic was slicing into her… trying to scavenge a vestige of the truth, a mere image,
even. Hermione trembled with the effort of resisting…

She could sense Sylvestra’s frustration building. She lacks patience, Hermione thought - a fatal
flaw in her otherwise formidable arsenal - and she was inching closer and closer… backing
Hermione up against the wall next to the table where Niko had found Katya’s drawings.

There was a bed shoved against the wall behind Sylvestra… It seemed an impossible task
but…Focus and Flow, she thought, Focus and Flow… Yes! It was moving upwards… bit by bit…
higher, higher - until it was upright.

Hermione’s limbs were shaking with tension and she was aching with the mental effort of keeping
her face smooth and unflustered - but all she had to do was raise it up and let it… DROP…

Sylvestra screamed as the bed crashed into the back of her head, jolting her to her knees. She was
smothered by a tumbling cascade of white bedlinens. She skidded onto her belly, arms out in front
of her and groaned as the bed collapsed heavily on top of her.

Hermione immediately leapt onto the bed to launch herself out of the room, but Sylvestra grabbed
her ankle and with superhuman strength yanked her backwards. Hermione slammed onto the floor
and struck her head against the table.

A blinding blur of light flashed across her vision… and to her dismay, Sylvestra reared upwards,
tipping the bed off her back with scary ease. Hermione instinctively fired off a shot of searing
purple… but Sylvestra bent backwards, elastic and yielding, so that Hermione’s magic whizzed
past her and petered into a faint speckling trace.

Desperate, Hermione seized the table-leg behind her and with a loud grunt, sweating with the
effort, she pitched the table at Sylvestra…

Sylvestra roared furiously, swiping the table away, pulverizing it into a fine, scratchy sawdust. She
threw herself at Hermione – blood up, control vanquished – gripping her neck with both hands and
squeezing hard, digging her nails into Hermione’s throat.

Hermione swallowed back hot bile. The urge to vomit was almost overwhelming… But she

She could feel colour-magic brewing up inside of her… scorching hot power, like molten lava
spooling through her veins… She was choking and crying but with a supreme effort she was able to
twist out of Sylvestra’s grasp and jab her knee fast and sharp into Sylvestra’s groin.
Sylvestra grunted in shock but wound her hand into Hermione’s hair, roughly pulling her back when she tried to make a break for it... Holding back tears of pain Hermione swung her fist against the side of Sylvestra’s head, followed by a ferocious right-hook under her chin.

Sylvestra eased out a dazed sigh, starry-eyed, and her hold on Hermione slackened.

Hermione took advantage of Sylvestra’s unsteadiness to claw herself up from the floor and scramble over the bed parked in the centre of the room, aiming for the staircase beyond the open door – but a rolling blast of colour-magic electrified her, slamming her against the door-jamb.

She span around, mortified to see Sylvestra standing on the bed, eyes flashing, shimmering with dark magic... Her powers of recovery were remarkable, unhuman.

The window, she thought...it was all that was left... She imagined the glass shattering, fragments flying through the air – a gleaming projectile...

The window exploded and Hermione threw herself onto the floor as myriad glistening shards of glass rocketed across the room, hitting Sylvestra...

Sylvestra shrieked in pain, ribbons of blood streaking across her face and neck. She fell down, bellowing in vexation... Her voice shook the walls and she showered Hermione with scalding, stabbing sparks of pure pain that had Hermione gasping and crying.

Hermione threw up a translucent colour-magic shield, but Sylvestra was weakening... a froth of pink-stained saliva spluttered from her mouth and dribbled down her chin. Sylvestra placed her hand against her abdomen and shook her head in disbelief. She’d been impaled by a long, thin spear of glass... She wrenched it free releasing a slick flow of blood that soaked the bedclothes beneath her within seconds.

‘What have you done?’ she mewed...She was convulsing uncontrollably and to Hermione’s surprise blood was dripping down her face in slow rivulets as tears streamed from her eyes.

A tumult to her right and Harry had bounded from the painting, Draco alongside him.

Sylvestra cowered, like a cornered beast, and Draco sneered – fierce and greedy. He raised his wand, poised to strike...

‘No, Draco!’ Hermione cried, ‘it won’t work!’

Sylvestra threw back her head and opened her mouth and let out a piercing, high-pitched scream that had Hermione slamming her hands to her ears, her head suddenly pounding with pain, and Draco and Harry falling backwards.

Black smoke was hissing and writhing, a living thing, spiraling through Sylvestra like a long, black flame... a black blizzard... before catapulting her upwards and out of the empty window-frame.

She was gone...

‘I thought we had her!’ Hermione moaned.

‘You okay?’ Draco asked, capturing her in his arms and holding her tight.

‘Gunter used GX61,’ she said. ‘Wand-magic didn’t work.‘

‘I’m sorry we’re late getting here... we had company.’
‘Company?’ Hermione instantly thought of Salvedra.

‘JOSEP,’ Harry snarled bitterly.

‘Where’s Niko?’ she asked, alarmed.

‘He set off a fucking light-quake to keep Josep at bay,’ Draco said.

‘Is he ALIVE?’

‘We think so…’ Harry said, but she worried it was more hope than certainty.

‘We need to help the others…’ Hermione said. But outside there were bodies lying still on the ground; it was quiet, except for Gunter, leaning over Elizaveta, babbling in German.

Hermione’s heart sank. ‘Oh no… is she—?’

‘No…’ Gunter’s reddish eyes were dimmed. ‘She’s hurt, though.’

Elizaveta’s teeth were chattering in shock. Her arm was almost severed from her shoulder.

‘We’d better get her back fast,’ Draco said, kneeling beside her while Harry quickly scooted around the windmill to see if Sylvestra had landed close by.

‘Shell Cottage I think,’ Angelina said, striding towards them. ‘I’ve broken my hand…’

The windmill burst into a towering blaze behind them… they all stared, faces stinging in the heat. ‘Job done,’ Bill said triumphantly, ‘though Troy got away… the bastard.’

‘Can’t find Sylvestra,’ Harry said grudgingly. He gawped at the inferno… ‘Fucking hope Niko wasn’t trying to get through that painting!’

_Bugger_, Hermione thought… they’d left it behind.

‘I’ve got to get back to Gwen,’ she said to Draco. ‘Her mother was murdered.’

‘Jesus… Who by?’

‘Tom Bennet. I killed him.’

XXX

‘She just upped and left!’ Parvati wept. ‘Oleg went with her – obviously.’

‘Where’s she now?’

‘She wouldn’t say. Said she had something to do,’ Thelonious replied, despondent.

‘Uncle Derek,’ Hermione said to Draco. She unloaded the scrunched-up paper from the windmill onto the dining table and was ready to leave straight away.

‘Hold on, I’m coming, too,’ Bill said. ‘We need to protect your uncle’s hospice…’

XXX

When Hermione, Draco and Bill arrived at The Spires, the lights were dimmed. Bill mumbled a spell and the duty nurse looked away as they passed her station.
'In here…’ Hermione said. The door was open and they collided with Oleg, standing against the wall looking crestfallen.

‘She won’t want to see you,’ he said sadly.

‘None of you… not ever again,’ came Gwen’s quavering voice from behind the door.

‘Gwen…’ Hermione said softly. ‘Please… I’m so sorry.’

‘It’s no good, Hermione..’ Gwen sobbed. ‘I’ve had enough. I was better off before… before your world stomped all over my world…’

‘Don’t say that,’ Hermione said in bleating tones. She looked at Oleg. His fingers had pushed his glasses up as he pressed away tears from his eyes.

‘She’s said the same to me,’ he said huskily. ‘She thinks we’ve stolen her life.’

‘My life… my son’s life… Alfred isn’t the same kid he once was. He’ll never be happy with what he is, what we have. Not ever.’

Bill whispered something to Draco and shuffled off into the shady corridor.

Hermione edged around the door. Her uncle was breathing with the aid of a ventilator. His grey, worn face was illuminated by a single bedside spotlight. Gwen was holding his hand and trembling as sobs wracked her body.

She gazed at Hermione, looking tear-stained and wretched, hair askew.

‘I have to think of Alfred… I spent too long forgetting that he’s what counts most. You see, I can adapt back. But with Alfred, the rot’s set in and I have to stop it. His best friend’s a wizard and one day he’ll be off to that Hogschool place you all go to – like one big, happy family—’

_Not quite_, Hermione thought…

‘And Alfred will be stuck at the local comp trying to forget that there’s another life, another world that he can never be part of.’

‘But you can be…’ Oleg said plaintively. ‘I’d look after you.’

‘I don’t need looking after, Oleg,’ Gwen said sharply. ‘I’m my own person and I managed perfectly well before and I still can… if you – if all of you – just leave me alone.’

Hermione could feel tears sliding down her face.

‘I’m sorry what’s happened… I’m sorry you’ve been hurt…’

‘My mum has been MURDERED… A real person, Hermione… someone who had nothing to do with all the shit going on in your stupid, made-up world…’

‘Hardly made-up! We’re real too!’ Hermione countered, feeling her emotions getting away from her… Draco laid a hand on her arm and emerged into the room behind her.

‘Gwen…’ he said. ‘By all means go home. Live your life and we’ll help you in any way we can with what’s happened to your mum…’

‘No doubt avenging her with even MORE people dying! And so it goes on…’ Gwen said, her face
crumpling, lips twisted and trembling... ‘it’s all so bloody pointless and yet none of you see it… you just drag innocent people in… us poor magic-less MUGGLES, whose lives seem to have less value unless we’re serving your great cause.’

Draco swallowed hard. ‘You’re right. The whole thing’s stupid… our community’s a fucking up-itself cult and I don’t blame you for wanting out. But please, Gwen, don’t shut Hermione out. Or Rose and Hugo. Even Scorpius. They love you. And that’s nothing to do with being magical or Muggle. It’s just love.’

Gwen’s face contorted into a loud, wrenching sob. ‘And I love them... But it’s too much, Draco. Too much….’

Hermione reached out to touch her but Gwen pushed her away and turned her face to the wall.

For a brief moment, Uncle Derek stirred and a soft sigh escaped his thin, grey lips.

‘Can you go now?’ Gwen asked, shoulders juddering. ‘All of you.’

Oleg threw her a desperate look but Hermione shook her head and led him away.

In the darkened corridor he held onto her, resting his head on her shoulder.

Draco followed a few minutes later. His face was pale and bottled-up. ‘Let’s find Bill and go home,’ he murmured gently. ‘There’s nothing more we can do tonight.’

XXX

Hermione was too tired to cry anymore. She’d failed her cousin, her family… she hadn’t protected them. Bill reassured her Gwen would be safe at her house. But nothing made her feel better…

‘Is the hospice safe?’

‘As much as it can be.’

Draco sat next to her on the sofa and she fell against him.

‘Are the kids in bed?’ she asked, hoping to follow their lead.

‘Sound asleep… Do you want to go up?’

Henrik was poring over Katya’s scrunched-up pictures at the dining table.

‘Katya didn’t draw these,’ he murmured.

‘She did,’ Harry insisted. ‘They were part of the same pile as these…’ He pushed her drawings from the windmill towards Henrik.

‘I’ve cross-referenced,’ Henrik said, ‘and I’m telling you, someone else drew these. See?’ He lifted up a picture of Hermione. On one side there was a light, deft sketch, but on the other the same picture had been rendered in thick, dark jagged lines.

‘It’s a bit spooky she drew me when she hadn’t met me,’ Hermione admitted. ‘But the darker version… It’s probably a blunt pencil…’

‘Okay, then,’ Henrik sighed, ‘what about this one?’
He held up a picture of Rose.

‘Oh god,’ Draco paled. His hand gripped Hermione’s arm. ‘She definitely hadn’t seen HER before!’

Henrik flipped the paper over presenting a mirror-image – except her face was dark and shaded – and her eyes were blacked out. The drawing was both the same and yet different – a different hand – to the first…

‘It had to be Sylvestra,’ Bill said. ‘Showing her who to look out for.’

‘But Sylvestra didn’t SEND Katya here,’ Harry said. ‘She came on her own accord.’

Hermione felt a fiery pain clench her chest. Raw panic... ‘Someone’s communicating with her… maybe it’s an enchanted pad or something?’

‘Definitely not the one she’s been using at The Burrow,’ asserted Bill.

‘Whoever it is wants her to know who Rose is…’ Draco said in low tones.

Everyone gasped as the French windows suddenly swung open and Niko stumbled into the living-room. He looked dishevelled, clothes torn and his hair was brittle and burnt.

‘Fucking nightmare!’ he shouted. ‘I stepped into that bloody rose garden and the whole place blew up on me!’

‘Oh no,’ Bill said, aghast. ‘That was my fault!’

‘It doesn’t matter! We’ve got something much bigger to think about,’ Niko said dismissively. He gazed around the room. ‘Padma’s lit the fucking candle in the window… So we’d best get moving, guys! It’s fucking game on!’

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

"L’INCONNUE" by BEACH HOUSE

"PARADISE" by NILÜFER YANYA

"HEART-SHAPED BOX" by NIRVANA

"KISS KISS BANG BANG" by HIGH CONTRAST

"VENUS IN FURS" by VELVET UNDERGROUND

"DON’T WANT TO KNOW" by KARINE POLWART

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
The Very Witching Hour

Chapter Summary

The plan unfolds, unexpected events and a trip into the past points to the future

62. The Very Witching Hour

‘Bollocks,’ Harry said, summing up how everyone – already tired and battle-worn – was feeling.

‘We need to take our chance while we have it,’ Niko said, his button-blue eyes blazing with fierce determination. ‘This wizard has sown the seeds of chaos for too long… it’s time we ended him!’

Draco suppressed a sigh but Hermione still heard it. ‘We need Gunter.’ He looked to Thelonious. ‘Contact him on the corundum. Tell him to get ready.’

Thelonious got going with that and Bill joined him.

‘Are you okay with this?’ Draco asked Hermione. She could feel his whiteness thrumming anxiously.

‘I’m not physically hurt… just a bit knackered.’ And sad... She couldn't stop thinking about Gwen's tear-stained face. ‘We can do this, Draco. You better tell that Muggle lady in Spain, Alenka Horvat, to get her strike force teed up for action at El Sol y Ter.’

Draco moved off to the kitchen to make his call.

‘Wish I could help,’ Henrik said, looking genuinely downcast.

‘Well I’m bloody glad you can’t, actually,’ Parvati said primly. ‘We’ve a houseful of children to worry about!’ She reached out and squeezed his arm affectionately and Henrik flushed crimson.

Hermione had to look away to smile and caught Harry’s eye. He was smiling, too.

‘Right,’ Bill said in authoritative tones, ‘Gunter’s on his way! Fleur’s just popped to The Burrow to draft in Molly to take her place nursing poor Elizaveta… I’m going to be needing Fleur with me and Kai at the old tin mine.’

‘What's happened to Elizaveta?’ Niko cried, alarmed.

‘She was injured at the Windmill I’m afraid,’ Hermione replied.

Draco was back. ‘Alenka can move special forces into the vicinity of El Sol y Ter within the hour.’

‘The hour?’ Niko shrieked, quivering with impatience. ‘But that’s too long!’ He brushed his hand through his singed hair and a pungent smoky smell filled the room. ‘We must strike while the iron’s hot!’

‘I wonder if Sylvestra will try to get to El Sol y Ter?’ Harry mused. ‘It’s her house, isn’t it? And she was in pretty bad shape.’
‘All thanks to you,’ Draco said to Hermione. ‘Considering you couldn’t use magic directly against her, you totally smashed it!’

But Hermione didn't feel celebratory. She felt apprehensive. Sylvestra was no NORMAL witch...

‘Niko… where was Josep when you last saw him?’ she asked, voicing her foremost concern. He scared her more than anyone...

‘Some beach painting, dull, featureless thing… no idea where. But I had him pinned back!’ Niko replied, excitedly, ‘and then I ran… went to find you guys.’

‘Which means he might retreat to El Sol y Ter, too,’ Hermione muttered. ‘We might find there’s quite the welcome party!’ she added in sardonic tones.

‘All the more reason for us to get there first!’ Niko declared. 'Which we can't fucking do if the Muggles are dragging their heels!' He stared at Draco, eyes bulging in frustration.

Draco pulled his phone from his pocket. ‘I’ll see what I can do…’

Harry fumbled with a knapsack and produced a faintly shimmering piece of cloth that vanished most of his body when he unfurled it. ‘Looks like I’ll be needing this…’

XXX

Padma was waiting for them at the foot of the hill leading to the painted castle which acted as a portal to El Sol y Ter.

There was an all-too brief embrace and warm greetings before everyone focused on the next step. Harry was going to venture in first – shielded by his invisibility cloak. Once he’d determined that Salvedra was alone – or at least unaccompanied by anyone worryingly powerful – he would find a way to venture outside (Draco had drawn a map of the house from memory and recalled a terrace) and fire off a rocket to trigger the Muggle attack. Harry would have three minutes max to get back to the room with the picture of the castle and summon Niko and Gunter.

Gunter would quickly make himself known to Salvedra while Niko and Harry attacked him with a combination of bedazzling hexes and mind-bending colour-magic. It was hoped that this would screw with Salvedra’s mind to the point where he failed to notice when Gunter was replaced by Niko... Niko would project an illusion of himself (as Gunter) through the painting, hopefully leading Salvedra - in hot pursuit - into the black box conjured by Draco and Hermione.

The moment Salvedra was in that box, Draco would think hard about Bill, Fleur and Kai waiting outside the old tin mine - thereby ‘driving’ themselves and the black box to the threshold of Gabby’s black rose painting. Everyone would focus on folding that box into the painting - trapping Salvedra - while Harry sent a Patronus to Bill warning him to drop the mine’s security barrier and cast a Fiendfyre to consume the painting and its ghastly contents for good. Fleur and Kai were there to add firepower, if necessary.

‘I’m terrified,’ Hermione said in low, breathless tones as Harry donned his invisibility cloak and snuck through the portal into the shadowy room with the long dining table at El Sol y Ter.

They could see Salvedra… he had his back to them and appeared to be bent over a large book at the dining table. Crucially, he was alone… but Hermione dreaded him noticing Harry. What if he could see through invisibility cloaks?
‘It'll be fine,’ Draco assured her, although he was chewing his lip nervously.

They waited for what felt like an age for Harry to return. The narrow, dark tunnel seemed to throb with an anxious heartbeat - the sound of their laboured breathing.

Salvedra slowly turned the pages of his book; contained, seemingly absorbed. Eerily quiet…

What had she expected? Hermione thought. A bloodthirsty warrior? An insane, ranting madman? The truth, of course, was no less dangerous and rather more insidious. Salvedra was primarily a scholar – the brains behind the operations, the inspiration. He devised the insane, supremacist theories that justified atrocities and recruited psychopaths to his ugly cause…

‘Too long; He's taking too long,’ Niko said between gritted teeth, jerking her back to their reality.

But no sooner had he said that then Salvedra’s tall, dark-clad, spidery figure jumped up from his chair and he sped rapidly out of the room.

Something… hopefully the Muggles attacking, had alerted him.

Moments later and Harry was waving frantically, having crept back to the picture and briefly peeled back his cloak.

‘We’re up,’ Gunter said gruffly, vaulting through the painting with Niko.

They immediately assumed their crow-forms and followed the brightly-coloured fwoofer feathers adorning Harry’s wand that momentarily poked out from under his invisibility cloak to guide them.

‘That’s our cue, beautiful,’ Draco murmured. He quickly clapped his arm around her shoulders and kissed her. She fell against him and basked for a brief moment in the tender warmth of his lips against his – and then registered the gasp of surprise behind them.

‘Oh!’ Padma cried. ‘I knew you were good friends, but…’

Hermione blushed heatedly. ‘We’re… we’re much more than that, Padma… We’re having a baby.’ She gave Padma a nervous, disjointed smile, uncomfortably aware of Padma’s fixed, pained grin…

‘Guess I’ve a lot to catch up on,’ and Padma's rictus grin melted into something much more genuine.

‘But not now,’ Draco warned. ‘Hermione… we need to make the box.’

This meant combining their magic. Was it something they could do at will? They focused hard and she allowed him to enter her mind… she could feel his whiteness oozing through her.

It was so familiar, so comforting – in spite of the wave of exhaustion rolling through their connection – and for a moment she almost forgot the tremendous peril of their situation.

But then she remembered… and a cold chill cascaded through her. She could sense Draco meshing their magic together with cool-headed efficiency and recalled how this task had fallen to her in Egypt at another point of crisis. She clung to him in her mind, craving his protection … Even though her eyes were closed she could sense they were shimmering, swiftly followed by an image of blackness filling her mind – the box…

*What do we do now?*

*We wait…* he replied.
‘Now!’ Padma cried… She was the lookout… They held hard, striving to keep the box in place…

Strain, terrible strain. Black, Black, the blackest black – not a chink of light, nothing but a forlorn blank of despair...

And DEADNESS….

But then there was a sense of motion, of spiraling violence…raging, screaming…

*Hold on*, Draco said in commanding tones, his voice resounding inside of her.

She was tired, bone-tired… her back, neck, now her head – aching.

A squirming wild sensation alighted in her mind… the box was dark and seething. More active, more intrusive than she’d hoped.

‘*Patronus!*’ Padma shrieked… ‘*Hermione! Send a Patronus!*’

But how could she? If she let go, the box would collapse… Why couldn’t Harry do it?

‘I can hold it, let go,’ Draco urged… So she did… struggling to feel anything but dank and gloomy, threatened by an evil that was desperate to surge out of the blackness to smother any light of life within her.

But she had memories, glorious memories… and a flash of joy burst through her… a streak of silvery light…

Except - there was a fillip of panic coursing through her connection with Draco.

‘*No-one there!*’ he yelled. ‘*There’s no-one fucking there!*’

‘*Where?*’

‘*Shell Cottage!*’

SHIT. WHY?

Hermione tried, too. Bill… Fleur… Kai…

Nothing.

*Jesus fuck.* Draco’s voice said in her head… *We’re screwed.*

A searing pain shot through her… the box suddenly evaporated and Draco grasped her arm and she was whirling in a frenzied blur of light and colour, horribly aware that a dark, twisting tornado was hot on their heels…

‘Where are we going?’ she screeched.

‘I don’t know…’ he cried, as they ran and ran before grinding to an abrupt halt.

Draco bent over to catch his breath and then eased himself upright, face screwed-up in pain. His shirt was ripped open and a bloodied gash streaked across his chest.

‘A mere scratch,’ he said in droll tones, his mouth clasped in a tight grimace.

‘We failed. He got out…’ Hermione said, tears flowing in frustration as she brushed her hand
across Draco’s chest and tried to focus hard on healing him... He winced but sighed in relief as his wound gradually closed over – before grabbing her hand - and they were flying again through painting after painting, a whorl of colours and shapes slipping past – faster, faster… Hermione could barely contain the urge to vomit that swiftly rose up inside of her.

‘Who did you think of?’ she yelped.

‘No one…’

‘But we need SOMEONE!’

ANYONE, even, Hermione thought. BILL! Where the bloody hell are you? Fleur?

‘Damn. He’s sticking with us,’ Draco said desperately, furtively glancing at the black cloud ballooning behind them, ever closer…

They needed respite to gather their thoughts, to craft a plan, an escape.

Hermione racked her brain – NARCISSA! And a wall of white, a glistening cocoon sprung up before them.

‘In here!’ Hermione hissed, shielding her eyes as she forced a door open.

Sparkling, pristine… whiter than Hermione could have ever envisaged.

Purity of place and moment… a void of its own. Not the black that she’d conjured with Draco, but similarly opaque she felt. Yes… a refuge of sorts.

‘Where are we?’ Draco asked.

‘I thought about your mother…we're in the in-between place.’

Draco quickly scanned their surroundings, eyes slitted against the fierce white glow that had enveloped them. ‘But there’s nothing here.’ He gave her an agonised look. ‘It’s just…light, Hermione... Salvedra could do anything here.’

But she didn’t feel he was right. ‘I don’t think it’s the kind of light which makes colour-magic work… it’s sort of... absent. Every colour and yet no colour… it reflects everything back…’

She struggled to put her thoughts into words, but it felt like another magic had made this space. Not Salvedra... His magic had a dark, seething taint – a corruption... No. This was raw colour-magic. The primordial stew of light, of colour. Rendered by something, someone whose natural habitat was not of their world, whose power was drawn from within this space…

Hermione hadn’t noticed that Draco had stepped away... He looked back at her, a distraught look on his face. His eyes were luminous, glowing...

‘Mother…’

He stood aside and Narcissa was lying on her back, arms crossed over her chest, eyes closed, face peaceful.

He knelt down and gently stroked her cheek.

‘Is she-?’ Hermione didn’t dare finish the sentence out loud.
Draco blinked rapidly. ‘Can’t tell. She’s not cold. More…neutral.’

Hermione reached out and touched Narcissa’s hand. It was cool alabaster-white. But soft. ‘It’s like she’s in-between, too. Neither one or the other.’

She slipped her arm around Draco’s waist and drew him close.

He rested his head against hers. ‘I don’t suppose we can take her with us.’

‘No. This place is controlled by Dolores.’

The moment she said this, a tugging motion jerked them both backwards and the whiteness fell away… a panoply of images and colours swept past them and they fell into a cloying, sticky brown – a wash of sepia. A tall shadow loomed over them… a shiny, green pillar rearing upwards. Hermione’s eyes were drawn by a lush, velvety profusion of glossy blackness … crumpled damask layers, silky petals…

Draco sprang up and raced towards a gossamer grey veil… scant light seeping through from the world beyond. Dark walls framed a moonlit sky.

Hermione joined him, squinting across a vast dark expanse… a small, grey figure was standing in the distance, a stark silhouette against the pale moonbeams bathing a field of grass.

‘But that isn’t Dolores,’ she said in a low, tense voice, clutching Draco’s arm tightly. ‘Doesn’t make sense.’

As she spoke, the pale grey figure moved away.

Hermione looked behind them… the heavy-headed black rose bobbed and swayed in an unseen breeze. ‘Oh my god… We’re at Shell Cottage.’

Draco shook his head in dismay, everything falling into place. ‘So where’s Bill?’

They gazed disconsolately at the empty lawn that stretched along the cliff-top.

‘Fuck! Is that smoke?’ Draco’s voice shook… A weaving, powder-grey skein wafted across the mouth of the mine before being swallowed into black.

Hermione’s heart accelerated and a sense of deep unease churned through her.

The smoke maybe explained why they hadn’t seen Bill… or Fleur and Kai. They needed to get out NOW… find out what had gone wrong… But they were stuck in a painting, trapped inside a mine…

A harsh, gravelly wheeze… Someone approaching at speed. Someone panicking. HARRY… frantically searching for something or somebody, before disappearing from view.

‘He needs to know we’re here!’ Hermione unleashed her Patronus, brimming with relief that the charm still worked in picture-world. A sleek, silvery tiger erupted through Bill’s wards, chasing Harry down.

Harry quickly returned and turned a Lumos in their direction as he peered at the painting.

‘Hold on!’ he bellowed. There’s a bit of a crisis going on here. I’ve been looking for you everywhere… Look, I’m gonna try and bulldoze Bill’s protective charms … It’s a sort of circuit breaker spell so you might get rattled around a bit.’
Harry closed his eyes tightly and mumbled a long incantation in a strange, guttural language that Hermione had never heard before. A neat Auror trick she fancied... It felt a bit like Dark Magic... But the next moment she’d been upended and was slammed flat against Draco as the picture shook – then stilled.

‘Right, let’s get out of here,’ Draco grunted, hoisting her through the painting.

She shivered, unexpectedly cold – a contrast to the bland tepidity of picture-world.

‘What the fuck’s happened?’ Draco demanded.

‘A fire broke out upstairs where the kids are sleeping!’ Harry explained. ‘Absolute fucking mayhem!’

Hermione looked at Shell Cottage in horror. It was cloaked in a pall of thick, black smoke - but a candle was alight in an upstairs window looking out onto the garden and bit by bit she could see that the structure itself was undamaged, that whatever had happened had been brought under control.

‘Is everyone okay?’ she asked Harry.

‘Just about.’

‘So that’s why no one was here!’ Draco exclaimed. ‘They were distracted by the fire.’

‘It almost got out of control! Lucky Niko and Gunter got back when they did! I’d got stuck in El Sol y Ter - ran into bloody Asusto! Bit of a nasty surprise.’ Harry was busy sealing the entrance to the mine as he spoke. ‘Won’t lie – if it hadn’t been for a fully-armoured commando unit storming into the building at that particular moment I wouldn’t have made it out alive!’

‘Why weren’t you wearing your invisibility cloak?’ Hermione shrilled.

‘The hood fell back and Asusto spotted me. I slammed him with an Expulso but couldn’t hang around to see if I’d taken him out or not because the Muggles kept chucking bloody grenades!’

'So how did you escape?' Draco asked.

'Used another picture - but I walked straight into a fucking VOLCANO!' Hermione’s eyes dropped to Harry's boots. The leather was curdled, melted-looking. ‘I then headed for Padma’s painting; she retreated the moment that cunt broke loose from the box,’ Harry continued, his fwoofer wand fizzing furiously. A blue glow soon encircled the mine’s open doorway. ‘Got myself into Folkvangr from there, then Apparated straight out…’

‘How the hell did you guys end up stuck in the mine?’ Harry eventually asked as they walked along the clifftop towards Shell Cottage.

‘I thought about Dolores… and for some reason we ended up HERE!’ Hermione said in a low whisper.

Harry stopped and spun around. His glasses were dazzling in the bright moonlight and the white tips of the waves crashing below swooped and sparkled behind him.

‘We saw someone in the distance… but it didn’t look like her, did it?’ Hermione said to Draco, who vehemently shook his head.
‘We have to find her,’ Harry said, urgently.

‘Except there’s no way she could have got in here, Harry,’ Hermione said emphatically, still keeping her voice at a low pitch as though fearing the shadows might overhear her… ‘It's not physically possible.’

‘It would mean something had happened to Bill,’ Draco agreed, ‘to breach the Fidelius Charm.’

‘Well. Bill’s just fine,’ Harry said irritably. ‘Pissed-off - but fine…’ He blew out his cheeks in exasperation. ‘What a monumental cock-up. We can’t ever try that trick on Salvedra again, you realise that, don’t you? And now he’ll be on full fucking alert and out for revenge.’

‘El Sol y Ter will be messed-up, though,’ Draco said, straining for optimism.

Hermione felt a squibble of nausea… sickness blended with fear. She desperately wanted to get back to Folkvangr. To be close to her children. But there was no chance of that. Not yet.

‘Let’s see what’s happened with this fire,’ Draco suggested as they approached the kitchen door, ‘but don't mention Dolores!’

