Summary

After a summer of recovery and revelation, Hermione is focused on her education once more. She has NEWTs to pass and a future to contemplate. While the traumas of the war are far from faded, their legacy has become manageable.

But then the complications set in. Old friendships are fracturing; hope turns to disappointment. Meanwhile, a series of thefts at St Mungo’s hospital might be the first symptom of a more sinister plot.

Inevitably, Hermione is right in the thick of things. As, apparently, is Severus Snape.

This story begins four months after the Battle of Hogwarts, and follows the events of Cold Hearts and Muddy Understandings.

Notes

With grateful thanks to my invaluable beta-reader and editor, DHW.
Prologue - Going Underground

"Double, double toil and trouble;  
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble."

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 1606

On New Oxford Street in central London, a short walk east of the Centre Point Tower, there is a run-down building of six crumbling storeys. Its brick façade is pollution-stained. Shutters cover most of its windows. The doors have shed much of their flaking paintwork and sport heavy, rust-flecked padlocks. To one side of the doors, a large sign informs of ongoing renovations within.

This building was once a department store. If Westminster City Council's Planning Office is to be believed, there is every intention that it will become one again. The fact that the renovation works are currently running six decades behind schedule seems to be of little concern to anyone. Nor does the absence of (now presumably geriatric) builders on site appear to cause alarm. The applications have been filed and processed, the permissions granted, and each letter has been inked upon the prerequisite paperwork with suitable attention to detail: i’s dotted, t’s crossed. If anything, the unchanging nature of the place is a comfort.

Hundreds of people walk along New Oxford Street each day. They are a disparate lot, these passers-by: all ages, shapes and sizes. All types of background, too. Some walk this stretch of pavement on a daily basis; some will never come here again. Each one, however, has something in common with the rest.

It is a feeling that all is as it should be.

And so they keep on walking, sparing no more thought for the building, nor for its sixty-year refurbishment hiatus.

In fact, this building has existed in central London since the seventeenth century. The dilapidated store-front is only its most recent disguise. Along with the Ministry of Magic in Whitehall, Hogwarts Castle in the Highlands, and perhaps Gringotts Wizarding Bank in Diagon Alley, it is one of the institutional cornerstones to British magical society.

It is St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. And its doors, should you know where to look, are always open.

It is a strange beast, St Mungo's. On the surface, it is a shining example of good-sense and organisation that neither the Ministry nor Hogwarts could ever hope to match. Each floor of the hospital has its own specialised department. A Welcome Witch or Wizard sits at a reception desk on the ground floor, directing both patients and visitors with a well-practised scowl. Spell damage, artefact accidents, creature-induced injuries, magical diseases: all varieties of magical maladies are treated here, self-inflicted or otherwise. There is even a ward dedicated to the long-term care of witches and wizards who have sustained irreparable damage.

In addition to the departments on its upper floors, St Mungo's has several sub-levels. For instance, three floors beneath St Mungo's reception you will find a set of tiled rooms and corridors lit by floating glow-globes that emit a hollow kind of blue-white light. This area provides the more unfortunate services necessary to the running of any hospital, magical or otherwise: namely, the
morgue and its associated examination rooms.

Above the morgue, acting as a buffer between life and death in a more literal sense than is strictly necessary, is St Mungo's long-term storage level. While situated on a single floor, accessed from a single landing on the main stairway, the topography of the storage level becomes ever more eccentric the further in you go. Magical extensions have been applied, often repeatedly, to some of its sections. Its dimensions would make no sense at all to Muggle architects. Tape measures, plans drawn meticulously to scale, the so-called laws of physics: none of that is of any help here.

The long-term storage at St Mungo's has become something of a legend in its own structural lifetime. The chambers on this level vary wildly. Some are the size of a generous wardrobe; some would house the average cathedral with space left over. They accommodate numerous environments, magically enchanted for the items stored or nurtured within. A couple are airless, requiring those who enter to cast a Bubble-Head Charm. Some rooms are frost-rimed, some cloying and humid, some drier than a particularly parched sidewinder on a baking hot day in the Namib desert. One room is kept in perpetual and absolute darkness; navigating its confines requires the casting of *Insono-Chiroptus* to avoid bumping into things.

Within the chambers can be found a truly mind-boggling variety of ingredients both living and harvested, along with stores of prepared potions. One room fizzes with magical potential, filled as it is with enchanted items infused with complex spellwork. Some of these items are unique; not even the illustrious International Artefacts Archive in Alexandria can claim their equal. Others are as commonplace as Sneeze-Away Hankies, Anti-Corn Socks or the numerous types of undergarments infused with diminishing and dispelling charms. (Male wizards, usually at a certain point in puberty, tend to get creative with spells like *Engorgio*. The results are inevitably disastrous, though, thankfully, treatable.)

The hospital's small but renowned library is also on this level. Among its collection of texts, scrolls and periodicals are items which predate the Muggle printing press by several centuries.

Above the long-term storage level, one brief flight of stairs down from the hospital's reception, you will find cloakroom facilities for the hospital's staff. On this floor there is also a suite of rooms intended for meetings and teaching, one of which is officially the best-equipped teaching laboratory in the UK, according to a 1995 poll conducted by *The Practical Potioneer*. (Admittedly St Mungo's had minimal competition, and won mainly because its laboratory is not freezing cold, ill-lit and poorly ventilated. Or, indeed, a dungeon.)

Usually, this laboratory is used to teach apprentice Healers the intricacies of the most widely used healing potions. The year 1998, however, did not qualify as 'usual'. (The culmination of an earth-shattering war between the magical forces of darkness and light had, oddly enough, disrupted quite a few routines.)

Thus, in the late summer of that year the teaching laboratory at St Mungo's was co-opted into a different service. It was made available to those former Hogwarts students who, for various reasons, were unable to return to school to finish their NEWT level Potions qualification.

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The lessons were scheduled to begin in early September and would run for a single term. It was expected that the entirety of the final year curriculum would be covered; the course of study would be intensive. Two afternoons each week were timetabled for brewing, and an additional two hour tutorial would accommodate theory and coursework discussion.

To the astonishment of everyone, not least the man himself, Severus Snape agreed to take the
classes.

This was – as it turned out – just as well. While Horace Slughorn would remain at Hogwarts for one more year to allow Headmistress McGonagall the time to search for a replacement, the elderly Potions professor was increasingly infirm and, as such, unable to contribute to the 'War Year Revisional Project': the rather pompous title this collection of courses was given in its Ministry paperwork. (Less formally, the classes were known as the 'Lost Sevenths' since the participants were those students whose seventh and final year at Hogwarts had been made discommodious by the presence of Death Eaters, beatings, torture and, in some cases, an absence from school entirely due to the imminent threat of being murdered.)

Since the war had ended, a good deal of information had emerged about the role Snape had played in the plan to bring down Voldemort. Snape's acquittal of all charges before the Wizengamot had been far from triumphant. (A more accurate description would be 'painful' or perhaps 'wince-worthy'.) The trial itself, however, had been well attended and the press had been meticulous in its coverage. Snape's seventeen-year commitment to the cause had been exposed, along with his loyalty to Dumbledore and his numerous personal sacrifices. Post-trial, the sideways glances Snape drew were no longer those of alarm and suspicion, but instead offered respect and, sometimes, a smidgeon of sympathy. At least in the over-forties set; those who had been taught by him would never completely lose the sense of discomfort they felt in Snape's presence. It would seem that no matter how heroic a man's deeds, they will never supplant the memory of callous sarcasm, cruelly-engineered punishments and a permanently deep-set scowl. Given that Severus Snape's tale of redemption had become a cause célèbre, the man himself no doubt viewed his less celebrated legacy as something of a silver lining.

While Snape had undergone a very public metamorphosis from 'sinister killer' to 'heroic force for good' (or, perhaps more accurately, 'morally-conflicted antihero') this proved a double-edged sword for the man himself. In an interview given to The Quibbler under protest, and motivated primarily by a desire to punish the Daily Prophet for a series of unpleasant articles published over the years, Snape even claimed to have preferred the suspicion to this newfound sympathy, which he described as "the uninvited pity of those who fail to appreciate context."

The Daily Prophet's reporting on Snape's trial had been surprisingly balanced. Given that Harry Potter's correspondence with the newspaper's Editor-in-Chief was not public knowledge, most put this development down to the way Rita Skeeter had resigned from the publication. The odious reporter had spent a single unsatisfactory month as the arts correspondent: a brief tenure that had culminated in a confrontation with the Centaur poet, Pavel, after the debut of his latest six-hundred verse epic: Ode to the Clustering Pleiades.

Skeeter, it seemed, did not find star-gazing nearly as compelling a topic as Pavel did. Though many would sympathise with her position (especially by the time the recitation reached its three hundred and thirty-second stanza), most would have thought twice before interrupting the performance. Yet Skeeter had stood on her chair and announced to the room that she was fed up to the back teeth with protagonist Aldebaran, and found his hopeless devotion to the Seven Sisters about as touching as a tension-headache which, by the way, she was well on the way to suffering if Pavel didn't shut the hell up right about now.

The room, unfortunately for Skeeter, contained a number of very large, muscular and short-tempered Centaurs. To claim that Pavel's be-hooved fanclub was unimpressed by Skeeter's attempt at constructive criticism would be an understatement.

Upon her discharge from St Mungo's, her pride the only wound left untreated, Skeeter promptly declared that she was finished with the Daily Prophet and, indeed, with the "whole bloody
country.” She moved on to a short and uncharacteristically sweet term at *The Pratller* (one of America's more squalid magical tabloids) before disappearing into much appreciated obscurity.

But we were talking about Severus Snape.

Few people in Wizarding Britain had been actively concerned about the notion of Snape once again taking up the reins of tutelage. There were, nonetheless, a great many raised eyebrows. Severus Snape was admired for his intellect, his magical skill and his dedication to Albus Dumbledore, but for most it would be a stretch to claim to like him. And in the light of the aforementioned information that had emerged during his trial, many people were convinced that he despised teaching and children in more or less equal measure.

This view was not inaccurate.

It did not bode well for that small group of Lost Seventh students who were sitting NEWT level Potions. It certainly went some way to explaining the not insignificant number of students who considered the Hobson's Choice that was a return to Hogwarts vs. Professor Snape and chose, instead, to make the short hop across the Channel to Beauxbatons.

There were, however, a handful of students who looked favourably on the Snape option. Perhaps their attitude was swayed by a preference for the devil they knew.

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In St Mungo's hospital there worked a Healer named Montague. She had become particularly invested in the Lost Sevenths project for two reasons.

Firstly, she was married to a Muggle-born wizard. During the war, in the interests of self-preservation, their family had retreated to a small coastal village in the Republic of Ireland. Healer Montague – Gloria, to her friends – had thus been invested, very personally, in the outcome of the war. Having been unable to do more than keep her own nearest and dearest safe, she felt indebted towards those people who had made the country a place where, once again, her family could live unthreatened.

Secondly, she had met Hermione Granger. They had become acquainted on the day Augustus Rookwood had infiltrated the hospital disguised as a staff member, murdered a young Auror and attempted to murder both Miss Granger and Severus Snape. Gloria Montague had been impressed by young Miss Granger. During subsequent meetings – Miss Granger being required to attend the hospital twice a week in order to keep a cursed injury from deteriorating – the subject of her reluctance to return to Hogwarts had come up.

At this point, Gloria had realised that St Mungo's could help. She had taken her idea to the board of the hospital, and had spoken up in favour of making St Mungo's facilities available. In spite of the odd voice of protest, she'd proved to be an irresistible force in this regard.

It should be noted that few people who knew her ever took Gloria Montague on in debate.

It was Healer Montague who was tasked to show Severus Snape the potions laboratory St Mungo's had generously provided. Gloria summarised the facilities as he looked around, paying her little attention. He presented the room with his finest sneer.

"The ingredients grown and stored on the long-term storage level below will be made available to your classes," Gloria said. "Some of them will be rather better than the ones you've been accustomed to using at Hogwarts."
Snape grunted. And continued to sneer. And naturally enough, Gloria thought little of it. There were many who considered Snape's sneer a permanent feature, no more worthy of attention than an eye or a nose. In any case, Gloria was not the type to be ruffled by curled lips and disdainful glares; she had a Muggle mother-in-law. From Tunbridge Wells. Who wore twinsets with pearls. As such, Gloria Montague had long developed a shield to even the most potent of sneers.

"There will be a limit on some of the more valuable ingredients you can requisition, of course," she added. "The restrictions will be made clear to you by the duty Storekeep."

Another grunt.

Gloria was polite enough not to roll her eyes at Snape's less-than-courtly responses. "Your wand will be registered with the long-term storage level, allowing you access. You'll be expected to collect the materials yourself, and to return any unused. While the board has agreed to this loan of the hospital's facilities, it would prefer to avoid any substantial addition to the workload of its staff. I think you'll agree that's fair enough."

A grunt. A curt nod. Nonetheless, it seemed that Snape was not impressed with the hospital's largesse. Indeed – perhaps because his sneers had failed to disconcert the Healer – he resorted to a verbal explanation.

Specifically:-

He had *liked* the dungeons at Hogwarts. Yes, fine, they'd been a terrible place to brew, but they had suited his preferences.

He *liked* low levels of light. Gloria asked whether this was because it made it much easier to lurk, but Snape would only concede that dimness allowed one to hide a multitude of sins.

He *liked* the cold. Gloria guessed, accurately (and, for that matter, rather bravely, because she guessed out loud) that this was because Snape could easily stick his own hands in his sleeves or under his arms as he stalked the classroom. It was only the students who suffered the uncomfortable extremes of temperature while they worked. After listening to Gloria's theory, Snape corrected only the word 'worked', for which he substituted the words 'savaged delicate potions ingredients with their ham-fisted attempts at brewing'.

Clearly annoyed by Gloria's continued composure, Snape raised his voice and informed her that, most of all, he *liked* the notion of thick stone walls, buried underground, that even a powerful blasting curse could not breach. Up in the towers, even at Hogwarts, you were exposed. Not in the dungeons. They were safe and secure and had offered him the choice of three hidden exit passageways avoiding all main thoroughfares.

"Always," he told Gloria Montague, "leave yourself a back-door."

Gloria gently suggested that he might want to talk to someone about these issues he had with vulnerability, and sooner rather than later.

Severus Snape was not placated. The opposite, in fact. He proceeded to tour the potions laboratory, gesturing here and there. This well-appointed teaching room, with its wide counter spaces and work stations complete with wandless running water, cauldron stands and charmed ventilation ducts, offended him greatly. The illumination globes were bright and neutral. The temperature was magically maintained at just below a comfortable 20 degrees (rendering Snape's preferred teaching robes far too heavy and uncomfortable). The stools at the work stations were upholstered. Cushions! Snape told Gloria that he wouldn't be surprised to learn that the students
who used this room were also offered house-elves to do all their work for them. And perhaps a cup of tea and a novel to enjoy while they did it.

Gloria asked him if he was quite finished.

Snape glared at her and told her that he had the strongest sense that there was pandering afoot. Also that he resented, profoundly, the notion that this newest generation would be learning how to brew Polyglotia in an environment that was so unhampered by the difficulties he had navigated when he’d learned the same thing.

(Severus Snape had never actually heard someone say, "The youth of today don't know they're born!" But he would have had tremendous sympathy with the sentiment if he had.)

After an uncomfortable pause which, oddly, seemed to bother Snape far more than it bothered Gloria, Snape acknowledged that, yes, he was quite finished now, and thank you very much for your time.

Because of course, potions classrooms were not ten-a-penny. There was no lengthy list of alternative options to choose from. (Nor was there a short list, for that matter.) St Mungo's help was therefore gratefully accepted.

And for Severus Snape, as well as his small group of Lost Sevenths, an offensively functional laboratory in the basement of the hospital remained a preferable location to one that was even in the vague vicinity of Hogwarts Castle.

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Fortunately, Snape was a man accustomed to grinding his teeth at injustice and then simply getting on with things. He’d had lots of practice. So he prepared his lessons and worked out the timetable and took small consolation where he could.

For instance: Healer Montague was quite right. St Mungo's ingredient store was highly prized among potioneers in Britain and, indeed, across Europe. Gaining access to such a resource was pleasing.

Then there was the issue of cauldron maintenance. St Mungo's did not, in fact, have house-elves. Nor did Snape have any intention of doling out detentions; not when this would eat into his own free time. Given that each work station came complete with a nice big sink, his students could bloody well see to the cleaning and oiling of their own set of potion-brewing tools, thank you very much. If they were serious about their craft then these skills had to be learned, even if time and facilities had rarely provided the opportunity at Hogwarts.

His former Slytherins would be furious. He was quite sure some of them had never, in their whole lives, washed anything that was not attached to their own body. For that matter he could name some whose bodies were, he suspected, far from well acquainted with soap and water.

So that would be entertaining, at least.

And then there was the intensive nature of this whole exercise. A moment of weakness had prompted him to offer these lessons. The months to follow would no doubt be taxing, but for a man who'd committed to a cause that had required almost two decades of investment it wasn't such a burden. By Christmas the course would be finished, and he would never have to teach again.

In spite of himself and his own cynical nature, Severus Snape had experienced something of a paradigm shift in recent months.
When he'd regained consciousness in hospital following the Battle of Hogwarts, he had been dismayed to find that he was still expected to go through the rigmarole of drawing breath. But then had come several annoying weeks of uninvited company, and coaxing, and challenge. Remarkably, as he'd progressed through the early stages of his recovery, he'd found himself resenting that company less and less.

The need to focus on his trial, and then the anticipation of resuming his teaching duties, meant that such things had been put to one side for the time being. Annoyingly, the withdrawal had left something of an absence in his life. It was not unthinkable, however, that once his Lost Seventh obligations had been discharged, the annoyances and challenges might perhaps resume.

Snape would have rather been dipped in jam then hurled at a wasps' nest than admit it, but he was cautiously looking forward to that time.

Optimism.

He'd often wondered what it felt like.

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"I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for you so frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed...
Let us sleep now."

Wilfred Owen, *Strange Meeting* 1918

Hermione Granger arrived at St Mungo's via Floo. She'd come from the Ministry, where she now had a part-time role in the admin office serving the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee. After dusting herself down and looking around, she nodded hello to the Welcome Wizard on reception. Then she walked from the Floo to the main stairs.

She was, it had to be said, annoyed with herself for being so nervous. To combat the feeling, Hermione began to give herself one of her Patented Granger Talking-To's:

The weekend after next would see her reach her nineteenth birthday. She was already an adult in the eyes of the law, Muggle and magical. She could drink, vote, have sex, smoke cigarettes and get married. Some of those things she'd now been able to do for almost three years. And yes, one of those things she had no intention of doing, ever, because cigarettes smelled disgusting and made your teeth go brown and she saw no sense in voluntarily increasing the likelihood of lung cancer and heart disease. But the point was, she was an adult in charge of her own decisions.

Then there was the issue of her experience. As in, wealth-of. She had faced down monsters and maniacal villains. She'd suffered torture and had come out the other side of the experience more or less intact. (Some days more; some days less.) She'd played at least a small part in helping Harry Potter put to rights a world that had been going horribly wrong. Frankly, she had done and seen and achieved more in her almost-nineteen years than many people managed in sixty. Her maturity was not a technicality based upon years spent alive. It had been *earned*.

All of which led her to conclude that she was strong and she was accomplished, and that she was a very different person now to the eleven year old girl who'd arrived at Hogwarts all those years ago, desperate for a sense of belonging. Hermione nodded to herself, drew in a deep breath and exhaled it slowly, then nodded again.

Good. She'd convinced herself.

So. Just because she was missing the presence of two stalwart best friends alongside her, as they'd been alongside her for most of the last seven years, that didn't mean she couldn't carry herself with dignity. It might *feel* like the first day at a new school, but the situation she now faced wasn't quite the same thing. All the cliques and the rivalries that school-life had hitherto been about could be set aside.

Couldn't they?

Perhaps it all depended on whether her fellow students were as willing to move on from such things as she was...

Hermione sighed, chewed at her lip, caught herself in the act when her eucalyptus lip balm made its presence felt, and forced herself to stop. It was a habit she was trying to break. (Hence the lip
Of course, it wasn't just about her classmates. The fact that she now had a markedly different attitude towards her teacher did not help calm her nerves.

She held the handrail and watched where she placed her feet as she trotted down a flight of stairs. It felt like the kind of day when a deficit of due care and attention would inevitably result in a mortifying tumble, and there had to be better ways to remind Severus Snape of her existence than turning up with a black eye or a fat lip. She made it to the lower floor unscathed, at which point Hermione checked her wristwatch. She had ten minutes' grace before the lesson was due to start. This was good. Of all the things she could remember about being a student in Professor Snape's class, his tolerance regarding tardiness did not feature high on the list.

She checked her clothing before exiting the stairwell. Student robes were not required for the Lost Seventh courses, given that the students undertaking them were no longer enrolled at Hogwarts. She had dressed neatly but comfortably in clothing suited to the brewing of potions: close-fitting enough not to accidentally catch bottles and jars with a dangling sleeve; loose enough to allow for a spot of vigorous stirring. Beneath her jacket she wore a plain long-sleeved T-shirt and charcoal-grey denims. Her boots were steel-capped and had been infused with a charm that would protect her feet from any accidental spillage of the more harmful ingredients she might be handling. Her dragon-hide gloves were an early birthday gift from Harry, who'd noticed during her sixth year at Hogwarts that her hands had all but outgrown the gloves she'd been using for the past three years.

And if she looked more Muggle than witch, then so what? Robes were cumbersome things to wear when brewing potions. She was not ashamed of being Muggle-born – she never had been, in spite of the insults – and her priority was to learn and pass her NEWT. Not to look all gothic and flouncy while doing it.

Her fly was done up, her hair was reasonably tamed and tied back, her bootlaces were not trailing along the floor. She had managed to avoid spilling her latte down her top between Soho and the Ministry that morning. Hermione was satisfied that she was presentable. She hoisted her bag to a more comfortable position and then went through the doors.

A flutter in her stomach reminded her that she was still in danger of turning into a crush-addled cliché. She had, over the weekend just gone, spent an unconscionable amount of time considering which of the blouses she owned might best offer a peek of cleavage to anyone interested enough to look in that direction. (She'd managed to put aside such amateurish notions of seduction. Mainly because she suspected that what cleavage she claimed was pathetic at best.)

Though she had arrived in good time, there were four students already waiting outside the door to the potions lab; all of them were Slytherins. Hermione made sure she did not hesitate. She kept walking, and she lifted her chin and exuded as much calm confidence as she could.

The presence of Slytherins was hardly a surprise. There had only been three Gryffindors who'd undertaken NEWT level Potions during sixth year, and two of them had now begun their Auror apprenticeships. Most of the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws would retake their 'lost' year at Hogwarts or Beauxbatons. Only the Slytherins were likely to balk at those options, as Hermione had done. And once it had been announced that Snape himself would take these extra classes...well. It was a no-brainer. The Slytherins would flock to him; the other Houses would steer well clear.

Except for Hermione Granger, it would seem.

So here she was. Just her and her old friends Blaise Zabini (who despised Muggle-borns almost as
much as he despised ungroomed nasal hair), Theodore Nott (whose father had been as much of a Death Eater as Death Eaters could be), Millicent Bulstrode (who had once assaulted her while working for the sadistic Dolores Umbridge) and...

And Draco Malfoy. Whose many childish crimes against Hermione and her friends paled in comparison with the way he had, with malice aforethought, engineered entry to Hogwarts for a whole group of Death Eaters on the night Albus Dumbledore had died. Draco Malfoy, whose aunt had inflicted more pain on Hermione than she'd thought it possible to experience. Whose father had nearly killed her when he'd arranged for the escape of a basilisk designed to attack Muggle-born students.

Looking at Draco, Hermione could see a glimmer of Bellatrix Lestrange in his features. The chin. And the line of the cheekbones. His father's image was even more obvious: that fair-haired, aquiline profile and the look of supercilious disdain.

She was still walking, but her mouth had gone dry and memories pressed. Hermione felt as if she were a minnow swimming in a tank full of sharks. Most disconcerting was the way the injury over her collarbone throbbed painfully. It was as if the lingering curse from Bellatrix's blade had done something to her body, something more than slicing her open in a way that conventional healing could not repair. Something that recognised fear and the proximity of enemies; something that revelled in them. Something that could taunt her, hurt her, frighten her, even months after Bellatrix's death.

"Well now," Blaise Zabini drawled as she drew closer. "If it isn't the Mudblood Princess of Gryffindor."

The others clustered around him, smirking, the very epitome of strength in numbers. And it made sense that Zabini ruled the group now. Nott and Malfoy had family connections that rendered them awkward acquaintances at best. Bulstrode was forever a hanger-on. But Zabini? He was an arrogant, preening, bigoted tosser, there was no doubt about that, but he'd never been connected to the Death Eaters. Quite the advantage, in the current post-war climate.

"Good afternoon, Blaise," Hermione said, having hard-swallowed her throat into a kind of steadiness. "Kind of you to proffer titles, but I tend to go by 'Hermione' these days."

She'd chosen to use his first name deliberately. Surnames were commonly used at Hogwarts, but Hermione and her fellow students weren't caught up in the trappings of school anymore. And if, as it seemed, Zabini wanted to cling to the outmoded idea of a system which placed pure-bloods at the top of the social hierarchy and Muggle-borns far below, then the best counter was to assert a sense of equality. To be on mutual first name terms seemed a good start.

Zabini's eyes flashed. He looked annoyed and perhaps a bit impressed, but for some reason he seemed to be treating this brief reintroduction as one of those moments where the alpha has to establish his authority. "Odd to see you on your own," he said. "I think we were all under the impression that none of the Golden Trio could wipe their own arses. Not without some help from each other."

The group sniggered.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Typical," she said. "Muggles and magicals, all of you alike. It's ever the wealthy in-breds who have this alarming obsession with backsides." The sniggers faded. She smiled sweetly at Zabini. "I'll let Harry and Ron know you were thinking about them, though."

Zabini's annoyance ramped up. He'd clearly considered her an easy target, and he was struggling
with the notion that she was not. "Yes," he said, trying to sound confident. "I'd heard the Golden Trio has become more of a Duo now." He glanced back at his friends. "Potter and Weasley – Aurors! We'll all sleep well at nights, eh?"

Bulstrode chortled obediently. Draco managed a half-hearted smirk. Nott just watched with avid eyes.

"You sleep well, do you, Blaise? I'm envious," Hermione countered. "After a year on the run from murderous psychotics – no offence, Theo – and a bout of torture at Malfoy Manor – no offence, Draco – I find it quite difficult to leave the cares of the world behind me."

"Oh, of course. Never let it be said you aren't a hero." Zabini glared at her, stepped closer, tried to use his height advantage to loom. The cloying waft of his *Eau de Cologne* charm insinuated itself into her nostrils, the sweet citrus scent overlaid with something more chemical, something weirdly familiar. "So now your two boyfriends have moved on, what does that make you?" he demanded. "The Golden Leftover? The Golden Third Wheel?"


"Oh, nice," Hermione said. "Like the golden ratio. I like it!"

Draco blinked and then frowned. The rest of them looked just as confused.

"Mathematics," she explained. "Also very useful in Arithmancy. The golden ratio is when two quantities, call them x and y, have the same ratio to each other as their sum, x plus y, has to whichever is the larger." Blank, blank looks. She shook her head. "It's quite important, actually. Pops up in nature, in the pattern of leaves on plants. Artists use it in their geometric shapes. Like Dali. It's supposed to be an aesthetically pleasing proportion. So I'm flattered, Draco, honestly. But not interested. Thanks anyway."

Draco now looked flustered. "I wasn't...don't think I was..." He changed the subject. "What the hell are you doing here anyway, Granger?"

Before she could reply, Bulstrode stepped in.

"She's only here for one reason. Didn't get the Head Girl position, did she? So she's thrown her teddy out the cot."

"Oh?" Draco said. "Who's Head Girl, then?"

Hermione watched all these interactions with an odd kind of objectivity. In the last sixty seconds she had noted that Bulstrode was desperate to get into Blaise Zabini's knickers (or whatever it was that narcissistic Slytherins tended to wear under their robes). Draco, meanwhile, was willing to take the step back that recent history demanded, yet still wanted to assert his place in the group. This made sense. Draco Malfoy had always been surrounded by yes-men. The notion of separating from them and functioning as a true individual probably scared the living daylights out of him.

Nott watched, dark eyes filled with interest. He'd always been the loner. He didn't want to speak. Hermione wondered how he had managed to escape the guilt-by-association that so many children of Death Eaters had suffered. She didn't like to make assumptions about people, but if anyone had asked her to pick out the potential serial killer from this little group then Theodore Nott had no competition at all.

Bulstrode, clearly delighted by the notion that she had information she could offer, drew breath to
answer Draco's question.

Zabini got there first. "Tracey Davis. Shame they had to go with a half-blood." He ignored the shuffling of Bulstrode who was a half-blood herself. "But I wish her well," he added magnanimously.

Draco barked a laugh. "Bit of a comedown for you, eh, Granger? Beaten to the prize by a Slytherin."

"I'm sure I'll get over it, Draco," she said mildly.

Zabini was still on his alpha-dog kick, however. "Don't be stupid, Malfoy," he said. "Old McGonagall, Gryffindor to the core, gives the highest student honour to a member of our illustrious House? Passing over the Mudblood heroine of the Battle of Hogwarts? One of her own dear little cubs?" Zabini's ability to sneer with his voice was well on the way to matching that of Severus Snape. "What the fuck do you think happened? Granger already turned it down."

Draco's eyes narrowed as he looked from Zabini to Hermione. "Did you?" he demanded.

"I can't imagine why you'd care either way," she retorted.

"There you go," Zabini said, turning away, smirking at the watching Nott and the fawning Bulstrode. He raised a hand to scratch at his forehead, then – with the hint of a fluster – turned the motion into a sweep over his close-cropped hair as if to check that everything was in place.

Hermione refrained from smiling, though she had just recognised the harsh, chemical smell that Zabini's scent-charm was supposed to mask: TCP. It seemed that even ultra-groomed pure-bloods were afflicted by the hormonal trials of teenage years. She could almost feel sympathetic.

She looked over at Draco for a moment, waiting for his attention. When she had it, she glanced at the way the three other Slytherins were trying to close ranks. Draco looked too. His forehead creased into a frown. He looked back at Hermione. She arched a brow, just enough. Just a suggestion. She'd been learning from the best, all summer, when it came to communication-by-eyebrow.

"It's not just that," Draco said. Zabini turned back, annoyed, but Draco knew what he'd been offered now and he took it. "Granger didn't merely turn it down, leave it open for Tracey. Granger made sure it was offered to Tracey."

Hermione gave a micro-smile. Just enough for her old enemy to see, then she turned her back on him and went to find a spare bit of wall to lean against.

"Is that so?" Zabini asked Hermione, trying to sound cool and collected.

"Oh, goodness. I'm just a middle-income Muggle-born. I'm sure I don't have nearly the amount of influence you suggest," Hermione said.

"That's not an answer."

"Do I have to answer to you, Blaise?"

Zabini hesitated. The young man had spent his life admired and adored for his good looks, wealth and magical ability; he'd forgotten that not everyone bought into his high opinion of himself. It was enough to give him pause.
Draco used the hesitation: in fact, he stomped all over it. "It's hardly a taxing conundrum, is it? McGonagall would never have dreamed of honouring a Slytherin as Head Girl or Boy. It would take someone whose opinion McGonagall valued to make her see the advantages."

"What advantages?" Bulstrode demanded. Then she frowned. "Apart from the obvious, I mean. Like how Slytherin is, you know. Best."

Nott snorted and looked away. Zabini rolled his eyes.

Draco's smile grew feral. "I'm right, aren't I, Granger?"

"About?" she coaxed. Draco needed her to make him say it. And she wasn't sure why she was helping him in this, because logic dictated that Zabini would have been an easier ally to make. But if she was about to undertake fifteen weeks of lessons with this motley crew, she needed to do something. She needed leverage. A smidgeon of support. Draco's current social vulnerability made him malleable.

Draco threw his shoulders back. Suddenly there he was: the thin, pale, overprivileged young man he'd been growing into for the seven years Hermione had known him. All attitude, all entitlement. All of it, Hermione sometimes thought, a carefully constructed façade to smother the turmoil that lay deeper within.

"You suggested Tracey," Draco surmised. "Didn't you, Granger? You knew Slytherin had taken a battering. Our lot were leaving Hogwarts at a rate of knots. Something needed to be done, else the school would be finished. So you pointed out the unthinkable to McGonagall, didn't you? A Slytherin Head Girl. Someone to rally the younger students. Someone to reassure people that not all Slytherins are evil incarnate."

She waited before replying. All the Slytherins were looking at her now. Behind her – though she didn't risk turning her back to look – she heard the arrival of some new students. Two together, by the sounds they made. More Slytherins? Had she effectively been surrounded?

"I liked Tracey," Hermione said. "Anyone who can share a dorm with Pansy Parkinson and her little band of hangers-on..." She tossed a disinterested look at Millicent Bulstrode and then looked away. "Anyone who can do that for seven years and still be a decent human being? I'd say they're worthy of an accolade or two."

Bulstrode worked herself up, through a series of snorts and gasps, to a, "How dare y–"

Zabini spoke over her. "I suppose you thought you were doing us a favour, do you?"

"Good heavens, no. Why would I do that? Slytherins have made my life difficult from the moment I first heard the word."

"Then why bother?" Distracted by the exchange, Zabini forgot himself and scratched at his hairline. His concealing charm was adequate, but Hermione knew what was going on underneath it now.

"Bit slow on the uptake there, aren't you, Blaise?" Hermione retorted. "For the school, obviously – just as Draco said. And for Professor McGonagall. And for every member of your House whose brilliance and subtlety was never compromised by their sense of entitlement."

Zabini glared at her. "La-di-da. But you helped anyway."

"I suppose I did. Even though the first thing you offered me today was a racial epithet. Be
assured, Blaise, I've no warm and fuzzy feelings for you." She turned away, then pretended to rethink. "Oh, unless you need some help with skincare? TCP's a decent antiseptic but a terrible treatment for acne. Very harsh, very drying. And it stinks to high heaven. Your concealing charm might hide the spots but it isn't helping with all those flaky bits you're scratching off."

Zabini's eyes grew round and outraged. He spluttered, but struggled to come up with an immediate reply.

Hermione shrugged. "It's difficult, I know. You're a little late to the puberty-party, but hormones are hormones. And there's no good charm, is there, to keep adolescent spots under control? Pimple Vanisher's good for a couple of hours, but the dratted things come back."

"I'm not..." Zabini's denial tailed off as he lifted a self-conscious hand to his forehead and then tried to disguise the motion with another sweep over his head.

"It's okay," Hermione said. "Don't be embarrassed. Muggle skincare products are incredibly useful – you just need to choose the right ones. I can recommend an excellent cleanser and moisturiser."

Zabini raised his wand. He was livid. Draco, meanwhile, was all but grinning with glee. Bulstrode was looking at Zabini's forehead with a new sense of distaste. Nott still hung back, but he was intrigued.

Hermione ignored Zabini's wand and turned her back on him, though she cast a wandless shield charm between herself and the Slytherin. It lacked potency, since decent shield charms needed the heft of a wand. But it would deflect most low-level hexes.

Further back along the corridor, staring with a mixture of alarm and interest at this confrontation, were a pair of Ravenclaws.

"Michael Corner and Terry Boot," Hermione said, smiling widely, already feeling better about the fifteen week stretch ahead. "How brilliant to see you both!"

They looked as pleased to see her. And thinking about it, Hermione remembered someone telling her that these two had suffered badly under the cruelty of the Carrows during her year away. So it made sense that Hogwarts had become a place of terrible memories for them, too.

As she stepped up to greet them, she heard a mutter behind her and then felt a magical spell bounce off her shield: just a small tickle of energy discharge. She did not bother to look around, or to renew her shield.

Draco said, loudly, "Oh grow up, Blaise."

Hermione swapped a hello-hug with Michael for a hello-hug with Terry.

And behind everyone else, a deep, sonorous voice said, "Wise advice, Mr Malfoy. Miss Granger, if you are finished manhandling Mr Boot perhaps we can make a start?"

She gasped and spun around. Fortunately Severus Snape tended to prompt such reactions in most of his students, so no one considered her behaviour odd. Blaise still looked angry, but cowed. Millicent Bulstrode gazed up at the professor as though she desperately wanted Snape to collar-and-leash her. Draco looked uncertain.

Nott was still quietly interested.
Snape sighed long and hard. "Foolish, I realise, to have thought that a select group of students who had managed a reasonable qualification at OWL level Potions..." He paused and glanced at the all-but-dribbling Bulstrode. "Most of you, anyway." Another sigh. "Foolish to think that, a few months on from your school careers, you might actually behave like young adults. It was clearly a vain hope. Enter the laboratory – all except Mr Zabini, Mr Malfoy and Miss Granger."

Everyone else trooped inside. Hermione wondered how she'd managed to place herself on the naughty step before her first lesson had even begun. Still, what could she do? She'd needed to position herself such that the next fifteen weeks were not spent constantly fighting off the collective attentions of the Slytherins. And she was almost nineteen; she refused to be treated like a child just because it suited Severus Snape to do so. She drew her shoulders back, lifted her chin and waited as calmly as she could.

Snape looked at her, at Draco, then at Zabini. He drew his wand. In the space of time it took the rest of them to wonder what the hell was going on he had already cast a *Muffliato*. At least, that was what the wand pattern looked like, and Draco winced and shook his head, as if it was filled with *Muffliato's* trademark buzzing.

But Hermione's ears were entirely clear.

She looked at Snape. He glanced at Draco, then at her. She worked it out. Hoping she wasn't overacting, she gave an annoyed grunt and pressed her hand to her ear.

Snape turned his attention to Zabini. "You get this one for free, Mr Zabini," he said quietly, "since I came upon the incident too late to work out whether Miss Granger's usual capacity for annoyance warranted a rather shoddily cast *Furnunculus.*"

"*Furnunculus*? Zabini had tried to hit her with a pimple jinx? She almost snorted at the complete absence of imagination, remembering in time that she was not supposed to be able to hear any of it.

"Her annoyance was at maximum levels, sir," Zabini assured his former Headmaster.

"Even so, I cannot condone this behaviour. If my students begin to fall prey to random acts of dark magic then my startling new status as heroic double-agent will be called into question. I will not allow this to happen. Do we understand each other, Mr Zabini?"

Zabini looked chagrined. "Yes, sir."

"Excellent. If you lose your temper again, especially to the extent that you wave your wand around in my presence, be aware that the consequences will not be a cordial little chat like this one."

"Understood, sir." Zabini hesitated, then a glimmer came into his eye. "We've got the numbers, though, now, Professor. Anyone wants to point fingers at us, we stand together."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "I am no longer in any position to protect those former Slytherin students who might look to me for support."

"I'm still a Slytherin, sir," Zabini insisted. "Nothing 'former' about it."

"Then you're a fool. The world does not work along the same simplified lines as Hogwarts. Now I suggest you give serious consideration to the advice proffered by Mr Malfoy and attempt to grow up. Enter the classroom and find a desk."

Zabini looked outraged for a moment, before his anger backed off and he nodded assent. He went into the classroom.
Alongside Hermione, Draco stirred and shook his head. It seemed his *Muffliato* had been released.

"Mr Malfoy," said Snape.

"Professor?"

Snape glanced at Hermione, which made Draco do the same. Hermione wasn't an idiot. She glared at the both of them before turning away and fiddling once again with her ear.

"It seems to me," Snape said in that same low tone, "that Miss Granger just did you a favour."

"I'm guessing she'll want something in return," Draco grumbled. "Though she did punch me in the face, once. Maybe I can assume this is a debt repaid." At Snape's snort, Draco added, "Didn't think so." Then, as if on a double-take, "How much of that did you hear, anyway?"

"I've had an amplification charm on this patch of corridor for the last half hour."

(Hermione, a little frantically, began to review everything she might have said since she'd arrived here, this time in the context of Severus Snape listening in.)

"You always were prepared," Draco acknowledged.

"As far as I can be." Snape sighed. "Zabini wants to be in charge."

"He's just a pretty-boy with attitude."

"He is not. He is intelligent and ambitious. Keep him in line."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"The obvious way," Snape replied. "Give him enough attention to appease his ego. Do not offer so much that he loses sight of his boundaries."

"Easier said than done," Draco protested.

Hermione turned back to look at the pair of them with as much casual disinterest as she could.

"You have until Christmas to work things out," Snape told Draco, "after which the problem will resolve itself. Surely you have faced greater dilemmas."

"Fine." Draco went to move past Snape into the classroom, but Snape blocked him. "What?"

A frosty moment, during which Snape raised a brow and Draco got to feel three inches tall. Then Snape said, very gently, "I think you meant to say, 'What, Professor?'"

"Sorry. Professor."

Snape nodded acceptance of the apology. "You have been informed of the conditions of your attendance here."

"Y-es."

"I was surprised to see your name on my student list, given those conditions. You and your mother have no intention of returning to Malfoy Manor, as I understand it."

"Oh, she's pretty much written the Manor off. Says it'll be the price we pay for some poorly
thought out decisions." Draco shrugged. "Fortunately we're not short of houses."

"But to return here to complete your education? There must have been better options."

"Mother didn't want me at Durmstrang. Beauxbatons wouldn't have me. And the thought of a permanent move to what she calls 'the New World'? That sent her into palpitations. Apparating over the Channel each day was easier than trying to find a school that would actually take a pariah like me."

"Self-pity is not an attractive quality. I'd suggest you refrain from indulging."

"Oh, I'm not expecting sympathy," Draco bit. "Not from the man who wouldn't even keep my father out of Azkaban."

Snape's shoulders went rigid. There was an awkward pause, then he seemed to relax. "Draco," he murmured, startling Hermione because she hadn't heard him use the first name of any student other than herself before, "what do you expect me to say?"

In a voice that sounded too emotional for Draco Malfoy, he said, "He saved your life."

"He did. Though I hardly thanked him for it." Snape must have been aware that Hermione was listening to this conversation, but he didn't so much as glance in her direction. "Do you think he did so because he couldn't stand the thought of me dying? Or did he do it because he saw which way the battle was going and decided to claim some...moral leverage?"

"You once told me people never do things for a single reason."

"Of course. You acknowledge, however, that your father's actions back in May were driven by what was good for him rather than what was good for me?"

Draco gave a grudging nod.

"Do you believe it was in my power to influence the outcome of your father's trial?"

"I don't...I don't know." Draco stood straighter. "I know I didn't see much evidence of you trying."

Snape nodded thoughtfully. "Do you wish for me to beg your forgiveness?" Without giving Draco the time to respond to this comment he leaned closer and said, "Or is it your father's apology you truly crave?"

Draco looked at Snape, and for a moment Hermione wondered if he was going to break down. Then Draco inhaled, quite abruptly, and said, "My father makes a habit of never apologising for anything."

"Indeed. He sees this as a measure of his power and strength. He's mistaken." Snape sighed. "Is it my fault your father is in prison, or is it his?"

"You don't have to patronise me," Draco grumbled. "I'm not six years old anymore."

"You understand. And yet you lash out at me. Does it make you feel better?"

"Not really."

Snape's expression seemed commiserative. "Then if my advice still means anything to you, I would suggest that you guard your emotions. There are few people left who wish to offer Lucius Malfoy the benefit of the doubt."
"People are hypocrites."

"Many are. As are you, if you have decided that your father was not guilty of the crimes for which he was imprisoned."

"My father had very little actual blood on his hands!"

"And yet he celebrated the death of every Muggle, every Muggle-born, and every witch and wizard who opposed the regime of Voldemort."

Draco flinched. "Don't. I just...I can't get used to that."

"The name? Or the fact that I am not the man you always thought I was?"

"Both!"

"Then I suggest you take some time to review. Harry Potter did you an enormous service, Draco – because of him, you have the freedom to work out where your loyalties lie. Perhaps for the first time in your life."

Draco didn't appear moved by this. "Since when do you have good things to say about Potter?"

"I believe I spoke of your newfound freedom as a good thing. Not Potter."

Draco opened his mouth to reply, then closed it. He looked confused, perhaps torn. Then he shook his head. "Potter didn't do anything for me. Why would he?"

"Why indeed? But I didn't say he did it for you, just that it happened. So – embrace this opportunity and think things through. In the meantime, work hard at these classes. Earn your NEWT. Keep Zabini in line. And please try to rein in any childish stupidity among your ex-Slytherin cohorts that might bring undue attention to me, to yourself and to these classes. I cannot stress sufficiently how we really, really do not need it."

"Okay, I get it. I'll do my best." Draco tried to move past Snape, but Snape again moved to stop him. "What? Um, Professor."

Snape's posture had grown formal again: this odd Slytherin heart-to-heart was over. "The conditions of your attendance, Mr Malfoy."

A stand-off for a moment. Then Draco's shoulders slumped and he unsheathed his wand from his sleeve. The wand was passed to Snape, who secreted it on his person with discreet efficiency.

"Go on in."

Draco may have glanced behind himself at that point, but as soon as Hermione had watched him surrender his wand to Snape she had done the sensible thing and turned her back on the whole conversation. It would not put Draco – currently her very half-hearted ally – in a better frame of mind towards her if he knew she had witnessed this humiliation.

She waited. Her breath was a little quick. It was just her and Severus now...

Not Severus. Professor Snape. For the time being, they were back to student and teacher. And there were lines he did not cross. He'd been very clear about that.

"Miss Granger," his voice said.
She turned around and saw him watching her. He did not move towards her, so she went back to
the open doorway. She understood why he stayed in sight of the other students. Snape would not
interact with her in a way that seemed secretive. The last thing either of them needed was a class
full of Slytherins getting wind of a special relationship between a deeply disliked Gryffindor and
their own former Head of House.

They looked at each other for a few brief seconds.

"Professor," she said, as formally as he had spoken.

He nodded a kind of acceptance; perhaps even approval. Then: "I would recommend you do not
goad Mr Zabini further."

"I'll take that advice."

"Though I must congratulate you on your choice of insult."

"I've been taking lessons," she said, careful not to smile.

A few breaths.

"I take it you didn't mean for me to hear all that," she said, of his conversation with Draco.

"I see no harm." Snape lifted his chin. "You have chosen to pursue an alliance. Your choice
makes sense. It is, however, useful to be fully informed regarding the attitudes and opinions of
your allies."

Hermione thought about this. "You did it on purpose," she realised.

"I rarely do things accidentally," Snape countered.

She nodded. She wasn't sure whether to thank him or bristle at his tactical manoeuvring.

Another few breaths.

"I will not be able to protect you in there," he said. "Not overtly, anyway."

"I would not expect you to." And, risking a little, "I'm all grown up now."

"Almost," he conceded. "Have you healed your injury?"

"Nope." She shrugged a shoulder and felt how the scar over her collarbone pulled. "It's the
position of the thing. I tried to practise the counter-curse, wand reversed and pointing at myself,
but I'd need to be double-jointed to pull it off. And casting into a reflective medium is nowhere
near precise enough."

"Can your friends not be persuaded to assist?"

"Ron's casting is slapdash at best. Harry tried, but the spell fizzed. He's brilliant at offensive
casting. Less brilliant at other stuff."

"Hmm."

"Neither of them believe the charm will work, though. They say if it did then the hospital would
use it already."
"Ah, yes. The delightfully straightforward worldview of Gryffindors."

"Says the man who just told someone off for clinging to the Hogwarts House system." Snape narrowed his eyes at the comment and Hermione gave a half-smile. "Oops. Sorry. Want me to tag a 'Professor' on the end of that?"

He rolled his eyes and changed the subject back to her injury. "My own magic is recovering well. In a few weeks I will be able to help with the healing charm myself."

"I'd appreciate that. Constant re-zips are no fun."

"Re...zips?"

"It's what I call them. Twice a week, when they charm the damn thing closed again."

"Ah."

A few more breaths.

"Miss Granger--"

"Please don't insult me."

He was irritated by the interruption. "By?"

"Telling me that things can't be as...free between us. Like it was during your recovery."

"You are many things, but I have never known you to be obtuse. It hardly needs to be said."

"Oh." She frowned. "Sorry. So what were you going to say?"

He shook his head. "Nothing," he decided. "Please take your seat inside."

"Right." She looked into the classroom. Four Slytherin heads were all turned in her direction, watching avidly. Good job they couldn't hear anything. Turning her back on them she added, "Um – it might be good if I act cross and frustrated."

He considered, then nodded. "As if I have chastised you."

"Yes."

"Very well."

She shot him a wicked look. "And by the way? In your dreams."

Snape's eyebrow lifted, proving to Hermione once and for all that no one could make that gesture as eloquent as he could. He nodded her into the classroom, and while she was walking away he murmured, "Quite, quite possibly."

She hurried into the classroom, face flushed, past sniggering Slytherins and the sympathetic looks from her two Ravenclaw friends. There were eight brewing stations within the laboratory, not counting the demonstration table at the front of the class. The stations were arranged four on each side, and comprised L-shaped desks which gave a good amount of space for the preparation of ingredients and the monitoring of a cauldron.

The Slytherins had taken the rear four desks, two each side of the room. They would not have
tolerated an arrangement where they were required to turn their backs on potential enemies. Michael and Terry had taken the two desks in front of Bulstrode and Zabini. They had done so to try to protect Hermione. She was grateful.

No one was surprised when she chose the frontmost desk on the other side of the room. It gave her the buffer of one empty work station between herself and Draco Malfoy, and it put her under closer scrutiny from the front of the class if anyone tried anything. All in all, the seating arrangements could have been worse. She slipped her jacket off and hung it up on the hook provided, then she took a seat on her stool.

Behind her, the door to the lab closed and Snape strode from the back to the front. It was only at this moment that Hermione recognised that he was not wearing his teaching-robies. His frock-length coat billowed pleasingly, but beneath it he wore just a high-collared shirt and black waistcoat above tailored trousers and black leather boots. His clothing hid all but the very edges of the bandages binding the injury at his throat; Hermione was not the only person present whose curse-riddled injury lingered.

It struck her as faintly amusing that the only robes present were the student robes worn by the Slytherins. They were going to have the hardest time adapting to this new learning environment.

Snape turned to the class. "You are no longer schoolchildren," he announced. "This is not Hogwarts. There are no Houses here. There are no points to be given or taken. This is a revisional class for the final year of NEWT level Potions, and we have a lot to get through in the coming weeks. I am aware of the disruption all of you have had to your education. Some of you have suffered more than others." He glanced at the Ravenclaw students. "Some of you, to my shame, have suffered because I was unable to prevent it."

Michael and Terry shuffled awkwardly. Behind her, Hermione could hear irritated rustling. Snape sighed. "Treat these lessons with respect and a proper sense of application. If you do not keep up with the work, you will be asked to leave. If you cause problems for me or for other students, even with so much as a misplaced remark..." He glared at Hermione. She stared back, glad she didn't have to pretend to quail. "...then I shall dismiss you from the course with no sense of regret. There will be no detentions. I am under no obligation to warn you, or punish you, if your conduct is unsatisfactory. Behave like responsible adults, or remove yourselves from my presence. The choice is entirely yours."

He turned his back to approach the blackboard.

Something hit Hermione on the back of her head. She spun around to see Draco studying the ceiling nonchalantly. A chewed ball of parchment lay on the floor beside her stool.

With his back still turned, Snape picked up chalk and began to write a page reference from the standard NEWT potions text on the board. "Is there a problem, Miss Granger?" he asked as he did so.

Hermione rolled her eyes at Draco and turned back to face the front. "No problem, Professor."

"Indeed. Let us hope that Mr Malfoy's ability to shred Starthistle has improved along with his spitball aim."

She glanced back at Draco, who was staring open-mouthed at Snape. He caught her eye and shrugged. She shrugged back.
Snape added, "I hear little in the way of quills on parchment. This does not bode well."
Hermione reached for her bag and got to work.

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Multitasking

"When you learn, teach, when you get, give."

Maya Angelou, 1928-2014

"What I don't understand..." said Hermione's father, as he passed a few more books up to Ron.

"This isn't biography," Ron said from his perch at the top of the stepladder. "This is...I'm not even sure it's English. I haven't heard of a mobe."

"Mobe?" Alan Granger mused to himself. "Mobe? Moby! Oh, dear me, no, *Moby Dick* shouldn't be in this batch. All the fiction should be upstairs on the landing bookcases."

Hermione barely glanced up, her focus on the myriad stacks of paper she was reviewing. Tax returns, passports, medical documents: the biggest issue with altering and then refitting memories in order to keep your parents safe from murdering bigots had, in fact, turned out to be the paperwork. She'd lost count of the number of forms that had required magical manipulation.

Thus distracted, she could offer only minimal input to the exchange between Ron and her father. "It's autobiography," she advised. "Stephen Fry. *Moab Is My Washpot*. 'Moab' is the historical name for a place near the Dead Sea."

"Oh," said Ron. "Okay then."

"Why did Fry reference the Middle East in his title?" her dad asked, puzzled.

"Metaphor. Using the work to cleanse himself of youthful sins. I think that was it, anyway. Suppose you'd have to ask him, to be certain."

"Ah. Well, I'll just get him on the blower, then."

Hermione shot a brief smile at her dad.

Ron said, "Who is this Fry bloke?"

Her father answered. "Outrageously talented and award-winning comedian, writer, broadcaster and actor." He frowned. "Did I miss anything out?"

"Probably makes a smashing soufflé," Hermione suggested.

Ron huffed at this list of achievements. "Sounds like a right show-off to me. But he isn't good at titles," he pointed out, "even if he's good at all this other stuff."

Hermione paid only half a mind to the conversation. As well as checking the post memory-charm paperwork, she was also mentally reviewing the spell she'd cast earlier that afternoon. It was a spell she'd designed herself. She hadn't been able to test it yet, so she was wondering if it would work. Wondering what she might have missed.

"Listen, though," her dad said, "I mean, honestly, I really don't understand--"

Her mother called through from the hall: "Hermione? Is Harry coming back for dinner?"
Hermione checked her watch. "He should be back soon," she replied. "I needed him to pick something up so we can test this spell." Then, suddenly worried, "Oh! Um, please don't go to any trouble. We can always get takeaway."

Ron said, "Yes! Definitely takeaway. Pizza. Pizza and garlic bread and-and that other kind of garlic bread that's round."

"Dough balls," her father said to Ron's knees as he held the stepladder steady.

Ron snorted, looked down at Alan Granger and said, "Bit personal, there, Mr G."

The two of them found this exchange hilarious. It was presumably a man thing. Hermione looked up as her mother came through to the sitting room.

"You two, behave," her mum said. "Hermione – it'll be takeaway or nothing, since I haven't got around to doing more than a basics shop yet."

"Right. Good, then."

"And didn't we agree to move past the eggshells?" her mother added.

Hermione grinned ruefully. "We agreed," she said. "But bear in mind – sometimes when I'm trying to be considerate, all it means is I'm not twelve anymore."

Ron said, "If turning nineteen means I have to be polite about food then bugger that." His ears went red. "Er, pardon my French, Mrs G."

"Less French, more Anglo-Saxon," said Linda Granger. Then she frowned, drifting in thought, probably recalling something she'd read. "Oh. No, actually I think you might be right, Ron. From 'bougre'. I think it was something about being unpleasant towards Eastern Europeans."

Her dad muttered to Ron, "It's as if they're related, isn't it?"

Hermione couldn't help but chuckle.

"What?" said her mum.

"No, it's just...I can't even begin to tell you how much I've missed you," Hermione said, with perfect and all-consuming honesty.

Her mum looked embarrassed. "That's lovely, dear, but we've still got to get some takeaway sorted out, and I used to have the menus pinned to the kitchen corkboard, only it isn't there anymore. Suggestions?"

Her father said plaintively, "Isn't anyone interested in what I don't understand?"

"I'm fascinated," Ron said. "But I'm no good at understanding stuff, so do what I usually do and ask Hermione."

"That is what I'm trying to do!"

Hermione finished her review of the paperwork and began to stack it up, separated by coloured card to keep it organised. She glanced at her father. "What's the problem?"

Her mother said, "I suppose I could check the telephone directory. Do takeaway outlets list in the Yellow Pages? It's been so long since I used the thing..."
Ron said, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. Yeah – me too. It's probably hungry. Think that's it for the top shelf?"

Her dad said, "I am entirely incapable of three conversations at once. Someone please thin it down for me."

Hermione stood up. She turned to her mum. "I removed the corkboard in case the bad guys broke in here, looked at the postcards on it and decided to track down Auntie Beryl. I'll fetch it back for you next weekend. But don't worry. I was here almost all day, Tuesday before last, waiting for the British Telecom engineer to reconnect the phone. So I happen to have the up to date menu for Pizza Republic – it's in my jacket, top left zipped pocket."

"Thank you dear!" Her mother disappeared back into the hall.

To Ron, Hermione said, "If you were working backwards from Z and you've just shelved Maya Angelou? You're probably done. Get down before you fall down."

"Could have done it in three seconds flat with a couple of shelving charms," Ron grumbled.

"But we aren't doing any unnecessary casting in a room with a television and a music centre, remember? Electronics go bang?"

"Yeah, yeah." He looked sheepish, as well he might. He had thoroughly blitzed her original mobile phone with a misplaced _Tergeo_ after spilling pumpkin juice over it, then made matters worse with an attempt at _Reparo_. To top it all off he'd tried to clean up the steaming mess of melted plastic and electronics, using a _Mobili_ charm to send it in the direction of the nearest waste-bin. This had, rather predictably, failed as well, since plastic had no _Mobili_-modifier. (Muggle-made plastics were awkward as anything when interacting with magic.)

"And for the record," Hermione added, "the caged bird sings because it is praying for freedom, not begging for bird seed. It's from a poem. Dunbar, I think." She turned to her father, as Ron made his way down the stepladder. "Thinned enough for you?"

"Better," her dad agreed.

"Right then. What don't you understand?"

The telephone rang. Her mother reappeared and grabbed it from its wall-mounted holder next to the door. "Gra-..." She stopped halfway through the word, glanced at Hermione, then coughed. "Hello?" she corrected herself. Hermione had already been through all the reasons why answering the door or the telephone with any more information than was absolutely necessary was best avoided. "Oh, yes, Harry...all right, I'll tell her." Her mother held the receiver away from her ear and said, "Harry is apparently about to 'initiate code yellow'."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Is it a Y chromosome issue? To always want to turn things into a James Bond film?" Still, she nodded. "I'll take this out to the garden, just in case. Tell him two minutes."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Is it a Y chromosome issue? To always want to turn things into a James Bond film?" Still, she nodded. "I'll take this out to the garden, just in case. Tell him two minutes."

Her mother conveyed the message. While she did so, her dad said, "I give up."

Hermione said, "Don't do that. Dad?"

Her father let out a big sigh. "Honestly, sweetheart, I don't understand. You're sitting six of these magical exams. At least one of them is in a subject you can't cram for on your own and you're shoe-horning the entire year's syllabus in to three short months. At the same time you're starting
the final year syllabus for all the other exams you'll sit next summer, and you're holding down a part-time job at the Ministry."

"Er, yes?" she said, struggling to find a question in there.

Her mother said, "Darling, Harry wants to do two tests. One with the bad-guy wand and one with just his. Oh. The other way around, I think he said...yes, the other way around. He says two minutes, then four minutes."

Hermione glanced at her wristwatch. "Tell him fine." Ron was trying to move the stepladder out of the way and couldn't find the catch that locked the two sections in place. "Right hand side, Ron, just below the hingey bit, and rock it on its back legs first or you'll trap your fingers." She looked back to her father. "Sorry, Dad, I missed the question."

Her father just studied her for a moment, then he shook his head and gave an affectionate laugh. "Never mind."

She shrugged. "Okay. Ron, when you're done with the ladder, give Mum a hand with the takeaway order, will you? You know what me and Harry like. There's cash in my wallet, inside pocket of my jacket. Pizza Republic won't take cards if they deliver."

She headed out through the patio doors at the end of the sitting room, then she crossed the paved terrace and walked down the shallow steps to the lawn. She was never quite sure whether September constituted late summer or early autumn, but either way the evening was a lovely one.

Perhaps she was just in a really good mood. It was wonderful to have her parents back on British soil. They'd had a productive day here in Banstead, starting to unbox all the smaller items Hermione had packed up last year. Making the house a home again.

Then there was the fact that her Distillation of Fortis Maxima had turned out absolutely perfect, last Thursday afternoon at her Potions class. First week done, two potions down, two big ticks for her course. Monday’s Ever-Bloom Drench had garnered an, "Adequate," from Professor Snape: normally the highest of his accolades. Her Fortis Maxima from Thursday, however? It had been textbook. Shimmery silver-blue, the consistency of undiluted cordial, smelling of ripe melon and lemon thyme with a coppery undertone: a thing of absolute beauty.

Snape had glared and sneered while examining the results Hermione had achieved after two hours of fairly intricate and effort-laden brewing. He'd spent quite some time looking for the flaw. Then he'd sighed and said, "Competent, Miss Granger." The whole class had gone quiet for a moment; Snape never offered a 'Competent' in his classroom unless something pretty damn impressive had happened. Then Michael and Terry had given her a round of applause, even as the Slytherins had muttered and cursed under their breaths. It had been hard work to quell the urge to do a happy-dance right there at her brewing station.

(Once she'd got home that evening and Harry had asked what on earth she was so pleased about, she'd had to explain that 'Competent' meant 'Outstanding', just as 'Adequate' meant 'Exceeds Expectations' and 'Subpar' meant 'Acceptable'. Snape refused to use the standard marking terms. To him a C-grade pass was not 'acceptable' in the slightest, nor did a solid B-grade 'exceed' any of his expectations. Potions were either correct, or they were incorrect to a lesser or greater degree. He might still be obliged to offer three levels of passing grade and to rate his students consistently against them, but the Ministry could no longer stop him from changing the language he would use to do so.)

Getting that 'Competent' had felt brilliant. Hearing the word had been great, but the look of ever-
so-slightly annoyed admiration in Snape's eyes had been even better. Hermione now felt very motivated to make him look that way at her again. Even though she missed her afternoons with Severus Snape the almost-a-kind-of-friend and first-rate Boggle opponent, and had to make do once again with Professor Snape the Potions Master, she had plenty of reasons to be cheerful.

Hermione sat down on the wooden bench at the far end of the lawn and checked her wristwatch. One more minute and Harry would cross into the outer zone Hermione's spell had established around her parents' house. If her spell had worked, any unrecognised wand that came within three hundred metres of the house would trigger a yellow flare from her own wand, along with a precautionary alarm sound. If the rogue wand moved closer, the alarm became a red flare and a louder siren.

Augustus Rookwood had been sent to Azkaban months ago, of course, along with his two cohorts from the attack at St Mungo's. There were, according to Kingsley Shacklebolt, no longer any high profile Death Eaters at large. But there were still sympathisers out there. Recent history had seen a mass break-out from Azkaban, in any case. You could never presume that the danger was over.

Hence, Hermione's new security measure. She'd worked it all out on an Ordnance Survey map of the area: a three hundred metre radius meant that she avoided the busier roads through Banstead and thus minimised the possibility of a false alarm. Her specially-designed charm recognised three 'safe' wands so far: her own, Harry's and Ron's. She'd probably expand that once she got access to the other obvious options: the rest of the Weasleys, most importantly.

She watched the second-hand tick round on her watch, then she unsheathed her wand and studied the tip. Harry would be crossing into the outer zone about now, wielding only his recognised wand, so no alarm should be triggered.

Nothing.

Another minute.

Nothing.

So far so good. Of course, that bit was always likely to work; since she'd cast the spell, the nearby presence of Ron's wand hadn't triggered any alarms either. But it was best to test any and all scenarios.

Now Harry would have to retrace his steps outside the trigger-zone and pick up the other wand that remained in their possession: the wand Hermione herself had been forced to use for a while, earlier that year.

Bellatrix Lestrange's wand.

That wand had felt appalling every time she'd used it: corrupting, sly, infectious. It was a wand that took joy in causing harm and rejected outright any facilitation of healing, as though a little piece of Bellatrix was still lodged within. Hermione had been grateful beyond measure when she'd been able to set it aside and return to the shorter vine wand that felt so right in her hand.

At least now the mad psycho's wand would serve a genuine purpose. In fact it could even be argued that Bellatrix Lestrange's final legacy in this world, postmortem, would be to assist in the protection of Hermione's Muggle parents.

She smiled grimly. There was definitely something satisfying in that.

Another minute. Hermione held her breath, glaring at the tip of her wand. 'Please work,' she
thought at it, as hard as she could.

The wand flared into life, yellow and dazzling like a sparkler on Bonfire Night. It vibrated in her hand and let out a low-pitched hum. She sighed with relief, though she felt a tiny bit of smug pride as well. The charm had been a complex one, given the geographic area it was covering and the need to incorporate various exceptions to its rules. So far, so good.

She waited. She jiggled a bit. (Waiting was not her forte. Nor anything that demanded patience and calm composure, come to that.)

Almost three more minutes passed, and then her wand vibrated even harder and emitted a high-pitched buzz. The yellow flare turned red. Hermione was pretty sure she couldn't overlook these alarm signals, even if they happened in the middle of the night. She nodded to herself. A good job, well done. She waved the cancellation charm. The flare and the buzzing ceased. Feeling flushed with success, she got up and went back into the house.

Her dad was sitting on the sofa, his nose in one of the books that hadn't yet been re-shelved. He looked up and smiled. She went to sit down next to him.

"Everything working as it should?" he asked.

"It's fine," she assured him. "Now I'll know if any unidentified wand-user approaches the house. I'll be able to Apparate here immediately and make sure you're okay."

He looked a bit sad. "You know, it bothers me that you have to organise your life around looking out for us."

"Oh, it's hardly organising my life around you. Now the charm's in place it'll probably never be needed. It just makes me feel better, knowing it's there."

"All right, then."

Ron came in from the hall. "We've ordered the pizza. There'll be lots. Did the alarm work?"

"Yup."

"Great!" He barked a short laugh. "Only you, 'Mione. Only you could take a silly charm from a book that was a joke present and turn it into something properly useful. Hey, you know, I'm thinking we should let Shacklebolt know the spell. Might be a useful Auror tool – an adaptable perimeter you can set up around sensitive targets?"

Hermione arched a brow. "Hark at Mr Law-Enforcement."

"Oh, bougre off." He grinned. "I can say that. If it's French it's not really swearing in front of your parents, is it?"

"Merde," Hermione said promptly.

Her father said, "Connard."

"Je m'en fou," Hermione said.

"Ferme ta gueule."

She snorted. There was something quite marvellous about hearing your father say rude words in another language.
Ron said, rather suspiciously, "You're being very coarse, now, aren't you?"

Her father said, "I knew that tutor we found to get you through your GCSE was money well spent."

Hermione smiled. "Mr Jenkins. He asked me to call him Tony. I was completely appalled."

"Quite right too. You were, what, thirteen?"

"Mmm." She leaned in to her dad's shoulder. "By the way – I'm not revising for six NEWTs. Not anymore."

Both men present did a double take.

"Er – you're not?" her father prompted.

"Wow," said Ron. "Not like you to ditch a subject."

"Oh, no, that's not what happened," Hermione told him.

"So...you're now revising for seven NEWTs?" asked her dad, rather incredulously.

"No, not that either." She shrugged. "Look, it wasn't my fault. Professor Vector tricked me into taking my Arithmancy NEWT last Tuesday."

"The what with the who?" her dad said.

"Professor Vector. Arithmancy. You know: magical mathematics. We had a chat after the first of her Lost Seventh tutorials. She was asking me about some of my projections when we were hunting for Horcruxes."

"Yeah, but how on earth did she trick you into an exam?" Ron demanded.

"Well, she said I'd already covered the techniques I needed for the NEWT. And I said, no, I need time to revise. So she said the best thing would be if I quickly go through a past paper. Just, you know, to see where my weak areas were. She said it was fine – she had a couple of hours in hand that morning and it probably wouldn't take that long anyway. Seemed like a good idea to me, so I sat the paper – just me and her in this small meeting room in the Ministry. And then she took it away and said she'd owl me the next day when she'd had chance to look at it."

"And she owled you your NEWT instead," Ron deduced. Though by that point it hardly needed a strategist's brain to work it all out.

"Actually she owled me a confession that I'd sat this year's exam. She didn't tell me my result until yesterday. She needed to get someone else to verify the marking. They're quite strict about objectivity in NEWTs."

"And?" her father pressed. "You passed, right? Or, what is it, Exceeds Expectations?"

Ron barked a laugh. "It's Hermione. It's Arithmancy. If there was a result better than Outstanding then she would have managed it. Maybe they'll give her a Phenomenal, or an Out-of-this-bloody-world! Oh. Um, 'scuse French, Mr G."

"Thanks, Ron," Hermione huffed. "Now my Outstanding sounds a bit crap."

Her father did a rather un-English whoop – perhaps demonstrating a capacity for exuberance that stemmed from his time in the antipodes – and gathered her up into a congratulatory hug.
"Hermione got an A in her Arithmantics A level!" her father crowed. "Or, NEWT. Thingy. You know. The Mathsy one."

Her mother looked at her, just a bit accusing. "You've already passed one of your NEWTs?"

Hermione pulled away from her father and submitted to Ron's hug. Over his shoulder she said to her mother, "Right. Yes. Um, actually...well, you know I was meeting Professor Babbling last week as well...?"

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Later, sitting at the dinner table and stuffed full of pizza, Hermione tried to explain that she wasn't nearly the intellectual superhuman that her friends and family seemed to want to believe.

"It's no big thing," she said. "I spent a lot of the last twelve months working with Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. It's hardly surprising I was up to speed on those subjects."

Ron tutted and said, "Most people collect chocolate frog cards or play chess or knit jumpers. But homework is actually your hobby, isn't it?"

"If it isn't assigned, it isn't homework. Some people enjoy research; I'm one of them."

"Two subjects down is all well and good, but your father and I are still worried about the rest of your workload," said Linda Granger.

"What's to worry about?"

"Take this Potions business," her mother said. "You don't even get a full academic year for that one! Cramming it all into three months seems rather daunting."

"It'll be fine. I'll learn more in three months with Professor Snape than I did in the whole year with Professor Slughorn."

"Actually, that's probably true," Harry put in, being supportive.

"And final year curricula are always short," she went on, "so it isn't as if there's three whole terms worth of material to cover. You know how it goes. That last summer term of your final year is always spent with revision lessons and then the exams themselves."

"Even so," her mother said, unconvinced.

"Really. There's no need for concern. In terms of theory, I'm not coming across much that's new. I had the whole of last year to do plenty of reading, remember?"

"Quite right," said Harry. "Not like we had anything else on, is it?"

She huffed her exasperation. "Look, I want these NEWTs out of the way. Sooner the better. I need the qualifications, but I'm so far from being a schoolgirl nowadays, I mean, it's not even funny."

Her mother looked at her, woman to woman. "Yes. I see that."

"And your Patronus is a rook," Ron pointed out. For perhaps the fifty-eighth time since the evening Augustus Rookwood had tried to slash her to bits with *Sectumsempra.*
"Ronald," she said warningly.

"Sorry."

"What on earth is a Patronus?" her dad asked.


"Oh dear. Like Margaret Thatcher?" her dad suggested.

"Worse than that," Hermione said.

"Yikes. Piers Morgan?"

"Even worse," Hermione said lightly, because acquainting her parents with the genuine properties of Dementors didn't seem like appropriate dinner-table conversation. "Patronuses will sort them out, though. You can use them for sending messages, too, when there isn't an owl handy. Dumbledore invented it. Used to be something just the Order did."

"What order?" her dad asked.

"Order of the Phoenix. You know, the good guys, the white hats. But with everything that's come out over the summer regarding the war, other people picked up on the idea. Now everyone's doing it. Well, everyone that can cast a Patronus, anyway. It's like the wizarding community just got voicemail."

"Ah," her mum said. "So these Patronus things are sort of like a mobile phone with added pepper spray."

Hermione thought about that then nodded. "Sounds about right."

"And why is yours a rook?" her mother pressed.

"They take the form of animals. Like a-a shamanistic totem animal, I suppose, would be a kind of analogy. They usually take on a form that, er, resonates with the caster."

"And rooks resonate for you?"

"Ohh, she's been resonating," Ron said darkly.

"Ron, I won't tell you again," Hermione snapped.

He held up his hands. "Sorry. Be fair, though. Still a bit weird."

Hermione's dad said, "I'm so completely lost."

Hermione said, "Good. Let's keep it that way."

Her mother stood up and began to clear the plates. Demonstrating that women tended to cotton on to certain notions with greater alacrity than men could find, she said, "Fine. But you will be careful, won't you, dear?"

She held her mother's eyes, then she sighed and said glumly, "Chance would be a fine thing."
"Really?"

"Hmm."

Alan Granger said, "Still lost."

"Good," said Hermione and her mother both.

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"So next weekend," her father said over coffee, "we were wondering if we might be able to take you out for dinner."

"It doesn't have to be on your actual birthday," her mother added. "I know you young people have probably got all kinds of things planned. Clubs and raves and whatnot."

Harry snorted. "Have you met Hermione?"

Hermione said, "Shut up, Harry! I can be young and-and spontaneous. If I choose."

"Course you can!" Harry said placatingly. "Long as you plan it well in advance. Dot the 'i's, cross the 't's."

"Set it all out in a colour-coded timetable," Ron suggested.

Harry snorted even harder. "Hermione's Spontaneity Schedule," he said.

"All events to be confirmed no less than one week in advance," Ron agreed.

"Cancellation requires forty-eight hours' notice," Harry said, nodding.

"Copies of the schedule available to all participants; timing to be strictly adhered to."

Hermione said pointedly, "Do either of you remember that time I spontaneously cast a bird-conjuring charm?"

"Sorry," said Ron, very quickly.

"Sorry," said Harry.

She tutted and ignored the residual smirks from her two friends. It was meant affectionately, after all, and she was only pretending to be annoyed. "So. Dinner. What did you have in mind, Mum?"

"Maybe the Sunday? We could go to the carvery at the Thorpe Hotel. You always used to like that. You always sweet-talked your way into getting an extra helping of crackling."

"Well, it sounds... fabulously nostalgic," Hermione decided. "It's a date. But Saturday – we kind of hoped you might come to ours."

"We're having a party at Grimmauld Place," Harry said. "Since my idea of having a bash up at Hogsmeade was shot down."

"And we all know why you voted for Hogsmeade," Ron put in.

"The Broomsticks is a nice place! Madam Rosmerta would have given us a discount too, for a big function. We cleared her name, remember?"
"Not the point."

"So what's the point?"

"You can't celebrate Hermione's birthday by trying to sneak off with your girlfriend!" Ron said primly.

"Maybe Ginny wanted to celebrate Hermione's birthday too – did you think of that?"

Ron snorted and rolled his eyes theatrically. "The Three Broomsticks. Right next door to Hogwarts. Run by a woman who thinks she owes you a favour."

"So?"

"An inn with an upstairs full of nice, comfortable, private guest rooms! We wouldn't have seen either of you, all night. Be honest."

Ron and Harry glared at each other for a moment, before they both remembered where they were sitting and who was listening. They looked round, a little chagrined, at Hermione's parents.

Harry coughed. "So anyway," he said, "there's a get-together at my house in Islington."

"I didn't even want a party, really," Hermione confided to her mum and dad.

"Yeah, yeah, Miss Young-and-Spontaneous," Ron said. "People like you. Deal with it."

"It won't be a big raucous thing," Harry assured them. "Just close friends, family, that sort of nonsense." He looked rather sweetly hopeful, considering how much he was missing Ginny. "I'm making chilli. And Mrs Weasley will no doubt bring loads of stuff too, because she doesn't trust that I cook without charms."

"And my dad is just itching to meet you both again," Ron pointed out. "He never gets the chance to chat with Muggles. You're both sort of exotic, really, to him."

"Gracious," Hermione's mum said. "I'm not sure I've ever been exotic before."

"May 1977," her father said promptly. "Monaco. When you were wearing that–"

Hermione said, quite loudly, "And moving on from this clearly inappropriate subject?"

Her parents both smirked.

"Seriously, though, sweetheart – are you sure you've got a handle on this being-a-teenager thing?" her dad asked. "You've only got one year of it left, you know. Inviting your parents to your own birthday party is definitely not in the teenager manifesto. At least it wasn't in the sixties, far as I can recall."

"Definitely not," her mum agreed.

Hermione shrugged. "I've always done things differently."

"Well – all right, then." He glanced at Hermione's mum, then they both nodded. "We'll be there. What time?"

"Seven," Harry said. "Are you coming the old-fashioned way or shall we Side-Along you?"
Hermione's dad looked briefly unwell. He swallowed hard and said, "I think we'll train and tube it, thanks all the same."

Hermione grinned. "That's great, then! We've been so busy this weekend, I haven't even had chance to hear all about Kenya."

"Oh, it was remarkable," her dad said. "And humbling. And rewarding. It isn't just the dentistry, you know, though that's a big part of it. But there's this orphanage, and--"

"Save it for next weekend, Alan," said her mother. "Or we'll run out of things to say to each other."

Hermione smiled and stood to clear the coffee mugs. Her mum could say things like that now.

Now there wasn't a really good chance it might be true.

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At the patio doors, Hermione glanced out into the darkened back garden. Ron had just Disapparated back to the Burrow – for all his complaints about living at home, he couldn't quite tear himself away from the good-food-on-tap that Molly Weasley offered – and Harry had Disapparated back to Grimmauld Place.

She turned to her parents. "I don't want to be a pain," she said, "but can we go over the plan one last time?"

Her father pushed his shoulders back. "I'm getting the motion-detector lamps installed as soon as I pick them up from Wickes tomorrow. Anyone who teleports or-or whatever it's called--"

"Apparates," said her mum.

"Anyone who Apparates into the garden will find themselves in floodlights."

"They need to be heavy-duty, remember," Hermione said. "Weather-proof. And if you can position them a few metres away from where I tend to Apparate, it'll minimise the chance of them blowing up as soon as I arrive."

"I've got it all written down," her father assured her.

"Good. And the emergency Portkeys?"

"Two on the back of the cubbyhole door, behind your father's overalls," said her mum. "And two upstairs in the shoe-rack in my wardrobe. And two spare in the carry-all that we'll stash at the practice next week." She frowned. "Hopefully somewhere Debbie doesn't decide to have a go at them with the Dettol wipes. That would be awkward."

"And they'll take us straight to the Burrow's back garden," her dad added.

"No one can Apparate too close to the Burrow, you see," Hermione said. "There are wards. It's a much safer option than Islington. All you have to do is hold on tight, and expect to feel a touch queasy for a minute or so after you land--"

"We've used Portkeys now," her mother pointed out. "You Apparated us to Adelaide and we Portkey'ed to Kenya. Remember?"

"Right. Yes." The month her parents had just spent in Kenya, volunteering with a medical charity, had provided excellent cover for their return to England. Their staff at the dental practice in
Banstead were under the impression that the two Grangers had been in Africa on a sabbatical for the full twelve months they'd been away; lies were always easiest when they resembled the truth.

"Of course," her father said, "if anyone with nefarious intent comes to the door without alarm bells ringing, they'll have to do so without their wand. Which would seem unlikely, for a wizard or witch."

"Very unlikely," Hermione agreed. "Now, you've got my mobile number. I don't keep it switched on much, but I check it three or four times a day, so if you need to get a hold of me and it isn't an emergency then leave a voicemail. But if there's an emergency and you're unsure what to do, please, please err on the side of caution. Get yourselves to the Burrow. Someone will be there who can get hold of me immediately. Portkeys can easily be replaced. Better safe than sorry."

Hermione's mother nodded. "We understand. And we appreciate your concern, darling, but bear in mind that we are still the parents in this relationship."

"Am I being annoying?" she asked. "Sorry."

Linda Granger sighed and shook her head. "Given recent history, I can hardly fault your precautions. But it's difficult for us to rely on you to protect us. It seems so topsy-turvy."

"I know. I get that." Hermione tried a smile. "And if you weren't the amazing people I know you are, I'd doubt we could make this work. But you are amazing. And I'm not a little girl anymore. I just need you to be generous enough to let me protect you."

Her mother nodded. "Do you have any idea how proud we are of you?" she said. "Me and your dad?"

Hermione blushed. "If I'm doing okay, you both have to take a big slice of the credit."

Her mum smiled and reached to touch Hermione's face.

Her father coughed, looked embarrassed and said, "Do I need to get the box of Kleenex? Or can we all remember we're British, thank you very much?"

"No, we're done, no need to panic," Hermione said. "Look – far as the plan goes, there's a good chance these precautions will end up being unnecessary. Let's set things up now so it's all in place, then, well, we can get back to just being us."

She hugged them both. Then she walked into the garden.

"Oh, Hermione," her dad called. She stopped and turned around. "If this 'rook' chap takes the slightest advantage then you come straight to me. All right? I may be a weedy old dentist with grey hair and an ever-expanding paunch, but I'm still ready to punch a fellow's lights out if he messes with my Hermbles."

Hermione said, "Um."

Her father shrugged. "Takes me a while, but I get there in the end."

She shook her head in resignation, growling under her breath at Ron's big mouth, then she turned on the spot and Apparated home.

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On the Monday of the second week of Lost Seventh Potions, the class was expected to prepare a heat-resistant salve called Flameaway.

"You should be aware, after several years of Potions lessons, that salves, balms or creams have an additional element to their design," Professor Snape lectured. Quills scratched on parchment at the back of the classroom, and a nice ergonomic rollerball glided effortlessly across a spiral-bound A4 lined pad at the front left. "In many cases the carrier material is as important as the magical infusion."

He turned to the blackboard, the tails of his coat spinning out theatrically. Hermione had to bite her lip to quell the urge to smile. A wave of Snape's wand and the left hand side of the board revealed a diagram. It appeared to depict the larval form of an insect, not the Pompeii worm that Hermione had been expecting. Whatever it was, it had certainly not appeared in the chapter on fire-resistant potions and salves that Hermione had read in her textbook over the weekend.

"With Flameaway," Snape went on, "the carrier material is even more important. Most of the commonly used carriers are inherently problematic." He moved to the front of the demonstration table and leaned back against it, arms folded, wand still to hand. "Consider. Vegetable and nut oils, beeswax – there is an obvious drawback when infusing these carriers with properties designed to repel heat. Miss Bulstrode?"

Hermione glanced over her shoulder at Bulstrode, then remembered herself and settled back into her seat facing the front. No one ever liked failing in front of an audience, but Slytherins were the worst. They would take their sense of humiliation out on any bystander, as viciously and as sneakily as they could.

While she waited for Bulstrode's answer, Hermione assessed the rather intriguing invertebrate drawn on the blackboard. She also considered the problem of a heat-resistant salve that required a carrier that did not alter its properties upon the application of heat. Perhaps she allowed a secret and hidden sliver of her mind to admire the way Severus Snape's tall, wiry frame showcased the rather Edwardian outfit he had adopted in place of his teaching robes, but only a sliver.

Snape was being oddly charitable, Hermione found herself thinking. Bulstrode's two attempts at brewing last week had resulted in one Subpar and one Unacceptable. Even so, Snape had not yet seen fit to kick Bulstrode off the course. The question he had just asked was hardly taxing; some might even suggest he was giving her the opportunity to gain confidence thanks to an easy answer. (Of course, since this was Severus Snape, Hermione was assured that the man wasn't being nice for the sake of being nice. There'd be another agenda somewhere, hidden in the murky labyrinth of his mind.)

Whatever Snape's reasons, Bulstrode failed to take the opportunity proffered. She said instead, "I did the reading, you know. That wasn't in it."

Snape said, "No, this is something different; it's called logic. Think, Miss Bulstrode. Beeswax.
Shea butter.  Castor oil.  What happens when you apply heat?"

"Um..."

He offered her a fair chance to come up with the answer before giving a small sigh.  "Might they get hot?"

"Well obviously," Bulstrode muttered.

"Perhaps, if in solid form, they might melt?"

"Oh.  Right."

"And the heat is conducted along the material.  Which is why vegetable oils are often used in cooking."

"I suppose."

Snape paused.  Hermione clutched her pen tightly.  It was one of the things she could do to stop her own arm springing into action.  (She had been reminded, the previous week, that Severus Snape never called on someone whose hand was raised.  Admittedly, this was a lesson she should have learnt seven years previously.)

The professor sighed again and said, "Summarise for us, Mr Zabini."

Zabini said, "You need a carrier that has low thermal conductivity and a high specific heat capacity.  Something with the properties of a phoenix feather, maybe?"

"Phoenix feathers tend towards magical regeneration when aflame.  This would create an imbalance, even if there were some way to turn them into an oil or cream.  You are right, however, that the carrier for our salve needs to be able to take plenty of heat, preferably without conducting that heat to the skin it is covering."  He shook his head in mock despair.  "One gets so tired of the smell of burning human flesh."

The humour was very dark and a touch self-deprecating.  Hermione pressed an arm across her abdomen to stop herself from reacting.  After an awkward moment, a couple of sniggers demonstrated that Zabini and Draco had decided Snape was joking.  The cautious delay to their reaction struck Hermione as being nearly as funny as Snape's quip.

Snape eased up from the table and went back to the blackboard.  "Mr Corner, I believe your father is in the building trade."

"Yes, Professor," said Michael.

At the back of the room Zabini muttered something about half-bloods, Muggles and 'knowing their place'.  Hermione spun around, immediately furious, but Michael caught her attention and shot her a consoling look.

"Miss Granger, please try to pay attention," Snape said.  She turned back, angrier now with Snape for failing to police the racism in his class than with Blaise Zabini for spouting it.  "Mr Corner, are you familiar with any of the materials used in Muggle construction which provide protection from fire?"

"Asbestos," Michael said.  "Although that turned out to have problems of its own.  There are silica-based fibres or, um, foams and gels, I think, that are fashioned into tiles or pumped into cavities."
"There are indeed. And for all Mr Zabini's muttering, it was he who introduced the expression 'specific heat capacity' into the conversation."

Hermione's anger eased off nearly as quickly as it had arrived.

Zabini said, "We did it in fourth year! When we discussed the properties of cauldrons!"

"Indeed we did, Mr Zabini. My sincere thanks for the reminder – in my dotage I have so many problems with memory." Oh, Snape could sound cold when he wanted to. "The point is that these phrases – specific heat capacity, thermal conductivity – are phrases we have borrowed from the Muggle disciplines of chemistry and physics. We have borrowed them because they are the right phrases. If a Muggle scientist were to analyse the properties of the carrier we are about to create alongside the properties of the silica foam that Mr Corner mentioned, they would see many similarities." He pointed with his wand at the diagram on the board. "Of course, Muggle scientists would find it difficult to believe in the existence of the glasswing beetle. Mainly because they rarely manage to get to those rocky plateaus of the Lut Desert that are home to such a creature. Copy the diagram down; learn the anatomy. You are about to skin the larval form of a glasswing beetle and then render it into a paste that will act as the Flameaway carrier." He paused. "Miss Granger, you are fidgeting and it is upsetting the symmetry of my classroom. Explain yourself."

Hermione had been fidgeting because sometimes the urge to fling her arm into the air was almost too irresistible. (In her own defence, she recognised the absurdity. She'd wanted classes that reflected a more mature kind of learning – a sort of university vibe rather than a return to Hogwarts – and Snape was offering just that. But still she needed to combat the urge to indulge her inner overachieving-thirteen-year-old.)

So she sighed, narrowed her eyes briefly at Snape, and said, "The process of rendering usually requires the material to be heated to melting point and then reformed, filtering out certain impurities. But if this material is thermostolerant...?"

The very corner of Snape's mouth twitched. "Heat does not affect the cellular structure of this animal. Not until you reach the kind of temperatures you'd need a volcano to provide, in any case. What would you suggest?"

Hermione thought as hard and as fast as she could. "Absence of heat?"

"Application of cold might cause problems of its own, might it not?"

Shit. She should have thought of that. "Ice crystals. Of course." She frowned as an idea formed. "Where does the life-cycle of this animal begin?"

Snape's mouth twitched again. "Deep within rock fissures in the middle of a baking hot salt desert."

She exhaled happily. "Light, then."

Snape dipped his head. "Light indeed, Miss Granger."

She frowned. "So how do we regulate the application of light to these larvae?"

Snape's eyebrow arched. "Glasswing beetle larvae are an expensive commodity. At Hogwarts, the Flameaway salve is learned using a pulp made from Pompeii worms as the carrier – the resulting salve might protect human skin from a spilled cup of tea, but little more. Here at St Mungo's, however, we have access to a breeding colony of glasswing beetles thanks to the magically-controlled habitat in the hospital's long-term storage area."
"Cool," Terry Boot said.

"I can think of more accurate words to describe a habitat that averages sixty degrees centigrade," Snape said. "The glasswing beetle is vital in several medicinal compounds and treatments, so the colony was established here from imported larvae about thirty years ago. We have the resource to hand, and we have been given permission to use it. That, Miss Bulstrode, is why the reading you have done for this lesson does not cover all the elements of our brewing. And in answer to your question, Miss Granger – given the high monetary value of our components today, we will be regulating the application of light very, very carefully."

They gathered around the demonstration table. The overhead glow-globe gave off a minimal amount of illumination at the red end of the spectrum. The rest of the classroom was in darkness.

"The trick is to work quickly and efficiently – this should hardly come as a surprise to students of advanced Potions," said Professor Snape. In the semi-darkness his voice seemed to take on a physicality of its own. Then again, perhaps Hermione was too ready to let her imagination run away with itself; she'd had a handful of delicious dreams about that voice in recent months.

Snape pulled clear the heavy black cloth that had been keeping light away from the tank of larvae.

"The larvae will already be reacting, even to this low level of illumination. Since they are not yet mature enough to pupate, they will attempt to achieve a dormant state in which the membrane that surrounds them becomes opaque."

Hermione said, "Wow, how do they do that?"

"There is an endocrine gland which produces a pigment: a kind of melanin. If you wish to learn more about the anatomy of magical invertebrates, Miss Granger, I'd suggest you contact Headmistress McGonagall and find out whether there are any further places available for NEWT level Care of Magical Creatures. Perhaps I might be permitted to continue, since time is actually of the essence?"

"Pardon me, Professor," she said, as unsarcastically as she could. Which was to say, not very.

Snape shot her a look that was probably a lot more scathing than the poor illumination revealed. Then he reached his left hand into the tank and plucked out a larva. He held it up so everyone could lean in and get a closer look. It was about ten centimetres long, roughly segmented into sections, grey and purplish in colour, with tiny blue-black lines forming a kind of mesh within its jelly-like structure.

"Mr Nott, if you'd be so kind as to replace the cloth over the tank? Thank you." Snape placed the grub down on the obsidian plate he'd prepared. "Note the direction it curls on itself," he said. "The curve is not symmetrical. Your attention should be focused on this end." He indicated with his free hand. "The one which curls more prominently. The labium – the feeding aperture – is here, though it tends not to be obvious unless the larva is actively taking on sustenance."

"Right," Draco muttered to Hermione's right. "So it's like it's hunching its shoulders. Got it."

Snape glanced up before he returned his attention to the larva. "Certainly, Mr Malfoy, if we absolutely must anthropomorphise the creature we are about to kill, render into paste and then smear over our own flesh."

Hermione couldn't help herself; she snorted with laughter. But she got lucky because Zabini,
Michael and Theodore Nott did as well, so her reaction didn't seem out of place. Snape glanced around at his students, glaring them into composure.

"Once you have identified the business end," he said, "turn the larva so – such that the curl is pulling the tail end upwards, off the plate. Try to avoid the setae at each side – the tiny hair-like constructs. They are so fine they're almost invisible, but they will easily pierce human skin if you pinch against them. Three segments down, you will see where the intestinal tract begins – the thickest of the 'veins'. You want to pierce it as close to the head as possible. Of course, the tract itself is merely a useful visual marker – you are, in fact, piercing the invisible cluster of ganglia that make up what passes for this creature's brain. Do this before you attempt any other incision, otherwise the larva will have time to react to what it perceives as an attack."

"How will it react?" Zabini asked.

"A gland near the head will release an odour a thousand times more noxious than a Dungbomb." Snape looked around at his students. "If you trigger this response and then fail to cast an immediate containment charm, I shall be looking very unfavourably on your continued presence on this course. Am I understood?"

Hermione, along with her fellow students, murmured that yes, he was understood.

"It should also be noted that if you cause the larva to activate its osmeterium – its bad smell mechanism – you will no longer be able to use that particular specimen. Contain the stench, and make careful use of the waste disposal behind Mr Nott's desk. You may try again with another specimen, but I would encourage great care. Fail a second time and you may not waste a third larva. Your score for this exercise will simply be set to zero."

"What, even if we redo the salve with ingredients we buy ourselves?" Draco said indignantly.

"If I were to permit that," Snape said, "I would be offering the more wealthy students an advantage. Speaking as someone who might euphemistically have been referred to as 'less wealthy' during my own Hogwarts career, you'll understand that such bias offends me greatly."

There was a pause. Entitlement crackled in the air around Draco, and Zabini, and possibly Bulstrode as well. But they didn't argue.

Snape took a narrow-bladed scalpel in a pencil grip and spread the larva against the cutting surface.

"A single incision, made at right angles to the larva when it is in this position." He demonstrated with a firm stab of his blade. Hermione managed not to wince. "The tissue you are cutting is no more resistant than cooled custard, so force is not necessary. However, use speed rather than caution. A broken scalpel can be replaced for a few Sickles. Each replacement larva would cost twenty-three Galleons."

"Or it would, if we didn't have a breeding colony," Zabini pointed out.

"It is St Mungo's that has the breeding colony, Mr Zabini. They are allowing us to use it, free and gratis, just as they are loaning us these facilities. While I have yet to meet a Healer who does not grate on my nerves like fingernails on a blackboard, a little respectful gratitude seems in order. Wouldn't you say?"

Zabini hesitated. Hermione supposed you couldn't just shrug off such a profound belief in your own privilege in a few brief moments. "Yes, Professor," Zabini eventually said. He was a self-centred pric, but he wasn't stupid.
"Is everyone watching?" Snape looked around. The very dead larva had relaxed its curl as soon as the blade had pierced its body. Snape withdrew the blade and then stretched the creature out lengthwise. "Head to tail, a central cut no more than half a centimetre deep." He sliced. "Set down your scalpel because you will need two hands." He did so. "Pinch at the tail end, where there are no setae. Turn it over. Pressure on the meaty part of the body. Pull."

Within a second, a gossamer-like membrane had been pulled from the creature, and its gelatinous innards lay in a gloopy heap on the obsidian.

Millicent Bulstrode said, "Oh, that's disgusting."

Hermione leaned closer, looking at the odd refraction of red-tinged light through the substance, already seeing how this was the start of a remarkable magical process. "It so totally is not," she breathed.

She glanced up. Snape was watching her. He blinked. In any other individual, this would not have been worth noting: just another involuntary motion of the eyelids made several thousand times a day. But somehow Hermione knew that her reaction had been met with approval.

"If you've quite finished, ladies?" Snape said, his armour of disdain back in place. "The next stage is the specialised Lumos charm we have already covered." He cast, then held his glowing wand over the obsidian plate. The grey-ish jelly began to collapse into a puddle. "Observe how the minute black lines which were apparent within the body of the larva are effectively being burnt away by light of this specific wavelength." Snape waited until the jelly was almost completely liquid, then he murmured another charm and his wand flared brighter, tending towards the violet end of the spectrum. The puddle thickened and then grew opaque, as if it had developed a cataract.

Snape cancelled the charm, sleeved his wand and then took up twin bamboo spatulas. He began to work the puddle, which now looked as if it had the consistency of petroleum jelly. "The heat-resistant element to this animal is conferred by a magical protein, which we have just preserved within the pulp of the body." He pulled the goo into a neat pile, and with every passing second the paste hardened like cooling wax. Satisfied, he stood back. "There. Not difficult, so long as you have the technique. Since you all learned how to skin a blind-worm for your OWL, this should not be too much of a departure. Questions?"

Hermione drew breath to speak, then remembered that time was of the essence as far as the tank of larvae on the table went. She let the breath out and firmly clamped shut her lips.

Snape sighed and said, "Hoppleberry's study on magical invertebrates has an excellent chapter on glasswing beetles, Miss Granger. Enjoy at your leisure."

"Thank you," she said.

"Swot," said Draco.

She wasn't sure if she was hearing things, but there seemed to be less scorn in Draco's voice than she'd come to expect. Still, given that he'd presumably been allowed to keep his wand for this particular lesson, perhaps he was just in a better-than-normal mood.

They all made their careful way back to their work stations. Time to make some Flameaway.

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In the murky red-tinged classroom, Hermione took a few moments to examine her larva. Close to, it was a magnificent thing. Its potential was awe-inspiring, both in terms of its ability to pupate
into a creature like the glasswing beetle, and its ability to lend its properties to a wide range of magical medicine.

"Got it!" Draco muttered behind her. He'd obviously taken the 'quickly and efficiently' advice to heart.

It was a fair reminder, though. Even these low levels of light would eventually prompt the increase in pigmentation. There was, however, something she could do to make things easier for herself.

Voicelessly, and as discreetly as possible, she cast Aspectu-Tenebris. She'd designed the spell herself. It was based on Insono-Chiroptus, the charm that provided vision in darkness, in the same way bats navigated using sonar. She'd combined it with the super-sensory charm. This was the result: her very own night-vision spell. (It had been invaluable on moonless nights in the New Forest, sitting up on watch, nerves shredded by the presence of the Horcrux.)

She blinked as her brain began to process the new information it was receiving. Though she could not see as well as she might have been able to in normal illumination, she was no longer restricted to a small dome of weak red light from the glow-globe above her station. She could see everyone present, including Severus Snape who was at the front of the classroom and covering up the tank containing the spare larvae. As if he sensed her scrutiny, he lifted his head and looked right at her. She wondered if he had his own night-vision spell, and in the semi-security of the darkness she risked a smile.

He didn't return it. But that didn't mean anything. He didn't tend to return smiles even on bright sunny days when they had complete privacy.

Back to work. Hermione set the grub on her cutting surface, her hands carefully mirroring everything she'd watched Snape's hands do. She found the black line she needed to sever. All was as it should be.

"Ow!" cried Terry Boot. "Bastard bastard bastard."

Scalpel accident or setae, Hermione diagnosed. She took the time to glance across, just in case Terry needed help, but Snape was already there, dropping a spare black cloth over Terry's wriggling grub and directing Terry out of the classroom to go and get the small slice in his fingers cleaned and closed. At least they were in the right place for emergency medical attention.

Hermione took up her scalpel, aimed the blade–

It trembled briefly in her hand.

She stood straight and tried not to sigh. After six years of Potions lessons in a classroom filled with Slytherins who hated her living guts, Hermione had long since learned to ensure that all her gear was immune to a remote summoning charm. In those earliest Hogwarts years, dishes of ingredients, knives, once even a jar of virulent lobalug venom had gone flying across the room when Snape's attention was elsewhere, to be hoarded ready for when they might be chucked back at her. She'd been blamed several times for the 'clumsy' way she had supposedly swept vessels on to the dungeon's stone floor. It had become something of a game, trying to catch the stolen items hurled her way with a well-aimed Accio or Leviosa before breakages occurred.

And then, at some point in her third year, Hermione had discovered a charm buried in an obscure text Professor Flitwick had lent her. You could use it to prevent any inanimate object from responding to a standard Accio. It was apparently the original source of the highly-guarded anti-theft charms that shops used to protect their goods.
So at the beginning of every subsequent Potions lesson, she had taken to casting this counter-spell on her equipment. Then she'd taught it to Harry and Ron, since Draco and his Slytherin cohorts had started to pick on them when they'd realised the know-it-all's equipment was no longer fair game.

And here they were again: herself and some hostile Slytherins, all together in a Potions class. It had been automatic, the way she'd gone back to protecting her equipment. These days she could cast the charm without the need for wand or voice, and she did so as a matter of course. She barely thought about doing it.

This was, however, the first time someone had tried to Accio an item from her brewing station in several years. And to try to pull her scalpel out of her hand while she was about to make a crucial incision was pretty specific timing. Come to think of it, it also suggested she was not the only student present who might be using a night-vision charm.

Another tremor of her scalpel. Whoever was trying to summon it was persistent.

Hermione breathed to steady herself. She did not look around; she would not give whoever was trying to disrupt her work the satisfaction. Instead, she took a firm hold of her scalpel, checked the larva she had pinned down on her cutting surface, and made the stab that ended the creature's life. With a fluid efficiency, she stretched out the dead grub and drew a fine line down its length with the tip of the blade. Then she set the scalpel aside and she skinned the larva just as Snape had shown her.

Unsurprisingly, the scalpel twitched again on the worktop. She kept her satisfied smile to herself and refused to look around to identify the caster. (Her money was on Zabini.) She unsleeved her wand and got on with her casting. The light from her wand began to turn the goop into a puddle.

Perhaps inevitably, from Bulstrode's work station on the other side of the room a voice complained, "Merlin, that is just rank..." This was followed by the suggestion of foulness in the air, before Snape's voice swiftly intoned a containment charm, cordoning off the worst of the noxious fumes now being emitted from Bulstrode's hapless larva. Hermione listened with half an ear as Snape tried to get Bulstrode's attention from inside the air-tight barrier he had created around her work station. He was struggling with this; she was throwing quite the wobbler as she breathed the pungent results of her carelessness. Snape finally managed to encourage Bulstrode to cast a Bubble-Head Charm, and then directed her to dispose of the larva.

While Hermione's focus was on the timing of the specialised Lumos charm, and Snape's attention was taken up with Bulstrode's mishap, something moved in the corner of her eye. She glanced, then returned her attention to her larva; if she messed up the light application now, the grub would be wasted.

But the glance was enough thanks to her night-vision. Somebody's careful Mobili charm had sent an item gliding through the air towards her work station. It seemed that if Zabini could not pull her equipment away with a summoning charm, he was going to try to knock things about another way.

She couldn't use her wand to repel the incoming mini-wrecking-ball – which, on second glance, proved to be a small granite pestle – so she'd have to rely on wandless casting. She swapped her wand into her left hand to free up her right: it was stronger for wandless casting and closer to the missile. Thank goodness her Lumos had already reached its second stage; she just needed to hold it steady. A few more seconds and she'd be done.

Wandlessly, she cast Arresto Momentum. The charm was successful and the velocity of the flying pestle slowed almost to a full stop; just as well, as it was close now. There was a judder to its
flight-path. Zabini was fighting her charm, trying to move it on again. Hermione cast another *Arresto*, but the pestle dropped suddenly and she missed.

The pestle bounced on to her work surface with a clatter that ought to have been obvious, except for the fact that Bulstrode was still causing a commotion at the back of the classroom. The pestle played skittles with her neatly lined up selection of stirring rods, and then its handle spun and knocked against the jar of powdered dragon horn that stood ready for the next part of the Flameaway process. There wasn't much dragon horn in there, of course, since it was another expensive ingredient, but if she lost it then she'd have to ask for more – which would be humiliating – and then she'd have to make sure that her second go was not also sabotaged. Snape had made it clear that they would have no more than two chances to prepare the salve correctly before losing marks.

So she moved fast. Even as the jar of dragon horn tipped over, Hermione wandlessly *Accio*ed the rogue pestle. First things first: remove the item that could do further damage. It was not protected and leapt into her right hand. She dropped it to the floor and stood on it, already turning her attention back to the puddle of jelly that was absorbing light on her obsidian plate. Not quite, but nearly. She heard the roll of that jar, darted a look at it, saw it almost at the edge of her worktop. Shit! She could not reach across to right the thing physically: not without disturbing the light charm over her larva gloop. Beneath her boot the pestle twitched. She stamped on it harder. She couldn't summon the jar with *Accio* because she'd protected it against summoning spells. She frantically tried a wandless *Leviosa* instead, to lift it off the table –

She was too late. Even as her fingers finished the final curl and stretch and her muttered instruction left her lips, she knew she hadn't managed to do it in time. Her spell flew through the place where, a fraction of a second earlier, the jar had rolled off the very edge of the table. She was already cringing in anticipation of the inevitable smash of glass on tile...

It didn't come.

Okay, she didn't know why that was, but her attention was back on her larva. The *Lumos* charm was done, she judged. She cancelled the light, checked her slightly-opaque paste was okay for a second or two, then glanced around the corner of her work station at the floor. The jar of powdered dragon horn lay on its side, lid firmly closed and glass intact. She narrowed her eyes, seeing more than the dimness would normally have allowed. The jar was actually floating a few millimetres off the surface of the floor.

"Credit where it's due, Granger," Draco said loudly from two work stations back. "That was an impressively fast Cushioning Charm."

She looked back. Draco was perched on his stool, his glow-globe brighter than everyone else's because he was already warming the Flameaway infusion in his pewter cauldron. His wand was almost out of arm's reach: possibly because Snape had allowed him to keep it for today's lesson only if he pledged that he would not use it for anything other than the necessary *Lumos*.

Draco raised an eyebrow at her: the minutest of gestures. And she worked it out.

"I've been practising," she said casually, and went to retrieve her jar. She then picked up the pestle and put it on her worktop.

"What is all this chatter about?" Snape's voice broke in, as he came from the back of the classroom. Hermione took up her bamboo spatulas and began to work her paste. It was already beginning to harden. She'd left it a few seconds too long and had to work swiftly.
"Nothing much, Professor," she said, even as most of her focus was on her task. "Nearly lost my jar of dragon horn, but no harm done."

"A shame," Snape said after a moment. "I was under the impression you had shed that childish clumsiness you used to display."

She glanced up at him. His word choice made her momentarily furious, but her anger bounced off his sneer.

"Oh, I shed it, Professor," she assured him. "Third year. Oddly enough, it seemed to happen at the exact same time I learned the counter-spell to Accio."

His eyebrow arched, less subtly than Draco's had a moment ago. "Indeed. Then it would seem some revision is in order."

"Yes it would."

Their eyes held. She was still angry, but even more annoying was the knowledge that being angry with him and having him challenge that anger was – damn it – the most thrilling sensation she'd known in a while.

So she looked away.

"You appear to have a spare pestle at your work station, Miss Granger," Snape said, his tone lower.

"Yes, I do," she said. "I'm sorry, Professor, but I can't account for where that came from. It seemed to arrive out of thin air."

She looked up again. His expression didn't shift, not a single tremor of a single muscle, but Hermione could see in his dark, percipient eyes that he was all up to speed at this point.

Snape looked away, as if disinterested in her. He reached across her worktop and took up the rogue pestle that had so nearly cost her today's first attempt.

"Perhaps its owner will claim it, then," Snape said, and put it in his waistcoat pocket. He marched off to the front of the classroom.

Hermione finished with her spatulas and tested the consistency of her carrier. Satisfied, she set it aside and lit the flame beneath her readied cauldron. Once this was done, she adjusted the illumination from her work station's glow-globe and then finally took the time to stand up straight and look casually behind her at the rest of the class.

Zabini was glaring at her furiously. Michael met her eyes, still busy with his spatulas, worried but helpless in this particular battle. Draco ignored her. Behind him, Theodore Nott shot her a brief look filled with amused awareness.

Millicent Bulstrode finally finished at the waste disposal and turned to walk glumly back to her work station to begin the whole process again. Her face was even pastier than usual, and covered with the residue of a cold sweat; glasswing larvae had quite the protection mechanism going for them, it seemed. Bulstrode had to be dangerously close to dismissal from the course. Not perhaps surprising for someone who was only here because of Slughorn's assistance during year six as she re-took her Potions OWL.

Motion distracted Hermione. Blaise Zabini had Accio-ed Bulstrode's pestle and mortar from her work station. He then levitated his own pestle-less mortar on to her worktop. Hermione rolled her
eyes and turned back to her cauldron. She needed to get the dragon horn simmering in a solution of salamander blood.

Slytherins, she thought to herself as she worked: they were sly, sneaky and ruthless. But you had to give them credit for covering their bases. Indeed, Hermione decided that today's incident should probably be considered a lesson.

Next time she brewed here, she was going to have to up her game.

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Her Flameaway got her an "Adequate." It was better than she might have expected, given how distracted she'd been at the most critical moment.

Hermione used the block of infused salve – now wrapped in waxed cloth and looking remarkably like the resin Tabitha Bennett used on her violin bow before she played in Flitwick's school orchestra – on her own finger. She made sure it was coated properly with no gaps, then she risked the candle flame that was burning on her desk. It was hard, in psychological terms, to make her finger do more than pass through the flame as quickly as possible. But she had faith in her salve, and she had faith in her teacher, and she forced herself to relax into the test.

After a few seconds, she realised that there was no heat anywhere on her coated finger. The untreated parts of her hand that were closest to the flame detected the usual amount of warmth, but her finger in the flame itself was untouched. Slowly she raised her hand. The hottest point of a candle flame was at the tip, where there was plenty of oxygen. She tested the limits of her salve. If memory served, this part of the flame burned at about 1,400 degrees.

Nothing. Not even a whisper of warmth. Brilliant.

"God, I love Potions," she whispered to herself.

She cleared up her work station, happily scrubbed her cauldron, returned unused ingredients to the front of the class, and generally felt delighted about another good afternoon's brewing. On Wednesday there would be a theory lesson, which meant she had until Thursday to prepare a new set of protective charms ready for whatever move Zabini was going to make next.

She was finished quite quickly, probably because she had far more experience at scrubbing cauldrons than anyone else in this room. Michael was waiting for Terry, who had finished his salve twenty minutes later than everyone else thanks to the minor injury he'd sustained. Bulstrode was still muttering about mortars and pestles, though she had to be pretty happy with the "Subpar, Miss Bulstrode. But a pass nonetheless," that Snape had deemed her second attempt worthy of receiving. Zabini was cleaning his equipment with a look on his face that suggested the work was beneath his dignity. Draco was about done, and less unhappy about the drudgery than Hermione might have expected.

She collected her jacket and hoisted her bag on her shoulder. She magically signed her block of salve and took it to the front desk, where she placed it on the tray that stood ready.

"Good evening, Professor," she said politely.

He didn't glance up from where he sat, reading. He grunted. No one would have expected anything else, but she still had to pinch her lips to keep that sense of disappointment at bay.

She turned and walked up the centre of the room, murmuring goodbyes to Michael and Terry. Draco passed her, on his way to the front. When she walked past Theodore Nott's work station she
saw him glance up, so she risked a congenial nod. There was no point perpetuating enemies where neutrality could be maintained, especially if he really had noticed the way Draco had saved her from the ignominy of a failed attempt today. Theo didn't nod back, but his eyes glinted with what could – maybe at a stretch – be considered respectful acknowledgement.

Weird, that in a class of Slytherins it was the children of Death Eaters who were treating her with something that approached courtesy.

She left the classroom and turned along the corridor to make her way to the stairs. She'd almost reached them when footsteps behind her made her pause. Hermione weighed the options and then waited by the door into the stairwell for Draco to catch up.

"Off home?" he said, as if the last seven years had not seen various members of his family frequently trying to hurt or kill her.

"Got an appointment first," she said. "Upstairs."

"What's that, then?"

They made their way together up the stairs, not friends, but no longer exactly enemies either.

Hermione grimaced. "Without wanting to be pointed or anything, I kind of have this cursed-blade injury that needs medical attention twice a week."

A pause.

"Ah," said Draco.

Another pause. A bit of an awkward one.

Hermione said, "So anyway, are we calling it quits? Or are we acknowledging that it might be nice to have someone in our corner from time to time? Especially someone no one else expects to be there."

Draco glanced at her. "You can be astute. Sometimes. For a Gryffindor."

Hermione huffed a laugh. "I'm not at school anymore. Headmistress McGonagall would hate me for saying it, but I have denounced the House system in all its divisive glory." She sniffed. "Bollocks to it."

"Might be right," Draco said. Then, "Um – I'll deny all knowledge if you claim I said that."

She sighed inwardly, but Draco's inability to trust was hardly breaking news. "Fair enough," she said. "And I'll deny all knowledge if you tell anyone I said thank you. For helping me today."

Draco snorted. "Thing is – why would I tell anyone that?"

"Why indeed? About as likely as me telling my housemate I had a nice chat after my lesson with Draco Malfoy."

Draco actually snickered. "He'd never believe you."

"He'd believe me. He might not ever forgive me, though."

"Careful, Granger. You're giving me information I could use against you."
"I know," she said. She smirked a bit. "I wonder why I'm doing that?"

She glanced at Draco. He was frowning. Trying to find the agenda, the double-play, the strategy, because the likes of Draco Malfoy had never been allowed to learn that human connection always had to start with a basic level of trust.

Hermione gave a small smile as she pushed open the door to reception. Draco would either get it or he wouldn't. He'd either keep to their ceasefire or he'd betray her. What would be would be.

They walked across reception. Draco turned towards the Apparition alcove, then he hesitated and turned back.

"Safe Apparition, Draco," she said affably. "See you Wednesday."

He nodded, still frowning, but he managed half a wave before he left the hospital.

Artefact Accidents, and her injury's first re-zip of the week, awaited. The route had become a well-trodden one for her. She went through the door to the left of the reception desk and took a seat in the waiting area beyond. Monday re-zips were always the worst. Four days had passed since the last healing charm, as opposed to the three that had passed when she came here on Thursdays. The extra day gave the wound chance to start pulling and prickling and sometimes even weeping and bleeding. She had to keep it dressed on a Monday, just in case.

She wondered how often Snape had to get his own cursed injury seen to. Might she run into him here sometime? Would he allow her to cast the counter-curse he'd told her about to heal his injury for good? They'd put that idea on hold months ago; it had made sense for Snape to stand before the Wizengamot as battered and bruised as he truly was. But things were different now. He could heal without it harming his public persona.