Harry narrowed his eyes. ‘But like you said - she can't actually be here - because of the Fidelius Charm.’

‘Except logic dictates that she IS... or at least has been,’ Draco said peevishly. ‘But not as HER. As somebody or something else… We need to look like we don’t know that.’

Hermione groaned. He was right... Dolores had somehow breached the perimeter of Shell Cottage and started a fire to scupper their plan to catch Salvedra. This could only mean she was impersonating someone already here – or had been invited in by someone they trusted and then assumed a different form... the small, grey figure they'd spied from the tin mine…

A few lights glowed from the cottage’s windows. The whiffs of smoke that had wreathed the rooftop just a few minutes earlier had already dissipated. It was oddly silent – beyond the whoosh and roar of the waves below and a stray seagull’s squawk in the distance.

Hermione shuddered and hugged her arms close around her, fighting, yet again, a desire to be sick.

‘Hermione,’ Draco said tenderly, ‘I know you don’t want me to fuss, but you’ve had one helluva night. You need to rest. Why don't you head home? Harry and I can deal with this.’

‘I will. Soon… Let’s – let’s just see what’s happening here first.’

Draco held her gaze – sorrowful, frustrated – but he wasn’t going to fight her on this. He knew better than that.

XXX

‘I’m so, so sorry for screwing up! We had a fire,’ Bill cried, ushering them through the backdoor into the kitchen. He reeked of smoke and his face glistened with perspiration. ‘Vithu – bless him – he noticed the smoke first and alerted everybody… He must have an incredible sense of smell because he was downstairs and the fire started in the attic.’

Vithu was sat at the kitchen table with a blanket wrapped around him. He turned large, dark eyes towards Hermione and she remembered her desperation to release him from captivity… But Fleur drew his attention with a plate of biscuits.
‘How are the other children?’ Hermione asked.

‘Mostly back in bed.’ A plaintive wail drifted down the stairs and Bill rolled his eyes. ‘Tien…’

They moved into the sitting-room where Molly was spoon-feeding Elizaveta a potion on the couch, Gunter dancing attendance. Bill beckoned them through to the living-room across the hall.

There were three makeshift beds on the floor and a scrunched-up blanket on the sofa.

‘We can talk in here,’ Bill sighed. ‘Alfred and Louis are upstairs helping out… and you’ve just seen Vithu.’ He sat on the sofa looking pale and exhausted and unthinkingly hugged the blanket against his chest. It occurred to Hermione that this was where Bill was sleeping, too.

‘I’ve no idea how long the attic was burning - I’ll check it out tomorrow – but once it had scorched through the ceiling in the twin bedroom the curtains quickly caught alight… it - it got a bit manic in there. Tuyen’s coping with four kids and it’s not the biggest space…’ Bill informed them. ‘The truth is, one minute more and the entire room would have been engulfed… We’d have lost them all.’ He looked sad and wretched as he spoke, as though he’d failed them.

‘We’ll have Hakim and Farida at Folkvangr,’ Draco said to Hermione’s surprise. It seemed a strange thing to suddenly announce.

‘We will?’ she spluttered.

‘You’ve too many…’ Draco said to Bill.

‘Farida’s very fond of Thelonious,’ Fleur stated, entering the room with Vithu.

‘And I made a promise to Hakim’s father,’ Draco added. Hugo was fond of Hakim, Hermione thought. They could definitely squeeze him in…

‘ME!’ Vithu declared. He pointed to his chest and then at Draco and Hermione.

Hermione was stumped. ‘Yes. You, too.’ Vithu kept staring at her… she could sense he wanted to say something else but didn’t know how or didn’t feel safe doing so.

She looked at Fleur and Bill, wondering… but she could sense Bill’s burgundy colour… And presumably they were both at the mine when the fire broke out - so they couldn't have ignited it, unless it had been quietly smouldering for some time. But it sounded like the inferno had been rapid, dramatic.

Vithu slumped onto the cushions on the floor and gazed up at them, wide-eyed, wakeful.

‘Who alerted you to the fire?’ Harry asked Bill.

‘Mum. Vithu ran to her and pointed upstairs. And then there was screaming.’

‘And Kai thought she saw someone on the roof! But I think her nerves got the better of her,’ Fleur said, shaking her head in disbelief.

‘Have you been onto the roof to check?’ Harry asked hastily.

‘There’s no way someone got in here, Harry! It’s impossible,’ Bill scoffed, seeing where Harry’s line of enquiry was headed.

Harry gave Bill a hard look. ‘You’re forgetting we had Alaydaa pitched up at the gates not so long
'And they couldn’t cross the perimeter!’ Bill replied, raising his voice. ‘Admittedly, though, this fire was bloody terrible timing... we had no choice but to quit the mine and pitch in to help!’

‘Where’s Kai now?’ Hermione asked.

‘In the study with Tansy… I’ll get her if you want,’ Fleur said, heading out.

Hermione felt a peculiar prickling at the back of her neck. She turned around but the curtains were drawn, shutting out the garden. Even so… Vithu looked beyond her towards the garden too, and then redirected his gaze back to her face. Yes… he definitely had a suspicion, but maybe he didn’t know how to say it in English?

‘Is anyone outside?’ she asked abruptly.

‘Niko’s checking the perimeter,’ Bill said.

Harry and Draco exchanged looks. ‘We’ll give him a hand,’ Draco said, and they left. Hermione instantly missed them and wished that Vithu would stop staring; she could feel his dark eyes boring into her.

‘You wanted to see me?’ Kai said, hastening into the room, followed by Tansy.

Kai was pale-faced and frightened, almost bowing to Hermione.

‘You thought there was someone on the roof. Can you describe what you saw?’

Kai eased herself into an armchair and clasped her small, bony hands together until her knuckles turned white. Tansy stood behind the armchair, arms tightly folded.

‘It was only a glimpse,’ Kai said haltingly. ‘I – I probably imagined it.’

‘Possibly,’ Hermione said in cool tones, ‘but not necessarily.’

‘It was a small, grey thing… nothing more,’ Kai chirruped. ‘I wondered if it was an animal, actually.’

‘And you only saw this thing once you were at the mine?’ Hermione asked in kindly tones.

Kai nodded. ‘Everything sorta happened super-fast… we were waiting to hear from you guys and I was a wee bit churned-up I guess, an’ I thought of making a run for the dunny… and in that moment I just… looked up.’

‘And this figure or creature… might it have been a bird?’

‘You said it was a person,’ Tansy prompted Kai in firm tones.

‘Yeah… It was - human-shaped.’ Kai didn’t like saying this out loud. The consequences were too frightening.

‘A woman?’ Hermione asked, thinking of the small, grey figure she’d seen on the clifftop... The figure she now assumed was Dolores - in some sort of disguise or wearing somebody else's body.

‘Probably... could have been a kid, I s'pose... It was dark and then the smoke came.’
But the children had been in bed, supervised. Except Vithu - who'd gone straight to Molly, the closest responsible adult, as soon as he worked out something was wrong.

Molly herself was now standing at the door, curious at the raised voices.

Hermione momentarily closed her eyes, digesting all she'd heard.

'I'm just trying to get my head around the geography of the situation... where everyone was when the fire started,' she said, trying to sound calm and measured.

'Well, there was three of us at the mine,' Fleur said, gesturing to herself, Bill and Kai, 'the boys were asleep in here and Tuyen was upstairs. Arlene was with the little ones and already in bed long before we headed out... She was completely out of the loop'-

‘Actually,’ Hermione said cutting in here - this was potentially critical - 'Besides you, Bill and Kai, did anyone else know what we planned to do to Salvedra tonight? It was a very last-minute call.'

Fleur pondered this. 'Tuyen was already in bed as well, thinking about it... And Gabrielle was a bit upset tonight. Kept herself to herself…' Her voice trailed off.

Hermione looked directly at Molly. ‘And you were with Elizaveta.’

Molly nodded. ‘Poor lass... I’ve patched up her injuries as best I can and she shouldn’t lose her arm, thank Merlin… but we were in the sitting-room. The moment I knew there was a fire I used a Sonorous to warn Bill.’

‘So, I’m guessing you knew exactly WHY Bill, Fleur and Kai were at the mine?’

‘Of course!’ Molly bristled. 'To catch this Salvedra creep! ... Shame it got ruined.'

Hermione vaguely discerned the shape of something dim, shadowy at the back of her mind. ‘Who else knew?’ she demanded.

‘Hermione? What are you thinking?’ Fleur asked, looking perplexed and a little scared.

‘Well, it’s obvious the fire was a deliberate distraction to stop us from moving Salvedra into Gabby’s painting,’ Hermione breathed.

She sensed Bill's colour exploding beside her... 'Are you seriously suggesting one of us snuck up to the attic and started a fire that could have killed us all? Because it sounds like you are!'

'Why would anyone DO that?' Molly remonstrated looking from person to person with unalloyed desperation. 'We all want this Salvedra finished off. Nasty, wicked piece of work! None of us would deliberately sabotage that, Hermione - and like you said, it was a last-minute decision! It’s why Fleur had to rush to The Burrow to get me!'

‘Exactly!’ Bill affirmed. 'There was no time for some dastardly masterplan! And the few of us clued-in on tonight’s operation were rather busy getting on with it!'

This was true, Hermione reflected... everyone was accounted for or didn't even know what was happening. Except... ‘Where were YOU when all this happened, Tansy?’

‘Wh–when?’ Tansy stammered, caught off-guard. She could barely meet Hermione’s gaze.

‘When the fire broke out?’
'In the study.'

'Alone?'

'I was tired…' Tansy’s eye suddenly swam with tears. ‘No. That’s not true… I was petrified. All this talk of luring a dark wizard to Shell Cottage?’ She sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. ‘I’ve only just got better from – from what happened… with the pigman.’

Yes, she was truly terrified, Hermione thought. Traumatised, even. She gave Tansy a sympathetic smile. ‘It’s okay. I’m not accusing you.’

Although she did fit the physical description of the small, grey woman - and she clearly KNEW about the plan to capture Salvedra and she'd also been alone.

Hermione fixed her with an intense stare, gently probing her from afar with her purple... it was staggering, she thought, how she didn't even need to touch someone anymore to do that...

No. There was no one skulking inside Tansy. Not now, at least. Which meant...

‘Is there something else you’re not telling us?’ Molly asked, her deep brown eyes roving Hermione’s face, needle-sharp.

‘No…’ Hermione said, jumping up from the sofa. No point scaring everyone. She caught Vithu's eye and he nodded. He knew. Bright lad. He'd worked it out...

‘I’ll go and help the others.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ Bill said.

‘No, no… I’m fine,’ she smiled, weaving her way past Molly, aware she was watching her as she headed out the door into the garden.

DOLORES… she thought. Where are you now? How did you KNOW that we were going after Salvedra tonight?

She strode towards the perimeter fence bordering the purple field of flowers, suddenly wishing she’d allowed Bill to accompany her after all, but she could hear the burble of male voices coming out of the darkness from the far end of the garden. Draco was within shouting distance.

She approached the flower-laden glasshouse she’d created for Melissa. So quiet. Peaceful. And very dark inside. Almost impenetrable.

She stood at the entrance… There was nobody there. But she didn't expect there to be...

Hermione entered and sat down on the small hardback chair that Fleur liked to sit on when she drank her morning tea with Melissa. She was overwhelmed by the smell of flowers – wisteria, roses, jasmine… sickly, cloying. She gulped back her nausea… now really wasn’t the time.

She closed her eyes, summoning her inner strength.

It was blindingly obvious when she thought about it. Dolores didn’t need to PHYSICALLY enter Shell Cottage at all, not when she could sneak inside the picture-world that Hermione herself had constructed inside Melissa’s mind.

‘Hermione…’ came a voice from the doorway.
‘You’re awake,’ Hermione said, snapping her eyes open.

Melissa’s neat little figure was cast in shadow… outlined by the soft white glow of moonlight.

‘She will be,’ Melissa said. Except it wasn’t Melissa, of course – even though it was Melissa’s voice. ‘I won’t harm her.’

‘I hope not. She’s innocent in all of this,’ Hermione said, her voice quavering in spite of herself. She wanted to be strong. Formidable… Fearless.

Melissa stepped into her floral shelter and now Hermione could feel the truth of it all. The dark grey she associated with Dolores. It was all-encompassing.

‘And before you get any ideas,’ Hermione said, lifting her chin defiantly, ‘I won’t let you take me… or anyone else for that matter!’

Melissa’s eyes were pitch-black and larger than usual - unnaturally so.

‘I’ve no intention of taking you today, Hermione,’ Dolores countered. ‘But I had to protect Grandmaster. I’m bound to do so, you see. And it appears I succeeded.’

Hermione nodded slowly. ‘Yes, you won… but how did you know what we planned to do? I presume you have a spy here?’ She hated even thinking this because it likely meant someone she trusted... they’d have to be careful from now on.

’If I did, why would I tell you?’ Dolores gave a nasty, barking laugh… it was shockingly removed from Melissa’s fluting, girlish giggle.

‘Well, it’d make my life a whole lot easier,’ Hermione retorted, flippantly. She pinched the top of her nose, suddenly dizzy with weariness.

Dolores smirked. ‘I understand your frustration, Hermione. Truly, I do. But I have my orders. And my main purpose, at all times, is to please the master I’m sworn to serve. And to keep him safe.’

Her face twitched and for a moment Hermione sensed some deeper dissatisfaction within Dolores... Was it with her Grandmaster? The terms of her service? Or had she once failed him and flinched at the memory?

‘How long have you served Salvedra?’ Hermione asked, genuinely curious. Dolores looked to be in her thirties - but there was something ancient and timeless about her, too.

A dark shadow briefly fell across her face. ‘I’ve been The Keeper for many, many years... it’s my solemn duty.’

‘So you could release Narcissa Malfoy!’

Dolores shook her head and laughed. ‘Only if the Grandmaster instructs me to do so... Ah. I see you fail to comprehend my position, Hermione! But then you've always been free, I guess. You've never known the considerable satisfaction one derives from serving well. It is a great honour.’

‘HONOUR?’ Hermione sneered. ‘Salvedra wants to destroy those I love and much, much more. He poses a threat to mankind! How can it be honourable to serve such a man?’ Tears flooded her eyes… ‘It’s not honourable at all. It’s disgraceful, pathetic. Speaking witch-to-witch, I think you’re capable of much more than that, Dolores.’

‘You misunderstand me,’ Dolores said, and her voice had a new softness to it. ‘His grandiose
schemes are of little interest to me, although it's not for me to pass judgement. That is not my role. I am beholden to the man, not his mission.' She paused a moment as though wondering if she should continue... 'But I have helped you, too. In small ways that you've barely noticed I believe. Tiny clues, small shoots that I knew would flourish and bloom inside your mind... leading you to uncover greater truths... And I can see when someone thinks they're hiding from me, Hermione. I can lead them to knowledge.'

Hermione gawped at her, open-mouthed. Was she telling the truth? Had Dolores helped her and she never actually noticed?

She instantly recalled Dolores telling her and Draco in Argentina that her mother-in-law had died of Gimlott’s... that Gimlott’s sufferers turned BLUE, like Dark Flux victims... Except there never was a mother-in-law... *That* had been a fabrication... And yet that random piece of information had sown a seed in her mind, guiding her towards the unconscionable truth of it all...The truth behind Dark Flux and how it was made.

And then there was the time Hermione had followed her through the paintings to El Sol y Ter and witnessed Sylvestra's request to have Katya released from her tower. But here was Dolores effectively telling her that she'd seen through Hermione's Disillusionment Charm that night.

‘You are as an open book to me, Hermione... I see it all. The secrets of your heart...' Dolores continued, speaking in honeyed tones. She’d advanced without Hermione noticing and her face was clearly visible to Hermione now beneath the softer, sweeter contours of Melissa’s visage. 'Ever since we met I have also seen the paths – for there is always more than one – that stretch before you... And I wish to reassure you, to reiterate that it is not my wish to inflict harm on you unnecessarily. But... I must still warn you, querida... Grandmaster’s bidding is foremost and it always will be. And protecting him will always come first. If he demands something of me I will ALWAYS obey.'

Hermione’s ears pricked up. Draco’s voice coming closer... and Harry, too.

Dolores cocked her head to listen. ‘Time for me to go... Rest assured, the protections on this place remain. They are untouched. Your friend here was my way in... she will be unhurt and remember nothing of this.’

'But you could use her to come again!' 'No. That won't be possible,' Dolores said. 'Unless I'm directly ordered to do so, I have no desire to harm the occupants of this house, especially the children. They are of no consequence to me...’ She gave Hermione a thin smile and extended her hand in farewell – but Hermione instinctively recoiled; fiery, defensive. She could feel her magic, silvery-white, ghosting across her skin, her hairs standing on end.

Dolores laughed. ‘You defend your young like a tigress!’

And the light dimmed in her eyes and her face slackened and Melissa’s body tumbled to the ground; boneless, jellied.

‘Hermione?’ Draco’s voice echoed from the doorway. His shadow blocked the light so he didn’t immediately understand why she’d fallen to her knees and was desperately hauling Melissa into an upright position.

But then he was at her side, helping her lift Melissa’s lifeless body onto the bed.
'She said she wouldn’t hurt her,’ Hermione wept, furious at Dolores’s betrayal, presuming the worst.

But as she spoke, Melissa’s eyes fluttered open. She gazed at Hermione and Draco, a combination of fear and relief on her face. ‘What happened?’ she asked. ‘Where am I?’

‘Shell Cottage,’ Hermione said, cradling her in her arms. ‘You’re fine. Everything’s fine.’

Melissa’s chest was heaving, breathing in lungfuls of air. ‘I’m alive? This is real?’

‘Of course it is!’ Hermione smiled, squeezing her hand.

‘What’s going on?’ Fleur asked from the doorway. She was flanked by Harry and Niko. ‘Oh!’ she yelped, when she saw Melissa staring back at her. ‘You’re back!’

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Finally, FINALLY, Hermione was in her own bed at Folkvangr with Draco. She'd rarely felt this tired but had told Draco everything that Dolores had said.

‘This means we have a traitor… Someone warned Dolores.’

'Yes. It looks that way,' Draco sighed. But then he lapsed into a long silence.

'What are you thinking?'

'Wondering who we can trust... Except, I honestly don't think anyone at Shell Cottage deliberately betrayed our plan, Hermione. There wasn't time.'

'No...'

'And if they did, was Salvedra expecting us?'

'Well, Asusto showed up!'

'Yes. But Josep didn't.' He turned to look at her. 'I don't think Salvedra knew a thing. I think only Dolores did - and that's crucial. She acted quickly to save her master. And she knew the plan.'

'But how?' Hermione was mystified.

'Well, just think through who knew what was happening tonight...'

'We only decided to act once Niko turned up,' Hermione pointed out. 'Aside from the five of us who went into the picture - and Padma, of course - Henrik, Parvati, Thelonious and Oleg were in the room - and I'm sorry, Draco, but I don't think any of them are traitors. Or under an Imperious Curse.'

'I agree with you. And even if they were, I doubt they'd have had enough time to warn Dolores.'

'How about the Muggles?' Hermione suggested.

Draco considered this. 'Alenka seems a decent sort... she knew the plan for sure. But not the full extent of it. It had to be someone who knew about the painting - and they had to know that Bill, Fleur and Kai were critical to destroying it. They were the weak link I'm afraid.'

Hermione sighed into her pillow. She was exhausted even thinking about this. 'Maybe Dolores IS a
seer after all?’ she groaned. ‘Maybe she saw it in her fucking crystal ball?’

'You're forgetting somewhere, Hermione.' Draco's eyes glowed as he spoke. 'The Burrow.'

'No, no, no... Molly's the last person who'd betray us. Arthur, too!'

'But they're not alone there, are they?' He held Hermione's gaze and her stomach turned over.

'You're thinking Katya,' she said, her voice dropping to a whisper.

'Dolores was her Keeper and... it looks like Katya's communicating with somebody through her drawings. Dolores is the most likely candidate.'

Hermione felt unaccountably scared... she took a deep, shuddering breath. 'I doubt the plan was discussed right in front of her.'

'Fleur floo-ed to The Burrow to fetch Molly... she might have let something slip. Not intentionally! But enough.'

'But she certainly wouldn't have said something in front of KATYA! Nobody trusts her,' Hermione reasoned.

'Doesn't mean she didn't overhear something.' Draco looked pained. 'We need to look at her drawing-pad again, Hermione... see if there's any new pictures we should be worrying about...'

Hermione sighed. 'Oh lordy. I hate Molly and Arthur being there with her.'

'I doubt she'll hurt them. If she IS a spy for Dolores... she won't do anything rash that gets her chucked out.'

'Not yet,' Hermione muttered. 'But we need to warn Molly and Arthur, all the same. And we need to work out what we do next to take out Salvedra. Harry's right. He'll be on guard now.'

'We won't need to seek him out,' Draco said in doleful tones. 'He'll seek us out instead... He has a vengeful spirit. I'd even say it's his defining characteristic.'

'Even so... we should talk about this tomorrow with everybody. Hold a meeting.'

'For sure... although... I need to go to Malfoy Manor, actually. Check it over one last time.' He pulled her close. 'I - I was rather hoping you'd come with me.'

'But of course I will,' she smiled.

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'Surreal…' Hermione murmured as they stepped through the heavy oak doors of Malfoy Manor and saw it stripped of every item of furniture, its rooms plain and bare.

Strangely, it seemed grander and more imposing, its vast, empty spaces transected by dark, angular shadows skewered by beams of light - alive with dancing, silvery dust-motes - piercing through drawn curtains and closed shutters.

‘At least Ephraim didn't lie about the wards,’ Draco said, a subdued, melancholic expression on his face. His eyes landed on her and she could feel he needed her. She slipped her hand into his and his fingers curled around hers, soft and warm, as he tugged her from one room to the next. They ventured upstairs… downstairs… down steep steps to the locked-up cellars, along winding
corridors to the kitchens, up spiral staircases to attics, traversing wide carpeted landings to grand master suites with wood-panelled walls and yawning expanses of window overlooking the oxbow lake, Narcissa’s pretty rose garden and her Plangentine grove, across sweeping lawns to Lucius Malfoy’s glittering mausoleum.

‘We’ll get her back,’ Hermione breathed as they watched a pair of albino peacocks strutting along the path that ran along one side of the lake.

‘We'll need Salvedra dead first…’

He was right. The spell that held Narcissa in limbo literally had to be broken... and it would require Salvedra's death.

‘When all of this is over, I want to find out more about my grandfather’s family,’ Draco said with the decided air of somebody who’d already put some thought to this. ‘If he was a Muggle-born, that means I have Muggle relations.’ He gave her a peculiar, crooked smile. To her astonishment, he was actually excited about this! She’d never have thought that possible… once upon a time.

‘Presumably Voltimand was local.’

‘Perhaps. The stables here once warranted a riding instructor,’ Draco said, as they turned away from the window and headed down the stairs to the entrance hall. ‘Titian and Caravaggio were spoilt for space.’

‘Who?’

‘Scorpius’s ponies… sweet wee things. Titian’s a Shetland, Caravaggio’s a Haflinger – very handsome but a bit of a brute, actually.’

‘Where are they now?’

Draco’s face darkened. ‘Sylvestra gave them to a riding school. Shame… the kids would love them. I reckon Rose would have the measure of Caravaggio in no time!’

‘I don’t think ponies in the garden at Folkvangr would work somehow,’ Hermione smiled, although she was suddenly dying to see Scorpius reconciled with them.

‘We won’t be there forever.’

‘So, presuming Voltimand was from around here, it’s possible you have Muggle family in Folborough?’ Hermione said, resuming their former conversation.

‘I’m not so sure. My grandparents didn't spend too much time at Malfoy Manor, actually. They spent more time in France… Although Voltimand was English.’

‘If he was a valued servant, he might have travelled with them?’ Hermione suggested.

‘He was clearly very valued by my grandmother…’

‘To think, Draco, just six months ago, you’d have been horrified by that,’ Hermione said tartly.

Draco curled his lip nonchalantly. ‘Well, Abraxas was a bit of a cunt … so I’m quite glad not to be carrying his genes forward to future generations.’

They were now at the bottom of the stairs and he span her around, guiding her into the large drawing-room on their left. He pulled her close and his hand fell to her stomach. She caught her
breath, gazing at the soft gleam in his eyes.

‘Our baby, Hermione, it isn’t a Malfoy at all… I don’t even know what Voltimand’s surname was, actually!’

‘Maybe we just call it MALFOP and have done with it?’ she laughed, recalling Rose’s proposal when she’d learned that Scorpius was a dreaded Malfoy!

He kept her close, wrapping his arms around her, and she felt his stomach moving in and out against her, his chest filling with air as he breathed deeply. ‘I fucking love you,’ he said, his eyes not leaving her face.

She glanced around the room they were standing in. It seemed darker, more shadowy than the others; shutters firmly closed against the summer sun. It was much smaller than the last time she’d been here – and for a moment she recalled the feverish buoyancy she’d felt dancing with Draco in a roomful of enemies… her palpable excitement when he touched her, when he twirled her into his arms.

They were always headed here, to this moment in time – she could see that now. To a sense of belonging.

But as she reflected on this and his eyes followed hers around the room, a growing darkness descended on them, casting back further to a different time in their lives when they were familiar strangers. Implacable enemies. When this same man whose child she was carrying, who she loved to the point of madness, had watched as his aunt tortured her and did nothing…

‘We still need to talk about it,’ he said.

‘You’ve said sorry…’

‘Yes. For everything.’ He dipped his head and stared at her neck, her mouth, her hair and she could feel his heart clattering – suddenly nervous. ‘But… it’ll never be enough.’

‘It is for me…’ she whispered.

‘I worry – worry that I don’t deserve you.’ His hand moved again to her stomach and he tenderly stroked her.

‘I’m no great catch,’ she said with a flippant laugh, teasing him…

‘You fucking are,’ he said gruffly, pulling her tight against him. She could feel his arousal and wondered if making love to Draco in this room would vanquish the past forever… but then he surprised her, grabbing her hand and pulling her away from the shadows, up, up, beyond the bedrooms, even past the attics…

They squeezed along a narrow passageway, ducking to pass through a small door at the end, illuminated by a skylight window. ‘I used to come here all the time as a kid,’ he said gleefully, ‘no one ever knew! Although that elf you and Harry were friends with – Dobby – he once found me up here! I was terrified he’d tell my parents but he never did…’

_Dobby_, Hermione thought with a sigh… so many shared connections, connections she never heeded as they were simply woven into the fabric of their lives.

Draco led her up a rickety metal staircase and they stepped outside onto a sea of grey slates – a flat expanse buttressed by tall, steepled towers. She looked up at the clear, cerulean blue sky and
gasped. It seemed so close! She was acutely aware of the vertiginous drops that weren’t too far beyond this tiled space where she was standing, holding Draco’s hand – but she was also in awe at the beauty of the golden glow of sunshine bleeding into the blue overhead and the soft coos of white turtle-doves nesting under slatted awnings up the length of the towers.

‘I’d sit up here for hours on end,’ Draco confided. He led her towards the front-facing edge of one of the towers where a long stone jutted from the base – an accidental bench. They were closer now to the edge - and a perilous, precipitous fall. She was glad the wind was warm and calm.

She gazed around – the gardens unfolded before them and the view from here encompassed far more than the Malfoy estate; over the walls, too. The busy life of Folborough flowed past the manor – cars and people, a cyclist – and the quaint High Street trailed up a hill in the opposite direction.

To her surprise, the thatched cottages and Victorian terraces that bordered the High Street were less deep than she expected. A modern road curved around the back of the old part of town; a boundary between the ancient heart and a wedge of red-brick houses and pebble-dashed semis and a grey-clad swathe of council houses abutting a small school – a collection of portakabins for the most part – and a stretch of playing fields. Even from this height and distance Hermione could make out a bunch of children playing football – she even fancied she could hear the sound of a whistle blowing on the wind.

Draco was watching the game and for a brief moment she spotted a trace of wistful longing on his face and she suspected he’d felt that same emotion when he was a child – and probably hated himself – and them – for feeling that way. A lonely, confused boy…

‘Did you want to play football too?’

He shrugged. ‘I was too busy thinking how pathetic it was that they didn’t have broomsticks…’ He shook his head. ‘Tragic, eh?’

‘I bet you wanted to play really.’

He looked at her, his eyes gleaming silver in the sunlight. ‘Of course I did… But the last person I was going to admit that to was myself.’

He felt for her hands and held them in her own. ‘I brought you here for a reason today.’

Her heart instinctively sped up and she didn’t know why.

‘Thing is… it feels like everything’s a bit shit,’ he said, ‘like we're losing…’ he grimaced. ‘But I really don’t want you to feel like that. I want you to know that there’s hope… MORE than hope, actually. Because we won’t lose, Hermione. We’re gonna win. I know we will. Because we’ve fucked up their plans, we’ve destroyed their homes and Ephraim’s in jail – a victory achieved almost entirely by you I should add.’

‘How so?’

‘Because you were strong and good and never cow-towed to him… and you persuaded him to surrender. You made him want to be a better man… and he couldn’t live with what he’d become… not at all, actually.’

He gazed at her with a peculiar intensity. ‘I know that’s the truth,’ he continued, ‘because it’s the same for me – and it’s why, when time has passed, when we’ve resolved everything with Ron and Katya… I want you to be my wife.’
Hermione beamed indulgently. ‘I’ve no doubt I will be - one day…’

‘Yes,’ he said earnestly, ‘but… I’m asking you formally, Hermione… When we’re free, that very moment – will you marry me?’

Her eyes were suddenly - unexpectedly - awash with tears…

‘But it might be years,’ she smiled. She patted her belly. ‘He or she will probably be in school by then!’

‘And might even have a brother or sister, too,’ he grinned. Hermione thought of Gabby describing them as ‘fecund’ – yes, she was right. There’d be more...

‘We’ll have a school-full of children if we’re not careful!’ she said, shaking her head fondly, feeling like her face might ache with smiling.

A curious expression burst onto Draco’s face. ‘That’s not a bad thought, actually…’

‘A school?’ Yes… she could see that. ‘Where?’

‘Not here.’

‘Well, it obviously can’t be Malfoy Manor, Draco! It belongs to the Ministry or this American bank Ephraim flogged it to!’

‘I know,’ he said ruefully. ‘But that’s fine, because I’d rather we were somewhere new and peaceful. Somewhere beautiful that we could grow to love…’

She nodded enthusiastically.

‘A crumbling, old Manoir, perhaps? Somewhere I could patch up – because I doubt we could afford something spangly and new anymore–’ he continued. He looked towards Folborough. ‘Somewhere with enough land for playing fields.’