Still, there was a new kind of formality to their dealings: the inevitable consequence of this resumption of old roles. Letting anyone other than a medical professional cast a healing spell on your body was an intensely personal thing. It required trust, and it fomented intimacy. Hermione knew this very well. She had, after all, healed a cursed-blade injury inflicted on Severus Snape once already.

Yes. For the time being, things were different.

She'd just have to be patient.

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"Can't say I've ever been too fond of beginnings, myself. Messy little things. Give me a good ending any time. You know where you are with an ending."


"Hi Mum, hi Dad," Hermione called from the open front door to Grimmauld Place.

Her parents startled, standing on the pavement and staring uncertainly at the terrace of houses. Then they saw through the privacy wards that Hermione had temporarily parted and hurried up the steps to join her.

"I can't get used to that, you know," Linda Granger said. "One moment there's no house there at all, the next minute..."

"The next minute, house. And daughter. Happy birthday, Hermbles." Alan Granger kissed Hermione's cheek, then held her out at arm's length and looked critically at her. "You look very beautiful and very grown up. I don't approve in the slightest."

Hermione laughed, and tried not to smooth at the rather-too-figure-hugging black dress she'd been loaned for this soirée. Truth be told, she was self-conscious about wearing it; she'd never enjoyed dresses. "About an hour ago I'd decided I had nothing to wear and was going to plump for joggers, sweatshirt and slippers."

"That would have been better," her dad said. "Oh! *The Magic Roundabout* slippers with Zebedee?"

"She grew out of those about ten years ago, Alan," her mother chided. "Hermione, darling, if you're throwing a wardrobe hissy-fit before a party, that means you're an entirely normal, fully-functioning woman. Your father will get over the fact that you've moved beyond knee-socks--"

"Don't count on it," her father said, as he hung up his raincoat on the hooks in the hallway. He skirted past the troll-leg umbrella stand with a mild grimace. "And I'm really not sure about all this--this piling up your hair in elegant..." He twirled his finger at Hermione's head. "What do you call that, anyway?"

"Um -- I tend to call it my hair," Hermione said.

"It's an updo," her mum informed them. "Reverse tuck. Very nice, dear. Who helped with that?"

"Fleur did. Ron's sister-in-law. She's good at that stuff. Much better than me, anyway." And since at this point Hermione was already sick and tired of discussing her appearance, she changed the subject. "Come and meet people!"

She led them through to the dining room. She and Harry had spent the last week doing a fair bit of cleaning and refurbishing. Magic made such projects so much easier. The dining table no longer dominated the room to the extent that it was hard to even sidle around it. Instead, its dimensions had been narrowed and it was pushed up against the wall. All the shelves and dressers had been removed. The heirloom china and crystal had been moved to more sensible dinnerware cabinets in the back room on the ground floor. The dining room was now panelled in attractive mahogany.
few of Grimmauld Place's magical portraits had been risked on display: the ones most likely to be well-behaved. (Their subjects had been admonished that if they refused to be cordial then they'd be taken straight back to the attic, with its strong acoustic containment charm and only each other to scream at. So far, so good, on that score.)

Spread over the dining table were linen cloths. At one end, a large pot of rather good chilli – Hermione and Ron had been Chief Tasters throughout the afternoon as it had simmered – stood ready to be dished up in bowls with the guest's choice of either rice or tortilla chips (or both, Ron had suggested, since tortilla chips made excellent cutlery when eating a bowl of chilli and rice, and such an approach would save on the washing-up, so it wasn't as if it could be called greedy, but rather helpful and practical). Alongside the chilli pot were two Pyrex dishes of roasted vegetable lasagne. There were at least three vegetarians attending the bash tonight, and possibly other attendees who weren't enamoured of spicy food, though Hermione still suspected she and Harry would be eating vegetable lasagne for most of the coming week. (Which was fine. She'd tasted that too. It was excellent. For a man whose potions skills were at best average, Harry was turning into a cracking cook. Much to Molly Weasley's annoyance, Hermione suspected.)

The rest of the table was filled with party favourites, many courtesy of the Weasley household, the rest courtesy of the local Tesco. Harry had been brought up as Muggle as Hermione, and they'd both agreed that you could not possibly have a birthday party without bowls and bowls (and more bowls) of crisps, sausages on cocktail sticks, cheese and pineapple (also on cocktail sticks), and mini-pizzas. Not to mention the pink blancmange in a rabbit mould and the Rice Krispie cakes and the trifle...although the pudding course was in the kitchen for now.

And if such things were all a bit juvenile, Hermione had reached the point in her burgeoning adulthood where she didn't really care. Harry, after all, had never been given a lavish birthday party when he'd been of an age to really appreciate one. When he'd turned eighteen, he hadn't wanted to do more than take Ginny out for a meal; most likely he'd had one eye on September and her return to Hogwarts. So Hermione had decided to indulge Harry's inner eight year old on this occasion. (It wasn't difficult. Actually it was a convenient excuse. Rice Krispie cakes were fabulous things, and she thought more adults really ought to embrace that fact.)

"Right then. If it has red hair, it's probably a Weasley," she said to her parents as they followed her into the room looking a bit overwhelmed. Understandably. They hadn't really been to any major gatherings before, and now Hermione came to think of it, most witches and wizards tended to be a tad eccentric in their appearance. "Since I think of the Weasleys as extended family, that means you're your extended family too. You know Ron's dad, Arthur, of course," she said, as Arthur Weasley yelped in delight and immediately pulled himself away from a group that contained Septima Vector, Xenophilius Lovegood, and Lysander Crocus from the Muggle-Worthy Excuse office.

Arthur glided through the gathering crowd. He led with his right arm which seemed to be anticipating a handshake and, thus, was already thrust out at right angles to his body: he looked sort of like a congenial (and fabulously ginger) Dalek. "Hermione's mum and Hermione's dad!" Arthur called. He was grasping and shaking before her parents even knew what was going on. "How marvellous to see you both! Marvellous! Now come and have some of these Cheesy-What-Is-Its and tell me all about this new wee-mail thing that Hermione mentioned. It sounds remarkable."

Hermione grinned as Arthur tugged them in the direction of a crisp bowl. "I'll get you both some drinks!" she called after them.

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"The Rotfang Conspiracy is still active, of course," Xenophilius Lovegood advised Hermione. "But low key. Low, low key. Like all conspiracies, it has decided that discretion – for now – is the better part of valour."

Hermione nodded solemnly. "I've always liked that description of running away."

"It is a good one," Xenophilius agreed.

She sipped her fruit punch. It was more potent than she would normally have made it, and about half as potent as Ron had wanted. (He'd been cross when he'd snuck into the kitchen earlier and tried to add more peach schnapps, and the schnapps had taken one look at the punchbowl and then flowed back up into the bottle. That had been a useful little charm she'd designed.)

"Anyway," Xenophilius went on, "Luna was wrong. Back in her fifth year, was it? When Harry took her to Professor Slughorn's party and she warned him off becoming an Auror."

"She told you about that?"

"Oh yes. Yes, she told me that one." He tilted his head, considering. "She doesn't tell me everything. That would not be normal at all for a seventeen year old girl."

Hermione coached her face into a neutral smile of interest. It was hard not to grin widely, however, to hear her friend Luna being described as normal. Luna's refusal to live her life according to society's idea of 'conventional' was one of her most wonderful personality traits.

"Yes, Luna was a little short-sighted, there," Xenophilius added.

Hermione huffed in disbelief. "I think Luna is one of the least short-sighted people I know!"

"Oh, perhaps. Perhaps. But the point is, we will never overcome the Rotfang Conspiracy if we steer the likes of Harry and Ron away from a career in the Auror Department. Seems to me the best way to oust the Rotfangers is to surround them with good-hearted Aurors, resistant to their agenda."

"Hmm. Like immunisation against a virus," Hermione suggested. Not that she really bought in to the idea that the Ministry was under threat from a combination of dark magic and gum disease, but the nature of the conspiracy didn't really matter, did it? Agendas had always existed, embedded deep in various sections of the Ministry, and there was a strong likelihood that many were rotten to the core and needed a jolly good ousting.

Xenophilius frowned in thought and asked Hermione, "A virus? How's that?"

"Oh. Yes. Well, you immunise as much of the nearby population as you can. Then an infected individual can wander about and the virus can't spread. Like the Muggles did with smallpox."

"Oh yes. Yes. I see what you mean. Good analogy!" Xenophilius smiled the same beatific smile that Hermione had so often seen on his daughter's face. "Secret cults do function rather like viruses, don't they?"

"I think the Auror Department will be better off with Harry and Ron in it," Hermione said. "They're only a month into their apprenticeships and yet they're both already...I don't know. Sort of different. Well – not different-different. But their perspective seems to be shifting."

"Shifting?"
"The way they see things. The possibilities they sense."

Xenophilius nodded sagely. "Might be Prangle-Scamps. It's well known that the Ministry is full of them."

Hermione looked at The Quibbler's editor askance. "I haven't heard Luna mention those before. Are they like Wrackspurts?"

"Oh no." He shook his head. "Quite different. Wrackspurts lead to an absence of focus. I would imagine that in law enforcement such a thing might be potentially hazardous. Fortunately, Prangle-Scamps are benign creatures. Quite invisible, naturally."

"Naturally," she said, with what she hoped was an absence-of-eye-roll.

"But their modus operandi tends to involve drawing attention to often overlooked detail. The kind of detail that offers insight. Probably rather useful at any scene of criminal activity."

Hermione nodded slowly. She had learned, over a long acquaintance with Luna Lovegood, to simply go with the more absurd claims regarding invisible creatures that might or might not be real. "Prangle-Scamps," she said.

"Hmm. Not widely recognised. Of course, they're far too clever to draw attention to themselves."

She found herself considering the possibility: invisible creatures that drew attention to overlooked details. A misplaced item of furniture; a scratch on the floor or the door; an absence on a shelf where a keepsake had once been placed. She had to fight hard not to tut-tut at herself after a moment.

It seemed a long time ago now – especially given everything that had happened – but on the first occasion when Hermione had met Xenophilius Lovegood he had told her about his daughter's assessment of her: that she was intelligent but narrow-minded. The notion had stung. Hermione had been resentful about it for some time, right up until the moment she'd forced herself to examine it as a potential truth rather than an insult, because the undeniable fact of the matter was that Luna simply did not insult people. There wasn't a vindictive bone in her body.

Once Hermione had accepted that Luna might have a point, she'd realised that refusing to embrace less tangible possibilities might even restrict her understanding of the world. Hermione had not been any less sceptical about the existence of Wrackspurts or Nargles, but she had decided not to dismiss, out of hand, any theory that failed to fit with her own sphere of knowledge. For if she accepted that her sphere of knowledge was expanding all the time, then it made sense that there would always be things she didn't yet know.

Like the shark that needed to keep swimming in order to stay alive, Hermione knew that she constantly needed to learn new things. Knowledge; awareness; understanding: all this was her oxygen.

Xenophilius Lovegood watched her kindly, even as these thoughts raced through her mind. She smiled at him. (She had, of course, long forgiven him for the terrible things he'd been forced to do following Luna's capture by Death Eaters.)

"Perhaps," she suggested, "Muggles occasionally find themselves in the company of Prangle-Scamps as well? It would explain the likes of Sherlock Holmes."

Xenophilius looked pensive. Then, gently, as if concerned he might be undermining a precious delusion, he said, "I was under the impression that Sherlock Holmes was not real."
Hermione chuckled at that. She couldn't help it; the irony was too delicious. "You've read Conan Doyle?" she asked, before her amusement caused offence.

"Oh, no. But I've heard of this Holmes character."

"Well you're quite right. He is a fictional character. But for the writer to write him, the idea had to come from somewhere."

"Ah. Yes. Yes, I see! It's worth looking into. Can we speak to this Doyle person?"

"I'm afraid not. He died quite some time ago."

"Shame. Shame."

Hermione decided to move the subject on from Prangle-Scamps and their possible influence on Arthur Conan Doyle before things got too quagmired.

"Have you heard from Luna since she went back to Hogwarts?" Hermione asked.

"She writes twice a week," Xenophilius told her. "All is well."

"After everything that happened there," she mused, "Luna has more courage than I. I couldn't go back."

Xenophilius patted Hermione's shoulder. "Nobody blames you at all for that, my dear. But Luna? Ahh, Luna is so interested in everything, she never takes the time to be afraid. That's where her courage lies. As her father, it's one of the things that worries me the most." He sighed, the sound heavy with memory. "There's a lot to be said for knowing when to be scared."

Hermione blinked as she looked at Xenophilius's slightly cross-eyed face. His expression was kind, concerned, and just a touch world-weary. Like the rest of them, he'd been to hell and back this year. She didn't know what she could say to make him feel better.

Hagrid chose that moment to clomp up to them. "Now then, Hermione," he boomed. "Monster Munch. These ain' real eyes, is they? I don' approve of that. Monsters is people too."

"They're made of corn," Hermione replied, smiling.

"Corn monsters?"

"Ah. Like Three-Toed Kingwarts," Xenophilius said wisely.

Hagrid's heavy brow creased hard. "Now I haven' heard o' them. Why haven' I heard o' them?"

Hermione said, "Would you excuse me, gentlemen?" and left them to their discussion.

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Michael said, "So has Harry forgiven me for dating Ginny yet?"

"Why do you ask?" Hermione replied. "Has he been snippy with you?"

"Oh, no. Just feels like it's sort of, I don't know, the erumpent in the room. Every time we do the pleasantries thing."

Hermione glanced around the dining room. Harry was engrossed in a discussion with Bill Weasley
and her own mum. "Pretty sure there's nothing to forgive," she said. "But it was a bit weird. How you and Harry ended up interested in the same girls, I mean. For a while back there, anyway."

"Good taste?" Michael said with a shrug.

Hermione gave a smile. "Do you still speak to Cho?"

"Oh yeah. Time to time. I mean, we broke up after she graduated. We said it wouldn't be sensible, one of us in school and one of us not." Michael winced. "I mean, I'm not saying no one could ever make it work, like, you know, Harry and Ginny are doing. Just – it wasn't for us. Me and Cho."

Hermione nodded. "Shame, though. Seemed as if you and Cho were good together."

"We were." He blushed a bit. "If she wanted to try again I'd probably jump at the chance, to be honest, but she said after the battle that she needed some time to sort herself out. Career and stuff, you know?"

"Right."

Michael lifted a hand to the back of his head and fiddled with his hair. "I think she always thought I was a bit young," he confided. "I mean, I'm like you – one of the oldest in our year. I'm nineteen next month. Cho's only three and a half months older than me. But at school it always felt like more. You know?"

"Maybe you'll sort yourselves out," Hermione said, trying to console. "It's been a hell of a couple of years. Hard to factor in all the more ordinary stuff, like relationships."

Michael nodded agreement. "So what about you then?" he asked. "Nothing on the horizon since you split with Ron?"

She almost rebuked him for the personal nature of the question, but the fact that she'd been talking to him about his own love-life for the last few minutes made that a bit unfair. And Michael was a sweet enough bloke. Prone to sulks and mood-swings, as seemed to befit his Byronesque features, but a good heart.

"I think," she said, "I can definitively state that I will be Hermione without a plus one for the foreseeable." Because as much as she liked and trusted her Ravenclaw friend, she was not about to divulge anything else she might be feeling.

"Terry will be gutted," Michael said with a sigh, looking round the room. Hermione looked with him, and they spotted Terry Boot chatting to Constance Underwood from St Mungo's. "He's always had a thing for you."

"Terry?" Hermione blinked at this rather surprising news. "Good grief, I thought he had more sense."

Michael shot her an appraising look. "Huh. Either you're genuinely unaware that you're good-looking," he said, "or you're better at false modesty than any Gryffindor has a right to be."

"Go on. Give a bloke a chance. Which is it? I need to get better at understanding the way women's minds work."

Hermione snorted so hard she almost inhaled her punch. "Okay – one? Women are not all the same. Two? False modesty doesn't work all that well when, seconds later, the person professing false modesty claims it as such."

"Thirdly, and finally? I am aware that I'm presentable enough. Takes a lot of work to
make me anything approaching elegant, but it can be done. My comment about Terry, however, was nothing to do with what I think I look like."

"Ah. So you think he should have 'more sense' because of your personality?"

"Probably. Possibly. I'm hard bloody work, truth be told. I like to be left alone when I've got stuff to do. I am not a socialiser – you wouldn't believe how much effort Harry and Ron had to put in to make me agree to this party. I overthink things to the point of absurdity – sometimes I get so bogged down in the minutiae I miss the obvious, which means I can upset people without meaning to. I'm trying to train myself out of that one, but recognising the fault is only the first step, isn't it? And to cap it all, I'm still recovering from what happened earlier in the year. I get nightmares and dark days and moments when I want to lash out. Sometimes I think I'm an accident waiting to happen. So to be quite honest with you, Terry would do very well to direct his attention elsewhere."

Michael arched a delicate eyebrow. "So you're attractive and intelligent and you're striving for self-awareness and improvement? You know what? Forget Terry. Want to have dinner with me?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I'll sit at a table and eat with you, any time you like. We can talk Charms or Potions or Arithmancy till the cows come home. But friendship only."

"Friendship only," Michael agreed with a grin, and offered a hand to shake on the notion. Hermione shook. Then he got a glint in his eye and looked over at the other end of the dining room. "So, um, is Ron actually with that tall brunette with the rather nice–"

"Careful," Hermione warned.

"Nice earrings, I was going to say," Michael added mildly.

She shrugged. "I think so. He hasn't introduced me yet. I think he's worried I'll throw a wobbler."

"That's not it," Michael said. "He's worried that you won't.

"What?"

"At least part of him wants you to be pining for him."

"Don't be daft!"

"Not being daft. He wants you to pine, and the minute he introduces his new girlfriend and you're all nice and welcoming and friendly? He has to let go of the fantasy that you still cry yourself to sleep over how much you're missing him."

She bristled. "Ron isn't stupid. Lots of people have made that mistake about him."

"Not saying he is. Honest. He knows the whole thing is ridiculous. But he's still a bloke, and he still wants the girl he loved to be pining." Michael sighed. "We all do. It's how we're wired. In this, each and every bloke on the planet is exactly the same."

"I'd better go and introduce myself, then," Hermione said. "Get the whole thing over and done with, so he can move on."

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"Um – this is Mariana," Ron said, high points of colour on his cheeks.
Hermione refrained from saying, 'Oh, like the trench?' She thought that this demonstrated how very mature, polite and totally over her thing with Ronald Weasley she was.

Instead she said, "Hello there. Lovely to meet you!" She offered a hand, which Mariana shook nervous and uncertain. Ron wasn't helping with all the blushing and the fidgeting, so Hermione added, "I'm the ex. Not much of an ex, I'll admit, but still."

"Yes. Right. Um," said Mariana.

"Hermione!" complained Ron.

"Better to be up front about these things," she said with a shrug. "So what do you do, Mariana?"

"I'm training to be an Auror, with Ron and Harry," Mariana said.

Ah. Hermione realised that she should have seen that one coming. Wasn't as if the boys were meeting lots of other people outside of their apprenticeships, was it? And Mariana had the shoulders of a Quidditch Beater and the stance of a dueller. Plus she was very good-looking. And Michael had been right: those were nice earrings.

"All right, you lot?" Harry said as he wandered over and offered up a plate of cocktail sausages. Ron grabbed three. Mariana grabbed the same number and chomped happily. Harry didn't even blink, but just grinned at the group.

And there it was.

Hermione was, she realised, jealous. Horribly, stomach-creasingly jealous. But not in the way Ron might have imagined. Harry and Ron had found a new third to complete the Golden Trio as they made their way through Auror training, and Hermione now stood apart. The Golden Fraction indeed.

"Ron said you were working at the Ministry," Mariana said once the sausages had been devoured. She was making friendly, inclusive conversation, because damn it, this new girl, this interloper, this replacement, she didn't even have the basic, common decency to be a bit of a cow, did she?

Hermione plastered a smile on her face. "Oh. Yes. Just helping out part-time with the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee. I've, er, got a bit of 'previous' with Muggles." She tried to smile, emphasising the joke she'd made, but Mariana just nodded and looked politely interested. Perhaps Magical Law Enforcement didn't use the cop-show language of *Prime Suspect* or *The Bill*.

"Of course, she's fitting that in with her fourteen NEWTs," Ron said.

"Fourteen?" Mariana repeated, eyes wide.

"Six," Hermione corrected, rolling her eyes at Ron. "I had to drop Herbology when I decided not to go back to Hogwarts. But I've already passed two of them, so I might take on History of Magic as well, bring the total back up to seven." She gave an awkward shrug. "I've done most of the reading for that, anyway, so I could probably manage it. But it feels like a bit of a cheat. You know. Since I haven't been to any lessons since fifth year."

Harry tut-tutted. "You never did get your head around what cheating actually is, did you?"

"I should hope not," Hermione said primly. "I save my nefarious leanings for things that actually matter. You know. Dark hexes, bank robberies, actual bodily harm on the odd Slytherin."
Mariana looked alarmed. Harry snorted. Ron grinned widely and said, "Honestly, Mari, I've seen Hermione punch. She's nearly as good as you!"

Wonderful. Hermione had not just been replaced, she had been superseded. She tried to think of something amiable to say, something that wouldn't make her want to growl it through her teeth. At that moment, however, the sound of the doorbell charm distantly rang through the open door to the hallway. Hermione thanked whatever gods were listening and excused herself from the group.

The golden leftover. The golden third wheel. The golden whatever went to answer the door.

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"Oh," she said.

"Good evening," said Severus Snape.

A pause. Snape's eyes flicked up to take in her hairstyle and then wandered down to look at the neckline of her dress before darting back up to stare determinedly at a point that seemed to be just above her left eye.

"Won't you come in?" she invited, remembering herself.

"Thank you, but no."

"All right then." Hermione frowned for a moment, then she shrugged and stepped outside and pulled the door to. "We'll do the party out here."

"I did not come here to attend a party," Snape said. "I am not generally given to celebration."

"You don't say," she deadpanned.

Snape sighed, as if the whole situation was the most frightful bother. "I was advised that you would be inconsolable if I failed to show my face."

She raised a brow, glanced over her shoulder at the bright window into the dining room at the front of the house. "Harry talks a lot of nonsense. And you should know better."

"He does, and I do," Snape said. He dug in a voluminous overcoat pocket and produced a small rectangular item. "Here." He thrust it at her.

"A birthday present?"

"Call it additional reading."

She took the object. It was wrapped in plain brown paper. "Because you don't have special relationships with your students."

"I most certainly do not."

They looked at each other a moment.

"Is it Hoppleberry's study on magical invertebrates?" she enquired.

Another pause.

"Yes," said Snape. "It appears I have become predictable."
"It appears you know me about a thousand times better than anyone else who brought me a birthday present this evening. Um – additional reading, I mean. Not a birthday present; not at all. Nothing special. Nope."

The corner of his mouth threatened to twitch, then he sighed. "I would have owled it to you, but there is something else I must say. This seemed as good an opportunity as any."

"Oh. All right then."

Snape looked down at his shoes. Behind him, Muggles trundled along the pavement unaware that they were passing beside a magical privacy ward that kept the entire property, top step included, from their notice. Hermione waited.

Snape drew back his shoulders and raised his black gaze to hers, and he said, "I have been photographed by the Prophet. In the company of a witch. I should imagine some kind of speculative article will appear in Monday's edition."

Hermione made herself breathe a couple of times before she said, "I see." She waited for the explanation. When one was not forthcoming, she said, cautiously, "Your personal life is, of course, your own business."

"Mine and, it would appear, the Prophet's."

Which meant that Snape was, indeed, having a personal life. He was having one right now: him and some floozy. Hermione swallowed a lump in her throat.

"And now mine as well," she muttered.

Snape looked down at the step on which he stood. "This was an error."

_This_ was the error? _This_? How about tarting around with strange and no doubt incredibly sexy and flirtatious and charming witches? How about _that_ being the error?

"I can't imagine why you'd think that," she said. She wasn't even sure if she was being sarcastic or not.

Snape sniffed. "This is not the kind of conversation a teacher should have with his student."

"Perhaps not. But relationships aren't monochrome, are they? We can't just pretend that this summer never happened."

"Nor should we pretend it meant something that it did not."

She narrowed her eyes. "I don't believe I am pretending any such thing."

They studied each other for long seconds. It was definitely, Hermione thought, more of a glare than a gaze.

Snape looked away first. He tut-tutted and said, "Yes, well, there it is. I thought it might be better for you to learn of the story from me rather than by reading about it in the gutter press. If I was mistaken, so be it."

He turned his back abruptly and made to walk down the steps.

Hermione swallowed the emotion that was welling up in her throat. She said, "Severus." He froze, and he didn't look back, but he didn't correct her form of address. "I miss you," she said.

"You spend eight hours a week in my company."
"I miss you," she told his resolutely turned back. He wasn't going to give an inch in this. He was a teacher, she the student, and his personal life was his own business. The best she could hope to achieve, now, was to ensure he did not leave Grimmauld Place wincing at the childish jealousies of a teenage girl. "But I suppose if I can't play Boggle with you then learning potions isn't a bad second choice."

His head went back a bit, as though he had lifted his chin. "You are doing well enough, thus far."

"Thank you." She sighed. "Thank you for my...my additional reading."

"Not at all."

"You'd be very welcome to come inside for some sausages on sticks. Or trifle." She glanced at the warm and welcoming light of the dining room window. "There's three teachers in there already. No one even blinks, these days, when the know-it-all parties with the faculty."

His shoulders moved, just enough that she could notice. Maybe it was a laugh, maybe another sigh. Then he said, "Happy birthday, Hermione," and trotted down the steps. He walked away in the direction of the Holloway Road without a single look back.

Hermione sagged against the stonework by the front door and thought some dark thoughts. This evening had taken quite the turn. Harry and Ron had found a new third member of their Trio: one who was taller and prettier and stronger and punchier than Hermione. Meanwhile Severus Snape was wining and dining some new witch who was only too happy to flutter her lashes and flash her no-doubt ample cleavage at the heroic double-agent who had helped save the world from Voldemort, and who – unlike Harry Potter – was unquestionably single and fabulously eligible.

It served Hermione right, of course. Not so long ago she'd been congratulating herself on how her life had seemed to be coming together. Clearly she had jinxed it with thoughts like that. She wished, for a moment, that she really believed in Nargles and Wrackspurts and Prangle-Scamps. It'd be lovely to blame things on some kind of invisible external influence. A much nicer option than the obvious explanation: Hermione Granger was neither as necessary nor as desirable as she had hoped.

She wasn't going to cry. Obviously. She was nineteen. Maybe later she'd indulge this feeling of things slipping away, but for now she had a party to attend. Her party.

She let herself back in to the house and closed the door quietly. A deep breath and she was composed once more.

Her mother's face appeared around the doorway into the dining room. "Oh, there you are, darling!" she called. A brief moment as Linda Granger waited for her daughter to respond and Hermione Granger tried to grit her teeth against the hurting: a moment in which two women who knew each other very well communicated quickly and silently. Her mother opened her mouth to speak, forehead already creasing with concern, but then she looked over her shoulder at something.

A second later Linda Granger had stepped out into the hall, closely followed by Molly Weasley. Molly was in the process of saying something, but she stopped short.

In the pause that followed, Hermione's mother said, "Your rook?"

Hermione felt herself crumple, hated herself for it, felt unsophisticated and childish and oh so ridiculous. But before she even managed to punctuate the first silent sobs with a gasped, wheezy breath, her mother had her arm around Hermione's shoulder and Molly said, in her most no-
"Right then. Upstairs to the drawing room and we'll get Hermione a bit of breathing space."
Presumption, Paramours and Pilferage

"It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence."

Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* 1888

When she arrived for her Potions class at St Mungo's on Monday afternoon, Hermione was sure of three things.

Firstly, she'd been an idiot. While it was true that the summer just gone had seen a real connection take shape between herself and Snape, she had been arrogant to assume that Snape would respond to her in the same way she'd responded to him. To date, he'd been quite fair. He'd advised her that her feelings should be set aside, at least until he relinquished his role as teacher. He had not promised – nor had he so much as implied – that he would live like a monk in the meantime. He'd made no promises regarding the future.

All he had done, in fact, was to accept – grudgingly – her company at a time when no one else was offering a distraction from the monotony of his hospital room. He'd played Boggle with her, allowed her to furnish him with coffee and grapes, and on one scary day back in June he'd rescued her from her own maudlin stupidity and then faced down a murderous Death Eater with her. Had those events brought them closer? Yes they had. Were they indicative of romantic intent on Snape's part? Of course not.

Hermione had presumed. And that had been idiotic.

Secondly, she knew she'd been right to refuse to name the object of her unrequited passion when pressed on the issue. Her mother and Molly had been very sweet and supportive, providing her with privacy and protection from the party-goers as she'd worked through her distress, but neither of them had needed to know Snape's name. As far as she was aware, only Harry and Ron knew whom her 'rook' represented. (Aside from Snape himself, of course, but Hermione didn't think he wasn't going to start blabbing it around.) It was definitely best to keep things that way.

Thirdly, and finally: Hermione was not going to risk a glance through the pages of today's *Daily Prophet* to see this compromising photograph of Snape and his floozy.

Not. A. Chance.

She walked down the stairs and along the corridor to the potions laboratory. Most of her fellow students had already gathered outside. Hermione knew she had to be her usual self today; she must not appear withdrawn or sulky. After all, this witch that had her claws into Snape might not stick around that long. For the sake of future possibilities, it was important to Hermione that he did not form any negative opinion of her.

So she took a deep breath, put her shoulders back and forced a smile on to her face as she drew level with her fellow students.

"Afternoon, Hermione!" called Terry. "Have you seen this?" He grinned at her and brandished a copy of the *Prophet*.

(It was fortunate that the voice that loudly exclaimed, 'Oh for fuck's sake!' existed only in Hermione's head.)
"I don't read that rubbish," she said, trying to sound nonchalant.

She cast a cautious look at the door to the lab, then turned away and found some leaning space. On her first day here Snape had placed an amplification charm on this section of the corridor. Like Draco had said, Snape liked to be prepared. On a day like this, with his picture in the paper, chances were that Snape would be listening in to every word.

"Seriously, it might be rubbish but you should read it today." Terry moved over towards her. Leaning against the opposite wall, Draco perused the same issue of the paper. He caught her eye over the top of it and twitched an eyebrow at her. Next to him, Theo Nott read over Draco's arm. Zabini was standing some way off and he looked unimpressed. Weird, that he wasn't making himself the centre of things.

Terry tried to offer her the paper. Hermione averted her eyes and wondered whether shouting, 'La la la la!' at the top of her voice and running back down the corridor might be considered immature.

"Honestly, Terry," she said, "this rag makes a habit of crapping all over people who don't deserve it. Remember what it did to Harry? It doesn't give a toss about truth."

Terry said, "But--"

"And to be honest," Hermione went on, unable to keep from sharpening her tone, "it bothers me that people still buy it. Far as I can tell, doing that only encourages more of the same."

Terry blinked at her. Draco lifted his eyebrows speculatively. Zabini, much to Hermione's surprise, was nodding as if he agreed.

She tried a smile for Terry to soften the words. Terry shrugged and moved off. There were footsteps coming from the direction of the stairwell. She turned to see Michael arriving.

He grinned a jovial grin at her. "Hey, you," he said. "How was Sunday carvery with the folks?"

"How did you know about that?"

"Nice long chat with your dad, Saturday night. Great guy. So did you smarm your way into extra crackling?"

"I had lamb. So no. But it was lovely, thanks."

Michael drew up beside her, looked at Terry and then at Draco, and grinned an even bigger grin. "I see the news is out! Do we have a sweepstakes for the wedding day, yet?"

(Hermione had to clamp her lips tight shut on yet another, 'Oh for fuck's sake!' Keeping them between herself and her internal monologue was getting to be hard work.)

Zabini said, rather angrily, "Look, the lot of you can piss off!"

Hermione blinked. That was not a comment she'd been expecting. She looked around. Draco was smirking into his paper. Theo was studying Zabini with interest. Terry was stifling chuckles and Michael was shaking his head with what seemed to be mirth.

She found that she was in the unusual position of both wanting and not wanting to know what was going on. Because surely Severus Snape, even seen in the company of a witch, would not warrant this kind of reaction? Snape-on-a-date was odd, perhaps even unprecedented, but only because it was him. People went out with each other all the time. It was rarely newsworthy. And why was
Zabini so bothered about—

"She's my mother! All right?" Zabini added.

Oh.

Oh.

Severus Snape...and Blaise Zabini’s mother.

Hermione frowned and tried not to look as if her mind was working at a furious rate. (Which, at this point, it was.) Zabini’s mother was notorious: a stunningly beautiful witch who’d been married and then widowed seven times, each bereavement leaving her more wealthy than the last. The pattern was so established that any further engagement would carry the strong subtext of ‘here we go again’ along with a little metaphorical countdown-of-doom to mark the remaining lifespan of the unfortunate fiancé.

Which led to an obvious question: just what the hell was Snape playing at?

Inevitably, Hermione began to theorise. Snape had not been all that happy to find himself alive when he’d emerged from the post-Nagini coma. Was this new affair evidence of a lingering death-wish? That said, death-by-murderous-siren seemed ostentatious, even by his occasionally theatrical standards. If he truly wanted to die, Hermione would have put money on him doing so quietly and mysteriously. (And, by the way, he would finish teaching this NEWT level Potions course first, because when Severus Snape committed to doing something he damn well did it.)

So if he wasn’t looking for someone to finish the job Nagini had started, what else could be going on? Surely he wasn’t egotistical enough to believe that he could woo and marry Zabini’s mother and not meet the same end as her previous seven husbands? It didn’t seem likely. Snape was a confident man when it came to his intellect, his magical prowess and, probably, his ability to make a small child cry. But Hermione was less assured of his confidence when it came to courtship.

Was this just a game, perhaps? A seduction, of sorts, while Snape’s profile was elevated enough to make it possible; something he would certainly not allow to progress to talk of marriage, but in the meantime a dalliance that empowered his sense of worth? For all her obvious and terrifying shortcomings, Mrs Zabini – or whatever her preferred surname was at the moment – was still an object of desire.

Which prompted another question: why the hell was Zabini’s homicidal mother interested in Severus Snape?

Not that Hermione was blind to those aspects of Snape that could be alluring; her head would hardly be spinning like this if she was. But she’d thought of Snape as something of an acquired taste. She’d even quietly congratulated herself on the sophistication of her palate: being able to see beyond the absence of a square jaw and toned muscles, bronzed skin and movie-star eyes and all the things young women were supposed to get weak-kneed over. She’d fallen for Snape because he was Severus Snape, and for that very reason the last thing she’d expected was much in the way of competition.

And okay, given all of Snape’s recent publicity Hermione should have anticipated that he might appeal to the average celebrity-hunting slapper. Maybe also to the odd widow of a Death Eater who wanted to invigorate her sullied reputation by associating with a war hero; that would have made a kind of sense.
But someone like Zabini's mother? This witch enjoyed a fame all of her own; she didn't need to borrow any from Snape. And her standard motivation seemed to be money. As far as Hermione was aware, Snape was not a wealthy man.

She sighed. Above all else, she was disappointed. Not because Snape was seeing someone – she'd already processed that disappointment – but because of the woman he was seeing. It all seemed so shallow and superficial and ordinary, when Hermione had wanted Snape to be the kind of man who found beauty in things other than the relative symmetry of someone's facial features or the proportions of bosom, waist and hips.

Terry's voice broke into her thoughts. "Fair play to your mum, Zabini," he said cheerfully. He was still examining the article and its accompanying photograph. "She's an absolute knockout in that frock."

Zabini's eyes went wide with outrage. The rest of the gathered students either smirked, or – depending on their ability to think ahead – prepared to cast a shield charm.

At this point, the door to the potions classroom flew open and the tension was effectively neutralised. Snape stood in the doorway, glaring. The remaining smirks faded. Then he stepped aside to allow everyone to make their way into the lab.

Hermione waited. (She had learned, in recent weeks, to keep a bit of distance between herself and some of her fellow students.) Behind her there was the sound of hurried steps. She glanced to see Millicent Bulstrode huffing and puffing her way along in an awkward half-jog. Hermione rolled her eyes and moved to enter the classroom. She did not look at Snape, and thus had no idea whether he looked at her.

"You were very nearly late, Miss Bulstrode," he said behind Hermione.

"Nearly isn't really," Bulstrode threw back, as if it was a thing that adults actually said to each other.

"Nearly is bad enough. See that it does not happen again."

Bulstrode entered the classroom, muttering something about how she'd seen the paper and reckoned Snape ought to be in a much better mood. Snape did not favour the muttering with a response.

Hermione went to her work station and set out her pad and pen and textbook. Today they would be brewing one of the more potent calming draughts: the kind generally administered to people whose anxiety levels approached hysteria.

Perhaps, she considered, she might be able to sneak a taste. It felt as if this Monday was rapidly turning into a day worthy of the magical equivalent of a Valium.

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She got a Subpar. It was the lowest she'd scored on a potion since fourth year.

Zabini got a Subpar as well. This was as unusual for him as it was for Hermione. It seemed that both of them had been distracted by unhappy thoughts. Oddly, Draco also did badly. She didn't know what was up with him.

Hermione trudged back up to the ground floor of the hospital after scrubbing her cauldron so hard she'd probably worn the copper down by half a millimetre. She was angry with Snape for being so
reckless in his dalliances, and now she was angry with herself for allowing it to affect her work.

She slumped into a chair in the waiting area for Artefact Accidents. It was no coincidence that her injury was playing up more than usual today. The curse that still crawled around her collarbone always seemed to relish those moments when she was distressed.

"Subpar," she muttered to herself, thinking back to the cold, unimpressed look in Snape's eyes when he'd made his assessment. It hurt, it really hurt, that he hadn't cared enough to look disappointed. "Second-rate. Below average. Deficient." She winced at her own words. "Fuck it. Acceptable is not, in any way, acceptable."

She crossed her legs, crossed her arms, identified the defensive nature of her posture and then tut-tutted. So what if she looked wound up? She was wound up. She was an idiot and she had feelings for an even bigger idiot. And this bloody course still had nearly three months to run. If she got another Acceptable then the overall Outstanding she was hoping to achieve was starting to look beyond her. And no, she did not want an Outstanding because Severus bloody Snape had demanded one in exchange for the vaguest consideration of friendship after the teaching was done. She wanted one because she was Hermione Granger, and when she failed to get an Outstanding people stared at her, all shock and gaping mouths and "Oh dear, whatever happened, Hermione?" And then she would have to explain herself, and it would sound like an excuse, and some people would turn away with that glint in their eye that meant they were glad to see the know-it-all finally brought down a peg or two. And maybe that was fair enough except it wasn't as if she did this stuff on purpose, was it? She couldn't help that she was good at studying. She couldn't help that she remembered things. She liked learning. It wasn't as if she'd asked for these qualities before being born. It was just how she was. Might as well ask Ron to be less red-haired and more crap at chess, or ask Harry to be less of a chosen one.

"Subpar," she growled. "Bollocks."

"Hermione?"

She looked up, startled. Healer Montague was standing over her, looking concerned. Looking as though she'd been calling 'Hermione' for a lot longer than Hermione had realised, come to that.

"Sorry," she said. "Miles away."

"So I saw. In you come, then."

Healer Montague led her over to one of the consultation cubicles. Hermione followed, wondering what had prompted this change to the routine. After months of re-zips, she was familiar with the personnel who would be here on Monday afternoons. Healer Montague was usually up on the Spell Damage floor at this time of day.

"How are you?" Hermione asked, remembering her manners as she sat down and watched Healer Montague whisk the curtain into place and then charm the cubicle with the standard privacy spell.

"Oh, well enough, well enough. You seem a bit glum today, though," said the Healer. "I was expecting you in fine spirits, what with the news."

Hermione sagged in the chair and sighed. "Did I miss something? Was I born without a certain gene? When did everyone get so interested in other people's personal lives?"

"It isn't just anyone, though, is it? Not for you." Healer Montague raised an eyebrow at Hermione's sharp look. "I'm not blind, you know. Wasn't just the Good Samaritan you were
"Playing, this summer."

"Healer—"

"Oh, I think you can call me Gloria these days, can't you? Take your top off. Let's get this nasty thing charmed closed again."

"Gloria, then.« Hermione pulled her top over her head. "And Professor Snape would be appalled by the suggestion that his relationship with any student went beyond the pedagogical."

"I'm only suggesting you and he are friends."

Relieved, and trying not to let on how relieved she was, Hermione said, "Even so."

"And as such, I was anticipating rather more friendly support on your part."

Hermione blinked. "You think I should encourage this?"

"Why on earth not?" Gloria unpeeled the dressing Hermione had applied to the wound that morning. There were dots of blood on the underside. "The man's been mired in the guilt of an old, tragic mistake for half his life. If he's finally ready to move past it, more power to him, I say."

"But did he have to do so with a woman like that?"

"What's wrong with her?" Gloria tutted. "Come now, Hermione, I know she might not be everyone's idea of a catch, but I'd have hoped for a more open-minded view from you!"

Hermione opened her mouth and then closed it again. She wasn't sure how to respond to the accusation that she was being prejudiced about someone who probably had seven murders under her belt.

"Not everything is about appearance," Gloria added, more gently. She unsheathed her wand and muttered the healing charms that sealed the slice over Hermione's collarbone.

"I know," Hermione said slowly. "The thing is, I'd hoped Sever—...I'd hoped Professor Snape knows it too."

"Of course he does. Isn't it obvious?" With another swift charm, Gloria cleansed the area around Hermione's scar. "That's you. Pop your top back on."

As she got dressed again, Hermione acknowledged that she seemed to be missing something: something to do with the appearance of Snape's new paramour. Perhaps Zabini's mum had, in recent years, experienced a disfiguring injury? Perhaps this was why she had withdrawn from the kill-your-husband-for-his-money market. Perhaps this was why Snape had decided to go for it: he had no money worth killing for, she had lost the perfect beauty she'd used as a snare. Maybe the two of them had come to a kind of arrangement.

Mind you, Terry had been impressed enough with the photograph. And no one had mentioned anything about Mrs Zabini's compromised looks before the lesson.

Gloria Montague stood straight. "Look. I know, as his friend — and yes, that's between us, don't fret — I know you worry about him. Goodness only knows, he's been through enough in recent years. I only spent an hour with him when he was touring the facility, but it became very clear, very quickly, that his life has been defined by a need to anticipate the worst possible outcome. It's second nature to him. It must be so very wearing to live like that, don't you think?"
"I'm sure that's right," Hermione agreed. And she was sure. She knew it from experience.

"So the fact that he's taking this first tentative step into something that should be about hope, and trust, and the future? That has to be a good thing. Doesn't it?"

Hermione pinched her lips together. "If that's what it is about, then the Professor would have nothing but my complete support." He would. She demanded it of herself. Even if it made her die a little inside.

"Time will tell," said Gloria. "But I know Roksana Bramble. We were at Hogwarts together, though she was a few years below me. Everyone in Hufflepuff was very proud of her. We knew, even back then, that she'd go on to great things. It isn't fair that she's become known primarily for the accident. Not after all her achievements in potions reform."

Hermione sat still for a long moment. Then she couldn't contain the chortle that escaped her.

"What's so funny?" Gloria asked.

Hermione shook her head. "Roksana Bramble."

"Yes."

"The Roksana Bramble. With the column in The Practical Potioneer."

"Yes, that's her."

"Professor Snape is seeing a former Hufflepuff potions expert."

"Well, yes. I thought you'd read the paper!" Gloria tutted. "Not that the Prophet is claiming anything like a romantic connection, of course. As if a man like Snape and a woman like Roksana don't deserve to be acknowledged as living, breathing, human adults."

Hermione sighed. "Okay. I am definitely going to need a copy of today's Daily Prophet – and those are words I never thought I'd hear myself speak." She smiled at Gloria. For some reason her sense of relief was making her feel punch-drunk. "Sorry. Cross-purposes. Lots and lots of cross-purposes. Like a wildly tangled-up phone exchange. You know. When they still had wires and plugs and ladies with plums in their mouths."

"Are you all right, dear?"

"Not sure. Probably will be, though." She inhaled and pulled her shoulders back and felt a bit better. "So did you come down here to talk about Professor Snape's hopes and dreams, or was there another reason why you swapped shifts today?"

"Ah. Yes. We did get sidetracked there, didn't we? There's something else."

"Right. Well – here I am. Listening and everything."

Gloria smiled a half-smile. "Not here. I was hoping you might agree to a meeting later on."

"Crikey. Are we doing cloak and dagger?"

"We're doing hospital politics, and that's much trickier."

"Okay. So how about the Leaky Cauldron?"
"Not there either." Gloria sighed, looking around at the cubicle, perhaps considering how much longer she could get away with keeping the privacy charm up. "Look, I feel awful asking. You've got quite enough on your plate. But I need...well, I suppose I need a second set of eyes on a bit of a problem. My instinct tells me you're a good choice. So would you mind ever so much coming out to my house in Puddlemere this evening?"

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Excerpt from the Daily Prophet, Monday 21st September 1998
Front page spread with large photograph:

EIGHTH TIME THE CHARM?

While she has been out of the public eye for a good five years, Jossinia Leigh Trelore, formerly Jossinia Harcourt, formerly Jossinia Dalrymple, formerly – shall we keep going? – Jossinia Goodwych, Zabini, Halfbucket, Appleyard, née Jossinia Brown, has never been far from our thoughts. This stunning witch’s breathtaking beauty and implausibly proportioned figure makes her hard to forget, as does her consistent run of bad luck when it comes to husbands. Widowed seven times due to a sequence of unpredictable accidents and devastating illnesses, Mrs Trelore, 51, seemed to have given up on finding husband number eight and, instead, disappeared into seclusion. While she remains a handsome witch, there have been those who theorised that potential suitors were put off by the consistency with which her husbands could not expect to live to see their third wedding anniversary – the exception, of course, being Niccolo Zabini, the father of Mrs Trelore's only son, who survived for six impressive years after marrying the woman many have called 'the most beautiful witch of her eon'.

* The Daily Prophet wishes to make clear that no evidence of wrongdoing was ever proven in the aftermath of Mrs Trelore's various bereavements.

But Mrs Trelore need languish in loneliness no more! Just this last weekend, one of your own Prophet's intrepid reporters ventured into the world of Muggle high society following a tip-off from a respected source. The event: a charity ball in aid of the Richmond Foundation. The host: Philip Richmond, the wealthy Muggle philanthropist who lends his name and his largesse to the Foundation's numerous good causes. And in the company of the prosperous patron himself: a preternatural beauty, a woman so perfectly formed that she has had the Muggle press scrambling around all weekend, desperate to identify her.

The Muggle tabloids have thus far come up short, but the Prophet can reveal that this well-heeled Muggle businessman is dating none other than Wizarding Britain's Jossinia Trelore!

Given the prejudices so apparent during our recent troubled times, perhaps there are some who might frown upon the choice of paramour Mrs Trelore, a pure-blood of impeccable breeding, is pursuing. In accordance with the anti-discrimination legislation being fast-tracked by the Ministry, the Daily Prophet, of course, refuses to indulge any such bigotry. As long as Mrs Trelore holds to the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy, we see no reason why a pure-blood should not dally with a Muggle. (Especially a Muggle with twelve fabulously appointed houses, and who wears Italian couture with such panache, as can be seen thanks to this candid shot of the clearly enamoured couple on the ballroom floor.)

So good luck to you, Jossinia! May number eight be the one that finally works out.

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Further excerpt from the Daily Prophet, Monday 21st September 1998
Article in lower left quarter with small photograph; Page 17:

POTIONS MAESTROS IN TALKS

Spotted last week at Madam Bonigut's Tea Rooms in Upper Flagley was none other than acclaimed war hero Severus Snape, taking the time to sample those famous Bonigut pastries in the company of reclusive potioneer Roksana Bramble.

Many will remember the terrible accident that took place fifteen years ago at the Netch-Rocksalt brewing facility on the Orcadian isle of Fara. Angus Rocksalt himself died in the blast; two others succumbed to their injuries in the days that followed. It was only the quick-thinking of Mistress Bramble that averted a wider-scale disaster. She held the raging fires at bay with containment charms for an incredible forty-three minutes until help arrived, remaining in place to do so when she could have Apparated away. As a consequence, four young apprentice potioneers who'd been trapped and injured by the initial explosion were able to be rescued.

Perhaps these two potions maestros spent some time comparing the permanent marks of their heroism. The Fara tragedy left Mistress Bramble with horrific facial burns which she conceals behind a heavy veil while out in public. Professor Snape's ravaged throat was obvious and startling to all who witnessed his recent acquittal before the Wizengamot.

More likely, however, these two intellectual giants were far more concerned with some shop-talk. Here's hoping there are some potions innovations on the horizon for all of us here in Wizarding Britain!

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Gloria Montague lived with her husband in a whitewashed cottage with climbing roses around the door. The sun had gone down about an hour ago, and the evening was calm and pleasant. Gloria invited Hermione out into the garden, and the two of them wandered the paths by the twin lights of their wands, examining the plants. Lavender and rosemary scented the air.

After an awkward pause, during which Hermione was expected to admire Gloria's herb beds, she gave up on waiting.

"Is someone else joining us?" she asked.

Gloria sighed. "Yes. Sorry. I asked Joseph to come by earlier so we could discuss how to explain things to you. Only he hasn't shown up."

Hermione cast her mind back over several months of friendly acquaintance with the Healer. "Joseph, as in your oldest son?"

"That's the one."

Hermione frowned. "All right then. So did you want to tell me anyway, or did you want to leave it until you've had chance to speak to him?"

Gloria opened her mouth to reply, but was interrupted by a small silvery light. Both of them turned to watch as, right there between the sage and the parsley, the light coalesced into an oversized honey bee.

"Hi Mum," the bee said. "Sorry I'm a no-show. I decided to stay on a bit. Keep an eye out. Look, don't worry, okay? This isn't your problem. I'm twenty-five years old – it's not fair, you feeling
you have to step in and sort things out for me. So just forget I said anything, okay? I'll talk to you soon. 'T'ra!"

Message delivered, the Patronus buzzed over a couple of the plants with what looked like a sort of species-memory interest, then it dissipated into nothing.

Gloria sighed again and said, "That boy!"

Hermione said, "Joseph's Patronus, I assume?"

Gloria nodded. There was a pause. The Healer seemed deep in thought. Hermione waited.

"Dash it," Gloria said. "I don't care what he says; I'm telling you. The last time Joseph tried to sort out a problem on his own he got himself fired from Verdant Acres."

Hermione suggested, "I can be a sounding board for you, at least. For, um, whatever this is."

"And that would be a good start. The thing is, I'm rather stuck for options. I can't ask my husband – William's right in the middle of commissioning tests for the new Nimbus Millennium. Very focused, my William. All my closest friends are associated with the hospital. And you're the one person I know who might have some experience with...well, criminal activity."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "Blimey. Well." She shrugged a shoulder. "I did once rob a bank."

"For the very best of reasons," Gloria acknowledged. "Fortunately this time the stakes aren't quite so high."

Hermione offered what she hoped was a reassuring smile, and gestured towards the back door. "We'll sort this out. Never underestimate the combined power of two intelligent females. Shall we go inside, though? It's getting chilly out here."

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The two of them sat down at the kitchen table. Gloria clasped her hands and took a deep breath, then she proceeded to lay out the issue. Hermione listened. Twenty-three seconds in to Gloria's explanation, Hermione held up a finger to interrupt. Then she rummaged in her coat pocket for her A5 notebook: the one she usually used for lists. She turned to a fresh page and wrote:

G.M.'s Problem.

She underlined the title. Wrote two bullet points beneath. She looked up, smiled sheepishly at Gloria, and gestured her to continue.

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At the first natural pause, Hermione scanned her notes and said, "St Mungo's long-term storage level. Right below where my Potions class is held. You know, it sounds rather wonderful – all those different terrains and climates and miniature ecosystems. The spellwork to maintain the enchantments must be astonishing." She sighed wistfully. "I wish I could see it for myself."

"I'm afraid that's not possible. Not unless you end up working at the hospital."

"Is it all locked up? I suppose it must be, given the value of what's kept there."

"Actually it isn't. Well, not in the classic sense. Access to the level is monitored. Upon leaving the stairwell at sub-level two you will find yourself in the antechamber. The Storekeep will take
your request for whatever it is you need. Usually you'd be a Mediwitch sent down to arrange a restocking of Blood-Replenishing Potion or Burn-Healing Paste or some such."

"Right. I see. So the Storekeep won't give just anyone supplies?"

"No, you need to offer your wand to prove you're a valid staff member."

"There's no way to bypass this? Apparition?"

"The storage level is subject to the same wards as the rest of the hospital. All incoming Apparitions are directed to the arrivals alcove on the ground floor."

"All right, what about Portkeys? You can Portkey to a place with anti-Apparition wards."

"True enough. The Ministry won't supply you with a Portkey to St Mungo's that goes anywhere other than the arrivals alcove, however. In any case, St Mungo's is warded for Portkeys as well as Apparition."

"So even a non-Ministry Portkey is no good?"

"Far as I know. It isn't something you see very often. Unauthorised Portkeys are highly illegal. They are not easy to obtain, and the punishment for using them is severe."

"Dumbledore used them," Hermione said wryly.

"Dumbledore...was Dumbledore," Gloria said, smiling.

Which was true enough; Dumbledore had always seemed to function outside certain rules and boundaries. Hermione herself had skirted the rules in recent times. She'd had to, to keep herself and her friends alive.

The Portkeys she'd acquired for her parents were entirely legal, of course; it hadn't been difficult to sort them out now Percy Weasley was the man in charge of the Department of Magical Transportation and thus the Portkey Office. But if she hadn't been able to organise authorised Portkeys, Hermione would have enchanted her own. It was difficult magic, but she'd mastered it because it seemed like a useful skill to possess. When push came to shove, the consequences of being caught with an unauthorised Portkey were infinitely less frightening than the consequences of failing to protect her parents.

Hermione set the ideas aside. "All right, we'll leave that for now. Let's explore how someone might gain access the traditional way, before we get too creative. All the storerooms and habitats and so forth are beyond this antechamber?"

"That's right. It's rather higgledy-piggledy down there. Lots of add-ons and expansion charms and so forth. Quite easy to get lost, if you don't know where you're going. Access to the rest of the level is through an archway at the back of the antechamber. It's enchanted. It won't let you pass through unless you carry a registered wand."

"Ah. Interesting. So who has access?"

"All the storage level's staff, of course. Several of the Healers, myself included. Some senior admin staff. The hospital's board members. I can get you a list, if you like?"

"Please, if you would." Hermione nodded. "Right then. May I summarise what we've got so far? Just to be sure I've got things straight?"
"By all means," Gloria said. "I'll put the kettle on."

While her hostess went through the ever-calming process of tea-brewing, Hermione frowned at her notes and said:

"Your son Joseph is a herbologist who works on the long-term storage level. Last Friday morning he discovered that several plants in the areas he tends had been vandalised. Some had been taken altogether."

"So far so good. Sugar?" Gloria called.

"No thanks. Now, the list of affected plants reads as follows: from the semi-arid habitat we have doloris and wormwood; from the arctic tundra habitat we have the snagberry. Doloris and snagberry are both on the Ministry's Restricted Register for controlled ingredients, and as such are not available over the counter. Wormwood, of course, is cheap and widely available, so I've no idea why someone would feel the need to steal some."

"It's the snagberry that broke Joseph's heart," Gloria said. "It's the only plant on the planet able to root through permafrost. The bushes survive arctic winters thanks to their remarkable, fast-growing, deep root systems which have the ability to produce a kind of antifreeze. The plants are incredibly rare, and there's only a single specimen at the hospital. It was grown from a cutting gifted to St Mungo's by the Canadian Ministry, and it's over thirty years old now."

"Is it the berries that are used for potions?"

"No idea, I'm afraid. In all my time at St Mungo's I can't recall using anything from that plant."

"So it's just there because it's rare and it was a gift?"

"Something so precious wouldn't be discarded. And new potions discoveries are made all the time. It might be that the next major medical breakthrough makes use of the snagberry – who knows?" Gloria frowned. "And if it does, well, we'd better hope the plant survives this assault."

"How badly was the snagberry damaged?"

"The miscreant took an axe to one of its main boughs. An axe! Can you imagine?"

Hermione found herself wishing Neville was there to have his brain picked. "Will it recover?"

Gloria nodded. "Joseph thinks so. The shrub was well established and in good health before this assault. The wound on the trunk has been magically sealed. If anyone can nurse it through the trauma then my Joseph will manage it. But none of that excuses such a-a desecration."

"Quite right too. So we have these thefts, which seem sort of specific. If someone wanted to make a Galleon or two by robbing the hospital then there's more obvious things to target. Glasswing beetle larvae, for instance. So we can probably assume that this was not a money-making exercise."

"Fair assumption," Gloria agreed.

"Okay. Before we go any further – this wasn't just a ham-fisted bit of harvesting by an inexperienced apprentice or something?"

"No. The harvesting is always done by Joseph or one of the three other herbologists who work on that level. All of them know how to collect ingredients without harming the plant."
"Do we know if anything else was taken? The habitats aren't restricted to plant-life. There's invertebrate colonies, fungi, then there's the separate stores of ingredients already harvested or imported, of course."

"I asked Joseph the same thing. He doesn't know."

"Right then. So the main question for me is: what could these ingredients combine to make? If we knew that, we might be able to narrow down our suspects."

"Suspects!" Gloria laughed self-consciously. "Oh, goodness me, it's like Inspector Morse."

"I wouldn't mind the Jag, but I'm not developing a drink problem, not even for you."

Gloria managed another half-laugh. She brought the tea tray over to the table and sat down again. "How do you take your tea, dear?"

"Just a splash of milk," Hermione said. "All right, so we have a lower basement floor at the hospital which contains plenty of stuff that might be worth stealing, but no means of getting in there without your wand being registered. I take it there's always someone on duty down there?"

"Oh, yes. The current Stores Master is Nicholas Lambage. Mid-forties, bit of a swagger, rather convinced of his own self-importance. He works nine to five and not a moment longer, far as I can tell. Under him are the Storekeeps, who cover the same shift pattern as the medical staff. Then you have the team of specialists – herbologists, zoologists, enchantment experts who manage the habitats themselves."

"So there's usually someone about, even outside of normal working hours?"

"There's always at least one Storekeep on duty. Sometimes items are needed quickly – if there's a medical emergency, for example. The rest of the staff keep the hours that their duties demand. Who else might be down there...?" Gloria frowned as she thought. "Oh, there's Tilda, of course. Matilda Swann, the hospital's librarian."

"The library is on the same level as the ingredients store? Why is that?"

"Accident of history, I think. Is it really so odd? Libraries are store-houses for knowledge, after all." Gloria gave a small smile. "Tilda doesn't keep the most regular hours, though. I've no idea whether she was around when the vandalism took place. She's an old friend of mine. I can ask her, if you like?"

"We're information-gathering, right now." Hermione nodded to herself. "Yes, I think it's worth asking the question. Thank you."

"Just bear in mind that she's a hundred and three, and very focused on her books. I'm not sure she's ever visited any of the habitats."

"She might have seen something out of place, though," Hermione suggested.

"Tilda?" Gloria gave a wry smile. "She's the kind of person who doesn't notice that she forgot to change out of her nightshirt to come to work. Noticing other people is something she only tends to do when books are involved." A pause. "I think she'd notice you. Which, as far as I'm concerned, is a huge compliment."

"I'll take it as such." Hermione nodded as she reviewed her own notes. "Now, you say your son is convinced the thefts happened some time after six o'clock in the evening last Thursday."
"Yes."

"So that takes in at least one shift change. Might the antechamber have been empty? Just for a short while?"

"Entirely possible."

"But Joseph hasn't reported this to the Stores Master. Nor have you been in any hurry to report this to the hospital higher-ups. Instead you're talking to a nineteen year old NEWT student." Hermione sat back, cradling her tea. "Shall we cover that bit now?"

Gloria sighed heavily. "I'm fairly sure that the person who took the plants is a hospital staff member."

"I thought as much, given that the perpetrator requires a registered wand. All the more reason to report it, surely?"

"Not when there's a chance the person I'm reporting to is complicit."

"So go to the top. You're senior enough – take it to the board."

"Again, potential complicity is a problem."

Hermione frowned. "This is sounding – forgive me – a touch paranoid."

"I know. I promise you I'm not actually barmy. Look, the storage level has permanent enchantments within its fabric. All activity on the level is recorded, wherever you go, whichever chambers you enter."

Hermione nodded. "Like CCTV in a Muggle business. But it's easy enough to carry someone else's wand."

"I suppose that's true, although if the duty Storekeep didn't recognise the wand holder then any miscreant would struggle to get past them."

"Polyjuice?"

Gloria pinched wearily between her eyes. "Maybe. Possibly. Oh, I don't know, Hermione. The more I try to think it through, the more my brain trips itself up. But if we try to stick to the facts? As soon as Joseph noted the damage to the snagberry bush, he checked the records to see who'd been in the tundra habitat."

"Ah. So he has access to the monitoring system?"

"Everyone with a registered wand does. A simple charm will display recent activity on the level. It's often used to locate a colleague. Sometimes it's a life-saver. Four years ago one of the zoologists got into trouble in the glasswing beetle colony. Heat probably got to him; he fainted before he could renew his cooling charm. Fortunately the monitoring system showed his colleagues where he was."

"I see. So Joseph checked the records. What did he find?"

"During the window of time when the damage had to have been done, the only people who entered the habitat had a perfect right to be there."

"All right, but I'm still not sure why Joseph can't simply report this."
Gloria sagged. "Yes. Well. The thing of it is, Joseph...he has something of a chequered past. Straight out of Hogwarts, he apprenticed to Solomon Pyke at Verdant Acres Botanicals over in Chudley. While he was there he found out that Pyke's son-in-law had a nice little sideline selling Venomous Tentacula leaves to people down the pub who didn't want to pay top Galleon for the tradeable extract. Only he ended up picking too many leaves, and the plants started to fail. When Joseph noticed this, he set himself up in the greenhouse with a Disillusionment charm. He saw Pyke's son-in-law helping himself, and like the good, honest boy we raised him to be, he reported it."

"Oh. Dear. And how did that go?"

"Pyke's son-in-law blamed Joseph, of course. Said my son must have been stealing the leaves and selling them on, and now the plants were failing he was trying to blame someone else. None of the customers down the pub were prepared to testify. It was Joseph's word against Pyke's own family. So Pyke fired Joseph."

Hermione felt a familiar bristling. She had never lost the ability to be appalled by a miscarriage of justice. "Spineless git," she muttered.

"It's possible I said the same thing myself," Gloria agreed. "And it would have ended there, only Joseph – well, he kicked up quite a fuss. Said he wanted Magical Law Enforcement to investigate. He told Pyke he was willing to submit to a Veritaserum test and he could offer his memories for Pensieve evidence."

"Good for him!" Hermione said.

"Pyke panicked, of course. Couldn't risk the scandal. The man's no fool; he knew what was really going on. So he offered to let Joseph leave with his apprenticeship paperwork fully signed off, just so long as he did so quietly. Joseph agreed."

Hermione winced. "Only now your son is worried that if the hospital investigates any thefts on the storage level, they'll notice that Joseph himself was present in the pertinent areas. And they'll get wind that he was once accused of stealing from Pyke, and maybe even that – technically, anyway – he never completed his apprenticeship?"

"Oh, he's not merely worried. He knows that's what would happen. You see, Pyke's thieving son-in-law is Jasper Crossley. Whose mother, Amanda Crossley, is on the board of St Mungo's. And she holds a grudge. When she found out Joseph was in for a job at the hospital, she did her best to make sure he was rejected – right up until the moment I told her that if she continued to interfere then I'd contact MLE myself, since my son's memories of the events at Verdant Acres were still available."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Hospital politics. I see." Mind you, it was a motive of sorts. If Amanda Crossley hadn't been able to deny Joseph a job then might she be trying to set him up as a thief, all over again? Hermione scribbled another note in her book. "All right, then. No formal hospital investigation – we'll try to keep Joseph out of trouble."

"I appreciate that. And I also appreciate that there may come a time when we have to grasp the nettle."

"But for now you're asking me to keep this confidential," Hermione said. "Which I understand, I really do, but the thing is – I have two best friends who are learning the business of criminal investigation. Both are utterly trustworthy."
"I'm sure they are. And if you wanted to involve them, I wouldn't dream of interfering. But my concern would be that if young Mr Potter is as close to Kingsley Shacklebolt as the recent Wizengamot coverage has indicated, then, well..."

"Harry might mention something to Kingsley, and the next thing you know MLE are telling the hospital to investigate an incident that Joseph has, rather suspiciously, failed to report."

"Yes."

Hermione nodded. "All right, we'll put that idea on hold as well." She reviewed her notes. "We really need to know what these ingredients make. Or even if they make something." She hoped she wasn't looking too eager when she suggested, "You know the best person to ask, of course?"

Gloria smiled tightly. "I know. And we can't ask him."

"Why not?"

Gloria looked down at her hands and frowned. "Severus Snape's wand is one of those that was active late on Thursday evening. In the very habitats in question."

"His wand is registered for the level?"

"Indeed it is. Professor Snape is responsible for the collection and return of any ingredients needed for his lessons."

"Well – that explains it, then. He teaches on Thursday afternoons. He was probably returning ingredients."

"He went into two ingredient stores and three habitats. As I told you earlier, only Joseph and his colleagues handle the harvesting. Professor Snape should only need to visit the storerooms."

Something churned a bit in Hermione's gut. "Maybe he was checking something ready for today's lesson. We made a calming draught and needed ginger root. Or something else. He's very prepared, you know. I can get you the list of upcoming potions; we can see if any of them have ingredients from those habitats." Hermione was getting cross and anxious. "It must have been that."

Gloria reached across the table and took Hermione's hand. "I'm not saying that Professor Snape is under suspicion. But think of how it looks. There is no doubt that he was on the level when the deed could have been done."

Hermione thought about this, then she nodded bleakly. "And if St Mungo's board decide they need a scapegoat then they have two prime candidates: Severus Snape and Joseph Montague."

"I think that rather adequately sums up my dilemma," Gloria said.

There was quiet for a while. The two women finished the tea in the pot.

"It isn't Severus," Hermione said. "He wouldn't do this."

"You don't think he'd steal ingredients?"

"Of course he wouldn't! Look, I know he's..." She hesitated, choosing her words carefully. "Difficult. Difficult to like, at any rate, but underneath all that sneering and sarcasm he's a decent man. Trustworthy."
The Healer looked down at her empty teacup. "The thing is – not all thefts are motivated by greed."

"I know." Hermione huffed a laugh at herself. "Wouldn't be the first time I stole potions ingredients in a good cause, actually."

"Do you think there are any circumstances where Professor Snape might feel compelled to do the same?"

"Of course n--" Hermione forced herself to stop. She had become better at thinking before speaking. "I don't know," she corrected. "Maybe."

Gloria was quiet for a while, just letting the idea seep into the conversation.

"So what can I do to help?" Hermione finally asked. "I mean, even if I look into this for you, my wand isn't registered for the storage level. I can't check out the crime scene."

"No – I don't want you anywhere near that floor. If this matter gets out, there'll be plenty of high-ups wanting to steer suspicion away from the hospital. I can well imagine they'll be swift to point out that the thefts took place after one of Professor Snape's classes. His students might even be accused."

"Seems a bit of a stretch. We'd have to know about the monitoring system. And find a way to bypass it."

"All that would take is a bribe in the pocket of one of the level's regular staff."

Hermione blew her cheeks out. She hadn't even thought of the theft-by-proxy angle. "Right."

"Which is why I want you to steer clear of the level for now. The best thing you can do is to find out about these ingredients. Because you're right – the thefts were so specific, there has to be some larger plot at work."

Hermione nodded, mentally cataloguing her resources. Her own stock of potions texts was not extensive but there were a few others in the library at Grimmauld Place. She could risk a brief trip to Hogwarts, at a push. Where else? Flourish and Blotts, of course. Annoyingly, the best libraries for potions texts were two that she had no access to: Lucius Malfoy's collection at the abandoned Malfoy Manor, and the material in the hospital's own library. A library that was itself situated on the long-term storage level.

Still, she could make a start, see where things took her. And it was nice to have an intellectual problem to get her teeth into. Even after a pain-in-the-arse day like this one had been, Hermione found herself feeling energised.

"Will you be in Artefact Accidents on Thursday for my next appointment?" Hermione asked.

"No. If you need to contact me, owl me here. Or drop by." Gloria looked sheepish. "Let's not get carried away with the cloak and dagger."

"Fair enough," said Hermione. "We'll talk again soon."

She said goodbye and Apparated home, clutching her new project to herself like a cherished stuffed toy. 'The long-term storage level' was such a functional name for an awe-inspiring place. An entire network of diverse and productive habitats: what a place that would be to explore! You could see plants and insects and animals in their native environments that might otherwise require a
journey halfway around the world. The snagberry intrigued her, as did the wand monitoring system. She was thinking about charts, and lists of personnel, and timelines.

She'd been in need of a distraction, and this one worked very well. There were few things that thrilled Hermione Granger more than the prospect of a research project.
"Have you been up here all night?" Harry asked the next morning, as he wandered into the library at Grimmauld Place holding a large mug of tea.

Hermione stirred with something of a jump. While she hadn't exactly been asleep, neither was she all that awake. A stretch of her shoulders made her realise that sitting curled up in the corner of the ratty old sofa, with three open books propped around her, was not a good position to hold for any length of time.

"Ow," she said. Mainly to the sharp pain in her neck.

"And a fine morning to you as well."

Harry shifted one of the open books and plonked the mug down on a low side table. He glanced at the volume before setting it aside, still at its opened page.

"Herbology?" he said. "Really? I thought that was one of the few NEWTs you'd decided not to cram into that great big brain of yours."

"Can't go back to Hogwarts," she muttered, grimacing as she slowly rolled her shoulders and tried to ease the pain in her neck. She woke up a bit as she realised Harry was looking at her in puzzlement. "Oh. Um. Yes, I'm still not doing Herbology." Feeling defensive because Harry had walked in on her investigating a matter that she'd promised not to discuss with anyone else, she added, "But I am doing Potions. They have, you know. Ingredients."

"Ah." Harry nodded. "So! Here we are again. Hermione, a whole bunch of books, and an entire night going by without her noticing." He shook his head. "You got distracted by a project, didn't you?"

"Might have," she said guardedly.

"You're bloody hopeless, you are. Good job you've got the morning off. Go on. Get some sleep, all right? You've got classes this afternoon."

Hermione tut-tutted. "Yes, Dad."

He smiled his lopsided smile at that. "Someone's got to look after you when you go on one of your research benders. Need help? I'm nipping up to Hogsmeade at the weekend, if you want anything from the Hogwarts library. I'm sure Madam Pince would help out. She likes you."

"Don't be daft. She doesn't like anyone. Except maybe Filch."

"She never got on your case the way she did me and Ginny and Ron. But she likes books. You like books. Maybe she saw you as a kindred spirit or something." He did a double take at his own comment. "Er, you know. One less vulture-ish."

"Too kind," Hermione said, rolling her eyes.
"Anyway, McGonagall would definitely make Pince loan you books, even if Pince did her whole it-isn't-leaving-the-castle thing. So how about it?"

Hermione felt a rush of gratitude; here was a way of procuring Eriksson's *The Magic of the Tundra*. It was referenced in Grimmauld Place's 1872 edition of *Index Ingredientus*. (A title she'd always found annoying. It wasn't even correct Latin. She could only assume that the compilers had tried to make their volume sound more academic than the eminently more sensible *Index of Potions Ingredients*. Morons.) She knew Hogwarts had a copy of the Eriksson because she'd used it herself when researching shimmerfrost lichen for her final OWL project...

...except...

Except she couldn't. She couldn't do it. Because she couldn't involve Harry. If he asked Professor McGonagall to get this book for her then there'd be questions. And within thirty seconds of her answering those questions Harry would realise something more than a NEWT research project was going on, and he'd want details, and he'd want to help and, damn it, she'd promised Gloria she would keep this confidential.

Looked as if she'd have to risk Hogwarts herself. Unless Flourish and Blotts were having a serious sale.

"You're kind to offer, Harry," she said, trying to sound relaxed and failing miserably, "but I've got this covered."

He nodded, and his eyes darted to the other open books on display. "What's doloris? Never heard of it."

Hermione moved hurriedly to close the books and stack them away. "Not important," she lied, feeling her cheeks begin to heat. "Just some light reading."

There was a pause: too long to keep fussing with the books. Hermione was forced to look up at her friend, and to acknowledge that he was frowning. Harry had noted her evasion and felt hurt by it. Damn it, why did the proverbial poker-face elude her so completely?

"Right then," he said after a moment. "Let me know if you change your mind. You know where to find me."

"Course." She needed to change the subject. "Off for your run?"

Harry had decided to improve his overall fitness levels now he was in full training as an Auror. Ron was not impressed, since Harry was doing so in ways that did not involve a Quidditch pitch.

"Healthy body, healthy mind," Harry said.

"Yes, I saw the kebab-shop boxes in the bin. You and your health kick."


"Hey, I'm all for it. Anything that gives you an edge over the bad guys is fine by me."

"Yeah, well, Ron still thinks I'm having a mid-life crisis."

Wizards, generally speaking, tended not to give much thought to their physique: not even the law enforcement officers. The ability to do anything with a flick of the wand did rather engender a sense of complacency. Harry, however, had begun to notice the way he'd piled on a few pounds
since May. (A development that was unsurprising, since he was no longer scratching about half-starved while on the lam from Death Eaters.)

Most of all, though, Hermione knew that Harry had come to value the forty minutes he spent jogging around nearby Paradise Park, watching Muggles follow their own early morning routines. It gave him a brief window of privacy that the magical world could no longer offer. She sympathised. She didn't have it nearly as bad as Harry, but being on the receiving end of stares and nudes and murmurs as you walked along, minding your own business, could grow wearing.

Snape, of course, faced the same intrusions. A visit to a tea shop had resulted in a camera shoved in his face. Okay, so the accompanying article hadn't included any wink-wink-nudge-nudge stuff, though Hermione had to acknowledge that this was probably down to the stern rebuke Harry had given the Prophet's editor after the last time the newspaper had decided Snape's personal life was fair game. In truth, however, the article hadn't needed to speculate. Everything was there in the photograph: two heads bowed closely together in intimate discussion, tea and cakes ignored on the table, shoulders nudging against each other...

She forced herself to put those thoughts aside, not for the first time in the last twenty-four hours. "Go to it," she said to Harry. "Don't forget to take some water this time – you can't Aguamenti in the middle of Islington. And have a good day. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Yep."

Another slight pause. He was still hurt by her secrecy. Hermione remembered the moment at her birthday party when she'd realised that she wasn't part of the trio any more. Things were changing, right under her nose.

Harry gave her a stilted wave and headed out. Hermione sighed and started to massage the pain in her neck.

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Grimmauld Place had given Hermione's research project a place to start.

Snagberry was a rare arctic shrub with tiny needle-like leaves, pale orange berries and silvery bark. In the right conditions – which, for most plant life, would be entirely the wrong conditions – a single shrub could live a hundred years or more. Full size, a healthy specimen reached about a metre in height and set forth a canopy of branches of a similar diameter. The snagberry fruited for six months of the year, survived very harsh, cold, dry winters, and rooted deeply. Its only known use was traditional: the crushed berries were part of a salve designed to reverse the damage caused by frostbite. The salve had become obsolete around the 1950s with the invention of the Novus Corporis process that combined a stasis charm, a dittany-based healing paste and an accelerator. It therefore seemed unlikely that someone would steal a section of a snagberry bush for the purpose of treating frostbite.

The doloris plant was mentioned in the Index and two other texts, including Borage's Advanced Potion Making. It was listed as a non-hardy perennial with fine narrow leaves and edible roots: if, that is, you didn't mind eating something that tasted of pickled earwax. The plant's roots were made into a (probably really unpleasant) tea used by Seers and Diviners; it was believed to lend clarity to magical visions. The roots were also used in a recipe for the antidote to Rose-Tinting Essence: a pretty name for a potentially hazardous potion that allowed the imbiber to see only the things they wanted to see. The leaves of doloris were not mentioned in any recipes, though the Index Ingredientus described them as a mood-depressant.
Wormwood had lengthy entries in the Index and most potions reference books. Hermione herself had used it a dozen times when brewing, from the Draught of Living Death to something as innocuous as Settling Syrup: the mild anti-nausea medicine she'd brewed in her first year. As a herb, wormwood could be beneficial in tiny doses, poisonous in greater ones, and was often used as a balancing agent to counter side-effects caused by other ingredients, rather than as a provider of magical effect itself.

Hermione had no evidence, at present, of how wormwood might interact with either snagberry or doloris. The only indication she had that these three ingredients were intended to be used together in some form was the fact that they had been stolen in the same heist.

After a power-nap that turned into a solid hour and a half of sleep, she showered, dressed and headed out to Diagon Alley in order to take her research further.

Flourish and Blotts was, as ever, the kind of place in which Hermione could happily lose herself for hours at a time. She restricted herself to thirty minutes, though, with one eye on her afternoon classes. She bought a copy of Spellwork in Potions as she had wanted one for a while. 'Foolish wand-waving' might have been deemed superfluous to the art of brewing potions back in her first year at Hogwarts, but she was far beyond the beginner's stuff now. The relationship between Charms and Potions became more intricate as potions increased in complexity. She wanted to learn more.

In the seconds bin to one side of the counter Hermione found a slightly spine-damaged copy of a more up-to-date Index Ingredientus than the Victorian issue Grimmauld Place claimed. (Two Galleons was pricey for a second, but it was still less than a quarter of its standard retail price. Which was why she had never owned one before. A diminishing charm would see the slab-sized tome safely home.)

There was no copy of The Magic of the Tundra, however. Since it was old, rare and a translated import, this wasn't surprising. She considered placing an order but decided against it. Having spent almost all her week's disposable income at this point, a further three Galleons for a book she knew she could access at Hogwarts was an expense too far.

None of the shop's stock of Herbology books contained information on snagberry or doloris she had not already gleaned. After ten minutes of surreptitious research in-store, she succumbed to the loud harrumphing from the assistant behind the counter and gave up.

Newly shrunken purchases tucked away, Hermione made to leave the shop. As she reached the door, it flew open with some force. She jumped back, narrowly avoiding a painful introduction to the brass handle. Hermione took a moment to steady herself and plaster an annoyed look on her face, which she then turned on whoever this abuser-of-doors might be.

It was Severus Snape. He looked even more unimpressed with the world than usual.

"Good morning, Professor," Hermione said after a moment.

He made a noise that was somewhere between a grunt and a sigh, then moved back to allow Hermione to exit the shop.

As she stepped down to the street past him, she found herself sighing too. Maybe it was lack of sleep, maybe it was the mortifying memory of yesterday's 'Subpar', maybe she was just plain sick of Snape's 'last summer meant nothing' stance, but she added, "How right you are! It is a nice day. And how lovely to see you too!"
Her heart was pounding. Her ears were hot. There was a quake in her knees as she walked off. Still, the sarcasm had felt like a relief valve being thrown open. In the minutes that followed, as the surge of adrenaline wore off, Hermione felt better than she had in forty-eight hours.

The second-hand bookshop offered nothing to augment Hermione's research resources, and the small number of texts available in Slug and Jiggers's apothecary were similarly unhelpful. Since she had developed something of an amicable relationship with Aloysius Rince, the current under-manager of the apothecary, she risked extending her investigation to include people as well as books.

"Mr Rince, have you ever heard of snagberry?" she asked, after paying for a new glass stirrer to replace the one she'd chipped yesterday when she'd flung her bag across her bedroom in a fit of Subpar-induced pique.

"Snagberry. Hmm. Yes, it's arctic, I think. Non-tradeable, I'm afraid, if you wanted some."

"Oh, I know. I was just wondering if you knew anything about it. What it might be used for."

"Can't say I do."

This was annoying, since Aloysius Rince had an impressive memory for potions recipes. She nodded, collected her purchase and made to leave the shop. For the second time that day a door flew open in her face. Expecting Snape again, she startled when she realised she was face to face with Blaise Zabini.

"Blaise," she said, and stepped back to let him come through. He would never think of showing a Muggle-born any courtesy and Hermione didn't want to be left standing there all afternoon while he waited for her to get out of his way.

Surprisingly, Zabini huffed then managed a muttered, "Granger," as he walked past. It was about as cordial as he had ever been with her. Perhaps she was in his good books following her diatribe about the *Daily Prophet*. Hermione watched as he headed for the counter, then shrugged to herself and turned back to the door. Behind her, she heard Zabini ask Mr Rince for two ounces of sneezewort and a bulk-pack of scurvy grass.

She wondered vaguely whom he was making Befuddlement Potions for, and made a mental note to check all food and drink taken in Zabini's vicinity with her tampering charm. She had neither forgotten nor forgiven last week's attempt to disrupt her Flameaway.

Hermione stood at the junction with Knockturn Alley. She was aware that as the seconds ticked by she looked ever more conspicuous.

Unfortunately, the final bookshop worthy of checking was two doors down past Borgin and Burke. And yes, the bookseller usually carried a fair few publications that might not look out of place on your average dark wizard's bookshelf, but it tended to have a good stock of out-of-print reference volumes as well. Hermione couldn't ignore the shop without feeling as though she was skimping on her investigation.

It was nerve-racking, though. This would be the first time she'd ever risked this part of the shopping district on her own. Not to mention: she was Hermione Granger, and people recognised her. A lot. Even in a world where Rita Skeeter had headed for the Americas it was still likely that...
someone might notice a member of the Golden Trio slinking off into the murkier part of town.

"Damn it," she muttered, craning her neck to see further down the alley and wondering if she could get away with a Disillusionment charm.

Behind her came a loud tut. She swallowed a gasp and spun around. Snape stood there, all dark clothes and narrowed eyes.

"Out of shrunken heads, are we, Miss Granger?" he asked with a sneer. "Or do you need to replenish your venom stocks?"

Hermione rolled her eyes at his attempt to be pointed. "I don't think a bit of well-earned sarcasm counts as 'venom'." She glanced around, lowered her voice and added, "Saying good morning to someone isn't actually harassment, you know."

"I beg to differ."

"When do you not?" She looked back at Knockturn Alley. At this time of day, in the late September sunshine, the place was all but deserted. Those who chose to frequent the alley's businesses usually preferred the shroud of dusk. "Knickers," she added.

"What's the matter?" Snape asked, accompanying the question with a world-weary sigh.

"I want to go to the bookshop. I don't like going down there on my own. Well, I say that. I've never actually tried it – I'm just assuming I won't like it. And now you've mentioned venom...

She let her words tail off as she considered. Ingredients could, of course, be used in poisons and maladies just as readily as they were used in potions and cures. It wasn't unthinkable that the proprietor of Shyverwretch's Poison Emporium might know something of snagberry or doloris.

Another sigh; Snape had quite the repertoire today. "Hermione," he said quietly, "the newspapers were interested in me taking tea with a female acquaintance. Do you really think no one would be interested if I was seen escorting you, one of my teenaged students and, indeed, a member of our gilded trio, into the sordid depths of Knockturn Alley?"

Snape made the word 'gilded' sound about as charming as the word 'sordid'. Quite the accomplishment, really.

"I didn't ask for your help," she said loftily. "And thank you, by the way, for making me annoyed enough to overcome my reticence. I shall see you at the tutorial tomorrow afternoon. Good day, Professor." She took two steps away then turned around. "And if Mistress Bramble is only an acquaintance then perhaps you might have chosen your words last Saturday more carefully."

Snape glared at her. "My relationship with Mistress Bramble is not your concern. Your propensity for adolescent tantrums, however, is. Yesterday your Aqua Sedatis was inferior. Do better next time."

Hermione bit at her lip. "I know. I intend to. And by the way? We aren't at St Mungo's right now, and I don't owe you any automatic deference, so – up your bum!"

She marched off into Knockturn Alley, and wasn't sure whether the noise she heard Snape make was an indication of anger, exasperation or disgust.

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Hermione found a treatise on frost-hardy magical flora in the Knockturn Alley bookshop. It was
bound in battered cardboard and retained several penned notes and questions in its margins. The treatise had been written by one P. Everswain in 1968, apparently as his final dissertation during a Potions apprenticeship to Angus Rocksalt. Rocksalt had died in the accident that had involved Snape's acquaintance-stroke-floozy, Roksana Bramble; realising this almost made Hermione toss the thing back to the box of tattered essays and expositions. The word 'snagberry' had caught her eye, however, so she paid her five Sickles.

The proprietor of the bookshop was uninterested in engaging Hermione in conversation, nor even matching her bland pleasantries with his own. On this occasion she decided not to berate the man for his social shortcomings. Once a day was enough.

She returned to Knockturn Alley without incident and glanced further along towards Shyverwretch's poison shop. Since she was here anyway, she decided she might as well have a look. All she needed to do was ask. Shyverwretch was notorious for playing fast and loose with the Restricted Register when it came to procuring certain ingredients. He seemed to get away with it too, probably because he provided a means for people of influence to bypass the rules. Even Professor Sprout did business with him. Hermione had seen the label on some supply boxes in the Hogwarts greenhouses.

So she set her shoulders and walked along to the store. The alley remained quiet and sunlit and much less intimidating than she'd thought it would be. So much for fear of the unknown. (Not that she intended to start coming here regularly, and certainly not without the reassurance of broad daylight.)

The door to Shyverwretch's had an ancient bell that gave a dull and half-hearted clunk as the door opened. Inside, the air smelt bitter and acrid. Hermione wondered whether it would be considered rude to cast a Bubble-Head charm and decided it probably would.

"Help you, Miss?" a young woman asked from behind the counter. She was pale and thin and thoroughly immersed in the classic witch vibe, to the extent that a sinister-looking cat was perched on her shoulder. With quite the preternatural glare, the cat watched Hermione make her way across the shop. Hermione refrained from greeting the animal. She was a soft-touch for felines but she retained a sense of self-preservation.

"Good morning," she said, though it was probably getting on for noon. "I, er, have a question about a rare ingredient."

The young woman tossed her unwashed hair over the shoulder that wasn't occupied by the devil-cat and said, "Next batch of Ashwinder eggs is due Thursday."

Hermione frowned. "Why would I be asking about Ashwinder eggs? I can buy those at Slug and Jiggers."

The young woman looked exasperated. "And you'd need to sign for 'em. Most women who want 'em prefer an element of confidentiality."

"Oh. I see. Well, I'm not in the market for love potions. I'm trying to find out whether I can procure two non-tradeable ingredients."

The woman raised a brow. "That'd be illegal."

"Oh dear me, would it?" Hermione said flatly.

A twitch at the corner of the woman's mouth indicated a sense of humour, or perhaps merely a
twitch. Either way, the woman leaned closer, ignoring the cat as it found a new place to balance. "What ingredients?"

"Doloris root," Hermione said.

"Never 'eard of it."

"Of course you haven't. Because it isn't relatively well known as an ingredient to divination potions."

The woman sighed. "We can get it. One and ten a quarter. But frankly, Miss, if you want to drink something that'll give you a meaningful vision you'll do better with a good quantity of Ogden's."

Hermione suppressed a smirk. "Don't buy the seer stuff, then?"

"Oh, I buy it. But if you need to take potions for it then it i'n't real. You want me to place an order?"

"No. Though – out of interest, do you know of any other uses for doloris?"

The woman looked annoyed. "Yeah. Four or five. But since I'm currently being paid to sell poisons and ingredients over the counter, not sure why you should get a free consult."

This would be the point, in an Inspector Morse or a Sam Spade investigation, where the stalwart detective intimidated or bribed the information out of the interviewee. Alas, Hermione was neither Morse nor Spade, and her capacity for intimidation was about as impressive as the capacity for bribery she currently enjoyed, given the two and a very-little-bit Galleons made up by the loose change in her purse.

"Snagberry," she said, moving on. "Can I get snagberry here?"

The woman's eyebrow fluttered: it was definitely a reaction of some kind. "It's pricey," she said.

"I would hope so, given its rarity."

The woman shrugged. "Bark or berry?" she asked, apparently now bored out of her mind.

Bark? Snagberry bark was a thing? This was useful knowledge. Pleased with herself, Hermione decided that this justified her foray into the more sinister of Wizarding Britain's shopping lanes.

"Um – either?" she prompted.

"Bark's six Galleons an ounce. Berries'll set you back two Galleons a dozen. Shipping time is at least three weeks." The woman hesitated, looked at Hermione and then huffed in disgust. "Don't tell me. You don't want to place an order but you do want to know what to use 'em for."

"That's incredible," Hermione said. "Are you some kind of seer yourself? Or have you just been at the Ogden's?"

A pause. The cat looked daggers at her before the young woman sniggered and the cat relaxed. "Okay, for that one you get a freebie. Berries'll give you a cure for frostbite."

Hermione's hopes were thus raised and dashed within the space of three seconds. "Ah. Interesting. Well, thank you."

"Weird, though," the woman said. "Hadn't even heard of it myself till a couple of weeks ago."
Another customer was asking for it. Had to owl blinkin' Norway to find out about shipment."

"Another customer?" Hermione prompted, heart accelerating.

"Yep."

"I, er, don't suppose you could--"

The woman snorted her derision. "You'd suppose right. One thing a shop like this depends on is..."

"...an element of confidentiality. Yes. I remember."

The woman scratched under her nose, glanced at the cat on her shoulder, then nodded. "You're Hermione Granger," she said.

"Yes, I am. Do you remember our lovely talk about confidentiality?"

A wheeze of a chuckle. "You're funnier than I thought you'd be."

"Er – thank you?"

"Fella that wanted snagberry? Seem to recall 'e 'ad a copy o' Baneful Brews tucked under 'is arm."

Hermione blinked. "Baneful Brews. I haven't heard of that volume."

"Yeah, well, it's banned, innit? Flourish and Blotts won't take kindly to you tryin' to place an order, so I'd advise against."

"Do you know where I might...procure a copy?"

"Unless Shadwell down the alley gets one in, nope. Not a clue."

Hermione frowned. At least she had something to go on, now. Avenues of enquiry seemed to be opening up. Perhaps she could be a detective after all. "Thank you for your time today," she said. "Sorry about not buying anything."

"Might want to rethink that," the woman said. "Young lady like you, on her own, nice clean clothes and all her own teeth? There's always runners outside in the alley. You were watched, coming in here. They'll be waiting. Prob'ly on the path between next door and the Coffin House."

Hermione hesitated, then said, "Really?"

"Really," the woman said, as if taking to someone less than intellectually gifted. "My advice? Little vial of Fogburn. Smash it on the ground, makes a corrosive fog. Keeps miscreants distracted long enough for you to Apparate away."

"Why can't I Apparate in here?"

"There's wards, i'n't there? Like most shops. Nearest spot is middle of the alley, just past Burke's."

"What if I go the other way?"

"Nothing for fifty yards or so. Alley gets narrower and you'll be out of sight of Diagon. Want to risk it?" The woman held up a small cardboard box. "Normally come in packs of three. I'll break one open and sell you a single dose for ten Sickles." She fiddled a small vial out of the box. "Now
you can't say fairer 'n that."

Of course, the woman could be lying. Easy to force a sale through thanks to a plausible lie. And even if she wasn't lying, Hermione should be able to deal with a pair of muggers. She'd dealt with worse in her time.

She narrowed her eyes at the tiny glass capsule that the woman was now holding up. "What's in it?" she asked, curiosity superseding her caution.

"Trade secret. Patented, innit?" The woman sighed. "Look, one side is lobalug venom. Other side is som'ing what reacts with the venom when they get mixed together. You want it, or you risking it?"

Hermione nodded to herself. "Maybe something like saltpetre? You'd get the dense smoke cloud, and the organic matter would react to maybe produce an acidic--"

"Want. Or. Risking?" the woman interrupted, apparently at the end of her patience.

Hermione sighed and decided not to risk being late – or perhaps permanently incapacitated – to her afternoon's DADA class by failing to take sensible precautions while walking past some muggers. If the muggers didn't kill her then the irony might finish her off. "Fine. I'll, er--"

There came the sound of a muted clunk as the door clattered open behind her. She spun round.

Snape stood there. "Are you going to be all day?" he demanded. "Much longer and the two halfwits waiting to jump you will have woken up again."

Beyond the counter, the woman sighed as she sensed her sale slip away. Hermione glanced round at her to see the cat actively arching its back at Snape.

Not wanting to burn her bridges, she said quietly, "Thank you for your help today," to the woman, then she walked over to the door. Snape preceded her out of the shop this time, looking this way and that almost nonchalantly. His wand was to hand, half-hidden up his sleeve.

"Come on, then," he muttered when she'd closed the door.

They walked in silence for a moment before Hermione said, "You can be very confusing."

Snape breathed a laugh through his nose: just a forced-out breath. "And you can be an idiot. What the hell were you doing in Shyverwretch's without a lookout? They make more money on percentage from the thugs than they do from actual orders!"

"She warned me about the thugs," Hermione said primly. "Actually."

"Of course she did. You're Hermione Granger. Probably panicked once she realised. There's such a thing as bad publicity."

She thought about that. "And making a sale while looking like a hero will do less harm than a story in the Prophet." Hermione sighed. "Okay. So I'm an idiot."

"Well spotted. Now answer the question. What were you doing in there?"

They'd reached the narrow side passage between buildings where the woman had said the assailants would be waiting. Hermione glanced. Two unkempt men were sitting up against the wall, heads resting together, sleeping the sleep of the thoroughly hexed.
"Research project," Hermione said shortly.

A pause. She glanced at Snape. He glanced back and raised a brow. "Fine. Keep your secrets."

"Thank you, I will."

They walked back to the main drag of Diagon Alley. Hermione wondered what she was supposed to say now. As it turned out, she didn't need to say anything. While she gathered her wits and looked around at the bustling safety of the busy street, Snape was already melting away into the crowd.

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After a quick lunch, Hermione made her way to level five of the Ministry building. The department of International Magical Cooperation boasted two lecture-theatre style presentation halls and several large conference rooms, generally used when dignitaries from overseas Ministries visited. With only a token show of reluctance, the department had agreed, back in August, that these same facilities might be used for some of the Lost Seventh classes.

Tuesday afternoons were busy for Hermione: two hours of Defence Against the Dark Arts and then two hours of Transfiguration.

Hogwarts's newest DADA professor was Sturgis Podmore. A member of the Order of the Phoenix, his main qualification for this teaching role seemed to be that he was still alive. (Considering the numerous brave and accomplished people who had in fact died for the Order in recent years, Podmore's survival did make him worthy of some respect.) Podmore's dirty-blond hair was now tinged with white at the temples – something Hermione knew had happened thanks to six very unfair months spent in Azkaban for a crime committed while under Lucius Malfoy's _Imperius_ curse – but Podmore carried himself with dignity and a sense of physical prowess. His shoulders were broad, his hands lacked the Azkaban-tremble seen so often in former prisoners, and his jaw was as firm and squared as ever.

"Settle down, chaps," Podmore said after striding into the room. The conference table and its accompanying chairs had been shrunk and moved aside. The floor held several combat areas with a cushioning charm in place. Podmore looked around and nodded satisfaction. "Bit of a departure today, but an important one. Today's lesson is teamwork. Let's start by reminding ourselves of the two types of shield—"

Podmore stopped, because Blaise Zabini was muttering something to Theo Nott. Zabini failed to stop muttering, even when Podmore looked pointedly at him.

Podmore cleared his throat and said, "Mr Zabini, can I assist?"

Zabini was as sulky and petulant as he'd been the previous morning before Potions. "Oh. Since you're offering, I suppose you could explain why teamwork is important for duelling."

There was a pause. Even Theo looked embarrassed, and he was the only other former Slytherin present. Everyone else glanced at each other.

"Do you believe I am teaching you how to duel in this class, Mr Zabini?" Podmore asked.

Zabini huffed a laugh. "Not really. Think I was about six when I learned the basics." He shrugged a shoulder. "Maybe seven. Long time ago, anyway."

"Ah. So you believe I have nothing to teach you at all?"
Zabini arched a perfectly manicured eyebrow. "On the contrary. Hopefully you're teaching me how to pass my NEWT."

Podmore sighed theatrically. "My apologies. I forget, sometimes, that not every student in this class has experienced the chaos of battle. Not everyone understands that the rules of duelling are as relevant to Dark Arts defence as the rules of Quidditch are to flobberworms." He looked around at the rest of the students. "Please be generous to those who have been sheltered from the fact that sometimes, when an enemy wants to attack you, they don't actually give fair warning and bow first."

A few people smirked and some sniggered. Not Hermione. While Podmore was correct about the difference between book-learning and experience, there was nothing funny or clever about finding yourself in the middle of a battle with Unforgivables zipping past you and the scent of spent curses and blood in the air. She looked around at the class. Everyone here had been present at the Battle of Hogwarts except Zabini and Theo Nott, both of whom had been evacuated prior to the fighting. Even Justin Finch-Fletchley had come back to fight at the school following a year in hiding; he was, like Hermione, Muggle-born.

Hermione risked a glance at Zabini, who had thrust his shoulders back and looked furious.

"So now I'm a coward, am I?" Zabini demanded.

A stray memory flickered through Hermione's mind; she remembered the disdain in Zabini's voice during that first confrontation outside the potions laboratory: "Never let it be said you aren't a hero."

Something clicked into place: Blaise Zabini felt madly insecure about all that had happened in the last year or so. He knew that his position as a pure-blood in Slytherin had allowed him to avoid the atrocities so many had experienced at the hands of the Carrows. And he knew that his evacuation, prior to the battle, had preserved his life when some of his classmates had fought and died.

For months, now, the Daily Prophet had bandied about labels like 'war hero' and 'battle-scarred' and 'victor' when talking about the defeat of Voldemort; there was a cachet to such things: a sense of prestige that Zabini had missed out on. And this had hurt him. Probably more than most, because he'd spent his whole life being told he was more intelligent, more beautiful, more gifted, more important than anyone else.

Hermione looked to their teacher. The way this discussion was progressing seemed worrying, even potentially harmful. These were the moments which might sow the seeds for the next Dark Wizard to emerge.

Podmore shook his head. "No, Mr Zabini, you are not being accused of cowardice. The circumstances that led to your absence from the battle in May were just that – circumstances. Perhaps now you might embrace learning something new? Something that might even be useful to you if, let's say, your future circumstances offer something different?"

Zabini glared a moment longer, then nodded curtly. Hermione let out the breath she had been holding.

"Excellent. Then we shall proceed." Podmore glanced around at the class. "Two types of shield spells. Number one – Miss Brocklehurst?"

"Protego," Mandy Brocklehurst said promptly. "Either on its own or with a qualifier like Maxima
"To add power."

"To form a barrier as directed by the wand which will block spells," Podmore summarised. "Problems with Protego? Mr Finch-Fletchley."

"It weakens with every spell that hits it," Justin said. "You have to renew it periodically. And you can't cast through it. You have to stick your wand arm beyond the shield to send out an offensive spell."

"Thank you, both. Other problems? Mr Finnigan?"

"Spells that hit the shield can sometimes bounce off and hit someone else. Not good when they ricochet in the direction o' one o' your mates," Seamus said.

"A worthy observation," Podmore nodded. "Now, the second type of shield – Mr Nott?"

"Repello Inimicum," Theo offered. "A barrier to physical attack."

"Thank you. Where Protego in any of its derivations will block all but the Killing Curse, Repello Inimicum will block a punch or a weapon or, indeed, any object being projected towards you. Problems? Mr Zabini?"

"Drains your energy very, very fast," Zabini said. "Unless you cast it with a Fianto Duri, but I only know three people who've got the wand skills to do that."

"An excellent point. Any other problems? Miss Granger?"

"Like Protego, you can't cast through it," Hermione said. "And being a physical barrier, you can't even stick your arm through it to cast. Although if you set up a Repello Inimicum tied to a defendable location with a gap to one side, you can nip out, cast, then move behind it again."

Podmore arched a brow. "Have you managed such a spell?"

"Not in battle. I'm not composed enough when the curses are flying." She frowned. It was this inability to find calmness under fire that had cost her an Outstanding in her DADA OWL. Come to think of it, this failing had also almost cost her and Severus Snape their lives when they'd been attacked by Augustus Rookwood. She shook the thoughts away; they were not helpful here. "Um, I've set up quite strong defensive charms like Repello when I'm not under attack, though."

Like when she was living in a tent in a forest, trying to hide from people who wanted to kill her because of her parentage. Podmore nodded. His eyes were steady. He knew; he understood.

Zabini said, "You cast a Repello with a Fianto Duri?"

Hermione looked his way. His expression was reluctantly impressed, shaded with a hint of disbelief.

"It took some practice, but yes," she replied with a shrug. "She'd needed protective spells that lasted through days and nights. She'd mastered the skill out of basic necessity."

Zabini nodded slowly. "Okay, make that four people I know who can cast it."

"Excellent work, chaps," Podmore said, drawing attention back to himself. "That covers spell attacks and physical attacks. Both types of shield are, of course, vulnerable to penetration spells, depending on the prowess of your opponent. Any other thoughts on defensive spells? Mr Boot?"
"Um," Terry said, "I always found a distraction works well. Even low level jinxes mean the guy who's attacking you is too busy worrying about his Jelly-Legs to send a Crucio your way."

"Very good, Mr Boot – always a sensible tactic. But I was thinking more in terms of defensive charms themselves, rather than attack-as-defence. Who haven't we had yet? Um – Mr Corner. Any thoughts?"

"There's Harry's special, I suppose," Michael said. "Expelliarmus is pretty defensive."

"Hmm – I'd class it as an offensive spell, myself, though its ultimate intent is to defend the caster. Of course, if you're up against a powerful wizard who can cast higher level curses wandlessly, Expelliarmus won't do you any good at all." Podmore looked around at his class. "Other ideas? Anyone?"

Hermione said, "I've used Cave Inimicum, as well as Repello. If your opponent can't see you or hear you or even smell you, they can't curse you."

Podmore grinned widely. "There speaks someone who's learned the benefits of invisibility!"

Zabini muttered, "And they call me a coward..."

"No one called you a coward, Mr Zabini. And if anyone in this room is ever given the choice between hiding or being attacked then I recommend you hide. Every single time. Miss Granger, did you use Cave Inimicum at the Battle of Hogwarts?"

"Well, no. Again, it takes some time and concentration. I used it when we were on the run, to keep us as safe as I could."

Podmore tilted his head. "But the premise is sound. Make yourself difficult to see and you're much less likely to catch a curse in the face. So perhaps a good defensive spell might be...?"

He looked around. Hermione thought to herself, 'Of course. Disillusionment.' But she didn't say it out loud. In recent months she had – just as Podmore was suggesting – learned the benefits of not being quite so visible.

Mandy Brocklehurst said, "Surely a Disillusionment charm will only hold as long as you don't do anything, though. It depends on the caster remaining passive."

Podmore nodded. "That would usually hold true, Miss Brocklehurst. However – time for a demonstration, I think. Please take up attack positions. Remember our crossfire-avoidance protocols." He waited until the students had separated out into a semi-circle and checked their lines of fire. "I will cast three defensive spells. I will not be moving from this room. Please cast a low-level jinx of your choice in my direction and take any defensive stance you deem necessary."

Hermione watched closely. The air just behind Professor Podmore rippled, like heat-haze.

Podmore raised his wand and intoned: "Repello Inimicum, Fianto Duri." He paused and arched a brow at Zabini.

Zabini half-bowed and said, "Five people, then. I see I have some practising to do."

Podmore half-bowed in response, a small smile playing on his lips. "Protego Maxima," he cast, adding magical protection to his barrier spell.

Hermione lifted her wand and considered her strategy.
Podmore swirled his wand around his head like a lasso and muttered the Disillusionment charm. He immediately faded from view against the background: not quite invisible, but very hard to see.

The students glanced at each other.

Zabini shrugged and cast a Stinging Jinx at the place where Professor Podmore had stood. There was a crack of light as it bounced off the shield.

"The man said teamwork," Seamus observed. "Shall we?"

In rapid succession, Seamus, Justin, Michael, Terry and Mandy all cast various jinxes that resulted in similar flashes of energy discharge. Mandy's Toe-Biter bounced to one side and narrowly missed Terry Boot. Hermione voicelessly cast as powerful a Protego as she could manage without an incantation.

Terry, poised again after dancing clear of the Toe-Biter, shrugged and fired a second Knockback Jinx at Podmore's position. The energy flash was shifting in colour; Podmore's Protego was beginning to drain.

"The Professor did not restrict us to a single jinx each, did he?"

Another flurry of jinxes went Podmore's way.

"Something wrong, Hermione?" Michael asked. He was about two metres to her right, and had noticed that she had yet to cast a jinx.

"I'm not very good at casting offensive spells at people who...well, who haven't offended me," she admitted.

A flash of energy caught her attention: the Dancing Feet Jinx. It came from Podmore, straight at her, as if in response to her comment. It bounced off her shield spell...

...and yet Podmore's Disillusionment charm was unaffected.

"Hang on," said Terry. "That should have made him visible again."

Most of the students who had not already raised a shield did so. Hermione renewed her own, glared at the space Podmore occupied and stuck her tongue out at it. She heard him chuckle.

Theo Nott, who also had yet to cast offensively, sidled around the other side of Podmore. He was looking to bypass the barrier and shield that Podmore had cast before himself. She wondered whether this was entirely fair, but only for a moment.

Hermione worked out what the point of this lesson in 'teamwork' was. This was not about joining forces in your offensive casting, the benefits of which were so obvious that they hardly needed a lesson. This was about teamwork for the purposes of defence.

"Who've you got there with you, Professor?" she murmured. Because somebody was standing with Podmore: someone who had arrived under Disillusionment charm, and whose charm was maintaining Podmore's hiding place even as he cast.

An idea struck her. "Homenum Revelio," she cast, careful to move past her shield.

The spell conjured a dark, arrow-shaped cloud over each and every human head in the room. Theo glanced up. Some of the other students swiped at the markers irritably. A step or so to one side of
Podmore's original position there were two markers hovering in the middle of the floor.

Theo smirked at Hermione, realising at the same time she did that the physical barrier no longer protected Podmore and his accomplice given their new position. Theo dug in his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, which he Transfigured into a bucket and filled with water using *Aguamenti*.

All this while, the other students were aiming jinxes at the position Hermione's revealing spell marked the two Disillusioned humans. Hermione knew that Podmore and his accomplice could not remove those markers without a *Finite Incantatem*, which would also cancel out the protection spells. What else could Podmore do to regain his defensive advantage?

Ah yes. He could–

"*Nox Supra,*" Podmore intoned, and the overhead globes went black.

He could do that.

Hermione voicelessly cast *Aspectu-Tenebris* and changed her position. Her shield charm was in place. She glanced at the markers for Podmore and his accomplice, then at Theo Nott, whose wand waved in a pattern that looked not unlike her own night-vision charm. Theo's wandwork was excellent; she'd known this for years. It was a shame, she considered, that they had never had the chance to collaborate.

Theo glanced her way, saw her looking, raised an eyebrow. He lifted his Transfigured bucket suggestively.

Perhaps they would be collaborating after all.

"*Specialis Revelio,*" Hermione murmured. It was a charm she had only recently mastered: a spell to reveal active magic. Her wand pointed at Podmore's location. The initial *Repellio* remained in place to one side, and an additional barrier had been raised between Podmore's accomplice and Theo Nott: a barrier that, by necessity, would not have the strength and duration of *Fianto Duri* since it had been cast voicelessly.

She looked at Theo. She pointed up at the glow-globes in the ceiling, then at her eyes. She closed them. She opened them again. Theo arched a brow. She lifted a hand with three fingers raised. He nodded understanding.

Two.

One.

Go.

"*Lumos Maxima Supra!*" she cast at the overhead globes, while closing her eyes as tightly as she could.

Most people in the room cried out at the sudden presence of bright light. Zabini yelped in pain, demonstrating that he too had cast a night-vision charm.

Relying on memory, Hermione cast three rapid Multi-Shot jinxes at Podmore's position because she knew it was the spell that would most rapidly deplete his shield. Then she wandlessly dispelled her night-vision, checked her *Protego* and opened her eyes just in time to see Theo Nott magically levitate his bucket of water above Podmore's marker and dump it on the two wizards still
Disillusioned beneath.

Hermione began to smile widely.

A mellifluous baritone said, "Pluviam Imbre."

Water hit an invisible canopy above two suddenly visible wizards, and sprayed out uniformly in a circle away from their position.

Hermione stopped smiling, looked down at her drenched clothing, realised that her white blouse had gone rather see-through in the last three seconds. She decided that she should probably have expended some time and effort on a physical barrier as well as a magical shield. She cast a grumpy Tergeo.

Podmore said, "Cease hostilities!" Rather redundantly, at this point, since the barrage of minor jinxes that everyone else had been throwing his way had stopped in favour of a whole host of drying spells.

"Finite Incantatem," said the familiar baritone.

The glow-globes went back to normal. The reveal-human markers blinked out of existence. The magical and physical barriers, darkened by Hermione's reveal charm, disappeared.

And in the centre of the room, Sturgis Podmore stood back-to-back with Severus Snape, grinning cheerfully at his class. Snape, of course, did not grin. He looked at Hermione, glanced down at her blouse, glanced up again at her face and lifted his eyebrow just a fraction. Then he turned to Theo Nott and nodded gracefully.

"Well, then, chaps!" Podmore said. "Lots to discuss there, I think! Let's get some chairs and we can go over all that we've learned about teamwork."

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Excerpt from 'Frost-Hardy Flora: A Study on the Magical Qualities and Uses of Tundra Plant Life' by P. Everswain, 1968

...much less so than the snagberry, a woody shrub of rare occurrence found only in territory north of the Arctic Circle. Traditionally the snagberry's fruit has been used in a poultice or salve to treat frost-related injuries, up to and including severe frostbite and the subsequent necrosis of soft tissue. Combined with the petals of the spectral saxifrage (ref: Chapter 2 – Flowering Perennials, p5) which can often be found growing beneath the shelter of the snagberry's canopy, and enhanced by a catalyst such as glacier wormwood or snow laurel, the regenerative qualities of the resultant salve are surprisingly powerful.

The Inuit magical community of Nuna Haven on King William Island in Canada claims to have used magical infusions centred around the snagberry to heal gangrene, to correct badly healed injuries such as mis-set broken bones and even to regenerate severed digits and to restore sight to wounded eyes. While the convenience of Novus Corporis might render much of the snagberry's qualities redundant, it is this author's belief that the true healing potential in this rare shrub has yet to be fully explored...

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"Wow," said Lysander Crocus, who had become a good friend in the six weeks Hermione had spent working in the admin office serving the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee. "You look rough."

This was what she got for a second successive night of research. She used to have such stamina! Was she getting old?

"Charmed, I'm sure," she said tartly. Then she narrowed her eyes and looked around, before asking in a lower tone of voice, "Do I have make-up on?"

"Don't think so," Lysander said, after leaning in to peer at her face. "But I'm not really an expert."

"Damn it. Knew I'd forgotten something." Hermione huffed a sigh. She never usually bothered with more than a flick of mascara and some neutral lipstick, but since she'd got the job, it had become a morning ritual. And it did make her feel a bit professional. "Ah well. Let's call it a take-me-as-you-find-me day today."

"Wouldn't worry about it," he told her. "We're going to be busy. Joint staff meeting, first thing. We've got an incident!"

"Really? Great!" Hermione hesitated, then winced. "I mean, not great. Incidents are bad. Very bad. And potentially harmful." Lysander snorted at the effort she was putting in to not being pleased. "Sorry. But we haven't had something to get our teeth into for more than three weeks. Not since Persephone Kingston from the Wimborne Wasps had her broom sabotaged."

"This one's going to be trickier than a Quidditch star crash-landing in some rich git's swimming pool," Lysander said.

"What's it about, then?"

Lysander drew himself up and tucked his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets. "How would I know?"

"Same way you always do. Someone gossiped and you listened."

Lysander gave her a look of mock-outrage which Hermione met with raised brows. He gave in and smirked, then he glanced at the wall clock. "Sorry, dearheart. You'll have to wait for the briefing. If you want coffee first, anyway."

Hermione considered: coffee, or knowledge she did not yet have? It was a close run thing, and coffee might have won out had the two options not been potentially inclusive.

"Tell me while I get my coffee?" she coaxed.

"Oh, all right." Lysander grinned. He was obviously itching to tell her all about it. Leading her through to the kitchenette, he said over his shoulder, "So you know the big story that broke on Monday? Front page of the Prophet?"
"Blaise Zabini's mum and the Muggle millionaire Philip Richmond," Hermione supplied. "Yes, I heard. You know, I always thought he was gay. Richmond, I mean. In his fifties, never married? Great suits and impeccable grooming?"

"Watch your stereotypes," said Lysander with a feigned glare. "Some of us pride ourselves on our appalling dress sense."

"Oh, you don't have to tell me," she fired back. "Orange and turquoise?"

"What's wrong with it?" Lysander said, tugging at his waistcoat.

"Nothing. I like it when my eyes bleed." They shared a grin. "We're getting sidetracked."

"We are. Point is, this thing with Philip Richmond and Jossinia Trelore has caused a problem."

"What did she do?"

"Oh, it wasn't her. Nothing to do with her or her Muggle paramour. But the reporter from the Prophet who snuck into the event last Saturday? He's landed himself in a whole heap of trouble."