‘But where would we get the teachers from?’

‘Well, YOU for starters. You’d be the most amazing teacher imaginable.’

‘You’re not exactly stupid yourself,’ she laughed. ‘And who would I be teaching?’

‘Anyone who wanted to know about magic?’ He gave her a sly, secretive smile. ‘Not strictly legal that, but… there could be an oath of allegiance or something!’

‘You mean MUGGLES?’

‘Only those who have connections… knowledge…’

‘Like Alfred.’

He nodded. ‘Like Alfred.’

‘And any other creature, too… Something truly... *ecumenical*.’

Draco grinned. ‘I haven’t a fucking clue what that means you know!’

‘Oh! It’s like a religious thing… bringing together all churches.’
'Sounds good.’ He paused. ‘Because we also have a bunch of refugees who need to be looked after… in the end they’ll deserve a choice. To go back to where they came from or have a home with us.’

They locked eyes and a bubbling sense of excitement flowed between them.

‘YES,’ she declared.

‘You think it’s a good idea?’

‘I meant YES – I want to marry you. I don’t mind if we don’t, if we are as we are… it makes no difference to how we feel… but that very moment you mentioned… the moment we’re free, I want to be your wife, Draco, for us to be together for the rest of our lives.’

It was Draco’s turn now – his eyes glistened with tears and his hands gently stroked hers, soft, insistent… overcome with emotion …

‘That’s – that’s wonderful,’ he said eventually in a low, husky voice.

He looked up at her and his eyes twinkled. ‘There’s one room I haven’t shown you yet,’ he said with an impish smile.

‘And what’s that?’

He curled his arms around her waist and bent his lips to her ear and his voice tickled. ‘My old bedroom…’

She twisted her arms around his neck and grinned. ‘But it’ll be empty.’

‘Not with us in it…’ His mouth captured hers and they kissed with deep, fervent passion, the sun warm on their heads and a gentle breeze caressing their cheeks.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT” by WIRE

“THE ARCHITECT” by JANE WEAVER

“WHERE THE TREES ARE ON FIRE” by THESE NEW PURITANS

“SWEET DREAMS” by THE EURYTHMICS

“BORN SLIPPY” by UNDERWORLD

“LIVE FOREVER” by OASIS

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.

Author’s Note:

With real life behaving like the worst and most frightening kind of fiction lately there’s been moments this past fortnight when I’ve wondered if I should actually finish this story. It suddenly feels very small and silly… but then I thought that applies to most things I once thought were important – and that just because life is suddenly unavoidably huge and surreal, that shouldn’t
diminish the things we’ve cared about or enjoyed doing for their own sake. In fact, holding onto the things we love doing, the things we hope to soon do again, the things that make us happy – and hopefully others happy, too - are more important than ever before.

So, yes, this is definitely getting finished. There’s three chapters to go, including the Epilogue. It’s only fair to say that there are ‘challenging’ moments in the next couple of chapters when it looks like all might be lost – but… without wanting to spoil, in the immortal, wise words of Luna Lovegood: "I’ll just go down and have some pudding and wait for it all to turn up ... It always does in the end."

I hope everyone stays safe and well. I’ll shut up now until I say goodbye at the end of the story. X
Rich Gifts Wax Poor

Chapter Summary

Murders most foul...

63. Rich Gifts Wax Poor

‘Is that a new wand, Ron?’ Hermione asked.

Ron was swishing a slender, delicately etched wand with what he thought were graceful sweeping movements – narrowly missing little Farida’s face as she chased Magda through the living-room at Folkvangr.

‘It is now,’ he said proudly and grinned at Bill who’d made it for him.

‘What happened to your old one?’ Hermione asked, hands on hips – already knowing the answer…

‘Dunno… Been gone a few days and then Bill showed me THIS beauty!’ He swirled the wand round and round in the air, trailing delicate yellow sparks. ‘Hazel and dragon heart-string.’

‘Charlie’s lined me up with a supply,’ Bill said with a smug smile. ‘Useful having a brother in the dragon trade.’

Hermione was impressed. ‘So is this evolving from a hobby into something larger?’

‘Well… Doesn’t look like I’ll be back at Gringott’s anytime soon. And Ollivander’s isn’t what it used to be since Garrick died…’

Hermione privately disagreed. The wand she’d bought from his nephew, Aloysius, had been a revelation.

‘I’m rather steeped in wandlore myself and have crafted a few wands of my own for fun,’ Thelonious said, turning Ron’s new wand over in his hand and studying it with a practiced eye. Bill looked a little uneasy at Thelonious inspecting his handiwork. ‘This is very fine…’ Bill visibly relaxed. ‘Though - using dragon heart-string with HAZEL is a somewhat unusual choice.’

‘It’s a local wood,’ Bill stressed. ‘I was being… ecological.’

Thelonious nodded sagely. ‘Yes, I also noticed a lot of ash and applewood when I was staying at yours. Dogwood, too…’ He glanced at Ron who was rounding up the children to take to Wisteria Cottage – the day was warm enough for a paddling pool… ‘I wonder if dogwood and dragon heart-string might have suited Ron a tiny bit more, actually… and there’s a fine oak tree halfway to Tinworth. I could see that working as well. Bit sturdier. Less jolly. But very effective.’

Bill looked like he’d swallowed a bug but nodded in reluctant agreement.

Ginny strolled in from the garden holding Lily’s hand. Lily’s eyes were streaming and she had a tissue clasped to her nose. ‘Poor thing. Got herself a summer cold,’ Ginny sighed. ‘Looks like she’ll miss out on The Rattenfanger.’
‘The play in the park!’ Hermione exclaimed. Had that already come around? This past week had been devoted to rest, recovery… but with everything unresolved, it had been far from relaxing. At least that was how SHE felt… Draco, too. And Harry and Troy and remained as alert as ever. Niko and Gunter were in picture-world right now… searching for Salvedra.

‘The big kids want to see The Rattenfanger,’ Ginny asserted, ‘except for mine as it turns out. Albus and James have gone fishing with Ted.’

‘That’s nice,’ Hermione smiled, quietly stewing. She had no desire to have Rose, Scorpius, Hugo and Vithu gallivanting around a large assembly – lots of strangers, too many unknowns. Had Draco already given his consent?

Draco was in the kitchen chatting to Ziff and Henrik. For the first time in a couple of days his face was warm and alive. It helped that Ziff always made him laugh.

‘Draco tells me there’s a Chitty Chitty Bang Bang car at The Burrow!’ Ziff said. He manically stroked his goatee beard – something he often did when over-excited.

‘No,’ Draco grinned. ‘It’s vintage but not antique!’

‘Do you think Arthur would mind if I had a look at it?’ Ziff asked, eyes agog.

‘I suspect he’d be only too happy to show it off!’ Draco said. ‘We’ll pop over this morning if you like.’

Ziff beamed and Hermione couldn’t help but wonder if his joy was partly inspired by the knowledge that Tuyen was at The Burrow today… enjoying an impromptu ‘potions class’ from Molly with Kai and Ernie. Fleur was also due to join them once she’d dropped Louis off at Wisteria Cottage… Alfred, Hermione was relieved to learn, had gone to Borehamwood with Oleg. Gwen was missing them dreadfully. Hermione hadn’t heard from Gwen herself but she hoped this was a good sign.

‘Did you know the kids are going to see that Rattenfanger thing today?’ Hermione asked Draco. Her tone was a little more challenging than she intended and he looked taken aback.

‘No,’ he said bluntly. ‘I’d forgotten it was on.’

‘I know we promised Hugo, but I – I’m not sure…’

‘They can’t go,’ Draco said in definitive tones.

Hermione chewed her lip nervously. ‘How do we break it to them?’

‘I’ll do it.’

‘Poor Draco,’ Ginny said from the doorway. ‘He gets to be bad cop, eh? Used to be YOUR job, Hermione.’

‘I’m just living up to expectations,’ snapped Draco.

Ginny arched her eyebrows. ‘Bit unfair on Louis, though. He’ll be the only kid there at this rate.’

‘It’s still NO.’

Ginny shrugged. ‘Ah well… maybe Lily can go with him if she ever stops snivelling. And I’ll break it to the kids, Draco. You’re off the hook.’ She switched her attention to Hermione. ‘I’m
being badgered by your daughter to BAKE, would you believe? I understand it’s somebody’s birthday tomorrow…” She nodded towards Draco with a sly wink.

‘And now you’ve ruined the surprise,’ Hermione said in droll tones.

‘Hardly a surprise,’ Draco laughed. ‘Rose has asked me non-stop for three days what my favourite kind of cake is.’

‘She even asked me!’ Henrik piped up. ‘Fucked if I know…’

‘Well. I should warn you, Draco,’ Ginny said pursing her lips. ‘I’m not the best baker.’

‘As long as you don’t poison it, I’ll be more than satisfied,’ Draco said tartly.

Ginny tossed her red hair and stomped out of the kitchen, loudly instructing the children to line up in the garden for side-Apparition.

‘When’s Neville here?’ Draco asked Hermione once they were alone.

‘Soon. I think Harry’s coming, too.’

‘Moral support? Or is he going to try and break Ephraim out and smuggle him to Paris?’ Draco asked with a smile.

The main reason the kids were being corralled for ‘pool day’ at Ron’s was because Hermione was headed to the Ministry to see Ephraim – on his request. She’d felt unaccountably nervous ever since waking up which had only served to exacerbate her now habitual morning sickness.

Draco gave her a long look. ‘It’ll be okay…’ He folded her into his arms.

‘No, I’m looking forward to it – sort of. Means I can find out what the hell Ephraim gave Katya that made her normal…’ Hermione sighed deeply against Draco’s shirt. Everyone now knew what Katya had done… that she was likely communicating with Dolores via her little sketch-pad. Molly had hunted high and low for the damned thing, but it had completely vanished and Katya had retreated to the living-room at The Burrow with the door firmly closed.

The situation was untenable…

‘Now Selwyn’s gone, I think we risk St Mungo’s,’ Draco said tentatively. ‘The healers could help her more than we can.’ Hermione could sense darkness bubbling up inside of him whenever he spoke of her. It was worsening… despite his best efforts, on the face of it, to stay patient… But Hermione knew he just wanted her gone and didn’t dare speak it out loud.

As though on cue, a trilling laugh and soft padding feet announced Magda’s arrival. She jumped up, arms outstretched, demanding a hug. Her face cracked into the sunniest smile when Hermione reached down and picked her up.

Oh god, Hermione thought guiltily, cuddling another woman’s child. She wanted Katya gone too… more than anything.

XXX

Despite many years working in the Department for Magical Law Enforcement, Hermione had never ventured this deeply into the Wizengamot dungeons. Neville and Harry clearly knew where they were going as their route ventured deep into the bowels of the earth, progressively darker,
steeper, more winding. Hermione plodded behind, scared of losing her footing on the slippery stone path.

The black rock walls down here were shiny with musty damp and a strange thrumming periodically rattled in the distance. Underground trains? Hermione wondered. Although they were undoubtedly deeper than the Tube…

Torches flared in sconces attached to the walls but the light seemed to dim the deeper they went. And a sharp, acrid smell assailed her nostrils. The sanitary system clearly didn’t function as well at this depth. She fought a bout of nausea and trudged wearily into the darkness wondering if Ephraim had come to regret his decision to hand himself over to the Ministry authorities…

Harry and Neville were waiting for her.

‘Cell K,’ Harry said, indicating a short, dark corridor.

‘Aren’t you coming?’ Hermione asked.

‘Not allowed, apparently.’ He cast a sidelong glance at a hulking prison guard who bore a passing resemblance to a troll, slumped on a bench against the far wall.

‘I’ll press your case with Ephraim,’ Hermione assured him. ‘I suspect the cells at Auror HQ are better than this!’

‘Fucking Ritz in comparison, frankly,’ Harry said in mordant tones.

Neville had already negotiated their entry with the troll-like guard.

‘Ten minutes!’ He rolled his eyes. ‘Ridiculous…’

Hermione could already sense Ephraim’s blueness… long, thin tendrils reaching out towards her. He’d heard her voice.

A green flash released a hefty bolt on an oversized, iron door and they stepped inside.

The cell was small and narrow with scuffed, murky-grey walls and comprised a single bare bed and a small, roughly-hewn bedside table supporting a plain white jug and washbowl. It was illuminated by a single candle.

Neville went in first and his shadow loomed large and overbearing, casting Ephraim – a surprisingly shrunken-looking figure on the bed – into momentary darkness.

He was barely recognisable at first because he'd grown a beard, threaded with grey… But his eyes were as blazing blue as ever.

He reached out to shake her hand and his skin was cold. Indeed, she could sense he was cold from the inside out… the dampness of his surroundings was penetrating the very heart of him.

‘Good to see you,’ he grunted and he fell into a bout of coughing. Hermione suspected he hadn’t spoken in a long time. ’You look well.’

‘I can't say the same for you,’ she said, patting her skirt demurely as she conjured chairs for herself and Neville and sat down. ‘You look terrible, Ephraim. And this place is dreadful!’

He sighed and nodded. ‘Not quite what I hoped… but pretty much what I expected. The new Minister for Magic never really liked me you know.’
‘I don’t think many people did,’ Hermione said. ‘Not truly. They were either in your debt or scared shitless.’

Ephraim’s face crinkled into a smile and his eyes twinkled, blue glowing orbs shining out of the gloom, when he looked at her.

‘I have something I need to tell you… both,’ he said, finally acknowledging Neville’s necessary presence – the Ministry had demanded Hermione had an officially-approved companion. ‘Dark Flux… most of the harvested supplies were exhausted I believe but I suspect two batches remain and you should know about them.’

Hermione prickled with anxiety. There was a weightiness to Ephraim’s demeanour that struck her as honest here… a desire to offload his guilt.

‘As you know, Hermione, we were working with Troobles – a test batch of goods was manufactured and put into storage.’

‘Where?’

He shook his head. ‘I don’t know.’

‘How can you not know?’ Hermione said scathingly.

Ephraim stared at her. ‘Because I wasn’t paying attention. Too many fingers in too many pies. I trusted Torquil to manage the businesses while I played politics.’

Hermione shook her head in despair. Would George know anything? He was working with Troobles. But he’d have said if he did…

‘You said TWO batches,’ Neville said pointedly. ‘What’s the other?’

‘We had a harvesting facility in New Zealand. Classified.’

‘Wanaka,’ Hermione said in clipped tones.

Ephraim’s teeth gleamed white. ‘Indeed. Well, we mothballed the site because its returns were disappointingly frugal… but there was a small stock remainder I believe, though I’m not sure where it ended up. Sylvestra would know because I think it was used for… well… you know…’

Hermione’s lips tightened. ‘For murdering innocent Muggles?’

Ephraim couldn’t hold her gaze and shuffled uncomfortably. ‘Which might mean there’s none left. But I thought you should know about it because I can’t account for it.’

A thought occurred to Hermione. ‘The workers at Wanaka were manufacturing tiny tubes… they had no idea what they were going to be used for… Do you know?’

Ephraim nodded. ‘That was Selwyn’s idea, actually. A Herb Healing nasal spray; to relieve Hayfever symptoms. But the required scale was beyond our capabilities… We’d never have made sufficient quantities of Dark Flux to make it viable.’

Hermione chilled. Viable, in this context, meant mass-produced murder… It occurred to her that Ephraim didn’t know they had Anna’s papers… the means to achieve precisely this.

‘I wish you’d reconsider giving yourself up to Harry,’ she said regretfully. He was ready to spill… given the right circumstances. ‘I promise you’d be better-treated than… here.’ She wrinkled her
nose as she surveyed the dank, miserable cell.

‘They’d execute me.’

‘You could cut a deal. Information for immunity.’

‘Your friend might have influence, Hermione, but he can’t FIX an entire trial - and you know it.’ Ephraim shook his head and folded his arms. ‘No… I’d rather moulder here and survive, thank you. I’ve always liked the idea of living, come what may. Where there’s life there’s hope, as they say.’

‘There’s – there’s something I need to ask you…’ Hermione said, realising time was running out. ‘We have Katya.’

Ephraim’s eyebrows shot up.

‘And – like you said – she’s not well… that much is all too obvious, sadly.’

He narrowed his eyes. ‘Does she know about you and Draco?’

‘Yes. I’ve told her. And so has he…’ She didn’t feel it necessary to explain further. ‘The thing is… you used medication to keep her…’ she paused, evaluating her words carefully, ‘balanced.’

Ephraim’s face hardened. ‘Hermione. You have to be very careful. I love her. But I also know what can go wrong… things that – that have gone wrong in the past. I’d advise you to steer clear.’

‘Oh, I am! But what I want most is for Katya to feel BETTER.’ She tried to muster a genuine smile.

‘She’s scaring the fuck out of everyone!’ Neville interjected, opting for plain-speak instead. ‘How do we make it stop?’

Ephraim closed his eyes for what felt like an age and then inhaled deeply through his nose. ‘It was a long and complicated procedure finding a potion that worked. Many of the ingredients that worked best were tricky to get hold of.’ He pressed his fingers to his eyes and looked weary. ‘Have you got something to jot this down?’

Neville conjured a scrap of parchment and a quill. ‘Fire away.’

‘Okay… you need borage – lots, if I remember rightly – and rhodiola. A trace of skullcap and a smidgen of kava, a liberal amount of first dew and either ground tooth powder from merpeople – very difficult to get hold of - or dried Graphorn feces. The feces was slightly less effective but adequate if the potion was perfectly brewed. All these ingredients have to be distilled in a solution of Occamy egg whites – or, at a push, Erumpent horn fluid. The potion has to be stirred with feathers from the Golden Snidget. It’s a rare bird but there’s a thriving black market. Knockturn Alley will see you good on that I’m sure…’

‘Do you recall any of the measurements?’ Hermione asked, feeling daunted and wondering if a Muggle medicine might suffice instead.

‘I’m afraid not.’

There was a loud thump on the grille. ‘Time’s up,’ droned the guard.

A bereft look stole across Ephraim’s face and Hermione could see the depths of his loneliness.
Serves you right, she thought.

‘Will you come back and see me sometime?’ Ephraim said, staggering up from the bed. She heard his bones creak. ‘Both of you. Either of you… Draco, too.’

Neville gave a short, sharp laugh. ‘Don’t take the piss. We all know it’s only Hermione you want to see.’

But Hermione wasn’t so sure.

‘Happy Birthday for tomorrow, Ephraim,’ she said.

He smiled ruefully. ‘Thank you, Hermione.’

XXX

It had been a sunny morning but cloud had rolled in thick and fast and hung low and ashen-grey in the sky. Hermione looked out of her kitchen window as she made up sandwiches for lunch with Neville and Harry hoping it wouldn’t rain and ruin Ron’s ‘pool party’ for the kids.

She presumed Draco was still at The Burrow but Harry came into the kitchen with a piece of paper in his hand…

‘Draco’s not happy. Says Angelina popped to The Burrow and mentioned the kids were at the park watching the play.’

‘Really?’ Hermione threw the butter-knife into the kitchen sink. ‘We said we didn’t want them going!’

Harry looked apologetic and she realised she was effectively dissing his wife.

‘Oh hell. I guess I’d better get over there,’ she groaned, putting a bottle of juice back into the fridge.

‘Draco and Henrik are already there. He says Henrik stopped by to get his gun!’ Harry pulled an aghast face. ‘Bit extreme… He’s left a note for Niko and Gunter, too. Tells Gunter to head to The Burrow to watch over Katya.’

‘But what about Molly’s potion class?’

XXX

Hermione, Harry and Neville headed into Ottery St Catchpole, cutting through the school playground where a campervan bearing a ‘Merry Plays make Merry Days’ banner was parked adjacent to the school building, and crossed the road to the park.

The ‘Rattenfanger’ play was in full swing… a throng of children close to the action were squealing with hilarity as a masked Pied Piper in a hooded cowl – The Rattenfanger - strutted across a stage tooting (very tunelessly, Hermione thought) a wooden pipe. He was being preyed upon by a line-up of huge Rats who kept sneaking up behind him to pull a dangling cord that inflated his trousers. The Rattenfanger was oblivious to their tricks and kept tooting as his trousers got bigger and bigger and bigger…

Hermione instantly spotted the tall, silver-haired frame of Draco at the fringes of the audience. He looked bored and anxious, never taking his eyes off the children crammed close to the stage.
‘Hey!’ she said, poking him in the back.

Draco swung around and his face melted into a relieved smile. ‘Look what I got roped into,’ he said peevishly.

‘Oh, I bet you’re secretly enjoying it.’

Draco curled his lip contemptuously. ‘Seriously? They’re rubbish!’

‘Well, the kids like it,’ Hermione said, peering over his shoulder at Rose – her voluminous red hair bouncing as her shoulders shook with laughter.

‘It’s nearly over, thank god,’ Draco groused. ‘How was he?’

‘Lonely. And his cell is MISERABLE.’

‘How tragic,’ Draco said sarcastically. ‘Did you get the potion recipe?’

‘More a long list of impossible ingredients.’ She smiled. ‘Your potion-making talents are going to be severely tested.’

She gazed into his eyes and sighed. Even when he was tired and grumpy he sent her heart spinning.

‘Harry didn’t persuade him to testify in Paris?’ he asked, knowing the answer was likely a negative.

‘Harry wasn’t even allowed to come in! Draco… He said there’s two missing batches of Dark Flux —’

‘Have you guys seen Bill?’ Fleur asked, looking flustered. ‘He went to get an ice cream about half an hour ago.’

‘The queue’s huge,’ moaned Ginny, ambling over. She gave Hermione and Draco a piercing look. ‘By the way, Mum took Vithu and Hugo back to Wisteria Cottage. Vithu grazed his knee in the playground and Hugo was bored.’

‘That’s nice of her,’ Hermione said. But then she thought about what she’d just said. ‘Isn’t she teaching potions?’

‘We finished early,’ Fleur said brightly.

‘I’ve asked Gunter to sister-sit,’ Draco muttered morosely.

‘I saw the note… but who’s there now?’

‘Ziff and Tuyen…’ Draco raised his eyebrows suggestively.

‘REALLY?’ Hermione laughed.

‘Oh, there’ll be none of THAT going on,’ Fleur sighed. ‘Kai’s there, too. She didn’t want to come and see the boring play…’ She made a passingly good effort at an impersonation of Kai’s teenage drawl…

Hermione was distracted by an urgent desire to pee… an increasing problem she was finding. She couldn’t recall needing to go to the toilet quite so much with her previous pregnancies. She noted the long line of ladies snaking around the Public Conveniences building.
‘I’m going to sneak into the school to use their loos,’ Hermione whispered to Draco, squeezing his hand.

‘Is it open?’

‘I think so.’

‘I’ll come too.’

‘No, no… looks like ye ole Rattenfanger’s building up to his grand finale! I won’t be long.’

Hermione headed into the school, through the main doors into reception. There was nobody in the Head’s office to her right and the guest toilet on her left was locked. She’d have to use the children’s toilets in the corridor behind the hall.

‘You alright Mrs Weasley?’ came a friendly voice as she entered the hall. It was John the school caretaker. He was descending a ladder. Hermione looked up and saw a big net, stretched across the arc of the ceiling, crammed with brightly-coloured, gift-wrapped tubes.

One of the Rats climbed down from a ladder positioned close to the stage at the far end of the hall and waved in thanks to John before slipping away.

‘Are the toilets open in the main block?’ Hermione asked John.

‘Should be,’ John replied. He grinned at the presents. ‘What do you think? As soon as the kids are in, we drop the net and it’ll be raining presents!’ he chortled.

Hermione could see a hundred and one health and safety reasons why this was a terrible idea – chaos and concussion chiefly amongst them – but she was too desperate to get to the toilet to discuss further.

Afterwards, as she washed her hands, she looked at the ‘Merry Plays make Merry Days’ campervan parked outside the window. It was a fairly warm day but far from sunny… but for some reason the acting troupe had used clothes, rags and a towel to ‘sun-block’ all the windows - including the windscreen and the windows at the back.

She decided to investigate and purposefully pulled open the door leading to the breezeway corridor - but was suddenly thrown backwards by a tumultuous blast…

She smashed into the toilet doors and lay winded on the floor, dimly aware that a large, brown furry figure had stepped into the room … She could hear him sniggering as he gazed down at her with beady, black eyes.

She blinked repeatedly and her vision gradually shifted back into reality.

JOSEP…

She instantly tried to jump up but he was projecting an unseen force that pinioned her limbs to the floor… He stepped closer but to her surprise a loud thwack propelled him forwards and an irate voice was yelling at him.

‘Get away from her, you creep!’

It was John the caretaker wielding a broomstick…

NO, Hermione tried to shout, but the words jammed in her throat. John had no idea who he was
dealing with…

John raised the broom and again struck the monstrous rat with all his might, but Josep brushed it off and sprang to his feet, facing down the confused caretaker. John swung the broom with even more venom and then screeched as Josep snatched the broomstick with a loud, earthy growl and reversed its momentum – driving it into John’s chest.

John gasped, eyes bulging fearfully, and a gobbet of blood spurted from his mouth…

Freed from Josep’s invisible bonds, Hermione clutched her wand and Apparated outside to the van. Her pulse was racing... palms sweating.

This whole damn thing was a set-up! A trap that half of Ottery St Catchpole was walking straight into...

She could see a crowd of villagers brandishing balloons and streamers following The Rattenfanger across the road in a gaudy parade. He was luring them into the school, she realised, where the gifts… the GIFTS!... would be released. HELL. What was in those packages?

She hurried towards the railings that fenced off the school from the road and tried to identify someone, anyone she knew… adults were largely lingering behind the flow of children, some hanging back as far as the grassy expanse of the park itself.

The ‘Rats’ bordered the children in lines - hemming them in, herding them…

‘NO!’ she screamed – a lone woman shrieking, but her voice was barely audible above the whoops and squeals… The Rattenfanger had ditched his wooden pipe and was merrily brandishing a long, candy flute and the Rats were blowing candy whistles.

Candy whistles? Wasn’t that what Troobles were making in association with Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes? This had to be the lost batch from Troobles… meaning these sweets contained Dark Flux!

‘NO! Don’t go in! Don’t touch the sweets!’ she screamed again and was about to cast a Sonorous when she became uncomfortably aware that a pair of malevolent, dark eyes were watching her from the playground… the hairs on her arms prickled at the sheer weight of magic massing, poised to strike her down…

She hastened out of range towards the school gates at the front of the parade and held her hands high to warn everybody.

‘STOP!’ she shrieked.

The Rattenfanger turned and looked at her… his ghastly, plastic mask was cruel, ugly… and she could sense his alarm. He started to run faster towards the school entrance and the children, seeing it as a game, giggled and chased after him.

‘NO!’ Hermione begged, running into the crowd. She had to do something - something shocking to stop this deadly procession!

She furiously slashed the air with her wand - sod the International Statute of Secrecy - and stripped The Rattenfanger of his clothes and mask, rendering him naked...

Without his elaborate costume, Torquil Haast was a scrawny figure... He directed a malicious look in Hermione's direction but paled when she raised her wand yet again and threw himself into the
thick of the parade.

The crowd screamed in horror and confusion and parents sprinted to salvage their children - but the Rats snatched as many as they could - two, three at a time - and muscled them through the school gates.

Hermione could see Harry immobilising Torquil who fell flat onto his face in the middle of the road – and there was Draco, his silver hair gleaming, punching one of the Rats in the face, enabling a child to scurry loose, crying towards the park.

A blaze of red hair shot past her, chasing down the Rats as they dragged wailing children into the school… Bill, then Ginny… followed by an influx of furious Muggle parents.

George and Arthur were weaving through the crowd, surreptitiously shooting tripping jinxes at any Muggles who got too close to the school entrance… clearly fearing the Rats would blast them to pieces without a second’s thought!

Hermione looked back to where Draco had been. She couldn’t see either him or the Rat he’d been fighting – but she caught a glimpse of Ernie and Hannah following Ron around the far side of the school building. YES! The side-entrance into the hall. Good thinking Ron, she thought… but was unable to think further than that as a red stunner screeched past her ear.

She skipped backwards and dodged another stunner, then another... and another... Who was firing at her? Where were they? She quickly found herself back in the school playground - isolated and exposed - and dashed to the campervan, hoping to use it as cover.

But the Rat was swiftly on her… his breathing loud and grating under his thick, furry shield.

She swiftly slammed him with a Petrificus Totalus and he keeled over, smacking his head hard against the concrete ground.

But another Rat was fast approaching…

Hermione held her breath, trying to gauge the moment to strike… Her face was pressed against the cold glass window at the back of the van and her eye was drawn to a chink in the ragged coverings slapped into the window.

She could now see a heap of intertwined bodies inside… and blood. Too much blood…

Her stomach churned and a stream of hot bile surged into her gorge. She turned to vomit, inwardly panicking because she could sense the second Rat was close.

She swung around and snapped a blast of purple colour-magic in his direction. But he disdainfully flicked it aside and continued bearing down on her, holding her firmly in his sights…

Oh lord. Not a HE, after all, she thought… This was Sylvestra.

And now she’d slipped from view… DAMN. Where was she?

Hermione stood stock-still, quivering with nervous, jangling energy – desperately trying not to be sick and yet having to steel herself for battle. Beads of sweat broke out on her forehead and her wand slipped greasily in her hand. She could hear the raging chorus of shouts and screams at the school gates, the frantic scampering of feet punctuated by pained cries and the occasional thump and blast of a wand hitting its target.
Shit… she thought. Draco, the children… and anybody in that school! She still had to warn them about the gifts… Dark Flux lollipops that could slay a Muggle child at the first lick.

She could sense Sylvester - heavy darkness encircling the van - and Hermione felt rich, black hatred curdling inside of her…

Lesson learned, Hermione thought. I can’t touch her person, but this bloody van can!

And with that she screwed up every ounce of strength in her body and mind and focused as hard as she could, harder she felt than ever before, and imagined the van jolting into life and crunching Sylvester to the ground.

The van shuddered and tipped with astonishing speed onto its side so that its tyres faced open air.

There was a heavy clunk and a shocked cry and Hermione launched herself forwards, ready to finish her off… but she was gone! Only her costume remained…

But she didn’t have time to ponder this as another another Rat lurched into view, holding a wand under George’s chin, pushing him backwards with grim intent until George was flat-backed against the wall of the school.

George gurgled something indistinct but his attacker shook his head and laughed and raised his wand to deliver a fatal blow...

‘Expelliarmus!’ Hermione yelled - as a thunderous gunshot rang through the air and the Rat crumpled to his knees, dragging George down with him.

A volley of panicked screams resounded from the school and beyond - doors banging, running feet…

George was now trapped between the Rat’s body and the wall. He shot Hermione an anguished look and reached out, hand shaking. But Henrik stepped into view, gun dangling, and hoisted the Rat's bloodied body away from George with brutish disdain.

George scrambled free on hands and knees. ‘Merlin’s fucking balls!’ he choked, ‘that was close!’

Hermione helped him to his feet. ‘Dad’s already contacted the Ministry,’ George panted. ‘This is a total disaster! Obliteration squads will be working overtime!’

This was the least of their worries, Hermione thought sourly.

‘Who’s this?’ Henrik said, ripping off the Rat-faced mask of George’s attacker.

‘Edgar Rosier…’ George said between gritted teeth. ‘Son of a bitch…’ And Angelina’s lover, Hermione noted wryly.

She knelt down and whipped the hood off the wizard she’d petrified. It wasn’t someone she recognised but she doubled-down on the spell to make sure he didn’t spring any nasty surprises. If Ministry representatives were indeed on their way, they could do with living witnesses when they addressed this debacle in the Wizengamot.

‘Do you know if our kids are safe?’ she asked George.

‘Louis’s with Fleur - I know that much. I – I think Rose and Draco’s son must have got caught up in the melee…’ he added sheepishly.
‘Did you see them go into the school?’

‘Draco was looking for them… and Harry.’

Hermione felt hot anger bubbling up inside of her. ‘I didn’t want them at this stupid play and neither did Draco!’ she spat.

George looked at his feet with a sorrowful expression.

‘Hey,’ Henrik said, gently placing his hand on her arm. ‘Let’s go find them.’

‘I’ll keep looking out here,’ George said as Hermione headed straight for the door by the toilets she’d used earlier. Henrik paused to reload his gun and followed.

‘George!’ Hermione called out as he shuffled away. ‘Tell everyone the gifts The Rattenfanger planned to give out are Dark Flux! Troubles whistling lollipops… They’re in the school hall.’ And then she brusquely turned away.

Hermione and Henrik stepped over the prone body of John the caretaker and tiptoed along the breezeblock corridor towards a closed doorway that opened onto the hall, adjacent to the stage.

Henrik edged the door ajar and peered inside.

‘Okay, there’s three, maybe four kids. *Not yours*… And a handful of adults… They’re sort of stuck in the middle of the hall. Huddled up.’

‘How many Rats?’

‘Five… might be six, actually…’

Hermione looked above Henrik's head to the net packed with ‘gifts’ swinging from the rafters in the ceiling.

‘Can you see anyone we know?’

‘Yeah… just saw Neville and Hannah rushing past… Draco’s smacking the shit out of someone… he’s not using his wand… NOPE! He just did! And another Rat bites the dust…’

*Five or six Rats…* Less than the number of Rats who’d been outside, Hermione thought ominously. She looked left and right along the breeze-block corridor. Where were the others?

She tried to muscle past Henrik into the hall but his stout arm spanned the doorway and he bucked backwards. ‘Stay put!’ he whispered in low, guttural tones. ‘There’s some Rat geezer chucking huge fucking humdingers at Bill just a few inches to our left… they’re on the stage. If we break cover he’ll see us!’ Henrik scanned the narrow, dark space between the curtain at the back of the stage and the wall. ‘Let’s sneak in this way.’

They quickly slid behind the curtains, fighting through musty velvet drapes and dusty cobwebs that slithered over Hermione’s face, before arriving at a narrow opening that afforded them a view of the stage and the hall beyond.

Henrik squinted at Bill and his opponent. ‘I recognise that guy… It’s the dodgy git Ron brought to Shell Cottage.’

*KRENZEL…* Bill had been disappointed not to find his body at the windmill and clearly aimed to make up for it. He had him pinned back and was hurling a string of stinging spells that had Krenzel...
quaking and cowering.

But then Krenzel struck back with a nifty stunner that threw Bill off-balance.

Hermione covertly flung a jelly-legged jinx in Krenzel’s direction, dropping him to his knees. Bill then yelled a Bombarda that had his opponent flying backwards, heels over head off the stage – sliding into a bank of stacked chairs that collapsed heavily on top of him.

Krenzel’s head and torso were hidden from view but his legs trembled, then stilled.

Out for the count or worse, Hermione thought. Bill’s delivery had been brutal.

‘Bill…’ she hissed.

He slipped behind the drapes, perspiring heavily…

‘This is fucking madness,’ he snarled. ‘Those rat bastards have blockaded the exits! We’re trapped in here! Kids crying for their mums… it’s hell!’

‘Have you seen Rose and Scorpius?’

‘They got pushed to the back of the parade… don’t know how but it’s a good job they were… so they’re safe. Don’t worry.’

Hermione felt almost light-headed with relief but then felt guilty because there was a bunch of Muggle children in grave danger and it was their job to save them. But first…the net carrying the gifts was still swaying above the hall.

‘The presents... They're Dark Flux,’ she breathed, turning soulful eyes to Bill.

Bill's face darkened. ‘Right... Well, I’m pretty damned good at Transfiguration, Hermione. If you guys keep an eye out for me, I could sort those presents out. Make them harmless… Don't you dare go near them!’

Hermione nodded and immediately scampered to the far end of the curtain to block off any unwanted intruder while Henrik anchored the other end of the curtain, gun at the ready.

She cast a worried glance at Draco. He was constantly diving and running, locked in combat with two Rats holding the front entrance… She focused on one of the Rats and imagined him twisting like a corkscrew until his legs snapped... She didn't imagine her colour-magic would work from this distance - certainly not while she did everything in her power to render it invisible, too...But remarkably the Rat tied himself up in knots, screamed in pain, and fell over.

Draco glanced over his shoulder, a confused look on his face, but the other Rat was rapidly homing in on him, so he let loose a rolling wave of wondrous white and both the Rat and the front door leading from reception to the hall were blown backwards.

Draco raced after the Rat, who was frantically scrambling to his feet, and targeted him with fierce bolts of energy. The Rat’s mask had been blown clean from his face and Hermione couldn’t help but clench her fist in savage encouragement once she saw that Draco was pounding Troy with devastating bursts of colour-magic that had him squirming and flailing.

They disappeared from view and but she could hear glass shattering… the Head’s office had been breached…
Her gaze dropped to the weeping hostages, recognising Rose’s friend, Jenny Slater... They’d been corralled into a group and Hermione could see a shimmering cordon had been wrapped around them... Colour-magic.

That likely meant Josep was still here. But where?

She scanned the hall... the front door was now open but a couple of Rats were holding position at the side-entrance – although, curiously, not the door she’d snuck through with Henrik.

Why are they doing this? she wondered … but her attention was drawn by a thunderous commotion from the corridor behind her - the corridor she’d recently left. It sounded like a running battle and she could hear raised voices and a cacophonous boom...

A flurry of movement from Henrik’s end of the curtain and he disappeared from view.

She was tempted to follow… but she had to stay focused on guarding Bill. She raised her eyes to the net... and there was a sweet burst of soft cooing, white turtle-doves! Package by package, Bill was transforming them into birds...

A heavy thump battened the door by the stage... Bill shot Hermione a worried look and whisked rightwards to investigate.

Hermione was about to follow but she was still bothered by the persistent colour-magic cordon around the hostages. The hall was largely empty now except for the two Rats at the side-entrance. They were conferring and looked edgy. But neither of them appeared to be controlling the cordon and to her horror the soft coos from the net hanging above the prisoners were being steadily replaced by a seething hiss as the birds changed one by one into snakes which then slipped through holes in the net onto the floor below - inching closer and closer to the hostages who were climbing on top of each other, hysterical with fear.

Worse still, a tear was ripping across the seam of the net... the entire mass of snakes was about to drop...

There was no time to lose. She had to break cover!

Hermione instantly unleashed an Immobulus, freezing the snakes and the net in position - not caring that her wand fire made her a target - and then bombarded the cordon with a fierce burst of colour-magic…

But the cordon stuck fast...

To her surprise, Ernie and Neville burst into the Hall, bowling over the Rats guarding the side-door with a barrage of Stunners. Ernie joined Hermione in targeting the cordon while Neville summoned an almighty Ventus, tossing the Rats into the courtyard outside.

He stepped forwards, keen to press his advantage, but one of the Rats reared up, firing a beam of red light that caught Neville in the stomach. He yelped in pain and stumbled and the Rat pursued him into the hall...

Hermione was torn… A faint shimmering blue flame - HER magic - was now dancing along the rim of the cordon, consuming the colour-magic that had constructed it… If she dropped focus the battle to save the Muggles might be lost as one snake then another unwound itself from the net and plopped downwards... Wee Jenny Slater’s bawling face as she clung to a woman Hermione recognised as Hugo’s form teacher decided her.
Hermione stepped deeper into the hall and applied maximum heft to her attack on the cordon.

It suddenly collapsed and Ernie flashed her a grin and a thumbs up and then quickly pushed the hostages towards the front door to safety as the net split and the floor became a sea of squirming, slithering snakes.

But as Ernie flung open the doors with a swift flick of his wand he was catapulted backwards… high over the heads of the hostages who pelted from the hall, not daring to look back… straight into the snakes…

Hermione instinctively cast a Flipendo, hurling Ernie into the air to avoid the snakes, but to her horror she could sense her magic was jousting with something else – an invisible force - and Ernie was now caught in the crossfire.

A sharp pain stabbed her arm and almost wrenched her shoulder out of its socket…overwhelming her… and Ernie was whisked high into the air, crashing into the ceiling. He quickly grasped one of the rafters and swung helplessly above the floor – but he was quickly conjuring a rope-ladder.

Hermione summoned a shield and vanished the snakes using colour-magic, although her head ached with the effort – one problem down, she thought, but she then realised Neville had just been sent flying and was now spread-eagled on the floor and Karl, rat-hood thrown back, had kicked Neville's wand from his hand and was stamping on Neville's arm, a vicious grin on his face.

Karl raised his wand with demonic, murderous relish…

‘Expelliarmus!’ she screeched, affording Neville a chance to Accio his wand and target Karl with an almighty cry of ‘Baubillious!’ An array of incandescent white sparks flew from the tip of Neville's wand, setting Karl's furry costume ablaze...

Hermione didn’t wait to watch the sequel to this chain of events. She shut out Karl's panicked screams and returned her attention to Ernie and his invisible combatant.

But where had they gone?

She then heard a piteous groan from the corner of the room. Ernie was crumpled in a heap, his limbs twisted and broken, head slumped at an unnatural angle.

She hurried to his side and was soon joined by Neville who took hold of Ernie’s hand and cast her a desperate glance…

Draco ran back into the hall looking wild-eyed, panting heavily. He spotted her and ran over – and then his eyes fell to the floor.

‘Where’s Troy?’ she asked.

‘Where he deserves to be.’ He shook his head. ‘What the hell's happened to Ernie?’

She quickly gazed around the room. ‘Someone INVISIBLE... I think Asusto. He's got form…’ but as she spoke she knew Asusto wasn’t here. Not anymore...

A penetrating scream rang out from the corridor behind the hall.

Ginny… or possibly, Hannah… was in trouble.

‘I’m okay here,’ Neville mouthed. ‘Go!’
Draco grabbed Hermione’s hand and they sprinted across the hall and through the doorway into the breeze-block corridor.

They were greeted by a crashing blast of dust as the wall at the far end of the corridor exploded.

Ginny lunged at a Rat who was making a break for it… He evaded her grasp but was thrown backwards by Draco. Hermione glanced at Draco’s face - the hardened sneer and the blank, cold eyes momentarily frightened her.

Draco knelt beside the Rat lying helpless on the floor and ripped the rat mask from his face revealing Charlie Dowson. ‘D-Don’t hurt me!’ Dowson begged. ‘I - I’ll testify!’

Draco glanced at Ginny. ‘Get him outside to Harry.’

She quickly tethered Dowson with an efficiently-struck Incarcerous.

‘Can you help Ron?’ she asked, eyes pleading. ‘He’s stuck in a duel with Carmichael.’

Draco nodded and caught Hermione’s eye and they moved deeper into the school.

‘Josep was here,’ she said, her teeth chattering with nerves. It was too quiet and each classroom they passed was empty. Henrik was somewhere around here, too, and Bill. And Hannah.

‘And I hit Sylvestra with a campervan,’ she added, realising how incongruous that sounded.

Draco threw her an admiring glance.

‘But she Apparated...’ Hermione added with a sigh.

A soft bleating sob from a darkened classroom drew their attention… Hannah was lying on the ground beside a Rat – flat on his back – a bloodied gash in his costume.

Hannah had her hand to her face and was sobbing.

‘I had to…’ she cried, her shoulders shaking. ‘He came at me! So I slashed him… but I was too strong – stronger than I thought.’

‘It’s okay, Hannah,’ Hermione said, kneeling beside her and squeezing her shoulder. ‘You did what you had to do, I’m sure of it.’

Hannah bowed her head, ashamed.

Hermione could hear Draco shuffling impatiently behind her. They could hear the faint strains of a ruckus - running and a man screaming like a banshee… a loud banging door followed by a sudden deafening report that sent her ears ringing… Gunshot. Henrik…

Voices coming closer…

‘I’ll check it out,’ Draco said, hotfooting it from the classroom.

Hannah continued to sob and Hermione’s blouse was now damp. She patted the back of Hannah’s head, wanting to comfort her – she’d clearly never killed anybody before – but she was equally desperate to check on the others. She gently eased Hannah backwards.

‘Can you do me a favour?’ she asked.
Hannah nodded, red-faced and puffy-eyed.

‘Neville’s with Ernie in the hall… Ernie doesn’t look too good…’

Hannah immediately stood up, swaying like a tree in the breeze, but she managed to gather herself.

‘Can you also tell Harry once you’re outside that Ruddy Krenzel is buried under a pile of chairs in the hall?’ Hermione added. ‘He might be alive. And there’s a chap Neville hit in the courtyard. And another in the playground.’

Hermione sprinted towards the sounds of battle... It was as though a tornado had ripped through the school. Furniture was upended, pictures and collages of children’s drawings hung from the walls or had fallen and been trampled underfoot.

Hermione found herself facing a glass door, but there was no one in sight.

But then a fierce blow to the back of her head knocked her to the floor... She buried her face in her hands, gasping for air, eyes strained and watering.

A wavering, blurry figure loomed over her but then fell from view amidst a raging fizz of wand blasts - burning streams of light, plaster flying, walls exploding...

A body lay heaped beside her.

Draco scooped her into his arms – she knew it was Draco; his whiteness saturated her mind – and a door was kicked open and he spun her outside. She caught a glimpse of a man with red hair dueling with another man - someone tall and lean and increasingly cornered as a second, larger man homed in on him, yelling and firing glinting splatters of light that sparkled like fireworks at the edge of her vision.

‘You okay?’ Draco asked, gently mopping blood from her face.

‘Yeah…’ she croaked, ‘just – just a bit woozy.’

She tried to touch the back of her head but it was painful. Wet…

Draco was muttering healing spells and a soothing warmth percolated through her… she sighed, momentarily content – and then remembered what was happening.

‘Who hit me?’

‘Osgood. Melissa’s horrid husband.’

‘Oh…’ She presumed he was dead. There’d been something deeply final about the way his body lurched sideways and slapped against the floor.

‘Ron and Bill have chased down Carmichael,’ Draco added. ‘But no sign of Josep.’

‘Or Asusto…’ She clung onto him and groaned. ‘Can we go home now?’

XXX

The cricket pitch was overflowing with oddly-dressed folks in robes mingling with a mass of Muggles – many being organized into neat lines for Obliviation.

‘Half the Ministry’s here!’ Arthur said. His eyes twinkled excitedly in spite of himself… the
Minister for Magic himself, Julius Merriman, was busily deferring to Arthur’s local knowledge.

Amidst the commotion a stream of police cars zoomed into the village from Colston Town a few miles away – and more disconcertingly, a van emblazoned with WRN on its side – Wessex Radio Network… the local Muggle radio station.

A voice was blaring on a tannoy, barely audible above the alarms and sirens – and more and more wizards and witches were popping up, wands at the ready.

‘Merlin!’ Arthur said, eyes popping at the general mayhem. ‘This is going to be the biggest operation since The Ilfracombe Incident in 1932!’

‘Arthur – have you seen the kids?’ Hermione enquired urgently.

‘Oh. Harry will know!’

Hermione and Draco headed towards Harry who was issuing orders as officials moved a hooded figure, Torquil Haast, through a jeering crowd, followed by Charlie Dowson, wiping tears from his face, and – to Hermione’s surprise – Ruddy Krenzel, shambolic, sullen.

‘Arthur said you know where we can find Rose and Scorpius,’ Draco said to Harry the moment he was free.

‘They’re hereabouts… Ginny had them.’

Hermione spotted a small pale face at the back of the crowd… Hannah, looking distraught.

Her heart instantly sank. ‘Oh no. Ernie…’ she breathed, clutching Draco’s arm.

Moments later and Ginny was at their side. ‘Not sure Ernie’s going to make it I’m afraid. He’s in a bad way... Neville’s staying with him.

Hermione felt like a cold stone had sunk into the pits of her stomach.

‘As soon as we get the kids home I’ll give Tim a call,’ Draco murmured. He looked around, his forehead creased in concern, then turned to Ginny. ‘Harry said you had them.’

‘It’s all been a bit harrowing,’ Ginny sighed. ‘Mum and Tana heard all the commotion and came to see what was going on but Scorpius just wanted out of here! Can’t really blame him, poor thing. I just saw Mum taking him to Wisteria Cottage—’

She stopped speaking as Ron came over, looking crestfallen. ‘You heard about Ernie?’ he frowned. ‘Looks really bad…’

Everyone nodded glumly… But Hermione could sense Draco's whiteness; quivering, uneasy. And it certainly wasn't Ernie he was most worried about.

‘What about Rose?’ he asked Ginny in terse tones. "You didn't mention her.'

‘She's fine!’ Ron said, stepping in quickly. ‘Tana took her to Folkvangr… She was a bit shook up.’

‘But there’s no one there! And Tana doesn’t know the bloody wards. She’s never even been to our house.’

‘But Rose knows them!’ Ron remonstrated.
‘And is Rose comfortable with this Tana?’ Draco sneered. ‘She never mentions her.’

‘She’s known her a lot longer than she’s known you, actually!’ Ron said, looking nettled.

‘She’ll wait with Rose till we get there,’ Hermione said, placing her hand on Draco’s arm, hoping to calm him down. What was wrong with him?

‘Yeah. Tana’s not the sort to just dump a kid and run!’ Ron snorted.

‘Except she’s NOT taking Rose to Folkvangr,’ Ginny interceded, ‘they’re going to The Burrow! Mum said she’ll be along there in a jiffy because the Minister’s popping round for tea…’

But Ron vehemently shook his head. ‘No, it was Folkvangr. I wouldn’t have let her go… there…’

His words trailed off but everyone knew he was referring to Katya.

‘For fuck’s sake…’ Draco said under his breath.

His obvious frustration was now infecting Hermione, too. ‘Are you sure she’s at Folkvangr, Ron?’ Hermione asked, wondering if they should just head straight to The Burrow.

‘Course I am!’ he said reproachfully. He grimaced as he wiped blood from a wound on his temple.

‘Let’s go,’ Draco said, impatiently. He abruptly dragged Hermione away from the park and the people and the chaos, past the bashed-up premises of St Botolph’s Primary to a bus shelter and were about to Apparate when Harry charged towards them.

‘We need to talk!’

‘Does it have to be now?’ Hermione said in clipped tones.

‘This was all about those fucking papers… Anna’s papers!’ Harry said, trying to catch his breath. ‘The plan was to persuade you to give them up! Torquil just confessed as much to me… didn’t need any persuasion. That guy’s gonna sing like a canary I reckon!’

‘But I saw Sylvestra!’ Hermione retorted. ‘She said nothing about the papers!’

Although thinking about it, she hadn’t had much of a chance to say anything at all! Hermione had made sure of that by smacking a van into her…

‘Look. That was the plan,’ Harry stated baldly. ‘Maybe something changed? Who knows?’

‘What changed was Hermione buggering up their dipshit parade!’ Draco grinned. ‘They obviously wanted some great hostage situation and it failed.’

‘Which would explain why Josep vanished…’ Hermione added thoughtfully. And Asusto. Even Sylvestra, when she thought about it. ‘They switched course mid-stream.’

‘Didn’t tell Troy, Carmichael and the rest of ‘em, though, did they?… Bit rude.’

Hermione felt a sense of dark dread well up inside of her…and she didn't know why.

‘Let’s talk at home,’ Draco added, but no sooner had he spoken than Hermione spotted a small figure bobbing between the clumps of people crowding out the park, frantically hunting… looking for someone.

Looking for them…
‘Kai…’ she breathed, rapidly crossing the road, breaking into a jog. Her heart was suddenly racing… ‘KAI!’

Kai spun around and ran towards her… her mouth was contorted in anguish.

‘What is it? What's happened?’ Hermione asked in alarm.

Kai shook her head and was crying so hard, gasping for breath, she couldn’t get the words out…

‘It’s okay, Kai,’ Draco said, placing his arm around her shoulder. ‘In your own time…’

She kept shaking her head…

Hermione looked around. Harry had disappeared…

‘C-Couldn’t Apparate you see… too – too young…’ Kai spluttered.

‘Has Katya escaped?’ Hermione asked, trying to keep her voice low and calm.

But Kai repeatedly shook her head. ‘No… She - she killed them.’

Hermione and Draco both stared at her, speechless…

‘What – what do you mean KILLED them?’ Draco asked. ‘Killed who?’

‘Ziff… Tuyen…’ Kai’s shoulders were heaving.

Draco blinked rapidly. ‘Katya did? … Katya killed them?’

Kai didn’t respond in words but her hands gripped Hermione’s arms like steel claws. In normal circumstances Hermione would have winced – but she was barely able to register the pain. She felt dizzy with panic.

‘Where’s she now?’ she asked, praying that Ron was right… that Rose had gone to Folkvangr.

‘Burrow… I ran.’

‘Rose… My daughter. Is she there?’

Kai shook her head. ‘Not when I left.’

Footsteps were fast approaching. Harry, then Ron. Thelonious was close behind, concern etched on his face.

‘Hey, Kai,’ he said tenderly once he’d drawn level with them. He curled her into his arms. ‘What’s happened?’

Hermione gave Harry and Ron a desperate look. ‘She says Katya killed Ziff and Tuyen…’

Saying it out loud … it didn’t seem real… KATYA? She didn’t even have a wand and she wasn’t the strongest-looking individual!

But as she thought this she found herself looking at Ron…

‘I’m going to The Burrow,’ Draco said urgently. ‘Hermione… go check Folkvangr! Make sure Rose got home alright.’
‘No. I’ll go,’ Ron said hastily and he Apparated.

Ginny, Fleur and Bill were crossing the road, dodging a police-car as it sped into the village and screeched to a halt outside the school.

‘What’s going on?’ Ginny asked. Harry split off to update them.

‘I’ll go with you,’ Hermione said to Draco taking hold of his hand in readiness to Apparate. She caught a glimpse of Ginny – her hands flying to her face, and Bill and Fleur, open-mouthed in horror.

XXX

Staring down the drive towards The Burrow’s patched-up, crumbling visage everything seemed quiet, normal… the front door was wide open. But that was it. Nothing untoward.

‘Maybe Kai hallucinated?’ Draco said, a note of hope in his voice.

Hermione looked at him. His face was taut with exhaustion. Truth was, they were BOTH exhausted. The crazy fight at the school, the non-stop tension… Hermione yearned for normality. Boredom. An end to it all.

A gust of strong wind shook the trees bordering the driveway. The leaves rustled and shivered like a thousand whispering voices. The sky was a deep, darkening grey.

‘You guys okay?’ came Harry’s voice behind them.

They automatically loosened their hold of each other’s hands.

As they walked towards the house angry shouts and the tell-tale flash of wandfire resounded from the fields to their left…

‘Shit,’ Draco groaned, instantly detouring. Harry followed.

But Hermione’s eyes were drawn to The Burrow. Something had flickered in one of the top windows.

She instantly pricked, the roots of her hair tightening – and in that instant she knew it was true. She knew that Katya had murdered Ziff and Tuyen and was waiting.

But for who, exactly?

She’d tried so hard to be fair. To be kind, even, knowing she’d harmed this woman, stolen something precious from her... But in that instant she hated Katya Malfoy - with a scalding intensity that took her breath away.

She started to walk down the driveway, eyes fixed on the open doorway, holding her wand tightly.

More shouts, a cry of fury… and footsteps rushing behind her.

‘Hermione!’ It was Thelonious… She saw he had his wand at the ready. ‘Best you don’t go in alone.’

His large, dark eyes were soft and sad. He believed Kai, too.

‘It’s probably not the best time for the Minister for Magic to come for tea,’ Hermione smiled
‘Hold up!’ Draco yelled, sprinting down the drive with Harry – and Niko! Where had he come from?

Ron was dragging a trussed-up figure through the thicket. He was red-faced with the effort and his mouth was twisted with disgust… distress…

‘What’s happened?’ Hermione cried, suddenly fearing the worst. That was TANA…

‘She’s under Imperio… we stunned her,’ Harry quickly explained. ‘She never took Rose to Folkvangr.’

‘Gunter was obviously on his way to The Burrow and she attacked him,’ Niko said, his face puce and sweating… ‘Harry’s sent for Ginny and Molly. We’ve had to leave Gunter in the field.’

Tears automatically sprang into Hermione’s eyes…

‘It’s okay. He’s alive,’ Draco said quickly… But then he looked ahead to the open doorway. ‘I think Rose is here.’ His voice shook with emotion – clearly fearing the worst. ‘Let – let me go in first, Hermione.’

Bill was now striding purposefully towards them with Julius Merriman.

‘No, Draco, I’ll go in…’ Hermione said, trying to sound brave although her heart was skipping beats. She could sense Ron right behind them; ripples of hot tension flooding off him like thick ochre. Burnt mustard… Why, at this particular terrible moment, could she finally sense his colour?

Ziff was lying on the kitchen floor, his body crumpled around the leg of the kitchen table. Hermione caught a quick glimpse of his face. Stretched and gaunt-looking, teeth bared. She wished she hadn’t seen… Her eyes were drawn to Tuyen. She was sat upright against the kitchen cabinets, eyes wide open in shock. Hermione could see a reddish shadow falling to her shoulder, sliding down her side to the floor…

‘KATYA!’ Draco called, his voice laced with volcanic wrath. ‘Get the fuck out here - NOW!’

He was physically shaking. Crying. For some reason this hurt Hermione more than she could have ever imagined; like a physical pain scything through her.

The room behind her was beginning to feel crowded. Shadowy presences - stunned into silence by the horror of unfolding events.

‘ROSE?’ Hermione croaked. Her throat was suddenly so dry it hurt to speak. ‘Where are you?’

There was a furtive rustle from the living-room - and Draco was kicking at the door with mad-eyed rage. She could sense his whiteness spiraling wildly, out of control.

Oh god, she thought. He’s going to kill her. He’s going to kill his wife.

‘Draco…’ she said plaintively, blinded by hot tears, panic coursing through her veins.

‘But she’s in there…’ he gasped. ‘I know she is…. ROSE is in there. With HER.’ And he punched the door so hard she heard his bones crack but he didn’t care and carried on punching, again and again, until his knuckles were bloodied and the timber-frame was splitting…

‘OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR!’ he yelled, and he repeatedly threw his shoulder against it.
'PLEASE! Just open it, damn you!'

'For fuck's sake, Draco! Use magic!' Harry pleaded.

Draco looked at Harry with bloodshot eyes. 'I did… it didn't work.'

Hermione turned to face the others. Harry, Thelonious, Bill, Julius Merriman – and now Ginny and Molly were surveying the scene with haunted, tragic eyes.

Ron pointed his wand at the door. ‘Stand back, Draco. I’m going to blow it up! I’ll blow the whole fucking house down if I have to!’

But Draco kept his hand on the door-handle and bent his mouth to the door.

‘Please, Katya. Please let her go…’ he begged, sounding lost. ‘I’ll do anything you want. Just don’t hurt her. Please don’t hurt her.’

There was a tiny creaking sound. His face stiffened and Hermione held her breath...

And then nothing...

‘Come on, Katya! Just let us in! Stop fucking around!’ Draco persisted in agonised tones… but there was silence.

Except… for a moment it sounded like someone was laughing – a small, smothered laugh…

Hermione’s heart thumped in her chest. She could see Draco’s eyes darken… White-hot anger erupting inside of him - all-consuming, violent, unstoppable...

‘If you fucking hurt her, I’ll tear you limb from limb!’ he snarled. ‘Is that clear?... IS THAT FUCKING CLEAR?’ he repeated, kicking the door so hard his foot drove through the woodwork and a burst of colour-magic - blinding, nuclear - wrenched the the door off its hinges.

Hermione surged forwards and together they smashed head-first into a translucent barrier … a magical screen.

‘No!’ she shrilled, desperate to get in – desperate because she could see Katya holding Rose and she was presenting her to the tower painting – which seemed to loom larger and shinier and looked altogether much more real than Hermione had ever recalled it.

Rose’s arms were pinned to her waist but she craned her neck to look back at her mother – a dazed look on her face, like she was stuck inside a bad dream and couldn’t decide if she should wake up or not.

Katya snuck a furtive glance over her shoulder and her elfin features were light and laughing… yes, she was LAUGHING! A high, fluting laugh… like tinkling bells in a storm.

Hermione and Draco slammed their fists against the invisible barrier and now Ron and Harry were pelting it with spell after spell… but then Niko thrust them aside and a powerful wave of colour-magic crashed into the barrier.

‘Try again!’ Ron screeched. He could also see his daughter and his face was a torment.

Niko flung multiple electrifying bolts in quick succession – magic so powerful Hermione felt her hair spark and rise up from her scalp…
The painting was rippling, soft, flowing waves of colour, swirling… and a pall of dark hair followed by a familiar figure inched through the painting and unfurled to her correct height and size. HOW? Hermione wondered... The painting had been blacked-out. Impassable...

Dolores flung back her head and gave Hermione a haughty but pitying look as she thrashed her fists helplessly against the barrier, screaming for her child.

‘I warned you,’ she declared imperiously – she sounded distant, like she was still in picture-world. ‘I am bound to serve. THAT is my duty.’

She turned to Rose and took hold of her hands – they looked so small and white – and gently tugged her from Katya’s grasp.

‘NO!’ Hermione cried, her voice juddering with emotion. ‘Please don’t take her! I beg you! Take me instead!’

Dolores shook her head regretfully. ‘I can’t...It has to be Rose. These are my orders… I guess they always were.’