"Go on," she encouraged, as she sniffed the coffee in the pot, found it fresh enough to drink and poured herself a mug.

"Okay, this reporter – he got talking with some of the other people at the event. Tried to impress the ladies with hints that he knew who the mystery woman with Richmond was."

Hermione rolled her eyes at Lysander. Blokes could be so dick-led.

"Thing is," her friend went on, "one of said ladies turned out to be another undercover reporter. A Muggle one. And since she, too, was desperate for the scoop of this mystery woman's identity, she followed the Prophet's scribbler when he left the venue."

"Ah. I see. And there we have our incident. This woman saw something awkward, did she? What did he do, Disapparate in front of her?"

"Um – no. Or not exactly. He claims – the reporter, that is, our one, Quentin Bittercup – he claims he knew he was being followed. So he walked around to the back of the place where this ball was being held – some posh hotel near Charing Cross – and made sure he tucked himself out of sight before he Apparated."

"Okay." Hermione frowned. "So what's the problem?"

"The problem is that his story doesn't match up with what this Muggle reporter is claiming to have seen."

"Which is...?"

"Hard to tell – her story's a bit hysterical. But about twenty minutes after the Prophet's man claims to have Apparated away, this woman stumbles in to the reception of the hotel, seriously shaken up. Hairdo all mussed, clothes scuffed and dirty. Claims she's been assaulted."

"Oh. Crikey."

"So the hotel's duty manager, he calls the Muggle police. The woman gets interviewed. She says she was following someone away from the event, then everything goes hazy. Says she loses a few minutes. Next thing she knows there's a man nearby in a hood and a cloak who does something
that involves what she's calling a 'silvery light'. She says she made a noise. You know, in
surprise. Which made the hooded man notice her. And according to this woman, he pointed a
'stick' at her."

"Okay, this is sounding more like a spell than a drunken hallucination," Hermione acknowledged.

"Right. She says she collapsed after that. She reckoned he must have hit her with his stick – she
was on the ground, see. Lost another few seconds, then she says she saw him toss his hood back
and drink something. And it made him change appearance. One minute he's dark-haired, next
minute he's blond."

"Polyjuice?"

"Would be the obvious explanation. Then this wizard – I think we can call him a wizard – takes
off his cloak to reveal that he's wearing a white-tie tuxedo. The reporter says she must have made
another noise, because the man waves his wand – I mean, his 'stick' – at her again. The next thing
she knows, she's come to and found herself alone in the back lane, head pounding, scared half to
death. So she gets to her feet and stumbles round to the hotel entrance. And that's her whole
statement, pretty much."

Hermione frowned. "If this wizard attempted an *Obliviate* that didn't quite work, that would
explain the trauma. I believe it can feel as though you've been thumped in the head."

"Which is, of course, why we have a trained department of specialists for memory work."
Lysander didn't seem to notice Hermione's self-conscious shuffling. "Now this whole incident
would be easy to contain if it weren't for the location. One woman's testimony can be undermined
quite readily. But at an upmarket hotel in central London? There are security cameras."

Hermione nodded. "Of course there are. I take it none of them were situated close enough to the
action to conveniently blow up when this wizard started casting?"

"Alas, no."

"Right. Why would the fates make anything *that* easy for us?"

"Why indeed? Fortunately, the cameras were therefore far enough away for some of the footage to
be less than clear, too. But they did record the whole thing. Which is why the woman's story was
believed. And investigated. And now the police are trying to get their heads around the fact that
on the security footage the hotel has provided someone in a cloak makes silvery trails come out of
his pointy stick, then appears to turn into someone else."

Hermione sipped at her coffee. "Okay, so that's the incident. Magic witnessed not just by a lone
female journalist but by a state-of-the-art hotel security system."

"*And* everyone who's seen the footage. Which, between the hotel staff and the police officers, is
now more than a dozen people. We're going to have to move fast on this one. Mr Arnold said that
he's favouring your idea from two weeks ago – the hypnosis thing?"

"Maybe," Hermione said, as her thoughts turned over. "Not sure. Mass hypnosis is plausible in
certain circumstances, but you need every witness to have been in the same place at the same time
so they could be primed to behave in the same way." She frowned. "Which hotel was it?"

"Um – Savoy?"

"Near the Strand. Okay." A glimmer of an idea began to emerge. "Ah! Close to theatre-land, of
course."

"Is it?"

Hermione chewed at her lip, just for a couple of seconds before she noticed what she was doing and forced herself to stop. "How did Magical Law Enforcement find out?"

"The police report. Certain key-words get flagged up at the Ministry. You know – stuff like 'broom' or 'magic' or 'invisible' or 'wand' or whatever."

"But this isn't being reported by the Muggle media, is it? I mean, the event was at the weekend and we're already up to Wednesday. I haven't seen anything about an assault near the Savoy in the Guardian."

"In the whaty-what?"

"Muggle newspaper. Left-leaning broadsheet." At Lysander's blank look she added, "Never mind."

"Oh. So anyway, yes. I mean, the whole thing's being kept quiet in the Muggle press. The reporter – the Muggle one, I mean, the woman – shouldn't technically have been at the event, and the hotel apparently gets lots of rich, influential guests who like to keep things discreet."

"And you say this bloke from the Prophet claims he isn't responsible?"

"Adamant it wasn't him. Unfortunately for Mr Bittercup, the hotel's cameras caught him behind the hotel before he turned a corner and seemed to vanish. The Apparition didn't register on camera, but the Muggle police are very interested in identifying and interviewing the shifty-looking bloke who was skulking about minutes before an alleged assault."

"Understandably."

"Plus, Bittercup's got no alibi after leaving the hotel on Saturday night. I've got a pal, Linus Mickle, works in MLE for the Improper Use brigade – that's, um, how I sort of got the gen up front on this thing. Anyway, Linus reckons the high-ups at Improper Use all think Bittercup's lying through his teeth. Isn't the first time he's come close to breaking the Secrecy Statute, apparently."

"So has he been arrested? Interrogated?" Hermione asked.

"Not yet. These days MLE need to formally charge him if they're going to submit him to Veritaserum. They're trying to move away from the whole fascist dictator thing the Ministry had going during the war. Bit more softly-softly."

"Hmm." Hermione nodded. "Okay. I don't think the hypnotism excuse will do the job here. The main evidence is on film, though, and stuff on film can be faked. Muggles are used to that idea. Plus – cloaks, and waving a wand around?" She arched a brow at Lysander meaningfully.

"What?"

"Abracadabra? Um – please welcome on stage the lovely Debbie McGee?"

He looked at her blankly. "Don't get it," he said.

"Never mind. Just the kernel of an idea." She shook her head and sighed. "I will do much better when I've finished this coffee."
Lysander glanced at the clock on the wall. "Hurry up, then, dearheart. Meeting's in three minutes."

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"Any other thoughts?" invited Balthazar Arnold, the Chair of the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee. His large forehead was shiny with perspiration; he looked frazzled after an hour and a half of listening to all the reasons why each and every proposed solution to 'the Savoy incident' was inherently problematic.

Lysander nudged Hermione. She shot him a warning look.

"We've agreed," Arnold said, "that we can't Obliviate all the witnesses. More than three days have gone by. That window has closed. And we've noted that the 'gas leak prompting mass hallucination' explanation is too far-reaching, given that several hundred hotel guests as well as the attendees at this charity ball failed to show any symptoms."

Beside Arnold, Jasmine Churlish, the deputy department head at Improper Use of Magic, shuffled in her chair. She was a sharp-faced woman with prematurely silvered hair, who carried herself with stiffly-set shoulders and an aura of authority. It seemed that she was getting annoyed by the lack of progress. Next to her was Quentin Bittercup from the *Prophet*, who had agreed to attend the meeting but remained resolute in his stance: he was not responsible for the actions witnessed by the Muggle woman. (There were very few people around the table, Hermione herself included, who weren't convinced he was lying his arse off to get out of trouble.)

Arnold sighed. "Miss Granger has pointed out, and Madam Churlish agrees, that the hypnotism idea would only serve for a group of witnesses who saw everything at the same time."

Lysander nudged Hermione again.

"What?" she whispered.

"I know you've got something. Go on!"

"Sod off!" She shifted uncomfortably. "Look, I'm just a junior office worker. I'm not even on the committee."

"You've got something!"

"Mr Crocus?" Arnold put in, perhaps inevitably given the volume Lysander was now employing. "Do you have something to contribute?"

"No, sir," Lysander said. "I'm trying to persuade Miss Granger that her idea should be heard."

Hermione cringed as the dozen other people around the conference table all looked at her. Damn it. Just as she'd trained herself *not* to throw her hand in the air with every answer she could offer, this happened. There was irony at work here. Or sod's law. Or something.

"Um," she managed.

Arnold, to his credit, looked kind and encouraging, though his expression might have been tinged with desperation. The rest of the meeting's attendees weren't so forgiving. There were plenty of people present who thought Hermione had got this job only because of her connection to Harry and to Kingsley Shacklebolt. (Unfortunately, those people were probably right.)
"Miss Granger, this is an open forum," Mr Arnold said. "Whether through Mr Bittercup's actions or some as yet unidentified wizard, we've been hexed into quite a body-bind here. Time is a factor. Please – speak."

Hermione sighed, tried to order her thoughts, then she lifted her chin.

"The Savoy backs on to the Strand," she said. "Just across the road from the Burleigh Theatre. Which, if memory serves, is currently being used as the audition hall for contestants wanting to appear on the new series of Make Me a Star." She registered twelve blank looks. "It's...a Muggle television programme featuring people who want a career in the entertainment industry. It's basically a televised audition platform. So they do singing or dancing or whatever, and a panel of celebrity judges decides who is best."

"How does this help us?" Jasmine Churlish demanded.

"We pretend Mr Bittercup was a contestant," Hermione said.

"It wasn't me! I'm not even a part of this!" Quentin Bittercup exclaimed.

"Or whoever," Hermione went on. "It doesn't have to be, you know, whoever it actually was. We just need someone to turn themselves in and say they were there last Saturday. Preparing for an audition. Practising their act."

"There wasn't any singing or dancing," Arnold pointed out.

Hermione smiled grimly. "No. No, we tell people that what this..." She glanced at Bittercup and sighed. "This unidentified man was doing was...well, magic."

There was a fifteen second uproar, during which everyone seemed to talk at once. Several people laughed nastily. Mr Arnold looked disappointed. Even Lysander muttered, "Oh, Hermione."

Over the tumult, Mr Arnold said, "Miss Granger, I'm aware that you are very new to this job, but I had hoped you'd grasped the central principle behind our committee's role." His voice was necessarily growing louder as the tumult failed to abate. "Our job is to divert Muggle attention away from magic, not to--"

In fact it was Jasmine Churlish who snapped everyone out of it with a "Quiet!" Even Mr Arnold shut up and looked startled. Once peace was restored, she narrowed her eyes at Hermione and said, "Explain."

Hermione gathered her courage. "It's like this. There's one thing guaranteed to make Muggles fail to believe in magic, and that is claiming that something is magic. The minute you say that's what it is, they're looking for the sleight of hand, the hidden wires, the big illusion."

She paused. Churlish considered this, then nodded for her to continue. The tuts and huffs around the table were quietening.

"So – given the location," Hermione added, "we've got an excuse for a stage magician to be practising his act nearby. It's a quiet, out of the way spot in a part of London that never really stops being busy. Five minutes away from a theatre which had rolling auditions for this TV show. You could probably spin it, with a bit of fast talking. All we have to provide is the stage magician himself. I think it's a matter of organising three things."

"Those being?" Mr Arnold invited.
"First we need to destroy the security footage, both from the hotel's system and from police evidence. We don't want anyone looking too closely at the actual events of Saturday evening. Once the footage is no longer available, everyone who ever saw it will start questioning themselves. Believing the explanations. Laughing at their own gullibility. The memory cheats, after all."

"Very well. Priority number one is eradicating the evidence. Easily done. I'm guessing Madam Churlish can organise that?"

"Of course," Churlish agreed curtly.

"Good." Hermione was in her stride now. "Secondly, we need to set up our so-called magician. He will claim that he found a quiet spot where he could warm up for his audition. He'll say he was in the middle of this when a woman challenged him. He tried to explain, but she collapsed. He assumed she'd had too much to drink, since she was wearing an evening dress and had the whiff of champagne about her. He wondered about calling an ambulance, only the woman started snoring away quite happily so he thought he'd just let her sleep it off. He continued practising his act. The woman was still sleeping soundly by the time he had to get across to his audition, so he left her there. Only he was worried about her, so after his audition he went back to check on her. She was no longer in the alley behind the hotel. At this point he saw all the police cars and uniforms, and he learned that a woman was claiming an assault had taken place. He panicked and left. Then he began to feel guilty, and thought things through, and decided he had to come forward. So he could provide what information he had."

"All well and good, but you can find someone else to be your stooge. I'm not going to pander to a bunch of Muggles!" Quentin Bittercup stated.

Churlish was narrowing her eyes as she looked at Hermione. "Actually, Mr Bittercup, I think you're right. I'm quite certain you do not qualify for this role. We're going to need someone with charisma and skill, aren't we?"

While Bittercup shuffled and mumbled his indignation, Hermione nodded her agreement. "We'll also need memory-charm experts to nip over to the Burleigh Theatre and deal with the people running the auditions – just to plant the false memory of a stage magician auditioning for the show on Saturday evening."

"Yes. Good point," Mr Arnold said, and gestured at his personal assistant to make specific note in the meeting minutes.

"Whoever we choose to do this," Hermione went on, "he'll be asked how he did the things on the footage. He will say he can't reveal his stage secrets. We can set up a charm that does the silvery thing so he can 'prove' that it was him. When the police look gobsmacked and say 'How did you do that?' our magician says 'Magic.'"

"And, er, that's what convinces them it wasn't magic? Just to be clear?" Mr Arnold put in.

"Exactly. And when the police get stroppy about the answer, which they clearly don't believe, the magician says that if he reveals his secrets he'll be chucked out of the Magic Circle."

"The what?" Arnold said.

"It's a Muggle thing."

"And if they insist?" Madam Churlish asked.
"I'd suggest our magician claims it's done with a combination of liquid nitrogen and a laser pointer. I mean, it's lazy chemistry, but the ideas will be familiar enough to be plausible to the police."

"And what is the third element of this subterfuge?" Churlish pressed.

"Well, I'm guessing Magical Law Enforcement need to know who actually caused this Muggle journalist such harm." She shot Quentin Bittercup a dubious look, then sighed at his defiantly lifted chin. "Which means that we need more than the grainy footage of a security camera – we need the woman's memories. One of the ranking officers in Obliviator HQ can take care of this, I believe?"

"I'll be organising a visit to this Muggle anyway, to fit her memories to the cover-story," Churlish agreed.

Everyone thought this over. Hermione found herself blushing and dropping her head.

"Right then," Mr Arnold said. "We need a wizard who can pretend to be a Muggle stage magician. That means someone who has at least partial Muggle background, an ability to think fast on their feet, a competence with charms, and a tendency towards theatricality." He looked around at the table. "Any thoughts?"

Hermione had a thought. Not a helpful one, though. Severus Snape fit the bill in every way except the one that mattered: he wouldn't do it in a month of Sundays.

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That afternoon her two-hour Charms lesson was uneventful, save for the fact that Professor Flitwick once again tried to insist that Hermione was ready to sit her NEWT. Given that she'd already achieved what she considered to be two rather fortunate 'Outstandings' for Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, a third early try had to be pushing her luck too far. Such was Hermione's view, and none of the arguments made by Professor Flitwick – nor indeed by Headmistress McGonagall, who was making the same case for Transfiguration – could persuade her otherwise.

At three thirty Hermione Floo'ed over to St Mungo's for her Potions tutorial. These Wednesday lessons were a little odd, in that they involved a Severus Snape who would actually answer questions. The tutorials generally proceeded thus: someone would mention an issue that had arisen in the most recent brewing lessons. Snape would offer some insight or advice, and a discussion might ensue. If the discussion was of interest then you were welcome to take part. If not, then Snape was unconcerned; he was tolerant of his students using the time to read or research or write their coursework. Or indeed to absent themselves from the tutorial entirely.

Today, Draco wanted to talk about the methods of preparing ginger root. He'd had difficulty maintaining a uniform slice when dealing with something so fibrous, and was interested in how different modes of preparation could affect the efficacy of the Aqua Sedatis potion; he'd read an article in _Brewmaster Monthly_ on a similar subject. Hermione followed along for a while, but she'd read the article herself and then researched the article's references – something Draco had not done – so when Snape began to expound on these writings, Hermione acknowledged that listening to Snape's voice for the sake of its sonorosity would be an indulgence. She began to work on her current essay, keeping half an ear on the discussion.

Around halfway through the tutorial, at a point where Terry Boot had changed the topic to stirring patterns, a brisk rap at the laboratory door made everybody fall silent and spin around. The incident was noteworthy. Hitherto, no one at the hospital had dared interrupt a Snape-class.
"Enter," Snape ordered, managing to make the word about as grudging as it could possibly sound.

The door opened to reveal a young man in Mediwizard robes. He looked at Snape, quailed at the raised eyebrow directed his way, coughed, then, alarmingly, made straight for Hermione.

"Apologies for the interruption, Professor," the Mediwizard said. "Urgent communiqué for Miss Granger from the Ministry."

Hermione frowned. The Mediwizard offered a tiny rolled-up scroll that had clearly arrived by owl.

In a scornful drawl Blaise Zabini said, "Don't tell me. A nest of Glumbumbles has appeared in the level one records vault and only Saint Hermione can save the day."

Silence. Zabini looked around at his fellow ex-Slytherins, annoyed.

Draco said, "Dear Hermione. I'm writing to you from my shitty job at Excuses, so you get this note this afternoon and feel important in front of the class. Hope things are well. Love Hermione."

Bulstrode cackled. Even Nott smirked. Zabini looked even more annoyed.

Hermione turned her back on them, busy unwrapping the letter. Once unscrolled, the parchment expanded thanks to its own integral charm. She scanned the words:

'Miss Granger,
Please attend the offices of the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee once your afternoon's classes are concluded.
Balthazar Arnold'

She folded up the parchment and tucked it away, then nodded her thanks to the Mediwizard.

"Is there a reply?" he asked. "Only the covering note said 'urgent'."

"No, thank you," Hermione replied. She was beginning to feel embarrassed as the eyes of the entire class were upon her. "I appreciate your time." The Mediwizard nodded and turned to leave.

Draco said, "Aw, aren't you going to give him an owl-treat, Granger?" The poor Mediwizard's ears went red as he hurried for the door.

Riled into a response, Hermione said, "Insult the man if you want, Draco, but next time you burn yourself on a cauldron that might be the medical professional seeing to your injury."

Draco drew breath to fire back, then thought better. The door closed quietly behind the Mediwizard.

Snape said, "Is your vaunted presence required elsewhere, Miss Granger?"

"Not at the moment, Professor," she replied as neutrally as she could.

"Then perhaps we can continue without further disruption. Mr Boot was asking about the figure-of-eight stirring pattern." He shot her an annoyed glare and then turned back, with a swish of his coat, to the other side of the laboratory.

She gritted her teeth. It wasn't her fault Mr Arnold had sent her a note! She wondered what this evening's meeting was going to be about.

The tutorial settled again. The discussion became interesting and Hermione set her essay notes
aside in order to participate.

And then there came another rap at the door.

This time everybody stopped, glanced at the door, then turned to look accusingly at Hermione.

Severus Snape, as it turned out, was perfectly capable of expressing the phrase, 'What the fuck?'
through the medium of a glare.

The door opened without invitation. It was Healer Montague. Hermione's heart sank; she'd been
hoping very much that this second intrusion would have nothing to do with her.

"Might I borrow Miss Granger for a moment?" Gloria Montague asked Snape.

"You'll have to ask her yourself," he grumbled in return. "She appears to be in high demand
today."

Hermione stood up. She almost asked permission to be excused; such was the protocol for leaving
a lesson at Hogwarts. Instead she offered a simple, "Excuse me a moment, Professor." She walked
to the doorway and stepped through with Gloria.

"Am I sensing some tension?" the Healer asked, when the door was closed and they enjoyed some
privacy.

"Oh, it's just...it's nothing. I got a note from my boss at the Ministry half an hour ago. Now you've
dropped by. My classmates probably think I'm trying to make myself look important, and the
Professor is cross that his tutorial has now been interrupted twice."

"Ah. Sorry. I'll make it quick." Gloria glanced around at the corridor and then said, in a lower
tone of voice, "Joseph and I had lunch today. We always do on a Wednesday. He admitted that
there's been a further theft. Monday evening, he thinks it was – you remember he decided to stay
late and keep an eye out?"

"I remember."

"He didn't see anything untoward while he was there," Gloria explained. "But he did the rounds of
all the habitats he could, to make sure nothing else had happened that he'd overlooked. Several
ashgrass patches were due for harvest this week, he told me. Only when he looked at them on
Monday evening, four of them had already been stripped of seed-heads."

"He's sure it happened on Monday evening?"

"He'd examined the plants that very afternoon and they were intact."

"Did he ask his colleagues about it?"

"He did. Casually. As in, 'Thanks for taking care of those plants, but I had it on my to-do list.' No
one has claimed responsibility."

"So he's thinking – another theft."

"What else can he think, given the context?"

Hermione sighed. Once again, an apparent theft on the long-term storage level had happened on
the same day as a Potions class at the hospital. "Wand activity on the level?"

"Does not, alas, rule out anyone we have already ruled-in."
She grimaced. "Damn it."

"Indeed." Gloria sighed. "Just wanted to let you know, anyway. In case knowing the extra ingredient helps pin down the elusive recipe. If there's a recipe."

"I have a few lines of enquiry underway," Hermione said. Mr Everswain's treatise, procured from the Knockturn bookshop, had proved interesting, as much for the penned notes in its margins as the text itself. She intended to visit the Hogwarts library on Saturday morning, when most of the students would be in Hogsmeade. "I'll pop round at the weekend, if you like – we can have a review."

"Make it Saturday evening, if you're free. William will be out at his pub-quiz, so the house will be quiet. Will you have some supper with me?"

"I'd be delighted."

The Healer smiled, patted Hermione on the arm, then rapped briskly at the door again and stuck her head inside. "Apologies for the intrusion, Professor," she called. "I think you'll agree that your student's medical care is of importance, though." With that blatant lie, Healer Montague ushered Hermione back into the class and then closed the door.

Hermione returned to her seat. Zabini said, "Have they finally discovered a healing charm powerful enough to shrink your inflated ego, Granger?" and looked around, expecting smirks. He was not happy with the way everyone, Hermione included, ignored him.

Michael said quietly, as she passed his desk, "You okay, Hermione?"

"Fine," she assured him, hating the heat in her cheeks. "Old injury. Just a change of appointment."

She sat back down and looked over at Snape, expecting another glare. None was forthcoming. For a moment, as he studied her without expression, she wondered whether she was witnessing Severus Snape offering some concern.

Hermione willed the tutorial to start up again around her, which – thankfully – it did. It struck her that in the last week her life had become extremely busy and not a little bit complicated.

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"May I present Dane Booth," said Balthazar Arnold, gesturing to the wizard who stood at his side. He was maybe thirty, with dark wavy hair and pale blue eyes, dressed in a Muggle-style business suit made interesting with a rather nice claret-coloured shirt.

"Hello there," Hermione said.

"Dane grew up as Muggle as they come," Arnold went on. "Unfortunately he did so in New Zealand–"

"Hey!" complained Booth.

"Now, now, I mean no disrespect to your fair homeland," Arnold swiftly put in. "I merely mean that the magical education system is rather lacking in the antipodes. Besides the school in Australia. Um – Parrathingie."

"Parramatta," Hermione said, remembering an aborted interview at that school on what had turned out to be one of the worst days she'd had in her life. She turned to Booth. "You weren't schooled
"magically?"

"Not till I was fourteen. That was when my parents stopped pretending there was nothing weird going on with me. Fortunately my Great Aunt on my mother's side also has magic. She got wind of what was happening, flew us over here on the pretext of her seventieth birthday celebrations. Took me aside, figured me out in three seconds flat and then set me up with some private tutors. Two years later I was up-to-speed enough to finish my education at Beauxbatons."

"Not Hogwarts?"

"Hogwarts only takes registered witches and wizards, as they appear in that big book of theirs. Wouldn't recognise me. Auntie knew Madame Maxime, though, so I had an 'in' there."

"The reason," Mr Arnold said pointedly, breaking in to the conversation, "why I have asked Dane here this evening is because, as a teenager, he developed something of a stage magician's act."

Hermione raised a brow at Booth. "As a teenager? Very enterprising."

Booth grinned. "It's easy to look impressive as a stage conjurer when you can cast actual spells."

"Where did you perform?"

"Cardiff, mainly, where my Aunt lives. Pubs and clubs. I was, what, fifteen? So I used a glamour to up my age a few years. Soon got some regular gigs. Remember the Great Soprendo?"

"Vaguely."

"I...was the 'Great Dane'."

"Of course you were," she said with a chuckle.

"Hey, don't knock it. Earned a nice amount of pocket money. Kept me in eyeliner, hair-spray and frilly shirts."

"Ah. The eighties?"

"What gave it away?"

Hermione smiled at Dane Booth, whose easy amiability was like a breath of fresh air after a fraught few days.

Mr Arnold said, "Such youthful indiscretions are now well behind Dane, of course–"

"Indiscretions?" Hermione put in.

"Ah, yeah," Dane said. "I got found out. Ministry wasn't impressed." He gave a shrug. "Went a bit too far with a disappear-the-audience-member trick, one night. Couldn't reverse the Disillusionment in good time. Improper Use called in Excuses, and big BA here went to bat for me." Dane clapped Mr Arnold on the arm. "Got me off the hook. Owe him bigtime."

"We all do foolish things when we are young," Arnold said with a rueful smile. "The point is, given Dane's history we seem to have ourselves a candidate with the relevant skills."

Hermione nodded. "You've been advised of what we need?" she asked Booth.

"Yep. Good call. We can pull this off."
"Excellent, excellent," said Arnold. "Now the reason I wanted you involved, Miss Granger, is because you have more of an insight into the workings of Muggle culture than most of us on the committee, and Dane here will need someone to help him work up his, er, 'act'. I thought you might be willing to be Dane's liaison."

And wasn't that just perfect? Hermione swallowed a weary sigh. She had four (maybe five) NEWTs on the go, an entire research project involving dark texts and the theft of potions ingredients, and a part-time job. The last thing she needed was a load of overtime spent coaching a fake conjurer. She was, on the other hand, very new at a job many thought she did not deserve. And the fake-conjurer idea had been hers in the first place. It seemed rude to hand-wave it all off on to someone else.

"The first thing we'll need is a copy of the footage from the hotel security cameras," she said. "We need to match Dane's appearance and his act to the things this reporter witnessed. Ideally, if we had access to our witness's actual memories as well, we'd get an even clearer picture."

"Just so, just so," Arnold agreed. "Madam Churlish is on her way back here with both those items. I've requisitioned the portable Pensieve from MLE – it's all set up in my office." He untucked a large silver pocket watch from his waistcoat and studied the face. "She should be here any moment."

Hermione looked at Booth. "We're going to need to get you an outfit. With a cloak and hood that match the man at the hotel."

"I'm a wizard," Booth said. "Cloaks are standard outer-wear. You think this silvery-light thing might have been a Patronus?"

"Possibly," Hermione replied. "Hope so, given the whole pure-of-heart thing a Patronus demands – at least we'd be sure we aren't dealing with a stray Death Eater. Actually I was wondering whether we could get a clearer look at the charm on the footage. If it is a Patronus then the shape of it could give us a clue as to the caster."

"Right. Well, we're going to need a different charm for me, I'm afraid. Never mastered the Patronus. And not 'cause I'm a Death Eater, by the way. Just not very accomplished with the wand-wiggling. Late-starter, you see."

"We'll figure something out," Hermione assured him.

At that moment the door to the offices was flung open. Jasmine Churlish strode in, followed by a stern-of-face Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"Acting Minister," Arnold said. "This is a surp..." He gave up on stating the obvious and moved on to more salient questions. "Has something happened?"

Churlish glanced tiredly at Shacklebolt, then handed off a CD-ROM to Hermione. "All the footage is on this, er, item," she said. "I take it you have the means to activate it?" Hermione nodded assent. "Against my better judgement, it has been decided that we need an informed Muggle-born viewpoint, and we need it quickly. The Minister..." Churlish and Shacklebolt glanced at each other. She looked annoyed; he looked determined. "The Minister tells me you're intelligent and trustworthy."

Hermione said, "Oh. Um, well, I'll certainly do what I can."

Shacklebolt paused only long enough to give her a supportive smile, though it was gone as soon as
it arrived. Then he said, "Matters have escalated. Madam Churlish and a member of our Obliviator squad were dispatched to a flat in Lewisham this evening to deal with the Muggle woman who claimed to have been assaulted. Her memories were to be altered in line with the plan – the one I believe you were instrumental in conceiving, Miss Granger."

"I'm just part of a team," Hermione mumbled.

"Of course. Unfortunately, the plan has now changed." Shacklebolt pinched at the bridge of his nose. "The woman was already dead at her property when Madam Churlish got there. The Aurors were called in. The body was inspected. Large quantities of alcohol and traces of baneberry."

"Oh, lord, she was poisoned?" Hermione said.

"Looks like. The Auror's time-stamped *Specialis Revelio* informed us that an *Imperius* curse had been cast there in the last twenty-four hours."

Hermione nodded. An *Imperius* would explain how the murderer got the poor woman to drink something as unpleasant as baneberry poison, even if she was three sheets to the wind beforehand. "She'll have died of heart failure. The baneberry extract will break down in her stomach to look no more suspicious to a Muggle pathologist than cranberry juice."

"That's something, I suppose," said Arnold, perhaps focused on the Muggle-worthy excuse viewpoint.

"Not helpful to the victim, though," Hermione said, as gently as she could.

"Nothing could be done to help her," Churlish said. "She'd been dead for at least twelve hours. But Mr Arnold is right – this will look like an accidental death to the Muggles. A misadventure with too much vodka."

"It does not look like that to us, though. We've opened a murder investigation," Shacklebolt said. Churlish frowned and looked down at the floor. Hermione suspected that this was the difference of opinion that she and Shacklebolt were having.

Arnold blinked his surprise. "A murder enquiry? For a Muggle?"

"Indeed. Murder is murder," Shacklebolt said. "I'm surprised I need to argue that point with you, Balthazar."

"Oh, you don't, of course you don't," Arnold said. "It's just...well, I can't remember it happening before."

"It hasn't," Churlish offered. Rather pointedly. "But my under-staffed and under-resourced team is, of course, delighted to expand our jurisdiction to include sixty million more people."

"Jasmine," Shacklebolt said gently. He met her challenging look. "You will be supplied with replacement officers as soon as they are trained. Would you prefer to keep the ones who disgraced themselves during the war?"

Churlish sighed, and conceded. "Of course not." She gave the Minister a resigned nod. "We'll manage."

"Surely there's always been some overlap between the magical and the Muggle, when it comes to criminal investigations," Hermione said. "Harry got pulled in front of the Wizengamot for hexing
his horrid auntie."

"That was because some people wanted to harm Harry, not because they wanted to protect Muggles," Shacklebolt said. "Jasmine is right. The Ministry has never been very good at acknowledging the damage that spills out into the Muggle world. It isn't set up to deal with such things. I know it is asking a lot, but I think it's time that changed. Does anyone here disagree?"

He looked around at the gathered group. Nobody said anything. "Good. Madam Churlish will be the lead officer in this investigation, though I wish to be kept informed of progress. It isn't so long ago that Death Eaters were murdering Muggles for sport. I'm concerned there is a link."

"Another dark wizard?" Hermione asked in a small voice.

"Any wizard capable of casting an Unforgivable and murdering a Muggle is, by their nature, dark," Churlish argued.

"Not everyone agrees with you on that," Hermione replied. She tried to ignore the churning sense of dread prompted by the idea that she had not, in fact, seen the last of the Death Eaters. "Actually, large sections of the magical population view Muggles as a lesser species."

"Change takes time," Shacklebolt said. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't strive to achieve it. Meantime – a murder investigation means confidentiality. All who know of the incident at the Savoy must be advised of this." He glanced at Churlish and she nodded abrupt approval. "This includes your people, Balthazar. I do not need this to turn into a debate on whether crimes against Muggles are worth investigating. Discretion, please, for the time being."

Balthazar Arnold nodded. "Of course. And my department will assist however we can."

Churlish said, "Unfortunately we no longer have access to the best source of evidence – the witness's memories."

"Might that have been the point of the murder?" Hermione suggested.

"I'd say so," Shacklebolt agreed. "Working theory is that whoever cast those spells at the hotel found out about the police report. He decided to tie up what he thought was the only loose end."

"It makes sense," Churlish said. "If we hadn't already brought the Savoy business to the Muggle-Worthy Excuse office then this murder might have escaped our notice."

"Quite so. But this is no longer an issue of some wizard failing to maintain the Secrecy Statute. We're hunting a magical killer." Shacklebolt drew himself up. "I want him found, I want him brought to justice, and I want the press reporting the outcome with a sense of outrage that, so soon after the war, a wizard could commit such a despicable crime. Even against a 'mere' Muggle."

Kingsley Shacklebolt might have been the acting Minister for Magic, but he'd developed quite the statesmanlike demeanour since his promotion.

"Speaking of the press – Quentin Bittercup?" Hermione prompted.

"Is in custody," Madam Churlish provided. "Pending a warrant for Veritaserum. I shall be conducting his interrogation myself." She shot a more amused look at Shacklebolt. "With, of course, two other officers present to ensure a fair and unbiased procedure."

Shacklebolt offered a nod and a tight smile.

"Um." Dane Booth still stood to one side and looked less than confident. "Don't want to intrude
on all this high-powered important stuff, but – you guys still need me to do my Great Soprendo tribute act?"

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At home that evening, Harry caught up with her when she was halfway up the stairs.

"You're late. Thought I'd have to head out without you," he said with a hint of rebuke.

"Um..."

"It's Wednesday," he informed her, as if she was being a bit slow.

"Oh!" she realised. "Curry night. God, are we that far through the week already?"

"Yup. I'm meeting Ron at seven, so you can either come straight out with me or we'll meet you there. Order you a lassi?"

Hermione thought about the prospect of a lengthy evening with her two best friends as they all shared a curry: something that had become their weekly Wednesday ritual. Harry was bound to ask her about the two nights of research she'd been doing, especially since she'd dodged all his questions. And with Ron there too, ready to grab on to a mystery: the two of them would gang up and bully it out of her in no time at all. She couldn't risk it.

So it was just as well she had a really good excuse. "Actually, I'll have to give it a miss tonight," she said. "Got something on. Need to head over to Banstead."

She turned and ran up the rest of the stairs.

"But it's curry night," Harry said behind her, disappointment in every syllable.

She held up a hand to wave, but she didn't look back. "Have fun! Don't eat too much!"

The front door slammed as he left. Hermione tried not to take it too personally. There was only so much of herself that she could spread around, after all.

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Control, or Lack Thereof

"Do not meddle in the affairs of Wizards, for they are subtle and quick to anger."


Hermione went straight in to see Mr Arnold when she arrived at the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee offices the next morning. She'd spent most of the previous evening at her parent's house, where she could use their PC and examine the camera footage from the hotel without risk to disk or device from nearby magic. Knowing that she might well be analysing the behaviour of a killer had made the exercise an onerous one. It had taken her until well after ten o'clock to examine the footage second by second, and a further hour to transcribe her notes into a sensible report.

Even so, she'd managed to get to bed only a little after midnight and had enjoyed a pretty solid six hours of sleep, so she felt more alert than she had in the last two days.

"Morning, Miss Granger," Arnold greeted her.

"Mr Arnold," she replied as she closed the door. She stepped up to the desk. "I've made three copies of my report. I've already dropped off the first on level two for the attention of Madam Churlish, but I've copied in you and Acting Minister Shacklebolt. I hope you don't mind – it's printed on A4. It was more efficient to prepare that way than using quill and parchment and a duplication spell."

"A...4?"

"Standard Muggle paper size." Hermione set Arnold's copy of the report before him, sheathed in a tidy plastic wallet. "I realise this matter is now in the hands of Magical Law Enforcement, but they may still want to use Dane – he remains the best excuse we've got for the footage that has been witnessed."

"Indeed he is," Arnold agreed, while looking curiously at the wallet and report. "Madam Churlish contacted me only ten minutes ago to say that the dead woman's body has been discovered by the Muggle authorities – someone raised the alarm after she was incommunicado yesterday. Their initial assessment, as we suspected, is of self-inflicted alcohol poisoning. Madam Churlish has organised a couple of discreet memory charms on the woman's closest colleagues. They'll testify that she had an enthusiastic relationship with alcohol. This will, of course, play into our narrative of what happened at the Savoy – a stage magician's act being wildly misinterpreted by a less-than-coherent drunk."

Hermione nodded, though she felt uncomfortable. It didn't seem right that in order to protect the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy a murder victim's memory was being tainted.

Arnold looked up at her, blinked, then smiled a sad smile. "I know, Miss Granger, I know. Ruthless, the work we do, sometimes."

Hermione frowned and cleared her throat, mainly as an excuse to look away. "I, er, I didn't mean...sorry." She shrugged helplessly. "I've never been very good at keeping my thoughts to myself."
"If it makes you feel better, the vodka used in the murder was already in the flat in Lewisham when
the killer arrived. There were recent shopping receipts. It's all apparently in the Muggle police
report. Likelihood is that this poor woman did rely on alcohol more than was sensible."

"Even so," Hermione said.

"As you say."

"Did Madam Churlish tell you how the interview with Quentin Bittercup went? The one with
Veritaserum?"

"Only to let me know that Bittercup has been released with a warning. Turns out he was telling the
truth when he said he was not the cloaked figure the Muggle woman saw. But he had omitted to
mention that when he left the hotel and realised she was following, he threw a clumsy Obliviate.
Claimed he was trying to do just enough to make her stop and wonder what she'd come outside for,
but he isn't the most proficient of casters. Memory spells should always be left to the experts."

"Of course." Hermione gave an understanding nod, though she privately wished people would stop
mentioning this. "Explains why the woman was already disoriented when the other wizard showed
up, though."

"It does." Arnold slid the report from the wallet and perched a pair of enchanted pince-nez on his
nose to look down at it. "Thank you for this. Your efficiency does you credit, Miss Granger. I
shall let you know the moment we're given the – how do the Muggles put it? – the 'green light', or
otherwise, on Dane's involvement."

"Yes, sir." She turned to leave, then turned back. "Oh! I had a couple of extra thoughts this
morning. Too late to put them in the report. It occurred to me – you see, the wizard in the footage
had prepared Polyjuice and an outfit to make him look like one of the waiters working at the
charity event."

"Oh? How so?"

"The wizard wore a white bow tie with his tuxedo. But the photograph in the Prophet on Monday
showed Mr Richmond wearing a black tie. Formal events like that are usually stipulated as black-
tie. White-tie events are quite rare. So in context, a white-tie tux would indicate serving staff. It's
the way they, you know, differentiate. So you don't ask the wrong person for a refill."

"Is that so?" Mr Arnold shook his head incredulously. "What a complicated and absurd world the
Muggles occupy."

"When it comes to high society etiquette, I can't argue with that. But you see – this might be an
avenue worthy of investigation. The wizard deliberately made himself look like a waiter. We've
been so focused on explaining away the reporter's testimony – that took priority, of course it did.
But the wizard clearly had some kind of intention to infiltrate the ball itself."

Arnold frowned. "That would seem logical. However, this is rather beyond our office's remit."

"It's just a thought, sir." She leaned over the desk as she tried to convey her certainty. "But the
thing is – if we knew what he was trying to do, it might help us identify him."

Arnold sat back in his chair. "I'm sure, if they deem it necessary, Madam Churlish's team will
come up with a way to look into this."

"Of course. I mean, yes, I'm sure they will. I've thought of some myself." Hermione stood
straight and counted the options off on her fingers. "One – hotel security. The wizard did not anticipate the cameras outside in the back lanes, so maybe he won't have anticipated the ones inside, either. The footage from those will be clearer thanks to the better lighting. Two – the Polyjuice. We could try to identify this blond man whose face was borrowed. I printed out the clearest image of him that the footage offers us; it's in the report. Now he **must** be a regular working at the Savoy – hotels like that don't bring in people they haven't already vetted, not for high-profile events. The man was probably paid off or incapacitated in some way last weekend to make way for our interloper, but he must have had some contact with the wizard in order for his hair to be procured for the Polyjuice potion. If we could find him and examine his memories, that might give us a clue. Three – witnesses at the ball itself. I know virtually all of them are Muggle, but there happened to be at least one witch present. I also think it logical to assume that whatever the disguised wizard wanted to do, it probably has something to do with the witch who was there. So I think Jossinia Trelore should be interviewed, perhaps her memories examined in case she saw the interloper do something without even realising what she'd seen. Four–"

"I think that's enough, Miss Granger," Arnold said sharply. His expression softened as Hermione drew back in surprise. "These all seem reasonable ideas, but they are less than relevant to Muggle-Worthy Excuses. Are you sure you should be working in my office? It would seem your talents lie closer to those of your friends Mr Potter and Mr Weasley."

"I'm not Auror material," she said with an embarrassed laugh. "I'm quite good at thinking about things, but in the heat of the moment I get flustered. That's rather bad, for law enforcement."

"I suppose it would be, yes." Her boss studied her a moment, then gave a big sigh. "Look, if the opportunity arises I shall pass on those thoughts to Madam Churlish. Like you say, however – this matter is now in law enforcement's hands." Arnold sat back and shuffled the papers of Hermione's report. "Thank you for this. That's all for now."

Hermione nodded at the dismissal and turned to leave. She tried not to prickle with the sense of leaving a job half-finished; she had, after all, done everything she'd been asked to do. Unfortunately, the pricking wouldn't go away.

It occurred to her that in the last year she had become far too used to being the person at the helm. She'd decided what to do about her parents' vulnerability to Death Eater aggression; she'd made the arrangements for keeping herself and Harry and Ron safe while on the run; she'd translated Beedle's tales from their Ancient Runes; she'd directed most of their efforts as they tried to find a way to bring down Voldemort.

Now she was back to living under the authority and instruction of superiors: teachers, managers, even – to an extent – parents. It rankled. To be a single cog in someone else's machine seemed restrictive. Hermione felt hamstrung.

Six months ago she'd ached for the day when the burden of responsibility would no longer fall on her shoulders. It seemed she'd deluded herself. She liked being the one in control.

She sat down at her desk and nodded at Lysander, who'd just arrived.

"How's things?" he asked as he shrugged off his outer robe to reveal a waistcoat of swirling crimson and saffron.

Hermione smiled across at him and gave a self-deprecating sigh. "It turns out," she said, "that I really **am** an overbearing, bossy little know-it-all."

"Oh, dearheart, I could have told you that," he said. "Wouldn't have you any other way. Coffee?"
After lunch, Hermione Floo'ed to St Mungo's and her Thursday Potions class, determined that today's brew would earn her better than Monday's Subpar. To her surprise, she came across Draco waiting in the stairwell. Waiting, apparently, for her.

"Granger," he said, eyes darting about, sensitive to the potential for eavesdroppers. "I need a favour."

He wanted her to play nice, after mocking her during yesterday's tutorial? "Is that so?" she said, unimpressed. "What was it? 'Dear Hermione, blah blah blah, love Hermione'?"

"Oh, come on. That was a joke. Quite a good one, actually. And would it really be better if I stuck up for you in class?"

He was right. This mutual-support thing they'd established was only useful so long as the rest of the Slytherins didn't anticipate it.

Hermione nodded her agreement. "All right, then. How can I help?"

Draco's eyebrows lifted at that; maybe he'd been expecting more resistance, or at least a negotiation. "The counter-spell to *Accio* – the one you mentioned to Snape last week during Flameaway. I need it."

Hermione narrowed her eyes as she thought back to Monday's Aqua Sedatis lesson. She'd been so caught up in her mistaken reaction to the *Prophet*'s front page, not to mention the sloppy way her brewing had gone, that she hadn't paid much attention to the rest of the class. Now she thought about it, however, she recalled that Draco had needed to ask for additional ingredient supplies and an item of equipment.

"Ah. I take it Blaise wasn't impressed with your reaction to the story about his mother," she said.

"He wasn't *impressed* with the way that story made our housemates distance themselves from him and look to another natural leader," Draco corrected, drawing himself up, narrow shoulders pulled back, looking at the whole world down the end of his nose.

She rolled her eyes at Draco. "Yeah, yeah, congratulations, you have minions again. You must be proud."

He glared at her for a moment, then his shoulders relaxed and he managed a wry smile. "It is all a bit ridiculous, isn't it?"

"Ridiculous is the word." Hermione nodded. "Okay, the counter-charm you need is in Dingle's *Charm Mechanics*. Chapter three, if I remember correctly."

"And that would be useful information if we were sitting in a library and I had half an hour in hand," Draco grumbled.

Hermione hid a smile. She'd garnered more of an appreciation for well-formed sarcasm these days, but Draco didn't need to know that. "I tend to cast it wandlessly," she said.

"Works for me," he replied, curt of tone.

Of course, she wasn't supposed to be aware of the surreptitious way Draco surrendered his wand to Snape for every lesson that didn't require the casting of a charm. Hermione nodded and moved to
stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Draco. She raised her right hand and took up a pre-casting form.

Draco copied her, watching carefully. She placed her left hand over her casting hand and said, clearly, "Mea Solum." The spell did not fire because of her left hand's position.

Draco repeated the charm, copying her emphasis on the first syllables. Then, conversationally, he translated, "'Mine alone'? Wonder if it works on intangibles. You know? Thoughts? Personal space? Free time?"

"It's a lovely notion, but alas, just material things. Ready?"

She taught him the wandless hand shape, then explained as succinctly as she could how to apply the charm to more than one item at once. Draco, not being dull of wit, caught on quickly. It took less than thirty seconds, all told.

"Annoying, isn't it?" she said as she picked up her bag again. "Getting your stuff Accio'ed when you're in the middle of a complex brew."

Draco grimaced and said, "S'pose it is. Drove me mad for a while, back in Hogwarts, when the charm stopped working – trying to figure out how you'd beaten it." He shot her a look. "It was only a bit of fun. Back then, I mean."

"Oh, fun, yes. Those hilarious projectiles of lobalug venom? Always a laugh."

"Yes, all right, fine. I was a little shit. What do you want, chocolates and flowers?"

There was a pause, as they both noticed the inadvertent connotations of courtship. When Hermione let a snigger escape, Draco laughed too: not without a certain tinge of relief.

She shook her head. "I think that would be very weird. Don't you?"

His mouth twitched. "Wouldn't it freak people out, though? Especially your two best mates."

"That it would. And it would thoroughly appall your parents."

Draco's humour disappeared. "Yeah. Don't worry, anyway. Think I'm being lined up with a Yaxley. Like that's a name that will kill the Malfoy-taint."

Hermione gave an involuntary flinch and looked down at her feet. "Yes, well, there's a reason I prefer to call you 'Draco' these days."

"Oh? Thought that was just a power play."

"It was that, too. But the word 'Malfoy' isn't an entirely comfortable one for me, so...you know."

"Yeah."

An awkward pause.

"This Yaxley. You can always make your own choice, you know," she pointed out.

"Not if I want my inheritance," Draco muttered.

"Oh, knickers to that. You're intelligent, you're articulate and there's still a fair few people out there who'd like to gain your allegiance. You could make your own money without breaking a sweat."
"There's a difference between enough money to live on and twenty-four generations of accumulated pure-blood wealth."

Hermione shrugged a shoulder. "So there's your choice. Freedom or obscene riches." She walked down a few steps, remembering the words Snape had said to Draco on their very first morning at St Mungo's:

"... Harry Potter did you an enormous service, Mr Malfoy – because of him, you have the freedom to work out where your loyalties lie. Perhaps for the first time in your life."

They seemed to be revisiting those themes right now, so she added, "Think of it, though. Maybe this could be the start of your choices being 'Mine Alone' too." It seemed like a good note to end this unexpected conversation on, so she continued walking downstairs.

"Granger," Draco called after her. "Um – thanks. For the favour. I owe you."

Hermione looked back. "Not for this, you don't." She didn't add that the whole *quid pro quo* thing had already become tiresome; Draco wouldn't get his head around that idea, poor sod.

She left him on the stairwell and went to wait by the laboratory door.

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"Ashgrass," Professor Snape informed his Lost Seventh class, "is a useful plant." He held up a seed-head and plucked, with dextrous fingers, a single seed. He squeezed it, thumb to finger, then held it to his nose. "A distinctive odour of copper and brine, ever so slightly sulphurous."

Ashgrass. The same plant that had been stolen earlier in the week, according to Gloria Montague's son. And it was not a plant Hermione had anticipated using in her brewing today.

What the hell was going on?

"You'll get the scent only in the freshest seeds, however," Snape lectured, oblivious to Hermione's racing thoughts. "Dried ashgrass seeds lack the potency of their freshly harvested counterparts."

Hermione tried to pay attention, though her confusion was distracting. Was the presence of ashgrass here, today, indication that Snape had indeed 'stolen' the seed-heads Gloria's son had noticed were missing? Only it wasn't a 'theft' at all, merely a misunderstanding?

Theo said, 'How fresh is 'fresh', Professor?"

"The fresher the better. My understanding is that these were harvested earlier this week."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at Snape's response. It seemed, to her, a careful, perhaps even a deliberately vague, choice of words.

Two possibilities, then. Either the seeds they would be using today were from the plants Joseph Montague had discovered stripped of their seed-heads, or they were from plants Joseph had harvested himself. Snape could, of course, be prevaricating with his language to disguise the way he'd harvested the seeds. But why would Snape have stolen ashgrass seed-heads for a NEWT lesson when such things were already being freely provided by the hospital? That didn't make sense at all.

She tried to reduce the problem to its facts. Someone had stolen seed-heads from ashgrass plants on the long-term storage level. They had done so – as it turned out – during the same week Snape
had unexpectedly introduced the ingredient into a lesson. A coincidence of timing seemed unlikely; Snape must have something to do with this.

Had he timed it like this so he had a potential excuse, if challenged? Perhaps he'd procured the stolen seeds for himself and then come up with a reasonable explanation why he might have harvested some? Except, if he'd stolen some and asked for some legitimately, all in the same week, the theft would more likely be noticed--

Hermione stopped her thoughts in their tracks, startled and dismayed to realise that she had begun to cast Snape as a possible culprit.

"Yes, but the idea's been taking hold since you realised that snagberries could be used to magically regenerate damaged flesh," her mind treacherously pointed out. "You've been wondering about Roksana Bramble's burns from the Netch-Rocksalt accident, haven't you?"

"So a few days won't make the quality deteriorate?" Theo was asking.

"Ideally you want to use seeds that were collected no more than a week ago. Seal them in an air-tight jar and they will keep at least that long." Snape glanced up. "Is no one interested in the application of ashgrass seeds? Or why I'm introducing a new ingredient to today's recipe for Pain-Quell?" He waited, looking around at the class. "Miss Granger? Surely you are brimming with thoughts, at least."

Hermione was, indeed, brimming with thoughts, though not ones Snape would thank her for. With a degree of effort she mentally shifted her attitude from detective back to student.

"Nothing?" Snape pressed. "Oddly, I find myself nostalgic for the days you would attempt to teach my lessons for me."

The Slytherins sniggered at the barb. Hermione considered Snape's face and saw only his familiar flat, disdain-tinged expression. She gave a sigh, because even if she was not offended by the comment it would not do to let her fellow students at the rear of the laboratory know that.

Then she said, "Ashgrass seeds, ground fine and added along with the Potio Augere charm, will augment the properties of many potions."

Snape arched a brow at her, waiting for more. The Hermione Granger of two years ago would, by now, be well into a reeled-off list of examples. Today's Hermione sat attentively at her work station, waiting with patience for Snape's next pearl of wisdom. (And, hopefully, not betraying the way her mind was still trying to work out all the ways that Snape could have harvested ashgrass himself without committing any kind of infringement on the storage level.)

"That's it?" Snape prompted. "A concise and correct answer to my question? How times have changed!"

More sniggers. Hermione risked an eyebrow raised in Snape's direction. Snape spun away from her.

"Of course," Snape went on, "those of you who, like Miss Granger, have bothered to read more of Borage than the assigned chapters will know that combining ashgrass seeds with common potions is not straightforward. There is more to this process than the sprinkling of some powder and the casual wave of a wand." He twisted the seed-head in his hand, as if examining it closely. "If it were so, every standard potion on the market would be produced with ashgrass in its recipe. Why, after all, would you purchase a Cough Potion that lasts the usual four hours when you can purchase
one that lasts forty?"

He set down the seed-head and leaned back against the demonstration table, arms spread to grasp
the edge, the neat black-and-white symmetry of his form and posture disrupted only by the hint of
angry red inflammation at his neckline: Nagini’s cursed legacy.

"Ashgrass," Snape continued, "does not grow naturally in this country. Certain magical habitats
have been established in order to cultivate the plant, such as the greenhouses at Verdant Acres in
Chudley or, of course, the habitat in this hospital's long-term storage level. Ashgrass requires
volcanic soil. Most of the ashgrass you can buy at apothecaries here is, for this reason, imported in
its dried form – Britain not being overly blessed with recently active volcanoes. You should
consider yourselves privileged to be working with the fresh form of this ingredient."

He paused and looked at his students. Hermione didn't risk a glance over her shoulder, but she was
pretty sure that none of Snape's former Slytherins were looking all that impressed.

"There are other complications when using this technique," he went on. "The charm Miss Granger
referred, Potio Augere, is not easy to master. The seeds need to be prepared with great care, and
any coarseness to the grind will not only render the augmentation effect useless but will, in fact,
decrease your potion's effectiveness. The powder must be added within a very narrow window
during the brewing of a potion, and the stirring pattern must be timed meticulously. And finally?"

Snape stood up straight and crossed his arms. He looked at his class, student-by-student, stern and
unflinching. Annoyingly, Snape in this kind of mood still had the capability to make Hermione
shuffle in discomfort.

"Ashgrass," said Snape, "when ground as finely as required, becomes highly inflammable, even
explosive. More so than wheat flour, given its magical composition. When using ashgrass powder
in proximity to a naked flame, as the very nature of brewing requires, accidents have been known to
ensue." He paused. "Catastrophic accidents."

There was a pause. Hermione swallowed hard. She'd just worked out the cause of the disaster at
the Netch-Rocksalt brewing facility that had permanently scarred Roksana Bramble.

"To that end," Snape said, "I expect to see an inordinate amount of care being taken today. You
will prepare your ashgrass seeds in advance of lighting your flames. Once prepared, the powder
will be measured and transferred into the sealed containers provided. Any excess will be brought
to the front of the class and placed in the containment area I will set up on the demonstration table.
You will cast a Tergeo over your tidied work station to remove all traces of dust. At that point, and
only at that point, will you light the flame beneath your cauldron."

The procedure was simple and sensible enough, but Hermione took the trouble to list it in bullet
points on her topmost sheet of paper. It never hurt to have a checklist. Lists were good.

"Additionally," Snape said, "I am aware that in recent lessons there have been attempts made to
disrupt the work of others. Do you take me for a fool? Did you believe I would not notice?"
Hermione held herself still, but she could see that Snape was staring at Blaise Zabini. "Let me be
clear. I do not care to which Hogwarts House you formerly belonged – any attempts at sabotage
today could be potentially lethal. Indulge, and you will be finished with this course. No excuses.
No mitigating circumstances. No second chances. I trust I make myself understood."

He held Zabini's gaze a moment longer, then swished around to the blackboard and waved his
wand at it. "Pain-Quell. A mid-range pain neutraliser which, today, will be brewed as Grand
Pain-Quell. Any adequate brews will be donated to the hospital's store, as the potion is rare and
expensive."

At the side of the recipe reproduced on the blackboard was a list of the same bullet points Hermione had just noted down on her pad. She was not the only person in the room who appreciated the value of a checklist.

Snape gestured at the gathered ingredients at the front of the class. "Begin."

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Snape toured every single active work station during the hour or so his students worked on their ingredient preparation. He examined the progress and spent at least a few minutes ensuring the wandwork for the Potio Augere charm had been memorised correctly.

He began with Michael Corner, at the front of the laboratory opposite Hermione, then moved behind to Terry, then to Millicent Bulstrode – who seemed to need quite a bit of time to get the wandwork of the charm down pat – and then to Zabini. Hermione followed Snape's progress with half an ear, unwilling to turn around and watch.

At the back of the class, Snape crossed over to Theo Nott. They spoke in low voices, but no one else seemed to be paying attention. Hermione continued, methodically, to prepare her ingredients.

Ashgrass seeds did, indeed, have a unique fragrance. Not all that pleasant, but certainly interesting. She counted out the seeds she needed into her mortar after checking her equipment carefully for any contaminants. Then she began to grind with a rhythmic, practised motion.

Snape reached Draco. More murmurs. Hermione demanded of herself that she ignore the frisson of Snape's closeness. He might be a thief. (If he was, it would be for a noble reason; she needed to believe that.) But perhaps he was not a thief at all. Perhaps he was a patsy. Perhaps someone else had noticed Snape's request for ashgrass this week, and used that to time their own theft, knowing that if it was discovered then this would turn Severus Snape into Suspect Number One. One of the few things she could be sure of, after all, was that the thief was well-informed when it came to the ins-and-outs of the long-term storage level–

'Concentrate, idiot,' that voice in her mind put in. 'You can think this through later. For now, try not to blow up the Potions class.'

She stopped grinding and looked at the powder her seeds were becoming. A few stray pieces of kernel remained. She stretched her shoulders then began to grind again.

A low voice beside her said, "You appear to have done this before."

Her mouth wanted to twitch in a smile of welcome. The adrenaline in her system, meanwhile, tried to make her jump. Severus Snape remained a source of huge ambivalence.

"Only about a thousand times," she replied in the same low tone. "Just as well. The first time I tried to use a pestle and mortar, it was to grind Elfpeppercorns. I managed to trap my finger against the rim. Tore the cuticle. Bled into the pot. An open wound and Elfpepper doesn't go."

"So you really were a clumsy oaf."

"Still am, given half a chance. This one time at St Mungo's I was trying to save a friend from a Death Eater and I dropped my wand."

"Really," he murmured, flat, neutral, refusing to follow Hermione down memory lane.
She shrugged. "I try, though."

She wasn't looking at him. He was standing close, and it would be too easy to fall back into the hard-earned intimacy of their summer connection. He'd been clear about his rules for the duration of this course, however, and she wasn't going to push further at his boundaries. She'd done so once before, with almost disastrous consequences, and she'd told him months ago that she did not tend to make the same mistake twice.

"I did not mean the use of a mortar and pestle, though," Snape said, keeping his voice to a murmur. "I meant ashgrass. Your consistency is perfect now."

Hermione blinked, looked into her mortar and shook the powder gently to see whether any larger pieces were still apparent. "Ah. Good." She risked a brief glance. "Nope, never ground fresh ashgrass seeds before."

She took her readied container, wandlessly checked it for cleanliness then carefully spooned the required amount of powder into it. She sealed the container and looked at the residue in her mortar.

"Right then. Looks like I'm about ready for my safety checklist," she said. (Mainly because she couldn't say, 'I'm supposed to take this excess to the front of the class, and I'd love to squeeze past you to do so, but I'm rather afraid that groin-to-groin contact might compromise our student-teacher formality."

"Show me your wandwork," Snape said. "Slow motion, obviously – we don't want to fire the charm."

Hermione took up her wand and formed the pattern for *Potio Augere*.

"Hmm," Snape murmured. "You have definitely done that before."

"Once or twice. I used dried ashgrass to augment the Polyjuice when we snuck into Gringotts."

"Indeed. I must keep in mind that you are a felon."

Irrked, Hermione made eye contact. "Takes one to know one," she retorted, before she could think better of it.

Snape's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "And that means...?"

'That I'm scared I'm going to have to expose you as a well-intentioned thief and sully your rejuvenated reputation,' she wanted to say.

"That I'm not the only person in this conversation who has broken the law for the greater good," she said, as mildly as she could.

Snape gave a grunt, perhaps of acknowledgement, and leaned closer. "Your subtlety still needs work, Miss Granger. Don't fool yourself. Not for a moment."

Hermione frowned. "And that means...?"

"You remain able to parse a clear sentence spoken in English, I believe," Snape said. "I shall take care of your excess ashgrass powder. Please do not forget the, er, 'safety checklist'."

Then he was moving away, taking her mortar with him, leaving Hermione a touch bewildered.
Had she just been chastised? Warned?

Threatened?

She didn't have time to think about it for very long, because a smash and crash sounded behind her and Blaise Zabini said, in a very loud voice, "Seriously, Malfoy? This is a good time to exact some revenge, is it?"

She spun around and saw Zabini's work station covered in ground ashgrass seeds and broken glass. Powder hung in the air like mist, and Zabini had white dustings over his robe. His cauldron had fallen to the countertop and was rolling across the mess. And Zabini's cauldron stand – the metallic tripod which would sit over the flame once brewing began – had landed neatly in the middle of Draco's work station.

Two desks away, Terry said, "Shit!" and immediately dowsed the flame he had just lit. Fortunately he was the only one who had proceeded that far.

The class was shocked into silence for a moment after that.

Snape set down Hermione's mortar at the demonstration table. "All other flames are out?" he demanded, checking each work station. "Nobody lights their burner until I say." He walked over to Zabini, who was starting to mutter outraged accusations. "Quiet," he snapped. "Be still."

Snape used a complex combination of cleaning and siphoning spells to dust the dangerous powder from all surfaces and then sweep up the broken bits and ingredient residue into a tight, compact ball of detritus. It floated just in front of the tip of Snape's wand as he directed it to the back of the laboratory and the disposal hatch behind Theo's work station.

Zabini said, "You said it yourself, Professor. 'No excuses.' I demand that y--"

"I said quiet!" Snape thundered.

The echoes of his fury bounced off the many flat and polished surfaces of the room before they faded to silence. Nobody spoke. Nobody seemed to want to move, even enough to breathe. All was still and racked with tension as they waited to see what would happen.

Finished with the disposal, Snape turned back to the class. "Everybody, seal your exposed ingredients and cast an additional Tergeo. Now."

Hermione followed this instruction, as did everyone else. Snape stalked the centre of the laboratory between work stations, cleaning the tiled floor.

Draco, all this while, had shown the basic common sense to keep his mouth shut. The more Hermione thought about it, however, the more she realised that the incident with Zabini's cauldron stand had had nothing to do with Draco Malfoy; Draco was neither stupid nor angry enough to risk Snape's wrath.

There was only one other explanation: this was classic Slytherin misdirection. Instead of sabotaging another student's work, Zabini had changed up his modus operandi and made it look like someone had done the same thing to him.

When Snape had finished with the floor, he walked past her to the rear of the laboratory.

"He bloody Accio'ed my cauldron stand!" Zabini managed to spit out.
"Mr Zabini, the next time I hear your voice, the words will either come at my invitation or they will be the last ones you speak as my student." Snape's voice was calm again following that brief moment of rage. While the volume and aggression had been startling, this particular brand of Snape-calmness was somehow more ominous.

"B–" Zabini, sensibly, noticed the cold fury in Snape's eyes and decided against another syllable.

"Mr Malfoy," Snape said. "Did you Accio Mr Zabini's cauldron stand?"

"No, sir," Draco said with admirable poise.

Zabini shuddered with the effort it took to keep a barked, 'Well he would say that, wouldn't he!' inside.

"Then how do you account for its presence on your worktop?" Snape pressed.

"I cannot," Draco said. "I can only theorise."

"Then theorise."

Draco said, "Last week Zabini levitated a pestle at Granger's work station when he realised he couldn't Accio her kit. On Monday he Accio'ed a number of items from my work station to try to disrupt my brewing. I'd theorise that today he levitated his cauldron stand at me, probably using Mobiliferrus, to make it look like I'd tried to sabotage his prep in retaliation."

Snape grunted. He spun back around to Zabini, whose eyes were actually bulging with the need to keep the counter-accusations inside. Blaise Zabini was not used to being gainsaid.

"Mr Zabini," Snape asked, "did you levitate your cauldron stand at Mr Malfoy?"

"Of course not!" Zabini said. "Why would I?"

"Since we are theorising? Because I have advised you all that any further attempt to disrupt a classmate's work would see the troublemaker expelled. Your demeanour towards Mr Malfoy has been less than collegial this week."

"You said this stuff was dangerous. I'm not an idiot!" Zabini said.

"That remains to be seen." Snape scrutinised both of his students, even as the rest of the class looked on nervously. "Fortunately," he said, "this can be resolved."

"It's my word against his!" Zabini said. "Just because his father was a fellow D–"

"Mr Zabini, I did not invite you to speak further. I should have made that plain. Until this matter is resolved you will speak only when I address you. Do not feel singled out – that goes for everyone in this classroom."

A pause. Snape brandished his wand and moved over to Draco's work station. "Your wand, Mr Malfoy." Draco handed over his wand with no fuss. Snape set it down on a clear bit of countertop and then used his own wand to cast the simple charm which would reveal the wand's last spell. "Apparition," Snape deduced. "This wand has not been used since Mr Malfoy arrived at the hospital."

Zabini made a strained noise that didn't quite turn into a word.

Snape ignored him. "Of course, a simple charm like Accio could be cast wandlessly." He turned
abruptly and went to Zabini's work station. "Your wand, Mr Zabini."

Zabini looked, for a moment, smug and relieved: enough to inform Hermione that Zabini's Mobiliferrus had been cast wandlessly as well. Snape repeated the charm on Zabini's wand. "Ah. Potio Augere. And yet you have not begun your brewing, Mr Zabini."

Silence.

"Mr Zabini, I invite you to reply."

"I practised it a couple of times after you'd come round," Zabini said smoothly. "Must have got too confident and forgotten to go slow."

Snape grunted then turned away. "Then we are reduced to a Specialis Revelio," he said.

"That only detects active magic," Zabini dismissed.

"My invitation to speak, once again, is rescinded," Snape said to Zabini. He walked back to Draco's work station and said, "The Aurory developed a version of Specialis Revelio with a timeframe modifier. It will detect magic that has been recently active within a specific location or on a specific object. The stronger the magic, the longer the imprint will hold. It is used to find out whether magic has been used at a crime scene. Fortunately, within a few minutes of casting even a small charm like Accio will still register."

Snape straightened his shoulders, pointed his wand at the rogue cauldron stand on Draco's countertop, and cast the spell. Three runes formed above the cauldron stand, light blue and smoky in the air.

"Mr Zabini, your Ancient Runes is of a reasonable standard, I believe. I invite you to translate these characters."

"Mobiliferrus," Zabini said with a desultory tone. Then: "That only means Malfoy was clever enough to use a Mobili charm rather than an Accio, though! And isn't it a bit suspicious that he knew exactly which charm was used to move the stand even before you proved it?"

Snape paused a moment, then he sighed. "We are left with two options, then. Memory extraction for Pensieve review, or Veritaserum."

"What!" Zabini said, outraged. "This is just—"

"This is what happens when misdeeds are perpetrated," Snape said quietly. He looked around. His eyes seemed to linger on Hermione, and she was taken aback by the anger he was projecting. "Actions. Have. Consequences." He seemed to say the words to her, and her alone.

While Hermione tried to decipher that particular comment, Snape dispelled the Revelio from the cauldron. He picked it up and took it back to Zabini's work station, where he set it down with exaggerated care.

"Fifteen years ago," he said, "in a potions facility on the isle of Fara, a sealed drum of powdered ashgrass seed was dropped from some height. The foreman's levitation spell had failed at a critical moment, thanks to the unfortunate timing of the poor man's heart attack. The drum cracked open. A cloud of powder filled the factory floor. Dangerous, of course, but the accident could have been contained were it not for the fact that the potioneer who owned the facility had left the door to a side-lab open while demonstrating a new recipe to one of his apprentices. The naked flame caught the airborne powder and it combusted. The resultant explosion tore into stocks of other
combustibles, and a raging fire took hold within less than thirty seconds. Three people died. Two more were permanently injured."

Snape walked to the very back of the classroom and stood by the door. Everyone was turned to face him, necks craned. Zabini was beginning to look panicked.

There was a lengthy pause. Snape seemed deep in thought. No one was about to interrupt.

Finally, he said:

"When Albus Dumbledore installed me as the new Potions Master at Hogwarts, seventeen years ago, I asked for some advice on how best to approach my new role as a teacher. I remember, word for word, what he said to me. 'It's Potions. Start by making sure they do not kill themselves.'"

A nervous murmur of humour. Snape, however, did not look like this memory had prompted any amusement. He drifted for a moment, perhaps thinking about Dumbledore. Abruptly he snapped out of it, chin up, a sharp intake of breath.

"I advised proper caution during this lesson because I know what ashgrass can do in careless hands. My advice was not universally followed. Thus, we find ourselves with the need to resolve this situation. Now. The use of Veritaserum has been closely moderated since the end of the war. I have access to a small, personally prepared stock, however. The law states that unless criminal charges have been brought, consent must be given before Veritaserum is administered. Mr Malfoy, would you be willing to submit to a test?"

Draco swallowed and said, "I would, sir, though I would ask beforehand that it be conducted in private, and the only questions asked of me while I am under the potion's influence be about today's lesson."

"Your terms are acceptable. Mr Zabini – I offer the same terms. Will you submit?"

Zabini's mouth opened, then closed, then he stepped away from his work station so swiftly that his stool was knocked over. "Why don't I make it easier for you?" he shouted. "No need to expel me. I resign! I'd rather drink goblin piss than spend another minute on this poxy course!" He took a step towards Snape and jabbed a finger at him. "And by the way? The whole world is going to learn what a traitor you are. To your House, and your own people. You're pathetic, Snape. You're just a-a-a domesticated, spineless half-man! Enjoy your fucking leash. You used to be worthy of some respect, bu–"

Snape waved his wand nonchalantly and a strong Bubble-Head charm sprang up around Zabini's head: the kind edged with a narrow vacuum. Zabini's petulant rant fell mute. Unfortunately for Zabini, he did not recognise what had happened since he could still hear himself. He ended his tirade with an attempt to spit in Snape's face. The disgusting projectile hit the shell of the Bubble-Head charm and rebounded all over Zabini.

"Ew!" said Terry. Then, hurriedly, "Um, excuse me Professor."

A bit of nervous laughter defused some of the tension. Zabini, having finally noticed the charm and dispelled it, caught the end of the chuckling as he wiped at his own face. He wheeled around, incensed by laughter he thought was directed at him, holding up his wand and waving it about as though trying to pick a target. His robe flapped as he did so; he almost caught some of the containers on Theo Nott's worktop. For a moment all was still, then he spun around and marched past Snape to leave.
Snape arched only a mild eyebrow as the door was slammed shut behind Zabini, then he turned and made his way back to the front of the classroom. Almost everyone breathed a sigh of relief and then settled back to face the front.

Theo Nott said, "Um – I think he took my–"

Hermione realised what was going to happen next with the alacrity of an intelligent woman who was, at least, very good at thinking about things. She threw herself into the space between the rows of work stations and pointed her wand at the doorway.

"Repello Inimicum!" she cast hurriedly.

Silence. Stillness.

"Explain yourself, Miss Granger," Snape said, sounding a little taken aback.

Hermione felt her cheeks begin to burn with the aftermath of what had turned out to be a presumption too far. She kept her wand pointed at the barrier she'd raised, beginning to feel the drain on her energy, wondering if she should let it go. She said, "Sorry. I thought th–"

The door was thrown open again. A sealed glass container was hurled through into the room. It bounced off the barrier, intact. Theo Nott immediately cast a cushioning charm below. Relieved, Hermione cancelled the barrier and sagged, panting.

In the doorway, Zabini yelled in fury, pointed his wand at the container of powder and began to cast: "Confr–"

"Expelliarmus," came Snape's voice. Zabini's wand flew out of his hand and into Snape's. It was enough to prevent Zabini's blasting curse from forming.

Zabini looked on, eyes wide. He hesitated a moment longer, looking at his own wand in Snape's hand, then he turned tail and fled, footsteps echoing in the corridor outside.

Theo went to recover the container of powdered ashgrass seeds. He closed the door quietly then returned to his work station.

After a moment, Terry Boot said, "Merlin's arse-crack."

Hermione couldn't help but agree with the sentiment.

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As it turned out, there was a significant upside to Blaise Zabini's meltdown. All of Hermione's theft-related thoughts, so distracting in the early part of the lesson, retreated to the back-burners of her mind. When Professor Snape offered his students the opportunity to head home early on the grounds that a fellow student trying to blow them up might qualify as a bit disruptive, only Millicent Bulstrode happily packed her as-yet unused cauldron kit away and scarpered.

"Um – she does know she's still going to have to brew this potion at some point, right?" Terry said to the class in general, as the door banged shut behind her.

Theo snorted. Draco said, "Good old Milly. Loyal as they come, but hardly the brightest Knut in the coffer."

The brewing continued, closely monitored by Snape. Whatever consequences Zabini was likely to
face, it seemed that for the time being the professor was more interested in maintaining the safety of his remaining students. Hermione got on with her work.

Terry was the first to cast his *Potio Augere*. Hermione was prepared for the flash of light that the charm would produce on an actively brewing potion, since she had used it before. Terry was less prepared and gave a squeak of surprise. Snape was there at his shoulder, however, already counting him quietly into his stirring pattern.

When Theo cast his charm, the flash was brighter. Hermione noted this peripherally, focused on her timing, and theorised that the superiority of Theo Nott's wandwork had rendered the charm more powerful. Some charms were like that, especially the more complex ones.

She was soon ready for her own application of *Potio Augere*. Hermione checked the status of her work station as she counted down her simmer. She took up the sealed container of powdered ashgrass seeds, aware that this was the dangerous moment. She checked her sleeves and her hair; a few strands had worked loose from her ponytail, probably when she'd leapt to cast her barrier earlier, but the sheen of perspiration over her brow thanks to the efforts of stirring a simmering cauldron had the stray hair plastered in place at her left temple. She ignored the slight discomfort and concentrated on her count.

Ready.

She unsealed the container and carefully tipped the pre-measured ashgrass powder into her bronze-coloured brew. The floury substance settled on the surface. Hermione resealed the container before setting it aside and taking up her glass stirrer, already counting.

The simple circular stirring pattern was not diffusing the powder through the brew well enough for her liking. She remembered a conversation during yesterday's tutorial about the figure-of-eight pattern, and risked a couple of those before reverting to the circular technique. It was enough. She switched her stirrer to her left hand and took up her wand.

"*Potio Augere,*" she cast, calm and precise, seeing the wand-form in her head and reproducing it without difficulty.

The flash was dazzling and might have given Hermione pause, had she not been so immersed in her counting and stirring.

"Beautiful," a voice whispered beside her.

...three...four...five...and the bronze of her Pain-Quell sharpened into a burnished tan colour, bright with the potency of its magic...eight...nine...

Ten. She changed her stirring pattern to the spiral-shaped technique, set down her wand and swapped stirring hands fluidly. A few more seconds...

There.

She used her left hand to dispel her burner's flame and lifted her stirring rod out of the potion. She stepped back, looking at what she had created.

"You're right," she whispered to the voice. "It's beautiful."

No reply. She glanced to the side but Snape had his back to her and was tending to Michael on the other side of the laboratory as he prepared his charm. She frowned, briefly annoyed, then fished out a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from her face.
She was chuffed, truth be told. A couple of weeks ago her Fortis Maxima had been textbook perfect, but this? This felt better-than-textbook. In any case, it had to be at least an Adequate.

Not bad, for a lesson where someone had tried to blow her up.

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"The man once wrote: *Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards, for they are subtle and quick to anger.*

Tolkien had that one mostly right. I stepped forward, let the door bang closed, and snarled, 'Fuck subtle.'"

Jim Butcher, *Changes* 2011

That evening, as Hermione waited in Artefact Accidents for her usual appointment, she idly picked up a copy of the *Prophet* that someone else had discarded on a side table. It did not occur to her that reading the *Prophet* was something she usually avoided. Perhaps she was distracted by the warm glow of her 'Competent', or by the even warmer glow of the additional comment Snape had made:

"*Miss Granger, more of this and I may be forced to revisit my contempt for the expression 'Exceeds Expectations'. Please refrain from undermining my world-view in this way.*"

It had almost been enough to make her forget that weird conversation before Zabini had kicked off: the one that had carried more than a whiff of warning.

Almost.

Alas, the *Prophet* was only too happy to take her glowing sense of pride and accomplishment and beat it about the ears with a metaphorical cricket bat.

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Excerpt from the *Daily Prophet*, Thursday 24th September 1998

Article in upper left quadrant with photograph, Page 11:

**POTIONS COLLABORATION CONTINUES**

Following the meeting between renowned potions maestros Severus Snape and Roksana Bramble reported earlier this week, further evidence of this intriguing collaboration is emerging.

Mistress Bramble's potions research business in Upper Flagley, founded with the compensation she received after her heroic efforts in containing the catastrophic Netch-Rocksalt fires, has announced the upcoming publication of a brand new potions text. The foreword has been written by none other than acclaimed war hero, Severus Snape himself.

The press release describes the volume as having been long years in the making. Its purpose is to teach advanced potions students how to 'play around with recipes' – as Mistress Bramble puts it. It will offer variations on classic recipes that have yielded good results, provide numerous techniques to try when altering established formulae, and is designed to 'encourage safe experimentation'.

Mistress Bramble notes in her press release that:

'*In recent years I have come to believe that potioneering is mired in a rut of its own making. Too often, skilled potions students have felt an obligation to follow, to the letter, the recipes in standard textbooks, some of which were written centuries ago. Yet there are always variables to be'}
tweaked. Progress happens only when new discoveries are made. Brewing well to classic formulae requires skill, but developing new and improved formulae requires flare and instinct. I hope that this book will encourage the newest generation of potioneers to develop their flare alongside their skill.'

When approached at her business for further comment, Mistress Bramble acknowledged that her terrible experience on Fara, and the hideous lasting scars of that incident, were the reason this book has taken so long to see the light of day. Potions, of course, remains a magical discipline with a significant potential for danger and damage.

Mistress Bramble, accompanied by her collaborator and muse, Professor Snape, informed the Prophet that concerned parents or guardians need not concern themselves with the manner in which this text encourages deviation from established standards; all the information within has been meticulously researched, and all safety precautions included. Mistress Bramble lays much credit at the feet of Professor Snape, who renewed her faith in the project when he confirmed to her that the current Hogwarts Potions curriculum produces a limited number of competent brewers but rarely any creative artists. "Regurgitating textbooks may allow you to pass your exams," Snape offered in his trademark rich tones, 'but it will hardly change the world for the better. After the events of recent years, I believe that changing the world for the better should be at the forefront of everyone's mind."

When Mistress Bramble was pressed for more information on this exciting new volume, it should be noted that Professor Snape appeared to lose patience. "There is a reason Mistress Bramble's press release was a written one!" he pointed out, even as his shy companion turned her damaged face away from the gaze of her admirers. "Just read the book when it comes out!" He hurried Mistress Bramble away in the direction of her home: two scarred veterans together.

It is some time, dear reader, since I learned about potions in the dungeons of Hogwarts, but Professor Snape is still capable of making me do as I am told!

'The Art of Experimentation' by Roksana Bramble is scheduled for release via Flourish & Blotts Publishing in October this year.

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The article's accompanying magical photograph showed Snape mouthing some words in the direction of the camera lens and then, with an impatient frown, turning his back and wrapping a solicitous arm around the shoulders of a veiled woman and moving them away. The arm stayed in place for the two steps included in the moving image before it cycled back to the beginning. It would seem that Snape was happy to indulge his rarely exhibited touchy-feely side for Roksana Bramble.

After setting the newspaper down with much the same care she'd have employed in handling a sweaty bar of gelignite, Hermione turned her back on the damn thing. She then spent a short time wondering:

a) Whether the 'regurgitating textbooks' comment was a dig she should take personally.

b) Whether her brief deviation from the standard stirring pattern in her brewing today was the element that had given her Grand Pain-Quell that je ne sais quoi that had so impressed Snape.

c) Whether, using her newfound detective nous, she could identify the reporter writing these articles about Roksana Bramble, punch him very hard on the nose and then ask him whether he'd like it if every time someone mentioned him in future it was alongside the phrase 'wonky-nosed
reporter’. Just because some scars were heroic, that didn't mean you had to constantly harp on about them.

d) Whether it was worth trying to persuade herself that literary collaborators are probably always welcome in each other's houses, and that there was nothing odd about Snape putting a friendly arm around a colleague. None of it necessarily meant that, behind closed doors, bodily fluids were being exchanged.

At this point in all of her wonderings, Hermione was glad to be interrupted by the duty Healer.

Once her cursed-blade injury was healed and sealed and twinge-free again, Hermione went back through the waiting area into St Mungo's reception.

"Oh – Miss Granger!" called the Welcome Witch on the desk. "This came for you, about half an hour ago. Too late for your Potions class. I thought it was going to have to wait until Monday."

Hermione crossed to the desk and took the owl-sized scroll, labelled tidily with her name. She opened it up and read the message.

Her presence was requested in Madam Churlish's office that very evening.

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Improper Use had decided to go ahead with the stage conjurer idea. The death of the Muggle reporter had made the Metropolitan Police even less willing to drop their investigation into the evidence recorded by the hotel's cameras. Churlish had summoned Dane Booth as well as Hermione in order to discuss how to proceed.

"Mr Arnold informed me at lunch that you had some ideas on how I should organise the investigation," Churlish said to Hermione when they had a moment alone, Dane having been whisked off for his costume-fitting.

"Yes," Hermione admitted. "Though when you put it like that, well...I'm aware I was going beyond my remit. Um. Sorry?"

"I understand. Criminal investigations seem exciting and exotic. It's easy to get carried away."

"Oh, it wasn't that I–"

"In real terms, of course, they're rather mundane and involve quite a bit of tedious work," Churlish went on over Hermione's half-hearted protest.

"I...see."

"As it happens," Churlish said, "we'd already begun certain lines of enquiry similar to those Mr Arnold said you'd suggested – oddly, we got there all on our own."

Hermione felt her cheeks growing warm. "The, er, internal hotel cameras?" she asked tentatively.

"The internal footage is not available, given that the magical surge used to wipe the archive was not overly picky about what it destroyed. I thought you might have anticipated that." Churlish frowned at Hermione, as if she'd been hoping for better. Then: "The Polyjuice was a better notion. Most apothecaries in the country have been asked for their customer records regarding the recent purchase of Boomslang skin."
"Most apothecaries?" Hermione put in.

"There are a handful of businesses that make much of their refusal to cooperate with the Ministry. They're the ones that get raided from time to time."

"I see. Well, hopefully you'll get something from those enquiries, but the potion could have been brewed some time ago."

"Of course it could. However, an additional lead has developed thanks to the image you produced of the man from the footage – the Polyjuiced disguise our suspect adopted."

"I'm glad it was helpful," Hermione said, and her reddening cheeks cooled a little.

"The original blond man is likely to be a known employee at the hotel. I've an agent there right now who's keeping an eye out."

"And what about Mrs Trelore?" Hermione prompted.

"What about her?" Churlish asked.

"She's the one person from the ball who's likely to have recognised something suspicious, in magical terms, given that the interloper was a wizard," Hermione said. "Has she been asked about the evening?"

"She has not," Churlish said, a touch sharply. "Nor will she be." A pause, then a sigh. "Acting Minister Shacklebolt is adamant that unless Mrs Trelore's behaviour threatens the Statute of Secrecy she will not be questioned about her relationship with this Muggle."

"The questioning wouldn't be about Philip Richmond. It'd be about a potential killer who was hanging around at her boyfriend's party."

Churlish sniffed and shook her head. "The distinction is immaterial. There are too many people who still view Muggles as inferior, and who view witches and wizards who take up with Muggles as blood-traitors."

"But that's just silly," Hermione said. "Every pure-blood family line has a dalliance or two with a Muggle, no matter how much they try to disguise it."

"Indeed they do. It's common knowledge. Common knowledge that, in certain circles, is never ever talked about." Churlish looked like she was losing patience. "Miss Granger, I appreciate your input. Truly. I'm not patronising you. It was clear from the meeting I attended yesterday that you're an excellent fit with Excuses, even if your current role came about thanks to your connections. But please try to understand – Minister Shacklebolt is walking a very fine political line. The new legislation that criminalises discrimination against Muggles and the Muggle-born is being ratified mainly due to a post-war wave of relief and guilt. That honeymoon will not last forever. It won't take certain people long to remember that their prejudice is comfortable for them, and they'd very much like to hang on to it."

"I understand that. I just don't see how asking Mrs Trelore if she saw something odd at the ball is relevant to it."

"The moment MLE questions Mrs Trelore, the assumption will be that there is high-level disapproval about her choice of paramour. No matter how discreet we try to be, the simple fact that we have interviewed her will get out. Law enforcement officers, like everyone else, like to talk."
Hermione thought back to the way Snape's most personal memories had been exposed in a feature in the *Prophet*, even when access to them had supposedly been restricted to the highest levels of MLE and the Wizengamot. Jasmine Churlish had a point.

"And you see," Churlish continued, "any hint of disapproval could ignite a larger debate. It is hard to see such a thing leading to a social revolution of tolerance and goodwill. Especially given Mrs Trelore's bloodline and her..." She frowned, searching for the right expression.

"Unfortunate history?" Hermione suggested.

"As you say." The office door opened and Dane stepped back through. He nodded at Madam Churlish's questioning look. "Now, if you have no further questions or...investigative suggestions?" An arched brow was directed at Hermione which seemed to combine chastisement with a reassuring absence of genuine anger. Hermione blushed and nodded. "You both have some work to do," Churlish said. "I can be Floo'ed here at the office until about nine thirty, I should think, if you need anything else."

"Right then. Oh! Just one idea I had..." Hermione checked her watch. "Damn it. Shops are shut."

"What do you need?"

"An ounce of Boom Berries, some powdered dragon claw, six Sopophorous Beans and a bat spleen." At Churlish's arched brow, she said, "It's a potion called Eve's Drops. Named after the inventor, Evadne Grimshaw. I read about it in *Spellwork in Potions*. I think it'll work really well for Dane and I tomorrow morning when he, er, 'turns himself in'." She dug in her bead-bag for the book that was her just-for-fun reading, turned to the correct page and handed it over.

Jasmine Churlish read.

"Right then," Churlish said after a few moments. "The shops may be shut but St Mungo's never closes. Let's go and see if the Minister has gone home yet."

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Hermione was back at St Mungo's just after seven o'clock that evening. She was hungry, desperate for a shower and a change of clothes, and aware that she had small chance of either over the next few hours. She was also in the company of Madam Churlish and Dane Booth.

In reception, Madam Churlish met with the evening shift's Senior Healer, as prearranged via Floo'ed message. Words were exchanged; expressions were grim. Magical Law Enforcement could command a fair amount of respect and obedience from Wizarding Britain's other institutions.

Instructions agreed, Madam Churlish nodded at Hermione and Dane, checked they had the accreditation needed, and then stepped over to the Apparition alcove and blinked out.

The Senior Healer walked them over to the reception desk, scrawled a note on some parchment, handed it off to Hermione and then directed them – needlessly, at least in Hermione's case – to sub-level two where the long-term storage facility could be located.

As they made their way down the stairs, Dane said, "Okay, I know you're one of those good-ideas kind of people, but is this really, honestly necessary?"

"Actually, I'm hoping not," Hermione said. "But I'd rather have a lifeline in place and not need it than the other way round."
At sub-level two, the door off the stairwell opened out into the antechamber for the long-term storage area, just as Healer Montague had described. The duty Storekeep looked up from where he worked at his desk, frowned as he failed to recognise his customers, stood and came towards them.

"Hello. Are you lost?" he asked.

"No. Just in need of some after-hours ingredients," Hermione said. "This is from the Senior Healer." She handed off the parchment she'd been given upstairs. "And this is from Acting Minister Shacklebolt." She dug in her inside jacket pocket and produced a magically sealed document. "On the orders of Magical Law Enforcement, I've been told to procure this list of ingredients."

The Storekeep, having perused both bits of paperwork, said, "Okay – um, what list?"

"Oh. Bother. Too many papers." Hermione rummaged in her inside pocket again before remembering that she'd placed her hurriedly written list in her back pocket to keep it separate. She fished it out and handed it over.

The Storekeep glanced over the ingredient list and nodded. "All this is in storage room alpha – that's the easy-access one for the stuff we need most often. I'll get it myself. Won't be a jiffy."

He went to the archway at the back of the antechamber, brandished his wand at an enchanted tablet set into the arch, then disappeared through it.

Dane put his hands in his pockets and shrugged his shoulders. "So this potion is going to let us hear everything that the other person hears?"

"Like a wiretap and an earpiece," Hermione agreed, knowing that Dane would understand the analogy. "It'll work both ways. I'm going to sit somewhere very quiet, so you aren't distracted by ambient noise from my end. I'm going to listen to everything the police officer says, and everything you say to him or her. And if you need a pointer or anything, all you have to do is pause and say 'um' and I'll know you're struggling and I'll make a suggestion."

"That's good." Dane frowned. "The thing is, see, when Mr Arnold asked for my help yesterday it seemed like a bit of a laugh. Only now – well, this poor woman's dead, and to be honest with you, Hermione, I'm not very good at Apparition. You know. If I need to make a speedy getaway."

"I think Mr Arnold, being the Chair of the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee, would frown on you Disapparating in front of a police officer," she said dryly. "It won't come to that, though. We'll do a bunch of role-plays this evening, get your answers down nicely. We've already got your costume sorted out."

"Right."

"And don't forget you'll be doing the whole thing under Polyjuice," she added. "Madam Churlish did well to find a wizard with a passing resemblance to the man on the footage. So even if the police aren't satisfied with your explanation, if they come after you again they're going to be looking for a six footer with fair hair. Seriously, Rutger Hauer's got more to be worried about than you do."

"And if they put me in a jail cell?" Dane pressed.

"Unlikely." She saw the nervousness in Dane's expression and touched his arm in reassurance. "Look, if you're really worried, we could set you up with a Portkey. Just as long as you give me your word you'd only use it if nobody was there to see."
"A Portkey. That's...that's genius." Dane nodded. "Yes. Let's do that."

Hermione checked her watch. She wondered whether she could convince Dane to get some takeaway before they embarked on their evening of rehearsal. Role-playing a police interview was going to be tricky when her stomach was threatening to growl more loudly than her voice.

"So when we're done here – my place or yours?" Dane asked.

Kingsley Shacklebolt had made the need for confidentiality in this matter clear. She smiled at Dane. "I have a housemate, and I think we'll do better without an audience. So yours."

"Miss Granger?"

She startled and spun around to face the archway. Emerging from the long-term storage level was – who else? – Severus Snape. And he was looking at her and Dane as if he'd just caught them pilfering his own private ingredient stocks.

This, Hermione recognised immediately, was not going to go well.

She inhaled, drew back her shoulders and said, "Professor. Good evening."

Snape walked towards her. He had in his hand a white paper sack with the top crumpled down. Her eyes darted to it, perhaps as suspicious as he was, then back to his face.

His eyebrow arched as he stopped, still looking at her. Clearly he was awaiting an explanation.

What was she supposed to say? 'Oh, I'm just here to pick up some emergency ingredients for a secret mission that MLE have asked me to undertake.' Hardly. 'Giving my new pal Dane here a tour of St Mungo's.' Not really. 'Don't mind me. I'm just keeping an eye on you, since I'm horribly worried you're somehow involved in a series of thefts that I shouldn't even know about.'

There was no good reason for her to be here: not something she could legitimately say to Snape, anyway. So she did the only thing she could and changed the subject.

"I hope the aftermath of today's unpleasantness isn't causing you more problems than it should, Professor," she said.

"The incident today has been dealt with," Snape said curtly. "The matter is closed."

"Of course. I mean, good. It's just, with Mistress Bramble and her...I know the ashgrass thing could be a bit...I'd understand you taking it personally."

A pause. A poisonous pause. Hermione castigated herself for this inability to put together a smooth and diplomatic sentence when such a thing was most needed.

"Miss Granger, you have no idea." There was a tremble in his voice, but it was gone when he declared: "Clueless. And on so very many levels, all at once. It's almost impressive." He sneered for a moment, then looked at Dane. "And you are...?"

Dane, to his credit, smiled an amiable smile and said, "Dane Booth, mate. Muggle Liaison Office."

Snape looked him up and down, unimpressed. "Really."

"Really," Dane agreed. "And you are...?"

Snape looked like he was lost for words: just for an instant. Understandably. His was one of the
more famous faces in Wizarding Britain.

"Come on, mate," Dane pressed. "It's polite to ask, isn't it?"

"Professor Severus Snape," Snape announced, clipped of tone.

"Course you are. And no, I didn't go to Hogwarts so I never learned to be terrified of you while I was small and vulnerable. So how 'bout you stop looking at me like I'm something you stepped in? Isn't working." Dane's amiable smile grew, if anything, more relaxed.

Snape's lips pressed hard for a moment. "You assume, Mr Booth, that I consider you worthy of the effort it would take to be scornful. Incorrectly."

"My mistake. Have yourself a nice evening, Professor." He gestured over to the archway. "Think our order's here, Hermione."

They all looked to see the duty Storekeep returning to the antechamber, this time burdened by a white paper bag much the same as the one Snape carried. The Storekeep pulled up short as he noticed Snape's presence. There was an awkward moment as he met Hermione's eyes, waiting to take a cue from her. The paperwork he'd been shown had, after all, impressed upon him a need for discretion.

"Did you need anything else, Professor?" Hermione asked politely. She had to grit her teeth on the caveat, 'Not that someone as "clueless" as me could ever be useful...'

Severus Snape was not usually an easy man to read, but his desire to work out what was actually going on with Hermione and Dane was, on this occasion, palpable. The moment stretched as he sought a way to uncover the truth of their presence on sub-level two, then, frustrated, he turned abruptly and marched out of the antechamber.

The Storekeep came over to them and passed her the requested ingredients. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes. Sorry." Seeing a glimmer of an opportunity, Hermione added, "I, er, didn't mean to put you in an awkward position. I thought the professor would be long gone."

"Oh, he usually picks up the stuff for his Friday sessions round about now."

Hermione nodded. "Friday...sessions?"

"That's what he told me," the Storekeep said with a shrug. "Anyway, there you go. I'm on till midnight if you need to come back. Keep the notes in case the shift changes."

"Will do," Hermione said. "Thanks for your help."

"Welcome. Hey, isn't every day I get to read a Minister-sealed decree! Good luck."

They bade the Storekeep farewell and returned upstairs.

"Well, that was brisk," Dane said dryly. "Something wrong?"

She was wondering the same thing herself. Her relationship with Severus Snape appeared to be deteriorating by the hour and she had no idea why. Then there was the fact that Snape had told the storage level staff that he needed materials for a Friday class that didn't exist: did that count as 'wrong'? Because Hermione was pretty damn sure it did.
"No, I think we're all set," she lied, and did her best to put the awkwardness with Snape behind her. She had work to do.

They exited the stairwell into the ground floor reception area.

Hermione said, "Not being funny, but I haven't eaten since lunchtime, and I got a bit hot and sticky during my lesson this afternoon. Mind if I nip back to mine to grab a shower and a snack before we get stuck in?"

"No worries," said Dane. They both moved aside as a pair of Mediwizards levitated a patient past them. A gaggle of worried relatives stood by the main door, calling after the clearly comatose patient, too concerned to realise how redundant their encouragement might be. Dane used a gentlemanly arm to manoeuvre them into space. "But – look, you're welcome to shower at mine, if you like. And I'm starving too. Fancy splitting a Chinese?"

They walked over to the Floo terminus as soon as the patient's entourage had bustled past them. Hermione considered what she knew of Dane Booth; was agreeing to take her clothes off in his flat, even behind a locked door, a risk too far? She decided it probably wasn't, given her personal repertoire of robust privacy charms (accumulated after several months spent sharing a tent with two hormonal teenage boys). And Dane seemed like a decent enough sort.

"You're right. Better use of our time," Hermione decided. She could magically refresh her clothing at Dane's place, and she already had her potion-brewing kit with her in her bead-bag. "Chinese it is."

She waited for Dane to announce his destination and Floo home, making note of the address. Then she stepped up to the aperture. Something made her turn back to look at the busy hospital reception. The Welcome Witch at the desk noticed her looking and nodded. Hermione smiled and let her eyes drift along the wall...

Snape was standing beside the main doorway, barely twelve feet away, making no attempt to disguise his loitering. He was staring at her. Hard. Accusing.

Hermione sighed. She didn't have time for any of this, but she couldn't leave it be. The day had begun with barbed comments, progressed through warnings and threats and had most recently sunk to insults, interspersed though these things had been with a disorienting array of compliments. Hermione was sick of it. She took up some Floo powder, said Dane's address into the Floo and then called through:

"Dane, I'll follow in a few minutes. Order me anything you like as long as it does not contain prawns. There in a bit!"

"Right ho!" came the congenial reply.

Hermione shut the Floo down, spun on the spot and marched up to Snape. "Fine. If you want answers, you'll do better talking to me than glaring. Potions lab. Now."

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He kept her waiting.

Well, obviously he did. He knew about power dynamics.

Hermione had been learning about such things herself in recent months, however. After three minutes on her own in the potions laboratory, leaning against the side of her work station, she left
her bags on the countertop and went to sit down at the stool behind the demonstration table.

Front and centre. Professor Granger, awaiting the recalcitrant Severus Snape who really needed to learn some manners. She thought that a particularly unpleasant detention was in order.

Another minute passed.

Hermione gave up on trying to maintain a forbidding pose and leaned her chin tiredly on her linked fingers. She began to wonder if he'd decided to humiliate her by leaving her here while he buggered off home. At this point she wouldn't have put it past him.

Five long minutes after she'd arrived, the door opened. Hermione sat up, suddenly feeling much less Professor-Granger-like. Snape came inside and closed the door.

"Right, then," she said, hoping to at least begin this conversation on the front foot. "What exac–"

She stopped. You tended to stop when Severus Snape jerked a hand bearing a wand high in the air and shot you an unambiguously warning look.

He cast: something complex, a charm combination no doubt of his own design. He did it in the direction of the door. Hermione wondered what she would have done had his wand been pointed at her. Had this recent suspicion on her part extended to a genuine fear for her safety?

Of course it had not. This had to be some kind of misunderstanding. Snape could conjure slights and insults out of the clear blue sky, and then hold a grudge about them for decades. He was a veritable master of misunderstandings.

All she had to do was set this straight.

"Done?" she demanded.

He turned to face her. She was unsettled by the anger in his eyes. "When I am meeting an overly emotional student, alone, in a room with no lock, I find I'd like some warning if someone is about to intrude."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Your amplification spell."

"Along with a couple of other things."

She made her voice as steady as she could. "I am not being overly emotional."

He huffed a short laugh. "You're doing your best to pretend you are not."

She felt her own anger levels begin to surge and had to work hard to maintain her measured tone. "Right. Because I'm so unsubtle. And clueless. And I shouldn't 'fool myself'. Apparently."

"I'm glad to see that your memory, at least, is functioning reasonably well."

"So you can see right through me, can you?"

"You are not difficult to read."

"Maybe not. And obviously I've done something to offend you. Except, you know what?" Hermione paused, surprised to find herself on her feet, stool shoved back behind her, leaning over the demonstration table as she tried to make her point. "I have no bloody idea what great sin I have committed! So if you can see it in the way I look and my oh-so-obvious body language and the
expression on my face and the glimmer in my eyes or-or-or whatever the hell it is you've decided you see? Could you do me a favour and please explain it to me!"

A pause. A carefully arched eyebrow. "And this is you not being overly emotional? Heaven forfend if I ever experience your more impassioned moments."

"This is not funny!"

"And I am not laughing," he spat back at her. He reached to pinch between his eyes, then sighed. He'd stayed by the door, as if he needed to keep as much space as he could between them. "I came here because you offered answers. Instead I seem to be in receipt of nothing but questions."

"I'll answer what I can," she said, after a deep breath. "But I should very much like to learn exactly when it was that I went from being your friend to being a woman who deserves insults and threats."

Snape held up a warning hand. She wasn't sure what he meant for a moment, until she heard the voices. Beyond the door, out in the corridor of sub-level one, hospital staff were walking and chatting, and the sounds echoed eerily into the laboratory as if from a hidden speaker.

She froze, not sure why she felt so nervous. It wasn't as if she and Snape were doing anything more than talking. Or maybe it was more like shouting...okay, so it wasn't the kind of conversation that a teacher and a student should really be having. But even so.

"...go on without me, pal. I've still got some stuff to finish up, tonight."

Hermione blinked. She knew that voice.

"You've been stopping late all week. What, Lambikins got you doing some overtime, has he?"

But she didn't know that one.

Okay, so there were two men talking. And the first voice she had heard before, when she'd been standing in a herb garden in Puddlemere. It had emanated from a honey-bee Patronus.

Joseph Montague.

"You really think Lambage has the first idea of the actual work that goes on in his department?"

Joseph remarked.

"Fair comment," laughed his friend. "Seriously – something up? Need some help?"

"Nah. Just want to check the Shade-Moth house. Bernie reckons they're struggling, and it might have a knock-on with the Spleenwart plants."

Joseph's friend adopted an outraged falsetto and said, "Sometimes I think you care about those flowers more than you care about me!"

"Sweetums, I will always care more for flowers than you. Unless it's your round."

"Speaking of – what time at the Leaky on Sunday?"

"Make it seven, I..."

The voices moved out of the zone of Snape's amplification spell, probably heading for the male changing rooms at the end of this bit of corridor. Hermione drew a breath and then looked at
Snape.

He was staring at the door. He seemed, if anything, even more angry.

"Oh, for goodness sake, what now?" she demanded.

A moment, then he looked down at his feet and shook his head. All of a sudden he looked tired and fed up. "Nothing you need to concern yourself with."

"Don't I get to decide what concerns me?"

"In this instance, no."

Hermione swallowed hard. "Seriously? You've decided at some point in what feels like the last twenty-four hours that I no longer deserve your trust? Everything we went through, every connection we were making, and it's all meaningless?"

"Do you know, I think that about sums things up." He moved further into the room. "I have things to do, and none of them involve a desire to navigate your cliché-addled drivel. If you insist on remaining here then remove yourself to your work station and retrieve a textbook. Let us at least give the impression of an educative discussion."

He had a point, buried somewhere amid his rather brutal words. Feeling her capacity for defiance slipping away, she bit her lip on the distress and walked around the demonstration table.

Before she had reached her work station, however, Snape had beaten her there. He snatched up the white paper sack she'd been given by the Storekeep and looked inside.

"Hey! Do you mind?" she exploded, her temper at least keeping the heartbreak at bay for a while.

"Not at all," he said with blithe indifference. He tossed the bag down again and walked past her to the front of the laboratory. "In all honesty, Miss Granger, you'd have better success with this attempt to play the innocent if you didn't insist on walking around with nefariously obtained ingredients for a spying potion."

She opened her mouth. She closed it again. It was hard to work out which things to be angry about first.

"Okay – one? Not nefariously obtained," she bit.

"I'm to take your word, am I? Because your word is coming to mean less than I thought."

"Why?"

Snape ignored the question and began to unpack his own ingredients bag: the one he'd been carrying when he'd emerged from the long-term storage level. He arranged the items on trays he took from a side shelf and set out on the front table.

Nux Myristica. Dandelion root. Silverweed. Valerian. These were among the ingredients for Fortis Maxima.

"What are you doing?" she asked, curiosity overcoming her anger.

"What does it look like? I am preparing for tomorrow morning's lesson."

Hermione shook her head. It was beginning to feel like she was the victim of a gaslighting. "There
isn't a Potions lesson on a Friday."

He glanced at her and arched a brow. "I think you will find that there is."

"So you're giving lessons that you're keeping secret from me, now?" she said. "What, is this about the 'regurgitating textbooks' thing? Too much of an irritating know-it-all, am I? You need at least one lesson a week where I'm excluded?"

Snape had straightened during this tirade, and he turned and looked at her blankly. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Secret lessons!"

"There is nothing secret about them. I run an early morning session on Fridays for those students who wish to make a second attempt at a brew that did not go well for them."

"Why was I not informed about this?" Hermione demanded.

"The information was included in the introductory course notes that were sent out in August."

Hermione hesitated, then she said, "Um – what introductory notes?"

"The ones I put together for all who'd signed up for my Lost Seventh class," Snape replied, losing patience. "You were not omitted from this list. And since you managed to arrive in the right place at the right time on the course's first day, I can only assume you did indeed receive the notes."

"Actually I didn't. I went to the Department of Magical Education last month when I hadn't heard anything. The timetables were up on the board in the reception area – I copied it all down." She shrugged a shoulder. "I thought the admin might be lagging a bit, with it being so last-minute."

Snape nodded slowly. "The information was sent out to the contact details Hogwarts has on record. I assume Grimmauld Place remains protected by Fidelius charm?"

"It does, though given that Harry is hosting parties there it isn't the most closely-guarded secret anymore. But yes – we can't get owls. Hogwarts wouldn't have that as my address, though, it'd have..." She tailed off. "Oh."

"Miss Granger?"

"My parents' house was empty until the second week in September." And owls tended not to leave neat little postcards that said 'Sorry you weren't in – we tried to deliver your Lost Seventh paperwork. Please collect your package at your local owl depot, leaving at least 24 hours after receiving this card...'

"I see." Snape breathed deep, then turned back to his ingredients. "It appears I finally have an answer, albeit to a question I was not overly concerned by."

"What question?"

"Why you have not requested to make a second attempt at Aqua Sedatis." He glanced back at her and sighed heavily. "Miss Granger, I remain your professor in spite of your outbursts. You are welcome to attend the class tomorrow morning and attempt a better brew – I will ensure ingredients are available. Seven o'clock sharp."

Hermione closed her eyes and sank down on to her work station's stool. "I can't do it. Not
Snape turned back to the table. "There is no time restriction on your second attempt. Any Friday morning session will do. I will not allow more than two attempts at any given potion, however."

She nodded. In truth, even in the middle of this upsetting and infuriating conversation, this development provided a glimmer of relief. She'd been dwelling on that Subpar. Here was a chance to put it right.

"I'll do that," she said. "Maybe next week?"

"Inform me by next Thursday if you wish to attend so that I can ensure everything is prepared."

Keeping his back to her, he added, "If there is nothing else you wish to discuss this evening, I think we'll both benefit from going our separate ways." Snape waved a wand over the prepared trays of ingredients, activating their safe containment until the morning.

"Severus—"

"Professor Snape," he snapped.

Hermione swallowed. "You wanted some answers? I'll tell you what I'm allowed. I'm not spying. Or...not the way you implied. The Eve's Drops potion is for a thing for work. I can't tell you the details because I have been asked to keep them confidential." He turned to look at her, and she met his gaze as steadily as she could. "That's why I'm busy tomorrow morning, by the way. Work stuff." A sigh. "Well go on then, Mr I'm-so-good-at-body-language. Am I lying?"

His lip curled in a sneer. "Not this time. Though your deliberate vagueness renders concepts such as truth and deceit somewhat meaningless." He drew himself up. "Why were you in Shyverwretch's? Was that for your work, too?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, that was for a different project. A friend asked me to help out, and I agreed to keep the matter between us. You know, maybe I do lack subtlety. Maybe I do fool myself when it comes to the people I care about. But if someone asks for my help and wants me to protect their privacy then I'll do my damnedest to comply." She slid off the stool and took up her bags. "I wouldn't have thought I'd need to explain that particular point to you. Keeping secrets for the right reasons – that's always been your M.O."

Hermione sensed him watching her as she walked towards the back of the laboratory. She didn't know what else to say, so she left the room and returned to the ground floor, where she Floo'ed to Dane Booth's top floor flat, took grateful receipt of a fresh towel, and used the noise of the shower to disguise the five minute cry that she found she needed to get out of her system.

Then she dried, dressed, and got back to work.

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Madam Churlish's Patronus materialised in the middle of Dane's living room. It was an eel. Hermione didn't even try to understand the talismanic connection there.

"I know it's late," the eel said, "but there is some further information you'll need. I'll attempt to Floo at half past ten tonight."

They were in Cardiff, in the house Dane's Great Aunt owned; the whole top floor had been turned into a self-contained flat for him. You could see the castle from his kitchen window. The rehearsals had actually gone quite well, so they awarded themselves time for a breather after
receiving Churlish's message. Dane decided that he needed to clear away the congealing takeaway boxes before the Deputy Head of Improper Use came calling. While he did this, Hermione packed away her potions kit. She was now in possession of two matching phials of Eve's Drops. The potion recipe had been moderately complex, but the charm which activated the brew had caused no difficulty.

While they waited for Madam Churlish, Hermione tried to chat. A bit of decompression was in order, she thought, after an evening of simulated police interrogation.

"You kept your New Zealand accent pretty well," she said to Dane. "You were, what, fourteen when you came over here?"

"I was. I kept it on purpose for a while. I liked that it made me different. And it felt a bit less like I was abandoning my home and my folks. You know?"

"Makes sense."

"Course, I didn't sound this Kiwi eighteen months ago, before Aunt Lavinia packed me back off down under." He lifted a meaningful brow. "She was one of the sensible ones. Saw what was coming pretty early on. Figured a Muggle-born like me with a funny accent to boot might want to make himself scarce."

"Three cheers for Aunt Lavinia," Hermione offered.

"No kidding. Anyway, I only made it back here in July, after the war. So it'll be a while before I stop saying 'fush and chups' correctly, I reckon."

She grinned at that. Dane grinned too.

"Hey – here's a thought," he said. "Are you seeing anyone, right now?"

Her grin faded. Hermione blinked. "Um."

"Ah." Dane winced at himself. "Foot in mouth. Big-huge error. Forget I spoke."

"No, I mean, I..." Hermione tried to pull her startled thoughts together. "Don't worry about it. No, I'm not seeing anyone. Nor am I really ready to do that. I'm still a bit...the last months have been kind of frantic." She sighed. "I think, basically, I need to sort myself out before I inflict it on anyone else."

Dane smiled ruefully. "And here was me, thinking you were about the most together woman I've ever had the good fortune to meet."

"You should see what the inside of my brain looks like."

The brief tension dissipated with that; the smiles were amiable again. "No worries," he said, "but you ever feel like you're ready, and you fancy grabbing a bite with a Kiwi ex-pat? You know where to find me."

"I appreciate the offer," Hermione said, semi-formally, aware as she said it that she meant it. With Ron's new love-interest, Harry's constant Ginny-related mooning and Severus Snape's interest — literary or otherwise — in Roksana Bramble, it was good to know that she could still attract a bit of interest herself.

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Madam Churlish dusted the Floo powder away and turned to face them. "How've you been getting on this evening?" she asked.

Dane turned to Hermione, offering her the lead.

"We've got the potion brewed," she reported. "And I've ordered a Portkey which will deliver Dane back to the Ministry Atrium. Just as a back-up plan."

"Good thought," Churlish agreed. "Your practice-runs?"

"I've asked everything I could think of, from the point of view of a Muggle police officer. We've covered as much as we can. Dane's good at this – he can deflect awkward questions with a neat line in self-deprecating humour."

"I can?" Dane put in, surprised.

"Yup." She frowned as she recalled the work they'd done. "The silvery trail has been easy to create with a modified *Lumos*..."

Hermione tailed off. She'd just joined some dots in her head that she hadn't realised needed joining.

"Yes, I saw in your report that you thought it unlikely to be a Patronus, given the shape," Madam Churlish encouraged.

"Just looked like those ribbon things that gymnasts dance with," Hermione said, adrift in her connecting thoughts.

"Those ribbon things – I'm sorry?" Churlish prompted.

"Or...a bit like your eel."

More sharply, Churlish said, "What are you suggesting, Miss Granger?"

Hermione blinked and came back to herself. "A *snake*. Why didn't I see it? It was a snake, a whacking great big one! Coiled around the man, like a constrictor. It was a Patronus!"

A pause.

Dane said, "I can still use the *Lumos* thing, though, right?"

"Of course. Yes, it's fine, I just – Madam Churlish, is there any central register for Patronus forms?"

"No. It would be difficult to maintain, since Patronuses can change. And a large proportion of the population either cannot or do not cast them. And...well, they are rather personal."

"Yes. Yes, they are." Hermione grimaced. "I don't suppose you know of anyone whose Patronus is a snake?"

"Not personally," Churlish said. "Though I'd imagine it is not uncommon among former members of Slytherin House."

Hermione nodded. "Not really that useful as a clue to identify the wizard, then. But maybe a way to help confirm we have the right man, when he's found?"
"Maybe," Churlish said.

"Mind you," Hermione added, "if he has committed cold-blooded murder since that footage was recorded, chances are he's lost the ability to cast a Patronus."

"Perhaps, but let's not get sidetracked. Anything else to report?"

"Sorry. Yes. Um – I worked out a glamour for when Dane has his hood up. It'll make it seem like removing the hood changes his appearance. Like on the footage. Fortunately we never get a good look at the dark-haired wizard." She did a backtrack on her own words. "Well, fortunately because it's easier to fake, I mean. I don't mean it's helpful that we don't have a description of our suspect." She shrugged "If you see what I mean."

"I do. Show me this glamour, then."

Dane grinned. "On with the show." He scooped up his new hooded cloak and put it on, head lowered so the fabric covered his face. Then he took up his wand and cast the glamour Hermione had designed. He raised his head with a certain theatricality. Peering inside the folds of the hood, Hermione saw what looked like a finely-boned dark-haired man wreathed in shadow. Dane tossed back his hood and he was himself again.

"And the Lumos charm?" Churlish said.

Dane raised his wand. "Lumos Argenti Tarda!" He swept the tip of his wand around himself, just as the wizard in the security footage had done, and a coil of silver slowly cascaded in a spiral, fading before it reached the floor.

Churlish nodded. "Good. Now, there's a slight change of plan. You are no longer going to hand yourself in."

"I'm not?" Dane said, surprised.

"No. My team discussed this. We've decided that too long has passed since the incident on Saturday. So we'll play it this way – the Muggle police will come to you instead."

"They will?"

"Indeed. Nobody could come up with a good reason why you waited almost a week before coming forward. Better that you play ignorant of any problem and let the investigating officers 'find' you."

"Okay." Dane wasn't looking sure about this. Of course, they'd just spent nearly two hours working on one scenario. Changing it didn't seem all that good an idea.

"Here is the back story," Churlish said. "You had a very bad audition at the theatre last Saturday and went straight home afterwards. You didn't think again about the, er, 'drunk woman' as you were caught up in your own disappointment. Meanwhile, we subjected one of the Muggle police officers investigating this matter to a memory charm. This afternoon he 'remembered' the auditions at the Burleigh Theatre and decided it was worth asking them about stage conjurers. The theatre staff had been primed with memory charms and told the officer that a conjurer had a disastrous audition at the theatre last Saturday. They've provided a name and address."

"Hang on, hang on – they're coming here?" Dane asked incredulously, shooting a nervous glance through the door to his hallway.
"Certainly not; this is Wizarding Britain. Everything else besides, your Aunt's house is unplottable. But the Ministry maintains numerous Muggle dwellings that can be used on occasions such as this. Mr Booth, your name is David Perkins. You work from home as a freelance accounts auditor but, of course, you harbour dreams of becoming a celebrity magician. You are unmarried, your one-bedroom flat is in Walthamstow – here is the address – and you have no criminal record. You are, and I cannot impress this upon you enough, a thoroughly boring individual, unworthy of further investigation."

"Boring. Right ho." Dane looked at the parchment Churlish had given him. "Hope it's handy for the tube. This is a long way from the Floo network."

Hermione looked over his shoulder. "I know where that is. I'll lend you my A-to-Z."

"The other thing you will need is this," Churlish said, and handed over a small phial. "Polyjuice containing the hair of the closest match we could find. Actually he's an apprentice with the Ministry's curse-breakers. It is well-brewed. The disguise will last at least six hours."

"Okay."

Churlish said, "The police officer will contact you at the address in Walthamstow some time tomorrow morning, thinking himself very clever to have tracked down the cloaked fellow on the footage. You should bear in mind that although the footage has been destroyed, the officer has seen it. Now he will probably call without announcing himself. But the, er, 'telephone' is connected in the flat, if he decides to contact you that way. You...know how to use such a thing?"

"Think I can manage," Dane said flatly.

"Good. There is a small business which appears to be used for the mass-washing of clothing underneath this address. Two of my people will be sitting in there from eight o'clock onwards, so if anything goes badly and the police officer decides to take you to the station, we will be aware of it and we will extract you. Please remember – this exercise is intended to close an investigation that has become awkward for us, but if the plan does not work then only a small number of people will need to be Obliviated. This is quite containable, and all in a day's work for my team."

"Right. And I'll have my Portkey if it all goes pear-shaped."

"Indeed." Churlish turned to Hermione. "The second floor flat in the same building is currently unoccupied. We don't own it, but an Alohomora should get you inside, and it will be a quiet place for you to monitor the interview and provide any assistance."

"Got it," Hermione said.

"We'll be setting up at eight, like I say," Churlish concluded. "Be there in good time." She turned to Dane. "You'll need to wear Muggle clothing which will allow for the extra inch or so in height the Polyjuice will give you. And don't forget to bring your hooded cloak. I'd suggest you don't take the Polyjuice until you know the visit is about to happen – just in case."

"Understood," Dane said.

Churlish smiled tightly at them both. "I'll let you get back to your evening. See you tomorrow."

She Floo'ed out.

"Right then," Hermione said. "One more run-through, only this time you need to come at it from a place of absolute ignorance. All that last Saturday currently means to you is that you bombed in
front of some up-himself *faux* celebrity."

"Absolute ignorance," Dane repeated. "Shouldn't be too tricky. Let's go."

~~~

Harry was in the kitchen when she finally got home, just before midnight. She had the sense he'd been waiting up for her.

"Another late one," he observed, as she went to the cooler and grabbed some milk to heat.

"Yes. Got quite a bit on at the moment," she agreed.

"New flame, is it?" he asked lightly.

She snorted. "God, no. That's one of the things I definitely do not have time for."

He laughed too, but it sounded forced.

"Something up?" he finally enquired. "Only you seem to have gone a bit AWOL, this week."

"I know. Sorry. Just busy, though. Everything's fine."

He was quiet for so long that she had to finish fussing with the milk and look his way.

"You'd tell me, wouldn't you?" he said. "If there was a problem?"

The answer to that was obviously 'no' given all that had happened. But she couldn't say that and she didn't want to lie, so she said, "Who on earth else would I tell?"

Harry brightened, came around the table and leaned in to brush a kiss over her cheek.

"What was that for?" she demanded, startled.

"Night, Hermione," he said, and left the kitchen.

She spent so long thinking how much easier Harry was to deal with when he was being stroppy and petulant that she nearly let the milk boil over.

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"Action is consolatory. It is the enemy of thought and the friend of flattering illusions."

Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo* 1904

A narrow stairway that smelled strongly of Persil and bleach provided access to the first and second floor flats above the launderette in Walthamstow. Hermione saw Dane safely into the Ministry-owned property and then headed further up the stairs. She checked for privacy before she magically unlocked the door.

The top floor flat was a hippy haven. The lingering scent of sandalwood incense was a sneeze-inducing presence in all the soft furnishings, even though the owners had been away for over two weeks, according to the postal marks on the accumulating pile of junk mail behind the front door. The kitchen cupboards contained nothing with meat and little with dairy, though there was quite the array of beans and other pulses in dried and tinned form. The small kitchen was separated from the equally compact living room by a dangling screen of beads and bamboo.

Hermione did not bother seeking out the CD collection in the basket-style drawers under the music centre. She knew what she'd find there, anyway. (Enya, mainly.) She also refused to investigate the bedroom. There were lines to this otherwise justifiable intrusion of privacy that she would not cross.

Though she was wary about casting in a Muggle flat unsuited to magic, she kept her wand to hand in case she needed to cast an emergency Apparate. Holidays did not, after all, last forever. She sat down by a window which overlooked the street, watchful for any visitors to the building. She had her phial of Eve's Drops ready. And of course, being a Muggle-born witch currently undertaking a mission with a fellow Muggle-born, she had her mobile phone.

It was just after twenty past eight in the morning. Outside, a light drizzle made the East Seventeen commuters hurry along with their collars turned up, some wielding umbrellas that were offering more harm to other passers-by than protection to their owners.

Grey, wet, autumnal London.

Hermione sighed. The weather and muted lighting seemed all too reflective of her mood. Since the argument with Snape she'd been in lugubrious form. It was perhaps fortunate that her various tasks and projects were keeping her as busy as they were; it gave her less opportunity to dwell.

Still, she was Hermione Granger, which meant that she never really stopped thinking about things. A quiet moment in a borrowed flat, looking out at the grey London drizzle, meant that she was soon reviewing each and every interaction she and Severus Snape had shared. She still thought of him as the unlikely friend she'd made in a cell-like hospital room, the man who'd put his arm around her and offered comfort when her injured body went into shock after Augustus Rookwood's attack.

Such amicable memories were now consigned to history, or so it seemed. Yet it wasn't as if things between them had been falling apart over time. As recently as last weekend he'd bought her a (heavily disguised) birthday present. He'd stepped in to protect her during her sortie into Knockturn Alley a mere three days ago.
And now this. He'd told her their connection didn't matter. He'd looked at her with such anger in his eyes. Hermione was desperate to learn what had caused this change in Snape's attitude. There had to be something: something real, something definable. It couldn't all be down to the way she'd been forced to consider him a suspect in the storage-level thefts. Not even if you combined it with how she'd never learned to keep from broadcasting her emotions.

But...

If that was all it had taken to turn Snape into this insult-slinging, tremulous-with-rage adversary, did that not strongly suggest his involvement in the whole sordid affair? Otherwise he'd be sitting somewhere quiet, watching the rain just as Hermione was watching it right now, wondering what the hell he'd done to earn her distrust.

God, she hoped it was something else. Some stupid misunderstanding that had nothing to do with theft and suspicion and bloody buggering snagberries. Everything else besides, she really didn't like the way the evidence seemed to be mounting up.

It was a conundrum. A hurtful one, at that. And unless Snape decided to explain his behaviour, she had to acknowledge that she would be stuck in this limbo of confusion for the foreseeable.

Instead of allowing herself to dwell any further, she switched on her phone and keyed in Dane's number.

"You're up there, right?" came his greeting. He sounded anxious.

"I'm up here. Why on earth wouldn't I be?"

"I just thought – you know. Maybe the owners had come home unexpectedly. Or you couldn't get in. Or something had called you away. Or–"

"Dane – calm down."

"Right. Sorry." She heard him take a deep breath. "I'll be okay when they get here. It's just the waiting."

"I know. Use the time to learn the flat."

"Learn the...what do you mean?"

"It's got to feel like your home. You don't want to trip over an unexpected side table or spend ten minutes looking for the tea-bags when you've got CID paying a visit. Kind of looks suspicious."

"Good point. Very good point. God, you're good at this, aren't you? Right. I'm going to make a cup of tea, pretend like I live here." She heard him stand up; the sofa downstairs had a distinctive creak. "Um – you want to stay on the phone for a bit?"

If the police telephoned ahead of their visit it would be to the flat's landline, not to Dane's mobile. So Hermione said, "We can still talk. I'm not going anywhere. But I'm a bit jealous."

"Jealous of what?"

"You. In a flat with actual, proper, normal tea." She made her voice jokingly wistful. "Bet you've got some lovely Tetley, or PG Tips. All there is up here is Peppermint and Echinacea and something called Tea-Tox."
"Crikey."

"I mean, honestly. I'd have been fine with a pack of Twinings English Breakfast, even a poncy sack of loose-leaf Ceylon from some overpriced specialist. Just something I can brew and put milk in. A nice, brown cup of tea. Is that too much to ask?"

"You want me to bring you one up?"

"Would you?" Hermione grinned. "Actually, I'll come down to you."

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The police officers arrived unannounced at a quarter to ten. Hermione noticed the unmarked car from her window seat: a big Mondeo with two thick-necked men in the front. They pulled in to the loading area outside the launderette without apparent concern for the parking restrictions. She was already phoning Dane when the officers got out. They were in plain-clothes, though this wasn't much of a disguise. Both of them might as well have been carrying placards reading: WE ARE COPPERS. Hermione hid a smile at the way a young man with over-gelled hair who'd been hanging around outside the newsagents opposite took one look and sauntered not-very-casually away.

"Here we go," she said when the call connected.

"They're here? Thank god for that. Let's get this done."

"Polyjuice. Right now. Give yourself chance to settle in to the new face. And don't forget your Eve's Drops."

"On it. Say hi in my ear when it's working, yeah?"

"Will do. Good luck."

Hermione cut the call, switched off her phone and took up her own phial of potion. She looked ruefully at it. "Bottoms up," she muttered, and knocked it back. It tasted like overcooked broad beans, which seemed fitting for the legume-friendly flat she currently occupied. Alas, Hermione wasn't keen on broad beans. She swallowed the mouthful determinedly, controlled the gag reflex, then spent a brief moment or two wondering whether Roksana Bramble's new potions volume might include ways to change classic recipes such that they didn't taste so consistently like old socks.

She waited. She tried closing her eyes in order to focus on the sounds she might hear when Dane took his own phial of potion. Realising that the traffic and pedestrian noise from the street was a distraction, she stood up and moved away from the window. She left the living room, closed the door behind her and sat down on the carpet in the narrow hall, as insulated from ambient noise as she could be.

She heard the police officers knock on the first floor flat, and for a moment thought that they were being very heavy-handed – like they'd been mainlining old episodes of The Sweeney or something – until she realised that she was hearing both the echo of their arrival up through the stairwell and what Dane was hearing in the flat downstairs.

"I'm right here with you," she said quietly.

"Oh. Hi. Wow. This is weird." A pause. "Not as weird as my new voice, though."
Dane's Polyjuiced voice now had more than a hint of the Black Country about it. Vocally, he'd morphed from Peter Jackson to Ozzy Osbourne.

"Go and answer the door," she said. "I'll be here if you need help."

She heard him breathe deeply – an odd sound to hear somebody else make, since it came through as Dane himself perceived it rather than from an external point of view – then she heard footsteps across an uncarpeted floor. The sound of a latch being turned. A door opening.

"Can I help you?" Dane's voice asked, just the right mixture of confusion and wariness.

"Mr Perkins?" a confident south-of-the-river accent said.

"Er, yes – that's me."

"Metropolitan Police. CID. Might we have a word, sir?"

A pause. Dane would hopefully be remembering to look at the proffered IDs.

"You'd better come in," he said.

There was a brief interlude of footsteps and shuffling and that distinctive creak of sofa amid other furniture-type-noises, before the police officer who was clearly the designated speaker got to the point.

"Mr Perkins, were you at the Burleigh Theatre on the Strand, last Saturday evening?"

"Yes. I had an audition. God – don't tell me I was so bad they thought they had to call the police!"

The police officers didn't laugh at the quip, as Hermione and Dane had decided they probably would not, last night when they'd worked it in to their role-plays. But it fitted well with Dane's persona and seemed like the kind of thing a nervous celebrity-wannabe might say.

"Can you tell me what you were doing in the hour leading up to your attendance at the theatre, sir?"

"Of course I can." Dane paused then said, "What's this about, officer? Was there a crime committed at the theatre, sir?"

"If you could just answer the question, sir."

"All right. I took the tube in to Charing Cross and got there about half seven. My audition wasn't till ten past eight so I found myself a quiet spot for a bit of practice – get in the zone, so to speak. I practised for a while, then I went to the theatre. Where–"

"Stop you there, sir, if you don't mind. Where was this quiet spot you found?"

"It was round by the big hotel between the Embankment and the Strand. What's it called? Um...Savoy. The Savoy."

A pause. Hermione imagined the two police officers sharing a significant look. So far Dane was doing very well.

"So you were near the front entrance, down by the river, is that it?" the police officer asked.

"God, no. They move people on round there, what with all the bigwigs coming and going. No,
round the back of the little arcade off the Strand, it opens out on a narrow lane. There's an underpass type thing where all the hotel deliveries go. I found a quiet nook, tucked to the side. By some big gate-type doors, but they were all shut up, set back from the road. It was quiet and private, so I got my gear on and practised." Dane paused, then said, "You, er, kind of need a private spot when you're wearing a big hooded cloak and waving a wand around."

A few seconds of quiet followed. Hermione used the lull to murmur, "You're doing great."

"I don't suppose you have your stage accoutrements available, do you?" the police officer asked.

"You want to see them?" Dane huffed with well-feigned surprise. "Look, fellas – I don't want to be in any way awkward, but it's starting to feel like I'm being deliberately kept in the dark. Have I been accused of doing something wrong?"

"If we could see the cloak, sir?"

Another huff. "Fine." The sound of Dane moving around the flat came through Hermione's link, and a door opened. He must have prepared the costume within easy reach in the flat's bedroom. He brought it back to the police officers. "Here you go. How it helps, I've no idea, but this is my magician's cloak. You like it, you can have it, 'cause I am never, ever going to wear it again."

"Never again, sir? Why is that?"

"Oh, come on. Sounds to me like you already talked to the crew at the theatre. I bombed. With arse-clenching, nightmare-inducing horror, I absolutely bombed." A beat. "Um – that's metaphorical, by the way. I'm not making a confession."

Again, neither police officer bothered to laugh and joke and be congenial. Hermione was relatively sure that police officers with a sense of humour existed. Unfortunately it seemed that any such officers were busy doing something else this morning.

A new voice said, "Definitely the right cloak, from what I can remember, Guv."

"Yes, thanks Colin," the other officer said, apparently annoyed that his colleague had ventured an opinion. Perhaps using phrases like 'from what I can remember' carried with it a hint of grey-area that the police officer in charge would have preferred to avoid. "Mr Perkins – do you remember if anyone else was in the vicinity while you were 'practising'?"

"Of course I do. It was only last Saturday. There was a woman, came along. Oh, hang on, back up. First of all there was a bloke. Tuxedo, slicked-back hair tied in a ponytail. He was hurrying along in front of me when I came out the back of the arcade – I don't think he saw me."

"A bloke, you say. About how tall?"

"Not very. Maybe five seven? On the portly side. Bit sleazy-looking. He ducked around a corner and disappeared." Hermione smiled at this description of Quentin Bittercup. "Didn't think much of it – I mean, why would I? So I got set up and got on with the show, getting my opening sorted, trying to calm my nerves. Then I hear a noise, like a yelp, and I turn around to face the street and there's this woman, leaning against the wall, looking at me like I'm stark bollock naked or something." A pause. "Um, 'scuse my language, officers."

"Can you remember what this woman looked like?" the officer asked.

"White. Pretty average height, slim build. Mid-thirties, maybe? Evening dress. Dark colour, maybe black or navy blue, with a shoulder wrap thingy. Dark hair, pinned back. I thought she
must be with the other bloke, the sleazy one in the tux, except she didn't seem to be looking for him. She was a bit unsteady on her feet, bless her. Think she, er, might have had a glass or two, you know?"

"And what happened then, sir?" the police officer pressed.

"Nothing much. I was glad of the audience, actually – it's always better to perform to someone. So I gave her a bit of a flourish with the old wand – oh, god, shit, that was not metaphorical, that was quite literal, all right? A wand. An actual wand. A pointy stick." A pause. "Not my p--"

"I think we follow, sir," the officer said blandly.

Dane coughed. Hermione did her best not to laugh, though she couldn't remember his performance being this funny last night.

"Yes. Right then. Anyway, I carried on with my act, and the woman watched for a moment and then--"

He stopped speaking, forcing the officer to say, "Then?"

"Well, I don't want to speak ill of a lady or anything, but she...sort of fell over."

"She fell over."

"On to some bin bags, just at the side of the double doors. A nice soft landing, fortunately. Looked like she tripped over her own feet. This is only a step or two away from where I was standing. She sagged a bit and grinned up at me then closed her eyes. I was still trying to work out what to do, whether I needed to get her any help, when she let out the biggest snore you ever heard. So I figured she seemed comfortable enough where she was, and I got on with my practice."

"I see." The police officer cleared his throat. "You didn't touch her at all?"

"Of course not! I don't go about touching up intoxicated women!" A pause. Dane's tone of voice hardened notably when he said, "What exactly am I being accused of, here? Because I give you my word, I did nothing untoward. The woman arrived, watched me, fell over and fell asleep. I left her there, snoring her head off, by the time I had to grab my kit and get my arse over to the Burleigh."

A pause. Hermione murmured, "So far so good. Don't push them too much, though. The main one won't like his authority being questioned. My diagnosis is a sense-of-humour-bypass. Poor chap."

"Something funny, sir?" the police officer demanded.

"Um – yes. A bit." Shit. Hermione reminded herself not to say anything to Dane that might make him smile. "Only when I was doing this trick I do with my wand, the woman – she was like all 'Ooh! Aah!' like she's watching fireworks. I really thought she was enjoying the show, right up till the moment the champagne caught up with her."

"Can you demonstrate what you were doing?" the other police officer said.

"Why would you need me to do that?"

"Just answer the questions as we ask them, sir," the first policeman put in. "Can you demonstrate?"
Dane huffed. "Fine." Hermione heard him stand up and take up his wand. "Lumos Argenti Tarda!" he cast.

A pause.

"How the hell did you do that?" the second officer demanded. "Loo-moss...what is that?"

"Latin. Well, pidgin Latin anyway. Sounds better for a magic spell than English. 'Slow silvery light!' Doesn't sound nearly as mystical. You know?"

"Can you explain the mechanics of this illusion, sir?" the first officer said.

"It's magic, of course."

"Please treat the interview with some respect, sir. This is a serious matter."

"Yeah, well, you say that, but I still don't know why you're even talking to me. What am I being accused of, here?"

"You've not been accused of anything, sir, you're just assisting us with our enquiries. Now how did you do the...silvery light thing."

"Basic A level science. A combination of liquid nitrogen and a laser pointer. Makes a trail like a sparkler. Neat, eh?"

"Very effective sir."

"Looks better when the footage is badly lit," the other officer grumbled. "You can see it's just a trick, now he's explained it."

"Thank you, Colin," the first one snapped. "And the other trick you pulled off, sir?"

"What other trick?"

"You changed your appearance."

"Oh. That." A pause. "How did you know about that?"

'Ooh, good catch, Dane,' Hermione thought to herself.

"The woman reported you," the police officer was forced to admit.

"Oh." Dane hesitated, then he said, "Um...um..."

Hermione realised with a start that he’d lost momentum. "So you came here to arrest me for being a bad stage magician?" she said clearly.

"So you're here to arrest me for being a bad stage magician?" Dane repeated.

Colin said, "I thought you looked quite good on camera, actually."

"It's on camera? Oh, thank god for that!" Hermione said, waiting while Dane repeated the words. "If it's all on camera then you must know I didn't do anything wrong."

"Can I ask you where you were on Tuesday this week, sir?" the first police officer said. Probably because he did not want to admit that the camera footage had mysteriously disappeared. Also,
perhaps, because he was getting annoyed with Colin and wanted to play the scary law-man again.

"Tuesday?" Dane prompted. "Um..."

"He wants to link you to the Muggle woman's death, basically because he's got nothing else on you," Hermione said quietly. "Tell him you were at home all day."

"I was here. Working. I work from home."

"And in the evening?"

"Still here. I don't go out much, mid-week."

"Can anybody corroborate that, sir?"

"Tell him no," she said. "You were alone."

"Unfortunately not. I live alone here."

"We can check the traffic camera outside, Guv," said Colin. "And the surveillance at the tube station. Should be easy enough to confirm it."

"Enough, Colin."

It seemed, however, that Colin was getting tired of his boss's posturing. "He's just a bloke, was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Wearing a big cloak." Colin's voice was cajoling. "Come on, Guv. We've found the guy, at least. Only took us two goes!"

Hermione sat up straighter. "Two goes?"

"Two goes?" Dane repeated, though she hadn't meant for him to do so.

Colin barked a laugh. "We've been trying to identify you for almost a week, now, Mr Perkins. Had a false start when we thought you was a waiter, works the Savoy. Staff there, they ID'd the bloke on the footage as one Sam Eades. Only turns out he wasn't nowhere near the hotel on the night in question."

The creak of furniture was abrupt. "Thank you for your time today, sir," said the Guv. "We'll be in touch if we need anything else."

It seemed even the aggressive one was giving up.

"Seriously, though," said Colin. "How did you make your face change like that?"

"Light and shadow and optical illusion," Dane said, back on scripted territory again. There was a swish, and Hermione knew he was wrapping the cloak around himself. A pause.

"Holy shit," said Colin. "That's...I don't...how were the Make Me a Star lot not impressed with that?"

Another swish. "You'd have to ask them. Tell you what, though, officer – fair play to you. You got me to put this thing on again, and I didn't think I ever would."

"If you're quite finished, Colin?" the Guv said.

"Sorry, Guv."
"I really thought the one in charge wanted to arrest me," he said.

"Maybe he did. He obviously gets off on the authority thing. You can pretty much guarantee his home life is hen-pecked and unfulfilled," she said.

He snorted. "Well. Turns out your lifeline was a great idea."

She tried to smile at the compliment. "Oh, I'm full of them." Someone thought she was more than 'clueless', at least.

"Want to come down? Bring your mug, I'll make you another cup of tea."

Hermione told him she'd be down in two ticks. She checked the rooms for any evidence of her temporary occupation, then she left the flat and locked the door behind her. While she had things she wanted to organise ready for the weekend ahead, there wasn't much point doing them until the Eve's Drops had worn off. She didn't need Dane listening in on her whole life. Fortunately it would only take another twenty minutes or so.

Just as well. Hermione was beginning to feel the urge to pee.

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"Sam Eades," Madam Churlish repeated, as they both made their report, still in the Ministry-owned flat. "Excellent. We hadn't identified him, yet."

"No address, though."

"Yes," she said. "That's a shame."

"Ah, don't worry. Looks to me like you need the Muggle Liaison people," Dane said. "Or, in other words – me! If we head back to the office I can pin him down for you."

"We can do that later on," Churlish agreed. "Let's wait for your face and voice to return to normal first."

"Right. Yes, good call."

"Do you need me for anything else?" Hermione asked.

"No, I don't think so," Churlish said. "You can get back to the office. Thank you for your assistance in this matter, Miss Granger."

"You're welcome. And I'm not going back to the Ministry – I don't work on Fridays."

Churlish arched a brow. "Then I'd better see to it that Mr Arnold arranges proper overtime payment."

"Won't say no. I like buying books." Hermione smiled at her colleagues. "Do let me know if I can help with anything else."

She excused herself from the Walthamstow flat and Apparated back to Diagon Alley. She had an owl to send.
To: Headmistress McGonagall  
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
25th September 1998

Could you please advise whether, as a Lost Seventh student, I'm allowed to borrow books from the Hogwarts library? If not, can any interim permissions be extended to me while I'm still studying for NEWTs?

Thanks in advance,  
Hermione Granger

---

To: Hermione Granger  
c/o Granger Residence, Tudor Close, Banstead  
25th Sept.

You still have full access to the library. Mdm Pince has a new pro forma for Lost Seventh students who wish to remove books from Hogwarts, requiring Mdm Pince's signature or my own, and a wand-seal. The book will be charmed to return to Hogwarts within a prearranged window of time if it is not returned in person.

Let me know when you're planning a visit and I'll do the paperwork for you. It will be lovely to see you outside of Transfiguration lessons, Hermione. I might even stop being a bit cross that you refused to come back!

Minerva McGonagall

---

Voicemail left on Hermione Granger's mobile phone, 17:23 25/9/98:

"Darling, it's your mother. There's one of those owls here. Frightened the living daylights out of me, pecking at the kitchen window. Never did get used to them. Anyway, I remembered the procedure and took its little message – it offered me a leg and everything, very polite and helpful, I must say. I offered it some of last night's chicken. I wasn't sure how it would be with raw meat. I mean, it would make sense that it would be fine, wouldn't it? Owls don't exactly cook the voles and mice they catch on little owl-sized barbecues, do they? But these creatures seem less like owls and more like owl-shaped postmen, which made me hesitate. So I hope that's all right. Um – the letter is here for you at your convenience. How you can read such small letters without straining your eyes is quite beyond me, but I suppose you know what you're doing. If you want to drop round to collect it then let me know and perhaps you could stay for supper? Dad's going to be a little late with an emergency extraction but I've got–"

beep

Voicemail left on Hermione Granger's mobile phone, 17:25 25/9/98:

"Sorry darling, me again, I think your phone ran out of tape or whatever it is these things are recorded on nowadays. Anyway, come for supper if you like. That is, if you aren't fed up with our company yet! I'm going to give this owl another piece of chicken and tell it thank you very much – it seems to be waiting. Maybe for a reply? Is that usual? Anyway, talk to you soon, darling. Go
safely now!

~~~

To: Headmistress McGonagall
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
25th September 1998

Thanks for the reply. I'll come up tomorrow, if that suits. Late morning? I know it's a Hogsmeade weekend and I'd rather do this while the school is quiet. (If this prevents you from enjoying a planned raid on Honeydukes then let me know and I'll reschedule.)

It will be lovely to see you too. We don't get much of a chance to catch-up during lessons. I hope term is going well, and your current Head Girl and Head Boy are proving worthy of their titles.

Hopefully you don't feel too badly let down by my absence at Hogwarts this academic year. There are few people in this world whose good opinion means more to me.

In future, could you send owls for me to the Weasley household? Grimmauld Place remains secret-kept, and my parents aren't always in during working hours. Molly says she's happy to alert me if something comes for me in the post.

Can I just confirm that the Restricted Section will be accessible to me tomorrow?