‘But it’s MADNESS!’ Draco scoffed. ‘You don’t have to do what that bastard tells you!’

‘But I do, Draco… I do.’ And her eyes swam with tears. ‘You once followed orders, too, my friend, not caring who got hurt by your actions – and your inactions… Never forget that.’

She clasped Rose to her chest and cast a final, sorrowful look at Hermione - and they were swallowed up into the painting.

Hermione gasped in horror and fell to her knees… Someone was behind her, holding her, a warm presence – but she squirmed free and crawled on her hands and knees into the centre of the living-room.

The barrier was gone and Katya Malfoy was sitting at the foot of the painting, pawing at the frame, shuddering with hilarity, her laughter rising and falling like a babbling brook.

Draco was standing in the room and shouting… but Hermione could barely hear what he was saying, could barely hear at all above the thud of her heart and the rush of breath in her chest… Katya’s face flinched and paled – but then she trailed off into sweet, girlish giggles, kissing the painting and clapping her hands with joy.

Draco put his hands to his head and closed his eyes… The laughter. It didn’t stop. It wouldn’t stop. It ran on and on… an incongruous torture.

‘SHUT UP!’ he bellowed. ‘SHUT THE FUCK UP!’ He crossed the room in a single stride, intent on entering the painting but Katya pulled out a wand and - YES. DAMN!… It was Ron’s wand – and Draco was flung backwards, slapping into the wall.

Katya held the wand aloft and stroked it – and for a moment there was a dark, lascivious look in her eye that shocked Hermione to the core.

Hermione threw herself across the room in an attempt to grab it but the wand was now pointing at her and Hermione knew that one false move and she was dead – and if she was dead she couldn’t look for her daughter…

must die.’

Katya’s eyes were round like saucers, hypnotic pools…

‘Where’s Rose? What you done with her?’ Ron bawled.

But Katya ignored him…

‘No Draco! DON’T!’ someone shouted – and it took a moment for Hermione to recognise Harry, who’d charged into the room and launched himself at Draco… but it was too late.

A stream of blood-red magic surged across the room and Katya was squealing and crying and curled up into a tight little ball, defenceless and shaking. Writhing in torment…

But Draco didn’t let up…. His stare was cold and pitiless and his wand-arm shook with the intense hatred coursing through him in that instant. Hermione felt irradiated by his fury, blinded by the shimmering white magic that glowed from him.

His wife was convulsing and mewling and for a moment Hermione felt nothing but sadness – sadness for her pain and her derangement, sadness that any of this had ever happened at all…

Because there were dire consequences. Minister Merriman had made that very clear… Unforgivables wouldn’t be tolerated.

And the timing couldn’t be worse, because Julius Merriman was standing at the open doorway, a remorseful look on his face.

‘Draco…’ Hermione said softly.

His wand clattered to the floor and he shook his wrist as though stung and looked at her, undone…

‘I’d – I’d have fucking killed her,’ Ron said boisterously to Julius Merriman, realising the consequences of what he’d just witnessed.

‘An understandable reaction,’ Julius sighed, ‘because Rose is your daughter… Mr Malfoy doesn’t have anywhere near your excuse to cast the Cruciatus Curse - and that includes, sadly, his friends being murdered. The law is the law. And it must stand.’ He eyed Draco dolefully. ‘I’m afraid I have to place you under immediate arrest, Mr Malfoy. It has to be Azkaban, I’m afraid, regardless of the circumstances.’

Draco didn’t look at him but continued to stare at Hermione, blocking out the furious roars of protest that resounded around The Burrow.

‘But the fucking circumstances can’t just be ignored!’ Harry cried. ‘She bloody deserved it!’

Except Katya Malfoy didn’t look like she deserved it all… she was a crouched, whimpering little thing, arms folded over her face to hide from the world.

‘At least give him time to go and find Rose,’ Molly Weasley implored. ‘Draco’s one of the only ones able to go into the paintings!’

‘You have to let him go!’ Ron protested heatedly. ‘It’s a nonsense if you don’t!’

Niko roughly shouldered Julius Merriman out of the way, knocking him into the doorpost… ‘Go get Gunter!’ he barked to anyone who bothered to take notice. ‘Pour potions down his throat if you have to! Get him to follow us!’
He grasped Draco by the elbow. ‘Fuck this shit, Draco! We’ve got a little girl to save!’

Draco offered Hermione his hand and pulled her off the floor.

He turned to face Julius. ‘Let me do this one thing… You can then do with me as you wish.’

XXX

Hermione was almost relieved to feel the dank, grey drizzle inside Katya’s painting on her cheeks, to be away from the wall of frightened, bewildered, angry eyes staring at them.

Draco immediately pulled her into a tight embrace and leant his forehead against hers. He was shivering uncontrollably.

‘You fool,’ she whispered and pressed her mouth to his. She gazed up at him, eyes brimming with tears.

‘I was just… just so fucking angry!’ He took a deep, shuddering breath.

‘I know,’ she said, wiping tears from his face.

‘And now I’ve blown it, Hermione… I’ve fucking screwed up big-time. Everything’s my fault. Everything that’s happened… I’m so, so sorry, beautiful, I really am.’ He grabbed her hands and brought them to his mouth and kissed them with trembling lips. ‘I fucking love you so much. I love you all… I don’t want to leave you alone.’

‘You won’t. We’ll be alright. It’ll be alright… We’ll find a way.’

He nodded but she could tell he didn’t believe it, didn’t know how...

Niko and Harry stood alongside them and Harry gave her a tender smile that almost broke her heart. And they moved deeper into the picture – dark urgency pushing them forwards, past the brown, brackish waters of the lake and the squat tower with its quaint, conical hat...

‘Everyone think about Rose!’ Harry commanded.

‘It’s fucking hard not to!’ Draco countered.

They held hands and the colours and images of picture-world skated by and they were thrown into a desolate, dusty landscape. The only features stretching to the far horizon were grey boulders and the picked-clean carcass of a long-dead animal.

Niko peered through the gossamer-grey veil between-worlds.

‘Nothing there!’ he complained. ‘Pitch fucking black.’

‘There has to be something!’ Harry said scornfully.

‘Yeah. Rose,’ Draco muttered. ‘Somewhere in there…’ His voice trailed off because it really was like the deepest, darkest night beyond the veil.

A swell of terror rose up inside of Hermione… She couldn’t bear it. Her little girl…

Without hesitation she stepped through the portal and landed in darkness – a darkness so dense it almost had texture and weight. She held her hand up to her face and saw nothing and briefly wondered if she’d died in transit. That the veil between worlds had been the final one. The veil to
But then a soothing warm white glowed beside her. And Harry – a soft, gentle green was behind her, and a tongue of flame, burning orange – Niko – was close by.

‘Where the bloody hell are we?’ Harry asked, his voice almost deadened by the darkness.

‘I think I know…’ Draco groaned.

And as he said it, Hermione knew too. The cellar at Malfoy Manor…

A slight shuffling movement and a frisson of fear trembled through her… footsteps and the clank of a door… A faint light speared the darkness and Rose’s small white face shone out of the gloom.

‘Mummy?’ she called, half-hoping, half-fearing – but a hand fell on her shoulder and she was gone.

XXX

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“THE BANDSTAND” by A-HA

“USED TO” by WIRE

“NIHILIST BLUES” by BRING ME THE HORIZON

"HURRICANE LAUGHTER" by FONTAINES D.C.

"ROSEATE" by IOANNA GIKI

"EXIT MUSIC (FOR A FILM)" by RADIOHEAD

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
64. When Hell Itself Breathes Out

There was no way to follow Rose. She’d been swallowed into the darkness and the cellar door was firmly locked, sealing them inside.

Hermione could barely think straight… barely breath. A firestorm raged through her; anger, frustration… dread.

But once they’d exhausted every possible way to escape the cellar – magic, brute force, lock-picking with only faintly-glowing wands to guide them – she sat against the cold, stone wall and an eerie calm descended on her.

Why would Dolores – or indeed ‘Grandmaster’ – want to hurt Rose? she asked herself. What would be the point? She was just a little girl… She’d never hurt anybody.

No… there had to be another reason Dolores had brought her to Malfoy Manor. Something less… fatal.

She had to tell herself this, or she’d run mad.

‘Try the door again,’ Draco said wearily to Niko.

Niko proceeded to fling vivid bolts of colour-magic that briefly illuminated their cold, dank surroundings before dwindling into the shadows.

‘It’s no good. It’s too dark for any serious colour-magic and your Lumos thingies are pathetic!’ Niko moaned.

He was right, Hermione thought glumly. Their magic had been blunted.

Harry pointed at the wall. ‘The painting’s gone!’

Hermione followed his gaze. ‘Which means we’re well and truly stuck.’

‘Stuck in here, with god knows what happening to Rose out there! It’s a shitshow!’ Draco groaned, slumping onto the floor beside her. She could feel his misery exuding from every pore.

‘They’ve obviously lured us here as part of a larger plan, using Rose as bait; so I doubt they’ll want to hurt her,’ Hermione said, surprised at her coolness of tone. ‘That’d defeat their purpose.’

Draco gave her a bemused look. ‘And what PURPOSE is that then?’

‘Yeah… What purpose?’ Harry cried in exasperation pinging yet another futile spell at the door, ‘because it’s not like we can go anywhere or do anything! We’re totally trapped!’
Hermione’s brief bout of calm instantly dissipated as the implications of that sank in...

‘Bugger… That’s it! WE - as in us four - we’ve been hived-off deliberately, separated… And the best way to do that was to lure us into a painting! There’s not many witches and wizards who can travel through paintings, are there? Only ones like us – with colour-magic.’

‘It’s revenge served cold!’ Niko grunted. ‘Salvedra really didn’t like us shutting him into a little, black box, did he?’ He gazed disconsolately at their surroundings. ‘Like for like, I’d say…’

‘But they can’t keep us locked in here forever, can they? … Unless the plan is to torture us to death by boredom,’ Harry added with a snort of derision.

‘No… there has to be a broader PURPOSE to it all,’ Hermione mused. ‘We’re just not seeing it.’

‘Okay… what about this?’ Draco said with fresh urgency. ‘Think back to the shit that went down at the school today… Torquil told Harry it was some kind of hostage plot to get hold of Anna’s papers. But then it went tits up when Hermione screwed the parade…’

His large, grey eyes moved from face to face as he spoke.

‘What if this is unfinished business? What if Rose was taken to persuade us to hand over the recipe for Dark Flux?’

‘Well… Sylvestra certainly thinks we – I - have Anna’s papers,’ Hermione said, feeling distinctly uncomfortable. ‘Oh hell... I’ve just had a horrible thought...They're at my parents' house with Binta! And Ziff was the secret-keeper…’

‘And now he’s dead they're unprotected,’ Draco sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose as though warding off a headache. ‘We need to warn them. Right away. Can you send Binta a Patronus?’

‘I can try!’ But try as she might, nothing came…

Harry tried, too. A thin sliver of wispy light bubbled from the tip of his wand, but was promptly extinguished.

‘Fucking hell,’ he cursed, trying again, then again…

‘Okay… so - it looks like we’re properly blocked,’ Draco said in resigned tones, ‘but thinking about it, Hermione, Sylvestra doesn’t actually know the papers are with your parents! So they’re probably fine!’ He was trying to sound calm, but Hermione wasn’t fooled.

Harry was far from calm… a restless, prowling figure, pacing in the darkness.

‘But what if they ask someone who DOES know?’ Harry countered, ‘someone like RON? They took his daughter, too, remember?’

‘Does Ron know where these papers are?’ Niko demanded.

‘Well. He had to know why we cast the Fidelius Charm on my parents' house,’ Hermione explained, ‘…seeing as he knows where they live.’ She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to suppress the panic rising up inside of her… ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, looking at their pale, scared faces in the ill-lit gloom, ‘but - I can’t see any reason why Ron wouldn’t go and get those papers knowing his child is in danger… and - I can’t blame him, either.’

‘The problem’s more if they insist on going with him – or pressure Ron into revealing where your
parents live and go themselves,’ Draco frowned. ‘I’m guessing Sylvestra would be the go-between? They’ve met, haven’t they?’

She nodded.

‘But if we can’t cast a Patronus to warn him, what can we do?’ Harry said helplessly.

‘Lucky I brought this little beauty from Folkvangr then, isn’t it?’ Niko grinned, brandishing a small piece of corundum. His teeth flashed white out of the darkness.

‘It won’t work,’ Hermione sighed dejectedly.

‘Damn…’ Niko fumed, turning the rock over in his hands and repeating the necessary incantation, before furiously shoving it back in his pocket. ‘Then we’re back to finding a way out! THINK, guys! THINK!’

‘Do we tunnel underground?’ Harry said sardonically.

But Draco suddenly jumped to his feet and slapped his ear to the far wall.

‘What are you doing?’ Hermione asked as he inched his way along the wall, tapping the brickwork at regular intervals.

‘I’ve got a weird feeling this cellar was once part of the old kitchen.’ He tapped the wall again, but this time more forcefully, and then listened... ‘It’s a false wall!’

‘Please say there’s a door behind it,’ Hermione begged.

‘I doubt it, but there might be a fireplace.’

‘All well and good, Draco,’ Harry remonstrated, ‘but it won’t be on the Floo Network! And even if it was, these bastards would disable it.’

‘Of course, but that’s no reason we can’t go UP it!’ Draco declared boldly.

‘Oh for fuck’s sake,’ Harry griped. ‘There’s EVERY reason! None of us would fit!’

‘Maybe not you guys, but I can!’ Niko chortled, feverishly attacking the wall, twisting and loosening brick after brick. ‘As a CROW I could easily squeeze through a tight little flue – and once I’m in open air I can use the corundum!’

They didn’t need further convincing. Everyone immediately set to wresting bricks out of place with their bare hands and digging into the cracking cement with their wands.

‘Stand back!’ Hermione commanded as she forced a Reducto. It was much weaker than usual but she managed to jolt the old brickwork and a modest rupture tore through the loosened bricks accompanied by a flurry of dust. Everyone immediately set to tearing off hunks of crumbling stone and a dark space, dominated by an almighty hanging hood, gradually emerged.

‘Right,’ Niko said clapping his hands enthusiastically. ‘I’ll make a pass up the spout, see where this thing leads to – and contact Ron. Tell him to warn Hermione’s parents.’

‘Except… Ron might still be at The Burrow where they haven’t got any corundum,’ Draco pointed out. ‘But there’s definitely a rock at Wisteria Cottage and Henrik was headed there. Maybe try him first?’
‘But most of the kids are at Wisteria Cottage. The last thing we want is them latching on to Rose being taken!’ Hermione said.

‘Yeah, that’d scare the pants off them,’ Harry agreed.

‘Why not try Shell Cottage, instead?’ Hermione suggested. Arlene, Gabby, Elizaveta, Tansy and Melissa – were convalescing or caring for infants. They could be trusted to sound the alarm…

Moments later, a large, black bird with bright blue eyes had shot up the chimney in a flurry of wings.

It didn’t take long for Draco to get agitated. ‘He’s taking ages!’

‘He’s only been ten minutes!’ Harry retorted.

‘DAMN. We should have mentioned the wards,’ Draco grimaced, pushing his hand through his hair. ‘They’ve likely been changed – Salvedra strikes me as particularly paranoid - and if anyone tries to stage some stupid rescue mission they’re gonna get mulched!’

A glum silence descended on them. It was the first time Salvedra had been mentioned by name, but Hermione knew he was here at Malfoy Manor. She could sense him – a dark, brooding presence.

Niko returned looking sooty and dishevelled. ‘Spoke to Arlene. Such a sensible lady… She’s dispatched Tansy and Melissa to Ron…’

‘Great. But did you also happen to see a way WE can get out?’ Draco muttered. ‘We can’t do Rose much good stuck down here!’

‘The flue leads past the kitchens to the roof.’ Niko pondered this… ‘I can probably extend the opening from up top – make it more navigable - and you guys could then crawl up…’

Hermione gawped at Niko in horror, not sure she fancied a steep, slippery ascent in an enclosed, dirty space. But then he was gone.

‘We’ll be fine,’ Draco murmured. ‘I’ll be right behind you.’

XXX

‘We could do with backup,’ Harry grimaced, peering cautiously over the drain-pipes that lined the roof of Malfoy Manor. ‘That’s Josep guarding the front gates… and if we assume Salvedra and Dolores are also here that’s an awful lot of firepower!’

Hermione tiptoed closer and stared out at dusky lawns and the patterned perfection of Narcissa’s rose garden. She looked right to the lake. It reflected the dying dregs of a wan, weary-looking sun.

The sun somehow reflected her mood… sombre, tired…

But she was all too aware of the heated panic palpating beneath her calm exterior – a pan of water quietly bubbling on the stove with the controls deliberately dialled down.

She MUSTN’T succumb. Her daughter’s life might depend on it.

‘I felt so happy here – with you,’ Draco said, wistfully gazing across the rooftop to the vast open sky, streaked with deepening indigo as evening set in… ‘Feels like forever ago.’

She gazed at him, captivated by his winsome, nostalgic expression and then quickly expunged the
recurring image in her head of Draco’s Crucio against Katya - his one-way ticket to Azkaban - desperately fighting the anxious swirl that instantly surged inside of her.

She couldn’t think about that… Not now.

‘There’s someone by the lake,’ Niko said; an almost welcome distraction.

Draco squinted into the dying embers of the sun hanging low over Folborough Hill, dropping his eyes to his mother’s Plangentine grove abutting the lakeside path.

‘Ah, yes... now I see him... weaving through the trees… It's that fucker, Asusto!’

‘Guarding Grandmaster,’ Harry said sarcastically, ‘though it's not like he needs it. He's stupidly strong.’

‘We should split up,’ Niko said impatiently. He was in a bloodthirsty, go-getting mood, Hermione could tell. ‘Two to take out the guards, and two to sneak into the house and steal back Rose.’

‘Two’s too few to go inside,’ Harry muttered. ‘Like I said, we’re gonna need help.’

There was a clattering on the tiles behind them and everyone swung around, poised to strike… It was a skinny, black cat who promptly skipped towards Draco and coiled itself around his legs.

Hermione’s heart was racing. Even though she’d set up Cave Inimicum as a rudimentary alarm system, the cat had scared her.

In her heart it was Sylvestra she feared most. Their personal animosity… Her rapid departure from St Botolph’s playground had the distinct feeling of a small hiatus in their recent string of encounters, rather than an admission of defeat.

‘Maybe we could ask the cat to spy INSIDE for us?’ Niko laughed.

‘That’d be cool,’ Draco agreed. ‘If only we had a stash of Muggle spyware to hand!’

‘I know a neat stealth spell, actually,’ Niko said thoughtfully.

‘Salvedra would notice,’ Hermione interjected before they got too far in recruiting a feline super-spy to their cause. She gave Niko a regretful look. ‘Truth is, we’re surrounded by expert colour-magic practitioners. So I think we stick to old-fashioned wand-magic as much as possible – it’s more difficult to detect. And we don’t want them working out we’ve escaped…’

‘They will, though – and sooner than we’d like,’ Draco admitted, lips pointing downwards. ‘Harry’s right. We need backup.’

‘…which we won’t be getting, if they’ve doctored the wards,’ Harry said. ‘And I’ve already tried Apparating… No chance.’

Draco’s eyes drifted to Lucius Malfoy’s mausoleum as he absentmindedly stroked the cat.

‘There’s an old story about a secret ward-busting entrance to Malfoy Manor, actually. The Spurlock Gate…’ he said. ‘Wish I’d been more curious when I was a kid and tried to hunt it down! … Legend has it that a tunnel passed between the estate and an ancient oak tree in Folborough Forest where Royalist soldiers were camped-out during the Civil War, hiding from Cromwell’s men. The Malfoys were Cavaliers to the core, apparently, so they opened up the Spurlock Gate, offering sanctuary to the Royalists for whenever Cromwell’s guys got too close for comfort.’ He
studied the garden with interest. ‘I’m trying to think where Milton told me the gate was meant to be… I think it was close to where the Mausoleum now stands.’ He looked at the others. ‘Might be worth a shot?

‘But we’re not leaving, Draco,’ Hermione said, allowing her inner turmoil to briefly percolate upwards. ‘Not without ROSE!’

‘God, no! I was thinking more of our friends coming to help us… We should tell Shell Cottage about it.’

Moments later he was talking to Elizaveta on the corundum.

Hermione looked down at the lake and caught sight of a dark figure flitting between the Plangentine trees… but when she looked again, he was gone, before reappearing at the furthest point of the grove.

Asusto’s ability to shift so swiftly to invisible made him a particularly dangerous foe. How could they keep track of him?

She quickly summoned a small handful of bluebell flames and sealed them into a hastily conjured glass ball… She concentrated hard, focusing – as best she could in the poor evening light – on Asusto.

The tiny blue flames jerked from her outstretched palm and spun into the air… She guided them towards the shadowy figure below while he faced the lake. She’d attached a homing spell to the flames so that Asusto could never shake them off, even if he chose to render himself invisible.

His back was now illuminated by the dancing blue flames - and yet he was oblivious…

‘Fuck. It’s Ron!’ Harry yelped.

‘So soon?’ Draco cried, dashing to his side.

The two wizards lay on their fronts, almost dangling over the edge of the roof, while Hermione hunkered down next to a hulking chimney-pot. They watched as Ron was ushered into Malfoy Manor through the front gates by Josep.

A soft mist swirled through the garden, a pale blueish grey in the dimming light. Ron’s face looked gaunt and pale and he was hunched-over in a bulky, black robe, inching forwards in trepidation.

Hermione clenched her hands anxiously. He looked terrified.

He was holding a package in his hands, clasped against his robe. Anna’s papers… But he came to a halt halfway up the drive, determined not to progress further. Josep said something to him and Ron listened intently, then nodded.

Hermione couldn’t help but think back to how Ron had dismissed her worries about Dark Flux and her quest with Draco as meaningless, overblown - and now here he was...

A figure was approaching, a tall dark shadow leading the way…

‘Sylvestra,’ Draco muttered. He shot Hermione a curious, grey-eyed glance. ‘Thought she’d be hand-holding Ron when he went to get the papers?’

‘They’re under-manned,’ Harry decided. ‘You guys did too good a job thinning their ranks at the
Yes, that was possible, Hermione thought as she watched Sylvestra in a flowing grey robe, her ashen hair fanning out like a peacock in its pomp behind her as she swept up the drive towards Ron.

Ron visibly cringed and held the package out towards her. They were talking… but what about? Hermione wondered. She strained to pick out what they were saying… anything. But they were too far away.

Ron nodded as she spoke and then opened his mouth to reply.

What if he said something dangerous? she worried. What if he leaked the whereabouts of her parents?

Hermione instantly targeted him with her wand and whispered: ‘Mimblewimble…’

It was the first thing that came to mind in the circumstances… a childish tongue-tying curse. However, even from her perch on the rooftops she could see it had worked, judging by Ron’s slack-jawed wonder and confusion at his sudden inability to string two coherent words together.

Sylvestra started shouting at him … loud, squawks of rage that sent the birds rushing from the trees in the Plangentine grove.

Ron babbled back and she smacked him hard in the face.

He promptly lost his footing and toppled over and then cowered against the perfectly-manicured topiary as she advanced with menacing intent.

Hermione was desperately trying to think of a way to intervene without drawing attention to themselves - mindful that Josep was already sniffing the air suspiciously - when an electrifying crackle of magic resounded and a powerful gust of wind almost blew Sylvestra over.

Hermione gave Niko a shirty look, and he feigned innocence with a nonchalant shrug…

But Josep was now on full alert – eyes flipping from pink to black – as he cocked his head up, down, side to side – trying to identify the source of the colour-magic…

‘Well, that’s fucking blown it!’ Harry snarled disdainfully, as Sylvestra hoisted Ron up from the ground, his voluminous robe billowing in the wind, and dragged him towards Malfoy Manor.

A brief blur of black spun away at breakneck speed into the elm trees that stood guard at the entrance to Malfoy Manor.

‘Clever!’ Niko exclaimed, smacking his lips with relish. ‘Gunter hitched a ride in Ron’s robe!’ And with that he changed form and soared into the sky.

That could only mean they’d hatched a plan, Hermione thought - meaning they weren’t alone… That they had a fighting chance of rescuing Rose and now, Ron, as the heavy door to Malfoy Manor swung shut behind him.

‘We need to get inside the house RIGHT NOW,’ Draco yelled. ‘They’ve got the damned papers and Rose hasn’t been released! If Ron negotiated an exchange he’s been double-crossed!’

‘No, not yet,’ Hermione said, watching her ball of bluebell flames flitting between the trees of the
Plangentine Grove. Asusto had moved into stealth mode…

‘Why wait? We need to find Rose and set her free!’

He was right, of course he was – and yet Hermione feared more for Ron than Rose… HE was a spare. But Rose was a Seer... despite her protestations otherwise. And powerful.

Maybe Salvedra never intended returning her? Dolores had hinted at Rose’s value. Ephraim, too, had warned her.

And Salvedra also wanted HER. And Harry. Even Draco... for his wacko Vitruvian Man project. Sure, they’d been lured to the cellar as punishment, to be sidelined; but maybe he had further plans for them, too? His labs at Akhr Makan…

All this was possible, while he lived.

They’d failed once, they couldn’t afford to fail again. His life, his existence, the threat he posed had to end right now… Tonight.

‘I think we take out Asusto and Josep first,’ she said under her breath. ‘That way if we DO have friends coming to help us, they don’t run straight into trouble.’

‘I know Malfoy Manor like the back of my hand, Hermione! Every nook and cranny. Every hiding-place,’ Draco argued. ‘If we get inside we can at least find out WHERE they’ve got Rose… Even IF they have her, because Dolores might have whisked her away!’

This gave Hermione pause for thought but she moved quickly back to her earlier thinking. ‘You also know the terrain out here, Draco… If we hunt down Asusto and Josep…’ she didn’t need to say KILL them, it was an obvious corollary, ‘the house – and whoever’s in it – are unprotected. We can then move indoors, find Rose and Ron, and – and…’

She ran out of road at this point because she couldn’t actually imagine killing Salvedra. That was the problem... So much power… It’d take ALL of them. MORE!

‘I agree with Hermione,’ Harry said. ‘Let’s sit tight a minute and wait for Niko to come back.’

But five minutes passed and there were birds – large, black shapes in the darkness – shifting from tree to tree, moving through the gardens – but Niko didn’t return and Asusto, his bluebell flames bouncing jauntily, had fully circumnavigated the lake as he kept guard.

Guarding WHAT exactly? occurred to Hermione.

‘What’s in the lake?’ she asked Draco.

Draco was now watching Asusto with a knitted brow. ‘Dunno, but he keeps doubling back. Checking…’

As he spoke, a dark ripple surged like an arrowhead across the centre of the lake, followed by a faint patina of bubbles… and then the waters stilled.

‘Looking at the lake?’ They wheeled around. ‘Some kind of beastie’s moved in…’ Niko was standing, hand on hips, a concerned frown on his face.

Gunter was beside him, looking bruised and broken, his reddish eyes drooping with fatigue.

‘You shouldn’t have come, Gunter,’ Hermione said anxiously.
‘I had to… you guys need help.’ He winced as though talking was difficult and his hand immediately clamped to his jaw. ‘And it looks worse than it is… Got hit with a nasty jinx by that lovely sister of mine. Felt like the ground jumped up and hit me – and kept on hitting me for a very long time.’

‘We’ve done a quick fly-through of the house,’ Niko said. ‘Salvedra’s turned the place into a massive cobweb… sticky shit everywhere! We couldn’t see him but he’s there alright… Malevolent fucker. No sign of Dolores, though. She might have fucked off already.’

‘We saw Rose, but we couldn’t get her because Sylvestra was a bit too close for comfort,’ Gunter said in gentler tones. ‘But from what we could see she’s peaceful. Sleeping.’

‘Sleeping?’ Hermione asked in tremulous tones.

Niko nodded. ‘She’s alive…’

‘And Ron?’ Harry asked.

‘Sylvestra was guarding downstairs…’ Gunter broke into a grin. ‘She was thumbing through the stack of parchment Ron brought and getting very frustrated! Binta’s cast a spell on the runic stuff – changed loads of letters round, that sort of thing.’

Everyone seemed unduly amused by this, Hermione thought, but Anna’s papers represented an important scientific milestone… crucial knowledge.

‘Right. We’re thinking of taking out Asusto and Josep before we go get Rose,’ Harry said in business-like tones.

‘Where’s Josep got to?’ Draco asked, alarmed.

‘Leave him to us,’ Niko asserted, ’you go handle the other guy.’

‘Let’s use the Mausoleum as a meeting point,’ Draco said, pointing out the gleaming, metallic monstrosity jutting out over the brow of the hill as the land swooped up and then fell away from the lake.

‘How do we get down without anyone noticing?’ Harry asked, eyeing the precipitous drop.

‘Without dying, you mean?’ Draco added. ‘There’s probably an old broomstick stashed in the stables… We can Accio it and take turns.’

XXX

Hermione gingerly stepped off the broomstick relinquishing her grip on Draco. They’d landed in the heart of the Plangentine grove.

‘Asusto’s on the path at the head of the lake,’ Harry whispered, peeling away from a cluster of stringy, black tree-trunks. He quickly cast a Muffliato.

Hermione peered through a narrow chink in the trees. The moon was low and limpid, shining on the smooth glassy surface of the lake.

Asusto’s tall, angular form shadowed by the bluebell flames dipped from view as he rounded a bend of the lake and then re-emerged standing at the water’s edge… there was a strange hesitancy to his movements as he stared long and hard at his reflection in the still, dark water.
'Oh, fuck…' Draco muttered. ‘He’s seen the flames.’

Sure enough, Asusto instantly began looking around, eyes slitted as he peered into the dark depths of the Plangentine grove.

Hermione held her breath and could feel Draco tensing beside her. Harry automatically crouched low as Asusto’s gaze passed over the area of the grove where they were standing.

Asusto pulled out a small slab of corundum from his pocket and edged away from the lake, plunging into the shadows afforded by a clump of bushes.

A slow, silent swoosh of water surged briefly through the waters of the lake and then vanished…

‘He’s probably telling them to check the bloody cellar,’ Harry groaned. ‘All hell’s about to break loose…’ He turned a pained, pale face towards them. ‘We need to finish him off fast before the next load of trouble heads our way.’

Hermione nodded. She never liked the feeling of KNOWING they had to kill someone, but in this instance, Harry was right.

Harry focused on Asusto through a gap in the branches and Hermione could see the end of his fwoofer-feathered wand pointing in Asusto’s direction. He had to get this spot-on or Asusto would be on to them…

There was a sudden flurry of movement and Harry yelped in frustration. ‘SHITTING FUCK! Where did he go?’