Hermione

~~~

To: Hermione Granger
c/o The Burrow, Ottery St Catchpole
25th Sept.

Access to the Restricted Section remains, as it will always remain, at the discretion of the teaching staff of Hogwarts. I will, of course, happily supply the necessary permission slip.

On an entirely unrelated note – the papers for the NEWT re-sits arrived this week. Usually we host re-sits on the first weekend in October, but if you're up here this weekend anyway and felt as though you could spare the time? Two hours for your written and forty-five minutes for your practical? Yes, I know what you've been telling me about sitting your NEWT early, but it's just a thought.

I should state, for clarity, that the permission slip I offer in the first paragraph does not depend* on you undertaking the exam, as mentioned in the second.

But wouldn't it be nice to get another NEWT under your belt? You've had three Lost Seventh lessons with me now, and I've managed to teach you absolutely nothing you don't already know backwards. If you don't do as well as you hope to, you can still complete the rest of the course and sit the NEWT again next summer.

Minerva McGonagall

*Not completely, anyway.

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"Manage some supper, Hermione?" called Molly Weasley, as Hermione came through the front door of the Burrow.

"No thanks. Ate with my parents earlier," she called back. She took a moment to greet the various Weasleys present; Arthur pressed a fatherly kiss atop her head, Percy shot her a buttoned-up smile as he perused some paperwork in the corner of the den, George offered a hug, eyes still shadowed by his loss. Hermione then went through to the kitchen.

Molly gave her a half-hug with the arm that wasn't directing a wooden spoon, a feather duster and a scrubbing brush. "The letter's on the window ledge next to the Strangleleaf. Mind it doesn't nip you!"

"Thanks, Molly." Hermione kissed Molly's floury cheek. She hadn't forgotten all that stalwart support last Saturday at her birthday party.

"Everything all right, love?" Molly asked in a quieter voice.

"Almost everything is fine," Hermione said.

"Almost?"

"Well, you can't have everything, can you?" She wandered over to the windowsill and eyed the small Strangleleaf plant in its pot. The whip-like tendrils that sprouted above each leaf node shivered threateningly at her proximity. "Oh yeah?" Hermione said to it. "You and whose army?" She saw her owl-sized post, snatched it with a well-timed grab, smirked as the tendrils missed her fingers by almost a second, then blew a raspberry at it.

"I'd sling the blasted thing out on its ear. Or whatever the plant equivalent is," Molly said as she bustled about. "But the beggaring stuff is so delicious in soups!"

Hermione grinned and came back to Molly. "Can I help with anything?"

"No, no, all in hand. You missed Ronald, I'm afraid. He and Mariana are off on one of their totally innocent 'walks' that none of us are supposed to raise eyebrows about."

Hermione felt a bit rueful and nostalgic. "Were he and I that obvious?"

"Oh, sweetheart, there isn't an eighteen year old on this planet that fails to be painfully obvious when it comes to their hormones. Bless the lot of you." She sighed, sounding wistful. "Common sense, respect, kindness. That's all a good parent can try to teach." She paused, looking at Hermione for a moment, then asked, almost carefully, "We did teach him the right things, didn't we?"

"He's one of the best men I know," Hermione assured her. "Gentle and giving and thoroughly enthusiastic."

Molly coloured and coughed. "Yes, well, there's some things a mother doesn't need to know." She looked pleased, though. "Now, you'll have some tea with us at least, won't you? We never see you here these days, what with this wildly busy life you lead! Go and sit down with the boys, I'll bring a tray through. You can tell us all about how you're getting on with Batty Arnold."

Hermione choked on a laugh. "Batty?"

"Oh, I shouldn't call him that. Not anymore. You know how nasty kids can be."
"And the reason for this unfortunate nickname?" Hermione prompted.

'Poor lad had such a crush on one of the Hufflepuff beaters – this is back in, ooh, '63, '64? Jonathan Platt. Everyone knew it. Balthazar Arnold was Batty about Platty. Didn't hide it. Enchanted the boy's face on a banner to wave at games. Most of the school thought he was making an awful embarrassment of himself, right up until the Yule Ball of his final year. Showed up with Platty on his arm, snogged the living daylights out of each other right there on the dance floor. Never seen Horace Slughorn blush like that. Pomona Sprout couldn't keep from cheering, though. Two of her Hufflepuffs, upstaging all the rest! And with tongues!' Molly snorted, eyes distant with memory. "Always on the earthy side, our Pomona, bless her heart." She shook the memories away. "And for the record – you may not tell your boss that I told you that story. Now off you go. I'll bring some tea."

Hermione went to sit down, telling herself sternly that she must not slip up and start calling her boss Mr Batty. Once seated, and half-listening to Arthur's enthused recount of his investigations into Muggle snack-food following her birthday party last week, she opened up her reply from Headmistress McGonagall.

She read it through. She noted the undisguised attempt at manipulation.

"And I'm being called unsubtle," she muttered after a moment.

"...called Hula-Hoops. I honestly didn't--" Arthur stopped. "Sorry, dear, did you say something?"

"Nothing important." She frowned at the letter, even as she felt a knot of nerves that had been present inside her gut for weeks on end loosen and tug apart, accompanied by a background thought of 'Fuck it, why not?' She looked up at Arthur. "Um – can I borrow Henrietta?"

"She's incubating a clutch, I'm afraid."

"Use Hermes," Percy put in. "She's in the cage next door – she knows you."

"Thanks, Percy." Hermione rummaged in her bag for paper and pen, then began to write.

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To: Headmistress McGonagall
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
25th September 1998

Fine. I'll sit the NEWT. Ten am, when I arrive tomorrow. I'd prefer to have it over and done with before I start my research, given that I've now got to spend the whole evening revising!

Since I would hope that I'm in your good books now – would it be possible to have a quiet word with Professor Sprout while I'm at Hogwarts?

See you tomorrow,

Hermione

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Back to School Mr Bean

"There's mud on the floor, cigarettes and whisky on the table, fish on a plate for you and a memory of them in my mind.
Hardly conclusive evidence I know, but then all evidence is circumstantial."

Douglas Adams, The Restaurant at the End of the Universe 1980

Hermione stirred from a tumble of chaotic dream images to find that her duvet felt heavier than usual. For the most fleeting of instants she was certain that the weight upon her breast was Severus Snape's deliciously possessive hand. Her brain stepped in all too quickly, however, to point out that Snape currently despised her and was therefore an unlikely bedfellow.

(In moments such as those, Hermione wished she could be slower on the uptake. Would a few seconds of pleasant fantasy have troubled her overactive brain so much?)

In any case, with the smallest of movements it became obvious she had fallen asleep under a big pile of books. Hardly surprising, since she'd been trying to cram for a NEWT she had not anticipated taking for another eight months. She breathed deeply, wondered what time it was and whether she ought to do a little more cramming or maybe just grab another forty winks. Then she wrinkled her nose at the odd smell in her bedroom.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo!"

Hermione startled, causing a minor earthquake of books. She floundered for a moment before she managed to sit up and look around.

There was a rooster strutting around under her desk, occasionally pecking at the floorboards and ruffling its feathers. When it caught her eye it did not seem impressed that she remained abed, considering it had done such an excellent job of telling her that the sun was coming up.

"Sod off," she told it. "You aren't even properly sentient. You're a bloody pillow."

At least this explained the crick in her neck. Hermione flopped back on the pillowless bed and reminded herself that when practising Transfiguration spells in the early hours of the morning it would be as well to return the Transfigured objects to their original form before falling asleep.

She found her wand amidst the books and waved it in the vague direction of the desk. Peace reigned for a moment: long enough for her to lift her head and blink blearily at the pillow now lying with an admirable lack of animation on the bedroom floor. Then the blessed quiet was broken by the thump-thump-thump of somebody hurriedly descending Grimmauld Place's aging staircase.

Harry barely waited long enough for her to call admittance before he opened the bedroom door.

"Was that a cock?" he demanded.

"Oh, god," she replied, not knowing where to even begin with that one.

"Please stop saying 'cock'."

She looked up from her tome-laden duvet to see Harry in his bathrobe and with half a face of shaving foam. He was so redolent with the smell of Radox shower gel that Hermione wondered whether he'd bothered rinsing off. *(Homo Hornificus*, she dubbed him. Just your bog-standard teenager getting ready to visit his girlfriend.)

"Did you run out of blankets?" he asked wryly.

"What?"

"Books. Everywhere. Hey – at least you fell asleep in bed, this time."

"Go and finish shaving."

"Um...boy hen?"

"It's gone now. I was practising Transfiguration."

"Why?"

"NEWT."

"As in the actual exam?"

"As in," she agreed.

"Today? Brilliant! We can go up together. Ginny'll be so pleased. We can have lunch at the Three Broomsticks. Ron's coming up for lunch too, so it'll just be like the old days. Total nostalgia trip!"

Hermione saw her carefully-laid plan for a stealth-visit to Hogwarts, cunningly arranged during a Hogsmeade-Saturday, halfway to going up in smoke. So she panicked and told a white lie.

"I'm taking the exam at the Ministry. Sorry," she said.

"Oh. Right." Harry looked so disappointed that she nearly came clean. Then he shrugged.

"Okay, but if you finish early – and, you know, you're Hermione so that's sort of likely – then you could still come up. We'll probably be around most of the afternoon. Shopping in the morning, lunch at the Broomsticks, then we were going to head up around the eastern crag, the one that overlooks the station. If it isn't raining. Curfew isn't till half four."

"I'll see how the day goes," she said, already wondering how she was going to navigate this if Harry came to realise that she'd lied.

"Great! Ron'll be chuffed. We missed you at curry-night. Wasn't the same. Mariana doesn't leave nearly as much naan for Ron to pinch!"

So Mariana now had a standing invite to curry-night? Seemed that Hermione would have been a little on the superfluous side anyway.

Harry turned and left the room to thump his way back up the stairs and finish his shave. Hermione groaned and got out of bed, shoving books and scrolls aside. She found the floor with her feet, stood up, walked two paces towards her discarded pillow and then promptly slipped arse-over-tit.

"Ow," she complained as the shock of impact gave way to the blossoming of bruises. She looked
at her foot, looked at the floorboards and then she remembered the odd smell she'd noticed earlier. A pile of recent rooster-doings. Right on the varnished floorboards in a gap between two rugs. And now, smeared disgustingly over her heel. Sometimes, Transfiguration could work a little too well.

"My pillow shat on my floor," Hermione muttered.

Even at this early hour, it occurred to her that these signs and portents did not bode well for the day.

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Timing her arrival carefully, Hermione Apparated to a spot she knew just beyond a five-bar gate set into the hedge-lined lane that linked Hogsmeade village with the school. At ten minutes to ten, even the stragglers should be out of sight by now. A cautious glance proved this to be true; the lane was empty. Still, she Disillusioned herself as a precaution before she walked up to the school.

Her ankle was hurting from that earlier clumsiness. She did her best not to put too much weight on it but otherwise ignored the discomfort.

The weather was cool and overcast, but it had not yet turned chilly. With her head already stuffed full of pre-exam nerves, Golden Trio regrets, research projects and crime investigations, not to mention the way that things seemed to be falling apart between her and a certain Potions professor at a spectacular rate of knots, it didn't even occur to her to check how comfortable she felt about this visit until the school gates came into view.

She frowned as she tried to get a sense of herself. Last time she'd been up here was in June, and she'd suffered with flashbacks. Everything was rather peaceful now; it wasn't easy to reconcile the familiar buildings with the horrific battle that had taken place here. She monitored her own physical symptoms: her heart rate was elevated only from the walk uphill; she didn't feel shaky; her chest was not encumbered by that strange panic-attack tension.

She thought she was probably okay. Ish. And it was unlikely that anyone would drop a massive section of levitated masonry from a considerable height today, as had happened in June. Big bangs and dust clouds were never very helpful when your nerves were on edge.

She shrugged off the memories, set her shoulders and then moved forward.

The gates saw past her Disillusionment charm, recognised her and swung open. She walked along the drive towards the school buildings, eyes running over the towers and spires, the battlements and roofs. The repair work that had been underway back in June was mostly completed, though there remained notable absences in the familiar Hogwarts shape where it was silhouetted against the grey-washed sky. But the castle was safe now, and it was healing. As Hermione made her way up the drive she did not experience any anxiety but rather a wistful sense of loss. She knew she would never again feel like this was her home.

Hermione removed her Disillusionment spell before entering the castle, to find Headmistress McGonagall waiting in the entrance hall. Their greeting was brief but warm. It struck Hermione as a bit topsy-turvy that Hogwarts was now one of those places where her relationship with Minerva McGonagall had stopped being defined as teacher-and-student. In their Lost Seventh lessons at the Ministry the old roles were in place, but back here, in the very place that had established that teacher-and-student dynamic, the formality had faded.
"Are you limping?" the Headmistress asked her as they proceeded up one of Hogwarts's imposing staircases.

"Oh. Um, yes. A bit."

"What on earth did you do to yourself?"

"Slipped and fell, earlier this morning," Hermione said. She didn't add that her initial fall had caused only a bruised backside, and the twisted ankle had come about afterwards. (She'd managed to haul herself upright and then tried to hop back to the bed to get her wand, so as to avoid smearing rooster guano over any more of her bedroom. It turned out that she was far from accomplished when it came to hopping.)

"Poppy's out on Hogsmeade patrol," McGonagall said. "If you're still around later on, I'm sure she'll sort you out."

"It's nothing serious. I'll be fine."

"Now, your practical," McGonagall went on, "is to be conducted by an outside assessor." An arch look. "Apparently I can't be trusted to remain impartial. Luckily Madame Fournier was willing to accommodate you today." A sniff. "Though I suspect this was mostly to do with the free Hogwarts luncheon."

"Right you are," Hermione replied. "So in other words – I've got it all organised and people have put themselves out, so don't wimp out on me now."

"Just so." Another look; a kinder one. "Ach, you'll do fine, Hermione. Better than fine. You're one of those rare students that makes the quill-pushers in Magical Education panic about needing to create another grade above Outstanding."

Hermione tried not to be too grumpy when she said, "You do realise that the problem I have with these exams is that everyone expects me to do brilliantly? Even after I've been denied an entire year's worth of lessons?"

"I know," McGonagall said.

"Which means that the moment I slip up and manage a 'mere' Exceeds Expectations, I've basically failed."

McGonagall huffed. "Yes, well, that's the price you pay for being born with a good brain, I'm afraid. You'll just have to accept that. Now! Here we are."

They'd arrived outside a smaller classroom in the west wing where Hermione had taken some of her sixth year Transfiguration classes. McGonagall knocked, opened the door and led Hermione inside.

Madame Fournier, a retired professor formerly of Beauxbatons, was waiting. Introductions were made. Hermione relinquished her bag and hung up her jacket. McGonagall indulged in a momentary display of uncharacteristic sentiment, gripping Hermione's shoulders, looking at her closely and smiling approval at what she saw. Then she left.

Madame Fournier gestured for Hermione to move into the space before one of the front desks. With a whisk of her wand, Fournier removed the cover from a prepared tray. Five everyday items had been arranged upon it.
"To begin," Fournier said in heavily accented English, "three of these items 'ave been Transfigured from other items. Two 'ave not. You must work out which. Return the three to their original form, and make for me a candle and candlestick from the other two."

Hermione drew a deep breath, visualised the spellwork she needed to produce, and got started.

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The practical exam was finished within thirty-five minutes. Madame Fournier nodded her satisfaction and indicated that Hermione might use the time before her written paper to visit the facilities and grab some tea. Unwilling as she was to go wandering about the castle, Hermione made do with a hobble to the nearest loos and then a glass of water.

She'd settled in to a corner desk by the time Headmistress McGonagall returned.

"There's coffee and biscuits in the staff room, you know," McGonagall said.

"I'm fine. I just need to get this over with."

The Headmistress rolled her eyes. "What are you still nervous about? You know, Madame Fournier has just spent five minutes bending my ear about how difficult it will be to submit her assessment!"

"Why?" Hermione tried not to panic. "I thought it went okay. What did I get wrong?"

"Nothing. That's the point. How can Madame Fournier's marking appear objective when the student has refused to do a single thing which would allow her to knock off a few marks?"

"Oh. Right. Um – sorry?"

McGonagall snorted a laugh. "Not that I told you about that, of course. Being entirely impartial. Now. Are you ready for the written paper?"

"Of course not," Hermione grumbled. "I'm only here because I was blackmailed into this."

"Too bad. It's happening now."

"Will you be invigilating?"

"Until twelve, when I'm off to get my lunch. Professor Flitwick volunteered to cover for the remainder of the time." McGonagall checked her pocket-watch. "Five to eleven. Shall we begin, Miss Granger?"

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Hermione grabbed a bite with Professor Flitwick in the staff room after finishing the exam. The diminutive Charms professor was kind and supportive and only made one pointed remark about how she was also entirely ready for her Charms NEWT.

She was reasonably sure she'd done all right on her Transfiguration paper. She'd always had near-perfect recall for the things she read, which gave her a considerable advantage when it came to written exams. Everyone was good at something, were they not?

With the afternoon, the overcast skies cleared to allow some late September sunshine to break through. Hermione smiled, pleased that Harry and Ginny and whoever was with them might have the weather to extend their time together. She had no desire to go and find them, though. After
more than three hours at the school, she was finally able to go and do the thing she'd come here to
do in the first place. Hermione went to the library.

The place was quiet. It was too early in the term for panicked revision, and only the more diligent
of the younger students were dropping by to work on essays. Hermione had not been the first swot
to grace these walls, and she wouldn't be the last.

Her first port of call was *The Magic of the Tundra*. She knew it had sections on flora and fauna so
rare they didn't get more than a single line in the *Index Ingredientus*, and nothing at all in Spore's
*One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*. The book had also been referenced several times by the
author of the treatise she'd picked up from Shadwell's second-hand bookshop in Knockturn Alley,
so she expected it to be informative. She went to the Herbology section and traced the spines,
working her way alphabetically through the authors to Eriksson.

The book, annoyingly, wasn't there. Hermione scanned the nearby shelves in case it had been
picked up then put back carelessly – not every user of libraries maintained Hermione's own strict
rules about proper alphabetisation – but in the end she had to give up and go and talk to Madam
Pince.

Harry was right about the vulture thing. The woman's face could at best be described as pinched,
at worst, cruel and predatory. Still, Hermione had learned early in life that people who wielded
authority like a blade tended to respond to polite deference more than demands. She bade Madam
Pince a courteous good afternoon, refused to flinch at the outraged look Pince offered her for
having the audacity to use her voice within the hallowed confines of the Hogwarts library, then
made her enquiry regarding the whereabouts of *The Magic of the Tundra*.

Pince huffed and trembled with the need to come up with a reason to send Hermione away with a
flea in her ear. Hermione stood her ground patiently. (She'd survived living on the run, torture and
murder attempts. An irate librarian no longer had any ability to make her quail.) Pince finally
turned to the ledger on her desk and traced an appropriately vulture-like talon back through the list
of recent withdrawals.

"It's out," Pince finally said.

"I gathered as much," Hermione replied. "Is there a return date?"

"There is not."

Hermione blinked. Hogwarts library books could only be borrowed for a specific and non-
egotiable loan period. Pince was more possessive about the library's collection than Ron used to
be about his chocolate frog cards.

"You don't know when to expect this book back?" she pressed.

"I believe that is what I said, Miss Granger. Is there anything else? I have work to do."

"Could you tell me who has this book on loan? I shall ask them myself when they're likely to be
done with it."

Pince gave an unkind smile. "You're welcome to try, though seeing as Professor Snape currently
has this title in his possession I would not rate your chances of a polite reply – nor would you
deserve one."

There was a chilling pause while Hermione digested this information: Severus Snape had sought
out one of the few books in the entire magical world that contained information about snagberries.
"Oh, no," she whispered.

Pince mistook her reaction. "Do let me know if you wish to harass him for the book, though. I'd be delighted to draw up a chair and watch. Was there anything else?"

Hermione tilted her head to one side and studied the woman. Oddly, she felt very calm when she said, "I don't suppose you'd like to talk about whatever it was that happened to you? The thing that made you so very angry with everyone under the age of twenty? I'd be glad to lend a discreet ear. Sometimes it helps to talk."

Pince looked at Hermione as though she'd taken to speaking in tongues, before turning away. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Miss Granger. Go about your business."

Hermione wandered back to the Herbology section, feeling as though a small victory had been won.

She spent an hour browsing, making notes, exploring her greatly expanded research options. Just as she'd found earlier in the week, few volumes made note of the rare snagberry, but there were references to doloris in several of the less widely-read texts. Hermione moved on to the associated genre of Potions, checking information against other sources. She frowned as the prickle of an idea began to emerge.

Once she'd exhausted the shelves of the main library, Hermione took a detour to the seating area just beside Madam Pince's desk. There she picked up one of the week's issues of the *Daily Prophet*. She flicked through it, to the classifieds and advertisements section towards the back. Nothing...she picked up another...nothing...another...

There. She knew she'd seen something like this in the paper. In a mid-sized box on the lower half of the page, an advertisement read as follows:

TIRED OF BEING TAKEN FOR GRANTED?

FRUSTRATED BY THEIR INDIFFERENCE?

READY TO MOVE ON, BUT CAN'T QUITE DO IT?

Then you need Hartson's Heart Hardener*!

Our new formula guarantees a gentle reversal of any inconvenient feelings. Whether you're married to a straying spouse or plagued by unrequited passion, our tried and tested hate potion can take away the pain. With one simple dose, your beloved's worst traits will be laid bare. You'll wonder what you ever saw in them!

Make that break!

*As recommended by the Prophet's advice columnist D. Shaman.

"A hate potion," she muttered to herself.
She'd heard of such things, seen the products on the shelves in Pippins' Potions and similar stores. She knew they could be used in lieu of a standard antidote for anyone under the influence of a love potion. But like most potions that claimed to alter the most fundamental things about you, their effectiveness was usually limited and temporary.

That didn't mean someone else hadn't embraced the notion of a hate potion, though. What she needed now was an actual recipe to confirm what her research suggested: that there could be a connection between St Mungo's vandalised plants and this kind of brew.

She went through to the library's Restricted Section, openly traversing the roped-off entrance and ignoring the disapproving harrumph from Pince. The Restricted Section was a narrow hall lined with shelves on both sides. A sealed cabinet with a heavy glass front stood at the end, housing those books deemed too dangerous to be left uncaged. In front of the cabinet was a desk and chair. Some of the shelved books shivered as she drew closer, others seemed to snarl, but Hermione knew from experience that the most dangerous of these restricted tomes were always the ones that remained quiet and unassuming.

Hermione looked along the shelf housing volumes on potions, poisons and maladies, but she did not find any book entitled *Baneful Brews*. That was almost as annoying as missing out on *The Magic of the Tundra*. She gave up and hauled out *Moste Potente Potions* by Phineas Bourne: a volume that, over the years, had almost become an old friend. She carried the book to the desk and sat down.

She looked up 'hate potion' in the index. There was no such listing. Hermione was nothing if not a walking thesaurus, however, and her quick eye soon found a reference to a recipe for a Philtre of Ill Will. It was worth a look, so she turned to the page referenced and read the recipe.

The Philtre of Ill Will was indeed a hate potion, designed to be activated – like Polyjuice – by a hair from the head of its target. Where 'Hartson's Heart Hardener' was advertised as a means to rid oneself of inconvenient feelings, the Philtre of Ill Will had been designed to manipulate others. Thus, the cuckolded spouse would not take the potion but would dose their treacherous partner into a sudden and inexplicable loathing for their illicit paramour. Business contracts might be scuppered; promotions denied to rivals; long-term happy romances broken up, leaving a confused and heartbroken lover ripe for the plucking.

It was pretty appalling stuff, really. But worst of all was the list of ingredients for its brewing:

- Dried adder's fork, crushed
- Seventeen leaves of doloris, finely sliced
- A piece of bark from the Siberian larch measuring two inches by two inches, cut into narrow strips and then tied with a tendril cut from a devil's snare
- Five drops of wormwood infusion
- Three rose thorns, dried and powdered
- Hair or blood from the individual deserving of ill will

Bourne's notes detailed the contribution made by each ingredient. The adder's fork poisoned the well of emotion. The doloris leaves were a suppressant that worked magically on positive feelings but, used in conjunction with the wormwood infusion, left negative feelings well alone. The bark of a tree accustomed to harsh conditions, brewed in the potion like a *bouquet garni* along with a devil's snare tendril, accelerated the incipient cooling of ardour and denied the imbiber any chance to struggle against this change. The rose thorns were magically symbolic of the pain inherent in love, and the power to be gained when love was allowed to wither into dust.

Hatred in a bottle. The bile rose in Hermione's throat and she swallowed it back down. She
wondered whether the Death Eaters had discovered this recipe. It seemed right up their street.

More importantly, here it was: a recipe using two of the stolen ingredients, with the potential to accommodate the others. Take one nasty little hate potion, augment it with ashgrass, and what do you get? Broken hearts, broken trusts, perhaps even broken people.

Then there was this business about the bark.

"Snagberry bark is a thing," she murmured to herself, remembering her visit to Shyverwretch's shop. "And long-standing recipes can always be refined..."

She now had a working hypothesis regarding the thefts from St Mungo's: it was all in aid of brewing a hate potion. The ingredients were right, and this theory explained the one thing she had not yet been able to square away:

If Severus Snape truly was the thief, and he'd stolen snagberries – as she'd originally thought – in order to create a powerful regenerative salve to cure his new girlfriend's scarred face, then why would he have taken an axe to the plant? Snape knew plants. He respected them. He valued them and their propagation. If he'd wanted berries then he would have picked some bloody berries. He would _not_ have risked wounding a rare and precious shrub. Especially when chopping off a bough was likely to be noisier, slower and more obvious than a spot of berry-picking.

That part of the evidence had never sat right with Hermione.

However, if he _hadn't_ been after the berries...if, instead, he'd needed a length of bark from a shrub known for its ability to survive the fiercest, coldest, driest conditions? A shrub that might be likened to the Siberian larch, only on steroids?

>'You don't know that snagberry bark would be a sensible swap for larch,' she told herself quickly. 'Nor do you know if you're barking – ha ha, very funny – up the wrong tree. And even if you're right about the hate potion, why would Snape even want one of those? Pretty much everyone already hates him anyway! No, no, the healing salve made sense. But this? You're flailing, Granger. Pack it in.'

For a moment she sat quietly at that desk, alone in a narrow room full of ancient and dangerous tomes, staring at the printed pages before her. Horrified by what they seemed to be telling her.

Then her nastiest inner voice added: 'Kind of feels like he's been dosing himself with a hate potion this last few days, though, doesn't it?'

"Don't get carried away," she warned herself out loud. With a sigh, she copied down the recipe and made some notes on her writing pad, then she closed _Moste Potente Potions_ and stood up to return it to the shelf.

She stopped. She narrowed her eyes at the wide blotter encased in a leather frame that graced the desk; the one she'd been resting _Moste Potente Potions_ upon. In the very corner of the blotter, in pencil, someone had scrawled: 'p213'. It seemed an odd coincidence that this was the very page on which the Philtre of Ill Will's recipe had been printed.

Hermione bit her lip. She took the book back to its shelf then returned to the desk. She ran her fingers lightly over the blotter, feeling the weave of the absorbent parchment and the indentations of pencil strokes. Someone had used a bit of force when taking their notes.

Severus Snape had striking, confident, forceful penmanship.
"This is not going to work," she muttered, even as she rummaged through her pencil case for the softest pencil she had with her.

She found the stub of an old 2B and checked the graphite tip. It would do. She slanted the pencil along the blotter until it was almost horizontal, then began to shade over the part which held most of the indentations. Scribbles and nonsense emerged in criss-crossed white lines which escaped the graphite. She kept at it, taking her pencil shading to the further edges.

When she was no longer revealing any white indentations, she stopped. She bent down and scrutinised the marks she had exposed.

On one side, quite clearly, were the words 'devil's snare'. Below was a sequence of letters that could only be the latter part of 'infusion'. And just below that, on an upturned angle as though someone had added an additional note after the fact, was the following:

'\textit{larch bark – snagberry}?'

And every single decipherable word was written in Severus Snape's unmistakable hand.

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"Hello there, Miss Granger! Careful of the screechsnap – it's young and ornery. I suppose I should call you Hermione these days, shouldn't I? If you're amenable. Do call me Pomona. Not Pommy, though. Or not twice, anyway! Now don't mind young Mr Dunford there, he's just helping me with the potting on. Lots of seedlings on the go. Had to replace a fair bit of stock after that dreadful business. Curses flying around are awful for plants. Did you know they demolished one of my greenhouses? Of course you did. You were here!...no, Mr Dunford, the dragon dung. The mooncalf is only for the tentacular, and you're not going anywhere near that until it learns some manners. Now then, Minerva said you wanted a word. What can I do for you?" Pomona Sprout stopped talking for a moment and cocked her head to one side as she looked at Hermione. "My dear, are you all right?"

Hermione swallowed and nodded. "Perfectly," she lied. She hitched her bag on her shoulder. The thick parchment from the Restricted Section's desk blotter, removed and rolled up and stowed carefully away, felt like it weighed a ton.

"Good, good." Sprout's head tilted the other way, patched old hat going with the swing as though it was welded to the kindly professor's head. "Goodness me, you are grown-up now, aren't you? You look five years older than when last I had you in my greenhouses."

"A lot has happened," Hermione pointed out.

"Oh, indeed, indeed." A sigh. "I was sorry to lose you as my student. You'd have done well on your NEWT."

She smiled at that. "I'm sorry too. But it's hard, being back here. And it's tricky to do Herbology practicals with only quill and parchment."

"Oh, so it is. Hands-on, all the way." Sprout gave a sad smile of understanding and patted Hermione's arm. "Now, what did you say you needed?"

Hermione had decided against going straight in with a snagberry question. If Snape had been up here in recent weeks, as the evidence indicated, it was possible that he'd have come down to the greenhouses to pick his former colleague's brain. As bad as things were between Snape and herself, the last thing she needed was Professor Sprout mentioning to him that Hermione Granger,
oddly enough, had been asking the same questions he had.

So instead she asked, "The harvesting of bark. I don't remember talking about it in your classes."

"No? I suppose not. Bit advanced for Hogwarts. Kind of skill you learn on an apprenticeship. Tricky business." Sprout thought for a moment. "Two very important things to remember – be careful not to remove so much bark that the circumference of the trunk is compromised. Girdling, it's called. And don't dig too far into the sap wood, either. Kills most trees and shrubs. Nasty, slow death – cuts off the supply to the leaves. Bark won't grow back, of course. The wound will heal eventually, but until it does the poor tree is prone to infection, infestation, so on."

"So plants grown for their bark tend to be shorter lived than those that provide leaves, berries, flowers, that kind of thing?"

"On the whole. Depends how much you take. You can take a bough and strip it for bark, of course, if your tree has plenty to spare. Wait long enough and it'll grow more."

"And you just cut the bark off?"

"If you know what you're doing. Better to do it magically. A modified air-blasting spell, very focused, will do quite well. Alternatively, take a felled bough and leave it outside for a few months. Let the beetles do the work for you. Bark'll pull right off."

Hermione nodded. "Have you used much bark in brewing?"

"Hmm. Wiggentree, obviously. Willow. Chap who writes for Greener Fingers swore by silver birch bark in his recipe for a compost additive." Sprout frowned into the distance. "Bark is protective and resilient, so it tends to be used when such qualities are needed." She blinked. "Why do you ask? Research project?"

"When do I not have research projects on the go?" Hermione quipped, hoping Professor Sprout did not pick up on the evasion. Then, taking a deep breath: "So, er, did you hear about this book that Roksana Bramble is bringing out?"

"Ha! Severus talked of little else when he was up here!" It was to Hermione's good fortune that Sprout chose that moment to turn to the small boy who was helping her. "A richer mix for the bubotubers, Mr Dunford. Remember? No, you won't need your gloves, they haven't set any pustules yet. Two parts compost, one part dragon dung, one part gravel."

Young Mr Dunford, who'd been shooting Hermione the occasional awed look, said, "Um, the gravel is running out."

"Then go and fetch some more. Round the back of greenhouse two, in the brown sacks."

Mr Dunford scooted off. Sprout turned back to Hermione. "Yes, it's a marriage made in heaven, that one. Roksana was one of my finest students, back in the day. A credit to the House. Brilliant girl. Ha! Less a girl now, of course. Must be into her forties. Exceptional mind for herbology as well as potions. Inquisitive." Sprout smiled widely. "And there's our Severus. After all his troubles – and I hold myself partly accountable there, I admit it, should have kept the faith, mea culpa. I told him I was sorry, but he made himself so damn easy to mistrust!"

"Yes, he did indeed," Hermione agreed. She pressed her left thumbnail into the pad of her index finger, hard as she could, in an attempt to keep her composure.

"Onwards and upwards, though, eh?" Sprout went on jovially. "And it's wonderful to see him so
enthused by something. By someone! He came up to the school a few weeks ago, you know. Just before term began. First time I'd seen him in months. Must have been odd for him, revisiting the scene, so to speak. So much happened, didn't it? He didn't show it, of course."

"Of course. Why was he up here, did he say?" Hermione asked as casually as she could.

"Fine-tuning his Lost Seventh course, at a guess. Did a bit of brainstorming with Horace down in the dungeons, raided the library, so on, so forth. Since he was up here anyway, Minerva asked him to join us for dinner. Just the core staff, you know, nothing formal, but it was still a surprise when he said yes. Minerva and I worried it was going to be awkward, but he was quite the conversationalist." Sprout paused and looked thoughtful. "Do you know, I'd even go as far as to say, he was relaxed and forthcoming. Severus! Took most of us a while to get used to it."

"I can imagine," Hermione murmured.

"He told us about the book, of course. It was Roksana-this, Roksana-that. Bless him. Never thought I'd see the day." Sprout chuckled to herself, turning half away. "Pair of mavericks. Such bright souls, the both of them."

The smile Hermione had plastered in place was beginning to ache. "Yes, I'm very much looking forward to reading the book," she said through teeth that wanted only to clench. "I'm intrigued about how to improve recipes by swapping out one ingredient for a better choice, that kind of thing."

"Hmm. Isn't hard, usually, to identify an alternative. It's getting a hold of the damn thing!" Sprout was frowning as she parted the foliage of a nearby flitterbloom patch. "I mean, it's obvious that powdered graphorn will give your endurance potion more of a kick than the standard staghorn powder, but how do you get hold of the stuff? Might as well be non-tradeable, the amount Dogweed charges down in the village. Four Galleons an ounce! Honestly!"

Hermione saw an opportunity. "Yes, well, that's one good thing about finishing my Potions NEWT at St Mungo's. The storage level at the hospital has some incredible ingredients."

"Hmm. So I believe, so I believe." The tentacles of the flitterbloom seemed to be trying to block whatever it was that Sprout was doing. "Severus said he was hoping to commandeer some glasswing beetle larvae for Flameaway," she added distractedly.

"That's right. And we've had fresh ashgrass, this last week."

"Really? Goodness, I hope you were careful. Dangerous stuff." A pause, a grab, and, "Ha! Got you!" Sprout turned back to Hermione with a look of triumph on her face, one hand still holding the flitterbloom patch aside and a large beetle wriggling between the thumb and finger of her other hand. "We have chizpurfles! Knew I'd heard some chittering. Go and fetch Mr Dunford, would you? I don't want to lose track of this nest. We can breed them for the carapaces."

Hermione hid her sigh. "Yes. Will do." She left Sprout half-submerged in flitterbloom foliage and headed off towards greenhouse two.

She didn't get very far. A shrill keening made her stop, and it grew louder as a discombobulated second year hurtled through the rear greenhouse doors, hands held before him awkwardly. Blood was smeared around the exposed skin, so much that it stained the rolled-up sleeves of his shirt. A gash was also apparent on the child's face, about two inches long and wet with blood.

Hermione had enough time to work out that Pomona Sprout had probably forgotten about the
snargaluff plants at the back of greenhouse two – the ones that would be fiercely protective of their newly developing pods, right about now – and then to adopt a reassuring look as she prepared to help calm the injured child. The child, however, ignored her completely, intent on rushing past her towards Professor Sprout, his pained keening now interspersed with the garbled words: "It whipped me!"

The boy's shoulder caught Hermione's elbow hard enough to knock her sideways. Her sore ankle failed to compensate for the unexpected shift in her balance. With a sharp cry of alarm Hermione dropped face-first into an adjacent container of muck.

She had a soft landing, at least. And since this was the third time today that she'd managed to fall over, she was getting used to it. She raised her head and sniffed cautiously, trying to work out whether she had landed in the open skip of rich, crumbly compost or in the stickier, pungent dragon dung.

Fate, of course, had long since decided which one she deserved.

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The problem with showering without her preferred conditioner to hand was that afterwards her hair frizzed out like that bit in the Pink Panther cartoon titles where he was blow-dried into a fuzzy ball after the car-wash.

Clothes magically cleansed, hair tied ruthlessly back in the most disciplined ponytail she could manage, and her alarmingly swollen ankle crammed back into its boot, Hermione looked at herself in the mirror of the prefects' bathroom and wrinkled her nose. She could still smell dung. She didn't know whether it was real or psychosomatic.

It was almost four o'clock. She'd intended to be away from the school grounds a good half an hour ago. Now she was going to have to peer around corners and tiptoe – if she could tiptoe on this ankle – past the returning students, hoping to avoid people who recognised her. All while she was wearing this face: the really recognisable one.

Still, since she was here she decided she might as well get her ankle seen to. She took the long way around to the hospital wing, navigating the alcoves along the upper corridors so as to avoid the entrance hall and the staircases. From various windows she could see students returning from their Hogsmeade day out in small groups, or sitting around on the lawns or in the courtyards. It was lucky that few students remained at Hogwarts who'd previously been her classmates. And if some nosy-parker fourth year started talking about how he'd seen Hermione Granger at the school, and the news got back to Ginny and then Harry? Well, she'd just make something up. Like how she'd done her NEWT at the Ministry but then she'd had to go up to Hogwarts to submit some coursework, and it was only a flying visit. Something like that. She could make it work. Probably. Just so long as whoever it was she was lying to didn't notice the way she was blushing furiously with every word...

Snape was right, of course. Hermione was not a subtle woman. Still, she now knew that he'd been up at Hogwarts extolling Roksana Bramble's charms to a rapt audience, and he'd done so several weeks before he'd bothered to warn Hermione about suggestive photographs in newspapers. Not to mention, he'd left behind incontrovertible evidence of his hate-potion research. So it seemed that he wasn't always a master of subtlety himself.

She made it to the hospital wing with only a few interested looks in her direction. The main ward was thankfully quiet. She ducked inside and closed the door behind her. At the far end a single bed was occupied. Another student sat alongside the bed with her back to the door, reading aloud...
from some book or other. Hermione looked around for Madam Pomfrey as she walked closer.

The reading student turned at her footfall, blonde hair swinging and guileless eyes blinking kind welcome.

"Hello, Hermione," said Luna Lovegood. "You look tired."

So much for Ginny not finding out that Hermione had been here today.

"It's been one of those days," Hermione confessed.

"Which days?"

Hermione drew up another chair, mainly to take the weight off her ankle. "The kind where I keep falling over. And have to lie to my friends. And find out awful things that I'd rather not know."

"Ah. Sometimes it's worse, not knowing." Luna cocked her head in thought. "I don't think telling lies is ever good though." A beat. "Or falling over."

Hermione smiled at that. "As ever, Luna, your insight is right on the mark. You didn't fancy Hogsmeade today?"

"Not really. Too many people." Luna shrugged and turned back to the student in the bed. He was a small, rather frail-looking first year, more asleep than awake. "This is Nigel. I think he has a last name – I forgot to ask. He has Vanishing Sickness. It's all right – he isn't contagious anymore. He's almost come back to himself. Just missing his left foot."

Hermione nodded her understanding. She smiled at the boy in the bed. "Hello Nigel."

The boy whispered, "lo," and blushed.

"I told Madam Pomfrey I'd sit with Nigel today," Luna said. "He gets scared on his own. Like he'll disappear and no one will notice he's gone."

Hermione thought it would be rather wonderful to have no one notice her, but she was sensitive enough not to say so out loud to a kid with Vanishing Sickness.

Luna said, "Are you worried about blibbering humdingers? Or is it a new perfume?"

"Um..."

"The scent. It's a bit...dungy, isn't it?"

Ah. Not psychosomatic, then. "Blibbering humdingers don't like the smell of dragon dung?"

"I believe even dragons aren't that keen." Luna met her eyes, and they smiled together.

"Accident in the greenhouses," Hermione explained.

"I see. Neville swears by the nettle leaf and eucalyptus soap you get in Thorogood's. He says it's the only thing that stops his hands smelling like manure."

"I'll bear that in mind." She looked around at the rest of the ward. "Is Madam Pomfrey due back soon?" she asked. "Only I appear to have sprained my ankle."

"She's running late," Luna said. "You're not the first to come looking. Professor Sprout brought in
a boy earlier, but they decided they couldn't wait. They were going to Apparate to St Mungo's. Was that part of the accident?"

"It was. The poor boy got the worst of it, though." Hermione thought about what she should do now. She had no idea how long Poppy Pomfrey might be delayed. "St Mungo's it is," she decided, even though it would be a long and painful walk to the gates in order to escape the school's anti-Apparition wards. She stood up. "It's good to see you, Luna."

"You too. My dad said you threw a nice birthday party. It was kind of you to invite him."

Hermione smiled, a bit sad, remembering those simpler, more innocent times of a whole week ago, back when the only thing she'd had to worry about was the way Severus Snape was taking afternoon tea with another woman.

Without even wondering why, she asked Luna, "Have you ever heard of the snagberry?"

"No."

"What about hate potions?"

"Hate potions, love potions," Luna said with a hint of contempt. "They're all horrid. Fake emotions are always vanquished by real ones. I think it's best to focus on the real."

Hermione smiled. Luna Lovegood, the girl who believed in myriad invisible sprites and creatures, was telling her to live in the real world. And for some reason it didn't even feel like a contradiction.

"See you around, Luna." She glanced at the bed. "Bye, Nigel. Hope you're feeling better soon."

She limped out of the hospital wing, down the passage and around past the west tower. She wondered whether Luna was right: did anyone who fell prey to a hate potion or a love potion sort of deserve it? Did it mean that their real feelings were too weak to fight back?

Hermione's sore ankle was becoming problematic. She stumbled down the stairs into the entrance hall, leaning heavily on the banister. A couple of people called her name and she waved vaguely at them but didn't stop. Suddenly she wanted to be free of this place again. It was too cloying and too familiar and too ripe with memories, and she wasn't that Hermione Granger anymore. Trying to fight off the sensations only made them worse. The pre-panic tension was forming in her chest. It made her breathing feel laboured.

Once she left the entrance hall, the fresh air was welcome. Less welcome was the distant sight of Ginny Weasley being walked up the drive by her boyfriend, her brother and her brother's new girlfriend.

"Bother," she whispered.

'Brazen it out,' said her inner voice.

'Bollocks to that. Run back to the hospital wing,' she argued with herself.

'On this ankle?' the first voice put in.

'Hide!' the argumentative one said.

She hid. She was too tired and too confused for any kind of confrontation. Hermione turned left at
the bottom of the steps and ducked around to the bushes that covered the lawns between here and the nearest shore of the lake. She walked as quickly and yet as nonchalantly as she could, finding the two things did not lend themselves to being inconspicuous. Neither did a sprained ankle that she could, at this point, hardly put any weight on.

The tension grew. Her heart was pounding. There was a ringing in her ears. She did some circular breathing and tried to head off the panic attack.

When the lake shore came into view beyond a line of shrubs – the deep inlet where the Durmstrang ship had been moored during her fourth year – she began to breathe more easily. It was the sense of renewed privacy, she supposed. She settled down low so as not to be seen beyond the bushes, and found a spot on a gently sloping rock to one side of the quay. She could wait here until things quietened down. People would be heading for their dorms, putting away the spoils of the Hogsmeade visit. It'd be safe to head out soon. She had time enough to ride this anxiety out.

There was quiet for half a minute or so. Hermione set her bag aside and tried to relax. She closed her eyes and concentrated on her breathing. Her chest grew less tight. The bruise on her bum from that morning's rooster-induced tumble made her sitting position uncomfortable, so she tried to shift her weight–

"Hermione!" Ginny yelled behind her. "What's wrong with you? Didn't you hear–?"

Hermione yelped, lost balance, grabbed for a bit of rock that happened to be slippery with algae or seaweed or something else that was green and slimy, lost balance even more, and found herself half-sliding and half-rolling off a rock. It all seemed rather inevitable as she left the solid ground behind and plunged into cold water that was deep enough to accommodate the draft of a magical ship.

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"Right on time!" said Gloria Montague, when she opened her front door to Hermione later that evening. "Supper's almost ready." Gloria did a double take. "Good gracious. Did you come by a particularly temperamental broom?"

"Certainly not. I promised myself at the age of sixteen that I was never getting on one of those things ever again. I Apparated." Hermione blinked and held up her hands. "I did remember all my bits, didn't I?"

"This time," Gloria agreed. "Thankfully. Once splinched, twice shy. Come on in and you can tell me why your hair is trying to fly away from your head, and you're favouring your right leg." A sniff. "And perhaps why you seem to have been rolling about in dung."

"It's the oddest thing. Today my life has been nothing short of a slapstick comedy." Hermione grimaced. "The bits worth laughing at, anyway."

She allowed Gloria to usher her into the cottage, moved through to the den, plopped herself and her bead-bag down on the nearest comfy chair and let her head fall backwards.

"Tea?" Gloria asked.

"Oh, god, yes. Thank you."

Gloria went off to the kitchen. Hermione breathed slowly for a while, enjoying the peace and the chance to catch up with herself. She wondered idly whether Gloria had a spare room here, and whether she might be able to use it tonight. At least falling in a lake had been one way to evade an
argument with her friends. (If they were still her friends.) The ignominy of having Mariana be the one quick enough with the wand to *Mobilicorpus* her back on to dry land had burned, though. And she’d lost her hair-tie. When she’d showered again, and looked in the bathroom mirror at the mushroom cloud her *Tergeo*’d hair had formed, she’d looked as if she was in a video for an eighties power-ballad. The steam in the room had been like soft-focus.

The argument might have been avoided, but it hadn’t ended there. Harry and Ron had insisted on waiting for her while she’d cleaned up. When she’d come out of the bathroom, there’d been a look in Harry’s eyes that bordered on betrayal. He knew she’d lied. He knew she’d run away from them. He didn’t understand that she’d had perfectly good reasons for doing so.

He’d offered to Side-Along her home or to St Mungo’s. She’d declined, using her supper-date with Gloria as an excuse. When he’d added ‘wounded glare’ to his look of betrayal, she’d been only too happy to make a (slightly be-hobbled) dash for it.

But like Snape had said last Thursday: actions had consequences. Heading back to Grimmauld Place was not something she was looking forward to. Unfortunately, the alternative – running home to Mum and Dad – seemed even less attractive.

How had things got this complicated, this quickly?

Gloria returned with a tray after a few minutes. The tea began to restore Hermione. She was allowed a calming interlude to organise her thoughts, before Gloria said:

"Now then. What's wrong with your leg?"

"Long story. Involving misplaced pillows and rooster ordure. But basically – I found out I'm not very good at hopping."

Gloria tut-tutted. "A sprain?"

"It's been hurting all day."

"Swelling?"

"Like a balloon. I could barely get my boot on."

"Right then. Let's have a look, shall we?"

The right boot came off, and the background discomfort bloomed into some serious pain.


"I've been a healer for nearly thirty years, dear, I've heard everything there is to hear," Gloria said mildly. She propped Hermione’s leg up on the sofa and unsheathed her wand. Two diagnostic charms later, she said, "Just a sprain. No broken bones. Nice bit of swelling, though. Hold on." Another bit of wandwork and the pain eased off until it was hardly there at all. "There. Should be fine in a day or two. I've repaired the ligament as far as I can. It'll be stiff and a bit sore. Let me know if it isn't better by Monday."

Hermione nodded, her heart rate and breathing only now beginning to slow following that burst of pain. "Right. Thanks."

They drank their tea.
"Dung?" Gloria prompted.

"Sorry. I did shower. Actually I showered twice. Without conditioner. Hence, the hair."

"Ah. The smell isn't overwhelming – don't worry. I'm used to it. Joseph smells of similar stuff more or less constantly."

"Right. Well, a small boy with sharp elbows knocked me into a compost bin. If you must know."

"I see. Slapstick?"

"I was like Mr Bean, back there."

"I don't know who that is, but I get the picture. So, apart from walking around on a sprained ankle all day and getting thrown into a dung heap by an exuberant child, what have you been up to?"

Gloria asked.

"Let's see," Hermione said. "I sat a NEWT, did some research in the Hogwarts library, tried unsuccessfully to avoid my closest friends and, in the process, fell into the lake." She sighed. "Oh yeah. And I found out that Severus Snape is our thief, and I'll be the reason he probably loses his job and goes to prison."

A long pause.

"I hate my life," Hermione added, since Gloria seemed to have no idea what to say.

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Hermione stayed the night at the Montague cottage. This had threefold benefits. It meant that she and Gloria could postpone their review of the theft-situation, which granted Hermione some much needed calming-down time. It also meant a bath, and access to some of Joseph's toiletries: the ones suited to people whose relationship with manure was more intimate than most. And of course, it meant she didn't have to go home and face Harry's wounded glares quite so soon.

A fair night's sleep did wonders for her mental health. Gloria made her a lovely cooked breakfast the next morning, claiming to be delighted that the presence of a guest gave her an excuse to indulge. William Montague, Gloria's husband, seemed happy about it as well.

William played golf on Sunday mornings. His Muggle-born upbringing had never faded entirely: something Hermione found reassuring. So off he went after breakfast, carrying his clubs over his shoulder and wearing a pair of disappointingly ordinary trousers.

When she and Gloria had the cottage to themselves, Hermione began to lay out all the information she had so far discovered. As she did so, Snape's involvement in the matter became ever more flagrantly obvious. Yesterday her findings had prompted a wave of panic: something that had shaken her sense of balance. Today her reaction had settled into a weightier sorrow that seemed to be lodged in her chest.

Gloria said, "So the witch in Shyverwretch's told you someone else had been asking about snagberries. Someone who had a copy of this book with them."

"Yes."

"And you believe now that this was Professor Snape?"

"I don't see who else it could be. He's the one who borrowed Magic of the Tundra. It's his handwriting on that blotter." Hermione indicated the parchment she had removed from the Restricted Section. "He was looking up hate potions, and considering snagberries for the recipe." She pointed at the chart she'd drawn up to provide a timeline for known events. "And he was doing all that weeks before the thefts even began."

"You're sure about that?" Gloria pressed.

"I'm sure. Why would Professor Sprout lie?" Hermione sat back and puffed some stray hair out of her eyes. "It's the timing of it that's the awful part. He's been working on this for more than a month. Makes me wonder just how far back it goes."

"How do you mean?"

Hermione sighed. "I mean – are any of the other things he's been doing since his trial relevant? Because he didn't only bend the ear of Hogwarts's Herbology professor. He's been romancing a known potioneer."
"I know. I'm sorry. Mistress Bramble is a friend of yours, I realise that, but it fits, don't you see? A sudden close relationship with one of the most reclusive and yet talented potions experts in the country? This research he was doing, before term even began? All after taking a job no one expected him to take, teaching the Lost Seventh students – a job that happens to get him access to the one place in the country where he can get hold of the rarest ingredients going."

She hated herself for the things she was saying, but intellectual honesty had to surpass personal loyalty. Gloria, meanwhile, was frowning hard at her thumbs. The Healer looked deeply unsettled.

"Everything about this points to one conclusion," Hermione said. "Professor Snape is using his access to the long-term storage level to procure the things he needs to make at least one very harmful potion. But I think what we've seen so far is his 'workings', if you like. His preliminary notes. To find out what his endgame is, I'm going to need a copy of *Baneful Brews*.

"All right. I'll send an owl to Tilda and ask her if the hospital library can help."

Hermione nodded. "Good. Yes." She looked across her pages of notes, her timelines, her lists, her books, her evidence. She felt miserable. "Something happened, halfway through last week," she said. "Earlier on he was the same old Severus. I mean, formal and distant and prone to sarcasm, but still with glimmers of the man I thought I'd come to know over the summer. And then...I don't know. Out of the blue, he started saying things. Angry things, threatening things, as though I've done something awful and he'll never ever forgive me."

Gloria said, "What could you possibly have done?"

Hermione shrugged. "That's the question. Could be anything. Severus Snape never seems to struggle for reasons to be furious about stuff."

"Hmm."

There was a hitch in her breath when she inhaled. "The papers call him a war hero. Which he is of course, but he's so much more than that. Good things and bad things. I suppose we all like to put people in boxes, don't we? Heroes and villains." She shook her head. "I've been guilty of oversimplifying. Seeing what I want to see. Conveniently forgetting the things I don't like."

"Such as?" Gloria prompted.

"He's incredibly thin-skinned. And when he feels he's on the defensive, he lashes out. He'll do that without any concern for the hurt he'll cause. Then there's his ruthlessness. His ability to identify a problem and do whatever it takes to solve it, even if it requires him to do the unthinkable."

Hermione winced at her own words. "Don't get me wrong. We all have flaws, even the best of us. But sometimes even good men do terrible things. Maybe because of some greater goal. Could be that's what's happening here." She sighed. "Oh, I don't know! It's all speculation. His current behaviour, though – it's making me dizzy. One minute compliments and support, the next minute warnings and insults. What am I supposed to think?"

"And you can't identify any reason for this change in the attitude he has taken up?"

"All I can think of is that he's worked out I'm looking into the thefts. He knows I went to Shyverwretch's – he's asked me what I was doing there on two separate occasions, now. He could have gone back and found out for himself. And I've probably given him any number of other
clues, because...well." She huffed a humourless laugh. "Because he's Severus Snape, and I'm me."

"It's a reasonable theory," Gloria agreed. "But as yet, just a theory."

"Fair enough, but it's not really the issue, is it? My wounded feelings are the least of our worries. Because the evidence speaks for itself." Hermione gestured at the paperwork on the table. "And it leaves me with a rather stark choice. Either I can ease off, let Snape get away with it, in which case he might do something terrible, maybe to someone who doesn't deserve it. Or I can try to stop him." Another half-hearted laugh. "But whether I manage that or not – and frankly, I don't rate my chances – he'll end up hating me. For the rest of my life. No potion even required." She hid her head in her hands and bit her lip until she was sure she was in no danger of breaking down.

There was a long pause. Then Gloria said, "I'm so sorry, my dear."

Hermione looked up, surprised. "Why are you sorry? You didn't do anything wrong. You're not the one stealing valuable ingredients from a bloody hospital, for god's sake."

"I'm sorry, because right from the outset Severus Snape was an obvious suspect." Gloria looked at her with such sadness. "If I'd known how you feel about him I would never have asked you to do this."

Hermione froze. She took a breath, preparing to deny, to dodge, to refute. Her friend's look of compassion stopped such thoughts in their tracks; she sighed the breath out again. "He's right about one thing, anyway," she murmured. "I've been a fool."

"Oh, now, don't give up on the man just yet. We have part of the picture but we don't have it all. Something else could be going on here."

Hermione made a scoffing noise, mainly to tamp down the pathetic surge of hope that Gloria's remark caused. "Like what?"

"Some greater plot," Gloria suggested. "Maybe Professor Snape is being coerced. Or he might feel he has good reason for brewing a powerful hate potion – his perspective is bound to be different to yours or mine given all he's been through. Or we might be wrong about the hate potion altogether."

"You sound like you're reaching," Hermione said. "You sound like the inside of my head, actually. And when you say it out loud it doesn't sound any more convincing than when I say it to myself. Believe me, I know."

Gloria nodded and waved her hands in front of herself, like she was clearing the clutter her words had just made. "All right, fine. Some of that is a stretch. But I think one point remains valid. She looked at Hermione. "Professor Snape might be in some kind of trouble. He might need help."

For a moment Hermione toyed with this idea. Then she slammed her palms down on the kitchen table so hard it made them sting, and she stood up. "That's just it," she said hoarsely. "He's either a villain, like me and Harry and Ron thought he was for so long, in which case I'm a gullible fool for feeling this way. Or he's in trouble and-and he didn't ask me for help." She heard herself getting loud and angry, and toned down the volume. "And somehow that's even worse."

Gloria bowed her head. "I see that. But Hermione – I'm not sure Professor Snape is the kind of man who is given to asking for help."

Which was, of course, one of the fairest points that had been made during the whole discussion.
"No, he's not," Hermione agreed.

"Asking for help is usually much, much harder than offering it," Gloria added.

Which was also true, and forced Hermione to consider another point: would she have sought Snape's help if she was the one in trouble? Not so long ago she'd recognised her strong preference for autonomy when it came to her decisions. If she looked back on her own history, the patterns tended to repeat, even all the way back to her first year at Hogwarts. Upset by Ron's insensitivity, she'd found somewhere to cry on her own (unfortunately when there was a troll on the rampage). She'd figured out there was a basilisk loose in the school, but instead of reporting this or at least arranging some back-up she'd investigated alone. The time-turner she'd used in third year had been something she'd kept to herself for as long as she possibly could. She'd taken on Rita Skeeter in a private battle of wits. (And, by the way, won.)

"I'm not much better at it than he is, to be honest," Hermione concluded.

Gloria smiled at that. "Look, I understand," she told Hermione. "You care about someone, they might be in trouble, and they didn't ask for your help. That hurts."

"Or he might not be in any kind of trouble," Hermione pointed out. "There's still the other possibility – he just wants to dose someone with a horrible potion."

"Indeed. But there might be more to this than meets the eye."

She chewed at her lip as she thought about this. "Okay, so what do I do? Take him to one side and say, 'Okay, option one, you're a reprobate. Option two, you're in a right old pickle. Could you explain which it is, please? It's bothering me.'"

Gloria shook her head. "I'm not sure that strategy would help us. Professor Snape does not strike me as a man who would favour a demand for emotional honesty."

Hermione recalled a painful argument that had taken place in a hospital room. "No, he is most definitely not that kind of man."

"So! For now I suppose we must keep researching. See if Joseph notices anything else on the storage level. And I'll try to get us copies of these books. Come up to Spell Damage tomorrow, after your appointment. I'll let you know what Tilda says."

Hermione nodded her agreement. "Gloria," she began cautiously, unsure how she should phrase her next request.

"Don't worry about it, dear," Gloria anticipated. "I wouldn't dream of discussing your private feelings with anyone other than yourself."

Hermione slumped in her chair and fidgeted with the handle of her empty teacup. "He told me nothing would happen until I was no longer his student. And he did that without actually saying anything about how he felt. Or, you know, could feel. Maybe. Some day."

"That, at least, is to his credit. Not all men in positions of authority take their responsibilities so seriously," Gloria said.

"Which is the point I'm making. Why would a man be so frustratingly noble about one aspect of his life, and so ignoble about others? Because stealing from hospitals and brewing dark potions – it doesn't really scream 'redeemed', does it?"
"Then we'd better find out if it's option two, hadn't we?" Gloria said. "And if he's in trouble and won't ask for help, perhaps you're simply going to have to insist."

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Gloria's adamance that there could yet be an explanation sparked an idea within Hermione as she left the Montague cottage.

Their review had clarified that the most damning part of the evidence against Snape was the timing of his hate-potion research. If Hermione could prove that the notes he'd made in the Restricted Section had happened only last weekend, for instance, rather than several weeks ago, then one potential explanation became clear: Snape could have discovered evidence of the thefts and was investigating them himself.

There was an obvious way to fact-check the information she'd received from Pomona Sprout. So she went to Diagon Alley and the Owl Office.

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To: Headmistress McGonagall
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
27th September 1998

I have a question that I realise will sound odd.

Professor Sprout told me that Professor Snape came to Hogwarts before term began, to do some work and then have dinner with his former colleagues.

What I need to know is: has he been back to the school since? Specifically, to the library?

I'm afraid I can't explain why I'm asking. I can only tell you that it's important. I'll wait here at the Owl Office in Diagon Alley for a return, since it's Sunday and I hope you aren't busy with classes.

Hermione

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To: Hermione Granger
c/o Diagon Alley Owl Office
27th Sept.

My dear girl, I've known you for seven rather eventful years. If you tell me something is important then that's good enough for me.

Severus Snape was indeed here during the last weekend in August. I'm fairly sure it was the Sunday. And no, he hasn't been back since. We weren't expecting him, though. Frankly, I'd imagine it isn't an easy place for him to visit. Bad memories, and so on.

Hope this is helpful,

Minerva McGonagall

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She tucked the reply into a pocket and left the Owl Office with shoulders slumped.
So much for that idea.

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Hermione made it home just before lunchtime, and found Harry and Ron together in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. They'd clearly been waiting for her. Both looked solemn.

It felt like an intervention.

They all looked at each other for a long moment. Hermione wondered whether this was the first time either of the boys had recognised that things were changing between the three of them.

"Is this about Mariana?" Ron blurted out.

She smiled sadly and moved to take up a seat at the kitchen table. "No, it isn't about Mariana. Please thank her for rescuing me from the lake yesterday. I don't think I was in any fit state to rescue myself."

There was a quiet moment. Harry seemed to be watching. A muscle in his jaw was clenching and releasing.

"Can it be a little bit about Mariana?" Ron finally said.

She laughed at that, and even Harry cracked a smirk, and the tension eased. "If you want." She breathed deep through her nose. "Okay, it's about her. But not how you mean. I've lost track of how I fit in with you both, and it's going to take some getting used to. But Ron, I do wish you and Mariana every happiness."

"You do?"

"Yes. Also, if she ever hurts you then I'll...no. Actually, better that I don't tell you what I'll do. Accessory before the fact, and all that. But I guarantee it won't be pleasant."

"Really? Like – two vixens fighting over me? Cool."

"No, Ron, not like that."

He sighed. "Yeah. I know."

Hermione glanced at Harry. He was back to looking solemn. "I'm sorry," she said, and she meant it.

He nodded. "I just want to understand."

"About yesterday? It isn't complicated. I lied about going to Hogwarts because the last time I went up there I had a panic attack. It was so bad I put poor old Hagrid in a body-bind. Since I couldn't avoid the place any longer, I tried to arrange things so it would be as crowd-free as possible."

"We aren't a crowd. We're your friends."

"So's Hagrid. My panic attacks don't seem to know the difference. I tried to hide before you could see me, but, well, it's hard to be swift and graceful on a sprained ankle. As you no doubt saw."

Harry blinked. "You were having a panic attack when we caught up with you?"

"Yes." She held his gaze, watching him search her face for the telltale flush. It didn't come. He
knew she was telling the truth.

"I wish you'd said," he grumbled. "Now I feel like an arse."

"I was a bit busy being spectacularly stupid," she pointed out.

"Are you okay now?" he asked.

"Better. Thank you. And I'm sorry. I hate people seeing me like that."

"You shouldn't. Not us."

"I know. But like I said..."

"...the panic attacks don't distinguish. I get it." He nodded, sighing with sympathy, before he straightened up again. "Okay, but what about the rest of last week?"

Damn it, she'd hoped he'd forgotten about that.

"What about it?" she asked.

Ron said, "You missed curry-night. So on Thursday Harry made pasta bake and it was going to be just the three of us. Only you never came home."

"Ah." Hermione looked at Harry. "You should have said."

"It was going to be a surprise," he told her. He shook his head, pretending it didn't matter. "I don't know, Hermione, it's like you've gone away. Like we aren't a part of you anymore."

"You will always be a part of me," she said firmly. "Both of you. Last week's just been insanely busy. Something happened with work that kind of mushroomed – and I'd love to tell you all about it, but I'm under orders not to discuss it. You want to get cross about that? Get cross with Kingsley Shacklebolt."

Ron said, "Hang on a mo. You're getting secret missions from Shacklebolt? Aren't we supposed to be the dashing crime-fighters?"

"Kingsley is Acting Minister now, not head of MLE," Harry reminded Ron.

"Oh. Right. Yes." Ron smirked. "So is it a secret mission to reorganise the quill cupboard?"

"I'm sworn to secrecy," Hermione said primly.

"And there's nothing else going on?" Harry asked her.

Hermione sighed. She didn't want to have to lie. She'd done quite well so far, telling truths without betraying confidences.

So she said, "The man who made my Patronus change to a rook is publicly conducting a relationship with another woman. Does that count as something else?"

Ron leapt to his feet and said, "Okay! Great talk, 'Mione. I think we're done here, right?"

Harry looked at her for a long moment. He wasn't so easy to deflect as Ron, but in the end he conceded. "You know where I am if you need me."
And that was that. Her two most important friendships had been developing an array of cracks, and Hermione left the kitchen aware that, at best, she had just papered over them.

Monday morning saw her back at work. Mr Arnold passed by her desk as she was hanging up her jacket. He laid the morning's issue of the Prophet down before her, smiled an encouraging smile and walked away.

On page five was an article about Magical Law Enforcement seeking a man to assist with their investigation into a crime that had been committed in Lewisham. The details given were vague, but the whole point of the feature was the sketch which accompanied it.

"They found the waiter," Hermione murmured. Found him and, it seemed, used his memories to identify the wizard who had stolen his hair for a Polyjuice potion.

She sat down, examining the face. The sketch artist was accomplished, given that they'd been asked to reproduce an image accessible only via Pensieve. The wanted man looked to be either Caucasian or Latino; the monochrome drawing made it hard to tell. The man's hair was dark, though silverying at the temples, and he had brooding, heavy-lidded eyes, George Michael-style stubble and high cheekbones. He looked to be in his forties. He'd probably have been handsome, were it not for the heavy, ridged scar which began above his left eyebrow and ran all the way down to his cheek. The left eye itself had been rendered a disconcerting milky white, due to the cataract that had formed with the injury.

The accompanying article detailed his height, which was given as five foot nine, and described him as having a slim, wiry build. Anyone who recognised the man was encouraged to contact MLE.

"Odd," she muttered.

"What's that, dearheart?" Lysander asked as he arrived at his desk.

"He looked taller than that in the footage."

"Who did? What footage?"

She startled and looked up. "Um, the footage I'm not supposed to talk about?"

"Ah. Thought so. How was your weekend?"

Hermione grimaced. "Accident-prone."

"Oh dear. Are there scars?"

"Not ones that you can see."

He hesitated a moment, then said, "Need to talk to Uncle 'Sander?"

"No thank you," she said wryly. "If I want the whole country to know my humiliations, I'll owl the Prophet." Then, as Lysander shrugged an unapologetic shrug and looked to be heading for the kitchen, she added, "No, sit down. My turn to get coffee."
Jasmine Churlish dropped by just before lunchtime. Hermione had already begun to wonder how she was going to get through three hours of Potions that afternoon without letting her confused thoughts about Severus Snape tie her up in knots. Churlish's appearance offered grateful distraction.

"A moment, if you would, Miss Granger," Churlish said as she walked past the desk.

Hermione rose and followed her into Mr Arnold's office.

"You've seen the sketch we managed to produce?" Madam Churlish asked once they enjoyed some privacy.

"Mr Arnold showed me," Hermione said, shooting her boss a brief smile. "That was quick work."

"Yes, well, we've done the easy part. The issue now is finding this damn wizard who obtained the Muggle waiter's hair."

Hermione nodded. "How does MLE do that? I mean, Muggles have things like fingerprint databases and mug-shots of known criminals. Though that doesn't help if they're trying to identify someone who hasn't been in trouble before, I suppose."

"You've already seen what we do," Churlish said. "At least, part of it. Pictures in the wizarding press, posters up on walls and in pubs and shops. We have people on the ground in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade and the other larger villages and communities across the country, showing the picture and asking questions."

The approach made sense. Wizarding Britain was not extensive, and everyone needed access to certain services. While the population of the UK was nearing sixty million, there were only about fifteen thousand witches and wizards among them. It made sense that boots on the ground and pictures in the press would do the job.

"It's funny, though," Hermione said. "I'd have put the wizard's height at six foot, maybe even more, when I watched that footage. He certainly had a good six inches on the Muggle reporter when both of them were in frame. Did the police report from Lewisham state her height?"

"Five foot five without her high heels," Churlish supplied. "Yes, you're right, it's a discrepancy we've yet to iron out. The cloaked figure can't be under Polyjuice at the beginning of the footage, since he takes Polyjuice later on and there's no evidence of two enchantments fighting each other. Our working theory is that the wizard disguised himself before he approached the waiter to get some hair. Probably because of the risk that the waiter would later be identified and questioned."

"If he's that cautious, he'll be difficult to catch," Hermione said. "It would mean our picture is only another of his Polyjuice-disguises."

"Yes, thank you, we'd worked that out," Churlish said, a bit shortly. "I suppose if we can find out where he stole that face from, we might be a step closer. He can't hide forever." Churlish turned to Mr Arnold. "Minister Shacklebolt has asked me to keep you both abreast of any developments. I just wanted to repeat that the details about the Savoy ball are not yet being published. As far as the press is concerned, this investigation is about a murder in Lewisham. The Minister does not want this turning into a debate about Jossinia Trelore's love life."

"Mum's the word, as the Muggles say, eh?" Mr Arnold said.

Cautiously, not wanting to earn more of Churlish's sharp tongue, Hermione said, "Those police officers who came to Walthamstow aren't likely to come looking for Dane again, are they? For a
No, that's all tidied up," Churlish assured her. "The two officers were followed back to their workplace by one of my team. They now remember Dane's story as being quite satisfactory, and they wrote out his statement themselves. That particular loose end is tied off." She offered Hermione an abrupt nod. "We appreciate your assistance, Miss Granger."

Hermione supposed she should be thankful that there was something about her recent life that had been neatly dealt with. One loose end tidied.

Now only seventeen thousand more to go.

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The usual crowd was gathering outside the potions laboratory at St Mungo's when Hermione arrived after lunch. That is to say, the usual crowd minus Blaise Zabini.

"That's it?" Terry Boot was asking as she drew up. "Snape just handed in Zabini's wand? No report to MLE? No report to Hogwarts? I mean, Zabini's still doing three other Lost Seventh courses that I know about. What if he tries to kill us all in one of those, too?"

"I can only tell you what I heard," Michael replied. "My cousin works in the Department of Magical Education and she said Snape showed up last Thursday, straight after class, and just handed over Zabini's wand. Nothing more than a request that Zabini be owled to come and pick it up, and an instruction to remove his name from the Lost Seventh Potions roll."

"And has he been by to pick his wand up?" Terry asked.

"Apparently not yet."

A brief silence, as everyone digested this. Hermione couldn't imagine going without her wand, voluntarily, for any significant amount of time. Wands were personal.

"Maybe he went to buy a new one?" Terry suggested, though he didn't sound confident. "I mean, money's no issue for the likes of him, right?"

"Ollivander's might be open again, but stock's been on the thin side since the war," Michael said. "Plus, we've just had a new set of Hogwarts first years to kit out. The Ministry instructed Ollivander to give them priority."

"There's other ways to obtain wands," Draco pointed out.

"There are," Hermione agreed, settling in to lean next to Terry. "But if you know where your own wand is, and there's nothing to stop you going to pick it up, why on earth would you do anything else?"

Draco grunted and looked away as if disinterested. Hermione knew her point was fair, though.

"It's weird," Michael said. "Far as I know, Zabini hasn't been showing his face much of anywhere since last Thursday."

"Why do you lot even care?" Millicent Bulstrode demanded, arms folded, eyes glinting with the opportunity to instigate her favourite kind of us-and-them. "He wasn't your friend."

"He wasn't yours either," Terry pointed out. "If he'd managed to break that jar and Incendio the
contents, you'd have been as chargrilled as the rest of us."

"Minor burns, probably, with that amount of powder," Michael put in.

"Maybe. Point is, I'm not sure the flames would have stopped to ask which House you were from."

Bulstrode tutted and turned away, seeking solace and companionship with Draco and Theo. Draco offered her a tight smile. Theo just watched.

"Blaise has been seething since we started this course," Hermione said. "Even before the story broke last week about his mother. We should have seen this coming. Tried to help, instead of winding him up."

Bulstrode spun back to face her. "Blaise did not need any help from the likes of you!"

There was an awkward pause.

"The likes of me?" Hermione said. "What does that mean? A fellow student? An ex-Gryffindor?" She arched a brow.

"You know what it means," Bulstrode said, voice dripping with disgust.

Hermione sighed. "Yes. Certainly. Let's go there. It always ends so well."

In a silent display of support, Michael and Terry both moved closer to her. Nothing escalated, though. Theo looked amused by Hermione's comment and turned airily away: his way of saying 'I rather approve of that, therefore I won't show you any contempt'.

Draco was more clear-cut. "Shut up, Milly, there's a dear," he said. While Bulstrode was still busy looking hurt and confused, Draco added more sharply, "Honestly, Granger, is there no sad creature whose welfare you won't campaign to improve? You're a fool to yourself."

Theo, still looking down to the end of the corridor, snorted.

Hermione glanced at the potions laboratory door and said, "People keep telling me that. Should I take it personally, do you think?"

As if on cue – which, given Snape's amplification charm, it probably was – the door flew open. She ignored the baleful look in those cold black eyes as she filed into the laboratory along with her fellow students.

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They brewed the standard unisex contraception potion. Bulstrode tried to snigger, apparently forgetting that she was eighteen years of age rather than twelve. The rest of the class were attentive and grown up about it; here, at least, was a potion to learn that would provide regular and necessary personal benefit.

The contraception potion had been on the curriculum for years, and was simple to brew. While its complexity level was much better suited to the OWL course than the NEWT, some ultra-conservative idiot on the Hogwarts school board had argued that the idea of sixteen year olds brewing such a potion was unthinkable. Hermione was familiar with the attitude: teenagers should not be having sex, and offering them safe and easily accessible contraception would make them have sex, and therefore the world would soon be filled with pregnant teenagers, and the downfall of society would ensue. (Those who made such arguments never seemed to notice the inherent
contradictions.)

In fact, Hermione had first brewed this potion when she was fifteen. She'd pocketed a phial before her date with Viktor Krum at the Yule Ball; just in case. She hadn't needed it. Viktor had been a gentleman all evening, taking his cue from her, and while that first experience of proper snogging had been fun, she'd known, back then, that she hadn't been ready for more.

The contraception potion was a convenient choice of brew for this particular Monday afternoon. Given everything else that was going on, it was a relief not to need to concentrate quite so fiercely. Hermione prepared her ingredients and brewed the potion more or less on autopilot.

All through the lesson she remained tense, expecting a voice at her shoulder to accuse her, once again, of having done all this before. But Snape did not venture out from behind the demonstration table at the front. Indeed, on the few occasions she looked up at him, he appeared to be as distracted as she was. She wondered why he hadn't made more of Blaise Zabini's dangerous behaviour last week. After Snape's anger during the lesson, Hermione had expected repercussions. Right now it looked as though Snape had been exhausted by the whole thing.

Bulstrode got an Adequate: her highest grade to date. She was delighted. Everyone else got a Competent. It was difficult to go wrong with such a simple brew, but at least it was another solid tick in the box. After signing and submitting her potion, Hermione paused at the demonstration table. She waited for Snape's attention. He did not offer it, sitting there with his eyes scanning a periodical.

Hermione coughed lightly and said, "Professor, I wonder whether I might attempt the Aqua Sedatis brew again on Friday morning."

Snape didn't look at her. "Seven o'clock. Do not be tardy. The room is booked only until nine thirty."

"Yes sir."

She turned away, even as Draco passed her and said, "Make that two of us, Professor. Same potion." He didn't favour her with a look as he walked back to his work station.

Hermione packed her bag and left the laboratory, to go and await her appointment in Artefact Accidents.

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After her cursed injury had been treated, Hermione went up the stairs to Spell Damage. Gloria was ensconced in a cubicle as she dealt with the effects of a badly aimed scouring charm, according to a nearby Mediwitch. Hermione took a seat in the waiting area outside the main ward.

She was getting tired of waiting areas, it had to be said.

Gloria appeared after only a few minutes. She beckoned Hermione to follow, and guided her past the open doors of the main ward and around a corner, into what turned out to be an empty private room. Gloria cast the standard patient-privacy wards then tucked her wand away. She looked at Hermione, clearly churning with consternation.

"What's the matter?" Hermione asked.

Gloria stirred at that and went to sit down on the chair in the room, hands fidgeting. "Last night," she said. "Oh, I didn't know what to do! And Joseph told me not to do anything, so I didn't, in the
Her words drifted off as her hands continued to wring anxiously.

Hermione took a seat on the low table in front of the chair and reached to hold those fractious hands. "What happened?" she asked, as calmly as she could.

"We were having a pot of tea after our supper, William and I. At the kitchen table. It must have been around nine o'clock in the evening. Then the back door burst open and Joseph came inside, all of a to-do, white as a sheet and-and trembling like I don't know what."

Gloria pinched her lips down hard in an attempt to conquer her distress. Hermione squeezed her hands and asked, "He saw something? On the long-term storage level?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. Not then, anyway." The Healer tut-tutted and shook her head. "Let me tell this in the right order. Honestly, Hermione, when I first asked for your help I thought it would be a straightforward issue of finding a pilferer. Maybe protecting Joseph from the nastier presences on the board of directors. But now? Oh, heavens, if I'd known it would come to this then I would never...I mean, I'd have gone straight to the Aurors! I certainly wouldn't have tangled you up in it."

"Is Joseph all right?" Hermione asked, concerned.

"What? Oh, yes, yes, he's fine. Well, he was shaken up, but quite intact. For now." Gloria sighed irritation at herself. "It took him a while, last night, before he could even tell us what happened. William had to force a glass of Firewhisky down him, and Joseph hates Firewhisky. Anyway – he'd been due to have drinks with his group of friends, as they often do on a Sunday evening. At the Leaky Cauldron. But as it turned out, one of his friends was a no-show and another was so busy trying to chat up a witch from Madam Primpernelle's that Joseph decided to call it a night fairly early. He said his goodbyes and left the tavern. Only once he'd got some way along that narrow little side passage that links back to Diagon Alley – you know the one I mean?" She waited for Hermione's nod. "Well, that's when it happened."

"When what happened?"

"He was jumped! Assaulted! Threatened!"

"Oh, hell. And he wasn't hurt?"

"Only frightened. He said one minute he was sure he was all on his own, walking along, minding his own business, the next minute a hand had shoved him face-first into the brick wall and there was the tip of a wand at his neck."

"A mugging?" Hermione asked.

"No. Just a warning, apparently." Gloria breathed deeply then sighed it out. "Joseph was advised that the extra hours he's been spending on the storage level, keeping an eye out, had been noted. He was told to stop his vigilance. Immediately. Or there would be awful, awful consequences."

"The thief, then," Hermione inferred. Hating what she knew was about to be said.

"Worse than that." Gloria was now the one squeezing Hermione's hands. "Joseph never saw the face of his attacker. When the man let him go and Joseph plucked up courage to turn around, the man was gone. But...oh, my dear...Joseph said that the voice was unmistakable. Everyone knows it – especially everyone who learned Potions at Hogwarts in the last twenty years."

Hermione closed her eyes and hung her head, even though she'd seen this coming. "It was Snape."
"Yes." A pause. "Or someone using Polyjuice to copy his face and voice," Gloria added.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "That seems to be the explanation of the day. Everyone's Polyjuicing everyone else. Let's go with Occam's Razor for now." At Gloria's frown she added, "Simplest explanation is the most likely. Which means – Professor Snape knows that Joseph has been investigating the thefts on the storage level and he does not like Joseph's scrutiny any more than he likes mine. So he's warned Joseph off. Rather more aggressively than he's been trying to warn me off."

" Warned him off, and terrified him! You should have seen him last night! Men in their mid-twenties do not panic and run home to their mum and dad lightly. And my Joseph has never been a shrinking violet."

Hermione nodded her understanding. "Did he report this?"

Gloria looked away and sagged. "That was the first thing William said. 'Go to MLE. You've been assaulted. Your memories will prove it.' Only Joseph said he couldn't risk it." She winced. "Snape, or the Snape-impersonator...anyway, the man who attacked him said that if Joseph took any of this to MLE then the first person he was coming for...was me."

"Snape threatened to hurt you in order to punish Joseph," Hermione clarified.

"Yes." Gloria shuddered. "I told Joseph I didn't care. Let him try! He'll find I'm no pushover! But Joseph said it wasn't worth the risk. I think, maybe, there's something about the way Snape can put a threat together that just..." Her voice became shaky and introspective. "Joseph said he'd never heard anyone express such cold, calculated violence in such calm, rich tones."

The two women were quiet for a while.

"I have to confront him about this," Hermione decided.

"No you do not!" Gloria held Hermione's hands more firmly, as though she needed to prevent her from getting up and going to find Snape at that very moment. "I will not have you risk yourself. I only told you so you knew that the jeopardy is ramping up! No, until we know more about what's happening, I'd ask you, Hermione, please – I know you care for this man but you must avoid being alone with him. Don't go anywhere at night on your own. Do the sensible things. Promise me."

"I honestly don't think he'd hurt me," Hermione said.

"And I honestly didn't think he'd threaten my son at wand-point in a dark alley, but he did!" Gloria's eyes were wide with distress. "I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you. Don't you see? It would be my fault! Please. Promise."

"I promise." Hermione sighed and shook her head. "What the hell is going on? How did it escalate like this?"

Gloria said, "I don't know. But I'm wondering whether it isn't time for you to involve your two friends. I'd feel so much better if you had someone keeping an eye out for you."

"I'll think about it." Even as Hermione said the words, however, she knew she wasn't ready to bring Harry and Ron on board. "But if I tell them Snape's going about assaulting and threatening people, Harry will go straight to Kingsley. A pause. "Actually, he'll do that if I'm lucky. If not, he'll go straight to Snape, and I've no idea how that might end up."

"You don't think Snape would hurt you but you think he might hurt Mr Potter?"
"It's more likely. Snape's hated Harry since before he was born. That whole thing with Harry's mum – it's, er, not as private as it should have been. I suppose you know."

"I read the article. That doesn't mean I know."

"Hmm. The point is, there's something about Harry that tends to bring out the worst in Snape. If Harry decided to go storming in to confront him? I don't think it would end well."

"So what do we do?"

"Wait. Watch. Do a bit more research." Hermione let go of Gloria's hands and stood up. She paced the room. "Tell Joseph to back off – Snape obviously sees him as a threat. I don't want your son getting hurt."

"Oh!" Gloria stood up and rummaged in the pockets of her Healer's robe. "I owled Tilda yesterday afternoon about those books. She dropped this off with me when I started my shift." Gloria handed over a narrow volume bound in rich forest-green leather: *The Magic of the Tundra*. "And she informs me that the hospital library does not have a copy of *Baneful Brews*, since it is one of only seven publications that the Ministry has seen fit to fully ban."

"Why was it banned?"

"Apparently there are recipes listed within that should never see the light of day."

"What, worse than the slow-acting poisons you can brew with *Moste Potente Potions*, or the Horcrux stuff in *Secrets of the Darkest Art*?"

"Actually, *Secrets* is another of the banned books. But yes. Worse."

Hermione grimaced. "Where did Snape get a copy, then?"

"I don't know. But I'd imagine that his undercover role among wealthy dark wizards would have offered him the opportunity to obtain titles such as that one."

She thought about that, and an idea occurred to her. "Malfoy Manor." She winced; it was still hard to say the words. "Lucius Malfoy has the most extensive private collection of magical texts in the country."

"Malfoy Manor, as I understand it, is currently empty and guarded by Aurors while the curse-breakers work out how to get inside without setting off defences that could take out half of Wiltshire."

"That's true," Hermione said. "I bet there's ways in and out, though."

"You think Lucius Malfoy will tell you? He's fresh into a six year sentence at Azkaban thanks in part to the horrors you suffered at his home."

"Oh, he wouldn't tell me anything. But there are other Malfoys."

Gloria studied her for a moment, then she went to the window. "I think that's a bad idea. It would involve a crime, after all. Breaking and entering? Banned books? No, this is something else you really should leave alone."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "All right. For now." She hoped that Gloria would not extract another promise.
But Gloria seemed only too happy to change the subject. "What I don't understand," the Healer said, "is how Snape even knew where to find Joseph. Snape hadn't been in the tavern, or Joseph says he would have seen him, so it couldn't have been a chance meeting. And Joseph had been home and then gone out by Floo, so Snape couldn't have followed Joseph from the hospital, or from his flat." She raised her hands then let them flop back down helplessly. "How did he know where Joseph would be?"

Hermione knew. An amplification charm. An overheard conversation. An agreement between two young men to meet at the Leaky Cauldron on Sunday evening at seven o'clock. She closed her eyes in resignation. One of the few things she was sure of was that the conversation she'd had last Thursday had been with the real Severus Snape, not some conveniently Polyjuiced interloper.

Which meant that the real Snape had known where to find Joseph on Sunday. This, in turn, meant that the Polyjuiced-interloper theory was looking unlikely.

It seemed that if Snape really was in some kind of trouble then he was working hard to make it worse. She couldn't make sense of any of it. She'd spent the summer with this man, playing Boggle and sipping coffee, arguing and even occasionally trying to flirt. He could be difficult company, certainly, but he'd also played a huge part in helping her regain her sense of equilibrium following the war. Never once had she considered him the kind of man who stole valuable resources from hospitals, who acquired banned dark texts for their atrocious recipes and who threatened good-hearted herbologists.

So had it all been a lie? A façade? And if it had, then what was the purpose?

"There's something else," Gloria said. "I almost forgot."

"Oh, god, what now?"

"Joseph went into work as usual this morning. He was in the meadow habitat, trying to get on with things, trying not to think about what had happened. And he noticed that at some point over the weekend the clumps of tormentil have been denuded of almost every single flower."

"Tormentil?" Hermione searched her memory for any recollection as to the plant's usage. "Yellow flowers. Very common in the UK. You shouldn't have to steal it!"

"And yet, apparently, someone did."

"Fine. Well, the only thing I remember it being used for is an anti-doxy spray. It paralyses them, I think."

"That was all I could come up with, too." Gloria rubbed at her forehead. "There it is, then. Another ingredient to add to our list."

"And a threat delivered at wand-point."

Gloria sighed. "It isn't going terribly well, is it?"
A Little Help from my Ambiguous Acquaintances

"If you need help, bark like a dog."
"That's stupid. If I need help, I'll shout help."

George R. R. Martin, A Clash of Kings 1998

Excerpt from The Magic of the Tundra by S. Eriksson, 1853

The benefits to health delivered by the fruit of the snagberry bush are less widely known. Those small communities established near to, or even within, the Arctic Circle rely on these berries in much the same way that modern medicine in more temperate climes has come to rely on dittany. Hogarth's excellent autobiography detailing his travels and experiences among these northerly magical enclaves can provide the interested reader with more detail.

The snagberry is no mere provisioner of fruit, however. This unassuming shrub enjoys the most exceptional resilience to frost and desiccation. Small wonder, therefore, that the plant's most protective element, its bark, embodies potent magical force. The denizens of Siberia's magical community at Lake Bustakh prepare a tea brewed from a combination of snagberry bark and berry which confers upon them substantial protection from the cold. Extending these qualities to the more symbolic interpretations of alchemy, the bark can be used to protect and manipulate the colder emotions: guilt, ruthlessness, self-loathing, melancholy.

The roots of the snagberry shrub are not harvested by any arctic communities, their priority being to keep these rare plants alive. Since it is the root system that prevents the death of the plant during long, dark, freezing winters, however, it is fair to assume that the material would be as magically vigorous as the berries and bark.

Finally, the snagberry's needle-like leaves are something of a disappointment compared to the rest of the shrub. While attractive in shape, colour and scent, their potential for alchemical use is no more impressive than the similarly shaped leaves of a douglas fir or Siberian larch.

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Few Hogwarts students took NEWT level History of Magic. This was because trudging your way to a successful OWL under Cuthbert Binns's laborious tutelage was hard enough work. The notion of two further years of study generally sent even the most diligent of students running fast and far.

Professor Binns was a ghost, however, and one very much tied to Hogwarts Castle. Following the creation of the Lost Seventh project, Headmistress McGonagall had therefore done what Albus Dumbledore probably should have done a good thirty years earlier; she had recruited a new History of Magic teacher.

Hilliard Hobday's claim to fame was that his mother had written Sites of Historical Sorcery. She had also instilled in him a passion for her subject. He was a pleasant man whose tendency towards jumpiness was an unfortunate side-effect of his impending fatherhood. (His wife was due in November, her pregnancy had been a difficult one, and a good night's sleep was something he remembered only distantly.) He explained all this with a good-humoured smile nonetheless, and since he set a tiny magical photograph of his gravid wife on the front table of the Ministry's conference room before beginning his lesson, Hermione could only assume that the stresses and
strains of his expanding family were considered well worth the effort.

It was the first time she had attended one of Professor Hobday's lessons. She'd been surprised by how readily she was welcomed, given that she had not attended a single History of Magic lesson since fifth year.

There were four other students taking the class: an impressive number for NEWT History of Magic compared to years gone by. Draco was there, probably because this was one of the few NEWTs he could yet pursue while adhering to the Ministry's rule that he relinquish his wand before attending classes. Millicent Bulstrode was another Slytherin presence. (Given her dislike for anything approaching hard work or intellectual engagement, it seemed an odd choice for her, but there she was.) Hermione's two other classmates were Terry Boot and Justin Finch-Fletchley.

Since Bulstrode didn't bother joining in during the lesson, and Draco's hostility towards Hermione had waned in recent weeks, the class felt like quite the relaxing and convivial place to be. The two hours actually flew by: something that had never happened during a History of Magic lesson at Hogwarts. Discussion was encouraged by Professor Hobday; political perspectives and historical agendas were considered. Professor Binns's insistence that his subject was defined by 'facts' was replaced by an acknowledgement that history is shaped by context and recorded by people, neither of which lend themselves to true objectivity.

By Tuesday lunchtime, as the class drew to a close, Hermione was glad she'd taken on the additional subject. She eyed the scrolls her classmates were submitting. Between now and next May, when she sat the NEWT, she'd have two years' worth of essays to catch up on. So there was even that to look forward to.

She watched as the professor discreetly exchanged Draco's essay for his wand. Bulstrode handed off a scrolled parchment that looked rather battered and stained; some people took no pride in their work. Professor Hobday arched a brow at it, unrolled the top, narrowed his eyes at what he saw, then simply let it snap back into its curled scroll-shape and nodded his thanks to Bulstrode.

Hermione took her time packing up her bead-bag. She called amiable farewells to Terry and Justin as they departed, ignored Bulstrode as she did the same, and wondered whether her discreet-but-significant look in Draco's direction earlier had tipped him off that she wanted a word.

"Delighted to have you with us, Miss Granger," Professor Hobday called as he left to return to Hogwarts. "Excellent contributions today!"

Behind her, Draco muttered, "Swot."

"Don't forget 'unbearable little know-it-all'," she said back.

Draco snorted. "News for you, Granger. You're not so little anymore." A pause. "You're all the other things, though."

"Thanks muchly." She finished with her bag and turned to face him.

Draco considered her. "So what's up? Calling in the favour?"

Hermione tried unsuccessfully to prevent an eye-roll. "Everything's transactional with you, isn't it?"

"Not just with me. With everyone and everything under the sun. You haven't figured that out yet? Thought you were supposed to be sharp." He waited a moment, then said, "Come on, spit it out. I've got a channel to jump."
Hermione sighed. "Look – you don't owe me this. Not you. And if you can't help, it won't change the way I've tried to...to view you differently. Since these courses started."

Now it was Draco rolling his eyes. "Merlin, I wasn't asking for a bloody therapy session! What do you want?"

"Fine, you want direct? What I want is access to your father's library in Malfoy Manor."

Draco cocked an interested eyebrow, but he turned away to hide the rest of his reaction. He fiddled with the strap of his bag, drew a deep breath, then turned back.

"Seriously?" he asked more quietly. "You want to go back to the place where my deranged aunt almost killed you?" His voice was level: too much so. Hermione could read the signs. "Pretty sure that's a daft idea. Unless this is about confronting your nightmares? Showing you're strong enough to face them down – is that it?"

"Nope. Actually I'm dreading the need to go there. I just want to look at a book."

"Which book?"

"If I told you that, I'd have to kill you."

Draco blinked.

"Bother," Hermione muttered. "I'm guessing that didn't translate." She sighed. "Muggle joke. Look, it doesn't matter. Can you get me into your father's library or not? I know the Manor is locked down."

Draco pulled a face and leaned back against the table. "There's a way," he said cagily. "And the Aurors guarding the place won't know about it."

"You're sure?"

"I've been back a couple of times to retrieve a few...keepsakes. For Mother."

"I see."

Hermione spread her arms. "So how about it? Can you help me?"

"If you tell me what book you want, maybe I can fetch it out for you. Simpler. Safer."

"I can't tell you that."

Draco smirked. "That tasty, eh? Well, you're right not to trust me. I'm a slimy little creep, after all."

"News for you, Draco," she said. "Not so little."

He snorted. "Stop flirting with me, Granger." His eyes grew calculating. "This is a big favour you're asking."

"I know. Do you think I'd ask if it wasn't important?"

"I know you wouldn't. Which makes me wonder what on earth you're up to." He considered. "I can't simply tell you how to bypass the defences. I'd have to take you there myself. It's, er, it's a blood thing."

"Okay."
"Which means I'll be able to see what you're looking up anyway."

"Oh, I'm not worried about that. I'll distract you at the critical moment with something fiendishly clever."

He laughed at that. "Fiendish. Yeah. That'll happen." He shot her an assessing look. "Let me think about it."

"You're not saying 'no', then?"

"Not yet, anyway." He widened his eyes at her. "Might want something in return."

She refused to be unsettled and said, calmly, "If I can help, I will. But I'll do that anyway."

The confident Slytherin ambition shuddered into momentary confusion. Draco sighed. "I'm starting to think you actually mean that."

"You've always been slow to catch on."

He shook the confusion off. Hoisting his bag, he said, "Not sure if you're an enigma or an imbecile, Granger. Or maybe a bit of both."

"Let me know what you decide – I'm never quite sure, myself." she said. "See you tomorrow."

She watched him leave the room, wondering what Harry would have made of that conversation. Then she stopped wondering, because she knew only too well.

Which was why Harry would hear nothing about it, of course.

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After her Defence against the Dark Arts class that afternoon – thankfully a lesson that did not play host to Snape's visiting presence – Hermione had some unexpected free time. There was, after all, little point in attending a Transfiguration lesson when you've already sat the exam.

So she left the Ministry and went to Flourish and Blotts, in search of a nineteenth century autobiography that had been referenced in The Magic of the Tundra. She didn't hold much hope of finding it, the title being old and rather obscure, but it was worth a look.

It wasn't on the shelves in the travel section, nor in biography. Hermione walked over to the counter and asked the shop assistant whether it was possible to place an order for the title.

"What's it called again?" asked the young man, who was new and seemed to be struggling with the paperwork.

"My Northern Lights," she replied. "And there's a subtitle. Do you want that as well?"

"Oh. Um, better had. In case of confusion." The assistant frowned at his parchment. "I hope it isn't very long. I've already run out of room."

"Let's leave the subtitle," Hermione suggested. "The author and publication year ought to suffice."

"Author. Oh." The assistant peered at his parchment. "Oh dear. I put the title in the wrong place. Just a moment." He turned to the open door behind the counter and called, "Mr Gadfly! Are there any more order forms? I think I've messed this one up as well."
Hermione held her patience as the bookshop's manager appeared through the doorway, quilted robe over an open-necked shirt very much in the style of a smoking jacket or dressing gown.

"Really, Thomas, that's the third one today. You must try to be more caref--" Mr Gadfly stopped as he saw Hermione. "It's young Miss Granger! How are you, my dear?"

"I'm well, thank you, Mr Gadfly, and how are you?"

"Fighting fit! Now, what's this order for?" He leaned past Thomas and picked up a fresh order parchment from the clearly visible stack on the counter. Thomas blushed and moved off, pretending that he'd been going to shelve some new stock all along.


"Yes, yes, I remember it. My Northern Lights," Mr Gadfly repeated happily, as he began to fill out the form. "The Tribes and Customs of the Arcane Arctic. By, um, Hogarth, isn't it? Don't tell me. 1841?"

"'42," Hermione corrected with a smile. "At least, according to the reference I have."

"1842...there! All done." He shot a look at Thomas, who was over on the other side of the shop now, and murmured, "Turns out it isn't all that tricky." He winked in an avuncular manner and added, "Now you will let me know, won't you, if you're after a part-time job once all your exams are done? I'd so very much like to employ another person who speaks in sentences."

"I'll let you know," she agreed.

Mr Gadfly stood straight again and, with a flick of his wand, checked the bibliographical ledger mounted on a book rest to one side of the counter. He leaned closer, frowned at the small print on the page, then turned back to her. "Looks like it'll take about a week. Check next Tuesday, if it suits. That'll be one and ten on collection, all right?"

"You don't want the deposit?" Hermione asked.

"Why, are you intending to skip the country?" Mr Gadfly's eyes twinkled. "My dear, you are one of my most reliable customers. One and ten, on collection. Unless you want to cancel the order and borrow your Potions professor's copy, that is! Ha!"

Hermione frowned. "Professor Snape has a copy?"

"On order. This is for some advanced Potions project, I take it?"

"More or less." She smiled, though it felt a bit weak. "Thank you, Mr Gadfly."

"Always a pleasure, Miss Granger. See you next week!"

She left the shop and stepped back down into bustling Diagon Alley. Damn it, it wasn't fair! How was she supposed to work things out in a timely manner when Snape had such a head start? He'd beaten her to Hogwarts's library, now he'd have this autobiography before she would. And god only knew how much time he'd had to pore over Baneful Brews.

Hermione shot a look along the lane, to the distant junction with Knockturn. She thought about how that witch in Shyverwretch's must have laughed at her: almost fleeced by the threat of some pre-paid muggers, and then the man who came to save her was the same one who'd already been in there asking about snagberries. Snape had called her 'clueless'. She was starting to think he might
She stepped closer to the bookshop as the crowd briefly swelled. A poster caught her eye, stuck to the inside of the window. The face she'd seen in yesterday's paper stared back at her. That slash of a scar and the blank staring eye ought to make the man easy to find. It wasn't as if he lacked any distinctive features.

Hermione tutted at the picture. There was no way that the hooded wizard she'd watched on the hotel's security camera footage had been an unexceptional five foot nine. Madam Churlish was right; Polyjuice was the obvious explanation. But what kind of wizard donned a Polyjuice disguise simply in order to go off and obtain hair for another Polyjuice disguise?

(Snape would have done the same, she mused. It was the kind of precaution that had kept him alive for seventeen years as a double-agent. He was also tall and lean: enough that the hooded wizard in the footage could, at a push, have been him. But Hermione refused to get her two investigations muddled up like that.)

She shook her head and turned away from the wanted poster. That, at least, was not her problem any longer. She decided to drop by and see George at the shop, maybe pick up a couple of I'm-sorry gifts for Harry and Ron. She merged with the crowd and made her way further along the alley.

Hermione hadn't gone more than ten paces when she caught sight of a familiar figure coming out of Slug and Jiggers, eyes fixed on his open cupped hand as he checked his change. Damn it, Tuesdays seemed to be Severus Snape's shopping day. Instinct made her step back to the cover of the curved front windows of Ollivanders. She did not want a repeat of last week's confrontation. Not after everything that had happened since.

She waited. Then she peeked. Snape was moving off further down the alley, heading for the junction with Knockturn. She was going that way anyway, so she followed. If he turned around and spotted her, or preternaturally sensed her, or used whatever spidey-senses he liked to use to menace people, well, she had as much right to walk along this cobbled street as anyone else.

Snape paused at the window of Potage's Cauldron Shop. Hermione crossed to the other side of the street, making no attempt to be inconspicuous. She noticed Sugarplum's ahead and made for the shop, rigid in her determination not to look back over her shoulder and check if he'd seen her.

Sugarplum's wasn't busy. She bought a large honey and boomberry cauldron cake, since it was Ron's favourite. If she produced it on Wednesday evening after Ron had filled up on Indian food at the curry house on Upper Street then there was even a chance that she and Harry might get more than a single slice.

Cake boxed up and balanced on her left hand, she left Sugarplum's. 'La la la,' she thought to herself as she tried to look relaxed. 'Here I am, doing perfectly ordinary shopping. Not suspicious at all. La la la.' It was natural enough to get her bearings and look left and right. Snape had moved on during the time it had taken her to be served. She considered for a moment that maybe she'd been trying to give herself an excuse to give up and go home.

But then she saw that dark head and shoulders through the crowd, moving purposefully beyond the main drag of stores, past the carnival-like frontage of George's shop, still making for Knockturn. She looked in exasperation at the delicate box with which she was now encumbered, hoisted her bag on her shoulder, ensured her wand was readily to hand, and then followed.

Hermione slowed as she drew level with George's shop. Just ahead, Snape had paused at the
junction and was checking something written on a piece of paper, then he looked up to note the
time on the clock mounted high on the wall of Gringotts Bank, just visible in the distance. It
seemed he had an appointment.

"Hermione?"

She startled so fiercely that she almost dropped her cake. "Oh. Hi, Verity. How's things?"

"Fine, thanks." George's stalwart shop assistant was taking down a large and colourful poster with
the day's special offers printed upon it. "We're out of Screaming Yo-yos," she explained. "Had a
bit of a run on them. Not sure why." Verity smiled at her. "Mr Weasley is up in the office if you
want him."

Hermione nodded. In sudden inspiration she said, "Here," and handed off her cake box. "Hold this
for me? I'll be back."

She left Verity staring after her as she speed-walked along to Knockturn Alley. Having learned
well from the last time she'd been here, she stepped up to the sheltered doorway of the second-hand
robe shop, swiftly Disillusioned herself, then stepped back again. She waited for a gap in the
crowd and dashed the rest of the way to the junction.

She looked down the alley. It was empty, just like it had been last Tuesday during her foray to
Shadwell's and Shyverwretch's. Snape was nowhere to be seen. She crept along, careful of the
sounds she made, keeping close to the walls and windows of the businesses and properties that
lined the left hand side.

She drew level with one of the narrow pathways off the main street: the one which ran up the side
of the Coffin House, where the muggers liked to wait for their marks. Further down the path, she
could see Snape. He stood with his back to her, wand to hand but relaxed by his side. He seemed
to be shaking his head in disgust. Hermione checked her Disillusionment charm and then made
herself stand very, very still, watching.

He turned around and walked towards her, his shoulders taking up much of the width of the side-
passage. Behind him, almost at the end of the path, she could just about see at least one prone
body. Were these the same muggers that had been lying in wait for her last week? Was this a
hobby of his, coming down here and hexing the bejesus out of wannabe miscreants?

Snape returned to the main drag of Knockturn Alley. He shot his jacket sleeves, wand still readied,
and looked around at the apparently empty street with lazy indifference.

"Your timing is off," he said to the thin air. "Or were you expecting the lowlives to present more
of a challenge?"

Hermione wondered for a moment whether he was speaking to her. He wasn't. The air to the left
of Snape shimmered as another person present cast off their own Disillusionment charm.
Hermione almost cried out a warning, but it wasn't necessary; by the time she'd drawn breath Snape
had whirled around and his wand was already pointed at the newcomer's forehead.

"Now, now," the wizard said, raising his arms in surrender. He was short and dumpy, with slicked
back receding hair and a cloak that had seen better days: a seedy-looking sort. His wand was
gripped in his right hand, but he didn't look as if he was about to cast. "No need for that. Just
being careful."

"So careful that you arranged a meeting where muggers like to congregate?"
The wizard opened his mouth, closed it again, peered around the corner of the Coffin House to check the side-passage that Snape had already cleared, then he coughed. "Looks like they've got other things to do just now," he ventured weakly.

Snape's cold glare was probably scarier than the threat of a swift hex. "Sheathe your wand."

The wizard nodded vigorously and did so.

Snape eased back, though Hermione did not get the impression that he was relaxing his stance. "You have information for me?"

The wizard frowned. "Um. No, I was told you'd have something for me. About the--"

A third air-shimmer, right behind Snape. Another man appeared, wand readied. Hermione had just enough time to think, 'It's a set up!' followed by, 'Fucking hell that's poster-boy!'

Then her wand was in motion. She cast her curse out loud because she wanted to warn Snape of the ambush:

"Petrificus Totalus!"

The body-bind curse caught only the newcomer's sleeve; he was fast in the dodge. By then, Snape had spun around and was matching Hermione's curse with a body-bind of his own. The curse caught the man's boot as he turned and dived for cover into the narrow side-passage. His build and colouring, not to mention the obvious scar over his eye, meant that there could be no doubt as to his identity.

Hermione moved to keep the man in her line of sight. Snape did the same, but by the time they were both directing their wands down the side-passage the man had scrambled to grab a hold of a discarded Ogden's bottle that lay to one side. As soon as he touched it he disappeared with the crackle of displaced air.

"Portkey," Hermione said between gasped breaths. "Bugger."

Snape turned to face her, furious confusion on his face. "Damn it, what the hell is it you're trying to do?"

"Oh, you're welcome!" she threw back. "I just saved your backside!" She pointed down the side-passage. "Didn't you see? That man's face is on wanted posters."

"And you just happened to be passing, did you?"

"Of course not, you numpty, I was following you."

"Why?"

"I don't even bloody know anymore!"

The two of them stared wildly at each other for a few seconds, before a voice said, "Um..."

Snape lurched around and levelled his wand at the seedy-looking wizard. During the recent flurry of curses the man had backed right up to press himself into the cover of the doorway of the Coffin House. His eyes darted around and a sheen of sweat had broken out over his high, pale forehead. He had not seen fit to ready his wand again, in spite of the events of the last thirty seconds. Hermione assumed this was the reason why Snape hadn't cast another hex.
The seedy-looking wizard raised his arms, his eyes nervously tracking Snape's wand, and he said, "Am I to take it that neither of you are here to sell me the stinger from a Manticore?"

Hermione blinked at what could only be a non sequitur.


Oddly, the seedy wizard's eyes lit up. "You have one?"

Snape shook his head slowly. The wizard's expression crumpled with disappointment.

"That's why you're here?" Snape asked.

"I was told someone would...look, Manticore parts are not easy to get hold of! The stingers especially!"

"Why would you even want one?" Hermione asked, bewildered. "The venom loses toxicity on exposure to air. And the rest of it's just chitin."

The wizard shifted. "You know. The, er, virility aspect."

Snape sighed. "It doesn't work."

"What doesn't work?" Hermione pressed.

"Oh, for...what kind of damn fool farce is this?" Snape demanded. "The man wants a more rigorous libido, Hermione. Do you wish to advise him on this, or shall we send him on his way?"

She glared at Snape for a moment and then walked over to the wizard. He started to back away, banged into the Coffin House's door, turned in surprise to look at it and noted only the big 'CLOSED' sign in front of him. At this point he seemed to acknowledge that he could neither outrun her nor Disapparate, so he straightened up.

"The other man. The one who tried to attack my friend," she said quietly. "Had you seen him before?"

"No!"

"Think. He has a prominent scar over his eye. You're sure you haven't seen him?"

"Never."

"Then who told you to come here at this time?"

"It was just a bloke. We got talking yesterday, in the Wyvern. You know. The pub, down there." He indicated further along the alley. "We were in our cups a bit, you know how it is, and the conversation turned to...well. Anyway. I mentioned the stinger. He said he knew a bloke, could sort me out, and...here I am. Um, Miss."

"This man in the pub – what did he look like?"

"Just a bloke! Er, youngish? Tall. Blond, I think. I don't take much notice of blokes."

It seemed the waiter from the Savoy had provided enough hair for more than one dose of Polyjuice. Of course, if this was the case then that meant there was an entirely new question to answer:
Why the hell was the wizard who'd infiltrated the Savoy ball and killed a Muggle reporter now setting an ambush for Severus Snape?

"I think you'd better run along home," Hermione told the seedy-looking wizard.

The man glanced warily over her shoulder at Snape, then he turned tail and hurried off. She watched him go, further into the depths of Knockturn, then she went back to the side-passage and glanced along it. The mugger – or muggers, perhaps – that Snape had dealt with remained slumped in the distance, mostly out of sight around the rear corner of the Coffin House. Just a couple of sticky-out legs.

It came to Hermione, rather suddenly, that she'd broken her promise to Gloria. Here she was, alone with Severus Snape. She turned back to face him. He was watching her, waiting for a move. Tense with distrust.

"So why did that man from the wanted posters try to set you up?" she asked him.

"I do not know."

"Well, who guided you here? Was it the same blond man?"

"I received an anonymous message," Snape said stiffly. "And I do not believe that you have any right to ask me these questions. And by the way – I am not your 'friend'. Do not refer to me as such again."

She stepped closer to him, chin up, refusing to be cowed, and in a quiet voice that shook with anger, she said, "If I am truly no longer your friend then you'd better work harder to keep from calling me 'Hermione'."

A pause. They were standing too close, her and this man who threatened and stole and consulted dark texts. This villain. This liar, this hypocrite, this abuser of trust, this seducer.

"Did you threaten Joseph Montague?" she demanded.

Snape's eyebrow arched. "Yes," he said evenly.

Hermione turned away and sagged against the wall. She rubbed at her face. "Why?"

"You know why," he replied. He took a step towards her, leaned in. "You know only too well. And I didn't think I'd be able to threaten you." His voice was like silk. "Still. I'm getting there." In a whisper: 'Give me time."

He turned and walked away, and by the time Hermione's knees had stopped feeling as though they were made of water he had vanished into the Diagon crowd.

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Hermione did not report the incident to Madam Churlish, though she agonised over the decision all through Tuesday evening. There was, after all, no way for her to explain her Disillusioned presence in the alley without revealing her suspicions about Snape. As solid as those suspicions had become, Hermione could not quite bring herself to formally announce them to MLE. Not yet.

In the end, she convinced herself that there was nothing to be gained in reporting the confrontation. A wizard so careful that he disguised himself habitually and set up Portkey escapes was unlikely to have left anything in the way of a trail of evidence.
It was therefore with mixed feelings that she greeted the next day's development.

At the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee offices, Mr Arnold asked to have a word. Behind closed doors, he told her Madam Churlish had informed him that the wanted man had been sighted. In Knockturn Alley. Attacking one Severus Snape.

Hermione took a moment to try to settle her racing thoughts. "Who saw this?" she asked, hoping she wasn't walking into a trap.

Arnold looked confused for a moment and then said, "Professor Snape did. Sorry, didn't I make that clear?"

"Professor Snape reported this man attacking him in Knockturn Alley?" Hermione said.

Arnold shook his head at her. "Are you all right, Miss Granger?" He gave a laugh. "Usually I think you're three steps ahead of the rest of us, not lagging behind like this!

She gave an embarrassed smile. "Sorry. I've had quite a lot on, of late."

"Oh, that's all right. It's nice to find out you're human, after all!" Mr Arnold gave her a kind look. "Anyway, that's the news. For some reason this fellow drew Professor Snape to a quiet location. I didn't get all the details, but fortunately Snape was well on his guard when he went along. Apparently the scarred chap in the picture, he popped out of nowhere and was about to fire off a nasty curse. Obviously hadn't done his research, eh? Not many wizards quicker on the cast than Severus Snape, are there? Had the blaggard racing for cover before he could cast a single hex!"

"He got away, I take it," Hermione said.

"Alas, yes. Organised a Portkey for himself nearby. Unauthorised, of course, so untraceable. Anyway, it's all good information, Madam Churlish tells me. This interest in Professor Snape might prove key to locating our suspect."

"Did Madam Churlish explain why the wanted man attacked Professor Snape?"

"No one has a clue at the moment. Including Snape himself. Very rum do."

"And nobody else witnessed this incident?" She felt the flush rising to her cheeks and tried to breathe calmly.

"Not that I've been told about. Even if they had, though, it's Knockturn. That sort are not your basic upstanding citizens; they pride themselves on telling the authorities nothing."

"Yes, of course."

"Anyway, there we go. Hopefully we're one step closer to sorting it all out. Now, why don't you get off for an early lunch. Looks like you could do with it."

Hermione thanked her boss and did as he suggested. She Floo'ed to the Leaky Cauldron and then headed out into the throngs of Muggle London, making for the wonderful anonymity of her favourite Soho coffee place. She ordered a sandwich, settled in and tried to think.

So Snape had done as she had not and actually reported the Knockturn incident. Surprising.

But in leaving her name out of his report, was he protecting her...or himself?

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The afternoon's Potions tutorial was noteworthy only because it was the first lesson she had ever attended where she didn't speak even once. Instead, she wrapped herself in her current essay and barely followed the discussions taking place among her fellow students. She caught Michael shooting her the odd look, presumably because he'd noted her lack of participation and found it weird, but even offering a reassuring smile felt like hard work.

That evening she made the effort to attend curry-night, though she still felt uneasy around her closest friends. She didn't like to have to guard every single thing that she said, but it was the only way to prevent those thoughts and fears and suspicions from escaping into the conversation.

Hermione did acknowledge, in a fit of personal honesty, that she was no longer keeping the St Mungo's thefts a secret for the sake of Gloria and her son. Now that Snape's involvement was obvious, she was doing so for herself. She told herself that Harry and Ron couldn't help her anyway; her two friends tended to go charging head-first at problems, which would not be a sensible approach.

Deep down, however, Hermione knew it wasn't about that. If she told Harry and Ron what was going on, her sense of disappointment and loss would become unequivocal. It would be like opening the box on Schrödinger's cat: the either-or would become a definite.

Mariana was absent for curry-night, claiming a prior engagement. Hermione suspected the boys had been keen to avoid anything that risked Hermione's own attendance. They had a nice enough meal, though Hermione's appetite was lacking. Back at the house afterwards, they settled in round the kitchen table, eating honey and boomberry cauldron cake and drinking mugs of tea. The sense of togetherness felt brittle, at least to Hermione, but it was still there.

And then, just when everything seemed to be settled and relaxed, Harry said, "So. A fake stage conjurer, eh?"

Hermione almost choked out her mouthful. Fortunately she'd been brought up better than that, and managed to get her breathing-and-eating functionality back under control. "What do you mean?" she asked warily, when she was no longer at risk of launching cake-projectiles.

Harry raised his eyebrows such that his forehead-scar disappeared under his scruffy fringe. "You know what I mean. Shacklebolt was surprised you hadn't told us."

"He told me not to!" She tried to gather her thoughts. "Okay, so why the hell did he tell you?"

Harry shrugged. "I asked him.

"You asked him." Her voice was too steady, the way it got before her temper blew.

Ron went very still and muttered, "Uh-oh."

Hermione ignored him. "So let me get this straight. I told you that I was busy with something at work. And I told you that I was under orders to keep it quiet. I'm right so far, yes?"

"Hermione..." Harry had caught up with Ron and was looking alarmed.

"Do not 'Hermione' me." She took a deep breath. "So. Having told you those things, what did you do? You went to the Acting fucking Minister and demanded to know what was going on?" She glared at Harry.

"Er...yes?" he ventured.
"Right then. All right. So let's set aside, for the moment, the monumental arrogance of an Auror apprentice who thinks he can just wander over to the head of the Ministry and demand information about confidential operations. Let's just...let's set that aside."

"I wasn't trying to abuse my celebrity or anything--"

"You can't help it! You're Harry Potter! You defeated the Dark Lord himself! When you ask people things, they feel obliged to tell you!"

"Setting it aside?" Ron put in hurriedly.

"Yes. Fine. Setting that aside – what the hell do you think it says about me? The Minister tells me to keep my mouth shut. I let slip that there's something going on. You go straight back to the Minister and demand answers."

"I asked nicely! I didn't demand anything!"

"Do you think maybe it might make me look untrustworthy? Unreliable? Big-mouthed, maybe?"

"Calm down!" Harry said. "He wasn't angry or anything."

In a blatant attempt to change the subject, Ron said, "Hey, how d'you come up with the idea? Fake magician?"

Hermione looked down at the table, breathed for a moment, then shook her head. "It was a Muggle-worthy excuse," she said wearily. "That's sort of my job."

"I thought it was brilliant," Ron said. Then he frowned. "Didn't get it. But it was brilliant."

"It was a bloody good idea. And I got it, by the way." Harry glanced at her, checking her anger-levels.

She tried to accept the peace offering. "Thanks. Seems to have worked, anyway."

"Only now we're after this wizard on the posters. The one who murdered some journalist in Lewisham," Harry added.

Hermione took the time to hide her face behind her tea mug. Her left knee was bouncing with nervous energy under the kitchen table. "I see. The Minister told you about that, too."

"Yes." He tried a smile. "I couldn't really stick my fingers in my ears halfway through, could I?"

"Well, there is no 'we' about it. The murder investigation is the province of Improper Use. I've done my bit."

Ron said, "Kingsley seems to think you did more than 'your bit'. The way he described it, we only have a description of the suspect because of you."

"That sort of happened accidentally. I was just part of a team."

"Whatever. But this is good, right?" Harry said. "You don't have to hide it from us anymore."

"Is that really what this is about?" Hermione asked. "Or is it about me telling you something and you running off to try and prove I'm a liar?"

An awkward pause. Perhaps she wasn't keeping a hold of her temper as well as she'd thought.
Ron coughed. "So anyway, Kingsley told us about Snape, too. You heard about that, right? That this bloke from the wanted posters attacked him?"

Hermione looked down at her plate. "Yes. I heard."

"Merlin, you've really been in the thick of things," Ron said, and it sounded like a complaint. "I thought we'd be the ones hunting bad guys! All we do is practise bloody defensive charms and wade through rule books."

"Look, it's just the way it happened," Hermione said. "I didn't go looking for a big scary drama. I only got this job because I'm Muggle-born. If someone else had come up with a good idea to explain what the hotel cameras recorded then I'd never have got a look in."

"Face it, Hermione," Ron said. "You're always going to end up right in the middle of everything. I mean, you didn't have to become Harry's friend in first year, did you? Seven years later, there you are, saving the world. It's what you do."

"Look who's talking," she fired back. "In any case, my involvement is over. Madam Churlish is only keeping me in the loop because Kingsley's a friend and he asked her to."

"Oh, so it isn't just me, then, gets special treatment?" Harry said.

"Not a good time to make that point, mate," Ron quickly put in.

There was an awkward pause. The noises of cake being eaten and mugs of tea being put down on the table were enough to make Hermione cringe.

Harry eventually said, "Funny that Snape's got sucked in to it too, though."

Hermione looked down at the rest of her cake. "Yes. That's...worrying," she admitted.

"Why worry?" Harry asked. "Snape is too good to get taken down by some rough-arsed criminal."

She grunted agreement, but that wasn't what she'd meant. She remembered how she'd had that weird moment, yesterday, when it had seemed possible that the cloaked figure at the hotel actually was Severus Snape. Of course, the idea was a silly one as soon as it was scrutinised. Snape might have matched the height, but the behaviour was all wrong. For instance, if Snape had tried to Obliviate an inconvenient witness then he'd have managed it perfectly. And he wouldn't have been incompetent enough to get caught in the first place.

With those thoughts, something clicked into place.

"There's two of them," she said.

"Two what?" asked Ron with his mouth full of cake.

"Nothing," she said quickly. "Just remembered something I've forgotten."

This time it was Harry who lost his temper. He stood up at the table and his chair scraped backwards along the floor tiles. "Really?" he demanded of her. "Did you even hear what I said? We know about it, now! You can discuss it with us! Stop pushing us away!"

Hermione stood up too, though she made the action more measured and took the time to breathe before responding. "I appreciate your concern," she said tightly. "But we aren't at school anymore, Harry, and nor are we fighting for our lives on the run from Death Eaters. There are
going to be parts of my life that do not involve all three of us."

"I know!" he said. "But this counts, doesn't it? Seems to me you've been dragged into a murder investigation, and another friend of ours seems to be involved, and Shacklebolt's worried that the attentions of the bad guy might even turn to you."

Hermione blinked away her surprise. "Kingsley is worried that I might be targeted? Why the hell would he think that?"

Ron, still sitting down, held up a hand as though he was in class. "Um – for the record, I don't consider Snape a friend."

"I don't know, not the specifics, but it's probably why he told us about the thing," Harry said to Hermione, ignoring Ron's comment. "Not because I'm some pathetic prima donna! Think about it, though – the last time Snape was a target, it was about his role in the war. And you were there too. I'm sure you remember. You were the reason Rookwood didn't succeed in killing Snape."

"Only just," Hermione muttered.

"Whatever. Point is, if Snape's a target again then chances are it's still about the war. What else would it be about?"

"I don't know. I don't have enough information to speculate."

Harry just shook his head. "Okay. But if it is about the war then you're involved. You're the enemy, just like Snape. And you and him – you get thought about together now."

Hermione opened her mouth, closed it, shook her head and frowned down at her hands. "I don't even know what that means, but it sounds tawdry."

"It just means that what happened with Rookwood got in the paper! 'Attempt on Snape's life averted by plucky Hermione Granger!'"

"'Plucky'?" Hermione said, not sure whether to laugh or shudder.

"Fine, yeah, get picky about my language, that's the important thing!" Harry glared at her. "The point is, if this man, Scarface, if he sees Snape as an enemy then he might see you as an enemy too. And whatever's happening, isn't it better to have someone watching your back? Call it 'just in case'."

"I think Kingsley is overreacting," Hermione said.

"Yeah? Have you considered the political implications for him if one of the Golden Trio ends up attacked, or worse, on his watch?"

Which was probably a fairer point than most Harry had made that evening. "Fine," she said. "Watch my back. You're well placed to do so. Because you seem to be very good at going behind it."

With that, she clomped up the stairs to her bedroom in order to cool off.

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Before she went to the Muggle-Worthy Excuse offices on the Thursday morning, she detoured to Improper Use of Magic on level two. At the reception desk she asked if Madam Churlish was in,
and would it be possible to have a word. The receptionist looked outraged by the very idea, but sent the message. When Churlish came walking through to collect Hermione, the receptionist looked even more unimpressed.

"Sorry to bother you," Hermione said. "I know I'm probably overstepping my bounds again, but something struck me last night about the wanted man. I wanted to run it past you."

Churlish paused as she thought about this, then she nodded and led Hermione through to her private office. Instead of inviting her to speak, however, Churlish asked a question. "You know Severus Snape quite well, don't you?"

"Oh. Um, yes, I suppose." Hermione begged her face not to flush up. "We were both a part of Dumbledore's plan. We had that in common."

"And you were at the hospital, the day he was attacked, back in June."

"Yes." She frowned. "Are you saying there's evidence that the suspect is something to do with the Death Eaters?"

"Actually, no, there is not." Churlish turned her back and looked at a copy of the wanted-poster that she'd tacked up on her office wall. "Nobody recognises the face. Whether or not it's his real face, no one knows it. Which is odd in itself – usually somebody recognises the descriptions we put out there."

"So why are you asking me about Professor Snape?"

Churlish turned back around. "Because two days ago Snape was lured to Knockturn Alley by our suspect with the promise of information. And all Snape will tell us is that it was information about one of his students." Churlish shot her a significant look as she sat down at her desk. "He won't tell us any more. Actually, he claims that little more was said to him."

"And you think this information was about me?" Hermione asked. She made her tone dubious, but it wasn't hard to work out that this was probably the reason behind Kingsley's sudden concern for her well-being.

"It's one possibility." Churlish looked at her expectantly, before she gave a sigh and shook her head. "Another possibility, of course, is that our suspect made something up that he knew would attract Snape's attention. For all Snape's reputation as a harsh taskmaster, I believe he takes his role as a teacher seriously." Churlish looked thoughtful. "The recent matter with Blaise Zabini was unfortunate, for instance, but it was Snape himself who insisted that the young man's expulsion from the course was punishment enough."

So Snape had reported Blaise's meltdown after all. Hermione nodded, though she remained puzzled as to why Snape's anger during that incident had so quickly turned to leniency. "Blaise is dealing with a lot, right now," she acknowledged. "I suppose we're all of us prone to the odd moment-of-madness."

Churlish seemed to agree, since she gave a rueful smile. "Just so. Being caught in a lie can make things spiral out of control very quickly."

Hermione felt a chill. Was there subtext to this comment? Had her presence in Knockturn Alley been discovered? Was Churlish engineering an opportunity for her to come clean, or was Hermione's guilt about withholding information colouring her view?

"I'm sure that's right," Hermione said, aiming for 'neutral'. She told herself Churlish could simply
be speaking theoretically.

Churlish grunted her agreement. "So you can't think of anything our suspect might have offered to tell Snape about you? I'm not prying, Miss Granger, truly, but if we can work out the nature of this man's interest in Snape and the information to which he has access, it might help."

This was a fair investigative lead. Unfortunately, the only possibilities that Hermione could imagine were not things she was prepared to say to Jasmine Churlish. "Snape's currently my number-one suspect in a series of thefts from the hospital. He appears to have been planning this operation all through last summer, and seems intent on brewing a pretty nasty potion. Also, he's been going about threatening nice botanists. In spite of all that, I dream about making wild, abandoned love with him at least two or three times a week. Does any of that count?"

No. Just, no.

"Sorry," she said. "Certainly nothing that would lure the professor to Knockturn Alley."

Churlish nodded. "Fair enough. Which brings us back to the theory that the information used as bait was simply fabricated. Oh, and we're still looking for the other witness, of course."

Hermione dry-swallowed and then tried not to cough. "Uh...other witness?"

Churlish didn't notice this stumble, distracted as she was with organising a pile of papers on her desk. "It's rather odd, actually. Professor Snape made no mention of it, but the clerk in the Coffin House claims to have seen at least one other person present during the assault. A short, threadbare wizard in his fifties, was the report." She glanced up at Hermione. "So we're making enquiries. There's a pub, further down Knockturn Alley. The White Wyvern. I've got someone there, keeping an eye out."

"Ah. Good." Hermione felt a watery sensation in her lower gut: the one that meant trouble was looming. If Improper Use found the seedy wizard who'd been used as a distraction, then her presence in Knockturn Alley would be revealed. And then she'd need to explain why she hadn't volunteered the information. So would Snape, for that matter.

Odd, to learn that a clerk had come forward, though. Like Mr Arnold had said, none of the businesses in Knockturn Alley were usually in any hurry to help MLE. And didn't Hermione remember a big 'CLOSED' sign on the door of the Coffin House?

Churlish looked up at Hermione. "Now, what was it you wanted to discuss?"

"Right. Yes. The wanted man. The height discrepancy has been bothering me."

"Us, too. But if the description we have is merely a Polyjuice disguise..." She shrugged. "It doesn't help our investigation, but it's a theory that fits."

"Yes, that's true. But I realised last night that there are other discrepancies. The kind that aren't explained by the use of Polyjuice."

Churlish frowned. "Explain. And sit down, Miss Granger, you're making me feel like a headmistress."

Hermione took the visitor's chair. "Okay. The wizard we saw at the beginning of the footage. The tall one, in the cloak and hood, who couldn't possibly be Polyjuiced. That guy – he's an amateur."

"Go on," Churlish said.
"Seriously. He's wearing a get-up like that near the delivery access for one of the busiest hotels in London? Waving a wand around? Trying unsuccessfully to Obliviate a Muggle reporter? He's an idiot."

"His Obliviate may have failed, but we still suspect him of being able to cast a Patronus. That takes magical skill."

"True. But people can be skilled in one area and idiots in another. And I'm saying – when it comes to risk assessment, he's an idiot."

Churlish said, "Or perhaps badly informed about how to conduct himself in Muggle society?"

"Maybe." Hermione thought about this. "Actually, that would make sense."

"The discrepancy you noted?"

"Oh, right. See, the wizard from the wanted poster, on the other hand – he's at the other end of the spectrum. Careful. Organised. Utterly risk-averse. Polyjuice disguises as a matter of course? The pre-arranged Portkey to escape? The double-layer of distraction when he lured Professor Snape to Knockturn Alley?"

"Double-layer?"

A brief moment of panic, as she realised she was revealing too much. "You know. The muggers that were in the side-passage, and then this other wizard your witness mentioned. I'm thinking he might have been there to keep the professor's attention while the attacker waited for his moment."

Churlish raised a brow. "You seem remarkably well informed. I didn't mention the muggers to Mr Arnold."

Hermione said, "Actually the Minister spoke to Harry about the incident. We were discussing it last night."

All of which was true. Thankfully. Though she hadn't expected to feel so grateful for yesterday's argument.

"Ah. I see," Churlish said with a nod. "You're right, Miss Granger. There does seem to be two distinct behaviours here."

"Which is why I think we should be looking for two wizards. Not one," Hermione concluded.

"A partnership," Churlish mused. "One tall, reckless wizard who makes mistakes. One shorter wizard with a scar through his eye who covers every angle and seems to have it in for Professor Snape."

Hermione sighed. "It's only a theory. I just thought I should raise it, in case no one else had."

"No one has." Churlish sighed. "Not sure how it helps us in the search for this suspect, but I'll bear it in mind. Thank you for dropping by, Miss Granger."

Hermione stood up. "I'd better get to work."

She said her goodbyes and left the office. It felt, weirdly, like she'd just dodged a bullet.
By the time her Potions lesson came around that afternoon, Hermione realised that she and Snape had got into the habit of failing to acknowledge each other's presence during classes. She also realised that she had become better at shutting down the more tumultuous sections of her thoughts in order to focus on her work. She brewed her Farsight potion well enough.

The slight hesitation Snape gave before awarding her an Adequate left her uncertain whether her results had skirted more closely to a Subpar or a Competent. Sometimes there was no reading the man.

Friday morning demanded an early start. She arrived at St Mungo's in good time for her extra Potions lesson. The hospital was quiet at this hour, and she made her way down to the first sub-level without any interruption. Nobody was waiting in the corridor, so she knocked at the laboratory door and then opened it to look inside. The room was empty, though covered trays on the demonstration table revealed that whatever else was going on with Snape, he still took his teaching duties seriously.

Hermione closed the door, settled down cross-legged on the corridor floor outside, and fished out her copy of Spellwork in Potions. No point twiddling her thumbs when she could be reading.

"Granger," said Draco some time afterwards, making her jump.

"Oh. Hello." She recalled immediately that she and Draco were not supposed to be openly friendly, and winced at herself as she checked the corridor for onlookers. She was relieved to find they were alone. "Yes. Good. Hello."

He smirked at her. "Subterfuge really is not your forte, is it?"

"Not really." She closed her book and set it aside. "Too much like hard work."

"Hmm. Maybe. Wouldn't worry, though. Now Zabini's made himself scarce it doesn't matter as much. Milly lacks the imagination to change her world-view. And I get the feeling Nott kind of respects you. Not that he ever really gives anything away."

"What's going on with Blaise, anyway?" she asked. "I knew he wouldn't be here for Potions anymore, but he's been absent from all the other Lost Seventh classes too."

"Not a clue," Draco said. "Remember, I spend most of my time in Normandy."

She nodded. "Do they allow you to visit your father?"

His voice sharpened. "Why would you care about that?"

"I don't, I suppose. Not as far as he's concerned. But he's still your dad, and, well, it can't be easy."

Draco just looked away. "Don't do that, Granger. Don't add me to your list of hopeless causes."

"There's no list," she said, feeling irritable. "It's all I can do to keep my own head on straight at the moment."

When she looked up, Draco had sunk down to sit on the floor against the opposite wall.

"So," he said.

"So?"

"Doing anything tomorrow?" He held her gaze steadily.
"Nothing planned," she said.

Draco nodded slowly. "Mould-on-the-Wold. The pub there – it's called the Cracked Vial."

She nodded. "I'll find it."

He glanced at the laboratory door, then said, "Three o'clock suit you?" Then he held up a hand with two fingers raised, and nodded significantly at them.

Of course, Draco Malfoy was aware that Severus Snape employed an amplification charm outside his Lost Seventh classroom; Snape had told him as much on their very first day here. Hermione didn't bother to tell Draco she'd already checked they were on their own. She just nodded her understanding. "Three it is," she said, and held up two fingers. Playing along seemed like the least amount of trouble.

At that point the door to the potions laboratory opened and Snape stood there, towering over them both. "Aqua Sedatis *remedials*?" he said disdainfully.

Hermione and Draco stood up. Hermione glared at Snape. Either he'd bypassed the hospital's wards and Apparated directly into the classroom – which seemed unlikely – or he'd arrived early and then Disillusioned himself to disguise this fact, which could only mean he intended to eavesdrop on his students.

So was he paying her back for her Disillusioned pursuit of him last Tuesday? Or was this unapologetic spying the means to some more specific end?

Either way, she had to wonder whether all this sneakiness was somehow catching.

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Back to the Nightmare

"Where shall I learn to get my peace again?
To banish thoughts of that most hateful land,
Dungeoner of my friends."

John Keats, What Can I Do to Drive Away 1795-1821

The Cracked Vial in Mould-on-the-Wold, at the southern tip of the Cotswolds, was unapologetically provincial. Not for this place the bustle of Saturday lunchtime at the Leaky, nor the hearty fare at the Broomsticks. The Cracked Vial was quiet, reserved and very, very local. When Hermione arrived there were three other customers hunched over their drinks, apparently positioned as far away from each other as they could manage. All three looked up as she came through the door. Their frowns were unwelcoming but thankfully brief, before they sank back into their various introspections. It seemed as though this huff of unfriendliness was more about muscle-memory than genuine hostility.

It was two o'clock. She'd either read Draco's cautious hand signals correctly, or she was an hour early. Either way, he wasn't here yet. She went over to the bar, since it was a bit rude to take up a seat in a pub and then not buy anything.

"What can I get you, Miss?" asked the woman behind the bar after she deigned to lift her nose out of the open copy of Witch Weekly lying across the counter.

"Gillywater, please," Hermione said. She had never really been one for alcohol, and Butterbeer set her teeth on edge these days.

She paid for her drink and found an unobtrusive table tucked away to one side. Since she had at least a few minutes in hand, she retrieved a book to read. Now that she was here, she found she wanted to distract herself from the fact that a) she was meeting Draco Malfoy without the obvious safety-net of having told someone else what she was doing, and b) she was about to revisit the scene of her worst nightmare. And all because she was keen to get her hands on a book deemed so evil and dangerous that the Ministry had banned it. What kind of a person did that make her? Reckless? Dedicated? Selfish? Stupid?

Maybe all those things.

A few minutes after she'd sat down, one of the locals got up and headed towards the back of the pub, presumably in order to use the facilities. She did not glance up and acknowledge the man. (She might well be in a mostly-empty provincial inn in the Cotswolds, but she was also a semi-presentable nineteen year old woman on her own. Eye contact, even of the most banal kind, made some men believe they'd been invited to flirt. When their attentions were politely rebuffed they could get nasty about it.)

She read some more, glancing occasionally at her watch. She sipped her Gillywater; it was surprisingly fresh and well-made, chilled, with a sprig of mint as garnish.

"Outside in two minutes, Granger," the local murmured as he returned from the facilities, walking past her without looking.

It was all she could do not to squeak her surprise. She imagined Draco laughing to himself about
her ineptitude as she watched him walk away. Polyjuiced? No, that had been his true voice. A glamour, then. Probably a sensible precaution, now she thought about it. Both of them had recognisable faces when it came to their insular society.

She finished her drink, took the glass back to the bar and said thank you, then left the inn. Draco, still in his disguise, was leaning against a stone wall and checking his pocket watch, doing quite a good impression of a man who'd been at the Ogden's most of the afternoon. He didn't look back at her but slouched off around the corner. Hermione followed.

He let her catch up when they were hidden from view behind the open gateway into the pub's rear delivery yard. With a wave of his wand, Draco let the glamour fall away.

"Nicely done," she acknowledged.

"You didn't bother with one yourself," he pointed out.

"It didn't occur to me."

He shrugged. "This is the closest wizarding village to the Manor. They know my face around here. Wasn't sure you'd want to be seen with me. You being who you are." He sniffed and looked away, adding, "Even if you are making an effort not to be quite the irritating harpy you used to be."

"Yes, fine, you're much better at this cloak and dagger stuff than I am, and no, I won't tell anyone you thought it might be nice to help out a classmate."

"I'm going to have to Side-Along you." He challenged her with a raised eyebrow. "Okay with that?"

Hermione had been anticipating the need. The only place she knew well enough to Apparate to herself was the Manor's front gates: not a location commensurate with this clandestine mission. "I scarcely have a choice, do I?"

"Course you do. You can go home."

Hermione shrugged. "Seems to me that if you really wanted me dead I'd probably be dead by now."

"You say the sweetest things."

"Let's just get on with it. And don't splinch us." She held up a hand.

Draco took it. "Hold tight."

With the familiar wave of blackness and pressure, they were underway. It took only moments, of course, before they staggered as they landed in the middle of a wildflower meadow. Draco had set them down in the cover offered by a lush and untamed hedgerow that had clearly not been given its post-summer prune.

Surreptitiously she checked and found herself intact. She looked around. The afternoon was overcast but dry, though the undergrowth was damp from recent rain. "So far so good," she decided.

"Right then," Draco said. "We're here on a Saturday because it's shift-change day. All week, a team of Aurors have been guarding the Manor gates and patrolling the perimeter, while the curse-breakers do their best to neutralise the defences. Which, by the way, they are not going to manage
any time soon – all the really competent curse-breakers get snapped up by Gringotts. There's another crew of Aurors ready to take their place at six o'clock tonight. Which means the officers on duty are bored shitless after an entire week of absolutely nothing happening."

"Okay," she said. "Why didn't we come a bit later, then? Maybe when we start to lose some daylight?"

"Because there's a handover period, one shift to the next, and the Senior Auror in charge of Malfoy Manor's security shows up to oversee it. Any time after four, usually. So the grunts tend to buck their ideas up around then, to look good for the boss."

"Makes sense. But how do you know all this?"

Draco shot her an exasperated look. "I watched, obviously. First time I decided I needed to get back inside, I did my research."

"And you're trusting me with this information because...?"

"Because no one's going to be surprised to find out that Lucius Malfoy's son is taking the piss out of the Aurory. But quite a lot of people would be surprised to discover that the sainted Hermione Granger asked him to help her do the same."

She nodded. The balance of risk was, indeed, in Draco's favour. Especially since they were on his territory.

He indicated that they start walking along the edge of the meadow. "For the record," he said, "I've no intention of betraying this little foray of ours unless you force my hand."

"Likewise," she said. She let her fingertips drag along the waving grasses and flowers as they walked. "Why did you do that secret hand signal thing when you told me what time to meet?"

Draco huffed a wry laugh. "Because Severus Snape is a sly old dog."

She kept her voice level when she said, "Even if he'd been listening in on our conversation, why on earth would he care?"

"You tell me, Granger. Word is, you spent quite a bit of time with him while he was in hospital."

"Word? Whose word?"

"Well, I heard it from my mother. She must have heard it from one of the few acquaintances she has who's still happy to gossip with her." He looked at her askance. "Is it true? Did you visit Snape during his recovery?"

A few months ago, Hermione's instinct would have been to justify her choice with a lengthy explanation. She'd learned better since then, and simply said, "Yes, that's true."

Draco shook his head. "The lost causes of Hermione Granger."

"Whatever. I still don't understand why you thought he'd care about this."

"Because 'this' – you, me, this tenuous alliance of ours – is an anomaly. It should not be. He'll be intrigued, and probably annoyed because he doesn't understand it. For all his 'you're not at Hogwarts now' bullshit, he's still Slytherin through and through." Draco glanced at her. "Knowledge is power, Granger."
She nodded. She didn't mention that Severus Snape had been the one to note, understand and even encourage this 'tenuous alliance' right from day one. If Draco didn't credit him with that much insight or subtlety then that was Draco's look-out. "So you thought – if he heard us speaking and decided to poke his nose in, you'd at least give us an hour's head start."

"That was the plan. Might have been unnecessary, of course."

She suspected that it had actually been a very good call, though not for the reasons Draco had foreseen. "We're off to some hidden back gate, then, are we?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Gates," Draco scoffed. "Doors. Portals. I mean, honestly. There's three gates in the boundary walls of the Manor. Main front gates, rear delivery gates and the little pedestrian gate in the west wall into the hedge maze. They're all sealed up tight and trapped with escalating threats. And they'll all have an Auror on guard there."

"So where are we going?"

"To somewhere we can gain entry without being so pathetically obvious."

"There's a secret entrance?"

"Of course there's a bloody secret entrance! There's four, actually. Two of them were built in the last twenty years." Draco flicked his hair back haughtily. "My father may have been forthright in his opinions, and those opinions may not be considered popular in current circles, but the one thing he has never been is an idiot."

"Oh, certainly," Hermione said. "I've always found great solace in knowing that the man who set a basilisk on me was relatively intelligent."

Draco stopped and shot her an irritated look. "Do you want my help or not?"

"Yes. But not if you want me to lie about what a murderous bigot your father is."

"If he's such a villain, what the hell are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere with me?"

Hermione shrugged. "Asking for your help."

Draco opened his mouth to speak then closed it again.

"He's your father," she said more quietly. "I understand. But you're not him. If you were, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"Not unless I've spent the last four weeks tricking you into trusting me, so I can finish what he started," Draco said.

"And you tricked me into asking for access to your family library too, did you? That must have taken some planning."

"Maybe I've just been waiting for an opportunity and you were enough of a moron to present me with one."

Hermione crossed her arms, exasperated. "Make up your mind, Draco. Do you want to be a leftover minion of a racist walking zombie, or do you want to be a human being?"

Draco's nose twitched to one side as he sniffed: a mannerism she'd been watching him indulge since they were both eleven years old. "Let's say...I'm still making up my mind."
"Okay then. Here's a question. Do you still see me as a 'filthy Mudblood'?

He didn't so much as blink when she said the word. Not like Ron or Harry, and especially not like Snape. "More like an occasionally unkempt Muggle-born," Draco said thoughtfully.

Hermione snorted. "That's progress, I think."

He smirked. " Might be. Still, I have to say, Granger – this is one of the odder acquaintances I've known through my life. " He turned and moved on.

They walked for perhaps another fifty yards before Draco held up a warning hand, turned and made a 'shush' signal with a finger over his lips, then he pointed to their left. Visible over the thriving hedgerow was a distant and much taller stone-built wall: Malfoy Manor's boundary. Between the hedge and the wall, a country lane. Probably one that formed part of the Aurors' patrol.

Draco checked his watch and then crept forward, darting across a gap in the hedge where a gate stood. They were running out of meadow; a short distance ahead two hedges met to form a corner. He led them as far as they could go, grasses and betony and field scabious brushing around their legs. He waited for a while, listening. After perhaps a minute, the steady sound of booted footsteps came along the surface of the lane beyond the hedge. They both waited until the footsteps had died away.

Draco held her eyes, took a deep breath, and said:

"The entrance to the orangery tunnel is located in the north east corner of Whittington's Field, in the ruined stable."

Hermione felt the rush and judder of a Fidelius Charm incorporating her into its magic. She shook the sensations away, even as a run-down building materialised in front of her where previously she had seen only meadow and overgrown hedges. The building was a mixture of dry stone walling and half-rotted timbers, with barely any roof left and plant life growing in every nook and cranny.

"You're a secret keeper," she murmured.

"I rather have to be. Don't know if you heard, but my father's in prison. Watch your step, here."

He ducked through the place where once a door had hung, stooped to avoid a half-fallen timber support, and then picked his way across rubble and weeds to the corner of the ruin. He produced his wand and flicked it at a pile of stones, and the stones disappeared to reveal a sturdy-looking trapdoor. Another swish of his wand, and Draco had charmed the tunnel entrance open.

"I'm glad I wore sensible shoes," Hermione said, as she looked at the steep steps leading down.

"It isn't a long way. Maybe two hundred yards. The orangery is well out of sight, tucked round the back of the manor house – my great-great-grandfather had it built to hide the servants' wing from the terrace and croquet lawn."

"Of course he did," Hermione said flatly. "Who wants to look at a servants' wing?"

"Ha ha. Right then! Off we go." Draco cast a Lumos and began to climb down the steps.

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"So you meant it literally when you said 'a blood thing'," Hermione remarked as they entered the orangery at the other end of the tunnel.
Draco blotted the pad of his thumb with a cloth soaked in Wiggenweld potion until the slit he had cut in it closed. He shrugged. "My family's always been a bit blood-obsessed."

She looked around at the orangery. A lavish suite of furniture was positioned to make the best of the light and the view across the croquet lawn. Containers and raised beds might once have housed tender plants, but most stood empty, only a few dismal looking specimens clinging to life after five months without care. The building smelled musty and unused.

She was here again: Malfoy Manor. Her heart was speeding up in spite of the way she tried to keep her composure.

"Has anyone actually been here since the battle?" she asked as they made their way over to the doors.

"Which battle?"

"The big one. Hogwarts."

"Just me," he said lightly. "On a couple of scouting missions. Mother didn't want to come back after...you know, everything. She seems quite happy in France, actually."

"But your family still owns this place, right? I mean, I know that the Ministry–"

"...is in the process of stealing it? Yes. They are. With the cunning use of bureaucracy." Draco held the orangery door open for her: a gesture that seemed oddly chivalrous. "Mother might not want to come back here but that doesn't mean she's happy to toss the Ministry the keys to the kingdom. All we can do for now is make it as hard as possible for the busybodies to gain entry."

He looked back at her as he led her across a paved terrace furnished with wrought-iron tables and chairs. "You probably think we should give it all up, do you?"

"I think this place is one big crime scene," Hermione said, eyeing the external walls of the manor house with a shudder. "If no one has been here since Voldemort went off to get his arse kicked at Hogwarts? I'm guessing there's evidence."

"Evidence to convict whom, exactly? All the senior Death Eaters that survived the war are in prison. Including my father."

"He got six years, Draco," Hermione said quietly. "Some might say that was incredibly lenient, given all he did."

Draco stopped at some large glass-panelled doors and made a swift sign with his hands. The doors swung open. "Some might say," he acceded. He turned to look at her. "I'm not so sure."

"It isn't a subject you can be all that objective about," Hermione said.

"No, no, this isn't about family bias. Listen – you told me, last week, that maybe I can start to make my own choices now. Remember?"

"Of course I remember."

"Right. You said it because you know that up until very recently I didn't get much of a choice in anything. My allegiance was predetermined."

Hermione nodded. "You were taught to hate people like me."
"I was raised to hold certain opinions – opinions that, in hindsight, are flawed. I mean, I'm not stupid, Granger. I was always told Mudbloods are weak in magic and intellect. But even back in first year it was clear that this simply wasn't true."

"Yes, but it's hard to argue the toss with a man as immovable as your father. Especially when you're just twelve years old. I wouldn't have expected you to try."

"Maybe. That's not the point I'm trying to make, though. Look, the reason why you're giving me the benefit of the doubt – because you think I was indoctrinated into a mindset with no hope of resisting? I think you could argue that my father deserves the same courtesy."

Hermione blinked as she thought this through. She could remember Snape making the same argument during one of their conversations in that cell-like hospital room. In fact she was pretty sure it had been the conversation that ended with him slinging her out on her ear for daring to get a bit personal.

Draco went on, "My father had it just the same as me! He grew up in a household that raised him to believe what he believes. His father taught him to hate people like you." Draco shrugged. "So that's why I think he deserved what you're calling 'leniency'. Why should I get a second chance, but not him?"

"Because you did what you did when you were seventeen, eighteen years old," Hermione said. "Not when you were forty-plus! And because even when you felt compelled to do Voldemort's dirty work, you fought against it. I saw you, when we were last here together, remember? I saw every hesitation. Every torn loyalty." She shook her head at the memories because they were already pressing too close. She did not want to be swamped. "That's the difference. I don't believe your father ever had those kind of soul-searching moments. And I don't think he's sitting in Azkaban right now thinking, 'Turns out what my father taught me was bollocks. What an idiot I must look!'"

"Yeah, well, maybe he would have worked it out if someone had caught him at the age of eighteen."

"Maybe. But it didn't happen, and he went on to make his own, informed, adult choices. Just like you get to do now."

Draco sighed and rubbed at his eyes. "I don't even know why I'm talking to you about this."

"Possibly because you can't discuss it with your parents. And your former Housemates, well, they might use what you tell them against you. Whereas me? You know that if I ever blab about what you've said, people will just piss themselves laughing at the idea of you confiding in me."

"That wasn't confiding," Draco said, a touch primly. "That was intellectual debate."

"Right you are. But can we get this over with now? I nearly died in here, and my courage has its limits."

He gave her a sharp look, then he nodded. "Fine. Let's get it done."

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Of course, the terrace doors led directly into the ballroom. The way to get to the library was right across the empty, echoing chamber where Hermione had been tortured with Crucio and a cursed blade, offered as a plaything to a bloodthirsty, rape-hungry werewolf, and where a chandelier had smashed down on her battered body.
Hermione girded her loins and squared her shoulders and did all kinds of reassuring things to any number of body-parts in order to maintain her sense of equilibrium. She took a step, held her head high, walked.

'Where did you get this sword? Where?'

"It's over," she told herself, shaking off the distant screams of Bellatrix Lestrange in her head.

"What?" Draco asked.

"Nothing."

'You are a lying, filthy Mudblood...' 

"She's dead," Hermione reminded herself with a shiver. She kept walking. It would soon be done, she'd be across the room, this...this ground zero for all her nightmarish memories.

'Crucio!' 

Hermione gave an involuntary flinch. She took another step. Just a few more--

Her toe kicked something that clinked and then skidded off across the dusty ballroom floor. As it moved it caught the sunlight coming in through the tall windows set in the wall between the ballroom and the terrace.

Glass? No, a crystal. From the chandelier--

—and memories surged as, with a thunderous crack, the chandelier broke free of its mounting right above where she stood, Bellatrix's knife still pressed to the vulnerable skin of her throat, blood dripping from the stinging slash at her collarbone, her every nerve-ending still shrieking in agony from _Crucio_ after _Crucio_ after _Crucio_...and then she was shoved aside, Bellatrix diving for safety, leaving Hermione weak and teetering, unable to help even herself let alone the friends she wanted so badly not to disappoint...and the tumbling mass of brass and crystal from above hit her shoulder hard enough that the pain was savage, even alongside the aftermath of all that torture. The impact spun her weakened form round in a circle. She slumped to the polished ballroom floor along with the metal and the glass, and the light caught at spinning shattering fragments as her mind tried to shut itself down but her survival instincts demanded that she stay awake, stay awake, don't let that animal touch me, don't let him touch me...

"Granger!"

She looked up, panting, wide-eyed with terror. Draco Malfoy. She gave a yelp of panic and skidded backwards.

"Granger, it's all right, it's okay, we're safe." He held up his hands in a gesture of peace.

"Remember? It's all over. The Dark L--" Draco closed his eyes and then said, "Voldemort is dead. It's over. Remember?"

She remembered. She forced her breathing to slow down and then looked around. She was on her backside, half-prone on the dusty ballroom floor, and her wand was to hand.

"Shit," she muttered, as terror began to give way to humiliation.
"You're not kidding," Draco agreed.

"I thought..."

"Yeah, I got what you were thinking." They looked at each other for a moment, Draco apparently as mortified as Hermione. "Um. You okay now?"

She considered. The adrenaline rush was easing but her body still trembled. The weight of tension in her chest focused into a sharp pain, but she had trained herself out of the immediate 'oh, shit, heart attack!' reaction that she'd had the first few times. It would dissipate.

She shook her head, waiting for the wave of fatigue that would come next. "I'm not sure."

"I should get you out of here," Draco decided. "Merlin! It was just daft, letting you come back. I mean, everything that happened..." He took a step towards her, tentative at first and then more confident when she didn't try to scoot back any further. He offered a hand.

Hermione couldn't take it. Not yet. She looked away, looked around, tried to anchor herself in the present and ignore the press of the past. "Give me a minute," she said curtly.

He backed off with a nod and half-turned away, perhaps to make her feel less scrutinised. Whatever his reasons, she was grateful. She hated attention in moments like these.

"What happened to the chandelier?" she asked after an awkward silence. As if it mattered in the slightest.

Draco played along. "Not sure. It got tidied up, I suppose."

"Right. You've got elves for that kind of thing." Hermione frowned. "Where are all your house-elves, anyway?"

"Normandy. There's only two left, though, since Potter stole D—"

"Stole?" Hermione said coldly.

"Fine. Since Potter tricked my father into freeing Dobby."

Hermione thought about Dobby: a small elf with vast courage. She and her friends would not have escaped this place back in March, had it not been for Dobby. (Of course, if not for Dobby then the bloody chandelier wouldn't have landed on top of her either, but rough with the smooth, eh?)

"It never occurred to your father that mistreating his servant – his slave – might backfire, did it?"

she said.

Draco huffed. "Why would it?"

"No, I mean – being decent to a loyal servant for the sake of doing the right thing? I get why he didn't do that. Your father wouldn't recognise 'the right thing' if it made an appointment and showed up with a business card."

"Granger—"

"I'm just saying. But surely even Lucius Malfoy must have realised it was worth being decent to his servants for the sake of maintaining loyalty? He could have made the effort, if not for his servants then for his own sake."
Draco shook his head and tried to sneer. "Dobby was an anomaly."

"Dobby was a pioneer. And a hero. This house was where he'd known the greatest suffering of his life, but he chose to use his magic and come back here because he thought a friend needed help."

A pause.

"Is that what you're doing?" Draco asked.

She looked up at him awkwardly, still seated on the floor of the ballroom. Was it what she was doing? Yes, she'd returned to the place where she'd suffered, and yes, she'd chosen to do so. But was she here to help a friend? With the way things were going, being here wasn't going to help Snape. Perhaps it might help Gloria, but at this point so would writing up her findings and submitting them to MLE. No, right now she was here for herself. She was here because there was a puzzle to solve and she could not let it go.

So she shook her head and otherwise ignored the question. "People say house-elf magic can overcome anti-Apparition wards because there's something stronger that drives them – their need to obey their master. But that's rubbish," she said. "Dobby 'ported right in to this place, right to the dungeon, never mind all the security. And he was a free elf when he did so. No master. Just friendship."

"So?"

"Just think about it! Out there at the gates, right now, there's a team of Ministry specialists trying to gain access to this place. They've been at it for months, and they haven't got very far. And yet a free elf managed it in the blink of an eye." Hermione shrugged. "I mean, don't you think that's impressive? I think it is. And maybe a species as powerful as that deserves respect rather than enslavement."

"Might be a sound argument, coming from someone else," Draco said.

"Why not from me?"

"Because you don't care how powerful something is. You'd demand sweetness and light for ruddy doxies if you could."

She actually smiled a bit at that. Because Draco wasn't wrong, and because the conversation had served its purpose and allowed her to rediscover a sense of composure.

"I am, indeed, beyond pathetic," she said, almost cheerfully. "Help me up?"

Draco offered a hand and hauled her to her feet. She dusted herself down.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Yes." She drew a deep breath. Weariness was settling over her now that the tension in her chest was easing off. "Did I do anything other than scream and fall over?"

"Bit of mumbling and gasping. Looked like you wanted to hex something, too."

"Sorry. Been a while since I had a big one like that. Thought I'd got through the worst."

"You don't have to be sorry." Draco was looking down at his hands, twisting and fidgeting. "What happened to you here – it was done to you. You weren't at fault." He looked up. "You survived."
"Yes, yes, no need for a pep talk. I'm all right."

"Honestly, Granger, I'm not sure that you are."

"Okay, fine, I'm not!" She rubbed at her eyes so hard she saw red-tinged swirls against the black. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. I came here to do a job, and that's what I'll do. Take me to the library."

For a moment Draco studied her, his expression an ever-shifting canvas of emotion: regret, admiration, exasperation, guilt, anger. Then he made a loud scoffing noise and said, "Even in the middle of a breakdown you're a bossy bloody cow."

It was this petulantly delivered insult that shattered the lingering shards of the nightmare. Hermione choked on a giggle. Draco saw the funny side too and his fair complexion flushed as he chuckled with her. Her laugh grew richer. For a moment she worried that the laughter would become hysterical and then turn to sobs, but it did not. Draco Malfoy did not enjoy the kind of trust that would allow her to be so vulnerable in his presence.

When they'd gathered themselves, he said, "Right then. Let me take you to the books."

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In a circular three-storey room surrounded by bookshelves, stairways and mezzanines, Malfoy Manor seemed to lose its menacing power over Hermione. She spent long minutes wandering from shelf to shelf, fingers itching to take volumes down for closer examination. Between the shelves were display cabinets of various shapes and sizes, containing artefacts and objet d'art and an alarming selection of intricately carved bladed weapons.

Finally she sought out Draco. He was sitting at a central desk, booted feet propped up, watching her idly.

"This place," she gushed. "It's..."

"It's just a library," he said with a shrug.

"There speaks a man who has learned to take this kind of thing for granted. Over-privileged git."

"'Over'? I'll have you know my privilege level is exactly right. So where can I direct you? Or are you still determined to find this book on your own?"

Hermione looked around. There had to be ten thousand volumes here, maybe twice that number. She could start by asking about potions texts, of course, but would Lucius Malfoy have had a book like *Baneful Brews* openly displayed on his library shelves?

Of course not. Malfoy was a murderous bigot but not an idiot; they'd already established that. Damn it. How was she going to find it without asking Draco?

Answer – she could not.

"Where does your dad keep the seriously dodgy stuff?" she asked cautiously.

Draco barked a laugh. "Depends. If you mean the porn then it's through there." He pointed with his wand to a leather-fronted section of wall between two tall bookshelves. She couldn't see a door handle. "If you mean the dark magic then it's there." He pointed to another fake-door. "And if you mean the large selection of Muggle romance novels that my mother insists on reading, they're
locked away from prying eyes in a safe in her dressing room." He arched a brow. "Some things are just too embarrassing to show the world."

Hermione shrugged a shoulder. "Dark magic. Will the door open for me?"

"Do you have a Dark Mark?" he asked, eyes glinting.

"Obviously not."

"Then no." Draco kicked up his legs and stood up. He strode over to the fake-door and lifted his sleeve to expose the tattoo on his forearm. He pressed it to the centre of the cushioned leather panelling. The fake-door swung open.

Hermione went to join him. She peered past his shoulder to see a narrow alcove lined on both sides with glass-fronted shelves, broken up by several ornate pedestals topped with book rests upon which rested large tomes open at certain pages. The glow-globes above warmed to a red-tinged luminescence, triggered presumably by the opened door. It was dim and claustrophobic and smelled of old, dangerous magic.

"Joking aside, Granger – there's some nasty stuff in here," Draco said quietly.

"I'm sure there is."

"I mean...there's books in here that will sniff out what a goody two-shoes you are and want to hurt you. Badly. And that's not a metaphor."

"I get it."

"Look – tell me. If it's here, I'll bring it out for you. And if you want me to make a vow not to tell anyone about what happened here today, then I'll do it."

She was taken aback by that. Such vows were not made lightly, and the consequences could be serious.

"Draco, why are you helping me?" she eventually asked.

"You're joking, right? Hermione Granger, the proud owner of the arse from which the sun doth shine? If I'm ever going to get back on my feet in this squalid little country, I need sponsors. People who aren't going to spit on my shoes when I walk past. Especially people like you. The ones other people notice."

He tried to look aloof and cynical. After the scene in the ballroom, however, he didn't manage to pull it off.

Hermione gave a small smile and repeated, more insistently, "Why are you helping me?"

Draco frowned, annoyed, before he sagged against the doorway. "It's a choice. I'm choosing to do better. Probably won't always succeed – I'm a jumped-up arrogant shit, and sometimes that gets the best of me. But on days like this, watching you...watching you remember? You shame me, Granger. And Merlin only knows, it makes me want to despise you...but I'm choosing to do better."

Weeks ago, when this strange alliance of theirs had begun, Hermione had quietly laughed at Draco for not recognising that sometimes, when it came to trust, you just had to make a leap of faith. It seemed it was time to take her own medicine.
"I won't hold you to any kind of vow," she said. "But I'd ask you to do your utmost to keep this between us." She waited for his nod, then took the plunge. "I need to look at a book called *Baneful Brews*. It's banned."

Draco gave a low whistle. "Granger, you rascal."

"Does your father have a copy?" she pressed.

"Not anymore," Draco said.

Hermione leaned heavily against the wall, then slid down to the plush carpet. "All this way for nothing," she muttered. For a moment she was adrift in self-recrimination. She could have avoided this whole escapade if she'd had this conversation with Draco before they'd come here. Then she processed the words, 'Not anymore.' Lucius Malfoy used to have a copy. Where was that copy now?

In the hands of one Severus Snape, perhaps? Damn it all to hell, when was this evidence going to stop mounting up?

Her attention was claimed by a small volume bound in soft leather the colour of old, dried blood. Draco was holding it out to her.

"What's this?" she asked. "Consolation prize?"

*Baneful Brews*, like you asked."

"You said—"

"You asked if my father owns a copy. He no longer does. It's an Azkaban thing."

"Azkaban prevents prisoners from owning books?" That seemed cruel and unusual to Hermione.

"Azkaban prevents prisoners from owning anything. Well, sort of." Draco ruffled his hair with the hand that wasn't currently holding a volume deemed so dangerous that it was illegal to own a copy. "You never heard of the Azkaban Slip?"

She pulled a face. "Isn't that rather draughty in a prison cell?"

"Not slip like a petticoat, slip like giving them the slip. 'Them' being the Ministry."

"No, I never heard of that."

Draco sat down on the carpet next to her. "It's a historic thing. Prisoners who died intestate always had their assets seized. By the Ministry. It was considered fair game. So prisoners started being more careful about making wills. When this began to eat into the income the Ministry was earning from dead prisoners' estates, the Ministry decreed that prisoners in Azkaban were not allowed to make a will."

"I'm fairly sure that's in violation of any number of human rights laws," Hermione said.

"You're thinking like a Muggle. Stop it." He glanced over his shoulder, through the doorway to the dark magic alcove. "Everything else besides, there's so much anti-Muggle doctrine in that very room that you might come out in a rash."

"Ha ha."
"Yes, let's pretend that was a joke." Draco shook his head. "Violation or not, the Ministry can get any legislation it likes on the statute books, as long as it shores up support in the right areas. And we're going back over a century here."

"Okay, fine, so if you aren't allowed to make a will once you're in prison then you make damn sure you've got one in place before you're convicted," Hermione said.

"Which is what everyone did. The legal eagles got it down to a streamlined system. No prisoner on trial could be denied representation, and that included making a will, just in case. So once again, the Ministry's nice little earner started falling behind."

"So...?"

"So they passed another law which meant every convicted prisoner forfeited the right to a will while serving their sentence. Any will. Even one that had been in place for decades."

Hermione pondered this. "Was this before or after the Ministry decided that having Dementors in charge of Azkaban was a good idea?"

"Oh, long after."

"Then I suppose I shouldn't be surprised at one maltreatment being loaded on top of an even worse one."

"I suppose you shouldn't. Anyway, that's how come the Azkaban Slip was invented."

She was all caught up on the idea by now. "The only way to circumvent the Ministry's grasping hand would be to ensure that the prisoner owns nothing at all. So if they die, there's nothing to inherit."

"Exactly. It's basically standard procedure, these days. Before the sentence starts, a prisoner's entire estate – big or small – is made over to their intended heir by deed of gift. And there's nothing the Ministry can do about it."

"I bet they've tried."

"Three times, since the beginning of the century. Unsuccessfully. The prison legislation got through because most people don't care about prisoners and think they probably deserve it anyway. But when the Ministry tries to make it illegal for a witch or wizard to gift something they own to someone else, suddenly that's about the Ministry poking their nose into everyone's business. Much harder to get that kind of law passed."

"And that's why you're the secret-keeper here, and...

"...and until my father completes his sentence I own everything in this house." Draco shrugged. "And most of the other houses too. The ones I didn't immediately gift to my mother, anyway."

"I see." Hermione shook her head in disgust. "It bothers me rather a lot that the wizarding populace hasn't risen up in revolution against this kind of self-serving, draconian governance." A sigh. "At least we've now got a Minister who can start to put such things right."

Draco gave a loud and incredulous snort. "Your shiny new Minister, Mr Anti-Corruption, is still the man who's trying to steal my ancestral home. It's all part of the same thing."

"This is different, surely. This house was the scene of several crimes."
"And if I thought the Aurors would simply come along, root about for clues, bag up their evidence, then sweep up after themselves and say thank you very much? I'd open the bloody doors to them right now." Draco's expression darkened. "But it wouldn't happen. Once the Ministry's in charge it will declare this place a seized asset. My father has been judged a criminal; one may not profit through crime."

"But you're the current owner. And you did not gain this house through crime."

Draco began to reply, then blinked, then closed his mouth. "The Azkaban Slip as a means to prevent other asset seizures?" he mused. "It's almost worth a thought."

"You're welcome. Now. Can I have a look at the book?"

Draco stirred and looked down at *Baneful Brews*, still clutched in his hand. "Oh. Right. You can do more than that. I've decided to gift this book to you."

"Why?"

"Bloody hell, Granger, haven't you made me grovel enough for one day? Just take it!"

Hermione took the book. "I shouldn't own this," she mused. "It's banned."

"Oh, so it's okay for you to look at my copy, but you won't take responsibility yourself?"

"When you put it like that, I'm a hypocrite," she acknowledged.

"Books aren't evil. Well – some of them will try to kill you, but they are what they're made to be. Even the information they contain isn't evil. It's only evil when someone uses it to do bad things. I mean – I don't have to explain the distinction to you, right? Or do you think that the Ministry really does have to protect us all from ourselves?"

Hermione considered. "I think banning books, even dark scary ones, is wrong. I don't believe in censorship."

"Good, then. Happy birthday, for whenever it was. Try not to destroy the world with it."

"I'll do my best."

Draco nodded. "We should probably leave."

Hermione glanced around the library, her inner bibliophile pining for each and every one of these volumes. "I suppose," she said with a sigh.

"Of course," Draco said slyly, "if the Ministry were to back off and acknowledge that it can't go round seizing private property, then I could take up residence here again. At which point you'd have a standing invite to use this library at your own convenience."

Hermione laughed at that. "I think I have a way to go before I can claim that kind of influence."

"Maybe. But you'll be thinking about it, won't you?" He got to his feet. "My work here is done."

In fact, she was glad of this bit of manipulation. Whether he'd meant it seriously or not, at least she could now be sure he was still Draco Malfoy, influence-pedlar extraordinaire.

She'd been starting to worry about the possibility of a doppelganger.
Excerpt from *Baneful Brews* by an anonymous author, 1948

Chapter Four: Essences of Ardent Devotion and Dispassionate Rancour

There is no point to love or hatred that exists in and of itself. These are emotions that drain one's energy and distract one's focus. To feel them is an act of weakness. It is self-diminishing.

Good will and ill will are transient, shifting things. The truly powerful care not for the feelings of others. They care only for deeds. Are others an asset or liability? Are they a resource to further one's interests, or an obstacle?

Love and hate potions are, for the most part, equally futile. They might please a witch or wizard seeking the façade of affection, or indeed, indulging the petty desire for revenge. Nevertheless, the creation of false emotions is a more absurd goal even than the tedious pursuit of real ones.

In their brewing, the structure of love and hate potions is the same. The ingredients differ, naturally, but the same pattern applies: repression of certain cerebral reactions; amplification of others. Where such potions finally become useful is in the degree to which they effect change.

A witch or wizard under the influence of a love potion will adore their contrived object. They'll long for them, pursue them, happily gratify their object's carnal needs. They will also demand attention and make irritating scenes if attention is not forthcoming. In all cases, the potion's effects will eventually fade, even if left uncountered by antidote.

Similarly, a witch or wizard under the influence of a hate potion will loathe, and seethe, and seek to undermine or harm their contrived object. They may do some damage, 'tis true, but hatred is as burdensome as love. Imbibe a hate potion to dismiss your attraction to an indifferent lover and the hatred will tax your time and energy just as much as your passion. Use a hate potion on an unwanted suitor and the same dilemma arises: their hatred will be as time-consuming as their adoration. And again, the sensations will fade and can, in any case, be countered.

A potion of indifference would be a worthy invention indeed. Alas, in all my years of experimentation I have not yet come across such a thing.

Still, a good potioneer works with what they have. Imagine, for a moment, a love potion so binding, so all-consuming that its effects cannot be broken. Imagine the subject of that enchantment: a human being so enthralled to your will, so subjugated by your presence, that their every behaviour is controllable. "No," you might tell them, "do not weep and wail for my absence. Do not indulge in hysterics when I seek other diversions. Come to me only when I wish you to come. Until that time, do these tasks without complaint and wait for my instructions."

A truly potent love potion should function like a permanent *Imperius* curse, only without the effort and magical drain. Such a potion should be as imperturbable as an Unbreakable Vow: immune to antidote, untarnished by time. Thus, you will gain satisfaction from a connection that is shaped exactly to your preferences, meanwhile your devoted subject will find only joy in this same connection, as the potion has decreed they will find joy. A pleasing result, all round. Such a brew might be known as the *Essence of Ardent Devotion*.

Now imagine a hate potion so dispassionate, so clinical in its focus, that it allows the user to bypass the laborious effort of hatred and focus on deed instead. How often do we say, "I could kill her!" and yet know, truly, that we could not. But the indifferent lover who spurns your attention causes stress, self-doubt, confusion. Cut this millstone from around your neck; let this potion free
you from your longing and cleanse you of the guilt and inhibition that would otherwise prevent a proper reckoning. Kill her and move on. Or, if it suits, give this gift to another and stand back to see obstacles topple, alliances fracture, the unworthy suffer.

This potion offers a new and unassailable perspective: hatred that has been liberated from effort and uncertainty. A way to take control. Such a brew might be known as the Essence of Dispassionate Rancour.

The recipes for these brews are set out below [...]

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Hermione set the book aside, wiped a sheen of cold sweat from her forehead and said, loudly, into the still of her bedroom:

"You, sir, are a fucking maniac."

She settled down into bed, part of her wishing that she could unsee some of the stuff she'd read in Baneful Brew's first few chapters. As she began to drift off, however, a stray thought occurred to her.

'None of it explains the bloody tormentil, though, does it?'

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Sleep had been impossible, the moment Hermione had remembered.

Tormentil.

Tormentil had also been stolen from the long-term storage level, but it didn't fit within the scope of her hate-potion hypothesis. That knowledge jarred her into wakefulness, like the pea beneath the mattress of a hypersensitive princess.

There was only one thing for it. Never mind that it was gone midnight, she had to check the rest of *Baneful Brews*, page by page, skimming each obscene recipe's list of ingredients, looking for a reference to tormentil.

She found one.

Then she wished she had not.

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"Too sloppy," she muttered to herself, as she retrieved all her notes, charts and references. "Too disorganised. Too reactive." She had straightened her duvet and made a wide working area to accommodate piles, because her little desk in the corner wasn't nearly big enough. "I've been so busy jumping from shock to shock, I've never managed to step back." She paused, rolled her eyes and looked up at the ceiling. "And now I'm talking to myself in the middle of the night. Excellent going, there, Granger."

Hermione sat cross-legged in the middle of her bed and distributed her notes into sections that dealt with the various strands of evidence she'd collected. She paused and took a few deep breaths. With her discovery of the tormentil recipe in *Baneful Brews*, the stakes had been raised. She needed to be sure about the things she knew.

Time to review the evidence. It seemed prudent to start at the beginning.

The hospital's snagberry bush had been vandalised. Other ingredients had also been stolen, including, most recently, tormentil. The thefts had begun no later than Thursday 17th September, with Joseph Montague noting the very obvious damage to the snagberry bush on the following Friday morning. He'd checked further, and then informed his mother about the problem at some point over that weekend.

Hermione had been given a list of individuals whose wands were active in the relevant areas of the long-term storage level over the time period when the thefts had taken place. That list included the names of Joseph Montague and Severus Snape.
So were these solid, reliable facts?

On the surface: yes. But this information had come to her second-hand. Hermione had not, after all, stood there and watched someone take an axe to a snagberry bush. So the issue became: did she trust the information's source?

Instinctively, she knew that she did. This process, however, was about being objective. It was time to question everything, and filter out supposition from fact. So Hermione made herself do just that.

If Joseph Montague's report of the thefts was not information she could rely upon, that meant that he had been leading her – and possibly his mother as well – a merry old dance. But why on earth would he lie? If there had been no thefts at all and he'd made the whole thing up, then the only real diagnosis was some kind of mental illness. In any case, there was too much additional evidence proving something was going on.

The thefts were, Hermione decided, a matter of fact. Somebody was stealing stuff from the hospital.

So was it possible Joseph Montague was masterminding the whole thing himself?

Her initial reaction was that this made no sense whatsoever. As an herbologist working on the long-term storage level, Joseph Montague was one of the few people in Wizarding Britain who might have carried out these thefts without tipping off anyone else. He knew the location; he knew the plants; he had an excuse to be there. His training would have allowed him to harvest with greater care and subtlety than had apparently been employed. Some of the ingredients that had been stolen were so easy to come by without resorting to the hospital's enchanted habitats that it was difficult to work out why an informed plant expert would risk stealing them at all. And of course, Joseph was the one who had reported the problem. Why would he have drawn attention to the thefts if he was the one trying to get away with them?

Hypothesis: because he knew he was not getting away with them. And he wished to appear innocent while diverting attention onto someone else.

Hermione sighed. This process was supposed to be about getting rid of all the what-ifs, not adding to the egregious amount she'd accumulated already! Still, now she'd thought up this theory she felt the need to work it through.

So. Joseph Montague could be behind the thefts. Assume, for now, that he'd been recruited by some sinister figure who wanted to make at least two loathsome potions courtesy of the recipes in Baneful Brews. Joseph had obtained ingredients that were otherwise unavailable: the fresh ashgrass, the snagberry bark and the doloris. He had, for some inexplicable reason, also decided to steal wormwood and tormentil from the hospital in spite of their ready availability elsewhere.

Then: assume his crimes had been discovered, probably thanks to his inability to stop stealing when he had far better procurement options. So he'd reported the thefts to his mother, Senior Healer Gloria Montague, a respected staff member, perhaps believing that her involvement in any subsequent investigation could help steer the blame away from him. Having done this, he had set himself up as the storage level's protector, working long hours while he pretended to keep an eye out for evidence of the crimes he himself was perpetrating. Meanwhile he'd kept stealing and then reporting the thefts to his mother.

For this scenario to work, therefore, it required Joseph Montague to be grasping, immoral, short-sighted in his planning and lazy, yet also dedicated and diligent, with a tendency towards the
Machiavellian. Some of those things were quite obviously contradictory.

Isaac Asimov had once said, '...let us have as few assumptions as possible.' This theory demanded too many of them; Hermione couldn't make herself believe in it. And Joseph's Patronus was a honey bee, for goodness sake! Honey bees were hard-working, intelligent, social animals who viewed the success of the hive as infinitely more important than their individual well-being.

(She paused in her review and spent a few moments trying to massage away the headache that was growing at her temples.)

Okay, so as far as she could tell, the only redeeming feature to this theory was the way it provided a motivation of sorts for Snape's encounter with Joseph in that alley by the Leaky. If Snape had discovered Joseph's criminal activities and had taken it upon himself to sort it all out, that would explain the threat delivered at wand-point...although thinking about it, it didn't fit with what Snape had actually said. In such a scenario, "Stop stealing stuff!" would seem a more likely warning than, "Stop being so vigilant!"

Mind you, Hermione only had Joseph's word on what had been said to him. And if Joseph was the consummate liar that this theory demanded he be, he could have lied about the nature of Snape's warning.

She shook her head at herself. It still didn't make sense, not really. If Snape had realised Joseph was the thief, Snape would not have reacted by threatening Joseph in an alley. Severus Snape would have gathered proof and then presented it to Shacklebolt, probably moments after catching Joseph in the act, incapacitating him with an expert body-bind and stashing him away somewhere ready for the attentions of an MLE patrol.

Hermione rubbed at her eyes. This particular theory was going nowhere fast. Everything else besides, it had now grown to resemble her earlier 'Snape is investigating the same thing I am investigating' idea: the one that had been scuppered by the way Snape had somehow managed to begin his investigation several weeks before the crimes even took place. Indeed, the only way she could make that part of the evidence fit was if she cast Severus Snape as Joseph's accomplice. In such a context, the assault could have been staged in order to throw off any suspicion Joseph might otherwise have drawn...except that it simply transferred the suspicion onto Snape himself. Which seemed redundant, especially considering that Snape could have disguised himself during that assault, and he had chosen not to.

And anyway, why would Snape have bothered to recruit Joseph's help? Snape already had access to the storage level. He had the potions expertise. He didn't need Joseph. And Severus Snape was not a man who gravitated towards accomplices and partnerships. He was, frankly, the proverbial lone wolf.

(Not that he'd take kindly to that description.)

Hermione decided that she had to discard the theory. Too much of it fell apart on scrutiny, and in any case, she was only focusing on Joseph Montague because it was so much easier than focusing on Severus Snape. So she returned to her original question: could she rely on Joseph Montague's evidence?

On balance, having reviewed his information alongside the rest of what she'd learned, yes she could.

Hermione moved on to the next element worthy of re-examination. A wizard had tried to purchase snagberry products illegally from Shyverwretch's Venoms and Poisons while holding a copy of
Could she take that at face value?

This was information that had also come to her second-hand, but why would the witch in the shop have lied? If she had been primed to surreptitiously steer Hermione towards *Baneful Brews* and its recipes then that would have required advanced knowledge of Hermione's visit. And Hermione herself hadn't known she was going to Shyverwretch's until a few minutes before she did so.

Although...

Actually, now she thought about it, one other person had known she was considering a visit to the poison shop. That person knew because she'd more or less announced it to him, prior to marching off to Shadwell's bookshop.

Severus Snape.

Did the timing fit? Could he have nipped into Shyverwretch's while she'd browsed in the bookshop, and cajoled or threatened the witch into dropping certain bits of information? Then ducked out again, awaiting his moment before sweeping back in to heroically escort her past those well-hexed muggers?

He could have, Hermione admitted. But why would he have done so? If he was the thief, he would not have wanted to advertise the fact. If he was not, then there were easier ways to guide her investigation...and how would he have known about it anyway?

What if it had been a test? A carrot, dangled before her, to see whether she reacted?

She growled to herself and thumped the duvet. This was all supposition, just like the notion that Snape had been the wizard holding *Baneful Brews*. She forced herself to set these ideas aside and got back to the main point. There was no reason to discount the evidence from the witch in Shyverwretch's. Either it could be taken at face value, or it had happened because someone wanted Hermione to investigate *Baneful Brews*. Whichever it was, it remained a piece of the puzzle.

What else?

With a sigh, Hermione forced herself to consider her suspect-number-one.

All the evidence that indicated Snape's connection to these thefts was circumstantial. Each element could be explained away when examined separately. But together? It just didn't work. There was no single innocent explanation that fit with all the information. God only knew, she'd tried and tried to find one.

What was the tipping point for circumstantial evidence? How much of it had to accumulate before the word 'circumstantial' stopped being more important than the word 'evidence'?

Hermione had to acknowledge that she'd passed that point a while ago.

"First principles," she muttered to herself. "Go slow. What do I know as a fact? Let's try to identify something we can take as incontrovertible."

As far back as August, Snape had been researching ingredients that matched the ones eventually stolen from the long-term storage level. That had to be considered a fact. How else could notes in his handwriting have been made in the Restricted Section?
"Back up," Hermione murmured. "Don't assume. Prove it."

She racked her brains for an alternative explanation. Could someone have tried to set Snape up by faking those notes? Such a person would have to be familiar with Snape's handwriting. They would also need access to the library's Restricted Section; that had to narrow things down. A registered member of the staff or student body could manage it, of course. Perhaps an official guest of the school could, if they were trusted enough to go wandering about. The only other possibility was an intruder who had managed to breach the most famously secure wards this side of Gringotts. Even Voldemort's Death Eaters had needed a man on the inside and access to a pair of Vanishing Cabinets to do that.

She toyed with the notion for a few minutes.

Damn it, this idea made no sense! If the plan was to implicate Snape, this hypothetical 'someone' would not have planned their misdirection through the absurdly subtle medium of indentations on a blotter. They'd have left a scrap of paper with those revealing handwritten notes bookmarking *Moste Potente Potions*, or lying oh-so-conveniently under the desk. The very nature of the evidence, and the Holmesian efforts Hermione had made in order to obtain it, meant there was zero chance that it had been left, with malice aforethought, for her to find.

It was not a set-up. She was convinced. There was no reason to doubt that Severus Snape had been in that room and made those notes himself. Thanks to the mutually corroborative evidence of both Pomona Sprout and Minerva McGonagall, she also had to accept that he'd done so in late August.

Might there be a non-damning explanation for this behaviour, then?

What if the thefts had begun much earlier than Joseph Montague had realised? Early enough that Snape had been the first to notice, prompting his flurry of research on what the snagberry could potentially be used for.

Hermione turned to the timeline she'd made and worked out the logistics. The vandalism to the snagberry bush would have needed to occur prior to Sunday 30th August. Joseph Montague had seen the damage on Friday 18th September. That meant almost three weeks had gone by between Snape noticing and anyone else working out what had happened. None of that seemed likely.

This scenario also required Snape to have been wandering around the long-term storage level, unaccompanied, two whole weeks before the Lost Seventh course had begun. A few days would seem plausible, allowing him the time to familiarise himself with the level and collect the ingredients needed for his first lesson. But two weeks? That was pushing it.

Still, assuming she could somehow justify all of that, why would Snape have reacted to the damaged snagberry bush by promptly diagnosing a sinister conspiracy involving scary potions? Surely the sensible response would have been to report the issue to the nearest herbologist or the Storekeep on the way out.

She sighed and discarded the idea. It required wild contrivances to explain both the timing and Snape's behaviour. Surely she could do better than that.

She tried again.

Could Snape, by some other means, have caught wind of a conspiracy in its earliest stages?

It was hard to understand why he'd failed to act sooner if that was the case. Severus Snape was
clever, subtle and resourceful. If he'd learned of the plot that was to unfold, and he'd identified the
items that were to be stolen and he'd been hanging around the corresponding locations when the
thefts took place – as the wand-monitoring system proved he had – then Hermione would have bet
her life on Snape torpedoing the conspiracy before it got any further.

She needed another explanation.

Perhaps he'd undertaken a perfectly innocent research project of his own, and someone had
discovered his notes and decided it was a great idea and they wanted to turn the theory into reality.
Now that was possible, Hermione thought. It would explain both the timing of his early notes and
the more recent events on the long-term storage level; Snape had realised someone was using his
research to do bad things and he was trying to stop them. It also explained why he hadn't reported
the issue: he felt guilty and complicit, and probably a bit shame-faced about the fact that he'd been
researching a hate potion in the first place.

Actually, that was a fair point. If Snape had wanted to research a potion, perhaps with a view to
making it more powerful by exploring the techniques discussed in Bramble's book, why on earth
had he focused on a hate potion? It was a horrible choice. Not to mention, it had already been
done! Why bother with such a project at all when the anonymous writer of *Baneful Brews* had got
there several decades ago?

Come to that, who could have seen and then nicked his research? Severus Snape was not the kind
of man who left potentially valuable research dossiers lying around. The only real candidate, as far
as Hermione could work out, was Roksana Bramble. How did that make any sense? You might as
well charge Harry, or Arthur Weasley, or Kingsley Shacklebolt with maniacal schemes. Mistress
Bramble was the antithesis of 'villain'. She had famously risked her own life to save her
colleagues. She was synonymous with potions reform, like Gloria had mentioned; Hermione
recalled that it was Bramble who'd spearheaded the campaign to end the way the biggest potions
producers habitually colluded to lock up the market and maintain their obscene prices. The woman
had willingly renounced numerous lucrative patents she herself held, and then published in full the
 corresponding recipes, all in a bid to encourage fair competition and make certain important
products more affordable.

And Roksana Bramble was considered one of the foremost potioneers of her generation. Snape
was brilliant at potions, no doubt about it, but he'd spent his working life teaching children rather
than exploring and researching and expanding his craft as Bramble had been able to do. Where he
was good, she was always going to be better. So why would she have needed his research?

Hermione admitted to herself that she couldn't make any of that fly. If there was an innocent
explanation for Snape's pre-emptive notes on hate potions, something that could fit with the rest of
the evidence, it eluded her. All of which brought her back to Occam's Razor. There was a not-so-
innocent explanation which served all the evidence:

Snape had researched powerful hate potions back in August because he wanted to brew one. And
he was present in the habitats where the relevant ingredients had been stolen because he was the
one who'd done the stealing. Necessary assumptions: Snape's potions expertise, his ability to plot,
to be ruthless, to be sneaky. None of those assumptions contradicted each other. And none of
them contradicted Hermione's perception of Severus Snape.

Damn it all to hell.

She moved on to the next unanswerable in her mental list. Snape had been angry with her since the
week after her birthday. Nasty-angry. Vicious-angry. If he hadn't been reacting to her
investigation, what else could have caused it?
One of her earliest thoughts had been that Snape was dosing himself with a hate potion. Was this possible? If he'd taken to using Hartson's Heart Hardener, perhaps as a means of maintaining his scrupulous professionalism while he remained her teacher – and she had to wince at the implicit arrogance of an idea like that – then it could explain his behaviour. Some of it. Not all, though.

Could he have gone one step further and attempted a Philtre of Ill Will? If he'd brewed such a potion and used a strand of her hair, perhaps plucked from the floor of the potions lab, in order to make her the target for his hate, would that explain things?

Actually, it would definitely not do so. If Snape had dosed himself with that much liquid hatred, he'd have contrived a reason to throw her off his course and wreck her academic career by now. And Snape was not stupid enough to use such a powerful concoction on himself, anyway. He was a man who valued control above all else. Why would he voluntarily take a potion that diminished his ability to make his own choices? The theory made no sense.

Fine, then. While the evidence proved that Snape was researching hate potions, it was much less conclusive when it came to the idea that he was taking them. She needed another explanation for his anger.

Might he have been trying to push her away because of the place Roksana Bramble now enjoyed in his life? This was a depressing thought, but not implausible. Severus Snape did not strike her as someone particularly skilled in the area of personal relationships. She knew of his aversion to honest conversations thanks to first-hand experience. Why would he say to her, "I'm sorry, but this has happened and I need you to understand," when he could achieve the same result by means of a campaign of unpleasantness?

Except...

Except he hadn't merely been insulting and dismissive. He'd been accusatory. He'd called her a spy. That did not fit with the idea of a man trying to distance himself from an unwanted suitor. What it did fit with was the idea of a man reacting badly to his secrets being exposed.

Hermione moved on again, aware that she was failing miserably in this last-ditch attempt to explain away the evidence.

So. The biggie.

What possible explanation was there for Snape's self-confessed assault on poor Joseph Montague?

There was, of course, only the explanation that Snape himself had offered to his victim. He had learned that Joseph was aware of the thefts and was being extra-vigilant, and Snape had needed Joseph to back off.

It was evidence in Hermione's 'unequivocal' pile that Snape had carried out this assault. Snape had felt no need to deny it. He'd made no attempt to disguise his identity. Indeed, from what Snape had said to Hermione in Knockturn Alley, he had fully intended for Hermione to hear about the incident, and to be as worried by it as Joseph had been. When challenged, he'd even confessed to an urge to threaten her directly.

All of which demonstrated that she was currently doing something which caused him problems, and he wanted to force her to stop. How that was supposed to help prove Snape was not up to his ears in skulduggery was quite beyond her.

"Bugger," Hermione growled. "Bugger everything. Bugger everything sideways." This process
was not working. Nothing was becoming clearer except the likelihood of Snape's guilt. In the dark of the small hours, she found herself overwhelmed by confusion, anxiety and a painful sense of loss.

Drowning in these feelings was doing nobody any good, so she forced herself to desist. She decided to give up on trying to understand 'who' and, indeed, 'why'. All she could do was focus on 'what'.

Thanks to *Baneful Brews*, she had discovered the potion that tormentil could be used to make. The nature of that potion meant it was definitely time to act. If she did not, something terrible could happen. And if she failed to intervene while she still had the chance? Well, then she knew she'd never forgive herself.

She couldn't do it all on her own, though.

Heading to Puddlemere and Gloria's cottage in the middle of the night was a non-starter, so she went to the library in Grimmauld Place and tried to busy herself with more research. When this activity – usually so calming and conducive to the passing of time – failed to occupy her shaken thoughts, she went out for a walk. London was a city that never really slept, but most of the residential parts of Islington were quiet. The chill night air was soothing.

As she walked, she thought about how much she wished that Severus Snape was the person to whom she could run, right now. She wanted to show him her research, tell him her fears, find some support. His knowledge, his intelligence, his indefatigable courage: these were the things she needed.

But his complicity had denied them to her. She realised with a start that she hated him for that.

When she'd walked herself into exhaustion she went home. She climbed the stairs back to the library, because an hour spent walking through empty darkened streets had helped sift into focus some of the things she needed to know. She made some lists. Then she went to her bedroom and lay down and closed her eyes.

For a while she managed a fitful sleep. She jolted awake in the middle of a nightmare, thinking she was screaming although the sound that came out of her throat was no more than a strangled choke. Her bedside clock told her it was almost six o'clock in the morning.

She showered, got dressed, got her notes together. At half past six she Apparated to Puddlemere.

Gloria was just going to have to forgive her for this brutally early morning call.

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Hands wrapped around a warming mug of tea, Hermione once again sat at the kitchen table in the Montague cottage. Gloria was wrapped up in her dressing gown, bleary-eyed and unsettled by this visit, and yet patient and steadfast in her attempt to offer support: Hufflepuff to the bone.

"I'm so sorry. I found something out," Hermione said. "Just a few hours ago. It's...terrifying."

"Tell me," Gloria encouraged.

"Okay. Yesterday I managed to get a hold of this book." She took the volume from her bag and set it down on the table, though it felt like she was defacing Gloria's welcoming and comfortable home with its presence. "*Baneful Brews.*"
"Ah. May I ask how?" Gloria asked, eyeing the volume.

There was no reason to lie to her. "I persuaded Draco Malfoy to help me."

Gloria's eyebrows raised. "That was a risk."

"It was a risk worth taking. Because I think something awful might be about to happen. And I think I might have found out about it just in time."

"Go on."

Hermione sighed and pointed at the book. "That book – it's sickening. And the recipe in there for a super-powered hate potion is actually in one of the less disturbing chapters."

"So the hate-potion theory is still in play?"

"It is. The recipe matches almost every ingredient that was stolen, including the ashgrass. There's a couple of other things needed to brew it – I don't know if it's possible to ask Joseph to check to see if they've been stolen too?"

"The moment he surfaces, we'll ask him."

Hermione blinked. "He's here?"

"He's been staying here all week. He hasn't been keen on going home to his flat at night on his own. Not after what happened last Sunday."

"I can't say I blame him," Hermione said. "By the way – it was definitely Snape who threatened Joseph. He admitted it to me." She frowned. "Although 'admitted' makes it sound like he was reluctant. He wasn't, not in the least. He was just stating a fact. He wasn't sorry."

Gloria's expression had clouded. "I asked you not to confront him–"

"I didn't intend to. It happened by accident."

Gloria looked at Hermione, eyes flickering over her face. Hermione wondered whether she looked as awful as she felt. After a moment, Gloria nodded. "I'm just glad you're all right. This whole mess is..." She sighed. "Very well. Do you have a list of the ingredients you need Joseph to check?"

"Yes. Here." Hermione passed over a prepared sheet of paper. "There's some others on there as well. I need to know about them for..." She hard-swallowed against rising bile. "For the second recipe I found."

Gloria cast her eye over the list before handing it back. "Right you are. Though I'm not sure if he'll be able to help with the items that aren't plant-based–"

"Help with what?" came a new voice from the kitchen door. Hermione looked up to see a young man with broad shoulders and hair that was, if anything, more tousled and spiky than Harry at his least-groomed. He was wearing pyjamas and a dressing gown, and appeared uncertain as he looked between Hermione and Gloria. He had his wand to hand, as if he'd come downstairs expecting trouble. "Mum, what's going on?"

Gloria beckoned her son into the kitchen and introduced him to Hermione, then got up to pour Joseph some tea. Hermione started to bring Joseph up to date on her research, unloading notes and
books from her bag in the process. When she was part of the way through, Joseph put his head in his hands and dry-washed his face. Then he looked up at her with weary, reddened eyes and a deep-set frown.

"What?" Hermione asked, concerned.

"Sorry. Hell of a week." He shook his head. "It's nothing. Or maybe it's everything. I don't know." He reached across her for the copy of The Magic of the Tundra, opened as it was to a page depicting the snagberry bush. "I mean, this plant, the snagberry – it's beautiful. Not in the showy way an orchid is beautiful, though. The snagberry's beauty is quiet. Understated. I mean, it's perfect. What it is. What it does. Its shape, its efficiency, its fortitude. Its magic. It is the most amazing thing."

"I wish I could see it for myself," she said quietly.

"All this," Joseph said, indicating her notes in front of her. "It's just plain wrong. Vandalising the snagberry was bad enough, but to do so because you want to use it to hurt people?" He indicated Baneful Brews. "You take a plant that is designed to preserve life, and you find a way to make it do harm?" He sighed, long and hard. "Well. I suppose the Ministry doesn't ban books that are full of healthy, happy lifestyle hints."

"It's a scary and unpleasant book," Hermione agreed.

"Scary and unpleasant." He looked like he was reliving a very specific memory. "Yep. Sounds about right." Joseph shook himself. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

"Right. Yes. Well, the upshot is that I need to know if any of these ingredients have been stolen as well. If they have, it'd prove my theory." She handed over the list she'd made.

"You think you've figured out what Snape's up to?" he asked.

"Yes. I honestly wish I hadn't."

"Then I don't want to know the details." He shot her a hard look. "Do you intend to put my mother in harm's way?"

"God, no! Absolutely not."

He nodded slowly. "All right." He scanned Hermione's list. "The scales from a common brown snake – those are only available as an import in the stockrooms, so I'd need to check the jars. Same for shrike spines. Sweet violet doesn't flower through the summer and autumn, so Snape would need to get the petals from stock too." He looked up at her. "I can check the woodland habitat to see if anyone's been poking around, just in case. That's where the valerian and bloodroot is, so I'll have to go there anyway."

"You don't mind doing this? I know, after your experience last weekend, you must be having second-thoughts about this investigation."

"I did. Lots of second-thoughts. But now I'm just really hacked off. I think we need to sort this out one way or another." He stood up. "It's Sunday, and it's early. I should be able to avoid most people. There and back in an hour, max."

Gloria said to Joseph, "If you aren't back here by eight o'clock, I'm calling the Aurors."

Joseph gave Hermione a wry smile. "She always knows how to reassure, does my old mum." He
stood up, taking his tea with him. "Better put some trousers on. Private eyes are supposed to be inconspicuous, right?"

He left the kitchen to go and get dressed. Gloria stood up. "Would you excuse me for a moment too, Hermione? With all that we're discussing, I think I'd feel better if I put some clothes on and brushed my teeth, at least. Do help yourself to some bread from the loaf, there, if you want some toast with your tea. I'll only be ten minutes."

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A short while later, after Joseph had Floo'ed out to St Mungo's, they resumed their discussion.

Gloria said, "Of course, I understand the basic premise of a hate potion. Is there anything different about the one in this nasty book?"

Hermione grimaced. "Hate potions make you hate. To a lesser or greater degree. But the recipe in Baneful Brews doesn't waste time on stoking up the anger. It bypasses all that and gets straight to the actions – the things you'd usually do only when you're out of your mind with rage. It destroys your moral compass, your ability to feel empathy. Basically it makes you a murderer. A happy, guilt-free, no-second-thoughts, utterly dispassionate murderer."

Gloria winced. Then she said, "And yet Severus Snape has already demonstrated that he is able to commit acts that most would balk at. And he's done so without the need for a potion to get him in the mood, so to speak, has he not?"

Hermione considered the argument. "He killed Dumbledore on Dumbledore's own instructions. I don't think that was easy for him. And yes, there's probably been other incidents in the last twenty years, but let's not forget that he can cast a Patronus. Dumbledore always used that as a kind of yardstick – the measure of a man, you know? I think being a cold-blooded murderer makes casting a Patronus tricky."

"So is he trying to become more of a killer?" Gloria asked, bewildered. "Why would anyone do that?"

Hermione said, "Whoever the anonymous psycho who wrote this book was, he had plenty of suggestions. But I'd guess it's a potion better suited to dosing someone else."

"Oh. Right." Gloria sat back, frowning. "So Snape wants to turn someone else into a killer?"

"Oh, god, I don't know, I don't know!" Hermione growled, and buried her face in her hands.

"I'm sorry, dear. I'm just trying to understand," Gloria said gently.

Hermione lifted her head and brushed the uninvited tears away. "So am I," she said.

"Are there perhaps wicked people who might deserve to be manipulated with this potion?" Gloria suggested.

Hermione thought about that. She thought about the most wicked people she had encountered in her life. Bellatrix Lestrange. Lucius Malfoy. Dolores Umbridge. Rita Skeeter, to an extent? While all of them had done things deserving of forfeiture, Hermione could not find it in herself to justify such a punishment. Bad people should be sanctioned for their crimes, not manipulated into committing new ones.

"No," she said. "Not even for the brief moment of satisfaction it might prompt. No one deserves
"Indeed, I rather agree. But might a man like Severus Snape have a more...ruthless point of view?"

"If he does, he's more of a maniac than I thought he was." She closed her eyes briefly, because the words seemed to be prophetic after all she had discovered in the last few hours. "Anyway, I think he lost any claim to the moral high ground when he threatened your son at wand-point."

"Oh, certainly he did as far as I'm concerned, but I'm doing my level best to be objective here." Gloria tilted her head. "People do awful things for reasons they think are valid," she said. "Snape is a prime example."

"This is different. This isn't like...like casting the Killing Curse at a man who trusts you, because he's dying anyway and he's begged you to do it so someone else cannot. Nor is it like hitting someone with an offensive spell while they're trying to kill you. This isn't even like throwing someone into Azkaban, back when that was basically a death sentence. This is not an area of any moral ambiguity; this is weaponising people. Taking a person and making them kill for you. Controlling their free will so much that they don't even care about what they're doing."

"Yes, I do understand."

"Do you? With this potion, Snape could make me kill my parents. He could make you kill Joseph, and you'd smile and relax and feel nothing more than the satisfaction of a job well done."

Giving voice to some tangible examples seemed to shake Gloria in a way that the bullet-points had not. "You'd want to take your own life," she whispered. "Afterwards. Surely. If you realised you'd been forced to do something so terrible..."

"But you wouldn't. Because the effects of this potion are irreversible. You'd live the rest of your life – however long you had before the Aurors caught up with you, anyway – without any kind of remorse." Hermione shook her head. "This is worse than Imperius, and our society already accepts that the Imperius curse is unforgivable."

"We have to stop him, then," Gloria said. "When do we think he's going to use this potion?"

"That I don't know," Hermione replied. "I'm reasonably sure I've discovered what he's doing, but not why or how or even when he's going to do it."

"So, what, we admit we're out of our depth and report him?"

"Maybe. Not sure." Hermione pinched between her eyes. "I don't think we're quite there. Not yet. I've sort of got a plan. It's taking shape, anyway." She pulled Baneful Brews towards her and opened it at the page she had marked with an incongruously jolly Beefeater bookmark. "You see, I think the hate potion is only one of the horrible things he wants to brew."

She pushed the book towards Gloria.

"What's this?" Gloria asked, peering down at the text.

"Something I wish I didn't have to ask you to look at."

"De Morte Magicae," she read. "Death of magic?"

Feeling as though the weight of the world pressed on her shoulders, Hermione said, "It's a potion that severs a witch or wizard from their magic. Permanently." She swallowed hard and said, "One
dose, and you would be forever a squib."

Gloria sat back, exhaling all of a rush as though she'd been punched in the gut. "Oh, Merlin save us all," she whispered.

"Yeah," Hermione agreed. "I don't know about you, but I'm finding it hard to imagine something worse. I mean, a poison will just kill you. Awful, but at least you're nice and dead afterwards. 
Crucio is agonising for a while, maybe it'll even melt your brain. But it eventually ends, and either you get better or you're in no position to care. But this? To take magic away from a witch or wizard – it's like, god, it's like amputating their soul. You'd have to live with that violation for the rest of your life. You'd never stop thinking about what you've lost. The very essence of who you are, ripped away from you."

"And this potion can do this terrible thing?"

"Apparently," Hermione said. "Pretty sure this is the main reason the book was banned. And by the way? The recipe includes tormentil, bloodroot and valerian."

"So you're basing this theory on the tormentil Joseph already noticed is missing."

"Yes. The De Morte Magicae potion is the only one in *Baneful Brews* that uses tormentil."

"And if Joseph comes back to us with news that bloodroot and valerian have also been stolen...?"

"I'd take that as strongly suggestive that this potion is Snape's endgame. It might even be why he needs the hate potion – maybe he anticipates the need to steel himself before he can make himself use it. Or prime someone else to do so."

"But who would he want to do such a thing to?"

"That's another question I can't answer." Hermione shook her head. "I just don't know, Gloria. And after the last two weeks my brain is so fried that I think I'd be an idiot to speculate."

Gloria nodded her understanding. "Let me see the recipe. What else does it need?" She read. "Haliwinkles? They're protected."

"I know. You can't get near the ones that thrive up on the north Scottish coast. Unplottable, secret-kept locations, thoroughly warded. They are strictly non-tradeable items. But I'm guessing there must be a habitat where they're cultivated in the long-term storage level. Otherwise the hospital wouldn't be able to brew the cure for Vanishing Sickness."

"There is indeed," Gloria confirmed.

"Which is where my plan comes in. But let's wait to see what Joseph says first. This will all be academic if the valerian and bloodroot have been left alone. And frankly, at this point I'd be over the moon to be proved wrong."