He was right! Where was he? The Bluebell flames had disappeared. Except... the canopy of leaves above them was now bathed in a soft blue glow.

Hermione spun around and detonated an explosive curse that clashed headlong with a similar spell headed their way … A spurt of flame instantly shot skywards, setting ablaze the foliage of the Plangentine tree bowed directly overhead.

Draco grabbed Hermione’s hand, jolting her backwards, and cast a Serpensortia… A snake flew forwards, colliding with an unseen figure - Asusto - who fell to the floor shrieking in fear… He instantly re-materialised, unable to hold his invisible form, as he frantically lashed out at the snake with his boot and shuffled backwards as fast as he could.

Hermione cast a conjunctivitis curse to add to his confusion and the bluebell flames shook frenetically as he thrashed his head from side to side in fear, unable to see where the snake had got to.

Draco pressed their advantage, unleashing a second snake that crawled up Asusto’s trouser-leg. Asusto squealed in panic and then screeched in pain, arching his back as the snake headed higher. He plunged his hands into the waistband of his trousers to wrest the snake free and leapt to his feet.

A blast of wind suddenly shook the trees and charred leaves fell like ashy snow and twigs and branches sharply snapped as Josep, a furious, vengeful force, clattered towards them, smashing the snakes with an almighty growl and a blinding white flash…

Asusto used the distraction to make a run for it with Draco chasing him down, slamming stunners into his path, severing trees that toppled like nine-pins, crashing to the ground, forcing Asusto to keep changing course.
‘RUN!’ Harry yelled at Hermione, targeting Josep with his wand and then ducking as a monumental blast of magic slammed into the trees, cracking their trunks wide open, spraying splinters the size of daggers.

Josep, eyes like hollow, dark pits, magic dancing at the tips of his fingers like tiny white flames, swept towards them and stamped his foot. The ground beneath them suddenly churned, tossing them high into the air.

Hermione instinctively flung a Confringo in Josep's direction but he snapped a shield into place and a jet of raw magic whistled past her ear.

‘Fumos!’ she cried, glimpsing Josep bite the air in frustration as a thick wall of clagging, grey smoke sprung up, but a further shot of magic sucked the oxygen from her lungs and her feet scuffed the earth as she was jettisoned into clear air. It was an unsettling sensation like railings she’d been leaning against had suddenly given way, except the railings were the solid ground beneath her feet and her fall was interrupted almost immediately by body-slamming contact with the rough bark of a tree.

‘GET OUT OF HERE, HERMIONE!’ Harry shouted through the smoke… ‘I CAN HANDLE THIS!’

She didn’t pause to look back, jarring her ankle as she ran along the path beside the lake. But there wasn’t time to care about pain because she could hear the distant din of spells thumping into targets - that she hoped didn’t include Draco - from the far side of the lake.

Hermione ran like she’d never run before, feet skidding as she cornered the far end of the lake, scaring a family of albino peacocks who stared at her with startled, pop-eyes, tail-feathers bristling in outrage.

She could sense a brooding magic swirling in the dark waters that ran alongside her… no time to think about that either, as a sharp cry rang out that she recognised: Draco.

The peacocks trooped behind her, triggered into uncharacteristic curiosity by her dramatic entrance into their lives.

A feast of lights – powerful rolling blasts of colour-magic – illuminated the furthest tip of the Plangentine grove to her right and she could see the tiny blue flames hovering behind Asusto as he swerved between tree trunks.

Her pace slowed when she hit a boggy expanse that occupied the no-man’s land between the lake and the forest at this, the less-visited section of the estate, furthest from the hulking manor-house, currently shrouded in darkness.

She almost tripped into the cloying, sticky mud that seemed to grab at her ankles as she passed, urging her to fall, but managed to skirt the worst of it - finally entering the forest.

A line of short, stubby bushes cordoned off the swamp section from the woods. The grounds here were wild and unruly - left to nature and much more alive than the moribund neatness of Narcissa’s carefully-honed gardens.

Asusto was seeking Draco, wand raised to blast him at the first given opportunity.

But where was he?

Hermione’s heart sank. She’d heard him cry out. Was he hurt?... Or worse?
Asusto impatiently waved his wrist and a glowing yellow ball, like a small sun, exploded into life in front of him, lighting up the area around him… but still no sign of Draco.

Hermione ventured a little deeper into the forest, but the sharp crack of a twig drew Asusto’s attention.

To her relief, the family of peacocks strutted eagerly into the copse, brightly illuminated by Asusto’s magical lantern.

Hermione surreptitiously whispered a spell to enlarge the bush she was hiding behind and watched with bated breath as Asusto dismissed the peacocks with a grunt of disdain – before stepping closer to the spot where she herself was hidden.

Hit him with the killing curse, she thought to herself… he’s within range. It’d be the work of a moment! But her wand-hand was slippery with sweat as she levelled it at Asusto’s lean frame, dark against the light that now hovered behind him, sneaking closer and closer.

There was a gaseous belching sound from the swamp behind her!

She instantly squeaked in alarm and then cursed herself as Asusto sprang towards her.

The peacocks screeched and fanned out their tails, circling wildly.

‘Oppugno!’ Hermione yelled, targeting Asusto – and the peacocks herded together and drove forwards, charging at him with breath-taking bravado.

Asusto flapped his hand and a fireball was flung into their midst setting one poor peacock ablaze. It screamed and gyrated round and round, a swirling arc of fire… But the remaining peacocks accelerated their advance, butting Asusto backwards with multiple sharp jabs of their beaks, barging into him, corralling him in a whirlwind of white towards the swamp.

A glugging splash heralded his arrival followed by a prolonged scream of terror as he tried to fight off the peacocks who continued to attack, pecking ferociously as though feeding on him, pushing him deeper and deeper into the mud which bubbled and squelched excitably.

Fighting on all fronts, Asusto whimpered in desperation and then stared with pale, limpid eyes as a tall, silver-haired figure emerged from the trees.

Draco was hobbling a little and his face was streaked with blood. His wand hung loose in his hand; seemingly nonchalant. He gazed at Asusto - weary, contemptuous - and raised his wand.

Hermione expected a shot of green light, but instead he muttered a single word and a glistening flash, akin to a jet of water, leapt from his wand and Asusto began struggling and shouting… ‘No! NOOO!…’

He was sucked into the swamp with startling rapidity; a swell of slurping, smothering mud crashed over his sleek, black hair … and he was dragged down into the swamp’s dark depths.

The peacocks gazed around at themselves and the tall, dark trees and the still, brown mud and then scuttled back to the path, cooing and bobbing as they toddled in white-fanned formation around the lake and out of view.

Draco continued to stare at the swamp. ‘For Miguel,’ he murmured.

Hermione dashed from the bush straight into Draco’s arms.
‘What happened? Are you alright?’ she asked, quickly mouthing Vulnérā Sanentūr to staunch the bleeding from a gash on the side of his head.

‘I’m good…’ he said, although from the state of him, he clearly wasn’t. She cleaned his face as best she could, unable to resist peppering him with kisses.

She was brimming with emotion, suddenly cognizant of the warm, weighty feel of his arms around her… silently praying that he wouldn’t be taken away from her, that these moments weren’t amongst the last time she’d be close to him.

But she couldn’t succumb, she thought…. Not now. Not here. Too much to do…

‘It’s okay, beautiful,’ he grinned. ‘We’re still here. Together.’ And he pressed his lips against hers.

A rushing roar from the far side of the lake pulled them back to reality. The Plangentine grove was on fire, the trees flaring like orange beacons, lighting up the night sky.

‘Harry…’ Hermione said, fearing he was caught up in the inferno – only to realise that he’d likely caused it, as she spotted him running the length of the grove, trailing flames from his wand, whipping up a firestorm in his wake.

He was heading towards the rising ground that led to the Mausoleum.

Hermione followed his progress with her gaze and almost skipped with joy as a slender shot of red, glistening like a chain of rubies, travelled high into the sky from the direction of the Mausoleum.

‘They’ve made it!’ Draco beamed. ‘The Spurlock Gate exists!’

Hand-in-hand they sprinted towards the scarlet spear of light. There was no path on this side of the lake and the grassy gradient was steep and slippery and they kept tripping, hauling each other upwards and onwards.

Hermione cast a glance across the lake. The low-lying grey mist that had wreathed Narcissa’s rose garden and encircled the front gates to Malfoy Manor was now hovering low over the water, but she spied a second figure - closing in on Harry.

Her breath caught in her throat, fearing it was Josep – except this was someone taller, rangier… and as the fire raged she could make out his face and his big, bushy beard. It was Niko…

‘Come on,’ Draco panted, pulling her along. But as he spoke a dazzling white flash tore through the skies and a deafening thunderbolt forced them to the ground head-first, hands clapped over their ears. The world shook and the lake bubbled furiously. A ferocious drumming beat rumbled overhead and threatened to push through the ground and swallow them whole – all at the same time.

Hermione prised open her eyes and the world had changed; a jarring tear in reality. The light was bending, trembling… she could see a myriad swirling threads, weaving and knotting and tugging at the earth beneath them, curling back the waters of the lake in brisk eddying swirls of churning froth.

She could sense the piercing black eyes – too many eyes – of the wizard now crouched on top of Malfoy Manor and summoned the courage to look at him… except this was not a HIM in the normal sense, but a creature, a beast – vast, multi-limbed, his eyes a depthless black like a never-ending well of sorrows and slights and a desire to avenge a world of woes that he believed had been inflicted on him and his kind.
‘You’re a monster,’ she breathed, unable to tear her eyes away from the face that presented itself in her mind… so close and yet far away… His power made her brain ache and sent sharp, shocking tremors tingling like a cold, hard shudder through each and every nerve of her body.

‘Black eyes. You have black eyes…’ Draco said, tenderly touching her cheek.

‘He’s on the roof,’ she cried.

A sheet of rain fell from the sky instantly drenching them. Raindrops like boulders smashed them to the ground and a second round of blinding bright lightning and the insistent rumble of thunder had her shivering with cold and gasping for breath.

Harry was climbing the bank but a stumpy, compact figure – Josep - was lurking ahead, arms wide to greet him. Hermione realised she could see him but Harry was blithely running straight towards him.

‘Draco…’ she said, teeth chattering, the rain bouncing off her face as she spoke, ‘Josep… he’s waiting…’ She pointed at the hunched figure hiding in the dip beyond the crest of the hill.

Draco shook his head. ‘I can’t see him!’

‘He’s there!’ She jumped up and fought her way through the rain – and it was a fight. It seemed to have a life-force of its own, determined to push her back, to press against every cell in her body and grind her downwards.

But he didn’t know, Harry didn’t know – maybe he thought he’d killed Josep already? Trapped him in the burning grove?

One hundred metres… eighty… fifty… and now he was just ahead, his back to her. She called on her purple - lush, swollen, pulsating with life – no point in restraint anymore, he knew she was here and was watching her beadily, screaming his rage … when a booming battle-cry resounded in her ear and Draco was hurling a curse at Josep – ‘SECTUMSEMPRA!’ he bellowed, his voice breaking with the strain.

Josep was flung high into the sky, shrieking in agonised shock, blood spilling from his body, his face, his mouth – and a pulsating burst of pure, pristine white spiraled him higher still with tremendous force, corkscrewing him into the air, ripping him apart…

‘Ah! I can see him now!’ Draco announced in almost cheery tones beside her. He gave her a lopsided, almost apologetic smile. ‘I had to cast blind!’

Harry stood on the brow of the hill and stared, mouth open, as Josep’s body fell to the ground before him. Niko pointed to Hermione and Draco and they scooted down the side of the hill onto the path by the lake.

The rain fell thicker, faster – sloshing down Hermione’s face, blinding her. Harry and Niko ploughed onwards, almost beaten back - and a thin, reedy scream projected high and piercing from Malfoy Manor...

Hermione slipped her hand into Draco’s, ready to run, because she could sense a stirring, a gathering, an explosive force poised to burst forth.

‘Come on!’ she yelled, running as fast as she could from the lake, heading towards the Mausoleum. ‘Run Harry, run!’ she screeched into the driving rain, urging him on.
She glanced back and Harry had changed course and was running towards them, his legs moving like pistons, hair soaked into tufted spikes by the rain... Niko was gaining ground but a watery eruption reared up behind him, throwing him forwards so that he skidded face first across the grass.

It was as though half the water in the lake had funneled upwards into a vast black wave – a rising tsunami, climbing higher and higher, threatening to smash them to a water-logged pulp.

Two dense black ovals... eyes, she thought, before questioning her sanity... seemed to stare out at them from the wall of water and a vast behemoth, a slick, oily mass, slopped out of the lake and rippled towards them.

‘HARRY!’ she screamed, extending her hand. He didn’t look behind him but there was sheer terror in his eyes – an overweening sense of danger; an unfettered beast bearing down.

‘What the fuck IS that?’ Draco said, jaw dropped in awe.

But the three of them kept running - and there was a huddle of people, friends, rushing to meet them from the shiny Mausoleum.


She paused to look. ‘You fool,’ she sighed, tears in her eyes, as Niko stood his ground, the hard rain attacking him as he shouted abuse at the beast in German. His hands were wreathed in flame as he threw scalding shots of magic at its shiny, black skin; a quivering mass of gleaming black flesh, like a whale’s, she thought. It opened its mouth – a gaping hollow – and roared.

‘We’re on it!’ Bill said, streaking past her towards the monster – and she could have hugged him, but all she really wanted to do was pull him back... but then Neville, followed by Hannah, Ginny and George charged past her. And there was Angelina, with Tansy trotting close behind... and Elizaveta limping gallantly, wand clasped in one hand, her other arm strapped tight against her chest. And Agatha Thrussington, wand held high like a call to arms.

Thelonious emerged from behind the Mausoleum, shadowed by Kai, a pugnacious snarl on her face. They sprinted towards the lake, wands at the ready.

And finally Parvati, hand-in-hand with Henrik... They ran towards Hermione and Draco and held them tight.

Henrik drew back and pulled the safety catch on his rifle. ‘This’ll blow a few chunks out of that motherfucker,’ he grimaced, and Parvati grinned, her face alive with love.

But her smile dropped once Hermione updated them. ‘Gunter was here. But I don’t know where he got to,’ she concluded, plaintively.

Niko cantered towards them, looking spent.

‘He went back for Rose and he had her!’ he panted, water dripping from his beard. ‘I was up ahead, but then Sylvestra was there.’ He shook his head. ‘I don’t know where they ended up. I was coming to get you when I saw Harry in trouble.’

Hermione felt sick with fear. She turned her face towards the towers crowning Malfoy Manor. Still there, she thought. The bastard.

‘I’ll go find her.’
‘And we have to get Ron,’ Draco added.

They locked eyes, because, yes. They did.

A ferocious colour-bomb – a blaze of colours – crashed into the ground, followed by another, then another – bombarding the smoking ruins of the Plangentine grove, pitting the lawns, exploding the grass into dust, soil and wind, great divots of turf thrown into the air, smashing into the Mausoleum - glass shattering, steel warping, its silver cladding wrenched apart, razor-sharp and deadly.

They ran deeper into the gardens, swerving and leaping as walloping bombs of raw power pounded the earth and scorched the leaves from the trees and withered plants to the root.

They traced a path close to the perimeter wall to shield themselves from the rain slashing at their faces and emerged at the head of the drive, by the high iron gates that led to Malfoy Manor.

Salvedra’s bombardment had suddenly ceased and Hermione sensed he was watching, waiting….

‘We were crossing the rose garden,’ Niko said, breathless from jogging, ‘when that scary Sylvestra bitch jumped out at us!’

‘I’d no idea you went back for Rose,’ Hermione said.

‘We wanted to surprise you,’ Niko said with a weak smile. ‘And – we’re always up for a challenge, Hermione… you know us. It’s how we were brought up.’

Indeed, she thought, surprising herself at the affection she felt for Niko and Troyanda – light years from her fear and suspicion in Argentina.

They headed into the ornate patterned pathways of Narcissa’s rose garden - a quincunx of rose bushes studded with clusters of neat, round heads set around a fountain – not dissimilar to the painting that had been hanging at Tom Bennet’s windmill, Hermione thought.

She glanced again at the towers looming over them… a scuttling sensation crept through her. His eyes had fixed directly onto her now – she could feel them.

‘There’s no one here,’ Niko said in forlorn tones, stamping from one rose bush to the other.

‘Maybe Gunter headed back inside?’ Draco suggested.

Niko tersely shook his head. ‘It’s hell in there… don’t hold out much hope for Ron I’m afraid.’

A pang of sorrow throbbed through Hermione and Draco regarded her with worried eyes.

‘We can still try,’ he said.

‘We need to destroy him,’ Hermione said, not daring to look up. ‘But I don’t know how.’

‘Can you get onto the roof?’ Henrik piped up. He was watching Salvedra through the sights on his rifle. ‘He’s up there… sort of flapping his hands about … JESUS FUCKING CHRIST! He’s a right fucking freak! Is he actually HUMAN?’

‘I don’t know,’ Hermione replied. And she didn’t. ‘I think he’s controlling the monster at the lake.’

‘Yeah… It’s like he’s conducting a fucking orchestra up there… except,’ he abruptly stopped and
lowered the gun, wiping raindrops from the lens. ‘He’s got too many arms! Must get pretty bloody confusing!’

Parvati had silently moved away… deeper into the rose garden, beyond the fountain to its furthest corner. She paused and then ran, before sinking down, out of view.

‘She’s here!’

Hermione’s heart leapt inside of her.

Draco had already vaulted over the next tier of rose bushes lining the paths that crossed the garden.

Hermione ran to them, legs jellied with nerves. Draco was sprawled on the floor with Rose draped across him.

Hermione’s hands flew to her face. ‘Oh god!’

She didn’t dare come closer. Rose looked so still; her face pinched and white, eyes firmly shut.

An arm encircled her waist. Harry; soft, soothing green.

Draco felt Rose’s wrist and bent his cheek close to her face. He looked up and a single tear had carved its way through the accumulated soot and dirt on his face.

‘She’s alive.’

Hermione fell to her knees and crawled on her hands and knees through muddy puddles towards them, unabashedly bawling.

Parvati pulled her close and the three of them held Rose and each other.

Hermione smoothed her daughter’s hair from her face… such beautiful, abundant hair… and her child sighed contentedly, as though sensing her mother was close.

‘Can you take her back to the Mausoleum?’ she asked Parvati – and then turned to Henrik who’d edged closer, eyes shining.

‘We will,’ he said croakily.

Draco bent down and gently brushed rain from Rose's face and kissed her on the forehead before easing her into Henrik’s arms.

XXX

‘So where the fuck’s Gunter?’ Niko fretted as they stepped into the dark hallway of Malfoy Manor.

‘Sylvestra’s gone too, from the looks of things,’ Harry muttered darkly.

Hermione illuminated their surroundings with a whispered ‘Lumos.’

‘This place is super-creepy,’ Niko said, gazing at the thick, glistening strands of web choking the banisters and stairs, encircling the fireplace. Every spare inch of wood-panelled wall and ceiling was coated in an oozing glutinous goo and there was an overpowering stench – damp, black rot, Hermione thought, and her stomach turned over.

Draco turned to Niko. ‘Sylvestra was on guard downstairs you said.’
'Yeah… in there,’ Niko said, indicating the main drawing-room. It was quiet and shuttered and dense with thick strands of gossamer silk, a syrupy gloop dripping rhythmically to the floor.

‘It’s too quiet,’ Hermione said. *Ron… Gunter…* where are you? she added desperately to herself.

Harry was creeping towards the drawing-room. He peered inside. ‘There’s someone here,’ he said in hushed tones. The light from his wand juddered, casting him in shadow as he dipped beneath a glistening twine with tree-trunk girth and stepped inside - and stopped… His greenness suddenly exploded, violent with heart-stopping anxiety.

‘What is it, Harry?’ Hermione asked, hastening to his side.

A body was buried amidst a mass of sticky web – similar to the pod Harry had been imprisoned in at Akhr Makan – and was dangling from a gently twirling piece of thread from the ceiling.

Even from the doorway Hermione could see a glint of copper hair… and his eyes - Ron’s eyes - were tightly closed; shutting out the horror.

‘We have to get him down,’ she wept, tears sliding down her face.

Niko brushed past her and an orange tongue of light coiled higher and higher drawing level with Ron’s body as it bobbed in an unseen breeze… the light wound itself around the cocoon and slowly eased him away from the ceiling, lowering him to the floor.

Hermione was too frightened to check he was alive, but Draco scooped the sticky strands from his face. ‘He’s breathing,’ he said.

Hermione nodded in relief. ‘Can we move him outside to safety?’

‘What next?’ Niko asked when the others had gone and they were alone in the drawing-room.

A tense silence brewed between them. ‘I think you know, Niko. We all do.’

Niko heaved a deep sigh. ‘He’s a terrifying opponent. We’re not enough.’

‘We need Gunter,’ she agreed. She closed her eyes and tried to sense him… Gunter’s red was usually very powerful but… she had no sense of him at all.

She shook her head sorrowfully.

‘He’s still here?’

‘I – I don’t know…’

Niko looked at her and his lips quivered. ‘We were so many, and now so few…’ He dabbed at his eyes with his sleeve. ‘We were family.’

‘You have new family now, Niko.’ And she meant it, of sorts.

Niko nodded. ‘I know. We know. But it hasn’t been easy.’

She sensed movement above them… his growing impatience… She feared he wouldn’t be satisfied until she’d confronted him, because he was curious about her; he’d wanted to ‘keep’ her – as an item of interest. A case study… an academic pursuit.

The thought made her sick.
Niko was talking but she tuned out, lost in her thoughts.

Maybe she should present herself to him? Offer to negotiate… but negotiate what exactly? Her compliance in exchange for his promise not to hurt those she loved? As an excuse to seek out his weak spot - because everyone had a weak spot, didn’t they?

And you’re curious, too, aren’t you? came a voice in her head… Her own, she hoped.

‘We’re not enough,’ Niko re-iterated in firm tones. His small, blue eyes bored into her. Penetrating. Perceptive. ‘And if we solve that, you won’t have to do anything stupid.’

‘I…’ Hermione didn’t bother finishing the sentence. He knew, damn him. And assumed she would fail.

No. Failure wasn’t an option here, she thought, suppressing a shiver.

‘And it has to be colour-magic. Nothing else will do…’

‘What do you suggest?’

‘It’s more a question of WHO…’ and he stepped outside where she could hear him talking in low, urgent tones to Draco and Harry.

Alone in the web-filled drawing-room – the room of her nightmares - Hermione made her decision. She’d better get on with it, because there was no escaping such dark, unyielding power - there never was.

They were still talking… arguing, even, outside, so she took her chance.

It was a slow, heavy trudge upstairs… endless stairs, fighting back thick skeins of sticky web that threatened to strangle the life out of her. She was fighting nausea all the way… eyes lifted to a fading light, like a will o’ the wisp that led the way – deeper into the darkness.

By the time she reached the narrow ladder leading to the roof outside, her head was spinning. She felt strangely heady … dark, granular toxins permeating her mind.

An unpleasant skittering across the tiles turned her stomach. But there was no going back now. So, she stepped outside into the cold, harsh rain and the biting wind.

Except the moment she did, the wind died down and the rain cleared. The sky was velvet-black, punctuated by a smattering of pin-prick stars, winking as though amused by what they were witnessing below.

Stupid girl, they seemed to admonish her. Did you really think you could escape your fate?

But you don’t understand… I want him to die, she thought sadly. That’s the plan.

You can’t have everything, a voice chimed in her head. And let’s face it; you’ve had an awful lot already!

It was true. She’d had so many good things. She had to remember that in these dark times. But there was no doubting it now. He wanted her – and her child, THEIR child - and her eyes swam with tears…

She walked gingerly across the wet roof, the tiles slippery underfoot, and teetered at the edge - caught between times, between states…
The monster in the lake had abated. The burning glow of spell after spell that had lit up the night sky had dwindled into darkness.

Its puppeteer was distracted… He had a new toy to play with.

*QUIS ES?* came the voice in her ear. Gruff yet silky… How was that even possible?

‘Hermione. My name’s Hermione,’ she declared in loud, ringing tones to the silver stars, rafters of heaven, pulsating in the night sky like jewels nestling in the darkest fold of a navy damask gown.

A hissing giggle reminiscent of the rustle of dried leaves on a chill Autumn day… And something hard and bristly trailed across her back. She swallowed a surge of bile that shot into her mouth.

A darkness enveloped her… above her, behind, around… She opened her eyes to the cold, dark air and looked left.

GUNTER… encased by cobwebs, bound solid.

His face was cold as marble, his mouth ajar – a dry, pink hole. The reddish glow in his eyes had dimmed to dust.

She felt winded, recoiling in horror. ‘BUT, WHY?’

*He gave himself to me,* said a cloying voice inside her, like dank, cold grease, staining her mind. She automatically shook her head, wanting it gone. Wanting it out. ‘To save… the prophet-child. Because she *interests* me. And I wanted to keep her… So he gave himself instead.’

‘You – you didn’t have to KILL him!’ Hermione gasped, convulsed with tears.

‘But he expected me to… Blood for blood, like for like. An honourable man… so, so *rare* these days…’ Salvedra wheezed, offhanded… flippant. ‘And *someone* had to pay the price for his mother’s deceit … her sins had to be atoned for - which means his sister can live. That debt is settled.’

Hermione stared at Gunter’s face until she was blinded by tears. *His* eyes – stilled and lifeless – were oddly penetrating, beseeching.

‘But do not fear, Hermione…’ Salvedra said. ‘His soul lives on.’ His voice slithered through her, cold and menacing.

‘How? Where?’

A splushing hiss, like water splashed onto a hot iron grate reverberated harsh and jarring. This passed for laughter, she realised soberly.

‘Within… Without.’

Hot anger rose up inside of her. ‘That makes no sense!’

‘Not yet, perhaps… not yet.’

Not EVER, she thought, spurred on by Gunter’s sacrifice… by the tragic waste of his life. She dug her nails into her palms, screwing her fists into tight little balls.

I’ll jump, she thought. I’ll jump and survive. Or die in the trying. She’d NEVER surrender herself, not ever.
Not so hasty, said the voice in her head.

Why not?

You haven’t looked at what I can give you, Hermione… this world you see before you. Because all can be yours, if YOU become MINE. You could be a KEEPER. The greatest! You have talent… Shame to let it shrivel away.

‘I’ve no desire to be your KEEPER!’ she growled. ‘You already have one.’ And she thought of Dolores and the dark-eyed misery that lurked within her. The sense of loss… it was all-pervasive when she thought about it.

Again… that whistling wheeze as he rocked with laughter.

There was a curious musty smell. His body; decrepit and wasting, riddled with decay. Falsely sustained by years of the darkest magic known to man.

You’re so old, she sighed inwardly. ‘Why steal a young man’s soul?’

‘I don’t steal… I borrow,’ came the clipped reply.

L’Escamoteur, she thought… a passing memory, like a cool breeze dappling hot cheeks on a broiling, summer’s day. An old leather book… its spine crumpled and creased on the shelf at Hogwarts.

Reynaldo Cornec had penned a warning… Not fiction. Because L’Escamoteur had existed all along. The dark wizard who stole souls… El Mago de Abaran.


NO, she said abruptly - still locked inside her head. I cannot serve you. I never will.

A sigh vibrated through her, tinged with genuine regret. ‘In that case, Hermione…’ Salvedra said, speaking the words out loud. ‘I have no choice.’

‘You wish to kill me too?’

‘QUIS ES?’ he rasped. And she said nothing.

‘EXACTLY,’ he replied.

And he prodded her sharply in the back and she found herself flying and falling – falling through endless black. An arrow of light spearing the darkness.

The light was blinding, burning the insides of her eyelids… filling her from top to toe. She flexed against the fall and a soft, billowing blanket, like white roses, gently embraced her.

Draco held on - and she could hear the reassuring thud of his pulse against her skin.

She blinked her eyes open.

They were bathed in shimmering white, magic conjoined… And she had not fallen as she feared, but tumbled through space, like folds in time, to the exact same spot where Draco had asked her to marry him.
She gazed up at him, speechless… surprised. And he kissed her, both knowing they had to fight now, and kill the creature that had wormed his way into so many lives and poisoned their hearts and their minds against humanity.

Just because he had power and believed he was invincible, everyone else had believed this, too.

Perhaps _that_ was the true secret of immortality?

If no one dared to believe in his destruction, who would _act_? But they had to believe now. And they had to act out their own believing.

Salvedra had his back to them, craning to peer over the edge of the roof. His crooked, tense posture told them all they needed to know. He was confused and angry.

He’d been foiled.

Hermione could feel her strength… an inexorable rush of power… pounding through her veins.

‘Okay, Beautiful?’ Draco said – less a question than a statement of fact, because she felt giddy with spirit.

They held hands and let it flow – a dark, seething river of resentment, winding its way around Salvedra, holding him fast. He writhed and slithered; furious, ashamed at the bonds that ensnared him. Barely able to comprehend…

The bindings strained, almost snapped, and Hermione’s body ached with the effort, her heart galloping at a million miles an hour.

‘Hold on!’ Draco cried.

For what? she wondered. But there were fresh footfalls chasing across the tiles… Harry, Nico and… Hermione’s heart leapt in shock… Ephraim!

‘Blame Neville,’ Draco said between gritted teeth. ‘He figured we’d need help!’

Ephraim looked across the rooftop towards her, a hint of a smile on his lips, but briskly switched focus to the tethered beast bursting to be free - and a dark scowl crept over his face. He’d come to hate Salvedra, Hermione realised – his former master.

Salvedra frothed and flailed, a frenzy of motion and energy… Hermione gasped at the power being summoned within him, jerking her arms from their sockets, pulling her apart…

‘No!’ she screamed, ‘Stop him!’ Because he was breaking free, galvanized by Ephraim’s appearance. She could feel the bindings stretch and loosen.

A furious bout of colour-magic struck Salvedra and he momentarily reeled. But then, with a fearsome toss of his head he struck back and Ephraim was catapulted into a chimney-stack.

Niko and Harry stepped into the fray and rolling waves of orange and green slapped mercilessly into Salvedra, almost pushing him over the lip of the roof into the cold empty sky – dragging Hermione and Draco with him, their feet skidding across the tiles.

‘Don’t let go,’ Draco grimaced, face contorted with the effort.

_Get up, Ephraim_, Hermione privately urged. Harry and Niko were powerful, but his single bolt of magic had been shockingly strong.
Ephraim gradually shuffled to his feet and shook his head dazedly, before directing a glacial stare at Salvedra, lip curled in disgust.