~~~

Joseph returned at just after half past seven. His face was ashen, and not from the Floo powder.

"What news?" his mother asked. But Hermione already had that sinking feeling.

Joseph slumped down at the kitchen table. He retrieved a notebook from his coat pocket and opened it up. Hermione's list was being used as a bookmark.
He took a deep breath. "At least six valerian plants have been uprooted and removed, intact, some
time in the last few days, I'd say. There's a trough of earth where a good dozen bloodroot have
been lifted, too. I wouldn't have spotted it without going to look – the bloodroot patch is in a dip
between beech trees, near one of the stream feeds that keep the soil moist. You have to go right up
to these places to see what's going on."


"That's not all," Joseph said. He checked his notebook. "Snape's wand was active in the woodland
habitat on Thursday. Early evening, after his lesson." He looked at Hermione. "Oh, sorry, I should explain – the long-term storage level has this system where the wands of the staff are tracked."

"Your mum told me," Hermione said.

"Right. Good. Anyway, I checked the records. Everyone else who's been in the woodland area
this week had every right to be there."

"Is your name on that list?" Hermione asked.

"It wasn't. Not till about seven o'clock this morning." Joseph shrugged. "I called it quits on all the
extra checks, this last week. And Benj, a colleague of mine, he was on the rota for woodland.
Why do you ask?"

"Because if this finally kick-starts some kind of formal enquiry, it would be nice to have a solid
piece of evidence proving your innocence."

"Oh. See what you mean." Joseph nodded, then gave a rueful laugh. "S'pose if it comes to that,
I've got Snape to thank for my alibi."

"The stockroom ingredients you were going to check?" Gloria prompted.

"Right." Joseph checked his notes. "The snake scales jar was all but empty. Which was weird – Storekeeps will place orders for refills when the stock reaches a certain level, but there's no order in place for common brown snake scales. The shrike spines jar was half full – couldn't tell anything from that. I'm pretty sure the stock of sweet violet flowers has been dipped into, because I harvested the last of the spring flowers myself back in May, and I remember stacking half a dozen stasis-jars on the shelf. There's only two there now, and it isn't a well-used ingredient."

"Right then," Hermione said. "I think we can conclude that we've gone from circumstantial to pretty suggestive evidence."

"There's something else," Joseph said. "The patch of sweet violet in the woodland habitat had been
yanked about a bit, as if someone was trying to find a hidden flower in the clump. I can't think of a
single herbologist who'd bother to do that – not in October. Anyway, whoever did it left boot
marks in the soil." Joseph turned the page of his notebook, to where he had sketched the footprints
he'd found, including measurements. "Eleven and a half inches. I measured my own boots and
they're eleven inches long. I'm a size ten. So I reckon these are size elevens, maybe?"

"They are," Hermione said dully. "Just the right size for a man of six foot." She stood up and went
to look out on the brightening garden through the window. Her throat was tight. "Those are
Snape's boot-prints," she said.
"You're certain?" Gloria asked.

"I recognise the tread pattern," she said, closing her eyes but still seeing Joseph's sketch: long soles tapering to a flattened toe, with a distinctive pattern of circular anti-slip ridges. "The first time he tried those boots on was three days before he appeared before the Wizengamot. His wandless magic was too weak for a knotting charm, and his motor function was still healing. He couldn't tie the laces." She laughed humourlessly. "He was furious with me when I did it for him."

Gloria sighed. "I'm so sorry, Hermione, truly, but we've got to report this."

"We will," Hermione declared. She turned around, trying to shake the memories off. "If we have to. But give me until Tuesday."

"Why not today?" Joseph asked. "Or for that matter, why not tomorrow, first thing Monday? Monday morning's a good time to do official-type things."

"Because tomorrow evening, at quarter past nine, we get a full moon," Hermione explained.

"Um..."

She walked back to the table and reached to close *Baneful Brews* firmly, shutting away the horror of its recipes. "The haliwinkles," she said to Gloria.

"Haliwinkles?" Joseph put in. "They're shellfish, aren't they?"

"Yes. Gastropods, specifically. Little sea snails that colonise the rocks on the Scottish coast. They are fiercely protected by law because they're essential for the communities of shellycoat which still survive up there. The few that haven't been wiped out, that is."

"Okay. And...?"

"And that means the only place where you can obtain fresh haliwinkles for potions is the coastal habitat in St Mungo's long-term storage level."

"I see. Am I to take it that some other horrible potion needs them?" Joseph asked.

"Yes. The one that also needs tormentil, bloodroot and valerian. But this potion not only needs haliwinkles. It needs haliwinkles that were collected under the light of a full moon, then brewed into the potion on the same night. Which gives us a window of opportunity."

"So you think Snape will have to harvest his snails tomorrow night," Joseph said. "Sounds to me like that's a good time to steer well clear of the hospital. I'm no slouch, but I'm not going one-on-one with the bloke. Not if I can help it."

"Steering clear of the hospital is exactly what you will do," Hermione agreed. "You and your mother. Preferably by going somewhere you can be seen by multiple witnesses. Take your parents out for dinner or something. Make a night of it." Hermione hesitated, bit her lip. "But I am going to need one of your wands, I'm afraid."

"You're going to lie in wait," Gloria deduced.

"Yes."

"And see who comes to get the haliwinkles."

"Yes."
"Because there's a tiny part of you that wants to believe it isn't Snape."

"No." Hermione tut-tutted at herself. "I mean, yes, I admit it. There is. But I'm not expecting that tiny part to be cheering a victory come tomorrow night. I fully anticipate that Snape will be the one who's collecting sea snails by moonlight."

Gloria nodded her understanding. "So you want to follow him. See if he meets someone to hand off the ingredients. You still think he might be in trouble — coerced by someone else, or some such?"

"It's one possibility, though if someone has managed to coerce him into stealing these ingredients then they'd be an absolute moron not to coerce him into brewing the potions as well. And if he is the brewer then there's only one sensible place he can do the work."

Joseph said, "Why? He can go anywhere he likes if he Apparates or Floo's out. How would you even follow him?"

"Because he can't Apparate," Hermione insisted. "Haliwinkles are weird, wonderful things. They emit a kind of dead-zone for magic. Even one tiny snail. If it's anywhere within about three feet of where you're standing then your casting will fizzle — at least, according to the Index Ingredientus. I'm guessing it's why they're effective in this potion. They kill magic."

"All right, so he'll Floo. You still might not be able to follow."

"Snape rarely Floo's anywhere, because he hates that the network records the journey." Hermione sat down again, aware that she was coming across like a bit of a lecturer. "But even if he tried, it wouldn't work. Because of the magic-deadening snails."

Gloria gave a harrumph of understanding. "He'll take them to the potions laboratory on sub-level one, then. It's his only choice."

"Yup," Hermione agreed.

"In that case, why do you need one of our wands?" Joseph asked. "You can just wait for him in the lab."

"If I do that, and Snape goes straight out the front doors of the hospital to hand off his stolen ingredients to someone else, that won't do much good, will it?"

"So wait for him in the antechamber," Joseph said.

"I could do that. But if it turns out that the thief is someone else — and yes, I know it's unlikely, but if it is — then they could walk straight past me and I'd be none the wiser. No, I have to get into the storage level and follow the thief from there."

"And how are you going to do that without the thief seeing you?" Gloria asked. "Because I can't imagine that any person who thinks it is perfectly fine to brew these awful potions would take kindly to an audience."

"Why are we pretending it isn't going to be Snape?" Joseph asked, confused.

Hermione sighed. "Because I'm a gullible fool. But your mum's right. If Snape realises he's being watched, it'll end badly." She drew her shoulders back and tried to relocate her sense of determination. "Which is why I have every intention of avoiding a confrontation, since it is a confrontation I could not possibly win. But you see, I have a friend who has a cloak of
invisibility."

Joseph thought this through. "You know, that could work," he murmured.

"I concur," Gloria agreed, a little gloomily. "And we do need to know whether there is another individual involved in this scheme. If we report Snape to the authorities right now, I doubt he'd give up any co-conspirators." She shot a look at Hermione. "Or blackmailers."

"Right," Hermione agreed. "And any co-conspirator could keep the plot going. Only we'd have lost our chance of identifying them."

"So if there is someone else involved," Joseph said, in the kind of voice that said he didn't really see why there had to be, "Snape will either take the ingredients straight to them, or he'll brew the potion that same night and then presumably take that to them instead."

"Yes. And I follow and find out who."

"Can he Apparate once the potion is brewed?" Gloria asked.

"Baneful Brews suggests you don't try. The brewed potion will still affect nearby magic. There's a chance the casting might go astray, if it works at all. Apparition is one of those spells where a random problem can have disastrous consequences."

"So you'll probably be able to follow on foot if he leaves with the potion. However, surely what we should be focusing on is the fact that we're to let him brew this terrible thing in the first place," Gloria pointed out.

"I know. Look, I haven't finalised the plan. I think a lot will depend on what happens. I've got two options, as I see it," Hermione said. "One – I let him do his brewing and follow him to see who he gives the finished product to. Then I follow that person and report them once I've got a name and location. That kind of thing. Hopefully MLE can sort it all out before the potion gets used."

"Hopefully?" Gloria said, less than convinced.

"Yeah, I know, there's risks involved. Which brings me to option two – I spoil the potion as it's brewed. Maybe add something else to it – a dollop of goosegrass would do the trick. It'd be obvious with the colour-change. Snape would thus be forced to explain to his cohort that the brewing was unsuccessful. At which point I follow and get the name and location thing, and we don't have to worry about it all going pear-shaped and some poor soul being turned into a squib."

"A squib!" Joseph looked alarmed for a moment, then waved his hands. "No, no, still don't want to know. But have you considered what might happen if Snape discovers you tampering with his brew?"

"He'd hex me sideways, I know. But it's worth the risk." Hermione glanced at Baneful Brews. "I'm not sure I want a single drop of that potion to exist. As in, ever."

The three of them were quiet for a moment as they all thought the plan through.

"And if it's just him?" Gloria asked quietly. "If there is no cohort at all?"

"Then we know we can report him," Hermione said. "Without the risk of leaving a back-door open for someone else to finish things off."
She blushed. Because she'd already decided that if it turned out Snape was working alone then the only choice she had left was to confront him directly and let the cards fall as they may.

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Letter left in Hermione's bedroom, magically sealed until midday on 6/10/98:

Dear Harry and Ron,

I'm about to do something risky. Maybe even stupid. And if you're reading this then it means that I've gone awol, or worse, and you've come looking for clues and you've found this letter. God, you must both be furious with me right now.

So I'd better say I'm sorry, straight away.

You should go and talk to Healer Gloria Montague at St Mungo's. She'll fill you in with the details. I'm leaving all my notes at her cottage, so it should be straightforward enough to work out.

You'll be wanting to know why I didn't tell you. Initially it was because Gloria asked me not to. Then, later, it was because things were getting strained between us and I didn't know how to deal with that. Then, finally, when things got really bad, it was because I didn't want to admit how much of a fool I've been.

Mainly it's because I'm not good at asking for help. If I survive this, I promise I'll try to do better. And if, as it turns out, I haven't survived it, please don't judge me too harshly.

I'm sorry it's been such a tricky couple of weeks for us. If I'd known our most recent conversation together would turn out to be the last one ever then I'd have tried much harder not to let my temper get the better of me. And by the way – losing my temper last curry-night was as much about all this stuff I've been dealing with as it was about being annoyed with you two. So if I've died, please don't remember me with anger.

You've been the best of friends to me. I couldn't have asked for better.

Take care of yourselves and each other. Be happy.

love,

Hermione

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Chapter End Notes

"Since we must start somewhere, we must have assumptions, but at least let us have as few assumptions as possible."

Isaac Asimov, Understanding Physics 1966
Following in Your Footsteps

"When push comes to pull comes to shove
Comes to step around
This self-destructive dance that never would've ended
Till I rose, I roared aloud."

A Perfect Circle (Maynard James Keenan, Billy Howerdel), Rose 2000

Monday was a day of second-guessing.

Should she go in to work or owl in sick? Hermione knew she was unlikely to be much use to anyone, but then again, would sitting at home reviewing her plan be a better use of her time? And she knew she should avoid doing anything to draw attention to herself.

So she went in to work, and made it through the morning. It was difficult not to try to say a veiled goodbye to people like Lysander Crocus. Part of her wanted to. Just in case.

She couldn't manage any lunch, not with her guts churning away with ever-increasing nerves. Then came Monday's Potions class. For the first time in her life, Hermione experienced the sensation of wanting to play truant. If anything, the 'don't draw attention' argument held even fiercer sway here, though. So along she went.

Her hands trembled the whole way through. She dropped a beaker. Snape snapped at her for being clumsy and she felt like a first year, all over again. In the end, her Perfect Grace potion – brewed as it was with imperfect gracelessness – scraped a Subpar.

But how was she supposed to relax and focus on her work in the very room where, that evening, a potion like De Morte Magicae would be prepared? And what would happen to that potion once it was brewed? Who was the intended target? How would that person cope with the loss of their magic? How would she cope, if it was done to her? She'd be half a person: less than half. She wouldn't be herself anymore.

It didn't bear thinking about. Alas, she couldn't seem to stop.

When she took her signed phial up to the front table, Snape looked at her with contempt and said, "Whatever plague of incompetence has overcome you today, Miss Granger, may I suggest that you snap out of it before disgracing my classroom with your presence again?"

Behind her, Bulstrode cackled. It didn't make Hermione feel any better that Bulstrode was the only one. Since replying to Snape was, at this point, impossible, and she could hardly stand to witness the sympathetic looks from the rest of the class, she grabbed her things and made her escape as quickly as possible.

She allowed herself five minutes of private weeping when she got home. Then she pulled herself together and got ready to face the evening.

She'd been home over an hour before she noticed the stinging at her collarbone. It was only then that she realised she'd missed her Artefact Accidents appointment.
"Harry, I need to borrow the cloak," she said, when he arrived home.

He frowned. He was still unhappy with the way last Wednesday had gone. They'd hardly spoken since.

"What for?" he asked.

She tried to look apologetic. "Can't tell you."

"Oh, god, Hermione – this *again*?"

"I know! I know how it looks, and I'm sorry. But I still need to borrow the cloak."

"Fine. I'll get it for you. But whatever it is you're doing, I'm coming too."

She huffed a sigh, but she had anticipated this. "Okay," she said. "But you have to do what I say. This is important."

Harry nodded, placated, and he disappeared up the stairs. When he came down again the silver-grey sheen of the magical cloak was draped over one arm.

"Right then. Where are we going?" he asked, as he handed her the cloak.

"I'll have to Side-Along you," she said. "Trust me?"

Harry gave an awkward shrug. "I know things haven't been great, recently, but of course I do."

She led him out of Grimmauld Place, then around the corner to the side of the terrace where they could Apparate in privacy.

"Should we go and get Ron?" Harry asked.

Hermione pretended to spot something over his shoulder. "No need! Look!" She indicated the end of the side passage, and in the moment when Harry turned to look, expecting to wave Ron over, she silently apologised to him, stepped clear and Apparated alone to Puddlemere.

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At Gloria's cottage, the Montague family were dressed up to the nines and about to head off to The Peppermill, one of Hogsmeade's more popular restaurants.

"All set?" asked Hermione as she was ushered into the cottage.

"Yes," Gloria said. She busied herself, straightening the collar on her husband's topcoat. "Although I'm having second thoughts about letting you do this."

"Join the club," Hermione said grimly. The only reason she wasn't tremulous with nerves was because she'd taken a calming draught half an hour ago. "If I thought reporting this to MLE, right now, would fix things, I'd probably do it."

"Look," Joseph said, "I--"

"Joseph," Gloria said sharply.

"Sorry, Mum, but it has to be said." Joseph and his mother looked at each other. Something unspoken passed between them before Gloria sighed and nodded. He turned to Hermione. "We've
been talking. And Mum hates the idea, but it isn't fair, you doing this alone. I mean, I'm not a
dueller. I'm not much of an anything, really, except a bloke who likes plants. And after the things
Snape said to me in that alleyway, I don't mind telling you, the man scares me half to death.
But..." He hesitated, put his shoulders back and cleared his throat. "I can come too."

It had, very obviously, taken a lot for him to say that.

Hermione smiled sadly and looked down at the cloak folded over her arm. "Back at Hogwarts, me
and Harry and Ron, we'd all crowd in together under this thing. Sneaking about, avoiding teachers
and prefects, trying not to trip over each other." She shook the brief burst of nostalgia away. "But
we were a bit smaller then. I'm afraid, logistically, this is a one-person job."

"I could wait outside the storage level, though," Joseph suggested. "A bit of back-up, once Snape's
got his snails and he's heading for the lab?"

Hermione considered. It was tempting. Very tempting, actually.

It also meant that in the event of a confrontation, she'd be putting someone other than herself in
harm's way. Not to mention, Joseph's presence could be counterproductive. She was hoping the
evening might yet provide an opportunity for her to appeal to Snape's better nature: something she
desperately wanted to believe still existed, somewhere beneath the threats and the anger. If that
opportunity arose, Joseph standing awkwardly nearby wouldn't help.

Whatever happened tonight, good, bad or cataclysmic, Hermione knew it had to happen between
her and Severus Snape. It was one of the few things she was sure of. This whole situation was
complicated enough without throwing third parties into the mix.

"I appreciate the offer," she said to Joseph, "but I'll do better if I don't need to watch out for anyone
other than myself." Behind her, she heard Gloria let out a small sigh of relief. "Also – I really like
the idea of you and your mum giving yourselves a nice, cast-iron alibi for your whereabouts
tonight. This whole thing could still get messy."

For a brief moment Joseph looked contentious, in the way of all young men who've just been told
that they are not required to look big and strong for the damsel. Then he sighed and nodded. "Fair
enough," he agreed. "Not like there's much I can offer the woman who brought down a Death
Eater assassin, pulled off a Gringotts heist and orchestrated the defeat of Voldemort, now is
there?" Joseph added a huffy laugh, as if he was stating the embarrassingly obvious.

Hermione needed a moment to process this rather startling summary. She did not tend to think of
herself in such terms. From her own point of view she was a woman who preferred books to
people, whose sine qua non was a up-to-date to-do list, and who still got panic attacks six whole
months after the events that had triggered them.

She coughed. "Um. Yes. Well, setting aside the fact that I'm actually about as brave, skilled and
heroic as a skittish Jack Russell on Bonfire Night...I thank you for the vote of confidence."

Joseph nodded. "If you change your mind? Send me a Patronus."

"Right, then," Gloria said decisively, steering the conversation away from Joseph's offer with no
attempt at subtlety. "Now, you've got the map of the route to the coastal habitat, haven't you?"

"Yes," Hermione agreed.

"And the goosegrass, for spoiling the potion?"
She patted her trouser pocket. "Got it."

"And an extra jumper," Joseph piped up. When Hermione and his mother looked at him in surprise he added, "It's what she always says to me." Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "Hey – it isn't such a daft idea. That coastal habitat can be bracing."

"Joseph? Wand," Gloria said.

He handed Hermione his wand: twelve inches, English oak with a unicorn hair core. It was too long for her and didn't feel quite right in her hand, but it would do all that she needed to do. She strapped it safely into her arm-sheath.

"What are you going to do with your own wand while you're in long-term storage?" Joseph asked.

"I'm going to leave it in the potions laboratory. There's a place I can hide it." She gave Joseph a smile. "I do appreciate this, you know. I mean – it's your wand."

"Just don't scratch it. And put some petrol in the tank before bringing it back." He offered a hand to shake. "Good luck. Please don't get yourself hurt in any way. I already feel terrible."

"Why do you feel terrible?"

"I'm the one who brought the thefts to Mum's attention in the first place, remember?"

Hermione shrugged off the comment. "I'll be fine. And–"

She was interrupted by an incoming silvery missile that turned into a galloping stag. It drew up in front of her, massive, noble, nostrils flaring in effort, somehow managing to seethe.

"Hermione Jean Granger!" the stag yelled. "You come home right this minute or I'm going to report you missing to Kingsley Shacklebolt. Don't push me! I'll bloody do it!" The stag stomped for a moment, then more quietly it said, "Come on, Hermione, don't do this to me. You know how worried I am, don't you?"

The stag faded. Hermione growled and said, "Oh, he had to do the quiet bit in the gentle voice at the end, didn't he? He couldn't leave it at a bit of shouty bullying!"

She turned around. The Montague family were all watching, none of them apparently aware of what they should say. Hermione gave a huge sigh.

"Would you all excuse me a moment, please?" she asked. She concentrated. She thought about the things she could usually rely on to form a Patronus. She cast.

Nothing happened.

"Damn it," she said.

Behind her, Gloria said, "Your friend seems to care about you very much."

(Thank you, Gloria.)

Hermione shrugged off her recent annoyance with Harry and instead conjured her best friend's grin, his ruffle-able hair, the way he'd looked in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place when they'd made Rice Krispie cakes together, chocolatey mix smudging everywhere. Like a couple of kids.

"Expecto Patronum," she cast. It was the first time she'd needed to conjure a Patronus in weeks.
and weeks. Her rook materialised and spent a moment looking at her, as if to say, 'What did you expect? It isn't like you've changed the way you feel about him, is it?'

Hermione cast the charm to convey a message and said:

"Harry, I'm sorry. I am. I didn't want to trick you but I don't have time. I'll explain everything tomorrow morning. Okay? Can you give me until then, at least? In the meantime, the whole point of borrowing the cloak is that I'll be safe. So thanks. And, you know. Sorry."

She sent her rook off and then turned back to the Montagues. Gloria shot her a look that seemed to ask how this whole thing had become so fraught before they'd even left the cottage.

"I'll see you all later to let you know how it goes," she said. They wished her luck and trooped off to Floo to Hogsmeade. Hermione let herself out into the front garden and walked down the path to the street.

Harry's stag rematerialised. "Fine," it said. "Tomorrow morning. And you do not take any risks. Right? And if you get in trouble and you need help, then for god's sake, Hermione, would you please try to remember that there is nothing in the world me and Ron wouldn't do for you? Idiot. So be careful. You big idiot." A pause. "Love you."

She laughed, a bit choked up. Then she checked her watch. It was half past seven. Time to get herself to the hospital and scout out the lie of the land.

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The Welcome Witch on duty at the reception desk turned expectantly to the alcove where incoming visitors Apparated, then looked confused. A pop, but no person. After a couple of seconds she shook her head and got back to work.

Reception was quiet: Monday evening, nothing much happening. This was good. Hermione had never quite got the hang of avoiding crowds while wearing Harry's invisibility cloak.

She moved over to the stairwell and waited. Her footwear of choice this evening was her aging pair of Converse All Stars: yes, the soles might sometimes squeak on polished floors, but her logic was that the softer the shoe, the softer her tread. Similarly she wore form-fitting dark clothing, mainly cotton, that would hopefully not produce too much in the way of a swish or a rustle. Her hair was tied ruthlessly back. She wore no jewellery that might snag or clatter. If it hadn't been for the way she knew she could give Mr Bean a run for his money in the slapstick stakes, she might even have felt a bit ninja-like.

The stairwell doors opened and a man in business robes came out: early forties, sweaty, oblivious to his surroundings. She caught the door before it swung closed, and made her way down the stairs to the first sub-level. Her heart was beating faster than usual, but the calming draught she had taken meant that it wasn't pounding like a kettledrum. She walked along the corridor, placing her feet carefully, making her footsteps flow, listening for any sounds she made.

So far, so good.

Now came the first tricky bit. She needed to get into the potions lab to stash her wand: taking it with her into the long-term storage level was not an option. Leaving it here made sense; this was the room she'd most likely be coming back to once Snape had collected his sea snails. She knew the room. The one positive thing she'd managed to achieve during the disastrous lesson earlier was to identify a good hiding place.
What she did not know, right now, was whether Snape was still in there. He could be, since he was waiting for the rise of the full moon as much as she was. And he had an excuse to be here. This was his teaching room. He could set out a stack of essays and pretend to be marking. Even if someone found him hanging around, they wouldn't be concerned.

Then again, would he want to launch an assault on a colony of rare sea snails while wearing an Edwardian frock coat and tailored trousers? The coastal habitat was less exposed than the actual coast, but it simulated temperature, wind and tides. So what would he do? Go home and prepare in privacy, or hang around for the four hours he'd need to wait between the end of his lesson and the rising of the moon?

Hermione shook her head, gathered her courage, checked both ways down the corridor and then opened the lab door.

The room was empty. Or at least, it seemed empty; she'd been caught out this way before, though. She closed the door behind herself and then murmured: "Homenum Revelio." She looked around, suspicious of dark arrows pointing at Disillusioned professors.

Nothing. Except the big fat arrow over her own invisible head. Hermione cancelled the charm with an irritated wave of her wand.

She walked to the demonstration area at the front of the class. This was where Snape would brew his loathsome potions. Once he had his ingredients he could take his time. Even if he was interrupted by some passing Mediwizard wondering what was going on in here so late at night, he could probably wing it. He'd claim he was used to keeping odd hours; he had some lesson preparation to do; there was nothing to worry about.

It occurred to Hermione that if Joseph hadn't noticed the thefts, and Gloria hadn't asked for her assistance, Severus Snape might have got away with all of this, clean as a whistle.

No wonder he despised her.

Within the gossamer cover of the cloak, she looked at her wand and then reached out to place it on the narrow shelf below the blackboard, sloting it in the groove shaped into the shelf to stop the sticks of chalk rolling free. She stepped back and looked. Unless you went rooting around for chalk, you weren't going to see it. It was a good hiding place: out of sight but reachable. She hadn't wanted to leave her wand somewhere she'd need to open a drawer or a cupboard to retrieve it, or on a high shelf where she might topple something as she reached for it. She knew that her ability to remain undetected would largely define whether she finished this night a success or a failure. (Or alive. Or dead.)

 Armed only with Joseph's wand now, she left the potions lab. The corridor beyond was still quiet; outside of normal working hours it only tended to get busy at shift-change. She crept back to the stairwell, still concentrating, still practising her silent footfall, still feeling vaguely ridiculous about it all. Then she risked cracking the stairwell door, slid through when no sound intruded, and she crept down to the next level.

Hermione peered through the glass in the door, into the antechamber. The Storekeep on duty was the same one who had brought her the ingredients for the Eve's Drops potion. She watched him for a while at his desk. She didn't really want to push open the door and arouse his suspicions: not while she still had plenty of time in hand.

After a few minutes she heard a noise from the stairwell above her. She unsheathed Joseph's wand, just in case, and found an unobtrusive corner where she made herself as small as possible.
Moments later a Mediwizard who was humming a Celestina Warbeck song appeared on the landing. He pushed open the door to the antechamber. Hermione followed as swiftly as she could.

"Evening, Tobes!" the Mediwizard greeted the Storekeep.

"Evening, Graham. What's it to be?"

"Crate of Wiggenweld and a dozen Blood Replenishers, please."

"Coming right up." The Storekeep wrote something on a clipboard and then pushed it towards the Mediwizard, who tapped it with his wand. Then the Storekeep was away through the enchanted arch and Graham the Mediwizard turned to the notice board that was mounted adjacent to the stairwell door, idly perusing the posters and adverts, still humming his irritating song.

This seemed as good a time as any to find out whether the long-term storage level was going to throw a wobbler when she tried to gain access using someone else's wand. Hermione crept over to the archway, checked that the Mediwizard's back was turned, held Joseph's wand out to the enchanted tablet at the apex of the arch and then stepped through.

Nothing happened. No alarm, no flashing lights, no nothing. Hermione didn't even feel the shiver of magic upon her. She almost felt like touching the archway and whispering a thank-you.

Joseph had drawn her a map of the long-term storage level, or at least the part of it that she needed to navigate. She'd memorised it, since it was much easier to do that than to mess around with a piece of paper under the cloak. Hermione pictured the map in her mind and set off.

First junction: side passages left and right for storage rooms alpha and beta, where the most common potions and ingredients were housed. She glanced to the side to see the Storekeep busy through an open door at the end of the passage. She went straight on.

Ignore the next left as that led to most of the fungal habitats. Straight on at the next crossroads. Take the next right, and right again. Now the doors and junctions were coming thick and fast. She was in the part of the level where most of the fauna was cultivated. Hermione counted doorways, hoping to high heaven that Joseph's memory had served him well when he'd produced his diagram.

She stopped outside an ordinary looking door: wood-panelled, with a brass handle and push plate. It looked like it might lead into a formal office or dusty records room. Hermione glanced around the narrow corridor she was in, then – taking a deep breath – she pushed open the door.

The wind hit her like a slap in the face, as did, moments later, the smell of salt and rotting seaweed. It was dark within; the pretend-sun had gone down more than an hour ago and the moon was not yet up. She glanced back at the reassuring lights of the storage level's corridor before she braced against the weather and forced herself into the habitat. She closed the door and then blinked at the way that an ordinary looking door with classic brass furniture was now set into the side of a cliff.

She wrapped Harry's cloak more firmly around herself. This would not be a good time to lose it to a grabby gust of wind.

After a few moments she got used to the cooler temperature and the briskness, though the noise of the wind and the distant waves remained a distraction. Her eyes grew accustomed to the dimness; the evening dark was not absolute. She took a step away from the door and then stopped and looked down. The tiled floor of the sub-level corridors had given way to a patch of smooth, damp sand: the sort of surface very much prone to leaving footprints.
"Bugger," she whispered.

If she walked straight over to the rock pools nearby, her passage would be obvious. And what would Snape do, when he came through the cliff door to collect his haliwinkles and saw an embarrassingly obvious set of size six footprints? If she was very lucky then he'd decide that this was not such a good night to go winkle-picking. If she was not, he'd locate her and make excellent use of the simulated bit of sea nearby: the one easily big enough to hide a body in.

Or would he? Would he hurt her? Not so long ago she'd been sure he would not. Even when Severus Snape had been at his most cruel and malicious at Hogwarts, he'd still thrown his own body between her and a werewolf...

She couldn't believe in that Snape anymore, though. Too much had changed.

There was no longer any point dwelling on the past. Nor on the disintegrating present, come to that. All that was important, right now, was finding a route to a hiding place: somewhere that would not betray her presence; somewhere she could wait for the moon to rise. She lifted Joseph's wand and risked a *Lumos*, then checked the nearby terrain. To her left, about three metres away, there was a tumble of boulders that formed a rugged but direct path down to the rock pools. Once she was there, the sand gave way to shingle; she could walk on that more safely. So she just needed to get across the sand to those rocks.

Severus Snape could fly without a broom. Hermione had always hated flying, but this was one of those occasions where she could see the usefulness of it. She could probably manage a cushioning charm that would take her weight, but renewing it every step would be slow-going and would drain her energy. Given that she was wielding someone else's wand and it was her only source of light, any kind of complex spellwork was out of the question anyway.

The only solution was the simple one. She jumped. She jumped again. She made it to the lowest boulder and turned back to the patch of sand she had just navigated.

Hello there, Hermione-sized footprints.

She cancelled the *Lumos* and cast the sweeping charm Molly had taught her. The footprints were scuffed out, and though the sand now looked far from untouched it was close enough to the door and the cliff edge not to betray her.

She lit Joseph's wand again and began to scramble along the boulder pile. The lack of grip on her shoes along with the coating of sand on the soles and the big billowy cloak she was wearing made the going precarious. She slipped once, stifled a cry of alarm, caught herself at the expense of a sharp pain and then kept going. Once she'd made it to the first rock pool she checked the damage: she had grazed the heel of her left hand. There wasn't much she could do about that; she didn't have her usual bag of supplies with her.

The rock pool was not home to any haliwinkles. A couple of small crabs ponderously traversed the seaweed-clogged interior, and a starfish wiggled an arm. Hermione sighed at them and then looked further down the beach. She could get down to the shingle just to her left. The crunch she was going to make was unfortunate, though; it wouldn't let her follow Snape in any kind of covert way once he arrived to do his thieving. She looked around at the dimly lit rocks and sand, her cloak whipped this way and that by the wind, the smell of the sea in her nostrils, the graze on her hand stinging almost as much as the place on her collarbone where her untreated wound was beginning to pry apart beneath the dressing she had applied.

Where were the fucking snails? That would surely be the place to start.
Hermione checked her watch. It was coming up on twenty past eight. She had less than an hour before the moon rose.

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It took another twenty-five minutes before she saw her first haliwinkle. She'd spent ten of those minutes trying to find routes across the terrain: routes that would not leave evidence of her passage and would not be noisy as hell if she needed to move fast. (There weren't any.) With time beginning to march on — though admittedly, Snape could come and take the haliwinkles at any point while the moon was overhead, up to and including about four o'clock in the morning — Hermione had given up and begun to clump across the shingle, examining rock pools and then moving over towards the sloping rocks nearer the breaking waves.

And then, finally, it could be said that it was the haliwinkles that found Hermione. Scrambling over a rock, her *Lumos* blinked out. She froze, startled by the sudden darkness, before she remembered the way haliwinkles emitted a magic-deadening zone. She let her vision adjust to the dimness and then she crouched down and began to search.

The rock sloped down to jut into the sea. The clusters of spiral shells she found were densely packed and interspersed with patches of greenery. Hermione found a precarious perch at the top of the slope, the spray from the waves below her turning her super-sneaky cotton clothing into something that felt heavy and cumbersome with damp. An idea struck; she peeked out from the hood of the cloak and checked the rest of her body, but it remained hidden. It would seem that permanently enchanted items like Harry's cloak were immune to the snails' dead-zone.

She covered up again, then edged down and lifted one of the haliwinkles up, detaching it from its grip on the rock with a gentle tug.

"Hello," she murmured to the tiny snail in its shell. "I'm going to a lot of trouble for you. Hope you appreciate it."

She set the snail back down and looked at the horizon. The light-haze preceding the moon's rise was visible now: this habitat must be charmed to face east. She wondered how long she could stay crouching here before her legs began to ache. Not long enough; there were still twenty minutes to wait. And to get at these snails, Snape would come right here to this very rock. Invisibility cloak or no, there was little room to hide.

She needed to find a place. She needed somewhere she could watch this rock and still be able to follow Snape out when he was done. Far enough away that Joseph's wand would work, too. Just in case.

Hermione looked around, hoping for an idea—

Behind her, like a crack of gunfire, someone clapped their hands.

Hermione squealed in shock, slipped on the wet surface, and for the second time in barely more than a week she tumbled from a rock into shockingly cold water. This time, however, the depth was shallow. Drowning wasn't an immediate issue, though the impact as she landed on her back in the uneven shingle beneath the rushing waves knocked the breath out of her. She lay there for a moment, prone, unsure what damage she'd done to herself. Shocked, wet, cold and frightened, looking wildly up at the rock she'd just been crouching upon.

She saw the air blur, which made her reflexes kick in. *Under attack!* *Protect yourself!* She lifted her hand to cast, but her hand was empty. She'd dropped Joseph's wand as she'd fallen; it was
either on the rock or lost to the waves. Either way, it could offer no help against the dark-eyed wizard who appeared out of nowhere, Disillusionment falling away as he stepped closer to the magic-deadening haliwinkles.

"He can't cast,' the sensible part of her mind tried to point out over the panic. 'Not while he's standing there. Don't give him a reason to move.'

"I must say, Miss Granger," Severus Snape called over the noise of the waves. "Invisibility cloaks are all well and good, but they lose their usefulness when you insist on going around talking to yourself." His coat and hair flared dramatically in the wind. He was tall, composed, commanding, dry: everything Hermione was not.

Hermione drew breath and immediately inhaled brine. She coughed hard for a few seconds. The graze on her hand and the splitting wound at her collarbone had reacted with the seawater and burned painfully. A wave lifted her and then dragged her back, making her tip this way and that. She had never felt more out of control.

"I was talking to the snail!" she managed to yell at him.

Snape favoured that comment with the kind of look it probably deserved, then he reached down and picked something up: Joseph's wand. "Montague's, I take it," he said mildly as he examined it.

"If you must know, yes." She blew out the water that washed over her face, then felt a surge of dread. "And-and if you hurt his mother then I'll..." She wasn't sure how to finish that sentence, because she was getting buffeted by rushing waves and the cold was making her shiver. The invisibility cloak had twisted and wrapped her left arm and shoulder but the rest of her was visible as she flailed in the surf.

And damn it, she was still frightened but she was angry too, and disappointed, so very, very disappointed. Because Gloria had been right; she'd been absolutely spot on. There'd been a tiny part of Hermione that had wanted to believe that it was all a misunderstanding, that Severus Snape was not the thief at all. Now she'd lost that glimmer of hope.

She struggled to her feet and tried to sort out the cloak, ignoring the lazy way Snape levelled his wand at her. She was soaking wet, so she stomped through the waves to the nearest flat bit of shingle and then realised she couldn't even manage a Tergeo, since it was not a spell she could cast wandlessly and Snape had a hold of the only wand she could currently claim. Her clothing felt weighty and uncomfortable; her body shivered.

Snape watched her with a cold, callous gaze. He glanced down at the haliwinkles, then moved back along the rock to a place where he could jump down to the shingle. He walked over to her. The urge to turn and run was intense, but he was several metres away from the sea snails and could cast again now; she knew she would barely manage three steps before he cursed her into oblivion.

Snape only stopped walking when he was close enough to reach out and touch her. It took all her effort not to go stumbling backwards. His gaze piercing, he leaned in and said, as quietly as the conditions allowed:

"Then you'll what, Miss Granger?"

"What?"

"If I hurt Montague's mother, then...? Do, please, finish your threat. I could use a laugh."

Hermione just looked back at him. She tried to remember Boggle-filled afternoons at the hospital.
She thought about the look on his face, the first time she'd brought him a decent espresso. She recalled dreams of velvet touches and that silken voice.

All a lie. She'd fooled only herself.

"Who are you?" she said helplessly.

His disdain was scathing. "Are you now pleading insanity?"

"Why?" Anger rose within her. "For wanting to stop a terrible thing from happening? Just because I'm bad at this doesn't mean I shouldn't have tried!"

"Oh, so you've decided you're on the side of the angels, have you? That must be quite some justification."

"Why do I have to justify giving a shit about you?" she demanded. With this rising anger her inhibitions were flying free in the wind, right along with the tails of Harry's cloak and the strands of her soaking wet hair. "Why? I don't even care about the snails, you stupid man! I mean, I do, because that recipe is...but it isn't the worst thing! You couldn't make yourself trust me, could you? Whatever the problem is, there's got to be a better way of dealing with it than those horrible potions! Don't you get it? I'd have helped! And it didn't even occur to you to ask, did it?" She swiped at the water on her face, not sure if it was tears or seawater. "So go ahead. Hex me into next week, then grab your snails and do your dastardly deeds! After two weeks of absolute hell I've finally gone beyond caring!" She spread her arms and offered herself as a target. "Do it! Just fucking finish this!"

Snape stared at her for what felt like a long time. He frowned. Then he shook his head. Then he frowned harder.

"What?" she yelled at him, running on empty, keeping herself upright only thanks to equal measures of fear and anger and grief.

"You're lying," he said. He didn't sound sure, which was strange, even in the middle of this windswept confrontation, because Severus Snape never sounded unsure.

"About what? Wanting to help? It's a bit late now. Just get on with it!"

Snape blinked. Spray from the waves had made his eyelashes dark. For a moment he looked torn, angry and confused, then he whipped his wand into view and cast. Hermione flinched, but it was unnecessary. Her clothing and hair dried instantly. He'd only cast *Tergeo.*

"Nice of you," she tried to sneer, because all she had left was bravado. "Bit redundant, though. Drying me off before sending me to a watery grave?"

"Damn it, would you please stop demanding that I kill you!" Snape fumed. "It is not remotely helpful."

"Oh, now you want me to be helpful, do you? Great! Here's an idea. Don't brew potions that turn people into psychos and squibs!"

His expression darkened. "So help me, Hermione, if this is some double-play—"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

She was fed up with waiting for the hostile spell that would finish her, so she decided to at least
face the rest of this showdown without an invisibility cloak twisted around her neck and threatening strangulation. She found the bunched up material and sorted it out with a few tugs. The waves began to rush over her feet as she did so, and she staggered further up the beach.

And in the distance, a rectangle of soft light appeared in the cliff face and the silhouette of a man emerged from its centre. She was so surprised that she just stood there, blinking, wondering if she was going mad.

"Bollocks," Snape growled behind her. She felt an arm pull her roughly against him and his other wrapped around her shoulders. His hand found her mouth and covered it before she could yelp her protest. In a rush of panic, Hermione realised that her feet had left the shingle. She was being carried through the night air, just over the surface of the breaking waves, hidden from the distant doorway by the cover of the rocks. It was only a few seconds later that Snape deposited them both on a wide ledge high up in the cliff, overlooking the haliwinkle colony.

As soon as his flying spell was released, he let go of her mouth. Below her, the rocky beach looked a long way down. She caught her breath in gulps. The calming draught she'd taken did not seem to be working anymore. She considered yelling for help, trying to attract the attention of the newcomer, but knew that the sound of the wind and the sea would drown out her voice. They were wreathed in shadow up here against the dark rocks. Hermione wondered whether Snape had been here all the time, right from the moment she'd set foot in the habitat. She decided he probably had, watching, waiting. Sneering.

Snape Disillusioned them both, just like in the DADA lesson. He kept one arm around her, holding her against him like he was worried she'd go throwing herself off the ledge. After so many fantasies of Severus Snape's body close to hers, Hermione could only acknowledge that context was everything. This half-embrace was not sexy in the remotest way.

"I don't—...I'm—...what are you doing?" she gasped. Her heart hammered out an allegro beat.

"Shut up," he murmured back. "Watch."

Since she didn't have much choice, she watched. The newcomer wandered further into the habitat. He held up his wand, lit with a powerful Lumos, and didn't care about leaving footprints in the sand. He made straight for the sloping rock where the haliwinkles clustered. Hermione knew when he reached the place because his Lumos blinked out. He stood there and looked at the night sky. Peeping just beyond the horizon was a sliver of the rising full moon.

The man proceeded to set out a box, a sort of trowel-shaped object and a large towel or blanket. He sat down on the towel and checked his wristwatch.

Oh.

Hermione finally emerged from fight-or-flight mode, enough to process these rather obvious clues. For the briefest of instants she felt a powerful rush of abject mortification, before her brain decided to divert that feeling into some kind of emotional holding-area for later attention. Right here, right now, on this cliff ledge, guilt and blame and confusion and explanations were not a priority.

She felt her body let go of its tension. Her breathing and her heart rate began to settle. Snape loosened his grip as he sensed her relaxing. In the blink of an eye, that arm around her stopped being restrictive and became reassuring.

She found herself breathing a slightly hysterical laugh. Then she remembered the edge of the cliff
ledge she currently occupied, and how worryingly close it was. She pressed backwards, leaning against Snape, almost dizzy with sensation as relief and a much-missed sense of trust swept over her.

She watched the man down on haliwinkle-rock. When the round moon had emerged in full from the horizon he eased himself up from his towel and began to pick snails from the surface of the rock, depositing each one in his box. Hermione counted them in. The recipe for De Morte Magicae called for eleven. He collected fifteen.

The man packed up and stowed his kit in a satchel-style bag. He looked around for a moment, then he hopped down from the rock and strode back up towards the door in the distant cliff-face. As soon as she saw the door open and the man step through, she turned around on that narrow ledge. Snape's Disillusionment charm fell away.

"It wasn't you," Hermione said.

"No," he replied.

"You're not the thief."

"Obviously not."

"Oh thank god," she gushed, as it all caught up with her. "Oh thankyouthankyouthankyou." She couldn't help herself. She grabbed his lapels, hauled him close and pressed a firm kiss on his mouth.

He didn't respond. She pulled away and opened her eyes. Snape was frowning.

"Is this really the time and the place?" he asked, and glanced over towards the distant door in the cliff face.

"Sorry." But in the wake of that surge of grateful relief, ideas were beginning to tumble into place. "Hang on," she said. "If you aren't here to steal haliwinkles then wh–"

"Later." He arched a brow. "Or shall we let him get away?"

"Right! We have to follow him."

"I will follow him," he replied sternly. "You will go home."

"Bugger off."

"Hermione–" Snape met her defiant eyes, but it seemed that whatever rage had been in him these last weeks was already gone. He shook his head. "Very well. Hold on."

"For the record, I don't like flying."

"Stay here, then."

"I didn't m–"

Snape gave an eye-roll as he interrupted, "Just close your eyes and shut up."

His voice was impatient, but Hermione noticed that he didn't object to the way she dropped her forehead against his shoulder when their feet left the ledge.
Snape handed her Joseph's wand as soon as they were out of the habitat and into the corridor. A pair of swift Tergeos removed sand and seawater from their footwear. Snape declined sharing the cloak, probably because it would turn their mutual passage into something of a three-legged race. He Disillusioned, she wrapped up, and they hurried along after snail-man.

They were holding hands through the enchanted fabric of the cloak. Obviously they were doing this to keep a track of each other.

They caught up with snail-man when they reached the antechamber. He had paused to exchange a word with 'Tobes' the Storekeep, thereby proving that he was also a staff member. He seemed relaxed and confident. Hermione and Snape paused just inside the antechamber, then edged around the perimeter of the room while the two wizards chatted.

Hermione realised she knew snail-man's voice. It was the same one she'd heard through Snape's amplification charm, in conversation with Joseph Montague. In fact, she recalled Gloria telling her that one of Joseph's friends had been a no-show at the Leaky on the evening they'd planned to meet up. And hadn't the tormentil been stolen that weekend? That had to have happened late on Sunday, since Joseph had only noticed on the Monday morning.

It seemed so obvious, now she thought about it. Three other people had known where Joseph Montague, self-appointed protector of the long-term storage level, was going to be at seven o'clock on that Sunday evening. Only one of them had been keen to use Joseph's absence to snatch some potions ingredients. She'd been so distracted by Snape's encounter with Joseph that she'd failed to pay attention to the events occurring simultaneously at the hospital.

A better investigator would have put those clues together days ago. In any case, it would seem that the thief was none other than Joseph Montague's drinking buddy.

"Oh, by the way," snail-man said to the Storekeep. "Seen Joseph?"

"Not today. Think he'd gone home by the time my shift started."

"Huh."

"Why?"

"Thought I saw his wand was active."

"What, right now?"

"About half an hour ago, when I checked."

The Storekeep shook his head. "No sign of him out here. No one's been down since Graham came on a potions-run from Creatures."

Snail-man shook his head. "Must have misread the records." He sniffed. "See you, then. Hope it isn't a long night."

"How could it be when I have all this fun stock-taking to do?" the Storekeep said. "Night, Gus."

Snail-man, now better known as 'Gus' went to the door into the stairwell. Hermione and Snape followed him to the stairs, then up to sub-level one. Hermione wondered whether Gus was much of a potion brewer, or whether he'd be taking his illicit stash of haliwinkles to someone else.
Annoyingly, her wand was still in the potions lab and she very much wanted to pick it up.

Gus went all the way along the passage to the male changing rooms. He opened the door. Hermione pulled her hand from Snape's; he seemed to be under the impression that she balked at intruding on a private male space because she heard the tiniest of exasperated huffs before Snape slipped inside the closing doorway.

Hermione speed-walked back to the potions lab, paying rather less attention to her footstep fluidity than when last she'd been here. She entered the room, dashed over to the blackboard, grabbed her wand and immediately felt better. Walking away from it earlier had been an unfathomably difficult thing to do.

She tucked Joseph's wand safely into her arm-sheath and kept a hold of her own wand. The graze on her hand drew her attention, but it was no longer bleeding so she decided to ignore it. She hesitated and then lifted up her sweatshirt to peer down at the dressing she had pressed over her cursed wound. The sides were peeling thanks to that dunking in the sea. She scowled at it, tried to press it back into place, scowled harder when it failed to stick at the top and flopped down to dangle from the one tiny spot where it remained sticky enough to cling. She tutted and ripped it off, took it round to the disposal hatch and chucked the damn thing. If the wound was going to bleed all over her top, so be it. At least she was wearing black.

She checked the cloak was in place and then left the lab to return to the door to the male changing rooms. After only a minute or so the doorway was pulled open and Gus emerged, still carrying his satchel, this time with a charcoal-grey topcoat of rather fine wool over his clothing, surprisingly Muggle-like. Hermione watched the closing door for a shimmer of heat-haze, swept a tentative invisible arm at the gap, wondered about whispering 'Severus?' and decided against. This was too important. She couldn't lose Gus now; she needed to know where he was taking those snails. Priority number one had to be finding out who the hell it was they had to stop.

Gus walked back to the stairwell, ignoring the potions lab, and went through the door. Behind him, Hermione tried to keep the stairwell door open for a few more seconds in case Snape was trying to catch up before giving up and following Gus upstairs to the reception. The Welcome Witch who'd been startled by Hermione's invisible arrival earlier offered the man a cheerful good-night wave. Gus went to the main door that would deposit him outside on New Oxford Street.

What could she do, but follow? It seemed it was all up to her, now.

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It was late in the evening. The shoppers – tourists, mainly – who had cluttered Oxford and Regent Streets during the afternoon had long since gone home, but truckloads of office workers had made their way here to enjoy the pubs and the nightlife.

At least they were in the middle of that slight lull before kicking-out-time came along at eleven. Hermione was able to keep Gus's woollen coat and close-cropped dark hair in view as he made his way along the pavement, apparently heading for Tottenham Court Road.

Damn it, what the hell had happened to Snape? It was hard to imagine Gus the snail-man somehow managing to get the better of him. Perhaps if the presence of the haliwinkles had disrupted Snape's casting, though...

She shook her head. As much as she wanted to rush back to the hospital and check the changing rooms, her priority had to be the snails. With that box of haliwinkles, Gus – or his buyer – could do immeasurable harm.
Gus looked around before disappearing down the steps into the tube station. Hermione almost forgot herself, shrouded as she was in Harry's invisibility cloak, as she stared after him. She could count on one hand the number of wizards and witches she knew who were comfortable using Muggle public transport. She could only guess that Gus was either Muggle-born or very well briefed. (And, looking at that coat he was wearing, well paid.) In any case, if he had some distance to go then public transport was his only option. He couldn't Apparate or Floo while he carried those magic-deadening haliwinkles in his satchel.

She gave an invisible shrug and went down the steps after him.

Gus had what looked like a one-day travel card ready. He fed the ticket into the barrier and strolled through like he'd done so a hundred times. Hermione had no such ticket, nor did she have the time to stop and purchase one. She looked to the side of the barriers, where a guard stood next to the larger door which accommodated people with luggage. The glass door stood open as the guard chatted with a cleaner. She thanked her good fortune and nipped through.

Busy underground stations were not a good place to try to remain undetected beneath a cloak of invisibility. But what could she do? If she found a place to rip her cloak off then she was just a passenger on the tube without a ticket. And if she lost Gus, then he'd deliver this final ingredient for one of the most despicable potions she had ever encountered to whoever was psychotic enough to brew it. She couldn't let that happen.

Descending to the tunnels, the stairs were not as busy as the escalators on either side, so she skipped down them, keeping Gus's head and shoulders in view. He made for the Northern Line and chose the northbound platform. The next train was due in only a minute, and Hermione could already feel the warm, dusty rush of air that preceded its arrival. Gus walked down the platform, finding a place clear of other travellers. Hermione did her best to follow, ducking a shoulder here and swerving there.

He paused just before the train appeared, and looked over his shoulder. He tried to do so casually but she knew he was searching for anyone following. She was glad of her cloak then, as his eyes skipped over the place where she stood. He gave a small, satisfied smile before he stepped up towards the nearest train doors as they trundled to a halt.

Hermione got on the train too. She found a corner to stand in, away from other passengers. Gus sat quietly, hugging his satchel to his chest, apparently in quite the reverie. Hermione watched and wondered where they were going.

When the train drew in to Chalk Farm Gus disembarked. This station wasn't nearly so busy as Tottenham Court Road had been; Hermione found the act of tailing easier. As was common in the smaller tube stations of an evening, the larger barrier stood open, no guard present, though Gus fastidiously used the ticket-feed anyway. He left the station and crossed the road, then took a left hand turn up a street called Bridge Approach. The pedestrian bridge this street led to crossed several railway tracks. Gus walked across.

There were few people around here, though a group had gathered outside a pub on the other side of the bridge. Hermione was glad of her soft shoes. She followed at a safe distance, keeping one eye on what was behind her as well as on Gus.

Just past the pub, Gus crossed the road and took a right turn. Hermione noted the street name: Regent's Park Road. She realised they had come back on themselves and were some way north of Regent's Park. Primrose Hill, probably, though her north London geography wasn't as good as her south.
Gus walked along the road for a short way then stopped at a narrow gate: wrought iron, painted black, hung between square brick pillars. He opened the gate in such a way that made it obvious he had been here before, then – annoyingly – he closed it behind himself and trotted up the path to a whitewashed Georgian terraced house beyond.

The gate had made quite the rusty-metal grind of protest when he'd used it. Hermione knew she couldn't do the same. A quick glance revealed a low brick wall that supported the gate's matching railings, however, and so she sheathed her wand alongside Joseph's and hefted herself up to stand on the top of the wall. She peered down the pathway. This close to central London, the evenings never got all that dark, so she could see the way Gus ignored the heavy front door of the terrace and turned instead to his left. His head and shoulders remained visible for a moment behind a bit of shrubbery then dropped out of sight.

Basement flat, then. And in a pricey area, too, this close to Regent's Park. Was the place his, or his employer's?

Hermione looked at the spiky-topped railings, then at the nice, flat-topped pillar beside the gate. She hoisted herself up so she was sitting on the pillar, swung her legs over the railings and then dropped down as quietly as she could. Now she'd found where Gus was going, she wasn't really sure what to do. Should she get back and report the location to MLE along with her suspicions about the hate potion and the De Morte Magicae? Or should she hang on, see if she could peer inside, see if she recognised anyone else here?

She was wearing a magic cloak, wasn't she? Another bit of undercover work was in order, she decided. As a precaution, she unsheathed her wand again, just in case she needed to make a hasty exit.

She crept forward. The small garden to the front of the property had been planted with various low-lying shrubs surrounding a large monkey-puzzle tree. She picked her way over to the path, begging her own body to refrain from indulging in another bout of clumsiness.

Hermione jumped when a light came on just below where she was standing. It took her a moment to remember that she was not relying on darkness and shadow to conceal herself. She inched forward to the railings that surrounded some concrete steps leading down to the basement flat entrance. The front door had no glass panels in it, but a window looked out on to the less-than-appealing steps and dustbin-area. The electric light was on in the room beyond. Hermione hunkered down to try to see inside. She couldn't quite get the angle, so she risked a few steps down and tried again.

Gus was in there, on his own. Did that mean he was waiting for someone to meet him? Was this his place, and his buyer was coming here? She looked over her shoulder nervously, then she moved further down the steps and tried to get a handle on what Gus was doing.

He was...he was on the phone. On the bloody telephone. Telling his buyer that yes, he'd got the magic snails? Why would a wizard who wanted to brew a powerful potion talk to his supplier on the phone? Hermione could name a dozen witches and wizards off the top of her head who wouldn't even know what a telephone was.

What the hell was going on?

Gus was nodding away, animated. In his free hand he lifted something to look more closely at it: something leaflet-shaped. A take-away menu? Because it looked like a take-away menu. Was being a psychotic maniac truly such hungry work?
So what should she do now? Try to break in? Wait to see who else arrived, or if there was someone else already in the flat? Give it up and take her report to the Montagues, and let them sort it out from here? Go straight to Shacklebolt or maybe Jasmine Churlish, lay it all out for them, see what they thought?

Find Severus Snape?

God, she wanted to find Snape. What the hell had happened at the hospital to separate them? It wasn't right that she was here on her own, not so soon after they'd found each other again. Mind you, she still wanted to know what he'd been doing in the coastal habitat, being all tall and scary and threatening for those few frantic minutes before–

Behind her, the gate groaned. Hermione gasped and turned to skip up the steps. Her earlier begging seemed to have paid off, because Harry's cloak decided on this one occasion not to twist itself around her legs or get caught under a heel. She made it clear of the steps before the newcomer arrived, and she found a place to stand, holding her breath, as a man approached.

He was of barely average height, with dark hair and brooding good looks marred by a prominent scar over his left eye.

Poster-boy. Or as Harry had called him, 'Scarface'.

Hermione watched with an open mouth as he went down the steps. It would seem that her two big projects of the last few weeks were connected after all. She heard rather than saw the man bang on the flat's front door. The door was answered. Low voices. She wanted to edge closer, but she was worried about giving her presence away. Gus had struck her as a hired hand, nothing much to be scared of, but the man with the scar had proved his care and meticulous planning. He was the one in charge here.

A voice, slightly accented, grew louder, apparently in anger. "No, Boris stays at the Ministry – she might go back there. But it has to be tonight. If we need to force him then it's your wand."

Hermione blinked as she tried to make sense of this information. Moments later, the door slammed on the two men.

Damn it, what should she do? What could she do?

Her indecision was rendered moot a moment later. Her wand lit up beneath Harry's cloak with a strong yellow flare, and it began to vibrate with a buzz of alarm. It took her a moment of wide-eyed staring before she remembered what this meant.

Her parents were in trouble.

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"All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* 1875

Hermione's first thought was to Apparate to Banstead.

Her second thought was that the men in the basement flat, one of whom had opened the door and was now shouting up the steps demanding to know who was there, might be about to brew that horrific potion.

Her third thought was that someone needed to stop them: someone who wouldn't ask her to sit down and take the time to explain. Someone who'd do what she asked, no questions, no delays.

Someone who'd do anything in the world to help her.

So she Apparated to Islington and raced around to the front door of Grimmauld Place. Trying so hard to be fast hampered her every move; she struggled to fit her key in the lock. She was becoming increasingly panicked. How long had her wand been flaring yellow? Maybe twenty seconds?

Her key finally turned and she flung herself through the front door. "Harry!" she yelled.

Pounding footsteps, coming up from the kitchen. Harry appeared, looked around, looked confused. Hermione remembered the cloak. She yanked the hood back. He yelped. Ron appeared behind him.

She didn't let either of them speak. "Two hundred and three, Regent's Park Road," she said. "The basement flat. Say it!"

Harry didn't hesitate. "Two hundred and three, Regent's Park Road. Basement."

"Get there as soon as. There's a man called Gus who works at St Mungo's, and there's the man from the posters. Keep an eye on them. *Don't* be seen. I think they're dangerous. They're about to—"

She stopped. Arriving behind Harry and Ron was Severus Snape, wearing the kind of annoyed expression that Hermione had come to recognise he wore only when he was worried. His appearance here, in her home – a place where she was not used to seeing him – threw her.

"Damn it, I haven't got time for this!" she cried. She pushed her right arm out of the cloak and brandished her flaring wand at Harry.

Harry's eyes widened. His mouth fell open.

"Shit!" Ron said. "Someone's at your mum and dad's!"

"I've got to go!" Hermione looked at the three of them in turn, begging someone to make the
decision she could not.

Snape pushed past Harry and Ron. He took one look at Hermione's frantic face and then spun back. "Potter, contact the MLE Patrol desk and report a sighting of their wanted man at the address Hermione just gave you."

"They'll scarper!" Hermione protested. "If they see Aurors then they'll disappear and we'll lose them!"

"Doesn't matter," Snape said. "I've got the haliwinkles."

Ron snorted a laugh, immediately followed by, "Sorry. Sounded funny."

Harry said, "Ron, with me." He turned to Hermione. "We'll get it done. Patronus me if you need us in Banstead. Snape..."

"Thank you, Potter, but I don't need direction from you." Snape grabbed Hermione's disembodied hand, wand and all, and pulled her out of the house. He Disillusioned them both as he did so. "Where do you Apparate?"

"Um – round here." She tugged him around to the side alley. "I'll have to Side-Along you."

"I know. Which is why you're going to take three deep breaths first."

He dropped the Disillusionment, pulled her in close. Hermione breathed deep, in through her nose, out through her mouth. For a handful of suspended seconds, all she could see was Severus Snape's dark eyes studying her own.

On her third exhale, she nodded. "Hold tight," she whispered, and moved them across Greater London to Banstead.

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The rear outside lights came on as they arrived. At the same moment, Hermione's wand coughed up a red flare. She was on the verge of racing for the house when she recalled that Severus Snape was with her and he owned a wand she had not yet defined as 'safe'.

"I need your wand," she said.

"Why?"

"So my security system knows you're a friend." But even as she said it, she realised she was being an idiot. Severus Snape was not the kind of man who simply relinquished his–

"Very well," he said, and presented his wand across the open palm of his hand.

"Um – it's okay, you can hang on to it." Hermione shook off the surprise and turned away to cast with her own wand. She cancelled the alarm, then she cast the charm she'd so far used only for Harry and Ron, then she touched the tip of her wand to Snape's. A tiny surge of magic acknowledged that the charm had worked. She nodded, then cast again, this time resetting the alarm system. As soon as she had, her wand flared back into life.

The alarm was still red. She looked frantically at the house, preparing to run.

"You're currently holding two wands," Snape reminded her.
Damn it, she'd forgotten about Joseph's wand, strapped in her arm-sheath. She hastily drew it out and handed it off to Snape in order to repeat the process. When she was done, she tucked Joseph's wand away, then she reset the alarm system once again.

Her wand flared yellow. There was still time. She looked at her own disembodied arm and unwrapped the invisibility cloak from her body. There was no need to terrify her parents more than necessary.

A noise drew her attention to the house. "Hermione?" Her father stood at the open patio doors, looking out into the back garden. He was in his dressing gown. "Is that you?"

Hermione had lost track of time since she'd found herself trailing Gus through the tube system. She glanced at her watch. It was nearly half past ten: earlier than she'd have guessed. "It's me," she called back. She cancelled the vibration on her wand but left the flare in place. "I've got someone with me."

"Right you are," her dad said. "Um – problem?"

She led Snape across the lawn and up the steps to the patio. As she went, she murmured, "I try not to cast in the house unless it's absolutely necessary. Electronics. But if someone's here to hurt my parents, feel free to blow the telly up if you need to."

Snape grunted his understanding. As they walked, he turned around, scanning the surroundings, watching the rooflines, searching the sky.

She tried to smile reassuringly at her father. "There's an unrecognised wand nearby," she explained. "Remember my spell?"

"Of course. Should we be worried?"

"Not yet. Might be a coincidence. Where's Mum?"

"Upstairs in the bath."

"Go and get her, get yourselves dressed and stay in the bedroom near your Portkeys." Her father nodded, then looked at Snape. "Oh – um, this is Severus. He's here to help."

"Right, then. Um, thank you. I'll – I'll go and get your mother." Her father retreated across the sitting room and disappeared out into the hall.

Hermione went inside and turned the lights off, then opened the blinds so she could see out to the front of the house. She peered into the dimly lit cul-de-sac. Nothing was moving. She went back to the patio doors, closed them up tight. The lights were still on in the back garden; she didn't know how long it would be before they timed themselves off again. Snape, meanwhile, had moved out into the hall. She assumed he was getting the lay of the land.

Half a minute or so passed as she watched from the window, one eye on the flare from her wand, Harry's cloak still bundled up awkwardly over her left arm. Upstairs she heard her mother leave the bathroom for the bedroom, exchanging low, worried words with her dad. The door closed behind them.

"What's wrong with your shoulder?" Snape asked.

She startled. She hadn't heard him come back in to the sitting room. Then she looked down at where she'd been pressing against the throb of her cursed wound. "Oh. Nothing new. Just missed
my appointment earlier."

He huffed understanding. There was a pause. He went to the patio doors and checked the back garden, then returned. "Will the alarm stop if the wand moves away?" he asked.

"Yes. Otherwise it's yellow for three hundred metres. Red for one hundred."

"Metres?" he asked with a raised brow. The magical world hadn't yet moved on from imperial measurements, of course. Hermione tended to mix and match the systems she used, depending on where she was and whom she was speaking to.

"Easiest scale to use on a modern OS map," she explained.

"Does the spell inform how many wands approach?"

"No. It won't distinguish between wands unless I charm them as friendly."

"So there could be one, or many."

"Yes."

He nodded understanding. "How did you design the spell?"

She grimaced. "Necessity. Mother of invention."

Her wand flared red.

"Oh god," she whispered. A deep breath. "Right then. 'Scuse me." She walked past him and called up the stairs. "Mum, Dad, we've got incoming." The upstairs bedroom door opened and her father appeared, still doing up his shirt buttons. "Might be hostile, might not. Stay up there. Try to keep the bed between yourself and the window, and stay low down, just in case. The second you hear anything scary, use the Portkeys. We'll come to find you at the Burrow when it's all clear."

"What about you?" her father demanded. His face was tense with conflict: a father's need to protect versus an intelligent man's awareness that he could not. "Sweetheart—"

"I'm far from helpless, Dad," she told him, shoulders back, chin up. "And I'm not alone."

Snape moved past her and went three steps up the staircase. "Your daughter will come to no harm this night, Mr Granger," he said calmly. He turned his back so he could face the front door, wand readied.

"Please, Dad. Do as I say. Later on you can mock me for being a bossy-boots."

Her father tried to smile for her, nodded, then closed the bedroom door again. Hermione heard her mother's muffled voice raised in distress. She did her best to shut out the sound and looked at Snape, at the way he had positioned himself as the last line of defence between whoever was coming and her parents. Something tightened in her throat that was partly gratitude and partly shame. Not so very long ago she'd been quite convinced that this man was capable of genuine evil.

Snape glanced her way, saw her looking, frowned at the attention.

"I've got some serious apologising to do, haven't I?" she said.

"Perhaps not right now," he suggested.
"Yes. Good point." She nodded. "Will you take the cloak? Whoever's coming might expect me here but they definitely won't expect you."

Snape reached down and took the bundle that she passed up. He shook the cloak out and wrapped it around himself. His reassuring presence disappeared from view.

Hermione turned to face the front door. She began to check herself for any of the warning symptoms that preceded a panic attack, then immediately forced herself to stop, knowing that the more she worried about such things, the more likely they were to appear. Her wand-hand was steady, at least. She wondered how this would start. A blasting curse? A broken window? A sneaky Alohomora? She bit her lip as the tension mounted. Outside, she could hear footsteps approaching. She cancelled the alarm flare, checked the door to the sitting room was shut and then cast her most powerful shield spell. Behind her she heard Snape do the same.

They were ready. Hermione visualised the body-bind curse's wandwork. It had worked for her in the past. She strained to listen, hoping for a clue regarding this attacker's hostile spell of choice.

A moment of heavy silence...

...and then the doorbell rang.

It took her a moment to process what it meant. She'd been expecting drama and violence, not absolute mundanity. She moved cautiously to the front door and leaned in to look through the spy-hole. In the darkness beyond she could see only a single figure: a woman, she thought. She raised her wand, switched on the hallway light and then positioned her body behind the door as she pulled it open.

The woman who stood on the doorstep was possessed of the kind of beauty that diminished everything around her. Her skin was flawless, her proportions perfect, her symmetry exact. She was of Afro-Caribbean descent, and looked to be in her late forties. She wore a long, sweeping cloak; her wand was held ready in her hand.

As she registered Hermione's presence, her eyebrows lifted. "Miss Granger," the woman said in urgent tones. "Good. That will save time." She turned away and looked over her shoulder, scanning the cul-de-sac as though expecting a pursuer, then she turned back. "We need to get inside."

"Do we now?" Hermione said. The woman's anxiety was catching; Hermione found herself watching the road beyond the driveway for movement.

"Yes! I will explain, but not out here!" The woman looked like she was all but ready to surge past Hermione, good manners be damned. Instead she shot another nervous look over her shoulder.

Hermione considered. The woman had yet to introduce herself, but Hermione recognised her from a picture she'd seen two weeks ago in the Daily Prophet: Jossinia Trelore, Blaise Zabini's mother. The woman had no known association with Death Eaters, but she moved in pure-blood circles. She also had seven dead husbands and the kind of reputation professional widowhood earned you. When you considered the character traits you'd like in your house guests, such things did not come top of the list.

A car drove past the distant junction of the cul-de-sac, briefly illuminating the street with its headlights. Trelore gasped and turned around, wand levelled, then got her reactions back under control.
"Miss Granger, please! Time is very short!"

"Sheathe your wand," Hermione said. "Then you can come in."

Mrs Trelore's eyes widened in momentary anger, before her desire for shelter overwhelmed her desire to dismiss the Muggle-born teenager's request. She sheathed her wand and opened her arms in a gesture of peace. "I mean no one here any harm," she said.

Hermione stood aside and allowed Trelore through the front door. The woman tossed one more look over her shoulder, came inside and sighed relief when the door was closed.

"How did you get this address?" Hermione demanded, wand still to hand, shield spell still active. She had to work hard not to look at the place on the stairs where Snape watched and listened.

Trelore blinked at her as if confused by the question. "I...take it you know who I am?"

"You're Blaise's mother."

"I am." Trelore frowned. "You did hear me when I said time is short?"

"Then you'd better hurry up and tell me where you got this address."

Trelore sighed impatiently. "From Narcissa Malfoy. She is one of my oldest friends."

Hermione swallowed. This was not remotely reassuring. "A Malfoy sent you here. How the hell did she get this address?"

Trelore looked exasperated. "I did not come here to be interrogated, Miss Granger!" She reached into a pocket of her cloak, stopped when Hermione's wand was lifted warningly, then slowly drew out a piece of parchment. "Your parents' address is written on here. Narcissa gave it to me as an aide-mémoire."

Hermione scanned the parchment. Her parents' name and address was indeed written at the top. Beneath it, however, were a list of other addresses, many scratched out.

Suddenly she felt very, very cold.

"This is a copy of Dolohov's kill-list," she said dully.

"It's what?" Trelore sounded genuinely confused.

"This list. The original was found on the dead body of Antonin Dolohov, a senior Death Eater."

She'd seen the list before. This one had to be the result of a duplication charm. She'd shown another copy to her parents in Australia, to convince them of the very real danger they'd been in before she'd altered their memories and sent them to safety. She'd returned that copy to MLE evidence once it had served its purpose. She'd never wanted to look at the damn thing again.

It was a sickening notion that duplications still existed, scattered around, in the hands of people with close associations to the Death Eaters.

"Narcissa Malfoy gave you this," Hermione pressed.

"Yes. She said that when I met with you, I should show it to you. It would explain how I'd tracked you down. What of it?"

"Congratulations. You've just been used to deliver a threat." Hermione glared at the woman,
anger making her tremble more than fear could have done. "I mean, seriously? Did you even think? You come here late at night, after learning this address from the wife of a prominent Death Eater." She held up the list and pointed. "This is a list of Muggle families. The ones who had the audacity to produce a Muggle-born witch or wizard. See all these other addresses? The ones with the lines through them?" Hermione pushed the list closer, and Trelore flinched. "Those are dead people, Mrs Trelore." She dropped her hand to her side, still clutching that parchment, looking with fury at the startled woman. "And you brought this filthy piece of paper into my parents' home?"

"I...didn't realise," Trelore said.

"What did you think it was?"

"I did not ask! Nor did I care! Miss Granger, I appreciate that your family has known some difficulties in recent times, but I came here tonight seeking your assistance."

A pause. Hermione tried to get her anger under control.

"When you arrived, you were looking over your shoulder," she said. "Do you believe you were followed here?"

"I do not know. Maybe. I came from Normandy, via Wimborne and then the Knight Bus – I could have been seen. But if I was followed, the danger is to me."

"Right. Because there's no such thing as collateral damage." She sighed. "Why are you here, Mrs Trelore?"

"I am in some trouble. I need assistance. Narcissa suggested you were a good person to ask."

Hermione looked at the parchment in her hand, then thrust it back to Mrs Trelore. "Thank you, but I'm entirely aware of why Mrs Malfoy sent you here."

"Damn it, girl, I am not here to hurt you!" Trelore pocketed the list without looking at it. "Even if I wanted to, I don't have the time. Somebody tried to abduct me from my own home, earlier this evening. My son has been missing for six days, and I fear for his safety. I've been subjected to any number of attempted poisonings over the last two months, and my fiancé has received death threats. Is that enough to convince you? Why would I add to my problems by harassing the family of Hermione Granger, celebrated member of the Golden Trio and close personal friend of the Acting Minister himself?"

It was at this moment that Snape decided he was fed up with being an invisible spectator to the conversation. With an impatient huff he flicked the cloak back as far as his shoulders.

Trelore turned at the noise and gasped with shock at the sight of his disembodied head. She clasped a slender, manicured hand to her chest and caught her breath. "Severus Snape," she said.

"Madam," he acknowledged. He turned to Hermione. "I do not believe Mrs Trelore intends you or your parents harm."

"Dolohov's list!" Hermione pointed out.

"Is a very unpleasant piece of parchment, but it is still just parchment. I am more concerned about other nearby threats."

Hermione nodded. "Me too."
Snape moved down the stairs. He paused beside Trelore. "Madam, your wand."

"What?" Trelore said.

"Your wand. Miss Granger is entirely justified in feeling threatened and angry by the manner of your arrival. You will go some way towards reassuring her if you surrender your wand. Merely for the duration of your visit, of course."

Trelore's shoulders went back. "I am unaccustomed, sir, to being spo–"

"No doubt, Madam. Would you like me to spend a few minutes offering softer and more eloquent arguments? Or would you like me to go and check whether you were followed here?"

Trelore swallowed. Once again, her nerves outweighed her outrage. She unsleeved her wand and handed it off to Snape.

"Thank you," he said politely, secreting it up his own sleeve. He glanced at Hermione, then strode up to the front door, flicking the invisibility cloak back into place.

Mrs Trelore said, "Don't be long!" As his floating head disappeared she turned to Hermione. "That's the very man I wanted to see!"

There was a brief pause, presumably because Snape had been as surprised by this remark as Hermione was herself. Then the front door opened and closed quietly.

Hermione gave a sigh. "Right. I have no idea what's going on, but for now – Mrs Trelore, my parents are upstairs, and they await my assurance that they do not have to flee their home. Would you please give me a moment?"

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While Snape was out doing a sweep of the nearby area, Hermione's parents decided they were unhappy with the notion of her remaining alone with their unexpected visitor. They came downstairs, exchanged stilted greetings with Mrs Trelore, then went into the kitchen to make some tea. Hermione insisted they kept their Portkeys close by.

She took Trelore into the dining room, mainly to keep an eye on her parents through the arch into the kitchen. The two women sat down together at the table. Hermione looked at Jossinia Trelore's straight back in the fitted robes she wore beneath her cloak. She looked at the way Trelore's dark hair was pulled into a silvered clasp, accentuating her shapely cheekbones. She looked at the perfect application of eye make-up and the bow-shape of Trelore's upper lip.

Hermione considered her own appearance. She wore old, dark clothing that had been dumped in seawater and then Tergeo'd dry, leaving streaks of salt on the faded material. Her hair had suffered the same dowsing and likely needed some attention to tame it into its ponytail again. Next to Jossinia Trelore, Hermione had never felt scruffier. Or lumpier. Or more unkempt.

"I apologise," Trelore said stiffly, after an awkward pause in which she'd clapped her hands on the dining table and then proceeded to fidget. "I did not intend to cause you distress this evening. I knew a late visit would be unsettling for your parents, but I intended only to ask them how I might contact you."

"If your goal was to speak to Professor Snape, I'm puzzled as to why you came looking for me." She frowned at her comment. "I mean to say – I know why Mrs Malfoy sent you here. I'm just not sure how she managed to convince you that it was a good idea."
Mrs Trelore shrugged. "Severus Snape is not an easy person to get hold of. Neither are you, for that matter. You both occupy homes protected by Fidelius Charm, or so Narcissa told me." A pause. "Was that not true?"

"I can't speak for the professor, but yes, my home is secret-kept. Though I can be owled quite readily at the Ministry or St Mungo's," Hermione said, adding pointedly, "as, indeed, can Professor Snape."

Trelorde shook her head. "The earliest you might have seen such a message was tomorrow morning. After today's events, I could not afford to wait."

"Owls will find a recipient without an address, if the situation requires them to," Hermione pointed out. She was reminded of several cold and lonely hours she'd spent in Australia's Northern Territory, back in June, which had been interrupted by the arrival of an owl.

"Indeed they will," Trelorde acknowledged, "and I'd have made use of this service were it not for the fact that Professor Snape habitually uses a masking charm to render himself untraceable. According to Narcissa, anyway."

Hermione had to admit that this rang true for Snape. She'd used such charms herself, back when she and Harry and Ron had been on the run. Still, it did not explain how Mrs Malfoy had convinced Mrs Trelore that the easiest way to contact Snape was through Hermione Granger. "So, just to be clear – you came here to my parents in order to get a message to me, in order for me to get a message to Professor Snape? Do I have this correct?"

"When you put it like that, it sounds rather convoluted," Trelorde conceded. "Narcissa's advice was sound, however. I expected only your parents and now...I have the entire set."

"Hmm."

Trelorde cleared her throat, rather delicately. "Miss Granger, might I ask why Severus Snape is here with you, so late at night?"

Hermione blew her cheeks out, thinking about the way Snape had appeared like a miracle behind the boys at Grimmauld Place. "Serendipity," she said with a half-smile.

"Excuse me?"

She pulled herself together. "This house is protected by a magical alarm system. Any potential threat sends a signal to my wand. You triggered that system by coming here. On receiving the alarm, I dropped what I was doing and Apparated home so I could notify my friend Harry of where I was going. The professor happened to be with him. He decided to accompany me."

"And why was he hiding himself away when the doorbell rang?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Dolohov's kill-list? Remember? I have learned not to give wand-bearing callers the benefit of the doubt."

Trelorde blinked. "Ah. Yes."

Hermione sighed hard. "Mrs Trelore, I have no idea what insinuations Mrs Malfoy might have made regarding Professor Snape–"

"She made none," Trelorde hurriedly put in. "She reminded me only of what is a matter of public record – that you were present at the hospital during the attempt on Snape's life earlier this year."
That you are his student, and your shared experiences during the war have probably facilitated a closer understanding.

Hermione nodded. "Mrs Malfoy knows well how to conceal a lie within truths."

"As I have said, I was not aware of her...agenda, in this."

"Oh, I'm sure the opportunity to terrorise my family was irresistible to her. Mrs Malfoy despises me. I am Muggle-born, and therefore lowest of the low. I have consistently outdone her son academically, in spite of my poor, tainted blood. She holds me partly responsible for her husband's downfall and her sister's death, perhaps arguing that I somehow provoked Bellatrix into torturing me and Lucius into watching." She felt her voice rising, looked cautiously to the muted bustle of her parents out in the kitchen, and stopped.

"And yet Narcissa lied to the Dark Lord himself in order to help Potter," Trelore said.

"Only after Harry told her Draco was still alive." Hermione smiled grimly. "Slytherins are all about the *quid pro quo*." 

"I wouldn't know," Mrs Trelore said. "I was in Hufflepuff."

Hermione was taken aback. "You were?"

Trelore gave a small smile. "You expected otherwise?"

"I'm...aware that Slytherin students usually have parents who were Slytherins too."

"I'm sure that's true." Trelore looked up at the archway into the kitchen; Hermione's father was bringing in a tea tray. "The Sorting Hat found that my loyalty and patience outweighed my ambition, however. At least when I was eleven."

Hermione smiled at her father. "Thanks, Dad. Are you and Mum okay?"

"We're fine, love." Alan Granger glanced at Mrs Trelore, then back at his daughter. "I suppose if we're going to get an unexpected visitor late at night, having to make a pot of tea is one of the better outcomes to hope for." He touched her shoulder and squeezed. "Do you need us to stay where you can see us, or can we be trusted to wait in the sitting room? If we promise to be quiet?"

Hermione smirked. "You're mocking me now, aren't you?"

"Well, you did insist. Bossy-boots."

Hermione reached up and patted her father's hand. "Make yourselves comfortable. Everything is fine."

Her dad leaned over her and kissed the top of her head. "Shout if you need anything," he murmured. He might have been powerless in a magical stand-off but he was still her father. He left the dining room, and he and Hermione's mother went through the kitchen to the hall, disappearing from view. 

Hermione poured some tea. As she did so, she noticed Mrs Trelore frowning in thought, occasionally glancing over to the kitchen.

Given the woman's marital history, perhaps she was unfamiliar with the behaviour of a good father.

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Snape came back to the house after a ten minute absence. He shed the invisibility cloak and draped it over a spare dining chair. At her questioning look he shook his head: he had discovered no lurking threats. Once he'd seated himself at the dining table he poured himself a cup of tea from the pot.

Trelore seemed less sure of herself now. Severus Snape was good at doing that to people.

"Mrs Trelore," he began, "you said earlier that you've experienced a series of problems, culminating in an attempted abduction earlier today – presumably this was the event that sent you to Mrs Malfoy?"

"It was. I knew I needed your help," Trelore said. "And I knew you had a strong connection with the Malfoys. I thought Narcissa could put me in touch with you."

"She could have," Snape said lightly.

Trelore blinked. "Directly?"

"Within seconds, if the matter was urgent."

Trelore frowned at the tabletop. "Then Miss Granger's theory holds water? Narcissa sent me to this house for a reason of her own?"

"I do not doubt it. However, that is not your most pressing problem. Perhaps you should explain what is."

Trelore glanced at Hermione. The look was very much one of wanting the teenager out of the room before the grown-ups spoke of important matters.

Snape gave a small sniff. "Do not worry yourself, Madam – Miss Granger can be the very soul of discretion when necessary." He shot Hermione a glance. "Almost to a fault."

"One of my many. But I strive for improvement," Hermione fired back.

"Naturally."

Snape looked to Mrs Trelore. "Please. Be as candid as you feel you can."

Trelore drew a deep breath and then said:

"I believe someone is trying to kill me. Or to use me in some way to threaten my son."

Snape nodded slowly. Then he said, "Start at the beginning. I suspect context will assist us, here."

"Very well. How far back should I go? I am involved with a Muggle. Philip Richmond. You might have seen a story about us in the Prophet."

"I'm aware of the story. I did not read it. Am I to take it that your courtship underlies the events you describe?"

"Yes. At least, I think so." Trelore considered for a moment, perhaps ordering her thoughts. Hermione noticed a tremor still apparent in the woman's hands. "It began with Blaise. My son was not happy with my choice of suitor."

"Having known Mr Zabini for over seven years," Snape said, "this does not surprise me."

"No doubt. He made his opposition clear early on. I was sorry he did not approve, of course, but I
could not allow that to affect my choices. So he became...sullen. Distant." Trelore sighed heavily. "Even so, when the problems began I didn't want to believe my own suspicions."

"Problems?" Snape prompted.

"I was slipped a libido-diminishing potion," Trelore said. "I suppose eighteen year old boys have a rather single-minded idea of what passes for important within a relationship."

"I see. You discovered this, how?"

"The empty bottle was tossed in the kitchen waste. I have..." Trelore drifted off, frowned, and looked genuinely grief-stricken for the first time that night. "Had. I had a house-elf. Polly. She saw the empty bottle and brought it to my attention." Trelore shot a defiant look at Snape. "Given that my relationship with Philip had not at that point progressed to one of physical intimacy, it hardly mattered."

"How do you know the potion had been given to you, then?" Hermione asked.

Trelore shot her a flat look. "Miss Granger, it is possible to experience feelings of sexual desire without doing anything about them."

Hermione glanced at Snape. He glanced at her. She looked hurriedly away.

"In any case," Trelore went on, "after the libido-diminishing potion, I was then dosed with a forgetfulness potion."

"And it was Blaise, doing this to you? His own mother?" Hermione said, disgusted. "What a prince."

Mrs Trelore seemed to have accepted that Hermione was now a part of the discussion. "I did not want to believe it at the time. It took me over a week before I realised I was being dosed. I began to forget about various rendezvous Philip and I had organised." She shook her head. "But Polly kept saving me. She had an excellent memory for dates and times."

"How long was Blaise slipping you these potions?" Hermione asked.

"I should be clear – I do not have any proof that it was Blaise. Only strong suspicions." She sighed. "But to answer your question, it went on long enough for me to worry I was experiencing symptoms of early onset dementia." Trelore arched a brow Hermione's way. "Very early onset."

"Of course," she said, keeping a straight face.

"At which point I began to use a Wit-Sharpening potion to try to counter the effects."

"Such a potion would not counter a forgetfulness potion," Snape said.

"It would not. But I got lucky. The next thing my poisoner tried was a Befuddlement Draught. And the Wit-Sharpener definitely took the edge off that."

Hermione nodded. Then she frowned. "I can help, there. I saw Blaise. In Jiggers. He was buying Sneezewort and Scurvy Grass. I wondered why he was brewing Befuddlement Draughts."

Snape said, "The evidence against your son appears suggestive, Mrs Trelore."

"I suppose," Trelore said. "Especially when my use of Wit-Sharpening potions allowed me to detect the scent of Sneezewort in the after-dinner coffee Blaise had taken to bringing me."
Snape sniffed. "Rather prosaic, for one of my former Slytherins," he mused. "Disappointing. I take it you decided to cut down on caffeine, after that?"

Trelore nodded. "I did."

"And the next assault on your person?"

Trelore looked briefly self-conscious. "It was, er, something brewed with Celandine."

"Ah. Chelidonium Miniscula," Snape said. "Oft used as a diuretic or purgative."

"Yikes," said Hermione.

Trelore shrugged. "I was rather poorly for a couple of days. Philip sent flowers and a fruit basket, and a card upon which he expressed his concern in iambic pentameter."

Hermione couldn't contain a small chuckle.

"Is something amusing, Miss Granger?" Trelore enquired.

Hermione had been imagining Blaise's face when he learned that his attempt to disgust his mother's boyfriend into abandoning the relationship had resulted in poetry and flowers. "What could possibly be amusing about that?" she deadpanned.

"Hmm. Anyway. After I recovered from my bout of...bed-rest...I thought that I should speak to Blaise about what was going on. He denied all responsibility, of course, though he reiterated his opposition to my courtship. He revealed that he has vivid memories of the loss of my sixth and seventh husbands." Trelore looked straight at Snape. "I'm sure you're aware of my history. I have become something of an infamous figure. 'The Black Widow,' they call me."

"Intriguing and highly evolved creatures," Snape said. "I've been called worse."

"Perhaps. For the record, I had nothing to do with the death of any of my husbands." She winced. "Except for poor old Antal. But I only found out about that long after he'd died." She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. The point is that I am not, actually, the serial murderer that some sections of the wizarding press believe me to be. Blaise told me he remembers the soul-searching I did after I lost Norris. Norris Trelore, that is, whose name I still bear. I had become quite convinced that there was something cursed about me. I vowed never to marry again."

Hermione watched. It was a hell of a performance, as it had to be a performance. An actual curse would have been discovered by MLE years ago. There was no genuine explanation for Mrs Trelore's run of bad luck when it came to husbands, other than her own complicity. Like Wilde said: to lose a husband once was a misfortune; twice looked like carelessness. But seven dead husbands? That definitely equalled homicidal maniac.

"You appear to have discarded this vow," Snape said. "Since Mr Richmond is now your fiancé."

Trelore looked away. "I shouldn't have mentioned that. We agreed to keep the engagement secret until Blaise had come around."

Hermione said, "It seems a touch optimistic to believe that he would."

"Perhaps. In any case, he denied dosing me with the potions, and I could hardly call him a liar. A short time passed. And then one evening three weekends ago I found myself, suddenly and inexplicably, in a state of wild confusion."
Snape tilted his head in interest. "Another Befuddlement Draught?"

"Perhaps, except my Wit-Sharpener was clearly deficient and failed to counter it."

"Maybe one brewed with ashgrass, then?" Hermione suggested.

Snape looked at her. He considered a moment, then nodded. "Possibly."

Trelore sighed. "I asked Blaise, once the confusion wore off. Blaise denied all knowledge, rather angrily. When I was able to pin down where I must have imbibed the potion, however, I had proof he was innocent indeed." She sipped at her tea and then set her cup down; it clinked a little in the saucer as her hands still shook. "On the evening in question, I was in town, at a ball at the Savoy Hotel – the one the Prophet gatecrashed. It promised to be a lovely evening and was, for a while, early on. After an hour or so, I started to feel odd. Then confused. Frightened, even. The feelings were potent – so much so that I was probably well on the way to making rather a public spectacle of myself. Philip, fortunately, recognised my distress and arranged for us to slip away so he could deliver me home safely to Polly's care." Trelore looked up at Snape. "Which means, of course, that Blaise had nothing to do with that particular incident. I can only have been given the potion at the hotel."

Thoughts suddenly racing, Hermione closed her eyes, trying once again to see the hotel footage she'd analysed on her parents' computer. Six foot plus, slender, dark haired before the Polyjuice...could it have been Blaise?

Yes, she decided. It could. Everything fit.

She opened her eyes again. Snape was studying her; he'd noticed her reaction. "You didn't report this incident to MLE," Hermione said, silently berating Kingsley Shacklebolt for failing to recognise that Mrs Trelore should have been questioned about the ball.

"I did not," Mrs Trelore said. "If I had, I would have had to reveal the earlier incidents, which would have landed Blaise in a lot of trouble."

Snape finished the tea in his cup and poured himself another. "Any incidents since then?"

"Yes." Mrs Trelore seemed to hunch into her seat. "Last week I spent an extremely unpleasant afternoon convinced that Philip was somehow unworthy of my affection."

Hermione sat up. Snape offered her only a small nod of acknowledgement.

"It was very odd," Trelore went on. "Philip is a kind man. Generous, compassionate, cheerful, interested. So interested, in everyone and everything. And yet for a short while last Tuesday all I could think of was how narcissistic he could be, how vain, how judgemental." She shook her head in remembrance. "It didn't last long. But it was horrible while it did."

There it was, then. Finally, the appearance of a hate potion. It would appear that they had discovered both the target of the St Mungo's plot and the identity of the tall, dark-haired, less-than-accomplished wizard at the hotel. Jossinia Trelore was the connection between the two investigations, and Hermione had found this out thanks to an inadvertent bit of assistance rendered by Narcissa Malfoy.

"You mentioned your son has gone missing?" Snape asked.

"I didn't know for definite until earlier today," Mrs Trelore said. "He's eighteen years old, and he's headstrong, and there are any number of young ladies only too happy to offer him accommodations
for the night. It would not be the first time he disappeared for a few days." She sighed. "But
today, something else happened."

"Go on."

"It was around half past eight this evening. I returned home after an early dinner with Philip. I was
a little upset because it had not gone well – I was worried about Blaise, and Philip has become
increasingly frustrated by my refusal to report all that has been happening to the authorities."

"Mr Richmond is aware of your magical heritage?" Snape asked.

"Oh yes. He knows," Mrs Trelore said. "When it became clear that what he and I were enjoying
was more than a dalliance, I went to the Ministry and acquired proper dispensation for revealing
my heritage to Philip. Which I received. But Philip is still in a phase of applying Muggle standards
to the wizarding world."

"So you arrived home at half past eight," Snape said, bringing her back on track.

"Yes. My home is in Dorset. Unplottable, of course, though not secret-kept, but I have sensible
security measures. Being something of a celebrity, I have been subjected to attempted incursions in
the past."

"And yet?" Snape prompted.

"And yet...when I got home I called for Polly. I wanted her to help me change, because I was
feeling fatigued and wanted some company. I'd been out all day, you see, shopping. Knightsbridge, mainly."

"Very nice too," Hermione murmured.

"But Polly did not answer the summons. I don't think it had ever happened before." Trelore
needed a good long pause, then, to conquer her hitching breath and steady her voice. The tremor in
her hands grew pronounced. "I found her in the kitchen. Such a tiny, crumpled body. Slightly
blue, by that point. Cold. Dead for hours, I expect. She'd been poisoned. Baneberry, I think,
from the smell and the colour. It was in her Boomberry and Gillywater – Polly's beverage of
choice while she baked." Trelore closed her eyes. "There was an apple and blackberry pie half
made on the kitchen counter. Blaise's favourite. Polly told me only this morning that if anything
could bring him home then one of those pies could."

Trelore's head dropped down and she pressed a horizontal finger beneath her nose: it was the least
messy and most ladylike cry Hermione had ever witnessed.

Snape waited for her to compose herself before quietly saying, "And your actions after discovering
your house-elf?"

Trelore lifted her head and swallowed. "I decided Philip was right. Whatever was happening, I
had to shake off this desire to protect Blaise. So I left the kitchen exactly as it was, and I went to
the fireplace in the drawing room to Floo to the Ministry and report the crime. I was reaching for
the Floo powder when someone shimmered into view behind me: I saw the reflection in the
polished copper of the fireplace surround. It gave me time to turn and draw my wand."

"You were attacked?" Snape asked.

"I think you could call it that," Trelore said dryly. "A Stupefy narrowly missed where I'd been
standing. The man who'd thrown it swore and made a grab for me. He was stronger than I am.
We wrestled for enough room to cast. He seemed absolutely furious, I remember. Demanded to know where I'd been all day, and in quite colourful language."

"Do you remember what he looked like?" Snape put in.

"Not in great detail – I was rather too busy grappling with him, and it was all such a shock. He had dark hair, I can recall, and was about as tall as I am. I'm five foot eleven."

"He didn't attempt to cast another hex?"

"No, he struggled to keep my wand arm trapped, spat some expletives at me, and then – then he told me to calm down and come along quietly because if I did not then I'd never see my son again."

"Oh, hell," Hermione breathed.

"I demanded to know where Blaise was. The man laughed and said I could find out when I'd had my 'baneful brew'. I assumed he intended to poison me with Baneberry extract, just as he had poor Polly. When I sensed him preparing to Apparate with me along for the ride, I decided that going along quietly was quite the awful idea. I managed to slam my knee into his tender regions, and as soon as he'd spun away, all creased over, I Apparated out."

Snape nodded calmly. "Do you recall anything else about his appearance? Tattoos, clothing, scars?"

"I was rather too busy fighting for my life to ask him to stand still so I could memorise his features." She frowned in concentration. "Average weight. Dark hair, closely cut. Clean shaven. He looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties. Nice looking, in a rather bland way."

Hermione looked at Snape: was he thinking what she was thinking? That the description was not a million miles away from Gus, thief of sea-snails?

Snape was frowning at Trelore. "What about your sense of smell?" he asked. "Do you remember anything particular in that regard?"

Trelore closed her eyes. She was obviously trying to be helpful, though the memories were difficult for her to revisit. Her hands clasped tightly, as if she was trying to keep the shakes to herself.

"Something smelled a little bit like burning," she said after a moment. "Unpleasant."

"Burnt paper? Coal? Hair?"

"Yes! That's it. Burnt hair, just like if you singe your hair with a candle-flame."

Snape looked at her and then nodded at Hermione. That was proof enough: whoever attacked Mrs Trelore in her home had been Polyjuiced at the time.

"Where did you Apparate to?" Snape asked Trelore.

"In my panic, I went to the place I feel most safe. Philip's house. It's in Kingston-upon-Thames. I arrived in his back garden, just on the river, and somehow I managed not to splinch myself."

"Your fiancé was at home?"

"No, he was still in town; he'd only just finished having dinner with me. His staff were on hand, though, and they know not to ask questions when I turn up unexpectedly. I was made a cup of tea,
"and I asked for some time alone to compose myself, which I was given." She inhaled shakily. "That's when it happened."

"What happened?" Hermione asked.

"After I'd been there for perhaps a quarter of an hour, a Patronus appeared before me. It was the first time I'd been messaged this way, though I believe it has become quite popular since the war."

"The form of the Patronus?" Snape asked.

"A large snake. An anaconda of some description."

Hermione caught her breath: this matched the Patronus cast in the hotel footage.

Snape flicked a look at her then returned his attention to Trelore. "And the message?"

Trelore's smooth and lovely face finally crumpled. She began to cry, properly this time. "It was Blaise's voice," she said. "He told me to go back home, and go with the man who was waiting there. He said that I had to do it, otherwise he would be killed. Merlin, the panic in his voice!" She swiped under her eyes with the back of her hand. "And I would have done so, except all of a sudden he changed what he was saying. Where he found the courage, I do not know, but he yelled for me to stay away. 'Don't do it, Ma – get yourself somewhere safe!' That's what he said. And that he was sorry, so sorry. And he said – don't drink the potion. He said that twice. 'Don't drink the potion.'" Trelore pinched at her own lips. "And then he screamed, as though someone had hit him with a Crucio, and the Patronus faded and I was on my own."

Hermione exhaled in shock. For a moment, she had found herself hypothesising that the attacker from Mrs Trelore's home was, in fact, Blaise himself in disguise. He might have sent his own Patronus to lure her back to his clutches. Still, that would not explain the shift in his message.

She and Snape remained quiet as Trelore tried to calm herself using the judicious application of a pristine handkerchief. They glanced at each other, but Hermione saw no inkling of understanding in Snape's eyes. He was as confused as she was.

"So you see," Blaise's mother finally said, "I had to make a choice. It was clear that Blaise was being used to get to me. If I reported the crime, there was a good chance the criminals would cut their losses. I could only imagine that would be very bad for my son. But if I went home and gave myself up, I suspected that I would not live to see the morning. My death would render Blaise an unnecessary hostage. So I needed a third option. I needed someone who might make sense of the things that have been happening to me." She looked at Snape. "I needed a potions expert, preferably one who knew my son and who could take care of himself in a tight spot." She smiled a watery smile. "I needed Severus Snape."

The twinge of jealousy Hermione felt in that moment was acute. She stood up and excused herself, mumbling something about needing to check on her parents. When she glanced back from the other end of the kitchen, she was unhappy to note that Trelore had placed her hand on Snape's, and even unhappier to note that Snape had not shaken her off.

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"What do you wish to do?" Snape asked her, after he had excused himself from Trelore's side and they spoke quietly in the kitchen.

"You're asking me?" she said, surprised.
"For an opinion," he said. "Or do you wish me to take charge of this and presume upon your obedience?"

Hermione gave a small smile. "You should probably never presume upon that."

"Quite." His look was only semi-accusing. "So – what is your opinion?"

Hermione sighed. "I understand Mrs Trelore's reluctance to go to MLE. The last thing she wants is to panic the bad guys into anything drastic. Unfortunately, that's now been rendered academic."

"You believe that the basement flat you discovered is key to the plot against Mrs Trelore."

"How could it not be?"

He nodded and hunched his shoulders. "It would be quite the coincidence if the two things were not connected."

"Right. And Gus from St Mungo's has close-cropped dark hair."

"He was stealing snails in the long-term storage area around the time Mrs Trelore was attacked."

"Yep. But he seems to be working with someone who likes using Polyjuice."

Snape grunted. "Speculation. But sound. I should imagine MLE Patrol officers have been all over that basement flat in the last hour, anyway."

"Which means that the bad guys are either already in custody, or they've fled."

"And for both of those scenarios, Mrs Trelore's reasons for keeping this covert are no longer applicable," Snape finished smoothly. "Yes. That is my assessment too."

"Yeah." She sagged against the kitchen worktop and spent a distracted moment pressing at the stinging wound at her collarbone. "So, much as there's a part of me drawn to the notion of – 'Granger and Snape! Crime-fighters extraordinaire!'..." She waited for the flick of his eyebrow and smirked. "I think it's time to take this one back to the Ministry."

Snape nodded. "There are elements to this situation about which I have not been advised."

"I think that's probably true for most of us."

"Hmm. Well, it's late, but there'll be someone at the MLE Patrol Desk. We'll start there."

Hermione nodded. Then she froze. "No. Wait."

"What?"

"Boris."

"Boris?"

"Scarface. At the flat. He said 'Boris' was at the Ministry 'in case she went back there'. I heard him. Just before my alarm went off."

Snape breathed deeply. "So there may be someone looking out for Mrs Trelore at the Ministry. I see. Did you hear anything else?"
She cast her mind back. "Something about – it has to be tonight?"

"The brewing window for the haliwinkles is narrow."

"Yes. I suppose it would explain why her attacker was so angry when she went home this evening. He might have been waiting there for her all day, getting more and more impatient. She said her house-elf had been dead hours, didn't she?"

"She did. Anything else?"

"Um...yes! Yes, he said...'if we need to force him to do it then we'll use your wand'. Something like that. He said it to Gus."

"Force him," Snape mused. "Blaise?"

"Maybe." She shook her head. "Unless I've got it all muddled up." She shot Snape a glance. "It's been known."

"Hasn't it, though?" he said flatly.

"Okay, look. The first thing we need to know is what MLE found at that flat. I'd suggest we go back to Islington and see if Harry can answer the question."

"And from there to the Ministry, if necessary."

"But without Mrs Trelore, just in case Boris is still there. Good. It's a plan."

Snape nodded. "Very well. I shall Side-Along Mrs Trelore."

"Okay. If you could Disapparate from the bottom of the garden?"

"Of course."

"I'll follow along in a few minutes. I want to speak to my parents."

"That's fine. It will take some time for Mr Potter to accommodate any extra visitors into the Fidelius, in any case. Then we should share our information. When we get to the Ministry, we'll need to present a united front to Madam Churlish. Especially given the...complexities of how we have arrived here."

"Sounds good. She already thinks I'm a busybody."

"Hermione, you are a busybody."

He turned and walked away before Hermione could say anything more, but the glimmer of a smirk on Snape's face was enough to soften the remark.

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"It's definitely safe now?" her mother asked, after Hermione had answered as many of their questions as she was able.

Hermione held up her wand and indicated the absence of alarm. "All clear. Not a sausage. You can go and finish your bath."

Her mother shook her head. "I am going to have a small glass of that single malt from Pitlochry,
then I am going to try to sleep."

The sitting room clock said that it was just gone half past eleven. An awful lot had happened since Hermione had been preparing for her stealth-mission at St Mungo's four hours ago.

"I'm so sorry about tonight," she said. "It must have been frightful for you both."

Her father gave her a hug. "Actually, I think it proved the system works quite well."

Her mother looked at her father for a moment, then nodded. "That's a fair point, darling."

Hermione hugged her mother. Each embrace was making her injury pull and throb, but sometimes hugs were more important. "Keep the Portkeys close for now, just in case. I'll check in with you tomorrow. And don't forget to--"

"Always err on the side of caution," her parents chorused.

"We know," her dad added. "At some point you're going to have to trust to our common sense."

"I do," Hermione said. "I just worry."

Her mother smiled reassuringly. "We know that, too." She favoured Hermione with a discerning look. "So, then. That was your Potions professor?"

"Um – yep."

"The scary, bullying one?"

"Yep."

"Who dislikes you and everything you do?"

Hermione shrugged a shoulder. "We've established a sort of moratorium on hostilities."

"Hmm." Her mother's eyebrow arched. "Dark. Sleek. Something of a prodigious beak...?"

"Stop being insightful." Hermione felt herself blushing. "He's still my professor. At least until Christmas."

"Hang on – that's the rook?" her father put in. "Oh, no. No no no. He's too old for you."

"That's what he said. But I'm working on him."

Hermione leaned in and kissed her mother's cheek, gave her father a wink, then turned to walk out the patio doors. At the end of the garden she raised her wand and Apparated home.

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Chapter End Notes

"To lose one parent, Mr. Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness."

Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest 1895
Harry appeared at the top of the stairs as Hermione came in through the front door.

"We're all up here," he said.

"All?"

"This thing kind of expanded since you headed off." He shrugged. "Sounds like you and Snape have found the missing bits of the jigsaw, anyway."

"Some of them."

She paused long enough to hang up Harry's cloak, then she went up to the first floor and followed him into the large drawing room at the front of the house. The place had not been quite so packed since the last Order of the Phoenix meeting. Ron was there, alongside an officer wearing an MLE patrolman's uniform. Madam Churlish from Improper Use had found her way here too. Dane Booth, Hermione's fake stage conjurer, was also present. He gave her a smile and a little wave as she went in.

Snape had Jossinia Trelore standing close to him, as if she looked to him for support. Snape looked annoyed; Trelore looked overwhelmed. Neither of them had expected this much of a crowd.

"All right?" Ron asked in a low voice, as their eyes met.

She nodded. She knew what he was asking. "They're fine." With so many people present, most of them looking at her, she found herself suffering a bout of self-consciousness. "Wow," she said awkwardly. "It's like Poirot. All gathered in the drawing room. Any butlers present? This is not going to end well for you."


Madam Churlish spoke up. "I hear you've been busy, Miss Granger. Quite the back-seat flyer, aren't you?"

A flush of embarrassment, accompanied by a surge of defiance. "For the record? I did not know it was all connected." Hermione stayed by the door, in spite of the way Dane had moved up on one of the sofas to make room for her. "If I've been fighting crime, it's by accident."

"Also?" Harry added. "Hermione's rubbish on a broom."

"Yeah," Ron agreed. "Her back-seat flying would consist of grabbing the pilot round the neck and screaming 'Aargh!'"

"Yes, thanks for that, both of you," she griped. Still, their familiar teasing steadied her. Which, come to think of it, was probably their intention. (Sometimes she forgot that those two knew her very well indeed, and that they weren't fourteen anymore...)
Ron said, "So anyway, do we really have to save Zabini?" At a couple of outraged looks he lifted his hands. "Joke!"

(...although Ron occasionally gave a fairly good impression of a thoughtless fourteen year old.)

Snape said, "Contribute or shut up, Mr Weasley."

Churlish said wryly, "Right, that's the pleasantries done. Now. It would appear that between us we have information worthy of sharing."

"There are most certainly gaps in my knowledge," Snape agreed. He looked at Hermione. "Or did I read your reactions to Mrs Trelore's tale incorrectly, Miss Granger?"

"You did not, Professor," she said. Snape's question had been phrased as a reminder to maintain the formalities, though she'd hardly needed it. Still, it gave her the opportunity to say, "I was, however, under strict orders from Madam Churlish to refrain from speaking about—"

"Those orders are rescinded," Churlish interrupted. "Since it would seem they have become redundant." She was clearly unimpressed with the way this case was developing. "Who's going to start?"

"I will," Harry said. "Hermione saw Scarface – the, er, man in the wanted posters – at an address in north London tonight. Regent's Park Road, in Primrose Hill. He was in the company of a guy from the long-term storage level of St Mungo's."

"Gustiver Walsh," the patrolman put in, checking his notebook. "He is an enchantments expert – one of several who maintain the habitats within the level."

Hermione nodded. Given his job, Gus had an excellent reason to be in each and every location on the level. As a hired burglar, he was a good choice.

"How did you come to be at this address?" Madam Churlish asked Hermione.

"It's sort of a long story," she admitted.

"Then summarise."

"Okay. There's been some thefts at the hospital. Certain potions ingredients were being pilfered. I've been researching what it could be about – just as a favour for a friend of mine...shit!" She covered her mouth, perhaps a touch belatedly. "Oh. Sorry. I just remembered – she's going to be frantic! I need to..." Hermione looked around. "Back in a sec."

She ducked out of the drawing room, on to the landing, and prepared to cast a Patronus. She closed her eyes and found herself reliving a brief, close-mouthed kiss on a cliff ledge. Her rook fired immediately into life.

"Gloria, it's me," she sent. "Sorry it's so late – it's been a bit of a busy old night. But I'm fine. Listen, we had it wrong. The thief is a man called Gustiver Walsh, and MLE know about it. Just wanted to let you know. I'll come by the hospital tomorrow morning. See you then." She flicked her wand and her rook took off.

She went back into the drawing room. Everyone was still looking at her. She wished she'd taken the extra time to go into the library and claim some privacy.

"May we continue?" Churlish asked, a touch acidic.
"Yes. Sorry. So anyway, I was looking into these thefts, and I won't get bogged down in the detail but the point is that I figured out the stolen ingredients, when they're used together, make really nasty potions. Proper scary stuff."

Mrs Trelore gave a whimper of distress.

Churlish shot Trelore an irritated look and said, "I'll be wanting a more detailed report than this, Miss Granger, but go on."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, well, up till about nine o'clock this evening all I had was a theory." She lifted her chin. "Nothing more solid than a notes file and a bunch of suspicions."

"I see," Churlish said. Not sounding all that convinced.

"I'd predicted that the thief would need haliwinkles, picked under a full moon. It's what this nasty recipe called for. And, you know, since this evening was the full moon, I thought I'd lie in wait. See what happened. Get some proper evidence." She looked at Harry. "That's why I needed the cloak."

"Should have told me," Harry said.

"But I didn't. Let's accept that and move on."

"I have to agree with Mr Potter," Churlish added. "You placed yourself in harm's way. I can't condone that."

"I made the best decision I could at the time," Hermione said firmly. She glanced at Snape, but he wasn't giving anything away. She hoped she was doing the right thing in skipping over so much of the story. "Anyway, this man, Gustiver Walsh, was the thief. Came for the snails just like I expected. So I followed him out of the hospital and into Muggle London. Haliwinkles stop you from casting; they emit a zone that deadens magic. So wherever he was taking them, he couldn't Apparate or Floo or fly. He had to take the tube."

She paused. She'd just remembered something Snape had said before they'd left to go to her parents' house. She'd hardly registered the comment at the time. But now...

"I've got the haliwinkles," he'd said.

What the hell had happened during those few minutes they'd split up at the hospital? When Gus had come out of the changing rooms, Snape had not been following. But Gus had still behaved like a wizard who knew he could not cast spells. So what had Snape managed to do?

She looked over at him. He tilted his head, almost imperceptibly. Encouraging her to keep going. She set the question aside for now; this was a loose end to tie up later.

"I followed him north from Tottenham Court Road, up to Chalk Farm," Hermione said, resuming her summary. "He ended up at the address I gave to Harry. I was thinking about what to do, how to report all that I'd seen while also minimising the risk of the bad guys scarpering with the ingredients. That's when the man from the wanted posters arrived."

"Scarface," Harry said helpfully.

"Yes. Which was a surprise, because I hadn't realised that there was any kind of connection between the stuff I've been doing for work, helping your team, Madam Churlish, and this favour I'd done for my friend."
"Of course, having made note of this connection," Churlish said, "I'm sure you were ready to contact the authorities immediately and pass on the baton to MLE professionals."

"At that point I'd have done so like a shot, only I was distracted. An enchanted alarm came through to my wand. I realised my parents were in trouble. My Muggle parents," she added. "The ones who had to flee their home last year because some very bad people wanted to kill them." She was still on an adrenaline high from the events of the evening; it was enough to make her less guarded in her choice of words. "And I appreciate things are improving, Madam Churlish, but if you really want to get stroppy about how long it took me to involve MLE in all of this, you might consider how much use they were to me, back when I actually, genuinely needed them!"

The room went quiet and still. No one dropped a pin, but everyone would have noticed if someone had. There was a ringing in Hermione's ears.

Then Ron said, quietly, "Hear hear."

Harry said. "Seconded."

Churlish stared at her. Hermione wasn't sure how the woman was going to react. Castigation? Defensiveness? Punishment?

As it turned out, none of the above.

Churlish dipped her head in a slow nod. "I had not considered the context of your decisions. I concede your point is valid."

"Thank you," Hermione said.

"Please continue. You were alerted to a problem with your parents?"

She drew a deep breath and tried to put her train of thought back together again. "Yes. I mean, it was terrible timing but I had to Apparate home. I did pass the baton, as you suggested, but, you know, on to Harry and Ron. They were going to contact the Patrol desk, last I knew."

"That's right," Harry said. "So Hermione comes by, and she tells us what she's seen but she needs to get to her mum and dad's, pronto. Fortunately Snape...um, Professor Snape was here with us. So he headed out with Hermione, and me and Ron contacted MLE. We told Officer Vernon here about the sighting of Scarface and we flew out with him and his colleague to check the address. Only when we got there the place was empty."

"Damn!" Hermione said. "They must have heard me when my wand alarmed. Or maybe when I Disapparated."

"So we figured." Harry gave her a supportive smile. "Wasn't all a loss, though. We found a brewing station tucked away in the back, and a fair amount of what I'm guessing were these stolen ingredients." He glanced at Trelore, then frowned. "We, er, also found another room with a mattress and some empty take-away boxes and a bunch of cable-ties."

Hermione frowned, then rolled her eyes. "Plastic."

"Right."

"You think...?"

"Yeah."
"Loath as I am to interrupt this informative discussion," Snape put in, "perhaps English might be a better language to employ?"

Harry said, "Look – even if you disarm a witch or wizard it's hard to completely incapacitate them. I mean, a body-bind will hold them for a while, but if you need to keep someone a prisoner for days at a time, especially if you can't have someone watching them twenty-four seven, you need to bind their hands. Keep them from casting wandlessly."

"An accomplished user of wandless magic can still cast with bound hands," Snape pointed out. "With enough force of will, the relative motion of a thumb and two fingers is often enough. At least to remove the binding."

Those present looked at him. Perhaps, like Hermione, they were imagining seventeen years spent undercover with the Death Eaters, and the skills Snape had needed to develop in order to stay alive.

"Professor Snape is right, of course," said Hermione. "But if you bind a wizard's hands with something that's made of plastic, like a Muggle cable-tie, then you limit their options. The standard manipulating charms won't work. They all have modifiers for the material they manipulate – wood, metal, stone. Like, you know, Mobiliferrus, or Minisculoferrous, or Perderoferrus. A decent wandless caster could snap a set of metal handcuffs without breaking a sweat. But they'd be pretty stuck, trying to snap a cable-tie."

Everyone was staring at her.

"Not much plastic in the wizarding world, haven't you noticed?" she added.

Harry said, "The point is, Scarface knows his stuff. He's careful."

Officer Vernon, the MLE patrolman, put in, "I think Mr Potter's right, Madam. This room at the basement flat – it looked like someone had been kept there for a while, probably against their will. There were several bolts fitted to the outside rather than the inside of the door to the room. And it, er, wasn't the freshest of chambers."

"You're saying you believe this is where they were keeping Blaise?" Mrs Trelore pressed.


Vernon added, "A time-stamped Revelio informed us that a Crucio had been cast in the room within the last few hours."

Mrs Trelore let out another whimper and turned to rest her head against Snape's shoulder. Hermione tried to be understanding about the onerous weight of a mother's concern, but it was hard not to be annoyed.

"Any indication as to where the suspect and his cohort from St Mungo's went when they abandoned the flat?" Churlish asked.

"There's a team at the address right now, checking evidence," the patrolman said. "It's still early days – we only got back ourselves twenty minutes ago. The team could turn something up." A sigh, and an apologetic glance at Mrs Trelore. "Apparating, though – they could have gone anywhere."

"Indeed." Churlish looked at Dane Booth, who'd been sitting quietly and listening. "I see Officer Vernon has already contacted the Muggle Liaison Office. That was...unexpectedly judicious, Officer."
Officer Vernon blushed and said, "I, er, thought we should investigate the provenance of this flat. And that time might be a factor, given that the suspects appear to be holding someone hostage. Didn't, er, didn't mean to overstep. Madam."

Churlish gave the patrolman a cool look, then returned her attention to Dane. "Mr Booth? I suppose we should be glad they sent us someone who doesn't require an extensive briefing."

"All part of the service," Dane said. "I got called out soon as it became clear this place had something to do with the work I'd already done with Hermione. Um, Miss Granger."

"And what work was that?" Snape asked.

Dane glanced at Snape and said, "Muggle-worthy excuse type stuff." He looked back at Churlish. "I don't have a proper report for you yet – I've barely had chance to check the preliminaries. All I can tell you so far is that the flat's owned by a guy called Nicholas Beatty. He's had it for fourteen years – it was last sold in '84. No luck turning up any photo-ID on this Beatty guy yet. In any case, he's never lived at the address – he's just the landlord. Rents it out. I'm still trying to get hold of the name of the current registered tenant, since there's nothing on the electoral register. I'll be checking with the other residents of the building tomorrow morning, see if they know anything about their downstairs neighbour. And obviously I'll keep digging for the Muggle paper trail."

"Thank you, Mr Booth." Churlish turned to Mrs Trelore, whom Snape had – quite gently – nudged upright again. "It would appear, from Professor Snape's brief summary when I first arrived, that you are the target of these men, Mrs Trelore. Can you explain?"

Trelore stood straighter. She opened her mouth to speak but apparently couldn't force a coherent sentence through the exhausted panic she was feeling.

"Perhaps I can flesh out my earlier summary," Snape said. "In recent months Mrs Trelore has been subjected to a series of harmful potions, administered without her knowledge or consent, in an apparent effort to sabotage her relationship with a Muggle businessman. Her son may or may not have had something to do with this campaign."

"I think he most probably did," Hermione said. She met Trelore's glower without flinching. "Sorry. But I think we can prove he was at the Savoy ball. He was seen behind the hotel, wearing a white-tie tux and casting the same Patronus you described to me earlier."

"Who saw him?" Mrs Trelore demanded.

"A Muggle reporter who was subsequently murdered, and several security cameras."

Trelore's eyes went round. "My son would never have anything to do with a murder!"

Churlish ignored her. "You are certain, Miss Granger? Blaise Zabini was definitely the wizard in the footage?"

"Mrs Trelore was dosed at the ball. All the drinks were served by waiters in white-tie. So unless there's another six foot something dark-haired wizard out there with slender build, a boa constrictor Patronus and a vested interest in trying to derail Mrs Trelore's romance with Philip Richmond...?"

"Hmm. Sold," Churlish admitted.

"I did not see my son at the ball," Trelore insisted. "Don't you think I'd have recognised him, even in a crowded room?"
"He took Polyjuice," Hermione said. "And he did it on camera, which is why it got flagged up to the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee," she added, mainly for Snape's sake. "By the way – the Polyjuice disguise he used was the same one used when Professor Snape was lured to Knockturn Alley."

Snape looked at her and raised a brow. "Ah," he said, feigning mild interest. "You know about that?"

Ha bloody ha. Though he made a fair point; it was difficult to keep track of whom she'd been lying to.

"I was informed," she said.

"Indeed." Snape's eyes glinted at her for a moment; she didn't know whether he was amused or being pointed. "In any case, things appear to have escalated somewhat for Mr Zabini. Where originally he seemed to be working with the wizard identified in the wanted posters, this suspect has now apparently turned on him. Mr Zabini has been missing from home for six days, and – if Mr Potter's assessment is correct – he has spent that time imprisoned in the basement flat on Regent's Park Road. I'd surmise that he has been held as a hostage in order to manipulate his mother."

Churlish turned to the patrolman. "Could the occupant of the room you found have been staying there willingly?"

"Unlikely," the patrolman said with a grimace.

"Let us take that as a working theory, then," Churlish said. "Young Mr Zabini fell out with his associates and has been taken prisoner. There's more, I take it?"

Snape nodded. "Earlier today the suspect, or possibly another cohort, broke into Mrs Trelore's home in Dorset. Her house-elf was fatally poisoned–"

"What kind of poison?" Churlish put in.

"Baneberry extract, was the assessment Mrs Trelore made, I believe."

Trelore nodded at Snape's side.

"Ah. The same way as the Muggle reporter was killed," Churlish said, looking at Hermione.

"Yes," she agreed.

Snape cocked an eyebrow at Hermione, then finished his report. "After discovering this, Mrs Trelore, understandably upset, went to Floo to the Ministry to report the crime. Before she could do so she was assaulted. An intruder attempted to incapacitate her. There was a struggle. Mrs Trelore was subjected to threats regarding her son and herself. Sensibly, she did not allow herself to be manipulated into surrender and managed to Apparate away. Shortly afterwards, as she attempted to work out what course of action to take, she was visited by her son's Patronus. Mr Zabini appeared to be reading scripted demands from his kidnappers, but towards the end of the message he veered off-script and shouted for his mother not to do as the kidnappers demanded. The message ended with him advising her not to 'drink the potion'. At this point he cried out in pain – his mother believed he was on the receiving end of a Crucio, and the patrolman's evidence would seem to bear this out."

Churlish said, "Just what is this potion intended for Mrs Trelore?"
"There's two, far as I can tell," Hermione said. "One of them is a hate potion, so potent that it can turn someone into a killer."

"And the other potion?" Churlish asked.

"It's..." Hermione shook her head. "God, I don't even want to say it."

Snape said quietly, "De Morte Magicae. It appears only in a banned book entitled *Baneful Brews*. Forcing it upon a witch or wizard will permanently destroy their magical ability."

A pause.

Ron said, "Fuck's sake." No one called him out on the reaction.

"Why would Scarface want to use a potion like that on Mrs Trelore?" Harry asked. "I mean, sure, it's a despicable thing to do and he sounds like a despicable man. But it isn't likely to split her and Richmond up, is it? If anything, it makes their relationship more likely to succeed. You know. Suddenly they wouldn't be so different."

As they digested that, Snape conceded, "A fair point, Potter."

Hermione said, "It's about hate." Everyone looked at her. "I mean, there's more to it, I think, but what it comes down to is...it's personal. Whoever this suspect is, he hates Mrs Trelore. Everything he's done, including recruiting her son? It's been to punish her. I think the De Morte potion is just that. The ultimate punishment, if all else fails. The worst way he can hurt her."

"Speculation," Churlish said dismissively.

"But supportable speculation," Snape said.

Hermione shot him a weak smile.

Mrs Trelore said, "But why? Why would anyone hate me so much?"

There was a brief moment of self-conscious silence. Lots of people studied their own shoes. In the end it was Ron who cleared his throat and said, "Um – not being funny or anything, Zabini's mum, but you're not that short of pissed off in-laws."

An idea struck Hermione. "Have you even seen the pictures in the *Prophet* or on the wanted posters, Mrs Trelore?"

"I make a point of never reading the *Prophet*," Trelore said. "And I limit my visits to Diagon Alley. With a reputation like mine, one always seems to attract uninvited attention."

"Then the first thing you should do is look at the sketch of the suspect," Hermione said. "Ron's right, though he might have put it more diplomatically. There are people out there who feel they have good reason to blame you for the death of a loved-one. And if this is as personal as I think it is, well, you might even recognise the man MLE are looking for."

"I don't see the point," Churlish dismissed. "I'm still of the opinion that our sketch is that of a Polyjuice disguise. Probably originating with another Muggle, like the waiter, since the face has gone unrecognised for more than a week, now."

"Maybe it is a disguise, or maybe it isn't," Hermione said. "But it's worth checking, isn't it, since this all seems to be about Mrs Trelore?"
Madam Churlish considered this argument, then nodded her agreement. "If you attend my office tomorrow, Madam, we can organise that."

"Um – I've got a copy here," Officer Vernon said. "It it helps?" He fished a folded copy of the poster out of a pocket. "Mrs Trelore?"

Snape reached to take the poster, opened it out and offered it to Trelore. The witch looked at it, and flinched. "Oh, my word! What an awful scar."

"Try to see past it," Snape suggested.

She frowned at the sketch and placed her hand over the left side of the man's face. She squinted, tilted her head. Then her eyes grew wide, and wider, and finally her hand lifted to press against her mouth.

"Who is it, Mrs Trelore?" Snape asked quietly.

"But he's dead," she whispered.

"Mrs Trelore?"

"He's been dead sixteen years." Trelore looked up at Snape with horrified recognition in her face. "That's Niccolo. That's my husband." She swallowed hard. "That's Blaise's father."

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Things were a bit frantic for a while after that. Madam Churlish consulted with Mrs Trelore who still clung to Snape, and then with the MLE patrolman. In the end, Churlish was forced to recognise that there'd be no more useful information out of the semi-hysterical Jossinia Trelore that night.

Churlish called the meeting to a close. Dane Booth was sent home, the patrolman sent back to join his colleagues in Regent's Park Road, and Madam Churlish finally extracted Trelore from Snape's side.

"Do you have somewhere safe you can stay tonight?" Churlish enquired. "Preferably somewhere unknown to the man who seems intent on doing you and your suitor harm?"

Trelore looked at Snape for a moment as if she expected him to say something, then looked away. "I will take a room at Claridge's. I have access to Philip's account there."

Churlish nodded. "I'll see you are escorted there safely." She turned to Hermione and her friends. "Reports. By lunchtime tomorrow. Then your involvement is over unless I request it. Is that understood?"

Harry's ears went red, but he nodded. Ron looked more defiant and said, "Of course, Madam Churlish. And you're welcome." Hermione loved him for that.

Behind Churlish, Snape had discreetly returned Trelore's wand to her and then leaned closer to murmur something in her ear. What *that* was about, Hermione didn't even want to guess. He coughed, attracting Churlish's attention. "Lunchtime tomorrow will not be possible."

Churlish did a double take and then flustered. "Oh. Professor, I did not mean..."

"I assume you require a report from me, too," he said. "Given that I was present when Mrs Trelore
made contact, and have some knowledge of the incidents at the long-term storage level?"

"Well...yes, that would be useful."

"Indeed. I shall provide what I can, if you will give me until close of business hours on Wednesday."

"That's fine, Professor."

"Excellent." He turned to the group. "You heard Madam Churlish. Wednesday, five pm. Don't forget."

Churlish looked confused. "Oh, no, I didn't mean for Mr P--"

"Of course, you didn't mean to place Mr Potter and his friends under an unreasonable amount of pressure," Snape said smoothly. "After all, Miss Granger has NEWT classes most of tomorrow, and Potter and Weasley are working through their Auror apprenticeships. Given the efforts they have all made this evening to assist your enquiries, not to mention the trauma Miss Granger went through earlier in believing her parents to be in danger...?"

Madam Churlish stopped letting Snape make her look like an idiot, and took the time to straighten her shoulders and draw a breath. "Your points are well made, Professor," she acknowledged, and then turned to Hermione and her friends. "Your assistance tonight has been appreciated."

"Just like Ron said, you're welcome," Harry told her flatly.

Churlish gave an exasperated head-shake at this backchat, but mainly she looked tired. It had, after all, been a late one. "Thank you for the use of your home, Mr Potter," she said politely, and then steered Mrs Trelore out of the drawing room and down the stairs.

Hermione looked around at the remaining group: the one-time Golden Trio, plus a Potions professor. "So what happens now?"

Ron said, "Well, I'm off home. Unless I'm needed here?" At Hermione's smile and shake of the head he turned away. "Oh. Nearly forgot." He dug in his jeans pocket and handed her a tiny scroll. "This came for you this morning."

Harry said, "I need tea. I'll be in the kitchen. Snape – if you need to stay, the top floor bedroom is always available to Order members. It's all made up." He turned away, and only the reddened tips of his ears betrayed the self-consciousness he'd felt in making such an offer.

Harry and Ron trooped out. Hermione glanced at Snape, then at the scroll. She shrugged and opened her correspondence. When she'd read the short note from Minerva McGonagall, she breathed a shaky laugh.

"Is this a secret as well?" Snape's voice was quiet and perhaps a little cutting.

She looked up. "No. I'd forgotten all about it, with everything else that was..." A sigh. "I have passed my Transfiguration NEWT."

"Grade? Or is that a redundant question?"

She smiled slowly. "What do you think?"

Downstairs the front door slammed as Ron headed out. Snape glanced over his shoulder, then he
stepped closer. His voice lowered as he said, "I think...that this might be a good time to stop making assumptions."

"That is an excellent point. Outstanding."

"I wouldn't call it that good."

"No, I mean, in answer to your ques--"

"I know what you meant." He narrowed his eyes in consideration. "And that is, what, three NEWTs down, three to go?"

"Four. Four to go."

"Seven NEWTs." He offered his best sneer. "You truly are a monstrous know-it-all, Hermione Granger."

"How many did you get?" she asked.

Those dark eyes blinked slowly, just once. "Does it matter?"

"Now you've said that, instead of answering a simple question? Oh, god, yes, it matters."

"A monstrous know-it-all, and insatiably competitive."

"I don't deny any of this."

He held her gaze for a moment more, then he looked lower, past her neck and shoulders. For a moment she was startled into thinking he was ogling her breasts before she noted the frown of distaste.

"You are bleeding," he said quietly.

She looked down and saw he was right. The cursed wound had been splitting apart all night. There'd been so much to deal with over the course of the evening, the throbbing discomfort had settled into a background sensation. As soon as she noticed the dark, sticky patch on her comfy old Fruit of the Loom sweatshirt, however, the pain levels spiked.

She winced. "Damn it," she muttered.

"Why was your appointment cancelled?" he said, looking like he wanted to go and have strong words with someone.

"Oh, it wasn't. I was an idiot and forgot." She looked up at him. "I've been in a state all day. Not enough sleep. I don't think I've eaten since I gave up on my bowl of porridge at breakfast." That comment made her notice the hollow sensation of nausea in her gut. "I made an arse of myself during my potions lesson and was so appalled that I just ran home." She shook her head and dismissed her own stupidity with a wave of the hand. "It's all right. I'll clean it up and put a dressing on it. I've got to go and see Gloria tomorrow anyway."

Snape was quiet for a while: long enough to make her feel uneasy. Then he closed his eyes. "Hermione," he murmured.

"If you're berating yourself for what you said to me in class, don't. No one has any business working in a potions lab if they aren't capable of basic safe working practice. I was distracted. I deserved every insult."
He didn't respond to that. Instead, he turned away and went to close the drawing room door. Voicelessly he cast something: probably his early-warning amplification spell. Then he returned to her side.

"If you are uncomfortable..." he said, then – uncharacteristically – seemed to lose the power of speech.

"With you? Often. But mostly it's a very nice kind of uncomfortable."

Snape shook his head at that. "That cannot be the issue, here. Not if you wish for my help."

"Your help with what?" she asked, confused.

He sighed and looked pointedly at her collarbone.

"Oh!" She worked out what he'd meant: if he was to cast the healing charm, she'd have to undress. He didn't want the intimacy of such a situation blurring into eroticism. "I see. But I didn't ask..."

She tailed off.

"No," he agreed. "You did not."

Of course, Hermione was almost as bad as Snape himself when it came to asking for help. Perhaps it was time to change all that.

She lifted her chin and met his eyes and said, "Yes, I'd like you to help me with this. Please."

He nodded, satisfied with her understanding, then he turned his back. She squeezed her lips together for a moment, preparing herself, then she took both wands she carried from her arm-sheath beneath her sleeve and set them aside. She breathed deeply and pulled off her sweatshirt.

"Ow," she grumbled.

"Hermione?"

"It's stuck. Hang on." The weeping wound had partly congealed against the fabric of her shirt. She had to tug to pull it free.

She put the sweatshirt down on the nearest sofa arm and dropped her chin to look at her collarbone. It was a mess. The wound itself, a slash of about five inches in length, was oozing and dark. The blood had spread over the course of the evening, smearing, trickling, drying in rusted patches on her skin. It had made it as far as the lace of her bra. Just as well that was black too, or she'd have started to look like an extra from a zombie flick.

Another deep breath and she looked at Snape. "Ready," she said.

He turned around, found her eyes and held them for a long moment before dropping his gaze to her shoulder. He stepped closer.

"There are fibres from your clothing in the wound. It has also been in seawater. I should cleanse it first," he said.

"Sounds sensible."

He cast a complex cleansing charm that she did not know. The throb of the injury flared.
He lifted his eyes to hers. "I will cast the counter-curse. It will work better if I use my other hand to press the sides of the wound together."

"Okay."

"There will be discomfort."

He wasn't kidding. She was going to have to bite her own tongue so as not to gasp when he touched her. Still, he'd been clear that this could not be about the sexual tension that – unless Hermione was suffering delusions – was no longer such a one-sided thing between them.

"I'll be brave," she said.

Snape's left hand came up to her collarbone and gently closed the wound. There was no hesitation, no brushed tracing of her skin, nothing more than a Healer at St Mungo's would have done. Still. The hand belonged to Severus Snape, so Hermione held her breath and did her best not to shiver.

He cast the charm that no one at St Mungo's believed in; the charm she had cast to heal his face after Augustus Rookwood had sliced his skin with the same cursed blade that had injured Hermione. Her nipples tightened with Snape's attention, and she tried to send a message to them, telling them to wait their turn, because really, this was not about that. Not yet.

And then it was done and his hand left her skin.

"Did it work?" she breathed, because she couldn't look away from his intent face.

"Yes." His eyes flicked up. "Are you still experiencing pain?"

She frowned and sought out the throb of her injury. It wasn't there. "Oh. No, I'm not. Sorry. Forgot to check."

A tiny smile. "I'll cleanse again, if you're happy."

"Of course."

One more spell and he was done. He stepped back and turned around politely. Hermione peered down at the place on her collarbone that had been causing her discomfort for the better part of six months. It was odd to see almost-pristine skin. Just a single, hair-like pale line was left.

"I've got a scar," she said, feeling rather satisfied.

"The wound was active for too long," Snape said, his back to her. "I was unable to avoid scarring altogether."

"No, it's fine. I prefer this to just...just wiping the slate clean." She went to pick up her sweatshirt, grabbed her wand and voicelessly cast a swift cleaning charm on it. "I think some experiences are meant to stay with you." She put her shirt on. "I'm decent," she said lightly.

He turned to face her. "You are a lot of things, Hermione Granger." There was gravel in his usually smooth tones.

"So did you want me to, er...?" She gestured vaguely at his neck. "You know. Return the favour?"

He appeared to give this some thought, then he swallowed visibly and shook his head. "Perhaps not tonight." They shared a strange suspended moment, then Snape broke it. He turned away and
inhaled sharply as, with a flick of a wrist, he cancelled whatever wards he'd cast to protect their privacy. "Well, then. Congratulations on your NEWT. I should leave you to get some rest. It's been quite the evening."

"We're not going to talk?" she said, confused. "But I have a hundred questions! Also answers," she added quickly. "Lots of answers. Total lack of secrets now."

Snape just looked at her. "I thought you might wish to take some time to gather your thoughts."

"Actually, I think most of my recent problems have come about because I've spent all my time thinking thoughts. It would probably improve my mental acuity no end if I did less of it."

"Hmm." He didn't look convinced.

"Stay here tonight. Harry offered. We can talk in the morning. I don't have to be at History of Magic till half ten."

She saw in his eyes that he was tempted, before he tossed the idea aside. She wondered if his reluctance was about Harry, or about her. A tiny, jealous part of her wondered if it was about Mrs Trelore, and the thing he had whispered into her ear before she left.

"You haven't even told me about the haliwinkles," she complained.

He gave one of his micro-smiles at that. "I shall call tomorrow evening," he said. "We will discuss things then. Including how much information to present to Madam Churlish in our respective reports."

Hermione gave up. "Fine. Tomorrow evening."

Snape offered an odd kind of half-bow, and she had no idea whether he was mocking her. Then he left the room and walked down the stairs. Hermione followed.

"By the way," she said, as he reached for the door. He looked back at her. "I'm sorry about, you know, kissing you."

His eyebrow arched in delicate enquiry.

"Oh! Not because it wasn't nice. It was very nice. It's just...I mean, I always thought that the first time I kiss you, it would be about 'Oh my god, I want you.' Not so much, 'You're not a maniac after all, hooray!'" She offered a wince and, feeling sheepish, stuck her hands in her trouser pockets.

Snape was utterly still for a moment, stern of visage, dark of eyes, the whole classic look. Then, without warning, a noise erupted that began as a snort and settled into a low, rich rumble of humour. Hermione found herself giggling right along with him.

It didn't last long, and was over as soon as Snape shook his head. "Good night, Hermione," he said.

Then he opened the door and left the house, and she stood there looking at the front door with her own arms hugging herself and a stupid smile on her face.

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Hermione slept like a baby.

Well, that wasn't quite the right analogy, since infants were most certainly not capable of the sensual peaks of eroticism that haunted Hermione's dreams. But she slept very well.

The following morning, she wrote herself a list. (Everything may have changed since the revelatory moment in the coastal habitat yesterday, but she was still Hermione Granger.) It went like this:

1) Phone Mum and Dad at the practice and make sure they're okay.
2) St Mungo's.
   a) Return Joseph's wand
   b) Speak to Gloria about what to include in my report to Mdm Churlish. (NB. Need notes file back again.)
   c) Return *The Magic of the Tundra* to Matilda Swann, via Gloria.
   d) Find out whether Gustiver Walsh turned up for work today.
3) Thank-you note to Headmistress McGonagall.
4) Check through essay for History. Redo reading.
5) SS.
   a) Oh my god where do I even start?
   b) Seriously. Where?
   c) Fine. Tell him I'm sorry for believing he's capable of dastardly deeds.
   d) Actually, I said 'dastardly' to him yesterday, didn't I? Who even talks like that?
   e) Can I get away with 'sorry for everything'?
   f) Knickers. I'll wing it.
   g) But I definitely want to know about:
      (i) What he was doing in the coastal habitat,
      (ii) Why he's been so angry with me, and
      (iii) The haliwinkles.

With that much sorted out, she ate some breakfast, checked in with her parents, packed her bedbag and then headed off to St Mungo's.

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After her History of Magic lesson, Hermione had a tight thirty minutes to get herself some lunch and prepare for the rigours of the afternoon's Defence against the Dark Arts session. Time being at a premium, she eschewed the delights of her favoured lunch spots in Muggle London and instead went to the Ministry's canteen-style restaurant situated at one end of the level eight atrium.

As she searched out a seat while loaded up with a tray containing a bowl of leek and potato soup and a warm crusty roll, someone called her name across the noisy restaurant. She paused and looked around. Three tables over, Dane Booth was waving at her. Hermione hadn't really wanted company, but there was no way to avoid the invitation now he knew she'd seen him: not without being rude. So she skirted around the tables and made her way over there.

To Dane's credit, he offered only a couple of banal pleasantries before letting her eat her lunch while it was hot. He was finishing off a baked potato with what looked like Coronation Chicken: a combination of flavours that Hermione had never found enticing.

"I'm really glad I saw you," Dane said, when they were both finished eating. He had a cup of the Ministry's less-than-drinkable canteen coffee in front of him. Hermione was content with water. "I wanted to run something past you."

"Is this to do with...?" She stopped and looked around, wondering what the rules for Churlish's investigation were at this point. Last night the requirement for confidentiality had been revoked, but had that applied only to the meeting in Harry's drawing room? Hermione sighed and made do with lowering her voice. "Is this about the case?" she asked.

"'Fraid so," Dane said, lowering his voice to match hers. "Madam Churlish asked me to keep my work on the Regent's Park Road address quiet."

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"Something about it being very bad if the press gets hold of the story. You know. There's a hostage involved, so any publicity might make the suspects feel exposed – enough that they ditch their plans and run. Possibly in a way that wouldn't be good for the younger Mr Zabini."

"Oh, I see." She nodded as she thought about this. "Yes, in those circumstances Blaise becomes a millstone rather than an asset. A millstone who knows far too much about his kidnappers to risk simply cutting him loose." She cringed at the implications. "Good point. Let's try very hard not to let that happen."

"Hey, I'm on board. No problem. But the downside is that the only person I'm allowed to consult with right now is my boss. Only my boss is Belinda Fawley, and she's in charge of the Muggle Liaison Office mainly because Cornelius Fudge liked a bit of a fumble with her, back in the day."

Hermione pulled a face. "Lovely image, that. Thanks."

"Yeah, sorry. Anyway, Fawley's got no Muggle heritage and no real understanding of what the department even does."

"Why is she still in place there, then?" Hermione asked. "Shacklebolt's been keen to root out corruption and incompetence."

"Politics," Dane said darkly. "The department was...I think the word used was 'rationalised'. Basically it got kicked into touch under Thicknesse when they established the Muggle-born Registration Commission. I mean, bear in mind I was back home on the other side of the planet by then, so I only know what colleagues tell me. But it was a brutal time, and the only reason Fawley
survived the culling was because of her name. Some pure-blood history thing, I don't know."

"I see. So when the department was reinstated after the war, everyone got their old jobs back?"

"Pretty much. The Acting Minister couldn't really make changes, not without it looking, you know, political. And Madam Fawley gave a couple of interviews about how harrowing the whole thing was, to have been one of the main 'victims' of the War Ministry's atrocities. Never mind that she never lifted a finger to help those of her staff who'd stayed, half of whom were Muggle-born."

Dane frowned down at his coffee. "Three of them didn't survive Umbridge's commission."

"I'm sorry."

"Hey, you're the one who stopped it – you and your mates. Pretty sure you're one of the few people who doesn't have to be sorry about that."

"And yet I am."

Dane shook his head. "Look, we're getting sidetracked. The problem is that the Minister hasn't yet got a politically savvy reason to move Madam Fawley away from Muggle Liaison. And trust me, she is going nowhere off her own bat – no one's going to offer her a job any time soon, especially not one with some prestige. You don't have to spend long in a room with her to work out she couldn't find her arse with both hands."

Hermione smirked. The antipodean tendency towards coarse directness was worthy of embracing. "So you're saying you basically have no informed support as you work on this investigation," she concluded. "Not allowed to talk to colleagues, and your boss is useless."

"That's about it." Dane finished his coffee, made a face at the flavour, sat back and looked at her.

"Which wouldn't be so bad, except I've started to uncover some stuff that's interesting."

"Have you spoken to Madam Churlish about this?"

"I've given her the bullet points. Her eyes glaze once I start on about National Insurance numbers and the General Register Office."

"So you want to discuss your findings with me?"

"I need to bounce my ideas off someone who understands Muggle bureaucracy. Someone who can confirm or rubbish what I think I'm turning up, here."

"And what do you think you're turning up?"

"Basically – the opposite of what Madam Churlish is saying." He sighed. "She reckons that even if this Zabini bloke managed to fake his own death back in 1982, the only way he could have pulled off the whole new-identity thing is if he'd gone to live somewhere that had minimal contact with either the British or Italian Ministries for Magic."

Hermione looked around, but none of the other nearby diners seemed interested in her conversation with Dane. Still, she shuffled her chair around and leaned closer. "Churlish is probably talking some sense there. Unless he went about permanently Polyjuiced...but even Barty Crouch only pulled that off for months, definitely not years." Her thoughts raced. "The thing with wizarding communities is that they're small. It's hard to just disappear. I mean, soon as we had that sketch of the suspect, all Churlish's team wanted to do was put posters up and stick it in the paper. Because that's all they've ever needed to do to track down suspects."
"And I agree. To an extent, anyway. I get why Madam Churlish is sceptical. She's willing to entertain the idea that Zabini's been tucked away somewhere obscure for sixteen years and has only just come back." Dane arched his eyebrows. "But that's not what I'm finding."

"Where do you think he's been?"

"Right here. In London. Disguised as a series of Muggles. Including the bloke who bought the Regent's Park Road flat."

Hermione nodded. "Nicholas Beatty," she recalled, and saying the words out loud made her add, "Of course. Sounds pretty similar to Niccolo Zabini."

"Right. But Churlish won't have it. She says there isn't a witch or wizard on the planet who'd voluntarily live outside wizarding society. To do so, they'd have to give up magic. Who'd do that?"

"Again, she makes a fair point," Hermione said, playing devil's advocate. "Though she's probably eager to make it, because it's up to Improper Use to police the unsanctioned use of magic in Muggle society. If you're right, and Zabini's been hiding in Muggle London for over a decade, presumably using magic at his own convenience, playing fast and loose with the Statute of Secrecy? That makes Improper Use look like amateurs."

He nodded. "Yeah. You're right. Unfortunately, I didn't think of that angle until it was too late." Dane grimaced at himself. "I was an idiot."

"How come?"

"I put my theory about Zabini hiding as a Muggle to Madam Churlish before I asked her for the historical case records I need – the ones MLE have on Zabini's death. Only now she's decided that what I'm suggesting must mean I'm totally useless at my job and, by the way, those records will not leave MLE's jurisdiction. Sent me on my way with a flea in my ear."

Hermione frowned. She'd developed a modicum of respect for Churlish over recent weeks, in spite of the woman's sharp tongue. It seemed that even the better leaders of the Ministry were not immune to the political urge to cover one's backside and hoard one's power.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I don't think she'd give those records to me if I asked for them. Especially after I lost my temper with her last night."

"Actually I thought she was pretty gracious about that."

"So did I."

"So – will you help me?" Dane had something of a hangdog expression. "Just another set of eyes. An informed second opinion."

"I don't see why not," Hermione said. "I suppose Churlish would rather you talked to me than someone who isn't already in on things."

"That's what I figured. And? You're smart. I like smart."

Hermione smiled at the compliment, though the memory of Dane's proposition – polite though it had been – made her slightly wary.

"So when do you want to do this?" she asked.
"This evening? I'd ask you to come by the office if you have some free time, but Fawley will get defensive. She likes to feel important. A member of the Golden Trio dropping by to confab with one of her plebs? That will not go down well."

"I'm busy this evening, I'm afraid," she said.

"All evening?" Dane sighed. "Okay, tomorrow evening, then?"

Wednesdays were curry-nights, and Hermione still had some fence-mending to do with Harry and Ron. Still, Blaise Zabini was in trouble and time might well be of the essence. Should he be placed in extra danger because of Hermione's personal life?

"You know what?" she said. "I might have some time later on. And since you're one of the few wizards I know with a mobile phone, I can call you. Check your messages after nine, something like that. I'll let you know if I can come by, okay?"

Dane sighed relief. "That'd be great. Until I can convince Churlish to put some resource on the evidence I've discovered, I might as well be pissing into the wind."

Hermione smiled. Then she screwed up her nose. Coarse directness was all well and good, but sometimes the imagery was a little too vivid.

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After her DADA lesson, Hermione detoured to Flourish and Blotts to collect her order for *My Northern Lights*: the travel-based autobiography that she didn't really need anymore, at least in the context of her snagberry investigation. Still, she'd placed the order, and it was hard to view any book as entirely needless. It'd probably be an interesting read.

She was tempted to stroll around Diagon Alley for a while, since Tuesdays also seemed to be the day that Snape ran errands. In the end, she decided against. She didn't want to think of herself as a stalker. Better to prepare for this evening's meeting.

She went home and began to write her report. Actually, she ended up writing two: one of them shamelessly, embarrassingly complete, for her own eyes only, and then one with significant redactions. She'd already agreed with Gloria and Joseph how much to include about them both. There were other things she couldn't possibly submit to Churlish: her presence in Knockturn Alley when Snape was attacked, for instance. At least the seedy-looking wizard who'd been set up as a distraction had not been found. She'd got lucky, there, she supposed.

With each line of her report, as she condensed two weeks of research into something coherent, she was able to review all the events and discoveries that had convinced her of Snape's guilt. Set out like this, Hermione felt reassured. She hadn't been seeing things. She hadn't been trying to make stuff up. All her suspicions had been rational. All her reasoning had been sound.

It had just been wrong.

Now she knew that the real culprit was someone else, it wasn't much of a leap to return to an earlier theory: Snape had also figured out someone was stealing from the hospital, and he had been investigating the problem in much the same way she had been. This explained a lot of the evidence, including the myriad ways in which their research had converged.

Of course, she'd discarded this theory a week ago for good reasons. There were noteworthy plot-holes, like that timing discrepancy: how had Snape been tipped off about this sinister plot weeks in advance of the thefts even starting? And why had he been so angry with her? Most of all, she
wanted to know why he had threatened Joseph Montague behind the Leaky Cauldron.

On the plus side, at least she could go ahead and ask those questions, now.

Harry was due home around six. She decided that an early dinner would be in order, since she didn't anticipate Snape sitting down happily to break bread with them. Harry was the cook, but he didn't tend to go to any creative lengths on weekdays. The Auror apprenticeship programme was working Harry and Ron quite hard.

In the corner of the pantry was a former Hogwarts trunk donated by George that had been enchanted with a permanent frost spell. It was their magical equivalent of a chest freezer. Hermione opened it up and rummaged. She pulled out the remains of some Bolognese sauce Harry had whipped up a week or so back, and unfroze it with a swift charm that beat the hell out of a microwave. Then, because Harry liked cooking done the non-magical way, she dumped the sauce in a pan to reheat and went hunting through the pantry shelves for pasta of some kind.

Harry and Ron came down into the kitchen just in time to watch her swearing with colourful zest at the pan of spaghetti that could not seem to decide whether it wanted to boil so fiercely that it erupted like a volcano or just sit there, barely at a simmer, ignoring the flame beneath like it wasn't even there.

Harry gently took the wooden spoon she'd been hitting against the stovetop in order to make clear her dissatisfaction. He turned her shoulder and pushed her towards the table. She got the message and went to sit down.

"I was trying to be helpful," she said crossly.

"'Mione, we're your friends," Ron said. "Please trust to our good intentions when we tell you never to be helpful in a kitchen."

"I don't understand," she grumbled. "I can brew potions. Why can't I boil pasta?"

Ron slung an arm around her shoulders and gave her a half-hug. "Don't worry," he said. "Some skills are so rare, they only manifest in chosen ones."

Harry, who now had the pasta pan boiling under perfect control and who had even wiped up the dried-in mess of three volcano-eruptions of spaghetti water on the stove, flicked them both the V's without even turning around. Ron snorted a laugh and went to sort out some water for the table.

For a while, as the two boys – men, now, she knew she should call them – finished getting their dinner ready, throwing jokes and comments around, Hermione just sat there, basking in her sense of rightness and belonging. She knew what had been happening, now. She saw it so clearly, it was hard to work out how she'd missed the truth.

Things had been changing. She'd been frightened of losing her two closest friends as their paths inevitably diverged. So she'd tried to take what control she could, and she'd chosen to let it happen. She'd distanced herself from Harry and Ron, quite deliberately, because it seemed like a preferable option to standing there, helpless, watching them move away from her without so much as a backwards glance.

Recognising this, she couldn't even claim that they hadn't noticed. They'd tried to stop her. Harry had even said the words: 'Stop pushing us away!' He and Ron had shown far more emotional awareness than she had.

"I am such a monumental idiot," she said, in a moment of quiet.
Harry turned from the stove and fixed her with a knowing look. Then he turned back to the cooking. "Yep," he said lightly.


"You would," Hermione agreed.

He turned to her, surprised. "Yeah? All masterful and with rippling biceps and a robe that had tantalisingly slipped off my shoulder?"

"Silent and still, is what I was thinking," Hermione deadpanned.

Harry barked a laugh. "Also you'd be a lot easier to keep fed."

"Good point. Sod statues. When do we eat?"

"Five minutes. Grate some cheese."

Hermione stood up.

"Not you," Harry said to the stove. "Ron. And wash your hands first."

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After they'd eaten and cleared up, Harry and Ron read through the initial draft of her redacted report.

"I take it the bloke you followed up to Chalk Farm didn't do us the favour of showing up for work today," Harry said.

"No sign of Walsh at St Mungo's this morning, according to Joseph Montague. But they've tracked his activity in the long-term storage area through his wand, and come up with a pattern that matches all of the known thefts."

Ron said, "How come it took so long? To see the pattern, I mean."

"Mainly because the wand-monitoring system was throwing up the same consistent group of names for every habitat that was involved. There was no reason for one name to pop out."

Not entirely true, of course. The name 'Severus Snape' had popped. Quite a lot, in fact. But that was a discussion for later, with the man himself. Hopefully in private.

"I s'pose our thief was competent enough to make sure he timed his access to merge with a crowd," Ron agreed. "I mean, he'd be a bit crap otherwise."

"And Joseph was the only person checking the records, anyway," Hermione said. She didn't add that Joseph had stopped doing so after a frightening encounter in an alley behind the Leaky Cauldron. There were elements to her investigation that Harry and Ron didn't need to know about.

"No one else noticed what was going on?" Harry put in. "I mean, the other people who work there, they didn't notice someone was stealing stuff?"

"Apparently not."

"Why would they?" Ron said. He looked up from the page he was reading. "I mean, there's, what,
four dedicated herbologists, yeah?” He waited for Hermione's nod. "One of them sees evidence of some unexpected harvesting, what do they think?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "That one of their colleagues has done it. Right."

"Seems a more likely explanation than 'sinister potions conspiracy'. Especially since it's happening when the hospital is playing host to a Lost Seventh Potions course. Good excuse, that, for extra ingredients getting harvested."

Harry nodded. "So how did this Montague bloke work it out, then?"

Hermione smiled. "He's got a thing for the snagberry bush."

Ron passed his current piece of paper to Harry and picked up the next in the pile. "I take it the storage level's wand system will no longer allow Gustiver Walsh access."

"His wand is no longer registered for the area. If he wants to sneak back in next month and grab some more haliwinkles, he'll need to use someone else's wand, else he'll trip an alarm system." She sighed. "Of course, if I hadn't given myself away last night, Walsh and Zabini would be in custody by now."

"Don't care," Harry said shortly. "I'll swap that scenario for one where you always know if your mum and dad are in trouble, any day of the week."

"Me too," Ron said.

Hermione considered. "Yes. Actually – me three."

"Explain to me again why your friend the Healer didn't report the thefts to the hospital high-ups when she first found out," Ron said, after he'd read a bit further.

"Politics. Joseph had been in trouble before, no fault of his own, and there's a member of the board at the hospital who has it in for him. Gloria wanted more information before the hospital launched an investigation that might have settled happily on a scapegoat."

Ron glanced over the accompanying notes and grunted his understanding.

Harry said, "Have you noticed how politics is the new Voldemort?"

"Actually, I think it might be one of the oldest Voldemorts," Ron suggested.

They all nodded at that.

"Speaking of politics," Hermione said, "I saw Dane Booth at lunch at the Ministry."

"The guy from Muggle Liaison?" Ron said. "The Aussie?"

"New Zealander, so don't let him hear you say that. But yes. He's been struggling with his side of the investigation. His boss is useless, he isn't allowed to consult with his colleagues, and Madam Churlish isn't being very supportive."

Harry nodded. "Doesn't surprise me. She was miffed with Officer Vernon last night, just for calling Muggle Liaison in. I think she's a bit of a despot. Likes it to be her good idea, otherwise she likes it swept under the rug."

"What are we supposed to do about it?" Ron said. "Churlish made it clear we're not part of the
"Of course she did," Harry said. "We're still the Golden Trio. The shiny hasn't worn off yet. Last thing MLE wants is for their criminal investigation to get solved because of us."

Hermione hadn't even thought of it like that. Perhaps she wasn't very good at politics. "I suppose," she said, thinking aloud as she followed Harry's idea along to its conclusion, "Shacklebolt doesn't need us taking credit for this one. It isn't good for the Ministry to look like it's dependent on a bunch of teenagers."

"No," Ron agreed. "And it would be a fair point."

Harry said, "So if we help, we'll just have to tell them that we don't need any credit."

Ron frowned. "Except, you know, any of the bits that make me look really good. Those we should mention."

Hermione said, "Ron," in her reproving voice.

Ron smirked. "Joke! Look, it's a nice idea, Harry, but it doesn't work like that. We can say we don't need credit, but anyone in political power won't believe us. Credit is currency."

"Plus, Shacklebolt's concerns aren't about perception, they're about substance," Hermione said. "He needs a Ministry capable of doing its job in all departments without the three of us stepping up when things get tricky."

They all nodded.

"God, what is it about us?" she wondered.

"We're just that good," Ron said.

"We're just that high-profile," Harry corrected. "Look – Hermione got the Muggle-Worthy Excuse stuff thrown her way because of her job, but she got the job because – high-profile."

"Thanks a lot," she muttered.

"Not saying you didn't deserve it, not saying you're no good at it, I'm just saying – it wouldn't have been offered to you if you weren't high-profile."

Hermione nodded. She didn't have to like the point for it to be true.

Ron said, "It's not just that we're well known, though. We're different – those public personas. I mean, do you two feel it as well? The weird sort of double-self thing?"

Harry frowned. "I have absolutely no idea what you're on about."

"Yeah, well, that's 'cause I didn't put it very well." Ron frowned. "Okay, so...there's sort of your actual self, and then there's a mirror image. But it's a weird mirror, it's all warped, blowing up some bits of you and shrinking other bits away into nothing. And, er, the image is the thing other people see." He nodded to himself. "That's what I mean. I think." He leaned over the table, as if he was trying to express something that had suddenly struck him as important. "Like at Auror training. You know how it's been, mate – those early weeks, anyway. We were famous. Couldn't help it. We just were. And all the apprentices who didn't already know us...and actually some of the ones who did know us, too – they sort of fell into two camps. Some were star-struck and
"gushy, the others were all standoffish and 'who the fuck do you think you are?'"

"Oh yes? Which camp did Mariana fall into?" Hermione asked, intrigued.

"Oh, neither. She came up to us on the first day, shook our hands and told us we'd done a top-notch job, thanks very much, then she put me on my arse with this insane tipping hex during our first defensive magic assessment." A dewy-eyed look came over him as he sighed with the memory. "She's as fast on the cast as I've ever seen. She's brilliant."

Hermione smirked. "What a difference seven years makes, eh?" She caught Harry's eye and they grinned together.

Ron frowned. "Um...?"

"Last time a girl showed you up in class, you said mean things and nearly got her eaten by a troll," Harry pointed out.

"Oh. Right." Ron rolled his eyes. "So I'm less of a twat, these days. Isn't that a good thing?"

"An excellent thing," Hermione agreed. "And by the way, I get what you're saying. About the dissonance between our self-perception and the perceptions of others."

Ron squinted, then shrugged. "Right. That's exactly what I meant. Probably."

Harry tutted at Ron's unconvincing attempt to play stupid. "I thought it was just me," he admitted. "I'm glad it isn't. Makes me feel better."

Hermione was thinking about that odd exchange she'd had with Joseph Montague yesterday evening, when he'd told her he could never be any use to a *bona fide* hero. Now she came to think about it, lots of other people did the same thing: peppered the conversation with references to her actions during the war. Having people define her by the more dramatic and public events in her life was hardly a surprise, she supposed, but it was still disconcerting.

"Most of the time, I'm oblivious to it, I think," Hermione admitted. "Which is probably a good thing, because otherwise it would drive me up the wall. But every now and then I realise that the Hermione Granger other people see is a person I barely recognise."

"It's still you," Ron said. "It's just the bits you never really focus on." He sniffed. "You can't blame people for being more likely to remember you bursting out of Gringotts on the back of a dragon than for your skill at colour-coded filing."

"Filing skills are important," Hermione said primly.

"But they're not that great a photo-opportunity," Ron said. "Dragons, on the other hand..."

"Which brings us back to high-profile," Harry said. "I mean, why on earth did you *think* Healer Montague asked you for help?"

Hermione felt a bit peeved. "Well, I don't know! We've been friends since she stuck my finger back on, last June. She knew I was a bit of a bookworm; she needed some research doing. Why wouldn't she have asked?"

Harry said, "A bookworm. Fair enough. But you're all that and more. The three of us, collectively, we're the Golden Trio. But you? You're the brains of the operation. You were at the heart of every headline we ever generated. Ron and me, we wouldn't have lasted a single
Hogwarts term without you. And everyone knows it."

"I am no longer comfortable with this discussion," Hermione declared. "This house is my safe place. When I am here, I am ordinary, non-heroic, useless-in-the-kitchen Hermione. I refuse to be anything else, and I demand that you stop making me feel weird."


"Hey, that could be your statue," Ron said. "Hermione Granger, reclining upon a plinth of books."

Hermione ignored him. To Harry, she said, "But what you're really saying is – the way we've got mixed up in all this stuff? It's my own fault, basically."

Harry shrugged. "Well, not exactly. You didn't ask to be high-profile. You just are."

Ron said, "With one shoulder of your robe tantalisingly draped low across your oof."

Hermione, having elbowed Ron very hard, got up from the kitchen table. "I am going to wash my face and brush my hair. And if either of you make any comments about how we are expecting Severus Snape very soon and I'm being obvious, I will punch you on the nose."

She was out the door and on the first step up to the ground floor when she heard Ron say, "Next time I'm bringing Mariana. She'll protect me."

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Hermione smoothed her hands over her T-shirt, checked her fly, took a deep breath and then opened the front door. She smiled the smile that she had just practised in the bathroom mirror after brushing her teeth.

"Hello Severus," she said.

The smile didn't seem to work. He waited for her to step to one side in invitation and then marched past her into the hall. "Let's get this done, shall we?" he muttered.

Okay, she thought. So yesterday evening had been less a reconciliation and more a temporary stay, had it? She looked after him. He'd stopped at the top of the stairs and was looking back impatiently.

She sighed. "We're in the kitchen."

He grunted and made his way downstairs.

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"This is largely satisfactory," Snape said, having read over her annotated draft and then snorted at the efforts Harry and Ron had been putting together post-dinner. "Play up the intellectual puzzle more. Churlish will accept your contribution if she can view you as an egghead who got carried away with her own cleverness."

Hermione felt irked. Surely what mattered was the actual contribution, not the way someone could spin it in Ministry meetings to make themselves look better? "Yes, of course," she grumbled. "That's certainly my overriding sense of the last few weeks. How clever I've been."

"Monumental idiot," Ron reminded her.
"Punch on nose," she retorted.

Snape ignored them, as he had ignored all attempts at humour, banter, friendly gratitude (since Harry and Ron remained impressed with the way Snape had stood up to Churlish the night before) and reminders of shared moments (those from Hermione, with what she hoped was enough subtlety to slip them under the radar).

"Healer Montague is happy to include the information about her son?" Snape asked.

"Yes. More importantly, Joseph is himself. He feels rotten about my involvement. Says that if it hadn't been for him then they could have reported the thefts weeks ago."

"Indeed." Snape deigned to lift his nose out of the papers he held and look across the table at her. "The board member who dislikes him?"

She checked her notebook. "Amanda Crossley. I, er, didn't think including the name in the report would be sensible."

"No. People don't like it when they are singled out and accused," he mused, with an edge to his tone.

"I'd imagine not," Hermione agreed, increasingly frustrated and worried. While she could hardly blame Snape for his resentment, she had no idea why it was materialising now rather than last night.

He sniffed. "Mr Montague will be asked why he didn't formally report his concerns. If this business with his past at Verdant Acres is investigated, will it come to Veritaserum?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't have thought so, since the threat of that was what kept both Crossleys from pursuing their revenge."

Snape grunted. "Let us hope you are right."

"Um – why's this an issue?" Ron asked. Because as well as being an undiplomatic idiot he was also sharper than most people gave him credit for.

Sharper than Hermione, in any case. Because it was only when Ron asked the question that she realised Snape was concerned about MLE looking too closely at Joseph Montague's part in events. Snape had, after all, assailed and threatened Joseph behind the Leaky Cauldron. It was one of those pieces to the puzzle she had not yet been able to make fit.

Snape's eyes were on her. He wanted to find out how much she had told Harry and Ron.

"It's an issue," she said to Ron, "because Joseph's difficulties are the reason I got involved in the first place. Churlish will want to prove that decision was flawed, since she's really not keen on enthusiastic amateurs. And if she gets sidetracked, trying to poke holes in the evidence, we spend less time finding Blaise Zabini."

Ron accepted the argument. Snape blinked at her then looked away.

While she was on the front foot, she added, "Madam Churlish never found her witness to your adventure in Knockturn Alley, I take it?"

Snape's expression grew considering. "Witness?" He glanced at Harry and Ron, then back at her.
"She told me some clerk in the Coffin House claimed to have seen the whole thing. Noticed another wizard present. Some seedy-looking chap, apparently."

Snape's eyebrow lifted. "Did she indeed?"

Harry said, "Shacklebolt never mentioned this. Who was the other bloke?"

"Not a clue," Snape drawled. "Nor have I any idea why Madam Churlish might be in touch with a clerk in the Coffin House. The business ceased trading in May. The owner fled the country, given his rather conspicuous sympathies with the Death Eaters. I believe he is currently in Hungary."

Ron huffed a laugh. "Sounds like one of the Knockturn-ers has been leading Madam Churlish up the garden path. Not for the first time, either, I reckon."

"I suppose that must be it," Hermione said. But she was looking at Snape, and he was looking at her, and there was obviously something she was missing. She shook her head and went on, "Do you have any objections to my summary of how Mrs Trelore came to my parents' house last night?"

"Difficult to see how that is a problem," Snape said, "given that Mrs Trelore will presumably explain to Madam Churlish what she explained to us."

"Yes, I know, but I suppose I'm asking whether you're bothered about how Narcissa Malfoy's involvement might reflect back on her."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Mrs Malfoy made a decision. She chose to use a friend who was in trouble to pursue an agenda of her own. If there are consequences to that choice, that really is her lookout."

Harry said darkly, "Fucking Malfoys."

"Oh, indeed, Potter. Pure evil, all of them." His dryness made Harry glance up, but it was Snape's knowing look at Hermione that shocked her. She read the subtext in his eyes: Snape was aware that she and Draco had achieved a kind of armistice. He'd also worked out that Harry and Ron were unaware of this.

Hermione felt a chill. Snape was telling her that he knew something that could damage her. He was threatening her again, in his own understated way, and she had no idea what she'd done to deserve it.

Ron cleared his throat. Everyone looked at him. "We've still got to explain the coincidence of Snape being at Banstead when Zabini's mum showed up."

Snape waved a careless hand. "Sometimes coincidences happen."

Harry said, "No, Ron's right. We said last night that you went with Hermione because you happened to be here. We didn't say why you were here."

There was a moment of quiet as everyone thought about this.

"I've no intention of revealing your presence in the coastal habitat last night," she eventually said to Snape.

"But you should," Snape decided. "I'll be including that in my own report. The wand-monitoring system will reveal I was there, should anyone choose to check it."
"I thought of that," she said. "Just because you were there doesn't mean I saw you."

Snape scoffed. "And how do you explain that your pursuit of Gustiver Walsh was more successful than mine?"

"Basic good fortune. I was under an invisibility cloak. You were Disillusioned. You needed to wait for Walsh to clear the habitat before you could make your way out, or you'd be discovered."

Ron tut-tutted. "I can't believe you were both working on the same project without knowing it!"

Snape ignored Ron. He nodded at Hermione. "I suppose that works. I was too far behind once Walsh departed the level."

"Right," agreed Hermione. "But you must have realised I was there too. Somehow. Maybe because when I followed Walsh out you noticed the footprints."

"And I'm supposed to recognise you from your footprints, outside of any other context? Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not being ridiculous," she insisted. "You saw the footprints and you knew that they were being made by someone wearing an invisibility cloak. Leading to an obvious inference."

"Be easier to say the wind whipped the cloak about and Snape saw Hermione before she put it back in place," Ron said.

"Whatever! It doesn't matter what gave me away, all that matters is that it explains why Severus went to Grimmauld Place to ask Harry what the hell was going on." She looked at Snape. "Which is why you were here when I arrived, and hence, you came with me to Banstead."

Harry said, "Sounds plausible. And I'd go with the wind pulling the hood free. I mean, sorry, Hermione, but you're a bit crap with the whole stealth thing."

"I was good enough to find a supervillain's lair," she tossed back.

"It doesn't explain the snails," Ron said.

"What doesn't?" Hermione asked, confused.

"MLE will have catalogued all the stuff at the basement flat now. And since it was a box of stolen sea snails that led Hermione there, they'd expect to find them at the address. 'Specially since, you know, you can't Apparate out while you're holding them."

Hermione shrugged. "Yes, that's true, but there was a tube station less than five minutes' walk away. One person Apparates out with Blaise as a Side-Along, the other heads for the underground. It isn't exactly a locked-room mystery."

Ron took a moment to process this, then nodded. "Right. Hadn't thought of that."

"Not that they needed to do that, of course, since they didn't actually have the snails. So. Do I finally get to learn the fate of the haliwinkles?" Hermione asked.

Snape looked at her, put the papers he'd been hiding behind down, sighed.

"I followed Gustiver Walsh into the changing rooms. You did not. Walsh checked to see if he was alone, which he thought he was, then he opened his satchel and admired his box of snails. He tried to cast a Patronus. I would imagine he was attempting to report his success to his employer. Of
course, the proximity of the haliwinkles prevented him from casting successfully. He realised this after a mere six attempts."

Harry hissed a laugh. Ron rolled his eyes.

"At this point," Snape went on, "he moved away from where he had placed his satchel. He looked at the main door and decided to define some cover, so he walked through into the shower area. Since this was likely to give me perhaps a minute alone with the satchel, I decided that it was worth removing the snails from his possession. At the very least, it would mean another four weeks before De Morte Magicae could be brewed."

"You switched them out," Hermione said.

"I Transfigured a comb someone had left on a bench into a box that matched the one containing the haliwinkles. I swapped them over."

"At that point you wouldn't have been able to re-Disillusion," she pointed out.

"Really? If only you'd been there to state the blatantly obvious. Of course I could not Disillusion. So I went to hide in a lavatory stall."

Hermione ignored his sneer and considered the logistics. "So you couldn't follow Walsh out. Not immediately."

"No. I deemed the retrieval of the haliwinkles more important."

"Well, of course it was. If you hadn't taken the chance, we might still have lost Walsh while we followed him, and then he'd've had all the ingredients."

"Again, you state the blatantly obvious. I could not locate you once I risked the corridor again. I had hoped that in my obvious absence you might have waited."

Ron snorted a laugh. "Yeah, that sounds just like Hermione."

Hermione didn't take her eyes off Snape. "So when you realised I'd headed out after Walsh you tried to catch up?"

"I could not have done so covertly. And I preferred not to be noticed in reception, four hours after I had been seen leaving St Mungo's after my class."

"Then you'll have stashed the haliwinkles somewhere first." She thought. "They're in the potions lab. You could make it there from the male changing rooms unseen. You know the room." She spotted the sneer before it grew to fruition and said, "Yeah, yeah, I know, blatantly obvious."

Snape looked away. "I considered disposing of the creatures down the hatch, but it seemed a waste. So I placed the box in a cupboard at the front of the lab, behind some supplies. I checked this afternoon. They were still there, so I returned them to the habitat."

"A friend to all crustaceans," Ron said with an airy sigh.

"Gastropods," Hermione corrected. She was still looking at Snape. "So once you'd hidden the snails, then you tried to follow?"

He sighed. He did not appreciate her insistence on the detail, but she was trying to remind him how worried he'd been about her. She'd seen the look on his face when she'd Apparated back here
last night. He had cared about her then. If he was having a snitty evening, he'd damn well have to put up with a Hermione Granger who fought back.

"I left the hospital under Disillusionment. By this time Walsh had been gone for a good five minutes or more, so I did the only thing I could." He paused, arched an eyebrow. "No suggestions this time?"

"At the risk of stating the obvious? If it was me, I'd have assumed Walsh was heading for Diagon or Knockturn on foot. So I'd have walked to the junction with Charing Cross Road and then headed for the Leaky. Hoping I might catch up."

Snape gave her a grudging nod. "I did not see Walsh, though I walked all the way through to the far end of Knockturn Alley. At that point I had to concede that I had lost his trail."

"So you came here, figuring this is where I would come once I ran out of ideas. Or ran into trouble."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "And, to my astonishment, I discovered that Potter and Weasley were also here, worried for your safety and yet unaware of what you were up to." He turned his head, as if inviting explanation, but before she could say anything he added, "Are there some trust issues that need resolving, perhaps? Keeping secrets can be dangerous work."

Hermione took the time to breathe, and checked her own anger levels. They were simmering nicely. Still, she should have known that when Severus Snape was challenged on his snittiness, the last thing he was likely to do was concede.

"Ah," she said, surprised by the steadiness of her tone. "Escalation. I'm getting good at that."

She noticed that Harry and Ron had gone very still. Snape glared at her for long moments, before – all of a rush – he broke eye contact and turned away.

"I've no idea what that means," he lied, and stood up. "If there are no other queries about these reports, I shall be on my way."

"I've got queries," Hermione said, surprised to note that she was on her feet too, though she couldn't remember her brain sending the signal to her legs. "A few answers too. And a really grovelly apology. Want me to do it in front of Harry and Ron?"

Snape looked at her as if he couldn't quite believe she was pushing this. She stood her ground, even when Ron raised a half-hearted hand and said, "Um, I'd rather be excused, if that's okay?"

Hermione tried to soften her expression. "Severus, you can't just--"

"I can do what I like," he said sharply. "Do not presume on my regard for you."

"I'm not presuming anything. I just want to straighten things out!"

Snape stalked around the kitchen table but she moved to intercept him at the doorway. He hesitated in front of her.

"What's happened?" she pleaded. "Last night we laughed together!"

His eyes blazed at that. She hadn't even realised how furious he was. When he replied, he spoke so quietly and dangerously it was like a knife sliding between ribs:
"I'm well aware that I can't stop you laughing," he told her.

While she was still trying to make sense of that, he pushed past her and walked quickly up the steps.

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"You're earlier than I was expecting," Dane said, as Hermione stepped out of the fireplace.

"Turned out I had more spare time this evening than I realised." She tried not to look too unhappy. It wasn't Dane's fault that Severus Snape was a riddle wrapped in an enigma wrapped in a what-the-fucking-hell-is-going-on-with-you?

"Tea?" he offered.

"No thanks."

"Coffee?"

She narrowed her eyes. "What kind of coffee?"

"It isn't instant, if that's what you're worried about." He smirked at her dubious look. "I'll go charm the pot on. Make yourself at home."

As it happened, Dane's preferred coffee blend was very drinkable. Hermione sat at his small dining table and read through his notes, checking every footnote and reference, sipping coffee and appreciating the distraction from other more personal matters.

"Is it odd that there's no photo-ID?" she asked, as she reviewed everything Dane had managed to assemble about Nicholas Beatty, the owner of the Regent's Park Road flat.

"These days, yeah. Anyone who's applied for a passport in the last five years has their photo on record. You probably know Muggle driving licences are moving from paper to photocard. There's other examples."

"So – not outright suspicious, but unusual that you haven't found an image of this man?"

"I'd say so."

She read some more.

"The owner of the ground floor flat above the basement – he's been there almost four years," she said. "Did you speak to him this morning? I know you said you were going round."

"I did. The guy wasn't there, so I went back after work. Caught him around five thirty."

Hermione looked across at Dane. "How did you play it?"
"I said I was trying to track down my Uncle Luigi. Dark hair, Italian, scar across his eye. I'd heard he might have been renting the flat below, only there was no one answering the door."

"The neighbour was helpful?"

"Oh yeah. I spun a sob-story about how my uncle had been cut off by the family, but my mum had passed on and I was desperate to reach out." Dane shrugged. "People forget you're being nosy when you start talking about death."

"Tricksy. So what did he say?"

"He said it's London, so he doesn't know his neighbours all that well. But the guy downstairs – who I guess we can now call Niccolo Zabini – has been living in the basement flat for around eighteen months. Quiet, unobtrusive for the most part. There was one incident a few months ago when there was a loud bang in the middle of the night. The guy from the ground floor flat, he went outside then checked the basement flat, worried someone was trying to break in. Knocked on the door, kept knocking, shouted out in case someone was in trouble, announced he was going to call the police. That made Zabini answer the door, quick sharp. And the upstairs neighbour? He said the flat stank like rotten eggs, and that Zabini was all sooty, hair spiked up, and his shirt even looked torn."

"Huh," said Hermione, thinking about how Neville Longbottom used to look in those Potions lessons where he managed to blow up his cauldron.

"Zabini told him it was nothing to worry about, he'd just had an argument with his pressure cooker. Sent the neighbour back to bed. Only the neighbour got to worrying the guy downstairs had been futzing with his gas pipework or something. Like when people try to disconnect the meter from the supply, you know?" Hermione nodded. "So he contacted the owner of the flat – got their address via the Land Registry. Wrote a letter expressing concern. Got a letter back a couple of weeks later from a Mr Nicholas Beatty, thanking him for his diligence and assuring him he'd been by to check out the flat and it was all fine – just a misunderstanding."

Hermione considered the story. "Could be taken at face value."

"Yeah."

"Or could be evidence that our suspect isn't a very good potioneer and is his own landlord."

"Could be that too."

She read some more.

"Beatty installs a new tenant every two years or so," she noted.

"Yeah."

"And the one before 'Uncle Luigi', as you called him, was a woman."

"Yeah."

Hermione turned the page. "Oh. You've got a picture of her."

"Yup. Harriet Worell. Works for some media service on Great Portland Street. Thirty-six years old, married just three months ago, lives in Greenwich."
"Not a disguise, then."

"It's a fucking good one if it is. Ah, um – 'scuse me."

"Please don't bother asking, my language is nothing to write hymns about. Okay, so the tenant before Uncle Luigi was an actual tenant."

"Looks like."

"And before that?"

"Lucas Klager. German guy, doing his PhD at UCL. He's back in Freiburg now."

Hermione turned to Dane and raised an eyebrow in question.

He nodded. "Another genuine one. But for the two years before the German guy arrived, Philippe Cortez. Another handsome Mediterranean."

"No scar?"

"No one mentioned it, when I checked. Could have been hidden with a glamour. Could have been pre-scar. Could have been an entirely innocent and coincidental handsome Mediterranean."

Hermione frowned. "Do you think it was Zabini?"

"See, now, Cortez is like Uncle Luigi. Not much information on either of them. Much harder to research than the other tenants."

"Same person, then. Niccolo Zabini."

"That's my theory," Dane agreed.

She shook her head. "Why? Why change things around like this?"

"I don't know. I've never tried to live under the radar. Maybe to avoid getting complacent? Change things up from time to time in case someone gets suspicious?"

"Okay, but that gives us a question that needs answering."

Dane nodded. "Where does Zabini live when he isn't using the flat? Yeah. I asked myself that. And that's when things kind of got interesting."

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"So 'Nicholas Beatty' owns three properties," Hermione said, looking over the notes Dane had made.

"That's what the Land Registry has turned up so far. He doesn't live at any of them, though. His postal address is a PO Box. Phone number just rings without an answer."

"'Beatty' is a figurehead, then. For doing Muggle business."

"He's got a valid National Insurance number, a Muggle bank account, a credit history, so yeah, I'd guess so. This is the persona Zabini's put some work into creating. It's the kind of identity that'll stand up to scrutiny from mortgage lenders, conveyancing solicitors, that kind of thing."
"Okay, so talk me through these properties."

"First one bought in '82, over in Bloomsbury. It's a first floor flat, three bedrooms. Then there's the basement flat on Regent's Park Road he bought in '84 – that's a two bed. Then, most recently, a house. Big place in about two acres, five bedrooms, listed building. Ex-farmhouse, with a converted stables. Lots of space, lots of privacy. He bought it in '94."

Hermione looked at the address. "In Dorset."

"Kingston Lacy, not far from Wimborne."

"So not very far from the home of Jossinia Trelore."

"Yeah, I noticed that."

Hermione looked at Dane. "This is very suggestive. Did you take this to Madam Churlish yet?"

"I did, late this afternoon. I only got the Land Registry search data back at about four o'clock – when I'm at work I have to nip out to Charing Cross Library for any computer stuff. Soon as I saw the Dorset connection I went straight to Improper Use. Hey, by the way – is something going on? Something else, I mean. Every time I've been on level two today, people have been racing round like blue-arsed flies."

"Have they? No idea. I was on level five for my classes, apart from lunchtime."

"Well, anyway. I suppose I was lucky Churlish even gave me five minutes. You know. After our earlier meeting."

"What did she say?"

"She conceded that this place in Dorset was worth a look and said she'd take a patrol to check it out this evening. But I got the feeling she's still resisting the idea. She said that even if Zabini has been hiding away as a Muggle all these years, how the hell did he get the kind of money to buy properties?"

Hermione tutted. "The kind of man who thinks De Morte Magicae is a good idea? He's hardly going to balk at a spot of burglary. *Alohomora* yourself into a cash-rich business, like an off-licence or pub or a bookie. Disillusion to avoid the alarm systems, *Stupefy* if someone comes sniffing, Apparate once you've grabbed what you need. Rinse and repeat."

"I'm concerned by how much thought you've given this," Dane said. "Is this how you kept you and your mates going when you were on the run?"

"God, no. Partly because we avoided all built-up areas and partly because, you know, stealing is wrong. I mean, I know I robbed Gringotts but that was different."

"Churlish mentioned Gringotts, actually. Said that Zabini would have needed access to funds to set this all up, but Gringotts would have required wand recognition. Kind of awkward since he was supposed to be dead. Fake Muggle identities are fine as they go, but they won't get you past the goblins."

Hermione sighed. "Okay, I get that Churlish doesn't like this evidence, but at least she's going to take a look at this place in Kingston Lacy. What about the Bloomsbury flat?"

Dane shook his head. "After how things went with Churlish? I went straight to Officer Vernon..."
with that one. Told him this might be another flat owned by our suspect. He agreed to check it out and took a colleague, but he Floo'ed me an hour or so back to say the place is currently occupied by three generations of the same Indian family, all of whom seemed very nice but less than wizardly." Dane shrugged. "He got offered samosas, though, so it wasn't all bad."

"Ah. Genuine tenants again."

"Exactly. Unfortunately Officer Vernon will be filing a report, so Madam Churlish is going to find out I went behind her back. If she doesn't know already." He sighed. "I'm guessing that was a bad call on my part. But what could I do? If the son, Blaise, if he's still being held somewhere then the clock is ticking."

Hermione nodded. "I don't know what's going on with Churlish, but I suspect it's got something to do with politics. I take it you still can't get a hold of the MLE records on Niccolo Zabini's so-called death?"

"No. Not my area of the case, apparently."

"Why do you want them?"

"Dates. Any family records from Italy. Zabini's history – I don't even know what the bloke did for a job when he was living here and married to the Trelore woman. Who, by the way – wow."

"She's very beautiful," Hermione acknowledged. "I suppose if you knew what Niccolo Zabini did before he faked his death, you could make better guesses at what he's done since." She closed Dane's notes file. "I just wish I knew what his motives were. Even assuming he's spent sixteen years setting up fake personas and buying property and so on, why change things now? He seems to be a careful sort, planning ahead, not taking risks. But all the stuff he's been involved with of late – it's all risk. You hire a thief at the hospital and you immediately lose complete control of that part of the scheme. You recruit Blaise – same issue. Something must have changed for him. Something that triggered the switch in strategy, from passive hiding-out to aggressive attacks."

"Seems like it's mainly about this Muggle businessman, to me."

"But that's exactly my point. If he honestly wanted Philip Richmond dead or otherwise out of the picture then the man would be gone. Dealt with. Same for Mrs Trelore."

"Can't be easy, though. Watching the woman you married get swept off her feet by one of the most eligible bachelors in Britain?"

"Why? Zabini has already watched her marry four times since he 'died'. He didn't see fit to step in and involve himself back then, so wh–"

She stopped abruptly.

"What?" Dane asked.

"Why is this one different?" she said slowly, frowning at the whirling thoughts in her brain.

"Right. So – is he just super-pissed-off that the latest flame is a Muggle? Is that his issue?"

"How do we know this one is so different, though?" Hermione mused.

"Um..."
"I mean – what if he did step in? What if he involved himself in all the other marriages, except we never found out about it?"

"I don't...what are you saying?"

"It's a hell of an alibi, isn't it? Being dead at the time?"

"At what time?"

Hermione nodded to herself. "What if Jossinia Trelore was telling the god's-honest truth when she said she had nothing to do with all those dead husbands? What if it was him?"

Dane frowned at her. "Um – if he's so psychotically jealous about her being with other guys that he kills everyone who marries her, maybe he shouldn't have faked his own death and left her a widow."

She shook her head. Too many thoughts, all swirling, all smushing together without coherency. "It isn't about jealousy, it's about hatred," she said. Another stray thought: there were hate potions that could crystallise the emotion into a clinical, detached capacity for murder. "Or maybe it's about, what was it? 'Dispassionate rancour.'"

"Losing me now," Dane said.

"It's about deeds. It's about tangible actions." She sighed. "But I don't get it. It doesn't make sense. He never profited from all those dead husbands; she did."

"Right. So why do it?"

"We need to deconstruct this. Let's go back to the start. Why would Niccolo Zabini fake his own death?"

"Er, money trouble?"

Hermione barked a laugh. "So not an issue."

"Wants a fresh start with a new lover?"

"Possibly, but if so then why pay any further attention to his ex?"

"Made a bad enemy and needs to disappear?"

"Again, possibly. But why go to such lengths? He had wealth aplenty thanks to his wife's previous two husbands. So why not use those resources to pay the enemy off, or get rid of him some other way?"

"Okay, well, I've got nothing, then. Why did he fake his own death?"

Hermione shook her head. "He was either running towards something – in which case, why the obsession with what went before? Or he was running from something – something he couldn't get rid of any other way." She frowned as she thought. "Could be he's enough of a selfish prick that he simply got tired of being a husband and father."

"Divorces are easier than faked deaths."

"Divorces are relatively rare in wizarding society. But you're right. Why did he have to die rather than divorce? And why would he stick around in Muggle London all that time afterwards? To
keep an eye on his wife? To watch Blaise grow up? No, if that was what he wanted he'd have based himself in Dorset right from the get-go. What else is there?"

"Sometimes men hate their partners but can't stand the thought of them being with anyone else," Dane pointed out. "Those are the bastards that beat up women and kill their own kids because they think of them as property."


"Um – what?"

"William Goldman. Screenwriter – All the President's Men. 'Follow the money.' Basically it means when there's crime and corruption and all that stuff, if you track the money then you'll get to your bad guys."

"Oh. Right. Sort of like cui bono?" Dane nodded thoughtfully. "Doesn't seem like Zabini is struggling for money."

"No, it doesn't, does it? How much did he pay for this house in Dorset?"

"Best part of four hundred grand."

She gave a low whistle. "Mortgage?"

"No, that one was a cash purchase. Beatty still has mortgages on the two flats, though – I'm guessing the rental income services those."

"Sounds feasible, but I wouldn't have thought it would do much more, especially since he has to live somewhere too. Where did this four hundred grand come from?"

"Not a clue. Are we going off the idea that he's been robbing off-licences?"

"That might have set him up with a deposit for a flat in '82, but the outright purchase of a listed house in two acres? I'm thinking he needed to do more than rob a few offies." She looked over at Dane. "I take it you can't requisition his bank details?"

"Not without some serious memory-charm work. In Muggle terms, you need a warrant for that stuff, and I don't have the computer skills to hack bank systems. I can tell you how long he's had the account and which bank it's with, but I've no idea what's in the account at the moment."

"Hum." She thought this through. "There's two things that Jossinia Trelorde is famous for: her beauty, and her wealth."

"Right. Thanks to seven rich dead husbands."

She shrugged a shoulder. "Or, you know, six of the seven. But Zabini was the one who lasted the longest, from what I remember, and he was the one who fathered her son. Maybe he was the one she married for love, rather than money." She shook her head at all these 'maybes' and 'what ifs' and other assumptions. "It's speculation. But it isn't unthinkable that he got to like the wealth quite a lot more than he liked being a family man. Came up with a way to lose the tedious stuff but keep the perks – use his wife's famous beauty to keep milking the cash cow."

Dane put his coffee mug down. "But if Zabini's supposed to be dead, how does he get his hands on her fortune? Like Churlish said, he'd need wand-access for the vault at Gringotts."
"I don't know," Hermione said. "Which makes it one massive, clanking spanner in the works."

"Only way I can see it happening is if she's in on it. The widow. They fake his death so, like you said, he's got a rock-solid alibi. Then she gets back into the marrying-rich-guys game, he starts killing them off and they reap the proceeds, knowing that she'll always pass a Veritaserum test."

"That makes sense, logistically. But when Trelore looked at the poster last night, I didn't think she was faking her shock. It was genuine. She did not know about her ex. She thought he was long dead."

"Yeah, I saw it that way too." Dane gave a sigh. "Okay, I'm not even sure I know what you're suggesting here, but I'm guessing we need information about Niccolo Zabini, from back when he was properly alive rather than, you know, sneaky-covert-alive."

Hermione nodded. "We need MLE records on all the investigations into Mrs Trelore's husbands. We need to know about her financial set-up. And we need to know if Churlish has gone to check out this house in Dorset, because we could short-circuit the whole investigation if it turns out you've already managed to uncover Zabini's hidey-hole."

"So – what do we do now?"

"You? You've pissed off Madam Churlish enough for one day. If you're willing, just stay here and keep researching. Even if 'Nicholas Beatty' doesn't own any other properties, he might have a long-term lease, or he might have dumped Blaise somewhere and then holed up in a hotel. Or Zabini could be using one of the other pseudonyms he created – you could try those, maybe? Basically we need to know if there are any other addresses he might have fled to."

"Okay, I can work on that, but what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to beg Kingsley Shacklebolt for a favour." Hermione rolled her eyes at herself. "Like the pathetic, entitled prima donna that I am."

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She Apparated home first, and found Harry and Ron still at work on their reports for Madam Churlish.

"You okay?" Ron asked, when she came into the kitchen.

She frowned. "Don't know. My ideas are all a bit mixed up but I think I'm on to something."

A pause.

"What?" she asked.

Harry said, "He meant about Snape. Who was being an arse. And I think Ron deserves some credit for trying to be nice and supportive even though he's still totally freaked out by you fancying him."

"Oh, I see. No, I'm not all right, not about Severus. But I can't sort that out because you can only do so much on your own. Ron – thank you for your support. Sorry I've freaked you out." She took a deep breath. "I think Niccolo Zabini might have murdered all of Jossinia Trelore's husbands. Including himself. Sort of."

Harry and Ron stared at her.
Harry said, "Um."

Then Ron said, "Fucking hell, that makes sense."

"Why?"

"Well, you know, the reports. In the newspaper. All down the years, it was a recurring thing. A massive scary domestic drama. A bit of time would go by and then there'd be another death. And there'd be an investigation and people would be all, 'This is the one that finally gets her,' only they never did."

"The Prophet," Hermione said. "It's a good thought. Maybe we can get something from their archive." She looked at Ron. "She was never found guilty of anything, obviously."

"Course not. Didn't you read it y—" He stopped. "Oh. Right. Sometimes I forget you and Harry didn't grow up in my world." Ron frowned. "Pretty sure the investigations got tougher and tougher. No one could believe it wasn't her, not when the pattern was so obvious. They'd use Veritaserum, then Pensieve evidence when the law changed and it became admissible, but she never gave anything away."

Harry said, "A good Occlumens can fight the effects of Veritaserum."

Hermione added, "And there's an antidote, if you're good enough to brew it." She frowned. "No idea how Mrs Trelore is with potions, but I'm pretty sure Niccolo Zabini is a crap potioneer."

"Why?" Ron asked.

"He blows cauldrons up," she said. "Which is why he needs a brewer." She blinked rapidly as one train of thought thundered to the fore. "Which is why he recruited Blaise. Blaise isn't a potions master, but he's competent enough. He'd probably manage the recipes in Baneful Brews. I mean, I could brew them. Technically."

"But you wouldn't," Harry pointed out.

"I think I'd have to be under an Imperius," she agreed. "Point is, Blaise has enough skill. Only he started to balk at the plan when the potions got scarier. Ended up saying to hell with it. Turning his back." The train of thought whooshed past at high speed. "Which is why Niccolo Zabini tried to get a hold of Severus! He needed a competent potions brewer. Preferably someone prepared to consider something a bit morally questionable — right or wrong, Severus has a reputation. Oh, and it had to be someone Zabini had actually heard of."

"How do you mean?"

"Fairly sure he's been living as a Muggle for sixteen years," Hermione explained. "I think he dips in and out of the wizarding world, but he hasn't maintained contacts here. Or at least, not many."

"Okay, so Snape fits the bill," Ron said. "And Zabini decided to try to grab him."

"Right. Last Tuesday, in Knockturn Alley. The last day Blaise was seen by his mother. And that's because Blaise's father made a mess of trying to nab Severus, so he had to go back to plan A. Use Blaise. Only this time be more insistent. So he kidnaps his own son and gets him stashed away, tied up in that basement flat. But Blaise still refuses to help, so Zabini decides to force him into it by capturing and threatening his mother. Only she got away too, like Severus."

Ron was nodding. "I suppose that fits."
Harry said, "I wish you wouldn't call him 'Blaise'. Sounds like you're friends, or something."

"Actually I started doing it to piss him off," Hermione said. "Look, sorry, this is a tangent. I need to find out about Mrs Trelore's dead husbands. And I think she passed all the Veritaserum tests and the rest of it for one very simple reason."

"You think she's genuinely innocent of any crime," Ron said.

Hermione remembered a comment Mrs Trelore had made the previous evening at her parent's house. "She feels complicit in one of the murders, from what she said." She shook her head. "I don't have enough information."

"Let me ask this, then," Ron said. "Why do you need to know? This isn't our investigation, remember?"

"I remember." She felt a familiar surge of frustration; the way she always felt when she saw someone doing something the wrong way. "Blaise Zabini is missing and I think he's in serious trouble. And everything I'm hearing about Churlish tells me she isn't on the right track."

"That doesn't mean we should just step in," said Harry.

"Yes, I know. Politics." Hermione sighed. It didn't seem right that Blaise Zabini's life should be risked because the Ministry had yet to get its post-war act together.

Of course, it didn't seem right because it wasn't right.

And Hermione had never been one to stand by and do nothing when she could see, plainly, that something was not right.

And fine, so maybe that made her a busybody, or a backseat flyer, or a bossy bloody know-it-all. Or maybe – just maybe, in a world where capable women were not habitually denigrated for their ability – she was a decent human being who could claim intelligence and compassion to a reasonable standard, and who actually bothered to react when presented with an opportunity to do something that might help.

"We've no authority here," Harry said regretfully, oblivious to Hermione's quiet moment of decisive self-belief.

She drew her shoulders back. "When did that ever stop us before?"

Ron looked at Harry. The two of them shrugged at each other. "She's got a point, there, mate," Ron said.

"She has. A good one." Harry nodded. "When did she ever steer us wrong?"

"Cat hair in the Polyjuice," Hermione felt the need to offer.

"Again...yourself." Ron said, "Did that to yourself."

"Went after a basilisk on my own."

"Again...yourself."

"I bet there's something," Hermione said. "I get things wrong too, you know!"

"So what?" Ron shot her a lopsided grin. "You're right more often than not."
She looked at Harry. "We've both seen enough police procedurals and thrillers. Kidnappings, abductions – the chances of success diminish by the hour."

Harry nodded. "You know what, I don't care if Zabini has always been a grade-A fuckwit. You're right. We have to try."

Hermione said, "So we're agreed?"

"Agreed," said Harry.

"Definitely," said Ron.

"Good. Harry, I need those MLE records."

Harry said, "Oh, well, I'll just pop to the Ministry and get them for you." He rolled his eyes.

"Apprentice Auror, remember?"

"Shacklebolt's ear, remember?"

"What was it you called me? An abuser of celebrity?"

"Yes. Sorry. I apologise." She sighed at him. "Now will you please go and abuse your celebrity?"

"Only if you come too."

"Fine."

Ron said, "Why aren't we taking this to Madam Churlish?"

"She's busy checking out a house in Dorset that might be Zabini's lair," Hermione said. "Or she damn well should be."

"What house?" Harry asked.

"Dane does good work. Can we go?"

Harry hesitated only for a moment, then he stood up. "If I get in trouble over this I'm blaming you."

"Okay."

"No he's not," Ron said blithely, as he stood up too.

"I know."

They moved over to the staircase.

"All for one?" Harry suggested.

"One for all," Hermione agreed.

"What the fuck are you two on about now?" asked Ron.

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At a quarter to nine at night, it was late for the offices of the Acting Minister for Magic to be quite
so busy. As Hermione led Harry and Ron from the lift on level one, they passed several people darting along the main hall wearing grim expressions. Odd, for such an administrative part of the building.

"Remind me never to stand for high office," Ron said as they walked towards Shacklebolt's suite. "I'd like a job where I can go home occasionally."

Inside the reception area, they had to wait while Amadeus Drinkwater – the only wizard who now stood between the Acting Minister and any concerned citizens – finished a Floo call.

"Help you, Mr Potter?" Drinkwater finally said.

"Is he in?"

"He's in. And extremely busy." Drinkwater offered them the look that said, 'Hey, I'm on your side guys, but there's a time and a place, right?'

Harry drew breath to speak. Hermione didn't know whether he was going to state their case or withdraw gracefully. All she knew was that she'd recognised a few of the words spoken during the Floo call, so she pre-empted Harry with a comment of her own.

"Claridge's. In Mayfair. Mrs Trelore was supposed to be there last night," she said.

Drinkwater frowned, hesitated, then beckoned them around to the side of his reception counter.

"I'm right, aren't I?" Hermione pressed. "What's happening?"

"There's been an incident," he said. "Actually it happened early this morning, but the Obliviator Squad has been at the hotel all day, setting things straight. It's been a right old mess. Containing the thing was touch and go for a while."

"Is Mrs Trelore all right?" Harry asked.

Drinkwater looked uncomfortable. "This isn't something I've been cleared to talk about."

An incident. On a day Hermione didn't work. She cursed the timing of it all. "Muggle-Worthy Excuse?" she asked. "Is the committee involved?"

"Of course. But I can't just t--"

"Sorry to have bothered you," she said, and pulled Harry and Ron away from the desk.

They followed her as she led them back to the lifts and then to the atrium. Only when she was approaching the departure Floos did Harry say, "What's going on?"

"I think Mrs Trelorde has either been murdered or kidnapped," she said. "And we need to know which one. Which means I need inside information. Which means I need Lysander Crocus."

"Oh, your friend with the horrific waistcoats?" Ron said.

Hermione threw Floo powder into the fireplace and spoke her colleague's address. When she heard his voice offer a hello, she leaned in to the grate and said:

"Lysander? How are you fixed for visitors?"

"Oh! Dearheart. I'm not naked, if that's what you mean."
"Naked might be better than those waistcoats," Harry muttered.

"Naked can be arranged, if you're handsome enough," Lysander called back flirtatiously, making Harry blush. "Come on through, Hermione."

"I've got Harry and Ron."

"Right you are!"

They all Floo'ed over to Lysander's cottage in Upper Flagley. He received them in his living room, minus a waistcoat but wearing a loud silk dressing gown of East Asian style over his shirt and trousers.

"The Golden Trio, in my humble abode," he said with a smirk. "How proud my old mum would be. May I offer refreshments?"

Ron said, "Oh, um--"

Hermione jumped in first. "What happened at Claridge's this morning?"

Lysander adopted his usual coy expression, eyebrow arched and eyes full of innocent question.

"'Sander," she said quietly. "It's really important."

Her friend's expression grew concerned. He waved them into chairs. "Discretion has been required of all staff who were at the meeting," he said.

"By?"

"Jasmine Churlish."

Hermione sighed. "She does like her confidentiality clauses." A glance at Lysander. "You'll tell me anyway?"

"Dearest, of course I will."

Lysander explained that Muggle emergency services had been called to Claridge's at around six o'clock in the morning. A fire had broken out in one of the third floor rooms. Alarmingly, the flames had taken on the shapes of writhing serpents and diving raptors and all sorts of terrifying mythical beasts.

"Fiendfyre," Harry said.

"You've seen it before?" Lysander asked.

Hermione watched Harry swallow hard. "Yes."

Lysander didn't push it, and went on with his recount. The hotel had been evacuated, but the fire service had been unable to douse the bestial flames. News coverage, in such a central and well-heeled part of London, had been extensive. The fire had only been vanquished when news of the incident had reached Improper Use, at which point a team of Aurors and Obliviators was dispatched, post-haste. The Fiendfyre spell was dealt with using the counter-charm. The witnesses were going to take much more effort.

Lysander said, "Since the fire spread so quickly it was easy enough to decide on the Muggle-worthy excuse."
"Gas explosion," Hermione said.

"That's the one. We got lucky, if you can call it that, with the Fiendfyre shapes. They stay where there's stuff to burn, so they were contained in the building. Staff saw them, and some fire-fighters, but none of the news cameras. Still, the word-of-mouth reports got out. We've put together an excuse – a large stash of recreational narcotics was believed to have been left near where the fire started."

"So everyone was accidentally tripping," Hermione said. "Bit of a reach, but it could work. You'll need physical evidence of the leftover material, and to set up the identity of..." She stopped, because Harry had cleared his throat loudly. "Shit. Sorry. Not my job."

"Not yet, anyway," Lysander remarked wryly.

"What about Mrs Trelore," Harry said.

Lysander looked sombre. "As far as the memory-charm people can tell, she definitely checked in to the hotel, late the night before. The staff remember her arrival."

"She was the target?" Hermione asked.

"Oh yes. The Aurors' report said there's no doubt where the Fiendfyre was originally cast – in the room she'd taken. But once the fire was dispelled, the room was searched. There are no remains."

"Would Fiendfyre even leave remains?" Ron asked.

"Might only be bone fragments, but yes," Hermione said. "However, if the spell was cast when Mrs Trelore was in the room, you'd expect her to either counter it if she knew the charm, or to Apparate to safety."

"Unless she was incapacitated first," Harry suggested.

"It's unlikely," Lysander said. "Apparently one of the porters working at the hotel recognised her from the Muggle newspaper coverage of the ball at the Savoy. Philip Richmond's mysterious beauty, in the flesh! He saw an opportunity to find out who she is, then sell the information to the press. Long story short, when the details she gave on check-in didn't help he went up to her room. Pretended to deliver a complimentary nightcap. Only she didn't answer his knock at the door."

"She might have been asleep. Or in the bathroom. Or utterly uninterested in callers, given the shitstorm her life was turning into," Hermione said.

"All possible. But the porter decided that 'bathroom' was most likely, so he used his universal key thingie to open the door and sneak inside, hoping for a quick look in the woman's handbag. And he found the room entirely empty. The bathroom, too."

Hermione frowned. "She was gone?"

"Apparently so. No occupant, no luggage. The porter snuck out again and completed his shift, but the memory-experts got a hold of him halfway through the afternoon as they worked through the witnesses."

"How much time was there between Mrs Trelore checking in to her room and this porter being a sneaky little shit?" Hermione asked.

"Not long. Twenty minutes at the most."
She thought about this. "So when Zabini, or whoever he sent to do his dirty work, showed up at the hotel at six in the morning, she'd probably been gone for hours. Which might even mean that the Fiendfyre wasn't so much attempted murder as a fit of pique."

"Hang on – Blaise Zabini? The woman's own son?" Lysander looked appalled.

"Different Zabini," Hermione said.

Ron said, "I think the question we should be asking is – where did she go?"

Hermione cast her mind back to yesterday's meeting in the drawing room. She remembered Snape leaning in to murmur something in Trelore's ear just after the woman had announced her intention to go to Claridge's. She thought about a man who had learned to expect the worst, and had stayed alive for seventeen years because of it.

"I know where she is," Hermione said.

"Right!" Harry said. "Where to next?"

Of course, the fact that the hotel room had been targeted at all meant that someone present at the meeting in Grimmauld Place had passed the information along to Niccolo Zabini. Hermione knew it wasn't herself, Harry or Ron. Trelore was the target, so snitching on herself seemed unlikely, and Snape had probably saved Trelore's life with the quiet word he'd had. Hermione was pretty sure of Dane Booth's innocence, given how hard he'd been working to uncover leads. Which left only Officer Vernon and Jasmine Churlish.

She knew where her instincts wanted to place the blame. "Nothing's ever easy, is it?" she muttered.

But the pieces fell into place. Churlish had insisted that Jossinia Trelore should not be interviewed after the Savoy incident. She'd become angry and defensive every time she lost control of the boundaries of the investigation. She had failed to identify the blond waiter, until the moment Hermione had rather inconveniently discovered the man's name.

And what about the supposed testimony of an unlikely witness to the Knockturn Alley incident? Even that made more sense when you considered that Zabini himself could have informed Churlish who was present when he'd tried to nab Snape, and she had decided to catch Hermione out in her lie. It also explained why the seedy-looking wizard had never been brought in for questioning. It was one thing to dangle the poor man over Hermione's head like a slipshod Sword of Damocles, but to formally interview someone who might have actual evidence about Zabini's plans: that was quite another thing, indeed.

And then there was Churlish's hostile attitude towards Officer Vernon last night, when he'd shown some initiative and brought in Dane. And her attempts to isolate Dane and deprive him of information...

Hermione stood up. She looked at Harry. "You need to go and see Shacklebolt. Right now. You need to insist on seeing him, do whatever it takes, and you need to make sure Jasmine Churlish is not in the room when you tell him she's working with Niccolo Zabini."

Ron squeaked. Harry swallowed and then said, "Sure?"

"Pretty sure. She's been trying to control this investigation long enough to let Zabini do his thing. She may have been coerced, she might be under the influence of a potion – it may not be her choice. Don't know. But for now, you need to make sure Shacklebolt knows not to trust her."
Harry looked flummoxed. "How am I s'posed to do that?"

"I'd start by asking him why he refused to let Churlish interview Trelore after the Savoy ball. When he says 'But I didn't!' you can tell him that Churlish claims otherwise."

"Okay," Harry said.

She looked at Ron, and told him Dane Booth's address. "Talk to Dane. Tell him I think Churlish has either conveniently forgotten to do anything about the Dorset property, or she tipped off Zabini before sending a patrol out there. Either way, we need to send a patrol to look at the house, so we need the address. And if there are any other addresses he's found in the meantime, we need those too. Get them to Kingsley, let him decide how to organise the patrols." She considered. "Dane might have become a problem for Churlish and Zabini. He may be targeted. So once you're with him, stay with him. Please? He isn't a dueller."

Ron nodded. "Dorset address. Other addresses. Manly bodyguard. Got it."

She looked at Lysander.

Lysander said, "You can give me a job. I'm very reliable. I could be in the Golden Trio. Ooh! – the Golden Quartet?"

"I need you to do something that won't come easy, 'Sander," she said.

"Dearheart. Anything."

"I need you to keep this conversation to yourself."

For a moment she thought Lysander was going to quip his way out of a promise, but he didn't. He stepped up towards her, tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear and said, "You don't even recognise the faith you inspire, do you?"

"She never has," Harry said. "She thinks people follow me."

"Oh, they do that too, Mr Potter," Lysander said.

Ron looked miffed. "What am I, chopped dragon liver?"

Lysander winked at him. "You? Are gorgeous. If you want me to follow, say the word."

Ron shuffled his feet. "Um, thanks. No thanks. I mean."

Harry touched Hermione's shoulder. "Where are you going? Where is she?"

"She's with Snape," Hermione told him. "Looks like I finally get to pay a visit to Spinner's End."

Lysander cleared his throat.

"What?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just that, you know, the good professor is more of a local, these days."

She blinked. "He's here?"

"A house guest of our own reclusive potioneer. Roksana Bramble. Don't you read the paper? He's been living here in the village for weeks."
Ron groaned in sympathy. Harry punched his arm.

Hermione ignored the tightness in her throat and turned to them both. "Go."

The two of them departed for their respective tasks.

Hermione gave Lysander Crocus a weary smile. "Right, then. I need to know where Roksana Bramble lives."

The house was at the end of a short lane on the outskirts of the village. It occupied a plot of land that included a large barn conversion: Bramble's potions research business. Hermione recognised the junction with the main through road; it was where the photograph from the Prophet had been taken. When she'd looked at that picture, she hadn't realised she'd been watching Snape walk Bramble back to the home they now shared.

The moon was full and round, though dustings of cloud skidded across its face. The evening air was chilly and carried a stiff breeze. Yorkshire was not a county known for the clemency of its autumnal weather.

A glow-globe mounted above the gate into the house's small front garden grew brighter with Hermione's arrival. There was a light on in one of the front ground floor windows, and another in a room on the first floor. It was an attractive house. Warm-looking. Welcoming. Probably the kind of place you'd never want to leave, once you were settled in.

She wondered what the hell she was going to say.

Her heart hurt.

She closed the gate behind herself and walked up to the front door. Another glow-globe in the porch came on. She reached for the door knocker which was carved in the likeness of a Hufflepuff badger, and then snatched her hand back as the door was yanked open.

Severus Snape looked at her with wide, outraged eyes for a few tense seconds, before he peered past her into the garden. "What the hell are you doing, you reckless, imbecilic–?"

"Enough," Hermione snapped at him. "Insult me if you must, but do it later. No one followed me here. Is she safe?"

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Snape's mouth moved of its own volition for a moment, though no sound came out. Then he gave a sharp sigh and gestured her inside the house.

"She's safe," he said, once he'd closed the door. "Now get yourself Disillusioned, get back to the main street where you can Apparate, and get the hell away from here."

Hermione ignored him. "It's Madam Churlish," she said. "She's selling us out. I'm sure of it."

He blinked. Then he growled with what sounded like impatience. "Damn it, Hermione, I can only keep so many people from getting themselves killed at any given time!"

"And you do it marvellously. But I'll take care of myself. You knew about Churlish."

"Suspected."

"Why?"
For a moment Hermione thought he wasn't going to answer, before his anger morphed into something wearier. "The questions she asked when I reported the incident in Knockturn Alley were...suggestive of another agenda."

"Huh. She asked me a load of things about you, too."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "And?"

"And I played the 'don't have a clue' card, obviously."

"Ah yes, you do that so well, don't you?"

"I remember. 'Clueless.'"

He tutted. "I was being sarcastic."

"Now, or then?"

"Now. Then, I was being furious."

"You mean you stopped? Doesn't feel like it."

They paused, drew breath, glared at each other.

"You should have told me about Churlish," Hermione said, getting back on track.

"If I had, your behaviour towards her would have changed."

She considered this, then nodded. "You're right. That doesn't matter anymore, though. I've sent Harry to speak to Kingsley."

Snape hesitated long enough to indicate that he was getting another surge of temper under control. "May I ask why?"

"Because if Zabini is chucking Fiendfyre around in Muggle hotels then I'm guessing we haven't got another four weeks of softly-softly to work out a more cunning plan. Plus – we've got some addresses for properties Zabini owns. We might be closing in. A corrupt MLE official overseeing the searches is the last thing we need."

Snape straightened up and looked curious. "Addresses? How?"

"My friend Dane Booth – the one you said you couldn't be bothered to sneer at? Which would have been a good line if you hadn't been sneering when you said it...what?"

She'd stopped, because Snape's face had gone from being reluctantly engaged with their discussion to flat, cold and emotionless. She'd somehow managed to shut him down.

"Thank you for the update," he said stiffly. "I shall move Mrs Trelore on to a safer site when you depart. I would recommend you Apparate to a few random locations before you—"

"What is it with you?" Hermione demanded. "What did I do?"

Snape breathed deeply. Then:

"...a few random locations before you fix upon your final destination. Do not go anywhere else alone."
"It's about Dane, isn't it?" she finally, and perhaps a little belatedly, figured out. "Why do you hate him?"

"I'll bid you a good evening, Miss Granger," he said, and reached past her in order to open the front door again.

Hermione grabbed his arm and forced him to look at her. "You didn't seem to have any history with him when we saw you on the storage level. So the only thing you could be angry about is that he's spent time with me."

The expression twisting Snape's usually implacable features hinted at fury and panic and a strange, hollow kind of grief. "Get. Out. Of. This. House," he spat at her.

Hermione had already advised him against presuming upon her obedience, however.

"Seriously? What happened to 'let's not make stupid assumptions anymore'? Because that? Stupid."

Snape looked down at where her hand touched his arm, and he wrenched himself free. "Stupid? Yes. That would be a part of it. A fine reason for a good laugh at my expense." His eyes flashed black fire at her before he looked away. Almost meditatively he said, "Stupid enough to consider that her regard for me was real. Stupid enough to think that maybe it was time to set aside the past and look to something new. Stupid!" He seemed to have become manic; his eyes were too bright. "But not stupid enough to fail to see what's right in front of me!" He leaned in close and adopted a faux-New Zealand accent. "My place or yours, Hermione? You're welcome to use my shower, Hermione. Come sit down on the sofa next to me, Hermione. Let's have lunch together – hutch up close to me, let me whisper in your ear." He spun away, pinched between his eyes. "I am not that stupid!"

Silence reigned for a moment.

Hermione exhaled with a sharp laugh.

"I have warned you about laughing at me," Snape said dangerously, still turned away.

"Oh, stop being such a drama queen, I'm not laughing at you. I never bloody would. Jesus!" She cast about herself, feeling adrift and helpless. "Are we really having this conversation? You do know you're thirty-eight, right? And I'm nineteen, going on ninety-four?" Hermione shook her head and pressed her hand to her forehead. "I am laughing because if I don't I'll damn well cry."

A pause. Snape sniffed. He didn't turn to face her.

"We haven't even got to the good stuff yet," she added, mainly to herself. "And we're already halfway to fucking it all up."

"We?" he questioned, apparently incensed by the idea.

"Oh, for...I'm not sleeping with Dane. He was interested but I turned him down. He was very nice and polite about it. Some people do that, you know."

"You expect me to believe that?" Snape asked.

"Believe it or don't. It's still the truth. God! Is this us? Is this what I can expect? You'll always assume the worst and then call me a liar when I claim you're wrong?" She gave up on waiting for him to turn around to look at her, and walked further into the hallway until she could force his
attention. "Do I have to prove it? Fine. You're the Legilimens." She tapped her own forehead with an aggressive finger. "Stab me in the mind and find out for yourself."

She held his eyes, frightened but defiant. Snape looked at her, and she could see the exact moment when his cold desire to do as she suggested was defeated by a worn-out, threadbare kind of humanity.

"I told you," he murmured. "I told you months ago. Do not toy with me."

"I'm not. You got it wrong," she said, more gently. "I suppose I can see why you misread the signals, but you got it wrong." She breathed deep and drew her shoulders back. "Still. That's kind of beside the point, isn't it?"

He lifted his chin and looked down his nose at her. "Then what is the point?"

"The point is that you do not get to pick fault with the way I interact with Dane Booth, or with Harry, or Ron, or with any other human being under the bloody sun."

"Oh, I do not? You may not like my opinions, but I will not be denied them." He shook his head, as if in disappointment. "I had hoped you'd outgrown the childish belief that the world will ever mould itself to your preferences."

Hermione took a moment to breathe as those words blurred into the air between them. Six months ago she wouldn't have known what to say to that. Three months ago she might have told him to sod off.

Today:

She lifted her chin. "Is that, in all honesty, the best you've got?"

Snape blinked, but didn't speak. Hermione squared her shoulders and held up a single hand, palm out flat: as clear a gesture of denial as she could make. 'Stop. Stop now, before you do or say something that means we'll never recover from this conversation.' As much as she cared for him, she could not allow him to force them both back into ancient roles, no matter how desperately he wanted to reclaim that sense of authority and control.

If they moved forward from this, they had to move forward as adults. As equals.

"Seriously, Severus?" she said quietly. "You're so thrown by this situation, you've resorted to that? Trying to belittle me? Infantilise me? Frustrate me into anger, use the same blunt weapons that served you so well as a teacher of young children? Do you really hold me in such utter contempt?"

Now she was the one to shake her head. "Hold any opinion you like, including the one that views me as a manipulative trollop. If you want to believe that's true then have at it. But what you may not do is assume that you are entitled to question my behaviour."

He finally found a rally. "I matter so little, then? You prove my very concerns."

The comment was weak and predictable, and Hermione returned it effortlessly. "Your concerns, as first stated, were that I was intimately involved with Dane Booth. Do you wish to change your position? Are you now concerned about how much you matter to me?"

He made a shoo-ing gesture and huffed. "Leave. This grows tedious."

"Ah, I see, so now it's my opinion that you would like to deny."
"I know, I know. But you do not get to call me a slapper and then throw me out when I have the
temerity to stand up for myself."

Snape lifted a hand and dry-washed his face. He didn't say anything. She almost reached out in
sympathy. Severus Snape was struggling to manage an emotional confrontation – even one he had
initiated – and he'd found that his armoury of cutting comments and well-judged sneers didn't help.

"Just hear me out," she said calmly, "and then tell me why I'm wrong. That's how arguments are
supposed to work." Hermione stepped closer and did her best to measure her tone. "I came on to
you, remember? You told me to back off, and for very sensible reasons. I did so. You then started
up with someone else." She arched her brows. "I mean, does that make sense to you? You think
you can do all that and then get huffy about someone else showing an interest in me?"

He frowned. He looked around at the hallway. "I, er..."

"Yup," Hermione said. "Here we are. In your extremely clever and accomplished girlfriend's
house. Where you've apparently been living the dream, all nice and cosy, for weeks on end. Is this
really a good place for you to throw a strop because a colleague of mine sat a bit closer than you'd
like at lunch?"

"Ah! Miss Granger, I presume."

Hermione startled and spun round to locate the owner of this new voice. At the top of the staircase
leading up from the hall there stood a woman. She was tall, her bearing proud. She wore worn,
comfortable robes in muted colours. A silk scarf wrapped her head, angled over one side of her
face.

Hermione had wondered when she was going to meet Roksana Bramble.

"Oh. Um. Hi," she managed.

Mistress Bramble gave a smile and began to descend. "You must forgive Severus. He's an
extremely intelligent and perceptive man when it comes to everything except women."

Hermione glanced at Snape. His face had drained of colour and his eyes were locked on Bramble.
"Roksana, it isn't..." He shook his head. Tiredly, he said, "No, actually, it's exactly what it looks
like."

Surprisingly, Bramble smiled more widely at that. She made it down to the hallway, her attention
on Hermione. "But it seems he's learning," she added, almost confidential in her tone. "With his
usual proficiency. Annoying, isn't it? Just when you think you've found something at which he is
not skilled." Bramble did an exaggerated eye-roll of irritation.

Hermione let out a nervous giggle and took Bramble's hand when it was proffered. Bramble's skin
was soft and too smooth in a few places. It seemed that few of her extremities had escaped the
fires of the accident. The scarf covered the worst of her facial scars, but most of her exposed skin
was still mottled and shiny. She seemed to lack much in the way of hair, even eyelashes. Her eyes
were lovely, though: grey-blue, and filled with humour. The burn scars around her mouth could
not undermine the warmth of her smile.

Hermione bit at her lip, then she said, "I have no intention of getting in the way of anything, here."
She winced at her own words. "Sorry, that sounds wildly arrogant." She blew her cheeks out,
vexed that in the space of two minutes she'd gone from being the master of debate to borderline
incoherence. "What I mean is – I've no intention of trying to get in the way."

"I'm not sure you can help it," Bramble said, a little sadly.

Hermione conceded with a frown, though the implication upset her. She did not want to view herself as some kind of vamp. Stealing other people's lovers was the tawdry business of soap operas; it had no place in Hermione's life. "For the record," she said, "I didn't come here to pick a fight with Severus."

"Then why did you come?"

"Because I think we might be close to finding Niccolo Zabini, and I was hoping Mrs Trelore might help with some information."

Bramble nodded. "Jossinia and her companion are occupying the flat I have in my barn annex."

Hermione blinked at the unexpected familiarity in Bramble's words.

Snape finally found his voice again. "Mrs Trelore and Mistress Bramble were at Hogwarts together, both in Hufflepuff."

"Right. Of course. And – companion?"

"Mrs Trelore was in danger," Snape said curtly, "and Zabini likes to coerce people by threatening those they care for. It was a sensible precaution to offer Mr Richmond temporary haven outside of Zabini's grasp as well."

Bramble said, "Severus will take you over there."

Hermione nodded. "It was...oh, god, could this be any more awkward?" A big sigh. "It was good to meet you. I was hoping I would. Even though I've been insanely jealous. But, you know, I could see why he'd...I mean, I don't want to overstep the bounds of courtesy but I just...bugger."

She tutted at herself and then said, "I read your column in The Practical Potioneer, it's the first thing I look for with every edition, and I can't wait for your book to come out, and-and if we all make it to the other side of this ridiculous situation without killing each other then I'd love it if we could maybe talk some time. About potions, I mean. Not Severus."

Bramble smiled at that. "Miss Granger, it would be a pleasure."

Snape said, a touch plaintively, "I have no idea what is happening here."

Hermione tossed him an exasperated look. "You'd rather we had a cat-fight?"

Snape hesitated, perhaps considering the visual.

She rolled her eyes. "What the hell is it with men?"

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Chapter End Notes

I apologise for the delay in responding to comments. I will catch up on them very
soon. In the meantime, a sincere thank-you to all who have offered feedback.
"Why do you need to know these things?" Mrs Trelore asked Hermione, after she had set out her opening questions.

"I might not need to," Hermione admitted. "If Dane's work on the Muggle paper trail pays off, Zabini might be in custody before midnight. But I suspect he won't be, because I think Churlish will have done enough to steer him away. Which means that we need more information to track him down."

Philip Richmond, a well-groomed man in his fifties who was reacting to this magical detour from his life with remarkable pragmatism, reached to touch his fiancée's hand. "Miss...Granger, did you say your name was?" Hermione nodded. "I mean no disrespect, but may I ask why you are conducting this interview rather than a more senior member of the wizarding police?"

Rather than feeling put out by this question, Hermione knew a surge of relief. She kind of wanted to take a moment. Revel in Philip Richmond's wonderful, soothing, blissful lack of expectations.

"Actually, I'm not in Magical Law Enforcement," she told him.

"So you are acting in a private capacity?"

"I suppose. I sort of get dragged in to things."

Behind her, Snape snorted. Richmond turned his attention to Snape, who sighed and then said, "Mr Richmond, you are looking at one of the three teenagers who, almost single-handedly, prevented our magical society from crumbling beneath the heel of a dark wizard."

(And so concluded Hermione's brief holiday from other people's expectations. It had been nice while it lasted.)

Richmond blinked. "Oh. That sounds...dramatic."

"Only in flashes," Hermione said. "Mostly it was tedious Ancient Runes translations and starving in a forest. And the professor is being modest. He had more to do with the crumbling-prevention than I did."

She shot Snape a cautious look. Their unresolved issues had (yet again) been placed on hold in the context of a greater emergency, but that didn't mean they weren't still achingly apparent. In the meantime, however, Hermione refused to resort to passive aggression. Severus Snape was a war hero, and he was perfectly capable of being one at the same time as being an emotional hypocrite and an addlebrained ninny. The latter issues were for them to discuss privately – as soon as they were given the bloody chance, at least – just as the former was a matter of fact and therefore not something she was going to diminish in order to score cheap points.

Snape caught her eye and blinked, then looked away: a classic Snape-acknowledgement. "The point, Mr Richmond, is that you find our society in something of a transitional phase," he said.
"The institutions that define us are recovering from a period of upheaval. In the meantime, we cannot rely absolutely on our Magical Law Enforcement in the same way that Muggles...that non-magical people rely on their police service."

"You're saying that Miss Granger and yourself are the best options we have to find Blaise," Richmond said.

"Not really. But we are the ones who are here, and we have some experience."

Mrs Trelore put in, "I'd be dead or kidnapped right now, were it not for Professor Snape." She patted Richmond's hand. "And Blaise is still out there somewhere. It's all right. It's about time someone heard the story."

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Jossinia's mother, a Selwyn, and her father, Mannfred Brown, had not been fond of each other. Such were the pitfalls of pure-blood arranged marriages. Jossinia was an only child. Her father died suddenly when she was four years old. Less than a year later, Jossinia's mother married again. To the horror of both the Selwyns and the Browns, she chose to marry a Muggle. She was immediately dubbed 'blood-traitor' and discarded by both families.

Jossinia thus found herself being raised in a tiny cottage on the outskirts of Falmouth, with a stepfather who had a window-cleaning business. In spite of this downturn in her fortunes, her early childhood was happy.

It was only when she reached Hogwarts that the prickles of resentment set in. As she made her way through school, she grew ever more aware of the differences between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. By the time she graduated Hogwarts she had formed a plan. She was going to get rich, and she was going to do it by using the one quality that had blossomed during her Hogwarts career: the astonishing perfection of her looks.

By the age of nineteen she had identified her target: Humphrey Appleyard, a wealthy wizard thirty-five years her senior. By twenty she had initiated their courtship. By twenty-one, she and Appleyard were married. Appleyard was aware that his wealth had earned him this trophy-wife, but he was considerate and appreciative. The two established an equitable if not necessarily a loving marriage.

One day, when Jossinia had business at Gringotts, she met Niccolo Zabini.

"Hang on," Hermione said. "Zabini worked at Gringotts? In what capacity?"

"Artefacts," Trelore replied. "He was young, then, like me. Junior in his role. He was a cataloguer and analyser of magical artefacts. The goblins are keen on such things."

Of course, the beautiful young Mrs Appleyard and the handsome young Mr Zabini immediately caught each other's eye. Jossinia began to contrive reasons for visiting the bank. After a time, the 'accidental' meetings at Gringotts became fully-fledged trysts. The two began a clandestine affair.

Appleyard was no fool. He knew his wife was taking her pleasure on the wrong side of the sheets. He told her plainly that he required only her discretion. She did her best to ensure that her behaviour with Zabini would never reflect badly upon her husband.

Three years into her marriage, Jossinia became a widow. A brain aneurysm took Appleyard. Jossinia was saddened by the event; she'd grown fond of her husband. She had, however, achieved all she'd wanted with the marriage: financial security. After a sensible period of mourning, she
anticipated that Zabini would propose.

But it didn't happen. She waited for months. She convinced herself that Zabini felt financially beneath her. She did her best to demonstrate that this could not be further from the truth. In fact it wasn't until a year after Appleyard had died that Niccolo Zabini finally broached the subject of marriage.