A crunching blue cascaded along the rooftops and the sky smelt hot and metallic. He struck again, in concord with Niko and Harry – raining blow after blow against Salvedra. Every sinew flexed, sweat dripping from their faces, they let rip with a destructive firepower that no single man should ever withstand…

Salvedra swayed and tottered like a drunk but he was still upright – although his struggle against Hermione and Draco’s tightly-held reins had waned.

*Drop the leash and let’s fire at will,* Draco said – his voice in her head.

*He’s still strong.*

*But weakening…*

*Okay. Together… NOW!*

They joined the bombardment and with every crushing blow, bit by bit, Salvedra’s power was spliced and diminished.

Hermione stepped forward, scenting blood, her pulse quickening as Salvedra's failed… an accumulation of deaths and souls leeching out of him, dissipating into the ether. Finding peace… she hoped.

A burst of satisfaction flared inside of her – the joy of working in unison to conquer an evil in a dazzling display of fireworks that illuminated the night for miles around.

She’d come here full of hate, but a new emotion had crept in and taken over…

And as she thought this, she felt its power, and tears sprang to her eyes… It was love - love of life - that ripped Salvedra apart, tearing at his limbs as he howled in horror – an unearthly cry that echoed around the valley and back again. And their refusal to fear that finally disintegrated his fleshy armour and shattered his core.

And he was gone.

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‘What do we do now?’ Hermione asked, putting voice to the mournful sensation welling up inside of her. Any triumphalism had been swiftly extinguished by the cheering voices hailing from the Mausoleum when Salvedra had finally imploded, smashed into oblivion – because the distinctive figure of Minister Merriman had been standing erect and tall, bristling with self-righteous authority, amongst their friends. He was flanked by Auror McClaggen and Loubella Blythe, the head of the Department for Magical Law Enforcement.

‘Let me do this one thing…’ Draco had begged, and now he had… So they’d come to take him away from her.

Draco’s arm was draped across her shoulder and he pulled her closer and buried his face in her hair as they slowly walked through the Rose Garden. ‘You’re a brilliant lawyer. I’d like to hire you for my Appeal, if that’s okay?’ He tried to smile.

‘If we can retrospectively prove we were at war… there’s a chance…’ A small chance, but better
than nothing.

‘Well, it certainly felt like a fucking war.’

Their pace had slowed but the path that tracked the estate’s walls seemed shorter than before and there was no escaping their fate. The Mausoleum, a mess of mashed metal and serrated edges, was before them.

Hermione was relieved to see Rose had gone – just a handful of their friends remained.

Harry and Ephraim talked as they walked, while Niko strode out in front, leading the pack, head bowed. Hermione recalled his face when he’d knelt beside Gunter’s body and gently closed his eyes.

‘What are you doing?’ Ephraim asked the Minister in sharp tones when he stepped forwards with a magical leash – a silvery serpent slipping through his fingers. ‘I thought we had an agreement!’

‘It’s not for YOU,’ Julius said. He turned to Draco. ‘Mr Malfoy’s leaving us, unfortunately.’

‘Azkaban,’ Loubella Blythe added in crisp tones.

‘It’s disgusting!’ Neville snarled, pointing his finger in the Minister’s face. ‘He just helped take down a fucking homicidal maniac and this is how you treat him!’

Auror McClaggen instantly inserted his bulky physique between Neville and Merriman and stared Neville down.

‘You don’t have to do this!’ Ginny screamed at Loubella Blythe. ‘It’s STUPID!’

‘Get off me!’ Neville yelled as Auror McClaggen pushed him backwards.

‘There’s no need for strife!’ Julius Merriman reasoned.

‘He was disturbing the peace, Minister,’ McClaggen intoned.

‘Oh, stop being a prize cock, Cormac!’ Ginny shrilled, shoving a fist close to his face.

‘Ignore him, Ginny,’ Bill groused, quickly pulling her back, ‘he’s just a twat...’

But a full-scale argument was fast breaking out... Hermione and Draco grasped each other’s hand tightly, but said nothing... A sense of sad inevitability had descended on them and all they truly wanted was the feel of each other’s skin.

They gradually inched backwards...

‘Merriman! What did my stepson do that warrants AZKABAN for Pete’s sake?’ Ephraim demanded. Hermione noted how easy it was for his old cocksure swagger to return given five minutes out of prison...

‘He performed an Unforgivable – on your daughter,’ Loubella smirked.

‘He KILLED her?’ Ephraim asked in tremulous tones.

‘Cruciatus Curse!’ Loubella said, ‘instant banishment.’

‘WHO?’ Ephraim shouted. ‘Which daughter?’
‘Katya,’ Parvati said, giving Ephraim a defiant look. ‘And she deserved it!’

‘He should be entitled to a hearing in the Wizengamot,’ Harry remonstrated. Hermione could see his spittle flying as he yelled at Loubella. ‘Katya murdered two of our friends and then handed Hermione’s child – who he loves - to our mortal enemies. He – he reacted like any decent man who loves his friends and family!’

‘That’s where you’re wrong, Mr Potter,’ Julius said with a nervous twitch of his eyebrow. ‘We live under the rule of law or there is no law and we have anarchy.’

‘Hermione’s having a baby for fuck’s sake!’ Ginny cried, ‘he deserves to see his own child!’

Ephraim shook his head regretfully and turned to Hermione. ‘I warned you about her,’ he croaked. ‘I warned you…’

‘They’re trying to get away, sir!’ McClaggen bellowed, snatching the silver leash from the Minister’s grasp and pulling Draco away from Hermione with a forceful jolt. He set to binding Draco’s hands.

‘You absolute CUNT,’ Draco spat… but a gun-shot from the lake shocked everyone into attention. They peered into the darkness, wands at the ready… It could only be Henrik. He’d been patrolling between the lake and Mausoleum – rifle in hand.

Parvati squealed, seized with wild-eyed panic, and she sprinted towards the black expanse of water over the crest of the hill and was instantly felled by a hissing streak of scarlet. She groaned, stunned, and crumpled to the ground.

Everyone sprinted towards the hill – except for Hermione, who felt rooted to the spot, every limb frozen… subsumed by a creeping darkness. Blank and empty…

Sylvestra lurched into view - nostrils flaring, eyes like glossy black almonds.

She was so close Hermione could feel her breath hot on her face… ‘Oh dear. Just you and me,’ she cackled maniacally. ‘You ruined my life so I’m going to take yours.’ She looked down and grinned and then patted Hermione’s stomach. ‘And yours, too…’

She held a small vial of lurid blue liquid in her hand and presented it with a smile. ‘The last drop… all for YOU, Hermione.’

Hermione twisted and turned, struggling to move, and a piercing scream resounded in her head – her own voice, trapped within her.

‘What a lovely surprise this will be for Draco and Daddy…’ Sylvestra giggled. She teased open Hermione’s lips with her fingers. Hermione flinched, but was helpless, unable to stop Sylvestra tilting the vial and letting its contents slosh ice-cold and tingling onto her tongue. She threw the empty vial away and stepped backwards.

‘Take a good look at me, Hermione – I’m the last thing you’re ever going to see!’

But the moment she spoke another shot rang out and a gaping hole opened up in her side.

Sylvestra’s mouth formed a perfect oval as she gasped in surprise… and she staggered backwards. Another shot exploded – this time closer - and blood spurted from her thigh and she collapsed to the floor… convulsing…
A rush of movement, voices screaming… but everything had slowed for Hermione. She was meant to die instantly, she dimly thought… but all she could feel was a sluggishness oozing through her body, a grey wooziness and black spots in her vision.

She was shimmering, she knew that… because she couldn’t decide at first if the heavy weightiness behind her eyes was the Dark Flux or the incandescent white glow that was shining out of every pore.

Draco… she could see Draco… but it was like he was running in slow motion, wading through concrete to get to her – a distraught look on his face – his arms reached out and he leapt forwards, catching her as she fell…

And there was Harry, sliding across the grass, mouth wide open - but she couldn’t hear him. She couldn’t hear anything anymore except for the slowing thud of her heart and a distorted buzzing in her ears - getting louder…

More people… legs… movement, she couldn’t move her eyes higher, but she could still feel the warmth of Draco’s cheek against hers; warm, wet… He was rocking her, cradling her… and now he was glowing, too.

Please, Hermione, please… I’m begging you… I love you. Don’t leave me. Please…

His voice in her mind.

I love you, too…

No! Fight it. Fight this… you’ve done it before…

But how could she?

Anteract! He was screaming. For fuck’s sake! ANTERACT! Our baby! It’s Epsilon+ … it’s part of you… you’re inoculated - And THIS – this miracle that we have between us, Hermione. It’s Anteraction. And it’s love. And it beats this thing. Together, we can beat this thing. All of us.

Anteract? But, yes! That was possible, she supposed… Or was it too late? Her chest was so tight - and a blackness was sneaking closer, fringing her vision…

Harry was holding her hand. She could see his knuckles were white – but she felt nothing…

That’s it, Beautiful… Draco sighed. Anteract…please… and she could feel his whiteness like soft, warm heat surging through her; the sweetest, liquid balm.

She tried to take a breath but her chest was stiff and hard - but then… it released, and cool, night air was flooding her lungs and she gasped as a tumult of sensation slammed through her. Pain, but joy…

‘Keep breathing,’ Draco murmured, ‘that’s it… that’s good.’ He kissed her face again and again and she could feel his lips on hers and his hand caressing her cheek… feather-light and perfect. ‘We’re there now, Hermione. You’ve done it. You’ve won.’

‘Exhausted…’ she gasped.

‘Then sleep, my love. Sleep. And when you wake up you’ll be healed. And you’ll have Rose and Hugo and people you love – who love you… And you’ll live to make a better day…’
But will I have you? she wondered, as her mind slipped away and the tiredness took her to grey.

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CHAPTER TRACKS:

“MONUMENT (THE INEVITABLE END VERSION)” by RÖYKSOPP & ROBYN

“DECODE” by PARAMORE

“GRANITE” by PENDULUM

"ARMY DREAMERS" by KATE BUSH

“BEIM SCHLAFENGEHEN” by RICHARD STRAUSS

“ONE” by METALLICA

“RUNNING TO THE SEA” by RÖYKSOPP & SUSANNE SUNDFØR

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.
To Thine Own Self Be True

Chapter Summary

The End.

65. To Thine Own Self Be True

Time didn’t heal. That was a lie, a blatant lie. But being this depressed when other people needed her, soon felt like an embarrassing self-indulgence.

Some days it felt like a subtle game of subterfuge; smiling when sad, supporting others while shrivelling inside.

Some days she was even able to kid herself… at least for a few hours. And then she’d remember… and feel overwhelmed by grief and anger and an aching loneliness...

At least he’s alive, she’d tell herself, mournfully aware that neither Elizaveta or Gabrielle had that luxury of thought. For them, this felt like the end of love’s journey. There was no light at the end of the dark tunnel they found themselves in, and their only route out was a different path altogether.

Hermione had no conceivable desire to pursue a different path. The man she loved, the father of her unborn child was alive – and while he lived, as Ephraim had said when faced with the prospect of possible execution, there was hope.

Even so, it still felt hopeless... Every plea for clemency had been rebuffed by the Ministry. Rules were well and truly rules and not to be broken or bent, according to the steely-souled Minister. Solitary confinement in Azkaban was exactly that… Not even a single line of communication with the outside was permitted.

The world had been sealed away from Draco, in perpetuity.

Hermione’s heart broke when she imagined how he must feel, what he must be thinking, his loneliness in a hostile place. The thought was so painful she often gasped aloud and at night she buried her sobs into her pillow in case she frightened the children.

‘It’s even worse than when Lucius was there! At least I was able to visit him – although that was in exchange for eye-watering sums of money,’ Narcissa said ruefully as she served Hermione a cup of tea. They were sitting in the small front garden of the tiny cottage Narcissa was renting by the coast, the air thick with the scent of honeysuckle and an over-effusive rhododendron bush.

Narcissa had thanked Lucius a thousand times over for setting up a Muggle savings account in her name that enabled her to at least afford a place to live – though this was a stark contrast to her former gilded life amidst the elegant opulence of Malfoy Manor.

But Malfoy Manor clearly wasn’t an option anymore. One look at their ‘investment’ – with its devastated interiors, ripped-up lawns, burnt groves and half-empty lake - and the American hedge fund which had bought the property had it bulldozed it to the ground. Plans were already afoot for a new housing development – Malfoy Towers.
It was late July and Britain was sweltering through one of the hottest summers in recent memory, which meant the children were all too eager to visit Narcissa’s little house by the beach at any given opportunity.

From their vantage point in the cottage’s front garden, Hermione and Narcissa could see them happily building sandcastles with Parvati and Elizaveta, skipping through the waves as they crashed ashore leaving long, hissing entrails of thick white foam in their wake.

‘We never really went to the beach when Draco was a child,’ Narcissa said wistfully. ‘It’s amazing how the simple things in life can bring such joy… I think Lucius and I sometimes forgot that.’

Her alabaster skin looked powdery, softly-crinkled in the bright sun’s glare and her gem-like blue eyes seemed paler than usual. She gave Hermione a wan smile.

‘Draco was very attached to you both so you must have done something right, Narcissa,’ Hermione smiled – not really believing what she was saying. She suspected – indeed she knew – Draco had been a lonely, rather lost child, who’d followed his parents’ example – for want of any other - into pride and spite.

Narcissa’s eyes rested on Magda who was being tickled voraciously by Scorpius and Hugo. ‘She’s a happy wee thing, isn’t she?’

‘Yes,’ Hermione said, glowing inwardly. Her eyes moved to Scorpius with a familiar pang. He was so like his father…

Rose was throwing a frisbee with Vithu and Farida further down the beach, her blazing red hair flaring out behind her like a flag unfurling in the wind, and a fierce desire to protect punched through Hermione… but also relief.

Rose claimed no memory of that fateful day at Malfoy Manor and there was nothing troubling in her behaviour to suggest she was speaking anything but the truth. She was often solemn, but then all the children were – not quite believing that Draco was away on a business trip.

Hermione was often moved to tears by their kindness towards her… their determination to stay happy, their uncanny ability to make sure she had a cup of tea at her bedside every morning, the way they made sure she never had to beg them to tidy their cramped bedrooms, the fact that Magda was always watched over, cared for… and how they literally looked out for Hakim, with his eyesight still affected by the cruel treatments he’d suffered, like it was the most natural thing in the world to gently guide him through life.

Hermione looked at Hakim snoozing peacefully in her arms, shielded by the shade of an apple tree curving overhead. The glaring sunshine hurt his eyes after a while, even though Thelonious had fashioned a special pair of tinted glasses for him.

‘Has Harry had any word back about his father?’ Narcissa asked, glancing at Hakim as she added milk to Hermione’s tea.

Rather worryingly, Hassan Aktari had vanished, so Harry had alerted his colleagues posted across the Middle East to be on the look-out. ‘Not yet,’ she said soberly.

Narcissa heaved a regretful sigh. ‘You won’t be able to run a household with all these children for too much longer on your own, Hermione,’ she said, pursing her lips. ‘You’ll start getting tired soon. It’ll creep up on you.’

‘I’m hardly alone!’ Hermione laughed. ‘There’s Parvati and Henrik, and Niko swings by regularly.'
And Elizaveta’s made the garden shed her very own home from home.’ Indeed, the shed – now the portal paintings had been moved to the old tin mine at Shell Cottage – had been transformed by Elizaveta’s rather more exciting brand of artworks. It didn’t surprise Hermione that Elizaveta was such an accomplished artist, but her eclectic, even subversive style had sent Narcissa’s eyebrows shooting skywards when she first visited Folkvangr. Despite this, both women had hit it off – a wordless, deep-felt gratitude on Narcissa’s part for Gunter’s role in liberating her. His sacrifice had not only delivered Rose but also broken the curse that entrapped Narcissa.

‘I have plenty of people to help me,’ Hermione assured Narcissa. Sometimes too many… There were days when she shut herself in the bathroom and sat in the shower, desperately seeking solitude.

Other times she missed Thelonious around the house. He was a steady, calming presence, but he’d moved back to Hogwarts with a promotion under his belt, following Neville – restored to his post as head of Herbology - with Hannah joining him, courtesy of her new job in the school infirmary.

‘You have help NOW,’ Narcissa said sternly, ‘but you need to think about what happens when Folkvangr is sold. Because it will be. It’s a fine family house for a more normal family.’ Hermione smiled, wondering if Narcissa had ever actually met one of those. ‘You have to start thinking about where you will go!’ Narcissa cast a sorry eye at her one-up, one-down cottage. ‘I won’t be able to help you I’m afraid.’

‘Molly and Arthur have offered to take us in at The Burrow. It’ll be a tight squeeze but they’re on their own there and—’

Narcissa’s lips tightened in disapproval. ‘You need somewhere NEW. Somewhere DIFFERENT. You told me Draco wanted a place in France, so that’s what you should do. Find a home for ALL of you, because one day he’ll be home. Mark my words.’

Hermione smiled politely. She loved how Narcissa fervently believed that the Minister for Magic would suddenly see the error of his ways! As much as his current intransigence annoyed her, Narcissa still had hope – something Hermione envied.

‘Just think, Hermione. With the proceeds from Folkvangr you could buy one of those lovely old farmhouse places… with a vineyard, perhaps?’ Narcissa sighed contentedly, lapsing into quiet fantasy. ‘A lick of paint and it’d be good as new.’

This was partly true. With Tom Bennet dead, Ron didn’t have to pony up the cash he’d borrowed to buy her house. But the truth was she was going to need somewhere much BIGGER to offer refuge to all the children they'd rescued from Dark Flux. Even the most rundown of French rustic idylls would likely cost more than Folkvangr's asking price. She’d be forced to borrow.

Ron had offered to help – indeed, he was helping already by paying most of the bills and working very hard at his new Ministry job to do so.

Hermione was initially uncomfortable with Ron’s financial involvement, but with Draco’s assets confiscated by the Ministry and little prospect of getting a good job herself in her current situation, she had little choice but to gratefully accept.

She found it easier to accept his kindness regarding the children who he regularly hosted at Wisteria Cottage to give Hermione a much-needed break – although she rather fancied he enjoyed the distraction… He’d been more severely affected by what happened to him at Malfoy Manor than he ever expressed, and he persisted – foolishly, Hermione felt – to blame himself for Tana’s betrayal, despite the fact she’d been placed under an Imperious Curse. Tana, in turn, accused Tom
Bennet of cursing her – except Hermione knew something that most people didn’t: Tom was already dead by the time she’d taken Rose to The Burrow…

Hermione suspected it was actually Sylvestra who had ensnared Tana using Legilimency, (Tana’s closeness to Ron meant she was a useful source of inside information), followed by an Imperio, which thankfully expired when Henrik shot Sylvestra at Malfoy Manor.

A roar of disapproval hailed from the beach… Magda had sat down on Hugo’s carefully constructed sandcastle and he wasn’t happy. At first Magda found his fury amusing, but her face puckered once she realised that Hugo’s distress was real and she started crying herself.

‘Oh dear, it’s getting late – I’d better get them home,’ Hermione said and was about to shift Hakim and stand up.

‘No…’ Narcissa said, reaching her hand out. ‘Let them work it out for themselves… children have to learn how to fall out and make friends again.’ She smiled at Hermione. ‘It’s something adults should learn to do much, much more, too… don’t you think?’

‘I guess so.’ And sure enough, Hugo was already rebuilding the castle and laughing as Magda proceeded to poke him and tangle her little fists in his hair.

Hermione marveled at the contented bond between them. Hugo more than tolerated her. He doted on her. And Hugo was probably the most important person in Magda’s life. Her eyes always sought him out and she visibly relaxed when he was close by.

Magda would likely have a much happier childhood than her mother had, Hermione thought. But she was also blessed with a naturally sunny disposition. Hermione had once thought that Katya’s ‘issues’ were chiefly the fault of her parents - Ephraim too busy to care, Iona resentful and neglectful of his love-child. But now she wasn’t so sure...

Katya's deranged attacks on Ziff and Tuyen allied with her obvious mental instability meant she was a secured inpatient at St Mungo’s undergoing a plethora of treatments, including Ephraim’s potion. But nothing had worked and one of the healers had confided that even without her pregnancy interrupting her former regime, any positive effects would have waned over time – enabling her true nature to come to the fore.

It occurred to Hermione that there was no known cure in either the Muggle or wizarding world for psychopathy – because that was the crux of the problem, surely? That strange, alien emptiness she’d encountered when she entered Katya's head...

Kai was convinced.

‘She enjoyed killing them,’ she said, when recalling the horrific murders of Tuyen and Ziff that Kai had been forced to witness. ‘I could see it in her eyes.’

‘No, Kai. She was cursed… following orders,’ Hermione pointed out. ‘And she had a tough upbringing. Unloving.’

‘Same for a lot of folks,’ Kai sniffed. ‘No reason to kill and LIKE IT.’ She suddenly looked crestfallen. ‘What bugs me is how I was used by her…’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I reckon she worked out I couldn’t Apparate into the village to fetch you – ‘cos of my age an’ all – meaning I had to run instead. This bought Tana time to hand Rose over to Katya – and Katya then
set the whole thing up, staging it for *your* benefit.’ She gave Hermione a meaningful look. ‘Because that was the reason behind it all, wasn’t it? To drag you in?’

‘But none of that’s *your* fault, Kai,’ Hermione remonstrated, fearing that the girl was being hard on herself – and deciding there and then that Kai was right. Katya had thought it through. She intended to wound, to punish. Was it psychopathy? Or some kind of mental aberration that, hopefully, could be addressed?

She squeezed Kai’s hand. ‘You behaved in a decent, honourable way, Kai. Never forget that.’

Kai had smiled sweetly, relieved to hear this. And she was determined to do the right thing and stick around to testify at Ephraim’s trial in Paris. Billed as the biggest trial in the wizarding world for many years it would likely prove a grueling experience. Both Arlene and Kai, with Baby Joyana, were now safely stowed at the Hotel Danemark in readiness.

There seemed little doubt that Ephraim would be found guilty… there were now innumerable witness statements addressing many charges levelled against him. But Harry had decided to narrow the field to his development of Dark Flux as a terrorist bio-weapon.

Padma was keen to testify – if only to exact some revenge of her own for all she had lost: her life, her lover, her freedom. Her return to reality after Sylvestra’s death had been bittersweet. She’d struggled with the concrete realities of everyday life more than she’d expected – even with her sister’s loving support.

Hermione suspected she was suffering from grief, because even though Tony wasn’t actually DEAD, he was as good as... He, too, had been confined to picture-world, but access to his painting was barred, even to Padma. She’d sadly concluded he didn’t want to be contacted. That he was happy with his isolation.

And yet Padma missed him terribly. Indeed, she appeared to miss her entire former life in a way Hermione struggled to comprehend, trying to recreate every last single detail - including her old job at the Ministry, occupying the exact same desk in the exact same office where she'd worked opposite Hermione for so many years.

Everyone had different ways of coping with everything that had happened, Hermione thought, as she strolled along the fine yellow sand to corral the children back to Narcissa’s cottage for a quick spot of tea before heading home.

Change had come to them all…

Bill had become a full-time professional wand-maker and Fleur planned to be his sales manager, although - with Tuyen gone - much of her time was still taken up with caring for the three youngest refugees, Tien, Hoang and Kek, with Melissa and Gabby’s support.

Agatha and Tansy continued to work on *Sub Rosa* but they’d expanded operations with a new recruit: Pascal Loubitier, from Troyanda13. It was hoped that Ernie – slowly recovering from the attack on St Botolph's and now wheelchair-bound – would soon rejoin their ranks.

As for Harry... Hermione paused here in her ruminations. Maybe he *hadn’t* changed so much? He'd been everything she could have ever hoped for with such a dear friend. Despite being busy with Ephraim's trial, he'd visited her every day and quietly managed things without her even noticing half the time. And she was fairly certain the fact her bank account never seemed to drop below a certain point was his doing, too.
He'd borne the brunt of her tirades and silences, and gone with her to her parents’ house when she broke the terrible, heartbreaking news about Ziff, and he insisted on accompanying her when the time came to say a final, devastating goodbye to her uncle.

He’d held on for so long and it was fitting that he regained some consciousness when she visited with the children – including Scorpius. But Hermione eventually received the fateful call from Gwen – their first contact since Aunt Rita’s murder.

Harry came with her to the funeral and he chatted amiably with Oleg and her family and then smoothed away the awkwardness with Gwen. It had been a tour-de-force for an essentially shy man Hermione thought afterwards. And she would always be grateful…

Her true reunion with Gwen – in the garden at her parents’ house a few days later – had been tearful, heartfelt. And Gwen told her that Oleg had asked her to marry him and she'd said yes.

‘Looks like I’ll be part of your world after all,’ Gwen said.

‘You always were – and always will be,’ Hermione said in return, heart brimming.

‘I’m sorry Draco won’t be around,’ Gwen sighed. And when Hermione explained to her about the baby, Gwen cried.

‘It’s not fair,’ she wept. ‘Is there really no hope?’

‘Our legal system’s different, unfortunately…’

Life had to go on, she realised, though sometimes she wished it didn’t…

Hermione stared out to sea, the sun warm on her back, wishing she could turn the clock backwards rather than watch dolefully as it pushed relentlessly forwards into dark uncertainty.

XXX

There were many more visits to Narcissa's cottage at the beach during that long, sticky summer. By the end of it, Ephraim's trial was finally over – although his punishment was yet to be meted out. Narcissa had long since given up caring what happened to her husband, but Hermione felt surprisingly anxious.

However, she didn't have much time to think about it. Folkvangr had suddenly secured a buyer and she was forced to turn her mind to the future, to her next steps.

‘I want you to come and see somewhere with me,’ Harry said.

‘What kind of SOMEWHERE?’

‘You’ll like it.’

XXX

Le Manoir des Anges was a crumbling, ochre-coloured manor house with pale blue shutters, but in the warm evening sun it shone with a rosy, pink hue.

Cypress trees casting tall sloping shadows lined the driveway leading to a paved courtyard in front of the house. A pathway on the right-hand-side of the courtyard passed a long, dilapidated barn after which a trellised archway led to an overgrown garden with a large, algae-covered fishpond and a softly tinkling fountain in the guise of a stone angel at its heart.
Verdant green lawns stretched from here down a rolling bank towards a glistening, silver river that curled around the extensive gardens, pounding over rocks and stones, gushing as it passed beneath a small wooden bridge that connected the property with a narrow country lane.

A collection of five thatched cottages (former gîtes) connected by a winding path were situated close to the main house, facing the barn across the courtyard. One of the cottages was currently inhabited by the property's vendor, an old lady who was a former acquaintance of Bernard Gagnon, Rozella’s father.

‘Bernard told Gabby who then told me about this place,’ Harry said after they'd wandered around the estate. ‘Do you like it?’

‘It would need a lot of work; a lot of money,’ Hermione said disconsolately. It made her heart ache to say this out loud. The faded glory of the manor house set in this tranquil setting amidst the slumbering slopes of the Provençal hills, sparse, rugged mountains rearing up in the distance, had stirred a deep longing within her. ‘The sad truth is, Harry, I can’t afford it.’

‘Yes you can,’ he said, sitting down on the wooden bridge, his legs dangling over the clear, rushing waters. ‘You’ll have money from Folkvangr and Draco made it clear that any remaining money from his estate was to be paid directly to you.’

‘But there’s nothing left.’

‘Not true,’ Harry said, eye-brows twitching as he unveiled a letter scribed in an elegant hand from Vendôme. ‘This is the official transcript of an exchange between a British Muggle bank and La Petite Bourse – that’s the main wizarding bank in Paris. You see, I tracked down Draco’s Muggle relatives, Hermione... His natural grandfather, Voltimand, left him a stable-yard in Shropshire. I’ve already found an interested buyer… Naturally, I’ve kept this quiet from the Ministry of Magic and only used French lawyers!’

‘And you kept it quiet from ME, too!’ Hermione shrilled.

Harry smiled sheepishly. ‘I had to. But the legals are done and dusted now, so I’m off the leash.’

Hermione studied the letter and a despairing look stole across her face. ‘It’s a lot of money, Harry, but – it isn’t quite enough. There’s still a shortfall.’

‘Which I’ll pay.’

‘No you damn well won’t!’

‘It's not a huge amount,’ Harry said airily, ‘and I honestly think this place – with a bit of hard graft – would make for a wonderful home and … maybe more? You told me Draco thought you should open a school… Well, I think that’s a great idea. You’ve too good a brain to fritter away on meaningless Ministry claptrap. Share it with those who’ll make this world better! Now, THAT’s a worthy investment… And this site's got huge potential!’ A gleam of excitement sprang into his eyes as he scanned their surroundings. ‘Those vineyards you can see on the other side of the river,' he said, pointing, 'they're part of the property.'

‘But, Harry… it’s still far too much money!’

‘I promised you both I’d do all I can to help if anything went wrong - and sadly, it has,’ Harry said fervently. He looked at the old, honeyed house and his eyes softened. He loved it too, she could tell. ‘And the thing is, I can see you here, Hermione, with your children… and the cottages could accommodate teachers or students or friends who outstayed their welcome.’
She laughed. ‘You’d always be welcome. You know that.’

She could sense his greenness washing through her. He felt strangely cleansing, wholesome. Interesting... She’d barely sensed ‘colours’ since Draco had been taken away from her.

Hermione followed his gaze and sighed. The house was wreathed in wisteria and its pale blue shutters were closed against the orange sunset. Something about the house made it look like it was smiling. It felt safe.

‘I love it,’ she breathed. ‘But… I can’t accept your money. I won’t.’

‘Without it you can’t buy this place, Hermione. And you have to. It’s perfect. Please accept my help. I’m a wealthy man…’

‘You have your own family to consider! Maybe YOU should live here? Not me.’

‘But I want to see you happy again. You’re all at sea, Hermione... Drowning. I can’t bear it.’

‘Living somewhere as beautiful as here? It’d be wasted on me, Harry.’

He gave her a curious look. ‘But not on your children… you have to think about them, too.’

‘I can see that - but as much as I love their company, it could also get lonely. We’re a fair trek from the nearest town.’

‘Kai and Arlene… they’ve grown rather attached to us, would you believe? And they desperately want to stay in Europe. Maybe they could take one of the cottages? And then you’d have neighbours.’

Hermione smiled. She liked the idea of them being close by and for a brief moment she had a vision of Arlene, flour up to her elbows, chasing chickens around the yard.

‘And Niko’s looking for a home,’ Harry added. ‘He’s a bit of a lost soul these days. He could be your gamekeeper!’

Hermione burst out laughing. ‘While I swanned about like the Lady of the Manor?’

‘And I suspect Elizaveta would come and keep you company.’ Harry gazed at the soft sunlight dappling the lush green landscape and the dusky colours of the vineyards climbing the hills, their fruits plump and ripening. ‘Plenty for her to paint! And the light’s bloody gorgeous.’

‘That’s true.’

‘And don’t forget, Parvati HAS to stay with you… She’s the closest Scorpius has to a legal guardian and where you go, he goes. She’s rather anxious about this, actually... So she’d be overjoyed.’

‘Which would mean Henrik would be here.’

‘Indeed. And now that he’s often away with work, he’d be happy knowing Parvati was with you I think.’

Hermione gazed at the house, the setting… and the little old lady who waved as she crossed the courtyard.

‘It seems unfair, though, Harry… this is what Draco would have wanted.’
‘I know… but he’d want you to have it for him.’

‘But I want him to have it, too.’

Harry stared at her, an unfathomable expression on his face. ‘There’s something else we need to talk about,’ he said hesitantly. ‘Ephraim’s due to be sentenced next week. He wants to speak to you.’

She vehemently shook her head. ‘NO. That man’s caused too many problems. He deserves everything he gets. I don’t want to be dragged into his woes.’ She studied Harry’s face carefully. ‘Do you already know what his punishment will be?’ She was ashamed that her voice quavered a little. She didn’t actually want him to DIE. And they’d promised him that he wouldn’t be executed…

Harry nodded, looking grave.

‘Is – is it bad?’

‘It’s not good. But it’s not death – although, maybe as good as…’

XXX

An isolated existence, permanent exile – but with a twist… that was Ephraim’s punishment.

He was to be banished to a small island near New Zealand. He would never leave this island and if he tried, he’d die.

But he wouldn’t be alone.

He’d agreed to wear the silver rose necklace Katya had intended for Draco - and from that point on he would be bonded to her, forever.

It was a fitting end, Hermione thought… finally forced to care for the child he’d forsaken, to try and find ways to heal their souls.

Hermione was glad she already knew about this before meeting Ephraim at Auror HQ.

Françoise, Harry’s colleague, ushered her into an interrogation chamber where Ephraim was seated, alone. It was a plain room with blank, breeze-block walls and grey furniture – similar to where Draco had been interrogated by Harry some months ago and a far cry from the dank, mould-infested subterranean cell Ephraim had occupied at the British Ministry.

Hermione felt a jolt of panic when she met Ephraim’s gaze. He looked so entirely different to what she’d expected she even wondered if this was the same man.

He was wearing a white pyjama ensemble and his wrist was weighed down by a thick silver band – a security device. His eyes were a startling, livid blue, thrown into sharp relief by his scalp-hugging buzzcut which accentuated his strong craggy features and the deep worry-lines etched into his face.

Most surprising of all was a vivid, crimson scar that dented one side of his head with thick lines irradiating outwards – a scarlet sun that she’d never have noticed while he had a full head of hair. She could barely keep her eyes from the scar as she stammered a greeting.

He flushed, self-conscious, and his hand darted to his head. ‘Not pretty, huh?’

‘What happened?’
‘My father…’

‘He did THAT to you?’

Ephraim shrugged. ‘He had a temper…’ He looked uncomfortable under her hawk-eyed scrutiny.

‘A TEMPER?’ Hermione couldn’t contain her curiosity. ‘What did he do?’

‘He put a drill to my head…’ He clearly didn’t want to explain more, but her shocked silence forced him to continue. ‘He didn’t want me or my brother to use magic and one day I did. I couldn’t help myself… I was young and impetuous, bursting with a gift that was forbidden me.’

‘How young?’

‘Oh… I dunno.’ His voice was more noticeably American than usual, she thought. Maybe she wasn’t used to hearing him. ‘Fifteen?’

Hermione dreaded to think what ghastly magic he’d cooked up to warrant such violence. Nothing short of killing someone she suspected. But even then... he'd still been a child.

‘What had you done to get banned from magic?’ she asked, almost reluctant to learn the true horror of Ephraim's past misdeeds.

A shadow fell across his face. ‘Nothing… It was **him**. My father. He killed my mother by accident. A MAGICAL accident. And he was so ashamed of what we could do, he promptly moved us to some deadbeat backwater where we could hide away - where we were home-schooled – although my father wasn’t the most **avid** teacher, so I took charge of our learning and Jake was doing well; until I screwed-up.’

She had to know now... had to know the terrible thing he had done. ‘What was the screw-up?’

Ephraim scowled. ‘We were fixing up our house – it was a mess of a place.’ He sneered at the memory. ‘And Jake hammered a nail through his hand… an accident. But the kid was screaming something **awful**. So, I did the first thing that came to mind to help him out. I used magic. My father came running… He was carrying a drill at the time.’

Hermione stared at him, open-mouthed in horror. Assuming he was telling the truth - and she sensed he was - he'd done nothing wrong at all.

-Madness- It was the only explanation for what his father had done to his son, because it was unspeakable. Gut-churning.

‘Maybe your father’s why you turned out the way you did?’ she suggested tentatively. 'You couldn’t bear the idea of hiding your magic ever again.’

Ephraim shook his head and guffawed loudly. ‘You're too kind, Hermione... Seriously. Some folks are just bastards. Like me. And my father. The difference is I became a **POWERFUL** bastard which can hide a multitude of sins - until you run out of road. Like now.’ His face fell. ‘But I didn’t want to see you today to talk about me or my father – worthless piece of crap - I wanted to talk about someone we both care about.’

She knew he meant Draco – and this made her nervous.

‘I’ve started procedures to adopt him.’
‘You’ve WHAT?’ Hermione spluttered. ‘He’s a grown man, for god’s sake!’

‘Indeed. But it’s perfectly legal in our society. To all intents and purposes, Draco will be my son... I won’t be offended if he keeps his old name... Draco Golowitz has less panache,’ he added in droll tones.

Hermione felt herself bridling. ‘Have you given him a choice in the matter? He’ll say no!’

Ephraim smiled slowly. ‘He doesn’t know yet so it hasn’t been finalised. But I doubt he’ll reject my offer.’ His eyes dropped to her swelling girth. The baby was beginning to show now and she’d already rediscovered the spell required to adjust her waistband. ‘He deserves to be with his child... and you.’

Hermione’s pulse quickened. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘He’ll be American.’

She shook her head, nonplussed. ‘No. No. He’s British. And just because you ADOPT him doesn’t mean—’

‘It does, actually. It’s a rather obscure American Magical Law – not much-trumpeted and it remains on the statute books more through forgetfulness than design. But by becoming my son, he immediately has American nationality... he’d be wise to drop his British citizenship immediately and forsake being Dual.’

He waited for her to absorb this information... and once she did, she felt faint with a rushing surge of headiness.

‘Azkaban... Americans are exempt!’ she breathed.

‘Indeed. All charges would be dropped... probably mitigated by a juicy fine... Of course Draco would have to fully embrace his new status. But he will. I’m sure of it.’ He gave her a lingering look. ‘How could he not?’ he added softly.

‘When would he be freed?’

‘Once the necessary administrative agreements are drafted and my lawyers negotiate his release with Merriman... It won’t be the quickest process. The Ministry’s famously heavy-footed, as you well know.’

Hermione felt tears spring to her eyes. ‘I don’t know what to say.’ PLEASE accept Ephraim’s offer, Draco, she silently begged. ‘Why didn’t you do this before?’

‘It didn’t occur to me... but I’ve had time to think. Lots of time.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, and her voice cracked with emotion. She hated being grateful to this man... but she couldn’t suppress the elation coursing through her veins.

‘It’s mainly for his sake, obviously,’ Ephraim said. ‘A man deserves the right to care for his child... or should I say his children.’ His eyes gleamed brightly. ‘Have you got a picture of her? My grand-daughter?’ There was a hopeful lilt in his voice.

‘Not with me...’

Ephraim’s face sank.
‘But I can forward one on to you if you like?’

‘That’d be kind.’

An uneasy silence fell between them, enough time for Hermione’s eyes to move back to his scar. It was a deep depression. He’d been very lucky. He should have died.

‘What happened to Jake?’

The colour drained from Ephraim’s face. ‘He’s dead… My father succeeded with him where he failed with me.’ He looked away, a distant look in his eyes.

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ Hermione said – and they lapsed again into silence. She shuffled her chair back in readiness to leave.

‘Look after Rose,’ Ephraim said, taking her by surprise, returning his eyes to her face. ‘She has a very powerful gift.’

‘I know.’

He raised his eyebrows. ‘Good. I wasn’t sure that you did.’

‘I do. And I will… I’ll try my best.’

Ephraim smiled. ‘Yes. You always do. That’s what makes you special.’

Hermione blushed to the roots of her hair.

‘I’ve made provisions for her… for all your children, actually. I suspect you and Draco would refuse any direct assistance, but there’s a bank account in all their names but with both of you as the main trustees. I’ve added Parvati’s name as well just to be sure that SOMEBODY sensible urges you to use it.’

Hermione’s blush deepened. ‘We don’t need your help.’

‘Yes, you do,’ he said crisply. ‘You can start making plans... I’d like to think I’ll know about them one day, but I suspect that’s a forlorn hope, isn’t it?’

He didn’t deserve it, she thought, he didn’t deserve anything - but she couldn’t be unkind.

‘I’ll write to you.’

He sighed. ‘Thank you.’

She stood up and extended her hand. ‘I doubt we’ll ever meet again so this is goodbye.’

He stared at her hand and then tentatively closed his own hand around it. She could sense his emotions: swirling, pulsating… and for a puzzling moment she felt the same.

‘You know there’s more I’d like to say to you, Hermione,’ he said gruffly.

‘Don’t,’ she warned. ‘Please, don’t.’

He looked at her and his eyes were wet. ‘I made mistakes and I apologise from the bottom of my heart…’
'There’s no need, Ephraim… I mean, yes, there’s need, but…'

‘You became my weakness. My conscience. I couldn’t bear your ill opinion. I don’t know why, I don’t know what happened to me… regret over Anna, perhaps?’ He shook his head in exasperation. ‘What started as the smallest chink in my heart became a deep longing for redemption and the faith of a good woman.’

She’d feared more – particularly as his hand tightened. But now she could walk away.

She slipped her hand free and looked down at him.

‘I forgive you, Ephraim,’ she said, feeling that he needed to hear this while wondering how she had the power to even bestow such a thing.

But it was done.

XXX

‘See? Wasn’t so bad, was it?’ Harry said when she joined him at a café on the Place Dauphine, a short walk from Auror HQ.

It was a warm, sunny day and Paris was buzzing excitedly. Hermione was pleased to see that Harry had snagged them an outside table at a pleasant café overlooking the elegant triangular square dotted with chestnut trees in full summer bloom.

'I can't fucking believe it!' she said breathlessly, as she sat down. 'I mean... it's completely fucking nuts - but if it works, Draco will be free!'

'Yeah... but there's still a bunch of bureaucrats to deal with, Hermione, so don't expect a quick fix,' Harry said in less cheery tones.

'Oh, of course, I realise that... I'm not expecting miracles.'

'But at least the ball's rolling... I heard from Ephraim's lawyer just a few moments ago and they've officially kickstarted the process.'

'Good... that's great...' Hermione poured herself a glass of ice-cold water and a thought occurred to her. 'So... I take it you already knew about this adoption plan before I went to see him?'

Harry eyed her over the rim of his wineglass. ‘Only as a very vague notion...'

'I see.' She sipped her water, a pensive look on her face. 'What's so special about TODAY then? I mean, if it was already a notion, what was his lawyer waiting for?'

'Well, I guess he - Ephraim - wanted to be certain... to speak to you first.'

'But this is about DRACO. Not ME! I'm not the one stuck in fucking Azkaban.'

'Sure,' Harry said, a little awkward. 'But I think he was worried you might object.'

‘OBJECT? Why the hell would I object?’ she cried. 'Getting Draco out is the one thing I want, that I think about all the bloody time, Harry! Every morning I wake up and I - I fantasise that he’s sprawled next to me... his stupid long legs encroaching all over my side of the bed... And then I realise it’s too bloody cold for anyone to actually be there at all and I’m facing yet another day when he’s gone. Another day torturing myself, thinking about him living, breathing... being somewhere awful and unimaginable.’ She shook her head in despair. 'So the idea that Ephraim
somehow needed my permission to rescue his own stepson-son-son-in-law or whatever the fuck Draco is these days is pretty fucking wild.'

She crushed her hand against her forehead fearing a sudden flood of tears, but quickly recovered herself with a forced smile and a laugh. ‘Sorry,’ she breathed. 'I just get so frustrated - like I'm locked outside of my own fucking life and can't get in.'

Harry fixed her with a tender, green-eyed gaze.

‘I love you… you know that, don’t you?’ he said.

She grinned, her eyes bright with tears, and she reached for his hand, clutching it tightly. ‘And I love you, too, Harry… and I’m ridiculously grateful for everything you keep doing for me even though I must bore the hell out of you moaning on all the time...’ She reflected a moment. 'Did his lawyer mention the fund he's set up for the kids? I'm not comfortable taking his money but it might mean you don't need to help me out with the shortfall on the house.'

'Except you're completely missing the point here, Hermione. I want to help.' His fingers kneaded hers anxiously.

There was a clink of glasses and cutlery as a waiter came and arranged their table and waited to take their orders. They instantly pulled their hands apart to manipulate the large, unwieldy menus, settling on Chateaubriand for two.

'The point I'm trying to make...' Harry said in slow, deliberate tones once the waiter had gone, 'is - you shouldn't blow all of Ephraim’s money at once. There’s an awful lot to be done to fix up the manor house and it’ll need a lot of groundwork, too.'

'But I've no idea how much he's given them...'

'Given YOU. Let's not play games here.'

'As I was saying, I've no idea how much it is,' she said irritably, figuring Harry did.

Harry told her and her hand flew to her mouth in shock. 'Bloody hell. I thought he was in financial trouble!'

'To a man of Ephraim’s former wealth, this amounts to a rounding error…'

‘It's too much. I can't accept.’

Harry rolled his eyes in exasperation. 'There's no point being proud here! This man owes you... And it's not like he can spend it on his prison island … and he certainly can’t leave it to his kids because one’s a fucking psycho an' the other one’s dead.’

‘When you put it like that...’ She thought about this a moment. 'Was he with Sylvestra when she died?'

Harry nodded. 'It was fucking grim, actually. She didn't die straight away... And she knew she'd failed to kill you.' He topped up his wineglass. 'Strange witch... She was the girl with it all, but she never failed to play a good hand badly.’

Harry's phone buzzed. He pulled it out of his pocket and frowned. ‘Got to take this… I’ll be right back.’ And he moved away, leaving her staring at his glass of wine, a sombre expression on her face.
‘That was quick,’ she said when he sidled back into his seat, but the moment she spoke she felt a wave of grey wash over her and despite it being a bright, sunny day – short-sleeve weather - Hermione suddenly prickled with cold.

She looked up and Dolores was smiling.

Hermione instantly grabbed her handbag, ready to run…

‘No need for panic,’ Dolores said hastily in her thick accent, staying her with a glancing touch of her arm. ‘I’m not going to hurt you.’

‘I’d rather not take my chances,’ Hermione said, furtively scanning the square behind Dolores for Harry.

‘I’m here to say thank you.’

‘What for?’ Hermione said, sharp-toned. And why now? she thought, frantically wondering how she could target Dolores with a permanent repelling charm without her noticing…

‘Because you have liberated me.’

‘By killing Salvedra?’

Dolores’s smile was slow and seemingly sweet but Hermione felt sure a shadow had fallen across the table – which only served to make what she said next so much stranger.

‘I am a servant of the light – La Luz,’ she said in soft, slithering tones. ‘La Luz – it is constant. All things fade and die but never the light. But Salvedra… he held the light captive. He used it and manipulated it to his own vainglorious ends.’

‘If you felt that way, why didn’t you just leave him? it all sounds a bit abusive to me,’ Hermione said wearily, tired of Dolores's gibberish.

‘I vowed to serve and my word is my bond.’ Dolores closed her deep, dark eyes in momentary reverence and her lustrous jet-black hair rippled blue in the sun. ‘It was always our way.’

‘OUR?’

‘Salvedra and I… Despite his many faults – and they were legion – Salvedra always remained a true caballero. A man of his word.’

‘And once upon a time, you were his lady…’ Hermione said, the pieces locking together inside her head.

Dolores smiled. ‘One day I will tell you my story.’

Hermione stared at her, a tide of anger swelling inside of her. ‘You know what? Don't bother. I don’t want to know! Not ever. I don’t actually care, Dolores. I want to forget you and everything about you.’

Dolores blinked in surprise. ‘But I wish to help you, Hermione. I could be your guide…’

‘I don’t want your guidance. I’ll muddle along in my own way, thank you very much,’ Hermione said tartly. And she meant it. No more mystery. No more complication.

‘But… I know things about you. I see manifold, potential destinies – for you and those you love,’
Dolores said stroppily. She hadn’t expected rejection. Her eyes dropped to Hermione’s body. ‘The child you are bearing… it will be important. Powerful. I saw that the moment I met you and Draco. Don’t you want to know how? And why?’

‘No,’ Hermione decided. ‘No, I don’t.’

Dolores looked astonished. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘It’s about being happy… living our lives by chance and our own endeavours, not by absurd and unfounded expectations.’

A tall man in black was standing next to the table, speaking to her. For a moment Hermione was confused and then she realised it was the waiter.

She turned her attention back to Dolores, but she was gone.

XXX

‘It’s perfect,’ Gwen grinned, looking around the barn. It had been transformed from a disheveled shed that still reeked of earthy manure and animal feed into a solidly constructed hall, smelling of sharp, clean pine. She grinned at Hermione. ‘It’ll be a wonderful wedding venue! Thank you so much!’

‘Orange and white blossoms and creamy orchids… I can see it now,’ Parvati sighed, gazing at the barn with misty eyes. Hermione fancied she was dreaming about her OWN wedding.

All this wedding talk made Hermione miserable, though she took pains not to show it.

She’d hoped Draco would be out of Azkaban in time for Gwen and Oleg’s wedding, but it looked increasingly unlikely. Harry had received verbal reports that Draco had agreed to the terms of his release, but he still wasn’t permitted to communicate with anyone beyond his jailers - none of whom were qualified lawyers able to draw up watertight contracts as far as Hermione knew, which meant they were at an impasse.

It was hugely frustrating.

Luckily, restoring Le Manoir des Anges was proving to be a useful displacement activity, keeping Hermione's mind and emotions in check.

The house and grounds were a hive of non-stop activity. An army of workers had been deployed and friends and family had rallied to help with Harry staying most days to oversee what appeared to be his pet project - the vineyard.

Before long, Le Manoir des Anges had been returned to a semblance of its past glory, both inside and out. Hermione lived in one wing of the house while the rest was converted in readiness for its next stage of development: a school.

The cottages were being refurbished by their prospective inhabitants.

As Harry anticipated, Parvati and Henrik were already occupying one of these and had more or less adopted Hoang.

Arlene, Kai and Joyana had moved next-door, while the third and smallest gîte had been bagged by Ernie and Tansy.
Thirsting for warmer weather, Ernie had left London (and Tim - an amicable split) to take up Hermione's offer to teach potions at the new school. Tansy was also keen to help out, in addition to her regular *Sub Rosa* columns.

Gwen, Oleg and Alfred had decided to pitch in too, occupying a fourth cottage situated furthest from the main house with its own small, walled garden.

Hermione offered the fifth gîte to Narcissa – but she’d grown to love the sound of the sea lapping at the shore beyond her cottage window. Melissa was keen to take her place, but Hermione worried about her living alone. Luckily, Elizaveta took a stroll one fine morning and realised there was an incomparable view stretching down the valley from the fifth cottage...

This left Niko, who nabbed a solitary hut by the river and revamped it to his liking.

Thelonious had found he was unable to re-settle at Hogwarts and asked Hermione if he could teach astronomy and charms at her new school instead. Binta with her expertise in runes and herbology was another welcome addition.

There were many more steps before the school 'opened' but Hermione felt she was getting a good team together.

She often thought about the odd turn her life had taken… a house full of children, living in what sometimes felt like a *commune* - the sort of ‘rustic idyll’ she’d discussed as a distant dream with Narcissa.

She still regularly visited friends and family in Britain and return visits were increasingly frequent. Fleur and Bill were particularly fond of Le Manoir and Louis often stayed at Gwen's cottage.

By the time Gwen and Oleg's wedding rolled around Le Manoir des Anges was ready to accommodate the arrival of friends and family from far and wide, making it a truly festive occasion.

They were blessed with the weather – a deliciously warm Autumn day, vibrant colours shading the trees that bordered the property.

Parvati had got her way – possibly jumping the gun on her own dreams, Hermione feared – and the barn was beautifully adorned in a sweet-smelling, floral sea of orange and white.

Arthur’s hog-roast was a culinary coup and there was music and dancing – led chiefly by the children … Everyone was celebrating with gusto.

Everyone, Hermione thought, but herself... because amidst so many friends and family, people she loved, she’d never felt so alone…

Harry was running late – he’d missed a string of drunken speeches - and she felt a little adrift on a table with Ginny talking non-stop to Gabby and Parvati and Henrik gazing into each other’s eyes.

She could see the night sky studded with brightly twinkling stars through the barn window. The sky here always felt clean and alive – and she suddenly craved it… that, and the sound of cicadas and the river rushing under the bridge.

She slipped outside, relishing the cool night air on her heated cheeks, hurrying away from the barn.

The music gradually faded and the excited gurgle and splosh of the river as it dashed downstream magnified as she drew closer to the rickety wooden bridge.
A tall figure was approaching through the darkness.

‘Finally!’ she called out, ‘you’ve missed everything!’

‘Believe me, I’d have got here sooner if I could…’ came the reply.

Hermione’s world spun on its axis and she could hardly think, let alone speak. Her heart was pumping violently in her chest and now she was crying out, like a wounded animal, as she ran across the bridge straight into Draco’s arms.

‘In fact… I’d have never left,’ Draco said, his voice buried in her hair as he coiled his arms tightly around her.

She was dimly aware that she was crying and his mouth was soft on her face, smoothing the tears away.

It was a moonless night but she could feel it was him, see it was him… truly him… by the silvery gleam of his hair, his wide, shining eyes and the glorious white glow that shimmered and shook between them, consuming them both.

They clung together, mouths stopped up by fervent, heated kisses, lost in taste and feel and the sensation of their skin warm against each other.

‘I didn’t know you were coming,’ she breathed, overwhelmed by his warm solidity, hardly daring to believe...

‘Neither did I.’ He leant his forehead against hers and his voice was scratchy and tired. ‘Harry came to Azkaban with a fat wad of parchments and some very shouty lawyers. Insisted I leave that instant…’ He quickly glanced over his shoulder. ‘He was right behind me.’

Hermione could feel tears flowing down her cheeks again… She’d cried so much in recent months she’d started to think it wasn’t possible to survive such sadness, but this was sheer, unadulterated joy beyond anything she could have imagined. And loving gratitude to Harry for bringing it about.

Draco glanced at the barn, alive with light and singing and shrieks of loud, pealing laughter - and then his eyes moved across the face of the manor house. Candles burned in the windows and its golden façade was gently illuminated by a single torch of flame in the courtyard.

‘It’s beautiful here,’ he sighed. His hand caressed the nape of her neck and she shivered at his touch. ‘Perfect.’

'Come and see,' she said and she tugged his hand and led him across the bridge that spanned the river. They passed the barn – almost guiltily – knowing there’d be time for him to re-enter the world… but not now, not tonight, because all they wanted, was to be together.

They stood in the hallway, candles bobbing in the breeze, a gleaming, polished balustrade curving away from the terracotta tiles to the upper floors, and smiled so hard at each other, their faces ached.

‘I can’t believe it’s you,’ she said in hushed tones, almost as though if she spoke too loudly he might disappear, 'that you’re real…'

'I'm very fucking real,' he said. He held her face in his hands and stared down at her. He was trembling. ‘And this is the best moment of my life,’ he added, speaking as she had, in a low whisper. One of his hands dropped down to the gentle curve of her belly and he smiled. ‘Truly.
The fucking best.’

They fell against each other with a groan. The sound of the party carried across the courtyard; loud and raucous and fun, but here in the house, the sound of their breathing seemed to fill the space around them as his arms tightened around her and he kissed her hair and her cheeks and then her neck before tilting her face upwards and capturing her mouth with his. She sighed at the soft, molten warmth that oozed through her, but then a hot flame of desire flickered brightly, burning like wildfire, and they were kissing with increasing need, straining to be closer.

‘Show me where we live,’ Draco said hoarsely, trying to catch his breath. ‘Just you and me…’ And he moved towards the staircase, his hand trailing behind him, his fingertips touching hers.

She paused for a moment and watched, heart racing, as he headed up the stairs before her - besieged by a memory from many months ago at Malfoy Manor when she’d had to choose to follow him – knowing that if she did, she’d be thrown into his world – and he into hers – and that her life would change forever.

On such moments are lives made, she thought with a smile. Best thing I ever did.

‘What's keeping you?’ Draco grinned from the landing above, hand outstretched.

‘Nothing,’ she breathed, running up the stairs after him, laughing with joy. ‘Nothing at all.’

XXX

Padma stared at the painting, an intent, mournful expression on her face.

‘Cornfields and Sky’ by Samuel Palmer. Loaned to the gallery by The Art Institute, Chicago. The painting was itself a recent acquisition, said the accompanying blurb.

‘He’s here,’ Padma sighed, settling herself on a wooden bench and facing the picture. ‘Tony.’

Hermione studied the painting, arms folded over the high, rounded bump of her belly, a whimsical expression on her face. The painting had been ‘donated’ to The Art Institute by Lothar Vilmark, former CEO of Gilgad Inc, as part-restitution for the myriad financial shenanigans he’d been embroiled in.

The painting was why they were here in this gallery, at a special exhibition which had accrued works from all around the world to celebrate ‘Victorian Art’.

‘It's a beautiful painting. Tranquil,’ Hermione said, trying to inject a buoyant tone into her voice. Padma’s face was an odd mixture of bereft and entranced.

Hermione glanced across the room to Draco. He was studying a painting with unusual concentration.

‘Oh!’ she said as she silently approached, shaking him from his reverie. ‘It’s… a bit like me!’

‘Yes, the resemblance is striking.’

‘La Donna della Finestra’ by Dante Gabriel Rossetti,’ she said, reading the sign. ‘One of the Pre-Raphaelites…’ She gazed at the serene-looking lady in a rich, blue dress, staring dreamily out at her audience. ‘She’s definitely got my hair,’ she commented, noting the Donna’s thick, brown curls…’but her eyes are blue.’
She curled her arm through his. ‘Maybe I've got one of those boring, generic faces that just looks like everyone?’ she said, thinking of Anna... even Katya.

‘You’re kidding, right?’ Draco exclaimed with a scandalised air, his sparkling grey eyes dancing. ‘You astonish me every fucking minute of every fucking day.’ He glanced between the painting and herself. ‘She's nothing to you, Hermione. No character.’

She smiled fondly. ‘She was real too, you know. A real, live woman. I doubt he just dreamt her up from nowhere.’ She glanced over at Padma. She was still staring at 'Cornfield and Sky', a rapt look on her face that broke Hermione's heart.

‘She’ll be sitting there for hours I bet,’ Hermione said sadly once they’d left the gallery and headed into a park that ran alongside the museum. 'She still loves him, but it’s hopeless... so sad.'

Draco pulled her close, fending off a stiff breeze that sent a flurry of rustling brown leaves flying through the air.

‘It’s hard to just switch off loving someone I guess.’ Draco looked at her and dashed a kiss across her cheek. ‘It’s just one of those things that sneaks up on you in an almighty ambush and then you're lumbered.’

‘Wow, Draco! That's SO romantic. You should use that in your Best Man's speech!’ Hermione teased. 'Henrik will be chuffed to bits.'

‘Oh, fuck. The speech... Did you have to remind me?’ Draco clenched his jaw in anguish. 'And we were having such a lovely day!'

Henrik and Parvati's wedding was less than a week away. Hermione couldn't help but think that despite all the death and drama, these past months had certainly inspired love and romance from the most unexpected quarters.

However, Draco - as Best Man - was terrified of screwing it up.

'WHY ME?’ Draco groaned. 'I'll be a rubbish Best Man...' His face fell into shadow. 'If only Ziff was still alive... Or Harry!'

'But Harry's not dead, Draco.'

'I know that! What I mean is he'd do better than me... I should have said no. What was Henrik thinking?'

'That you're his friend and he trusts you,’ Hermione smiled, nestling into the crook of his arm, her mouth curled in wry amusement… ‘And you ARE the best man...the best fucking man I know.’

‘Yeah, but you’re biased... And thank god for that,’ he said, pulling her behind a large, oak tree and into his arms, so close she could feel his heart thumping against her. ‘Because the only type of Best Man I ever want to be is to you and our children; to love you and be loved by you forever… Because being with you is the greatest fucking privilege of my whole damned life.’

She gazed longingly at him, starry-eyed; and the sound of crashing cymbals and the white-hot dazzle of sun piercing clouds on an overcast day could never have accounted for half of what flowed between them in that instant.

'We're so bloody lucky,’ she grinned, thinking you made your own luck, too; in the choices you made.
'Let’s go home, Beautiful,’ he smiled.

And he took her hand, and they were gone.

XXX

"Music is your only friend, Until the end." - The Doors

CHAPTER TRACKS:

“CELLOPHANE” by FKA TWIGS

“SUGAR FOR THE PILL” by SLOWDIVE

"WHAT I’VE DONE" by LINKIN PARK

"GETTING AWAY WITH IT (ALL MESSED UP)" by JAMES

"DIG DEEP (WEST COAST MASSIVE REMIX) by LXANDRA

"BEDSHAPED” by KEANE

"MELODY OF LOVE” by HOT CHIP

"LA VIE EN ROSE” by LUCY Dacus

Disclaimer: I own nothing except my original characters.

AUTHORS NOTE:

Thank you for reading... and your patience! It’s been a pleasure to share this story with you. I hope you’ve enjoyed…

I feel a bit weird walking away from this world, these characters – they’ve been with me a long while now, which is why I’m already drafting a new story – a Dramione, but interpreted rather differently! I tell myself it’ll be shorter and less intense, (definitely the latter), and I’ll try and wean myself off my addiction to creating new ‘characters’ (but I won’t. Doomed to fail).

In the meantime, love yourselves and those around you and this bloody beautiful world we live in. Take care. XXXX

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!