Except he had no intention of being the groom.

"This man wanted you to marry someone else?" Richmond asked, aghast.

"Yes," Trelore said simply.

"But you and he had been lovers for – how long?"

"More than three years, by then."

Richmond shook his head. "And you weren't appalled by the suggestion?"

"Naturally I was appalled," she said with a shrug. "At first. But Niccolo has a way of putting things that makes them sound like the most sensible idea in the world. He pointed out that the man he had chosen for me to pursue – a man named Antal Halfbucket – was not only wealthy but he was ninety-two years old. Niccolo argued that if we lived on Humphrey's wealth, we'd wear it down until eventually it would restrict our lifestyle. But if we could augment it with the money I would inherit from Antal then we would be set up for life."

Hermione grimaced. "Mrs Trelore, your ex is a nasty piece of work."

"Thank you, Miss Granger, I am increasingly aware of that."

"Might I ask," Snape put in, "whether there was any question-mark over your first husband's sudden passing? An aneurysm can, of course, be induced magically."

Trelore sighed. "At the time, there was not. If you are asking me whether Niccolo caused Humphrey's death, the answer is that I do not know."

Zabini persuaded Jossinia to begin a campaign of seduction in pursuit of the elderly Antal Halfbucket. Halfbucket himself, a property magnate who owned many of the buildings in and around Diagon Alley, was feeling vulnerable; his beloved mistress of thirty years had upped and moved back to her home island of Grenada following the death of her father. Jossinia played her role to perfection, claiming to be lost and adrift in her grief, in need of guidance and connection. Halfbucket fell for it. He was, perhaps, not so wary as he should have been; Jossinia was already a wealthy woman. Blinded by her looks, he became Jossinia's second husband in 1973 after a whirlwind romance that raised more than a few eyebrows.

Hermione said, "So. Ninety-two. Do I even want to know?"

Snape coughed into his hand. Richmond blushed.

Trelore gave her a tight smile. "I guarantee that you do not, Miss Granger," she said.

"Yeesh."

Trelore shrugged a shoulder. "The situation was of my own making. I should not have listened to Niccolo, but I did, and there I was. Unfortunately, Antal was shrewder and more possessive than
Humphrey. The opportunities I had to leave the house and meet with Niccolo were few and far between. Meanwhile, I was expected to...behave as a wife should."

She shot a look at Richmond. He shuffled uncomfortably. "Do you want me to leave?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, but then stayed him with a hand. "I hate that you're hearing this about me. But I think it's better for you to know. I realise that you will have a decision to make at the end of the story. At least that decision will be informed."

Unfortunately for Jossinia, the marriage to Antal Halfbucket looked like it might last forever. He was strong, vital and thoroughly controlling. After more than a year of this unsatisfactory situation, Zabini furnished Jossinia with a tonic: something he claimed to be a gentle libido-diminishing draught that she could secretly administer to Halfbucket to ease at least that part of her married life. He advised Jossinia to be patient. At ninety-three, her husband couldn't live forever. Indeed, Halfbucket's health took an immediate downward turn in the weeks that followed until he was admitted to St Mungo's with liver failure and died hours later.

Since this was Jossinia's second bereavement, Magical Law Enforcement came sniffing around. She was interviewed about her marriage, asked if she had intended harm to her husband, and she truthfully claimed that of course she had not. After an inquest, Halfbucket's death was declared natural.

Jossinia waited for news of her inheritance. She received the handsome sum of six hundred thousand Galleons and ownership of Halfbucket's mansion on the outskirts of Wimborne Minster: the house she still lived in to that day.

"And finally," Trelore said, "after all that, Niccolo asked to marry me. He also handed in his notice at Gringotts. We waited for a time before being seen out together, but I was happy. Ready to move on. I'd finally come to understand why my mother had sacrificed everything in order to marry for love." She sighed. "You don't understand how much it means until you've been forced to function without it."

Hermione glanced at Snape. A muscle pulled and released in his jaw.

"I take it Halfbucket's death was not natural?" Snape asked.

Trelore looked bereft for a moment, then she shook her head. "It was not. But I did not realise that until later."

"What happened?" Richmond asked.

"We waited twelve months, Niccolo and I, then we announced our engagement. By this time I was known as a wealthy, good-looking widow. I'd already achieved a measure of notoriety through my marital misfortunes. When I began to appear in pictures in the paper with Niccolo at my side? Oh, they lapped it up. We looked beautiful together." She sighed, apparently with remembrance, then her expression grew solemn. "It was soon tainted, though. You see – Niccolo found out something about the terms of Antal's will."

It seemed that Jossinia had not inherited everything from Halfbucket. His properties had been bequeathed to his former mistress in Grenada, with instruction that they eventually be passed on to the daughter Antal Halfbucket had never felt able to claim, conceived as she had been while his lover was married to another man.

On discovering this, Zabini was incensed. The whole point of targeting Halfbucket had been for
those properties. Now he'd learned that they had been offered on a plate to someone else. Jossinia
did her best to placate him, pointing out that they had done very well out of the arrangement
themselves, but nothing calmed his fury.

"He thought it was my fault," Trelore said. "I should have secured the terms of the will. I should
have challenged them when the will was read. I should have done all kinds of things, according to
him, but I did not." She looked at her clasped hands. "He threatened to call off the engagement. I
thought it was just his Italian temperament – he'd always flared hot and then cooled down,
sometimes without pausing for breath."

"I don't understand why you didn't eject this man from your life," Richmond said.

"I loved him," Jossinia replied. "And every bit of my worldly experience had taught me that love
required sacrifice. I thought that was simply the way things were." She frowned. "I was young,
and foolish. I came very close to ending things between us, though. Especially when he told me."

"Told you what?" Snape asked quietly.

"That the tonic I had given to Antal was, in fact, a poison designed to finish him off." She looked
her fiancé in the eye. "I didn't know it at the time, but I am in fact guilty of murdering my second
husband."

Richmond sat up straighter. "Murder requires premeditation. You are at most guilty of
involuntary manslaughter."

"You can call it what you want – it was an horrific thing to learn." Trelore took a sip from the
glass of water she had prepared before embarking on her tale. "It was enough to drive Niccolo and
I apart for almost three weeks."

"But he came back," Hermione said. "Because of the money."

"He said it was because of me. Because he'd been a fool. He'd let his temper get the better of him,
but it had all been for me, you see. The income he'd wanted us to have – all to make sure I could
live any way I wanted." She shrugged. "He said that when he gave me the poison it was only
because he couldn't stand the thought of that wizened old prune touching me. Not when I should
be for him, only for him."

"Perhaps he should not have engineered the marriage in the first place, then," Snape pointed out.

"Logic!" Trelore gave a short, sharp laugh. "Logic does not play much of a part where love is
concerned. I wanted to believe him, so I believed him. We put the past behind us, and our
engagement progressed to marriage, and in 1976 I became Mrs Jossinia Zabini."

"May I ask," Hermione said, "about your financial arrangements?"

Trelore nodded. "I suppose you should. It's obvious why they are of interest."

"Your wealth was originally stored in your first husband's family vault, I assume," Hermione said.
"Did this remain the case during your second marriage?"

"It did. Antal did not express any interest in combining our finances."

"After you had inherited Mr Halfbucket's fortune as well, did that change? Or did you just keep the
two vaults?"
"I combined them. Antal's vault was on a more secure level of Gringotts and had larger capacity. So I moved what was in Humphrey's vault to the better one." She hesitated, struck by some memory. "Niccolo was angry about that, I seem to recall."

"Why?"

"I don't know. In any case, he went back to Gringotts to work shortly after we married. Told me that even though his income was dwarfed by my fortune, he still wanted to make a contribution."

Hermione frowned as she thought about this. She glanced over at Snape to see the same expression on his face.

Jossinia and Niccolo Zabini thus began their married life together. For a while, all seemed settled. Jossinia was in love, and Zabini gave every impression that he felt the same. He gave up his job at Gringotts after a few short weeks, recognising that his time was better spent with his wife than at the grindstone of nine-to-five. They lived lavishly; they were the ever-present faces at all the social events reported in the *Prophet*. Their parties were the stuff of legend.

After a couple of years Jossinia began to talk about her desire for a family. Zabini resisted for a while but eventually conceded. In December of 1979, Blaise was born.

"He seemed happy," Trelore said. "Niccolo, I mean. The parties and the socialising tailed off, but we'd produced this beautiful boy together. Niccolo seemed smitten, just as I was. I thought Blaise would be the glue that bound us closer. Niccolo even chose the name." A sigh. "I was so busy embracing motherhood that I truly thought everything was perfect."

"It wasn't?" Richmond asked gently.

"I suppose it couldn't have been." Trelore shook her head. "Blaise was growing up, beginning to explore the world. He demanded attention. Oh, I adored every minute of it, watching this tiny human being come into his own. And then one day I looked up, and I realised that Niccolo wasn't there. He hadn't been there for a long time."

"He'd left?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. He just spent his days away from us." Trelore frowned. "I was still trying to work out how to talk to him about this when he announced that he was going back to Italy for a few weeks. His family comes from a small wizarding village near Lake Maggiore. He'd go back from time to time. I said to him that we should all go together, now Blaise was old enough to Portkey. But he said no, it would be distressing for a two year old. I was so shocked by the idea that he wanted to travel without us that I couldn't think what to say. By the time I'd put my thoughts in order, he was already gone." A dramatic pause. "That was the last time I ever saw him."

Hermione leaned forward. "So his 'death' occurred in northern Italy?"

"He and his cousins played this game when they were teenagers – peak-flying, they called it. They'd hop on their brooms, Disillusion themselves, and then take off around the slopes and peaks of the Alps. Daring each other to fly as fast and as close as they could, especially up high where the air gets thinner and broom-handling is trickier." Trelore exhaled a shaky breath. "There was an avalanche. Huge. It killed eight Muggle climbers as well as Niccolo. Or...so I thought."

"I take it no body was ever recovered," said Snape.

"No. Not for want of trying. As soon as the news came through, I was organising searches.
Niccolo's family helped. We turned up nothing. Meanwhile, MLE from both British and Italian Ministries were interested in interviewing me about the loss of a third husband, though it was easy to prove that I could have had nothing to do with this particular loss. After six weeks, Niccolo was formally declared dead. March 1982."

They all paused. Mrs Trelore drank some water and accepted discreet consolation from her fiancé. Snape stared at his fingernails. Hermione wondered whether any of this was going to be relevant.

"Your vault at Gringotts," Snape said. "In the months following your loss, did you notice anything...unusual?"

"You mean, is it possible Niccolo managed to grab himself some money at a time when he needed it to set up a new life?" Trelore asked sharply. "I hardly see how. The security measures at Gringotts are well known to us all."

"Do you monitor the contents of your vault with any regularity?" Snape pressed.

"I do not." She met Snape's eyes with a challenging look. "The whole point to my plan, when I left school, was that I never wanted to find myself counting every Knut, ever again."

"I see." He pressed the tips of his fingers together and studied them thoughtfully.

Hermione wondered what was going through Snape's mind. He, too, had grown up poor: probably more so than young Jossinia Brown. He had experienced the same feelings of resentment and jealousy and rank unfairness as he progressed through Hogwarts. So did he understand her drive to escape privation, perhaps even applaud her success? Or did he look at this woman – someone who had married her way into a fortune, to the extent that she saw no need to even monitor her magical bank account's balance – and wonder at her reckless complacency?

"I did spend over ten thousand Galleons on the search for Niccolo, though," Trelore admitted. "Most of the money went to locals in Italy who knew the terrain. It was arranged through Niccolo's family." She stiffened her shoulders. "At the time I did not begrudge a single coin."

Hermione thought about that. Could one of Zabini's childhood friends, a cousin maybe, have been in on the secret? And possibly have redirected some of these funds? It seemed plausible.

"Forgive me for being blunt, Mrs Trelore," Hermione said, "but how much time went by before you decided to embark on your fourth marriage?"

"I waited four years," Trelore replied. "Long enough to grieve. And to notice that my son was growing up fast, and was precocious and undisciplined and probably in need of a father-figure." She sighed. "And I was lonely. I met Frederick Goodwych in his professional capacity – he was a financial advisor and I wanted to set up a trust for Blaise. We got to talking, and found we were...compatible. I suppose I was not looking for more than companionship at this point, but Freddie was delighted by my looks and enthused by the notion of becoming a father to Blaise. He talked of giving Blaise a little brother or sister, and I was not averse. We married in 1986."

"Were there changes to your financial arrangements?" Hermione asked.

"Quite a lot," Trelore admitted. "Freddie knew that the traditional approach of letting your gold sit in a vault was not the best way for your money to work for you. He suggested some investment possibilities, all of which worked out very well for me."

"The returns on these investments," Snape put in. "Where did they go?"
"I arranged for the profits I made to go to Blaise's newly established vault."

"Forgive me, but I need to be clear," Snape said. "You are saying that the vault you inherited from Antal Halfbucket was slowly being depleted, the funds invested, and the profits made were directed to a different vault."

"That's right. Although 'depleted' is an exaggeration. My wealth remained substantial."

Snape grunted and sat back.

"What happened to Mr Goodwych?" Hermione asked.

Within barely a year of their marriage, Frederick Goodwych died suddenly of a heart attack. Since he was forty-two years old and otherwise in excellent health, MLE launched another investigation. Jossinia was, on this occasion, interrogated under Veritaserum. She told her questioner, truthfully, that she had done nothing to bring about her husband's death. Since no crime could be proven, the verdict was natural causes. Jossinia once again settled in to her role as a widow.

Husband number five came along in 1988: Horatio Dalrymple was younger than Jossinia – a quality she hoped might disrupt this unnerving pattern of her husbands dropping dead. Dalrymple was the wealthy scion of Carolyn Ollerton-Dalrymple, the owner of the Cleansweep Broom Company. He was in line to inherit a fortune, but at that point he lived off a healthy but not exceptional private income. Given Dalrymple's wildly expensive tastes, he'd been delighted by the attentions of a beautiful and wealthy witch like Jossinia. Even if she was nine years his senior.

Three months after they had married, Dalrymple's mother died in a recreational potions den off Knockturn Alley, in spite of no evidence that she'd ever sought such illicit diversions before. Even as Dalrymple dealt with the aftermath of this rather squalid tragedy, including his own inheritance, he undertook the one job at the family business that he enjoyed: he tested out the newest model of broom in development. Halfway through the broom's inaugural flight, the prototype lost control and crashed spectacularly into the roof of company headquarters, killing both Horatio Dalrymple and an employee who happened to be standing on the mezzanine beneath the skylight where the Dalrymple-shaped missile struck.

"Sabotage?" Hermione said.

"Unlikely," Snape said. "Altering the prototype's enchantment would require an expertise in such magic and uninterrupted access to a property the broom company likely considered valuable. My hypothesis would be a line-of-sight hijacking jinx, such as Quirrell employed during your first year."

She held her breath for a moment, before her memories caught up and she remembered that he had already told her he knew exactly who had set fire to his robes while he had done his utmost to keep Harry alive. Hermione looked at him. His right eyebrow twitched a challenge, though the subtlety of this gesture made her wonder if he'd been seeing things when he looked away again.

Trelory shook her head and pressed her fingers to the centre of her smooth and perfect brow, as though staving off a headache. "At the time it seemed like yet another awful accident. MLE came along, interviewed me again – we were all getting well and truly fed up with each other." Her hand dropped back to her lap. "That occasion was the first time I met Jasmine Churlish, by the way. She was a patrolwoman, then."

Hermione glanced at Snape. He acknowledged the look but did not say anything.
"Do you know," Trelore went on, "they even interviewed Blaise as well. He was only nine, hardly old enough to stand witness. Of course, neither of us knew anything about any skulduggery."

"Did Blaise get along with his stepfather?" Hermione asked.

"Freddie, yes. He adored Freddie. Horatio wasn't interested, so Blaise wasn't interested either. By the time John came along, Blaise was learning to be grumpy."

"That would be your sixth husband, John Harcourt," Snape said.

"Indeed. I mean, yes, by this time I was quite aware that my life had become a farce. My son was fast approaching Hogwarts age. I'd become a caricature in the press – the woman everyone believed to be a serial murderer, even though people were careful not to say so to my face. When John and I began to flirt, I realised that I was, at this point, so desperate to prove I could establish a healthy, happy, accident-free relationship that I'd have jumped all over practically anyone."

"And Mr Harcourt's fate?" Hermione asked. "If you'll forgive my baldness."

Trelorde sighed. "In the new year of 1990, John left a public house in Hogsmeade after sharing a celebration with some friends. He was followed and set upon by a band of thugs, and beaten severely. Curses were used. Bones were broken. Head injuries sustained. He was dead on arrival at St Mungo's on new year's day." She sniffed. "4:23 in the morning, if it's of interest."

Richmond took her hand. Hermione took a surreptitious look at her watch.

Snape said, "And finally Norris Trelorde."

"Yes. Blaise was about to start school. I thought of Norris as my last, best hope. A nice man. Tedious and unfulfilling, but so terribly nice. We set a new record together, Norris and I." She smiled grimly. "Five days, we lasted, after the 'I do's."

"How did he die?" Hermione asked.

"Killed himself." A pause. "Was the verdict, anyway, after extensive interrogation and Pensieve evidence. I came home to find him in the bath with his wrists cut." She stood up, rather suddenly. "Well, then. It's been a lovely trip down memory lane, but I find I'm exhausted by all these recollections."

"One more question, Mrs Trelorde," Hermione put in.

Trelorde sighed but waited for her to speak.

"Can you tell us how you intend to organise your finances after you and Mr Richmond become man and wife?"

Trelorde frowned and then looked at Richmond. "We have not really discussed it," she said. "I suppose I had the vague idea that my wealth would support the magical part of our life and Philip's would support the Muggle. I've also been thinking about making some contributions to the good causes that Philip's foundation supports. My outgoings are more than serviced by the interest on my account and my investments – it's been a long time since I felt the need to accumulate wealth."

"Have you mentioned your intentions to anyone at all?"

Trelorde shook her head. "Not even Blaise, if that's what you mean. Just Polly. I always talked to Polly." She closed her eyes, shook her head, gathered herself. "Now you will excuse me, won't
Jossinia Trelore moved out of the annex's living space, to shut herself up in the bedroom. Richmond followed, leaving Hermione and Snape alone.

"It's about the vault," said Snape.
"It's got to be the vault," said Hermione at the same time.

They looked at each other.

"He went back to Gringotts after she moved her vault," Hermione said.

"He must have some way to access a vault that bypasses the security measures."

"How, though? I know as well as anyone that you can't get in there without the right wand. Then there's the Thief's Downfall and the guards and the Probity probes."

"Vaults situated closer to the surface have fewer security measures. Perhaps that was how he was able to gain access to the first one."

"Except when Mrs Trelore changed vaults he went back to work, presumably sorted out what he needed, then jacked in all over again. Whatever the tighter security on the new vault was, he found a way."

"Hmm." Snape frowned. "Zabini's acquisitiveness seems to inform his every decision. I do not believe he would have arranged for his 'death' without being assured of a way to access the vault in perpetuity."

"No. And I don't think he would've cared much about Frederick Goodwych. Not until he realised that Goodwych was engineering a net loss to the vault."

"Perhaps not." He narrowed his eyes. "Mrs Trelore said she confided in her house-elf."

"So?"

"So house-elves bound to a family must obey their master or mistress. It is their highest law." He held up a hand as Hermione drew breath. "Yes, I know, you find this repugnant – this is not the time for a moral debate. The point is that, through marriage, Niccolo Zabini was Polly's master. He could have returned to the house at any time after his so-called death and questioned the house-elf, knowing she could only tell him the truth."

Hermione nodded. "And he could have sworn poor Polly to secrecy regarding each and every visit. An easy and undetectable way to keep tabs on his ex-wife." She frowned. "It's probably the way this whole plot was set in motion, thinking about it. Polly was forced to tell Zabini that Trelore is secretly engaged to a Muggle. Zabini suspected that his all-you-can-spend buffet was closing."

A pause as they both thought this through.

"We still don't know how he accesses the vault, though," Hermione said. "You cannot Apparate in or out of that area."

"Nor can you use a Portkey," Snape said. "The Portkey Office will not issue them for access to the secure area of Gringotts, and unauthorised ones do not work. Robbers have tried, and come to a sticky end."
"Oh? What happens?"

"Incoming Portkey users are redirected to a holding tank."

"So they're arrested?"

"No, not 'tank' like an American jail. An actual tank. Filled with flobberworm mucus."

"Oh. So when you said sticky end..."

"...I was being unfortunately literal."

"Hmm." Hermione wondered what drowning in mucus was like, then decided to stop. "And outgoing Portkeys?"

"They are simply rendered non-functional. The only reason someone might attempt to use an outgoing Portkey from the secure area of Gringotts would be to escape after having perpetrated a crime. Since the Portkey would thus be activated either in a sealed vault with a limited air supply, or in a restricted area filled with numerous dangerous guardians, there is no need for the goblins to do more than stop them working." He shot her a look. "It is a little known fact that the Gringotts goblins hold an annual sweepstakes for how many dead bodies they'll pull out of the secure area. The record is thirty-seven. 1964."

"Okay. I'm glad we didn't consider Portkeys when we had to get into the Lestrange vault." She shuddered.

"Indeed. Escape by dragon was much safer." The flatness of his tone was immaculate.

"Admit it. You were a tiny bit impressed."

"By an ostentatious Gryffindor spectacle? Hardly."

Hermione snorted. "Tiny bit."

He grunted. It could have been concession; it could have been denial. It was too hard to tell with Severus Snape.

Hermione got her thoughts back on track. "Okay, so what about this? Zabini likes recruiting insiders, like Churlish, or Gus at St Mungo's. Might he have bribed a goblin or a guard?"

"It'd have to be a goblin, if Mrs Trelore's vault has the kind of security I suspect. But I can't imagine what it would take to recruit one." He arched a brow at her. "Well. If one does not have access to Godric Gryffindor's sword, that is."

"Yes, very funny. But – Zabini was an artefacts expert. Maybe he came across something just as valuable? Something that bought him an 'in' with a goblin?"

"Plausible," Snape conceded. "Though we are entering the realm of speculation now."

Hermione could only agree. The two of them sat in silence for a brief time.

"I'm really quite cross with you," she said. "For the record."

"And I have no right to be angry? You thought I was a maniac," he threw back. "I think that buys me some leeway."
"You thought I was a maniac too," Hermione said. At Snape's oh-so-confused look, she just snorted. "Oh, come off it. Did you think I wouldn't work it out? You were waiting in the coastal habitat for me. You weren't surprised to see me there. You thought I was the one who'd be stealing the haliwinkles."

"Perhaps. I didn't anticipate the torturous performance you gave before you even got to the bloody snails, though."

"Whatever. I'm right, aren't I? Or did you have another reason for being so angry with me of late?" Because she'd already deduced that it couldn't have been about Dane Booth alone; the warnings and threats had begun before Snape and Dane had even met. She shot him a glance; he was looking pensive. Hermione tutted. "You know what? Scratch that. Of course you've got other reasons to be angry. If it's easier, you can write me a list."

Snape turned away and folded his arms.

She needed a different strategy, so she changed tack. "Fine. Here's a question. Do you have access to a time-turner?"

He turned back, surprised. "Why on earth would you ask me that?"

"Because of the linear nature of time," she replied cryptically. "Do you?"

"I do not."

"Okay, rules out that possibility," she muttered to herself. "So how about Divination skills. Can you predict the future?"

"Would I be sitting here having this ridiculous conversation with you if I could have avoided it?" he asked.

"Fair enough." She didn't bother pointing out that he could get up and walk away any time he liked, and the very fact that he remained sitting here, semi-engaged with their discussion, constituted a massive step forward in their ability to communicate. "Please tell me Minerva McGonagall is not an habitual liar. There are only so many disappointments I can take in one day."

Snape was getting ever more annoyed. "She is generally a woman of her word. Hermione, what is this about?"

"You! Your research!"

"What about it?"

"You were up at Hogwarts before term started."

Snape nodded curtly. "I was."

"You went to the library."

"Naturally, I did." He looked exasperated by her need to make this point. "Is this such a surprise? I had not taught Potions in two years. I had an entire academic year's worth of NEWT lessons to somehow condense into three months. I also needed to confer with Professor Slughorn regarding my students' year six progress."
"Yes, fine. I get that. But how the hell did you figure out that you needed to investigate hate potions so soon? I mean, this was weeks before it all kicked off at St Mungo's."

Snape was quiet for a moment. "I did not do that," he finally said.

"But...your notes!"

"What notes?"

"The ones you took from the Bourne volume, in the Restricted Section. The recipe for the Philtre of Ill Will. You were matching the larch up with bark from the snagberry, even back then."

His eyes narrowed. "How did you know about that?"

"Your handwriting left indentations on the desk blotter."

Snape's eyebrows lifted. "It seems I should have bought you a deerstalker for your birthday."

"Holmes never wore a deerstalker in canon, that's a misconcepti—...Hang on, so that was a birthday present after all, was it?"

"Shut up," he grumbled. "Your skills of observation are, alas, flawed."

She scowled. "Explain."

"You assumed I made those notes during my August visit to the school."

"I most certainly did not, because it was not an assumption." Hermione's brow knotted into a frown. "I asked the Headmistress if you'd been up there since. She told me you had not. And by the way, the relationship between Hogwarts and its head teacher is all magical and esoteric and coactive, and everyone knows that because Dumbledore never stopped showing off about it, so if you'd been up there another time then the Headmistress would have known. Even you. Captain Cagey." She sat back and folded her arms: Q.E.D. "I'm not an idiot, you know. I checked my facts."

"Not well enough." Snape sighed. "I was once a Headmaster of Hogwarts."

"Well, I know that!"

"And the castle accommodates its former head teachers in a most obliging way."

Hermione drew in a breath and then let it out without speaking. She frowned down at her clasped hands. "It does?" she said, in a much smaller voice.

"I went back up to the school on the weekend of your birthday. I did so overnight. I prevented the school's wards from flagging my presence to the current Headmistress." He hesitated, then said shortly, "I did not wish to be interrupted."

Hermione frowned. "You organised a sneak-visit?"

"I had my reasons," he said more sharply. "And Headmistress McGonagall was unaware of my trip. You may consider her integrity unsullied."

She thought about that for a few moments, then gave a weary laugh. "Okay. I suppose that explains that one."
"Delighted to be of service," he said flatly.

"Yes, well, you can be as sarcastic as you like, but you have no idea how I've been tying myself in knots over that bit of timing."

Snape rolled his eyes. "I thought you said you had the whole thing worked out."

"I do now. Well. Most of it."

"Enlighten me," he invited.

"It's hardly a case of enlightening you when you already know full well." Still, she couldn't help herself: not when she'd finally put it together. "You're Severus Snape—"

"So far I cannot fault your logic."

"You're Severus Snape, and you'd just been let loose in one of the most amazing places for potions ingredients in the world. Why wouldn't you wander about a bit, take some time, study the plants you never usually get to see grow?"

"Why indeed," he said without expression.

"You did it," Hermione scoffed. "You made the most of it. It's what I'd have done. And during that time, you figured out someone was up to no good down there. I don't know what it was that tipped you off but I'd guess it was the snagberry, since the shrub is so rare and the damage was so obvious."

"It was the snagberry," Snape conceded.

"Right. So you realised someone was on the take. You probably checked the wand-monitoring system." She looked to him for confirmation, but he'd decided not to concede anything further. "Wouldn't have taken you long to work out the thefts were happening after your potions lessons. Maybe you thought someone was trying to set you up. Anyway, you'd've needed to get to the bottom of it."

"You seem to have the story already written."

"Am I wrong?"

"Not yet. Give it time."

"You knew the thief had to have wand access, so they'd likely be a staff member. But you thought maybe the thief was being bribed by some other person. Given the timing of those early thefts, you wondered if it was one of your students. That's why you started making those comments during lessons, emphasising the value of the ingredients. You wanted to see if it tripped any of us up."

Snape grunted. Hermione took that as an acknowledgement.

"Then you noticed ashgrass had been stolen. So you made it a surprise inclusion for a lesson."

"It was an obvious strategy. In fact, it was the only one open to me." He pinched between his eyes, then sighed. "I'd grown concerned that the thefts had not been reported. When I realised some ashgrass seedheads had been stolen, I requested some for myself in an attempt to draw attention to the problem."
"Oh. Right." Damn it, she hadn't thought of that angle. "That makes sense, actually." She rolled her eyes. "I thought you were just fishing for a reaction from your students."

"I was doing that too." He looked sideways at her. "You must learn not to oversimplify." At her outraged look, he held up a hand. "No, I am not attempting to belittle you, I am merely advising you that people rarely do things for a single reason. Motivations tend not to be 'this' or 'that', but a mélange of both."

She considered, then she nodded. "I accept the admonition."

"In any case, that part of my strategy worked," Snape said. "You went white as a sheet, the moment I said the word."

Hermione gave a sigh. "Yes, fine, you noticed that it bothered me. But I was flustered because I was worried about you being the thief. Not because I thought you were on to me."

Snape finally shed his aloof attitude. "How was I supposed to deduce that? I knew how I was aware of the thefts – how were you supposed to know about them? The only possible explanation seemed to be that you were involved."

"Right. And the best way to deal with that was to start shooting me poisonous looks, and dropping warnings and threats. Excellent strategy. It really, really helped."

There was a taut silence for a few seconds.

"You forgot to mention the lie about the appointment," Snape said.

Hermione hesitated, blinked, shook her head. "What lie?"

"Healer Montague interrupted one of my tutorials, calling for you. When you returned to the room she gave some excuse about a rescheduled appointment."

"Oh. Right. I'd forgotten about that."

"Had you, now? Upon checking, I found that no such rescheduling had taken place. Therefore there must have been some other reason she met with you."

"Actually she was telling me about the stolen ashgrass. She only lied because I said you were annoyed by the interruptions. She was trying to keep me out of trouble." Hermione glared at Snape. "And you took that white lie and assumed I was a criminal mastermind, did you, Mr Jumps-to-Conclusions?"

"I jump to conclusions? You thought I was a maniac!"

"I didn't want to! I've been to hell and back, these last weeks! I tried to believe you were doing it for noble reasons, then I thought maybe you were in trouble because you wouldn't do anything so awful unless someone had a hold over you and then...damn it, Severus, mainly I wanted to know why you didn't ask for my help."

"Here's an idea. You could have asked me!"

"Yeah, well, you could have asked me too!"

They paused. Simultaneously they realised that they had leaned in and were now uncomfortably close. Hermione dropped her gaze to take in his mouth before catching herself in the act and
looking away. Both of them eased back. They took a moment to breathe; to pretend the air between them wasn't humming with tension.

"At least you've got maniac form," Hermione pointed out grumpily. "Don't forget, you committed common assault in an alley behind the Leaky. That didn't do you any favours."

"I had good reason," Snape ground out.

"Let's hear it, then."

He made a breathy, dismissive noise of impatience. "Why should I bother?"

"Because between the two of us I think we've proved conclusively that things go horribly wrong when we don't talk to each other!"

Snape sighed hard and examined the ceiling.

"Please," she said, trying to measure her tone. "A week ago, a friend of mine told me that you assaulted her son in a dark alley. Then you admitted it to me yourself, as though you'd done nothing wrong. And since that time I've been wondering what the hell kind of woman I must be, keeping information like that to myself."

He turned to look at her. There was a pause, then he said, "Joseph Montague was the man who harvested the ashgrass seedheads I requested. He failed to report the very obvious vandalism to the rest of the plants, even after I'd handed him that evidence on a plate. I could discern no reason for this, aside from his complicity. His mother then took you out of my class in order to pass you information. She lied about the reasons. Frankly, Hermione, when we were speaking in the potions laboratory and you reacted to Mr Montague's voice like a startled rabbit, I had all the proof of his involvement, and your own, that I needed."

"I see. And the obvious way to deal with that was to threaten a man in a dark alley. Brilliant!"

She huffed her annoyance at Snape before a thought struck her and she hesitated. "No, wait, though. This doesn't fit. Joseph said you warned him off the extra hours he was putting in."

Snape looked puzzled. "I said nothing of the sort. I merely told him I knew what he was up to and it had to stop."

"Oh, for...staying late at work while he kept an eye out for thieves and vandals was what he was 'up to'!"

Snape looked at her a moment, then his eyes closed briefly, then he tutted and turned away. "I can hardly be blamed for the way he misinterpreted my warning."

"Can't you? You assaulted him when he wasn't doing anything wrong. Actually he was trying to put things right. You and he were on the same side!"

"And if he had reported the thefts to his superior then I would have considered myself sensibly advised of that fact."

Hermione shook her head. "Fine. Crossed-lines. But you scared the crap out of the poor man."

"That was my intention."

"Congratulations. You must be very proud." Hermione glared at him. "You honestly thought I'd bribed a nice herbologist to steal ingredients for a hate potion?"
"I was worried you were being coerced! I thought if I shut down Montague then your usefulness would wane and your coercer would look elsewhere!"

"Well you were wrong!"

"I didn't want to be right!" He swept a fractious hand over his dark hair, pushing aside the strands that were falling in front of his eyes. "Mainly because I thought that if you were in trouble then you'd come to me for help, and the fact that you did not meant that--"

Abruptly, he stopped speaking.

"Meant what?" she demanded.

"Meant that last summer was ultimately meaningless," he said.

She blinked. A hot, fat tear ran down her cheek. She couldn't do anything about that so she ignored it. There was no sobbing, no hitching of breath, nothing but water spouting from her eyes as if they functioned as some kind of emotional release-valve.

"Last summer meant something," she said. Her voice shook with the force of her sincerity. "Something real. I don't go a single day without thinking about it."

"Really," he said, and folded his arms and looked away.

Hermione sniffed. "You left your bloody boot-prints next to the sweet violet, by the way."

He sniffed too. He pretended it was disdain, but neither of them were fooled. "I was looking for evidence."

"Well done. You left some. I think you might remember how well I know those boots."

They both paused. The sound of their laboured breathing was uncomfortably obvious.

"Anyway, what do you mean, I have 'form' as a maniac?" Snape protested.

"Oh, bugger off, Severus, that's like Mrs Trelore saying, 'What do you mean, I have form as a widow?' Common assault? Remember? And let's not forget you spent years convincing people you were a Death Eater."

"So it was fine for you to suspect me but not for me to reciprocate?"

"Of course it wasn't fine! I should have known better and I was a bloody idiot and I am beyond sorry I doubted you."

Snape glared and said, "Humph."

There was a pregnant pause.

"Well go on then!" she said.

"Go on what?"

"Apologise to me, you git! You thought I was a maniac!"

The door to the annex bedroom flew open. Philip Richmond stood there with his hands on his hips. "Without meaning to be rude, would you please take this somewhere we don't have to listen
Snape turned his glare on Richmond, then stood up and marched into the narrow hallway.

"Sorry," said Hermione. "We've...got some baggage."

Richmond tossed a brief glance over his shoulder and then gave a forgiving sigh. "There's a lot of it about," he agreed, and closed the door again.

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"Severus!" she called, as she hastened to catch up with him along the path that linked the barn conversion and Roksana Bramble's house. The moon was wreathed in clouds, now, and a cold rain fell.

He stopped walking, turned to look at her, huffed and then started up again.

"What's pissing you off now?" she cried. "God, it's like trying to juggle hand-grenades, having a conversation with you!"

He stopped again. He spun around. He raised his arms, wand ready, then dropped them again.

"We have work to do," he said.

"Yes we do. Won't it be easier when we've finished clearing the air?"

"The air is clear. We both appreciate the misunderstandings that have taken place."

"I've apologised," she said. "For thinking bad things about you. I said sorry, because I absolutely one hundred per cent bloody well am, even though I think it's pretty obvious I had good reasons for thinking them. Meanwhile you've thrown nothing but spite and bile and threats at me for less good reasons. Including, by the way, accusing me of being unfaithful to you while you're in a relationship with someone else!"

"So?"

"So I think I deserve more than a glare!"

"Then what the hell do you want?" he demanded.

"Right now?" She swiped at the rain on her face, considered her elevated heart rate and breathing, acknowledged the buzz of arousal that had been present since they'd started shouting at each other. "Oh, god, right now I want to kiss you so badly my knees are about to give way."

A frozen moment of absolute longing. She had no idea which way this was going to go.

Snape moved faster than any mortal human had a right to. He swept in, reached to cradle her face. For a suspended moment Hermione was caught in his gaze. She sensed his thumb tracking over the contours of her left cheek as if he brushed away a tear. Then he sighed out his surrender, the sound lost to the wind and the rain and the strangled sob of relief that Hermione gave as his mouth came down on her own.

She clutched at his arms and tilted her face and pressed her smaller body to the lean length of him. *God*, but she'd wanted this. She'd dreamt of it: his hands on her skin and his mouth moving over hers with this slow, deliberate sensuality. When she felt his tongue brush against her lower lip she was all but ready to drag him to the ground.
The kiss lasted until their need for oxygen became too pressing. They pulled apart by barely an inch. Hermione opened her eyes and scrutinised Snape's face. She didn't know what she was looking for, but it felt as if she was looking for something.

"Hermione," he murmured. Just her name.

"Oh boy," Hermione whispered back. She thought she was doing quite well to be even that coherent.

Snape drew in a shaken breath. "I should not be doing this," he said, all on the exhale.

"I won't tell if you won't."

His brow furrowed, and she wasn't sure if he was castigating himself or her. "My judgement has not been at its best, of late," he ventured.

"Join the club."

"Forgive me."

An actual apology. She treated it with the respect it deserved. "Of course."

He seemed to hesitate. "Truly?"

"Yep, forgiven. Shall we kiss again?"

Snape sighed, tremulous, and his breath touched her sensitised mouth and was almost as erotic as his kiss had been. "Better not."

"Right."

They moved reluctantly apart. Hermione squeezed her lips together. She could taste him still.

"What do we need to do now?" she said. "I'm pretty sure there's something important. I had all these ideas but my head's gone wonky."

"Now we find and rescue the young man who greets you with racial epithets," Snape said.

"That was it. I remember."

"You said Mr Booth had some addresses of potential interest?" Snape asked.

"Yes."

"Then we should investigate."

They were holding hands by the time they reached Mistress Bramble's house. Hermione took one look at the Hufflepuff door knocker and snatched her hand away.

"Damn it," she said. So much for not being the bad guy.

Snape paused. He dropped his chin to his chest and studied the tiles on the floor of the porch. His expression was troubled. "Roksana and I are friends, colleagues, nothing more. She...declined my proposition," he said, in the kind of voice that suggested revealing such a personal confidence was more painful than pulling teeth. "You bear no guilt in this."
"Oh," Hermione said. She decided that this was not the time to dwell on the fact that he'd propositioned Mistress Bramble in the first place.

"Unlike myself," he added. But he was moving into the house before Hermione had even processed what he'd said.

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A hurried conversation took place in the hallway of Roksana Bramble's house.

"Do we need to move Jossinia and her partner elsewhere?" Bramble asked.

Snape considered. "If Churlish has worked out that I arranged for Mrs Trelore to come here, we would have seen Zabini make an attempt to recover her by now. He's had all day."

Hermione nodded. This made sense.

"Where are you going now?" Bramble asked.

Snape glanced at Hermione. She shrugged and replied, "Two options. The Ministry, to find out how Kingsley reacted to the news about Churlish and to find out whether anyone's been to the Dorset house. Or Dane's place, to see if he's turned up anything else."

"Ministry first," Snape said. "Potter may need additional testimony to convince Shacklebolt that Churlish is corrupt. We can provide that."

"Right."

Bramble stepped closer and touched Snape's arm. "Please be careful." She looked at Hermione. "Both of you. This man, Zabini – from what I've been told, he wouldn't blink before doing either of you harm. Take care of each other."

Snape nodded abruptly. Hermione tried not to drown in all the subtext and nodded too.

Then he turned and left the house through the open front door. He began to walk briskly up the lane to the main road. Hermione hurried along beside him, and his hand found hers just before he wrapped them both up in his Disillusionment charm.

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The level eight atrium of the Ministry, sparsely populated at this time of the late evening, had altered in appearance since Hermione had been here earlier with Harry and Ron.

Two pairs of patrol officers guarded each end of the hall, keeping a watch on the Floos and the Apparition alcove beyond the wand checkpoint. The large enchanted banners which had not been used since Cornelius Fudge's self-promoting reign had been unfurled. This time they bore three images, huge and imposing above the walkways. Niccolo Zabini's sketch was displayed alongside images of Gustiver Walsh and the blond waiter from the Savoy. At least the MLE patrol officers knew which faces to keep an eye out for.

Snape led Hermione over to the lifts with only a brief nod of acknowledgement to the nearest
patrolwoman. They rode the lift up to level one.

"I should not have kissed you," Snape murmured into the confined quiet. "I apologise."

"Why? I all but begged."

"Irrelevant. Until I no longer claim any influence over your academic success, there should be no further incidents of..." He tailed off, as if unsure how to put it.

"Desperate rain-swept passion?"

He huffed a short laugh. "Or any other kind."

She sighed. "God, it's going to be a long ten weeks."

The lift juddered to a halt and they walked out into the level one corridors. The crowds of busy staff members Hermione had seen earlier seemed thinner on the ground, now. Hopefully the incident at Claridge's had been successfully resolved.

She noticed that Snape had partially unsleeved his wand; he carried it such that the end rested in the slightly-cupped hollow of his hand. Even here, in a building that should have been the safest in the country, he did not trust his surroundings. Hermione thought about the way he had offered that same wand to her in her parents' back garden, and her heart ached a little bit. Severus Snape was a complicated man. He was difficult and thin-skinned and had the emotional insight of an insecure adolescent. But he was decent, too, and loyal, and passionate, and when he learned, he learned fast. She was confident that he was going to be worth every bump in the road. She could only hope that he would view her shortcomings and idiosyncrasies with the same tolerance.

With these thoughts, even as they walked purposefully toward the Minister's office, an odd kind of sensation suffused Hermione's body. Between one breath and the next – or so it seemed – something shifted inside her. She went from being a woman who was hyperaware of her self-conscious desire for an unlikely man...to being a woman who knew who she was and what she felt, and was entirely at one with those things.

"Oh," she said, surprised by the sensation even as she welcomed it.

"Hermione?"

"Sorry. Nothing. I'm fine." She blinked, considered herself, then smiled.

They reached the open doors to Shacklebolt's reception area and marched through. Amadeus Drinkwater leaned heavily on the reception desk, nursing a steaming mug of something probably laden with caffeine. He looked like he could really do with a break. He glanced up, recognised his two visitors and didn't even wait for their enquiry. Touching his wand to the enchanted voice-stone on the desk, he said:

"Minister – Miss Granger and Professor Snape."

Moments later, Kingsley Shacklebolt came out of the office behind the reception area. He looked harried and tired, though his solid presence was as reassuring as always.

He smiled at Hermione. "I've been worried. You're all right?"

"Fine," she said. "I take it Harry got you up to speed?"
Shacklebolt shook his head. "I thought Churlish was one of the few I could rely on. I was considering her as the new head of MLE." He looked at Snape. "Severus – is Mrs Trelore...?"

"Safe and well, as is her fiancé."

Shacklebolt breathed a sigh of relief. "Some good news, for a change. Now – come through, come through." He glanced at Drinkwater. "Merlin's sake, Amadeus, get yourself off home."

Drinkwater sat up straighter. "I go home when you go home, Minister."

Shacklebolt rolled his eyes and shot Hermione a look. "You'd think when you've been corralled into serving as Acting Minister for Magic people might actually do as you tell them. But no."

Drinkwater said, "You can always fire me."

Shacklebolt tutted, clapped his colleague's shoulder and did not argue further, perhaps because he recognised bloody-minded loyalty when he saw it. He ushered Hermione and Snape into his office and gestured them into chairs.

"Now then," he said. "I've got Jasmine Churlish downstairs in Improper Use, fuming because she is under orders to personally review the Obliviator reports from today's fire. I've got two Aurors I trust keeping a discreet eye on her. In the meantime I have assigned senior patrolman Officer Vernon to be the lead investigator for the Zabini case. He is with the patrol team down in Dorset, investigating a large, empty farmhouse that has clearly had magical inhabitants residing there at some point in the last twenty-four hours."

"Is Harry with them?" Hermione asked.

Shacklebolt gave a sharp laugh. "Do you think I had any chance at all of preventing him from tagging along?"

"Probably not." Hermione glanced at Snape, who seemed happy to sit back and watch as she directed the conversation, so she sat up straighter and asked Shacklebolt, "Is this the first time a patrol has visited the Dorset property today?"

"Yes."

"So Madam Churlish failed to send the patrol she promised. Instead it looks like she contacted Zabini and gave him time to bolt."

"Maybe so," Shacklebolt said, "but on a day like this one she has a solid excuse. Her resources have been stretched thin. It would be easy to justify setting aside a stray lead that may or may not be relevant until later in the week." He held out his arms. "I need more, if I'm going to take Churlish into custody. What can you tell me?"

Hermione began to explain the reasoning behind her suspicions. Almost as soon as she had begun, however, a noise in the outer reception area made her stop. They all turned towards the office door as they heard Drinkwater calling out, "Madam, you cannot simply walk in on the Minister when he is..."

And then Jasmine Churlish appeared in the doorway, closely followed by an Auror who appeared to be weighing a preference for discretion against the urge to challenge.

Churlish looked at Hermione. She looked at Snape. Then she looked at the Minister.
"I see," she said. "This explains much."

"Jasmine?" Shacklebolt invited. His voice was calm but his eyes had gone diamond-hard. The expression was shocking in a face Hermione had come to associate with reassurance and humour.

Churlish glared at him. "I came up here to inform you that these memory-charm reports are a waste of my time, especially when a young man's life is in the balance. Now I see that you, like me, have been the victim of these two liars."

Hermione shot a quick glance at Snape. As the mood in the room shifted from conversation to confrontation, his posture became more relaxed. His body seemed loose, free of tension, and his right hand dangled over the far side of his seat where it was hidden from Churlish's view. His wand was ready.

Shacklebolt's eyebrows lifted. "Jasmine, sit yourself down and, if you'd be so kind, give your wand to the Auror behind you."

Churlish's eyes darted about. Hermione held herself stock still as Churlish seemed to consider Apparating right out of there. Even as she lifted her wand, however, the Auror behind her reached in and twisted it expertly from her hand.

"Thank you, Madam," he murmured, as though she had surrendered it willingly.

Churlish closed her eyes for a brief moment, then seemed to gather herself. She sat down.

"Excellent," Shacklebolt said. "Now. I hear you refused to interview Jossinia Trelore after the Savoy incident."

Churlish shot a venomous look at Hermione, then threw her shoulders back. "If we'd interviewed the woman, the whole damn thing would have turned into a debate on wizards dating Muggles. I exercised my own judgement."

"That judgement would seem poor, since the Polyjuiced wizard we now believe to be Blaise Zabini was infiltrating the event because of her."

"I hardly knew that at the time."

"Didn't you," Shacklebolt said, disbelief in every syllable. "What would have happened, do you think, if we had asked Mrs Trelore about the ball immediately after it took place? Might it have emerged much earlier that she'd been subjected to a number of harmful potions? Might Blaise Zabini have been brought in, questioned? Might his connection to the suspect have been revealed? His abduction prevented?" Shacklebolt sighed. "Might this whole situation have been nipped in the bud, so to speak?"

"I made a choice. Clearly I got it wrong."

"What you got wrong, Jasmine, was the fact that when Miss Granger pointed out to you the very good sense in questioning Mrs Trelore, you blamed your refusal to speak to her on me."

"I don't recall doing that," Churlish said airily. "But since we have Miss Granger here, perhaps you might ask her why she lied to Magical Law Enforcement about her presence in Knockturn Alley when Professor Snape was attacked."

Shacklebolt frowned and looked at Hermione. She opened her mouth, closed it again, tried to work out what to say. Churlish was, of course, speaking the truth; Hermione had lied about that.
Shacklebolt's frown grew deeper. He was concerned. His eyes searched hers. Panic churned inside her as she reached for any kind of justification: an excuse that did not involve revealing how, at the time, she'd been investigating Severus Snape as a potential thief.

"She lied because I asked her to," Snape's voice interjected. He sounded calm and unruffled.

Shacklebolt turned his attention to Snape, and Hermione immediately felt better. She could bear quite a lot, she had discovered, up to and including torture and battle, but the one thing she could not abide was disappointment from those whose opinion she respected.

"And why did you ask her to do that, Professor?" the Minister prompted.

"Miss Granger was indeed present when I was attacked. Fortuitously so, as Zabini had laid quite the intricate trap. After Zabini had made his escape I told Miss Granger that I would bring the matter to the attention of Madam Churlish. I did so that same evening. Madam Churlish, however, directed our interview in a way that I found unsettling. She demonstrated uncanny knowledge of what had happened before I made certain details plain. She asked questions that seemed...out of place."

Churlish laughed derisively. "You're lying! You're lying to protect this girl!"

Snape ignored her. "This was, as it happened, not the first time Madam Churlish had responded to information I brought to MLE in a way that worried me."

Shacklebolt frowned. "Go on."

"The week before, I reported an incident that took place in my potions class – an incident perpetrated by Blaise Zabini. Madam Churlish caught up with me before I even left the Ministry that evening to advise me she would deal with the matter personally. She spoke to me at St Mungo's the following Monday. She claimed to have spoken to Mr Zabini and had extracted a heartfelt apology from him. She asked me to make no more of the incident than I already had – naturally, I had expelled him from my class – as this was punishment enough."

"You disagreed with her assessment?" Shacklebolt said.

"The incident involved a deliberate attempt to ignite ashgrass powder," Snape said quietly.

Shacklebolt actually caught his breath in shock, before he glanced at Churlish. "And you thought a smacked-wrist would do the job?"

Churlish gave a nonchalant shrug. "Mr Zabini regretted his actions. I warned him about his future conduct. The issue was dealt with."

Hermione said, "Um – just a thought, but since Madam Churlish saw Blaise the day before he went missing, perhaps she can explain why he didn't collect his wand from the Department of Magical Education? By that time he'd had four days to do so. Something must have been keeping him away from the Ministry."

Something like, perhaps, a tip-off from a corrupt MLE official? A warning that a report had been formally raised, and Blaise might do very well to keep a low profile for the foreseeable?

Churlish glared at her, then looked away. "I did not ask him, since I was unaware of the matter."

"When exactly did you speak to young Mr Zabini?" Shacklebolt asked.
"Monday some time," she said vaguely. "Not long before I spoke to the professor."

"We spoke at twenty minutes before two in the afternoon," Snape supplied. "I had only just arrived at St Mungo's in preparation for my class."

"Well, then, it must have been around noon that I saw the boy," Churlish said.

"You were at the offices of the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee between a quarter to midday and half past," Hermione pointed out. "We spoke about the sketch of Zabini senior, if you recall. The one that had been published that day in the *Prophet*."

Churlish's jaw moved, as though she was grinding her teeth. "Yes," she snapped. "That's right, I was. I remember, now. I saw Mr Zabini beforehand. Late morning, on Monday."

"And where did the interview take place?" Shacklebolt pressed.

"At the boy's home! Where do you think?"

"So his mother will be able to confirm this, then?"

"I believe his mother was out at the time," Churlish said. "I do not recall seeing here there."

Hermione arched a brow and glanced at Snape. He gave the smallest of nods. It would seem that she and Snape were in agreement: Churlish hadn't spoken to Blaise at all. She'd just wanted to make sure MLE were not looking for him.

"Getting back to your original question, Minister," Snape said, "by the time I reported the Knockturn incident last Tuesday, I was, rightly or wrongly, concerned about Madam Churlish's behaviour. I therefore kept two specific details to myself – Miss Granger's presence, and the presence of another wizard Zabini had arranged in order to distract me."

"Liar," Churlish muttered.

Snape arched an eyebrow. "Miss Granger informed me later that Madam Churlish had also spoken to her about the incident. Madam Churlish advised Miss Granger that a witness had come forward to claim that an additional wizard was in the alley when I was attacked. This witness was, according to Madam Churlish, a clerk from the Coffin House – which seems unlikely, but there we are."

"Why did Madam Churlish say these things to you, Miss Granger?" Shacklebolt asked.

A question she could answer truthfully, thank heavens! Hermione lifted her chin. "I had the impression she was trying to catch me out in the lie, Minister. Possibly because I'd already been making a nuisance of myself by asking questions like – 'Why the hell are we not interviewing Mrs Trelore about the ball?'"

"Quite so," Snape said. "Miss Granger had the common sense not to fall for this clumsy attempt at entrapment, however, and informed me of the conversation. Since I knew I had not advised Madam Churlish of the presence of the other wizard, I surmised that she was getting her information from another source. I was concerned, of course, that this other source might be the suspect."

"You didn't bring any of this to me, Severus," Shacklebolt said.

"I had only a strong suspicion. But it was enough for me to arrange Mrs Trelore's removal last
night to a safer location. The events of today would seem to...bear my suspicions out."

Churlish bristled at that, looked longingly at her wand, then fidgeted in her chair.

"Well, then, Jasmine," Shacklebolt said, suddenly quite cheerful. "We can clear all this up easily, then. Your witness from the Coffin House should be enough to convince Professor Snape that you were not actually being fed information by our suspect. Name and contact details, please."

Churlish narrowed her eyes at Snape and Hermione. "You two," she said. "You make a play of the formalities, but you're thick as thieves, aren't you?" She looked at the Minister. "Are you happy for a teacher to be carrying on this way with his student?"

The cheerfulness dissipated and a darker expression filled the Minister's face. "You should mind your insinuations," Shacklebolt said. "In private, Miss Granger and I use each other's first names. She and I once shared a Thestral, while Death Eaters fired curses at us. Such situations engender a sense of familiarity. Are you going to accuse me of 'carrying on' with her too?"

"He was at her parents' house last night!"

"I'm aware. I have read Officer Vernon's report of the meeting at Mr Potter's house. Jasmine, produce your witness or submit to arrest."

Churlish looked around frantically before all her defiance left her and she crumpled. For an awful moment Hermione thought the woman was going to start to sob, but she seemed to get a hold of herself.

She lifted her chin and said, "Minister, I ask that you relieve me of duty and place me under arrest, pending an investigation into my actions. I would like to offer evidence on several other crimes I know Niccolo Zabini has perpetrated, including the unlawful murders of Horatio Dalrymple and his mother, and of John Harcourt and Norris Trelore."

Shacklebolt arched an eyebrow and nodded, apparently unsurprised by the list of murder victims. It seemed Hermione was not the only person to have figured out why Jossinia Trelore had been so unlucky in matrimony. "A sudden change of heart, Jasmine?"

In fact, with her admission Churlish's posture seemed to lose a lot of its tension and betray an odd sort of relief. "I think it's about time. I would ask that the assistance I am now freely offering is taken into account when my actions are investigated. I would also ask that the origins of my acquaintance with Zabini be considered as a mitigating factor."

"Origins?" Shacklebolt asked gently.

"I will tell you everything. I ask you acknowledge this cooperation."

"I acknowledge it. Whether it will buy you leniency down the line is another matter." He glanced up at the Auror. "Take Madam Churlish to the holding cells as discreetly as you can."

"Wait, please. A moment." Churlish stood up, and the Auror held his wand ready, but Hermione could see from the look in the woman's eyes that she'd conceded this fight. "It's easiest if I give it in memory form. It may help you find Nic."

Hermione looked at Shacklebolt. Shacklebolt gave the offer some thought.

"Miss Granger," he said. "Would you please ask Mr Drinkwater to secure for me the Pensieve from storage?"
"Certainly," she said.

As she departed the room, she heard him say, "Professor Snape, I require two witnesses present when evidence is extracted in this manner. Will you serve as such?"

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Churlish had been marched off to the holding cells in the company of the Auror by the time Shacklebolt finished setting the Pensieve up. He glanced at Snape and Hermione, then dipped his head to view the memories Churlish had extracted. A few seconds – ten at the most – passed before he lifted his head again.

Shacklebolt looked worried. "You should both see this. I've no idea how he..." His words tailed off. "Please." He gestured at the Pensieve.

Snape glanced at Hermione and offered her first go. She shook her head, oddly reluctant, so he stepped forward and lowered his face to the silvery magic swirling above the runed bowl.

When he stepped back, a frown of intrigue played across his face. "It's all right. You've witnessed much worse," he murmured to her, and gently nudged her forward.

She stepped up to the Pensieve, drew a deep breath as though she was about to submerge herself in water, and let herself fall into the memory.

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Churlish looked about ten years younger, and wore the uniform of an MLE patrolwoman. She strode through the empty cobbled streets of Diagon Alley at night, purposeful and prepared.

Another patrolman walked two paces behind her, younger, fresh of face.

Hermione watched, disembodied and floating some distance in front of the source of the memory, like a camera tracking a film's leading actor: the Pensieve's odd viewpoint.

Patrolwoman Churlish stopped outside the Quality Quidditch Supplies shop, wand at the ready. She paused, listening. There was a light on beyond the thick glass windows, but it was impossible to see what was going on past the display of beaters and hoops, and mannequins dressed in various professional Quidditch team robes.

Churlish drew a deep breath and then entered the property. Her colleague was right behind her, and stayed in the doorway as Churlish moved inside to assess whatever threat had called her patrol out here. In the space between counter and displays, a pair of men stood over another who lay curled and defenceless on the floor. The men were delivering a hefty beating, less with the curses of their wands and more with the slamming kicks of their boots. Their victim had been injured so badly that he'd reached a semiconscious state where each blow to his ribcage or his gut barely prompted even a moan of pain.

"Magical Law Enforcement!" Churlish shouted, startling the thugs; so intent had they been on their beating that they hadn't noticed the patrolwoman enter. "Surrender your wands immediately."

The thugs spun towards her with their wands raised. She cast swiftly, a body-bind, and the leftmost thug fell to the floor. Her colleague was not so fast at getting his spell off. He gave a yelp as the other thug managed to hex him with a Stupefy before he could complete his casting. The young patrolman collapsed to the ground right there in the open shop doorway. Hermione winced at the noise his head made as it smacked on to the outside step.
Churlish glanced back in alarm at her colleague. She realised immediately that this had been an error and was already casting a second body-bind when she turned back to the remaining thug. Fortunately he had not used her momentary distraction to take her down. He’d bent to his body-bound colleague, placed a hand on the man's shoulder and then activated a Portkey retrieved from a pocket. The two of them popped out of the shop with a snap of displaced air.

Churlish went to the man who had been beaten. The man groaned softly but could not respond to her queries about what his name was and whether he knew where he was.

Hermione watched as Churlish stood straight and moved towards the doorway to Rennervate her colleague, but even as she did so a noise drew her attention. A doorway behind the shop counter clattered open, and a man appeared: large, ruddy-cheeked, with curly auburn hair and several chins. For a moment, Churlish and the man looked at each other in surprise, then he ducked back beyond the door and closed it again.

"Shit," Churlish said. She looked back at her colleague, hurried over, released him from the Stupefy. The young patrolman scrambled to his feet, gingerly touching the back of his head. "All right?" she asked.

The patrolman nodded, then winced as the motion made his head hurt.

"Good. There's one other goon, out the back. I'm going after him. Get this man to St Mungo's."

The patrolman looked reluctant. "Rules say we shouldn't split up."

"Rules also say that if a man's been beaten to within an inch of his life, he shouldn't be left lying there for ten minutes while we play cat and mouse with some lowlife. Get him to hospital, and get yourself examined too. That was a nasty tumble you took."

The patrolman hesitated a moment more, then nodded. Churlish, wand unsheathed, went around the counter to the door through which the other man had gone. Behind her came the pop of Disapparition.

She opened the door and maintained cover to one side. Hermione almost smiled at the cop-show-like rhythm of Churlish's pursuit. Churlish glanced around the frame, saw nothing, twisted round and made for more cover. In the room beyond were stacked boxes and a couple of clothes rails bearing hangers of robes. A trapdoor in the wooden flooring was propped open and another doorway led from this backroom into what seemed to be a tiny unlit office.

Churlish went to investigate the trapdoor, which might have been her undoing because Hermione could already see a shadow moving within the office. Fortunately for Churlish, the man who was raising his wand at her from the shadows chose that moment to tense, cringe and then let out a growl of pain.

Hermione had seen this kind of thing before: in a hospital room, while Severus Snape had been hexed into a partial body-bind and then sliced about the face with Bellatrix Lestrange's cursed blade. Then, she'd seen Augustus Rookwood's disguise as a young Mediwitch painfully twist its way free of his body. Now, through the Pensieve, she saw the fat man crease up with agony as his own Polyjuiced disguise gave up its hold.

Churlish cast a Lumos to better see what was going on. She moved around to the office doorway the man had retreated through. Cautiously she approached, trying to get an angle in order to incapacitate him. The office was so tiny, though, and the man had pressed himself to one side of the door, even as his body shuddered with discomfort. Churlish had no line-of-sight to cast until
she was close enough for the man to reach out and grab her. Which he did; he snapped an arm out to take hold of her wrist, looked up at her through the grimace on his newly dark, handsome, vaguely Mediterranean face and--

--with a lurch of reality, Hermione followed Churlish's memory to the place the man had taken her.

Hermione blinked, just as Churlish was blinking. Churlish was also swearing and staggering and looking dazedly around. They were in a vault, a Gringotts vault, a large and impressive one. Coffers were stacked along one wall, sacks of gems piled beside them. Into the walls, alcoves were cut to form shelves that held goblets and silverware and other items apparently worth too much money to keep in an actual house. A table stood to the left of the heavy, closed vault door, liberally spread with piles of Galleons, a selection of jewellery boxes and several leather-bound ledgers. The lighting had not activated with the arrival of a visitor because the door had not been opened and the vault did not recognise their presence. The only light came from the wand of the man who had brought Churlish here. The sparkle against so much precious metal and mineral was disorienting.

Churlish was a professional, however. With impressive speed she gathered her wits, raised her wand and prepared to take her adversary down.

"Now, now," said Niccolo Zabini. Unsurprisingly, he looked younger than he did in his wanted poster, though this difference was exacerbated by the fact that the robes he wore were now far too big for him, thereby giving the confounding impression of a child playing dress-up. He also had no scar damage over his left eye. He'd used Churlish's brief confusion to put a few steps between them. "Think. Do you want to leave this vault, or do you want to die in here?"

The words gave Churlish pause. She was intelligent enough to realise that there was no way this man should have been able to 'port them both to this location. She also had to know that the air in a sealed vault would only last so long, and that the magical door would not open from the inside.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"The man who holds the key to you surviving this night," Zabini said lightly. His voice was accented only lightly with a hint of his Italian origins. It was higher pitched than Hermione had expected. "Do you want to survive?"

"I will not be threatened."

"What an odd thing to say, when you just have been," Zabini retorted. "Still, as you wish."

With that, he gave her a smile and a shrug and blinked out of the vault, leaving the place dark and cold and empty.

Hermione gasped, feeling the oppressive claustrophobia of that unlit vault in spite of the second-hand nature of this experience. Moments later Churlish had conjured a Lumos and was looking around. Trying to work out what to do.

As Hermione watched, Churlish tried to Apparate. The spell fizzled. She huffed and frowned and clamped her lips tight shut, looking as though she was trying not to panic. She took out something from under her uniform, worn around her neck: a kind of pendant. The pendant pulled apart into two sections and a sewing needle seemed to be mounted within. She drew breath and then touched the needle.

Nothing happened.
Churlish tried again. Nothing. She resealed what was clearly an emergency Portkey and tucked it despondently away.

She went over to look at the ledgers. "Halfbucket," she muttered to herself as she turned the pages to the front of the book. "Halfbucket?" A further examination as she skimmed through the pages. "Goodwych?" Churlish rocked back on her feet, frowning up at the vault ceiling, then she made a noise of recognition. "Of course. The Black Widow."

With a sniff, she turned away. "All right, Jasmine, you know where you are," she muttered out loud. Hermione understood, at this point, the desire to keep yourself company with your own voice. The pressing containment of the vault was awful. "You can't open the door, you can't move yourself elsewhere, but if you can only send a message..."

She screwed up her face and thought. Hermione wondered why the woman wasn't attempting to conjure a Patronus, before she remembered that the messaging capabilities of a Patronus were known only to Dumbledore and a handful of Order members at this time.

"Two and a half hours," Zabini's voice announced, "if it's of interest."

Churlish spun around, wand readied, to see Zabini back in the vault, leaning casually against a stack of coffers.

"What?" she demanded, trying not to sound panicked, trying not to sound relieved he'd come back, but failing.

"Two and a half hours. I timed it, one night. Just to see how long I could last before the air began to give out." Zabini shrugged at her. "Maybe I could have lasted longer, but I didn't want to risk losing consciousness."

Churlish gave a growl of frustration and tried to close the distance between herself and Zabini. Zabini merely smirked and blinked out again.

She railed, then, did Churlish. Panic got the better of her and she began to shout. She called for help, she announced that she was a patrolwoman, she hammered on the vault's metal door with her hands then, realising that the noise this made was minimal, cast around and located a small stack of metallic ingots underneath the table. She hefted one and used it to beat at the door, the effort making her growl as she swore imaginatively and voiced numerous doubts regarding Zabini's manhood, parentage and moral decency.

When she'd exhausted herself, she found a stray chest to sit down on and put her head in her hands. Hermione wondered how much air Churlish had already used up with that performance.

"Ready to talk yet?" Zabini asked.

Her arm snapped out like a whip crack and a Stupefy left her wand in Zabini's direction almost before he'd finished speaking. The spell bounced off the shield that he had clearly prepared before 'porting in, and made some pretty sparks. Zabini arched his eyebrow at them, then rolled his eyes at Churlish, then blinked out again.

"No!" she yelled.

The spells came, then. Blasting curses at the door that bounced right off it, threatening only the tidy stacks of boxes and sacks and, of course, Churlish herself. She tried an alarm spell known to Aurors that was designed to attract the attention of nearby colleagues. She tried a diminishing spell, to see if she could crawl through a crack or keyhole in the vault door. She tried every kind of
dispelling incantation to attempt to disrupt the magical locks.

After ten minutes of this, Churlish's energies were drained and she hadn't made so much as a dent in her prison. She sat down again, her weak _Lumos_ the only light. Her head rested back against the vault wall. Her eyes were wide and unseeing. Her breathing was fast and shallow.

Hermione thought that she looked like a woman who had acknowledged defeat.

Zabini made her wait for what seemed like a long time. Hermione experienced every minute of it along with Churlish, even though she knew, logically, that when she finished with these memories and left the Pensieve only a handful of seconds would have passed. Churlish didn't move. Her breathing slowed only a little. After several long minutes sitting quietly in this oppressive dimness, Hermione realised that Churlish had given in to despair.

"Oh, my dear. Cheer up. It doesn't have to end badly, you know."

Zabini wasn't so much as making a rustle in the air each time he 'ported in. There was no pop of Apparition, no crackle-and-rush of Portkeys, nothing at all. Whatever he was doing, it was subtle and effective. Hermione couldn't see what he was using, but he reached into his outer robe each time he travelled. He had something tucked away there. It couldn't be a Portkey, though. Churlish had proved Snape right about their functionality in Gringotts. They didn't work.

"What do you want?" Churlish asked Zabini dully.

"Ah! Now we talk. _Eccellente_." He didn't move closer to her. "What I want is simple, patrolwoman. I want to be left alone."

"Try not committing crimes in Diagon Alley, then."

"That? Was no crime. I own that building. The man owes me money. Rent. He's the criminal, not me! He has refused to pay for a very long time; he got what he deserved." He waved his arm petulantly at Churlish. "Okay, fine, my employees became a little enthusiastic. I will discipline, yes? Is done. But no crime."

Churlish lifted her chin. "I cannot promise you there will be no report. My colleague was there too."

"Of course. Is not a problem, patrolwoman. You tell mostly the truth. Two bad men, beating the business owner. Both Portkey'ed out. Another man – big man, reddish hair, wobbly face, not so nice looking – he saw you, ran away, you followed. He hit you with _Stupefy_ and when you came to he was gone."

"Why can't I say he Portkey'ed out like his cohorts?"

"Because you've been gone..." Zabini checked a Muggle-like wristwatch. "Is nearly an hour, bella."

Churlish closed her eyes. As though she was signing away her soul, she said, "Fine. I'll do as you ask. No mention of you or what you look like. No mention of this vault."

"I knew you were a sensible lady," Zabini declared. "Here. Catch."

He tossed her a hefty leather pouch that Churlish almost fumbled. "What's this?"

He grinned. "The carrot. I like carrots better than sticks."
As Hermione watched, Churlish opened the pouch. The pouch was enchanted with an extension charm and inside were several hundred Galleons.

"I prefer not to be bribed," she said, and sealed it up and tossed it back.

Zabini's expression darkened. "Are you quite sure? You see, I know your face, now. I know your voice and your partner and I know how to find out where you live and who you care for. I don't wear this face often, lady patrolwoman. So you'll never know when I follow you in the street, or pass you in the Ministry, or sip wine at the next table over in an inn. But I will do that. Often. Just to check that we are all square here."

Churlish swallowed. She didn't know what to say to that.

"I've learned to be careful, you see." Zabini smiled at her, and the smile was compassionate and kind and all the more discomfiting for that. "So if I get a hint that you want to tell your bosses at MLE about this adventure of ours tonight? I bring you back here, quick as a flash. Or maybe I bring someone else. Someone who matter to you."

Churlish seemed to believe every word Zabini said. Hermione believed him too. She wondered what she would have done in Churlish's situation.

"And maybe," Zabini went on, "maybe I forget to collect them in good time. Two and a half hours. A lonely way to die, don't you think?" He shrugged. "Is no problem to me. So you see – you might as well take the carrot. We work together now." Suddenly his congenial, charismatic expression twisted to something that was utterly sociopathic. "Take the money, bella. It will be so much easier."

Churlish, perhaps to her credit, hesitated before surrendering. She stood up and this time walked towards Zabini. She took the pouch from him, tucked it away and then allowed herself to clasp his hand.

"Your wand," he whispered.

She sighed and handed it over to him.

Hermione sensed that odd reality-lurch again as Churlish was dragged back through whatever dimensions this mechanism of Zabini's employed. They all returned to exactly the same place they had begun: the Quality Quidditch Supplies store on Diagon Alley.

Zabini stepped away from Churlish, watchful as they regained their feet. Hermione wondered whether Churlish knew any wandless hexes powerful enough to incapacitate Zabini. It seemed that she either did not, or perhaps that the time she had spent entombed in a sealed vault had broken her spirit sufficiently that she could not even try.

"I am a better friend than enemy," Zabini said quietly. "Shall we part friends?"

Churlish's jaw moved from side to side for a moment. Her pride was at war with her sense of self-preservation.

"Friends," she finally mumbled.

Zabini smiled at her: handsome, seductive, terrifying. Then he sauntered into the main part of the shop, set Churlish's wand down gently at the end of the counter and left the premises, whistling to himself, as though everything was right with the world.
Jasmine Churlish ignored her wand and made her slow way back into that unlit office. She sat down at the desk in there, and put her exhausted head in her hands. In the silence of the otherwise empty building, in Diagon Alley's quiet, small hours, the patrolwoman softly wept.

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It took Hermione a moment to recover her wits as she returned to Kingsley Shacklebolt's office.

"That man wants taking down," she said. Annoyingly, there was a tremor to her voice. Churlish's experience had shaken her.

Shacklebolt reached for her shoulder, steadying her as she swayed, then he squeezed reassurance and let go. "That's the plan." He looked at Snape. "Any thoughts as to what he's using to get to the vault?"

"No. Well – a thought, but they're supposed to have been lost for centuries."

"What?" Shacklebolt prompted.

"Quickstep stones."

"Never heard of them."

Hermione had, though. "They originated around the Baltics. A rather clever wizard and his equally clever goblin friend wanted to create a Portkey that could bypass wards and other obstacles. Since house-elves do that as a matter of course, they looked into harnessing elven magic. Which led to some pretty rotten experiments. Magical vivisection. Torture, really. But they managed to make a prototype. An incredible achievement, perhaps, but it cost the lives of six free elves." She swallowed her way past the distaste. "Good sense and decency prevailed, thank goodness. The technique was declared illegal worldwide, since it required the life of an elf for every stone manufactured. The original pair found themselves in a lot of trouble. They went on the run, but were caught in Finland. Tried and executed. I think it all happened in..." She pretended to search her memory; people resented her less when her near-perfect recall looked like harder work than it was. "Um...the late seventeen hundreds."

Shacklebolt was still frowning in confusion. Snape was just looking at her.

"What?" she said to him. "I did a lot of research about elf history when I was...you know."

Snape rolled his eyes at her. "Hermione is ever a friend to the downtrodden. Beware, Kingsley, lest her attentions turn to you."

Shacklebolt looked at the two of them, then he smiled. "Oh, I don't think that's going to happen any time soon, is it, Severus?"

"Excuse me," Hermione said pointedly. "Standing right here. And Severus is right in that it's only a working theory. There were supposedly a dozen Quickstep stones forged following the successful prototype. Most are accounted for because we know when they were destroyed."

"Most?" Shacklebolt said.

"Far as I can recall there's two intact. One in the artefacts archive in Alexandria. The other on display in the Estonian Ministry of Magic, alongside a memorial to the elf communities that used to inhabit the forest regions of that country. They got wiped out in the mid-nineteenth century, of course."
"Hmm. What's been done once could be done again," Shacklebolt pointed out.

"That's true," Hermione said, her stomach churning at the notion.

"A working theory, then," Snape agreed. "Quickstep stones function like reusable Portkeys. You have to take them to the location where they are to travel, then trigger the enchantment that will recognise that location as 'home'. Once done, I am unaware of any restrictions regarding their use. Distance, depth, magical wards – everything is overridden by the stone. Activate once and you're there; activate again and you're back where you started."

"Which is why Quickstep stones are considered incredibly valuable and potentially dangerous," Hermione said.

Shacklebolt nodded. "I'll reach out to Estonia tomorrow morning. Did either of you notice anything else in the memory we just experienced?"

Snape said, "Yes. Mr Zabini claimed ownership of the Quidditch shop. Yet Mrs Trelore informed us earlier that her second husband bequeathed his Diagon Alley property empire to his mistress and illegitimate daughter – something Zabini was apparently furious about."

"Oh, good spot," Hermione said, who'd been so distracted by the vault and Jasmine Churlish's ordeal that she had perhaps not been paying enough attention to the peripheral details. "So how did he get hold of the property?"

"I don't know. But I'm beginning to suspect that investigating Niccolo Zabini's crimes is going to be a full time job for some poor MLE officer."

"For now, we can follow the money," Hermione said. "The current owner of that building will be a matter of record, here at the Ministry."

"That name must be linked to Zabini somehow," Snape said.

"Another fake persona?" Hermione mused. "This one has to be a wizard rather than a Muggle, though. I wonder if that's easier to set up?"

"Either way," Snape said, "the property's owner ought to have an address on file. Perhaps even an address that Zabini feels he can use on a night like tonight."

Hermione nodded vigorously. "Yes. Especially when he's been forced out of two of his safe houses already."

"Good idea," Shacklebolt said. "But that will have to wait until the morning. I don't have anyone here who can follow that up." He glanced at the clock on his office wall. "Not at eleven o'clock at night."

"Tomorrow might be too late for Blaise Zabini," Snape pointed out.

"You know who we need for that job?" Hermione said. "Someone with an intrinsic talent for navigating Ministry records. Someone for whom paperwork is a passion." She grinned at Shacklebolt. "We need Percy Weasley. Give me a tick?"

She turned her back and closed her eyes. Happy memories were easy to come by, now.

"Expecto Patronum!"
She opened her eyes. The charm to send the message stuck in her throat.

"Oh," she added.

Her playful, frisky otter scampered around in a circle, looked up at her with delighted enthusiasm, then took a dive through thin air as if hunting for her dinner.

Hermione spun around to look at Snape. He arched an eyebrow at her. "I don't know why that's happened," she said. "I haven't changed how...I mean..." She looked cautiously at Shacklebolt then back at Snape. "If anything it's more, not less, if you, er, see what I mean?"

And Severus Snape, who had reacted with the unjustified jealousy of a pubescent teenager where something as innocuous as her acquaintance with a colleague was concerned, merely looked at Hermione's Patronus – the one that no longer demonstrated how hard and fast Hermione had fallen – and he smiled. Just for a second or two. It was, perhaps, the longest she'd seen that particular expression remain in place on his face.

"You are yourself again," he said quietly.

"But..."

"Trust me," he said. "This is a good thing."

Shacklebolt's presence meant that no more could be said. Hermione set her confusion aside and sent Percy a message asking if he'd mind ever so much Floo'ing the Acting Minister and helping him with a rather urgent bit of business. She sent her otter off with an odd mixture of feelings.

Shacklebolt coughed once it was all done. He was insightful enough to know something had just happened, and tactful enough not to press them on it. "Do you intend to join Harry in Dorset?" he asked. "Or are you calling it a night?"

Hermione grimaced. "Blaise is still in trouble, and his father is spraying Fiendfyre about in Muggle hotels. I'm going to keep working." She shot a look at Snape. "I want to check in with Dane."

"Then that's what we shall do next," Snape said smoothly, without so much as a twitch.

Hermione turned to the Minister. "Oh. Um – if that's okay with you, Kingsley?"

"Told you," he said. "I stopped getting a say in things when they gave me this office." He looked at them both for a moment and then said, "Hermione, Severus." His brow furrowed just slightly. "Word of advice. Be discreet."

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"I don't understand," she said, as soon as they were sequestered in the relative privacy of the lift. "I just, I don't, I don't get it!"

"Don't you?" Snape's voice was mild. Hermione was growing infuriated by his lack of reaction.

"How am I supposed to convince you now?" she demanded. "It was the one tangible thing I had! My rook! My dark, sleek, beaky, totally and pathetically obvious rook!" She found herself oddly close to tears. "My feelings have not changed!"

"Yes, they have," Snape said.
"They have not! I want you in my life, Severus. God knows, we've had a hell of a few weeks, but this thing we have – I want to see where it goes!"

"As do I. In good time."

"But–"

"Hermione," he said, and his tone was reasonable and composed: this Snape was the flipside of the petulant man he'd been only a short while ago in Roksana Bramble's hallway. "Consider to whom you are speaking."

"You think I'm confused about who you are?"

"I mean...do you think there are many wizards who have spent more time than I, researching and analysing the implications when an original Patronus changes?"

She stared at him. She recalled that when it came to shifting Patronuses, she and Snape could claim some common ground.

"When our Patronuses change, they do so at times of upheaval," he said. "They reflect an earthquake of emotion within ourselves."

"I know! It's the kind of thing that happens when you fall i–"

"Don't," he snapped. His hand came up. He breathed in the silence that followed, and Hermione witnessed a tremor of uncertainty behind his composure. "I would prefer that you leave certain words out of our discussions."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Even when they're the right words?"

"If they were not, it would hardly be a problem."

A pause. They looked at each other. Snape, as usual, saw no need to clarify the looming implications of his remark. Hermione, with the wisdom she had learned from her dealings with Snape all through the summer, refrained from urging him towards more unequivocal statements.

The lift tinged and the door slid open. Hermione sighed and went to leave. Snape touched her arm and gestured her back. He leaned in and said, very quietly, "We should not be defined by our emotions, particularly not the ones which set us spinning. Our emotions should be defined by us. Who we are. Our...essence of self. Do you see the difference?"

She remembered a moment, upstairs in the corridor, when she'd realised she had grown into her feelings for Severus Snape. What had once been uncomfortable, like an ill-fitting costume, had become solid and real and integral to her being.

"You don't mind, then?" she asked.

"Do I mind that you have demonstrated that what is happening between us is not merely a crush, a crutch, a product of trauma, a novelty, or any of the other things it could so easily have been?" His eyes burned. "I find I do not."

"But otters are cute and fluffy and playful," she said, perhaps a touch absurdly. "You hate that."

"Otters have sharp teeth, as well."

Involuntarily, she captured her lower lip with her teeth and held his gaze. His hand came up and
his thumb coaxed her lip free. The gentle pressure was powerfully erotic.

"We will continue this discussion at a later date," Snape said hoarsely.

The lift doors chose that moment to slide closed, enclosing them in that bubble of privacy again.

Hermione widened her eyes in challenge. "The lift is on my side, at least."

His mouth twitched with a smile. Then he turned abruptly away from her, waved his wand at the control panel, and marched out of the lift when the doors reopened.

Hermione touched the place where his thumb had been, and followed.

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"Any news?" Ron asked her, as she emerged from Dane's fireplace.

"Um – Severus is with me?"

"Oh joy."

"The feeling is mutual, Mr Weasley," Snape said as he emerged behind her.

Ron flinched for a moment, maybe with muscle-memory, then he said, "Bugger off. You were an arsehole earlier. And I can say that to you now. So I am. Saying it. And-and Hermione deserves better!" Ron lifted his chin and did quite a good impression of a young man who no longer felt completely intimidated by his former potions professor.

"Yes. Excellent," said Hermione. "This is definitely a good use of our time." She turned and nudged Snape. "Stop glaring." She moved over to Ron and gave him a hug. "You're sweet to care, but I can fight my own battles." She stepped away. "And thank you for staying here with Dane when I know you must have wanted to join Harry in Dorset."

"Well, the gang's all here!" Dane said cheerfully as he emerged from his flat's second bedroom: the room he had configured to accommodate his more Muggle-centric activities, including power sockets for electrical equipment and a phone line for his modem. "Or some of us, anyway. Right! Do I report to the sinister sneery one or the beautiful brainy one?"

Hermione growled under her breath and muttered, "Oh, this was a great idea, wasn't it?" She fixed Dane with a cool look. "Let's call it a group-share of information and refrain from getting personal, shall we?"

"Right ho," Dane said amiably. "We've got six further addresses. Ron's been in touch, periodically, with Harry as they search the farmhouse in Dorset. They've been turning up a treasure trove down there. Paperwork. Most of it hidden behind charms and glamours. Seems the place is Zabini's hub of operations. There were a fair few defences in place. They needed to get the Aurors in to dismantle a couple of curses."

"Everyone all right, down there?" Hermione asked.

"No serious casualties. One patrolman caught the edge of a nasty blasting curse when he stepped on the wrong bit of path, but he'll be fine."

"The information on this paperwork?" Snape asked.

"Pretty much everything. The identities Zabini uses, the documents, the histories. Balance sheets
for the accounts he maintains – he's got several vaults at Gringotts under assumed names, along with four Muggle bank accounts, including one with Credit Suisse."

Hermione whistled.

"Exactly," Dane said. "This guy's done very well since he killed himself off."

"Nicholas Beatty isn't his only Muggle identity, then?"

Dane went to his dining table and picked up a printed-out sheet. He handed it to Hermione. "Nicholas Beatty changed his name by deed poll in 1982. Before that, he was known as Thomas Preston. The original Thomas Preston was born in 1955 and died when he was thirteen. Drowned in the Thames following an accident on a hired pleasure boat. Two other kids drowned too."

"Zabini didn't create this identity from scratch, then, he stole it?"

"Yup. And he stole the identities of the other two casualties as well. Kevin Lockwood. Brendan Wallace. Three boys who didn't survive a tragedy, now three names supporting a network of properties and investments."

"And you've got all of this from the papers at Dorset?"

"Enough to give me something to dig into. Most of the paperwork is being packed up for evidence. Actually, Harry's the one who recognised the significance of a few things."

Hermione nodded. "Seems to me there should be more of an overlap between Muggle Liaison and MLE. Anyway – the three kids that died had valid National Insurance numbers. That's the point, I'm guessing?"

"Exactly. Those are the things you can't create magically." Dane took the sheet back from Hermione when she offered it. "Once I had the names and numbers, I did another search with the Land Registry. Turned up some more addresses." He picked up another print-out and handed it to her. "The info's probably buried in the Dorset paperwork too, but MLE patrol officers like to run around with their wands in the air shouting 'Freeze!' rather than analyse documents."

"Wonder why?" Ron said. "I'd've been grateful for an opportunity to shout 'freeze' this last couple of hours. Mostly I've been standing here with my wand pointing at the Floo."

She smiled at her friend. "I'm sure you looked very rugged." She didn't look at Snape but she could practically hear his eye-roll. "Okay, Officer Vernon is the new point of contact – you're aware of that?"

Ron said, "Yes, Harry told us. So Madam Churlish is...?"

"Up to her neck in it," Hermione said. "Though I wouldn't be too quick to judge. Niccolo Zabini's very good at getting people to dig themselves into a hole of their own making. He's done it to Blaise, I think." She looked at the print-out Dane had handed to her. "So how far along are we with searching these addresses?"

"You'd have to check in with Officer Vernon for that," Ron said.

Dane stretched his back. "I'm about out of ideas for now. Anything else you want me to poke with a stick?"

She tried to think.
Snape said, "We suspect that at some point between 1982 and 1988 Zabini seized ownership of a number of buildings along Diagon Alley and its offshoots. To do so, he would have had to interact with a witch who lives in Grenada. Which would probably have meant travelling there."

Hermione nodded at this reminder. "And at the time he'd have been avoiding the Ministry as much as possible," she said. "I mean, so soon after his highly publicised death? He wouldn't have wanted to risk being recognised."

"Polyjuice?" Ron suggested.

"You can't use an international Portkey while under the influence of Polyjuice or Disillusionment or a glamour. They're pretty strict about that in Magical Transportation."

"So you reckon he'd have travelled as a Muggle?" Dane asked.

"It seems likely. Good way to avoid attention. Witches and wizards who grow up without any Muggle influence tend to overlook possibilities like that. Non-magical options just don't occur to them."

"Good point," Ron said. "I mean, I needed you to point out the tube station thing, earlier."

"Okay, well, I can't pull archived aeroplane manifest information out of the clear blue sky," Dane said. "It's property of the airlines and treated as confidential." He sniffed. "But what we can do is ask Harry to check the old passports that the patrol found in Dorset."

"Oh, good thought," Hermione said. She almost lifted her wand, then hesitated. "Ron, would you mind? We need to know if any of the passports are stamped for Grenada. And if you could ask whether there are any addresses on Dane's list that the patrols haven't checked yet, too."

He shot her a look, then nodded his understanding. He probably thought she was self-conscious about her rook. Ron moved off to one side and sent a Patronus message to Harry.

Dane said, "So, um – am I in any danger here? You left Ron in case this guy came after me, right?"

"You should be fine," Hermione said. "Any danger to you would have come through Churlish, and she's now in custody."

Dane nodded. "Still. Might nip downstairs and avail myself of my aunt's spare room tonight." He stifled a yawn. "You need me for anything else?"

"I think you've gone above and beyond."

"I'd offer to come with when you check out these addresses. But I know my limitations. I can't hex my way out of a soggy paper bag."

Ron came back over, having sent his message. "So, er, anyone here think there's a chance Zabini's still with us?" he asked awkwardly. "Our one, I mean. Blaise. The ponsy racist git."

"Promise me, Weasley, that you will never attempt to move on from law enforcement to international diplomacy," said Snape.

Hermione snorted. Even Dane smirked. Unusually, Ron just rolled his eyes.

"Well, I'm still optimistic," she said. "Mrs Trelore seems to be Zabini's endgame, and Blaise is the
best way he has of getting to her. As long as we can track him down sooner rather than later, I'm still hopeful."

"He's never ever going to say thank you," Ron pointed out.

"Just as well I'm not doing it for that, then," she returned.

"So why are you doing this?" Dane asked. "I mean, none of my business, I know. And I realise why you got landed with the Muggle-worthy excuse stuff. But now? It's after eleven o'clock at night. You're not MLE. From what Ron's been telling me, this guy, Blaise, he's never exactly been a friend."

Hermione gave a tight smile. "'They fuck you up, your mum and dad,'" she quoted.

"What?" Ron said.

"Philip Larkin," Snape said, a little smugly. "Muggle poetry."

"You're blaming the parents?" Dane asked.

"Amongst other things. I've been thinking quite a lot of late about second chances. Forgiveness." She breathed deeply. "About the kind of things that might make the world better."

Ron groaned. "That's your new project? Championing the whole sodding world?"

"Well, you've got to admire the ambition," Dane said.

Snape said, "'Forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them more.'" At Hermione's questioning glance he said, "Wilde. I thought we were doing quotations."

The conversation halted when a silver cannonball careered through the window over the dining table and coalesced into a huge, proud stag.

"All right, Ron, so the passport for Nicholas Beatty that ran out in '92 – that's got Grenada stamps. 1983, June. Coming back the following November. Hope it helps. Vernon says he's just sent the alpha team out to Hendon, since Watford was a bust – proper tenants again. If you want to help, that'd be great. Every time we hit an empty property we have to leave two officers there guarding it, in case Zabini comes back. We're getting really short on manpower, even after extending the shifts. There's still Deptford and Hammersmith to check. Vernon says you're welcome to pick one but surveillance only. We're staying here for now, so you can still send Patronuses. Um. Shout out if you need anything else. 'Tru!"

Snape leaned in to take the page of addresses from Hermione. "Deptford is not an area I know well, but this address in Hammersmith is close to the bridge. I know an Apparition point."

Ron straightened up. "You are not Side-Along-ing me anywhere, Snape."

"Your choice," he said lightly. "Hermione?"

"Tell Vernon where we're off to, would you, Ron?" She held up a hand. Snape took it.

Ron said, "Be safe." He swallowed, and as if it took him some great effort he said, "Both of you."

Snape frowned at the comment, then at Hermione. "Bugger. Wilde was right."

He swept them off to west London.
Please note: the next chapter will be available on Tuesday 19th November (GMT).

"They fuck you up, your mum and dad. They may not mean to, but they do. They fill you with the faults they had and add some extra, just for you."
Philip Larkin, *This Be The Verse* 1971

"Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much."
Oscar Wilde 1854-1900
Snape set them down in a dark space beneath an overhang. When they emerged into the orange dusk of London's night Hermione realised they'd been under Hammersmith Bridge itself, on a paved pathway that ran alongside the river. Snape positioned her to his left in order to keep his wand arm unrestricted.

"How do you know this place?" she asked, as they set off along the path.

"I don't," he said. "Not in any local sense."

"Oh. So...?"

"I maintain several Apparition points across London, should I ever need to access an area swiftly."

"You are such a planner," Hermione said with a fond smile.

"As are you," he pointed out.

"You're better."

"I'm more experienced."

"Either way, Niccolo Zabini might have met his match in you," Hermione said.

"Which would be flattering, if this was actually my job," Snape countered.

"Yeah, I know," Hermione acknowledged. They hurried along past riverside apartment buildings. "But I've got faith in Kingsley. Another year and maybe they won't have to drag us into things to sort them out."

"The word 'drag' implies reluctance," he said. "You leap, Hermione." He glanced behind, then drew them over to the edge of the path and Disillusioned them. Moments later, the light of a cyclist drew close and then overtook them, heading west in the direction of Chiswick. Once they were alone again, Snape dropped the Disillusionment and looked down at Hermione. "You even leap for the sake of those who despise you."

She shrugged. "Draco used to despise me. Now I'm just confusing the hell out of him."

His eyes narrowed. "I take it he took you to the Manor."

"Yes."

"And?"

And what, indeed? She'd had a panic attack, involving a very scary flashback. Hermione had, over time, grown reticent about such things. A scant few weeks after the Battle of Hogwarts, her panic attacks had seemed justifiable: an entirely human reaction to the horrors she'd experienced at
Malfy Manor and then at the school. Six months later, however, the lingering symptoms felt more like a deficiency in her strength of character.

So she tried for a smile and said, lightly, "And that is one fabulous library. Got to love a place like that." She looked over at the river, pretending to admire the view. "Did you try to follow?"

Snape did not reply. He hesitated a moment, then he turned his back and began to walk along the path again.

"That's a 'yes', then," Hermione muttered, as she went to catch up.

They walked past a pub, doors shuttered for the night but a light on beyond as the detritus from several hours of beer and crisps and cigarettes was swept away. They passed another building, advertising itself as a rowing club. Snape whisked them around to the right and Hermione caught sight of the sign mounted high on the building on the corner. They'd arrived at the street where Zabini's property was located.

Snape lifted his wand, ready to Disillusion them again, but Hermione touched his arm. "Let me," she said. "Teamwork, remember? That way you can cast without dropping the cloak, if you need to."

He considered, then nodded. "I'm glad you remembered the lesson."

"You sneak-attacked my blouse see-through." She put her left hand on Snape's shoulder, just to keep track of him, then she lifted her wand and cast the Disillusionment charm which wrapped them both. "I'm hardly going to forget that."

Hermione heard Snape give a wistful sigh. "Nor I."

They moved off down the street, glancing at house numbers. The properties were early Victorian semis, attractive without being ostentatious, all London brick and bay windows. Most had been converted into flats. It was another pricey area, so close to the riverside walk. Zabini could pick his spots.

Snape guided them across the road. Number sixteen. They'd found it. Now they just had to work out whether the place was occupied, and if so, whether the occupants included a murderous thieving wizard and his captive son.

Of course, Zabini had to have bought on the upper floor, didn't he? No nice accessible basement or ground floor flat here, where a Disillusioned witch might tiptoe up to the window and sneak a peek. Oh no. Flat 16C had to be up high. Officer Vernon had restricted them to 'surveillance only' which meant no ringing of doorbells or Alohomora's. And they lacked a cloak of invisibility on this occasion. The only way they might achieve a discreet view through the upper windows would be to continue the theme of teamwork: Hermione would need to maintain their Disillusionment and Snape would gain them the altitude.

They were going to have to fly.

"Brave heart, Gryffindor," he murmured to her. He'd clearly come to the same conclusion.

"Don't patronise me," she muttered irritably.

"Annoyed?"

"What do you expect?"
"Good. Annoyed enough to set aside the nerves?"

She hesitated. She remembered marching off into Knockturn Alley, having used her anger with Snape to overcome her reservations. With a sigh, she said, "Do you always have to learn so fast?"

"We can but hope."

She blinked in surprise, but since they were both invisible it was difficult to match the innuendo in his voice to the expression on his face.

"Okay," she decided, "now you're flirting. You're a degenerate."

"I've been telling you that for months. Are we going to do this, or shall we just have loud conversations about it all night?"

"Fine." She felt her way around to his back and threaded her arms through his then looped them up to hold on to his shoulders. Her wand remained to hand, awkwardly stuck out on an angle.

He waited until she seemed comfortable, then she sensed him cast and his body pulled her up through the air. She held on tightly, focusing on her Disillusionment charm, unwilling to be the reason this surveillance exercise failed. Snape drifted up towards the upper storey. There was a spill of faint light beyond the larger front window, visible only through a gap in the ill-fitting curtains.

They hovered there for a moment. Snape's control was impressive, and his solidity was reassuring as Hermione clung. Still, her arms were already beginning to ache. She murmured, "Sorry," and lifted her knees up to wrap over his hips. He used his left arm to lift her up more comfortably and provide support. All the while his flying spell did not waver, nor did Hermione's Disillusionment. Snape was effectively giving her an invisible piggy-back ride at an altitude several metres from the ground.

They moved in closer. The room beyond the window was bare of furniture, to the extent that no rugs or carpets covered the tatty floorboards. The source of the light was from a distant hallway rather than the room itself; an internal door was open and let the light through. It seemed that no one was home. After a few moments spent drifting to one side then the other as they tried to peer through the gap in the curtains, Snape moved them across the building to the other window at the front. The curtains here were snugly shut. He continued to fly around the upper storey, through the narrow gap between this house and the semi next door, until they turned the corner to the rear of the building. The first window they came to was dark and unhelpful. Snape carried them over to the larger one further away.

No light was on in this room. Hermione couldn't cast her night-vision spell without releasing the Disillusionment, so it took her a moment to adjust to what she was looking at. A crack of light showed at the back of the room: a barely-ajar door to the illuminated hallway beyond. The light seeped in just enough to make it obvious that this rear room was as bare of furniture and fittings as the front room had been.

It was not entirely empty, however. In the middle of the floor was a heap of something. Something that was quite unmistakably body-shaped.

"Oh no," Hermione whispered. "Is that...?"

"Get us in there," Snape murmured. "Quickly and quietly as you can."

So much for surveillance-only. Snape was right, though; whoever was in there might need help.
He moved them up to the window. The body-shape lay ominously still. Hermione dropped her Disillusionment, glad they were doing this in the relative privacy available at the rear of the building. She did the obvious first:

"Aspectu-Tenebris."

The details of the room she was looking at sprang into her vision. The shape on the floorboards was covered in a cloak and made no obvious move. She swallowed hard.

"Homenum Revelio."

She begged the spell to offer a nice fat arrow pointing at the body on the floor, but there was nothing. Either the shape was an inanimate heap of stuff or the life had left this particular vessel already. She dispelled her charms, raised the Disillusionment again and gave a shiver. She needed to clutch at Snape's back for a moment.

"Damn it," she whispered, trying to regain her composure. Her breathing had quickened and she dreaded that knot of tension forming in her chest.

"Calmly," he murmured.

Hermione drew a deep breath, then considered the window. She couldn't break it, either physically or magically, without making a racket. She couldn't cut a nice round hole in it like spies did on super-secret missions. She could simply vanish the pane of glass from the window frame, of course, but that would preclude the window being reinstated later.

Her Transfiguration skills were more sophisticated these days, though. She even had the NEWT to prove it. She dropped the Disillusionment again, readied her wand, focused her mind and cast. The largest sheet of glass in the window frame immediately Transfigured into a feather pillow, which Hermione wandlessly directed to fall into the room beyond, ready to be replaced when they left.

Snape grunted approval and flew them inside. When her feet found the floor again, she didn't even take the time to sigh her relief; she was too busy restoring their Disillusionment charm. Snape fired a Mobili at the internal door and it opened widely enough to let more light spill in from the hallway.

Together they edged closer to the cloaked heap on the floor. Snape's left arm guided her to stand behind him as they reached the body-shape. It was vaguely chauvinistic, perhaps, but since she'd already demonstrated a capacity for shivering in the vicinity of dead bodies it wasn't a gesture she felt at pains to denounce. She kept a hand on his back, as much for comfort as for sharing magic, and focused her efforts on their Disillusionment. If this shape suddenly came to life, or if someone else came thumping through into the room, she would at least ensure that they provided no visual target.

Snape crouched. Hermione leaned over him. The cloak wrapping the shape lifted to Snape's left. Snape muttered something as he cast, though Hermione could not tell what it was; perhaps he was checking for traps or curses or something. Then the cloak lifted clear and the form beneath was revealed.

A man lay face down. He was wearing a woollen topcoat. Hermione knew that they were looking at the dead body of Gustiver Walsh even before Snape pushed the man on to his back. The eyes were wide open in a death-stare. It looked as if Walsh had bitten his own tongue in the moments before he died, given the trickle of dried blood at the corner of his mouth. Hermione sensed Snape
leaning closer, then those staring eyes were gently closed by invisible fingers.

Snape cast a reveal-magic spell: the same one he'd used on Blaise Zabini’s cauldron stand during that disrupted Potions lesson. Three stark runes of violet blazed above Walsh's body before Snape cancelled them.

The Killing Curse. At least it had been quick. That was supposed to be some comfort, wasn't it?

Snape stood up. He cast again, and the cloak pulled free where it was twisted around the body and then spread out to provide a respectful shroud over the corpse. Hermione felt a little ashamed at her relief when the body was covered up. More than that, though, she was grateful that Snape's presence beside her seemed to be keeping the panic attack at bay.

Snape's free hand found her wrist. Another muttered charm and then he pulled her towards the flat's internal door to check the rest of the property. Whatever spell he had cast made their footfall utterly silent: no steps, no board-creaks, no sole-squeaks.

They stepped through the doorway into a narrow hall lit by an unshaded electric light bulb; the light was either too far away or too unsophisticated to have been affected by the casting in the back room. A door further along led into a darkened galley kitchen. On the counter was a cauldron and a number of brewing instruments. Snape moved to take inventory of them, and she heard him inhale deeply through his nose. It was only then that Hermione detected the burnt-hair smell of powdered horn of bicorn: the telltale scent of Polyjuice. Even if the dead body in the back room hadn't tipped them off, this would have done. Niccolo Zabini had been here recently.

Hermione wondered what happened to someone when they spent as much time as Zabini did wearing other people's faces. Did they begin to lose their own sense of self?

They went back to the hall. There was another door into a bathroom, though most of the fittings had been ripped out. Further on, a side door of sturdier construction formed the flat's main entrance at the top of the stairs. They were moving towards the front rooms of the property when a noise made both of them freeze.

It was the snap of displaced air. Someone had just Apparated or Portkey'ed in to the flat.

There came the sound of an undignified dry heave of nausea, immediately followed by a scoff of irritation. It was enough to allow Hermione to register that two people had arrived, and to pinpoint their location: they'd arrived at the back of the house, in the room with the body. She checked her Disillusionment charm; it remained in place. As she and Snape turned back to face the new arrivals, Snape's left arm came around her and nudged her behind him again. Hermione decided to stop thinking of this as chauvinism and more about distribution of workload. So long as she kept them cloaked they were less of a target.

"The fuck?" an uncouth voice demanded. "Someone's been at the fucking window."

"Um...who is that?" another voice asked. "That, over there, on the floor." He sounded agitated. "Is he...he's dead, isn't he! Oh, Merlin save us all, I thought you said--"

"Shut the fuck up."

One of the newcomers had clearly not been expecting a dead body. Hermione stood behind Snape, one hand on his left shoulder to monitor his position, much of her concentration given over to keeping their Disillusionment solid.

A man appeared in the doorway, peering down the hall with narrowed eyes. He blinked with the
light. Snape did not move a muscle. Hermione didn't even breathe. If the man decided to walk the length of this hall, there was no way to avoid a physical confrontation...but after a moment he turned his back and returned to his companion.

Hermione thought she recognised the face. It was older now: about ten years older. But she was pretty sure she'd seen the younger version less than an hour ago, in a Pensieve, delivering a violent beating to the manager of a Quidditch shop on Diagon Alley. This was one of Zabini's thugs.

Snape moved them forward, slowly and carefully. They made no sound thanks to his footfall spell.

"Here. Drink it," the thug's voice ordered.

"What is it?" the scared man said.

Hermione frowned. Actually, come to think of it, that voice sounded weirdly familiar.

"Just. Fucking. Drink it!"

"All right, all right, no need for that." The hasty placation was reminder enough; the voice belonged to the seedy-looking wizard from Knockturn Alley, the one who'd wanted the stinger from a Manticore in order to rejuvenate his flagging libido. Back then he'd been a distraction. But now? Was he a henchman, or a dupe? "Um – this isn't going to hurt me, is it?"

"Only for a moment," the thug said, as if he was trying to temper his aggression. "You know about Polyjuice. It'll be fine. Just one little job and you can have your reward."

A dupe, then.

"You haven't even said what you need me to do," the nervous wizard said.

"Right now? I need you to drink the fucking potion. Are you going to make me ask again? Do you know how angry that would make me?"

"Fine, fine, all right. Um – here goes."

Snape edged them inside the doorway of the room just in time to see their flaccid friend from Knockturn Alley upend a small phial. The contents were thick and black and evil-looking, like those adverts about what cigarettes do to people's lungs. Hermione swallowed hard and dug her fingernails into her hand as she tried to maintain her concentration. She sensed Snape lift his wand arm.

The seedy wizard from Knockturn handed back the phial. "Not nice," he croaked out. He followed it up by another heave, this one less natural than the nausea he'd felt upon arrival. His body shuddered and then he creased in the middle, arms around his rotund gut. The Polyjuice had begun to take effect.

Under the cover of the wizard's gasps and groans, Snape cast a voiceless *Protego*. The whistle of his wand through the air was still enough to distract the thug, who'd been watching the hapless wizard transform. He turned to look suspiciously at the doorway. Hermione closed her eyes and concentrated. She could not allow her nerves to compromise their cloak.

After a brief time, she felt Snape relax and allowed herself to breathe. She opened her eyes. The thug was pulling the wizard upright.

Mr Flaccid now looked exactly like Niccolo Zabini.
"Good," the thug said. "You'll do."

"That was very unpleasant," the wizard whined in Zabini's voice.

"Not to worry. We're almost done now."

"Oh. Right. Good, then. So what's next?"

The thug stepped back from the Zabini-copy. Hermione felt Snape lift his wand arm and then hesitate; she suspected he was weighing up taking this thug down against listening in on the plan. The real Zabini eluded them yet. Finding out where he was holed up would be huge, not least because it would likely lead them to Blaise.

"Put these on," the thug said. He withdrew a small bundle from a pocket and tossed it down on to the floorboards. With a swish of his wand he turned the small bundle into a bigger one. "You seem to have lost weight," he added, smiling nastily at his own quip.

The Zabini-copy looked down at the way his robes now hung on his considerably slimmer figure. "Ah. Yes." He looked up at the thug. "Um – some privacy, if you don't mind?"

The thug rolled his eyes and turned his back. Unfortunately this meant that he was now looking straight at the doorway. Just past his shoulder, the Zabini-copy began to strip off. Hermione decided this might be a nice time to close her eyes again. She did so, and concentrated on her Disillusionment charm, and on breathing as quietly as she possibly could.

"I'm done," the Zabini-copy said after a minute or so. Hermione risked looking. The wizard was holding the bundle of his original clothing.

"You can put those down," the thug said. "You won't need them where we're going."

The wizard looked uncertain: an expression Hermione suspected did not often cross the original version of those Zabini-features. He set the bundle down then straightened up. "We'll be coming back here afterwards, then?"

"Course," the thug said cheerfully. "Ready for another trip?"

"Oh. Dear. Do we have to? I much prefer the Floo—"

"Avada Kedavra," the thug spat without warning, hatred fuelling every syllable. A flash of sickly green light; a brief roar, like the sound of a waterfall.

The Zabini-copy's body lost all rigidity and slumped, lifeless, to the floor.

Hermione gasped. Her cloak wavered but didn't drop entirely. Snape snapped into action. Even as the thug spun around to face the doorway again, drawn by sounds that should not have been present, Snape was casting. He kept it voiceless, not wanting to give the thug anything to home in on, and as he cast he moved them smoothly inside the room, along the wall adjacent to the door.

The thug was good, though. Even before Snape's voiceless curse was released, a swift Stupefy hit the doorframe. Snape's curse fired straight at the thug a fraction of a second later but missed, just, as he dived to the side.

Snape didn't pause. "Petrificus Totalus," he growled, clearly deciding that the speed he could gain by using his voice was worthwhile. The curse bounced off a Protego the thug had raised a second earlier, spitting sparks. Again, Snape didn't pause and prepared to repeat the curse. The thug
chucked out another *Stupefy* in the vague direction of Snape's voice; it glanced off the far side of the shield that protected them. The inaccuracy of the strike convinced Hermione to maintain the Disillusionment a while longer rather than try to do anything else.

Snape's next body-bind depleted the thug's shield entirely. The man's body shuddered with the part of the curse that got through. He screamed frustration, gave up on his own hostile spells and cried out with effort as he forced his semi-paralysed left hand into the neckline of his shirt. A second later, Snape's follow-up curse fizzed against bare floorboards as the echoes of Portkey departure cracked round the room.

They were alone.

Hermione dropped the Disillusionment charm and raced over to the poor, silly, gullible fool who currently wore a Zabini disguise. She hoped against hope that the Killing Curse hadn't been successful, that something might have gone wrong, that there might be a way to restore the man if only they got him some help quickly enough...

She hoped in vain, of course. The man was quite dead. She sat back on her heels and closed her eyes against the sight of him.

"Fuck!" Snape shouted from the other end of the room. A loud thump. Hermione turned to look at him; he was kicking at the wall. A moment. Snape breathed deeply, trying to regain his composure. His head came up and he saw Hermione watching him. "I could have saved him," he said, more quietly.

"So could I," she said.

"I was waiting to see..." Snape turned away, swept his hair back from his face, kicked the wall again, though in a more half-hearted way. "I thought we might learn something. I waited too long," he finally said.

Hermione made herself look back at the dead wizard. She gathered her courage and did something she had never done before: she touched a dead body. The eyelids closed easily, as though they wanted to close. The man looked better like that. Almost peaceful.

She stood up. "Is he likely to come back?"

"Not on his own."

Hermione nodded. "I should let Harry know what happened here. He can tell Officer Vernon."

"Very well." Snape drew his shoulders back. He seemed to have regained some poise. "I'm going to check the rest of the flat and then set some wards."

Hermione went into the smaller front room, since she could remember that its curtains actually fitted the window and provided some privacy from the street. She conjured her Patronus and charmed it with a message. Then, feeling tired and upset, she sat down on the floorboards, against the wall, and took a moment to breathe.

Snape joined her a few minutes later. He looked at where she sat, then simply took a seat on the floor next to her. His wand was still to hand, as was her own, but there was no point going anywhere else; not before Harry replied to her Patronus. Big silvery stags tended to be conspicuous on the streets of Muggle London.

Their wait for a reply was not long.
The stag leapt out of the wall between the two front rooms and then, unerringly, turned to face them. "Right – I've told Vernon," Harry's voice announced. "He wasn't happy. Actually he wanted to know what part of 'surveillance' you didn't understand. Anyway, he says, can you wait there until he can get one of his teams to you – he's worried Zabini might send someone back. Looks like the bastard was trying to fake his death all over again." A pause. "Hey, um – what's going on with your Patronus, by the way? Shit. Never mind. Forget I asked. Just tell me later. Or, you know, don't. If you don't want to." Another pause. "God, I hope Snape isn't listening to this. Okay, look, sit tight, be careful. Someone should be with you soon."

The stag departed. Snape snorted his derision.

"Oh, shut up," Hermione said, but she edged closer to him.

They sat quietly for half a minute or so.

"Who do you think he was?" she asked.

"You didn't recognise him? He's a hired hand. The same one from Churlish's memory."

"No, I mean the other one. The wizard from Knockturn Alley."

Snape thought about this. "Just a man. Someone with hopes and flaws and gladness and sorrow."

She nodded. People didn't come more important than that: real and contradictory and unique. Feeling lost and uncertain, as though her own presence in the world was no longer a perfect fit, she dropped her head to rest on his upper arm. He did not protest the way she leaned on him.

"The other one, under the cloak – how long ago did he die?" she asked.

"Around two hours," he said. "The colour of the runes shifts from bright blue to a dark red with time."

She nodded her understanding. "Do you think it was Walsh? Or another Polyjuiced stooge?"

"Why go to such lengths to fake the death of a hired thief?" Snape sighed. "I suspect that was the real Gustiver Walsh."

"But why?" she asked. "Why do that? I mean, I understand the other one. It's horrible, but I get it – tie off a loose end and offer up a Zabini-shaped body to the authorities. But Walsh? The man was on his side."

Snape drew in a deep breath then said, "Because it made sense."

"I don't see how."

"Zabini's plan, whatever it is, is coming apart. Actually it's been coming apart since his son made such a mess at the Savoy. Zabini is wanted by MLE, and he's running out of safe houses. Kill Walsh, and that's one less body to keep fed and watered and sheltered."

"I suppose," Hermione said.

"And he couldn't be sure Walsh would stay loyal – not when they were no longer lying low at a nice Dorset farmhouse. Rushing around in a panic, holing up in unfurnished Muggle flats? Zabini couldn't risk Walsh going back to the Ministry with his tail between his legs, hoping for some leniency in exchange for information."
"Right."

"Plus – Zabini does the deed in front of his son, and Blaise has a whole new motivation for brewing some more Polyjuice."

Hermione lifted her head. "How do you know it was Blaise doing the brewing?"

Snape turned and looked at her in the dim light that came through the open doorway. "Ah," he said, as if she'd interested him with the comment. "How do you?"

"Because Zabini-senior blows cauldrons up, according to his upstairs neighbour in Regent's Park Road. I don't think he can brew for toffee. Now you."

"When he tried to grab me in Knockturn Alley, he must have wanted my services for some reason. Since I am known for potions, subterfuge and murdering headmasters, I suspect he needed me to brew for him – perhaps when his son decided that Baneful Brews was not a recipe book he was comfortable exploring."

"I see." She'd entertained the same theory herself.

"But the fact is that I've taught Blaise Zabini for over seven years. Once you pass a certain level of competence in potions, you develop your own style. The way you cut, grind, crush, the way you arrange your equipment, set ingredients aside...I'd know if you'd been working at any given cauldron too."

Hermione nodded. "So you think Gustiver Walsh died so Zabini could threaten his own son."

"It solved several problems at once," Snape said lightly.

She bit at her lip. "I'm glad I didn't join Harry and Ron in Auror training. I'd be rubbish at it."

"It would also be a waste of your genuine talents."

"I have genuine talents?" she asked, surprised.

"Don't fish for compliments."

"I know better than to do that from you."

"Well then."

They sat quietly. Hermione felt the peacefulness wrap around her. Being soothed by this respite made her feel guilty when there were two dead bodies at the other end of the building.

And on the subject of guilt:

"Severus – I'm sorry I didn't trust you better," she said.

He tutted. "You have no idea how sick and tired I am of hearing people say that to me. Please refrain."

"Dear me," she said. "And who else has been treating you with respect and courtesy? I'll sort them out for you, don't worry."

He huffed at her attempt at humour. "It couldn't matter less."
She sat up straight and looked at him. More than ever before, she felt cued in to his signals: body language, tone of voice, even his depth of breathing. Contrary to what Snape had just said, Hermione was quite sure this mattered very much indeed. "Humour me," she invited.

Snape hesitated, then he conceded with a sigh. "Let's just say, my Hogwarts reunion was hard bloody work."

Hermione frowned. "Really? Pomona said you were the life and soul. All carefree and talkative." She considered her own words. "You know, now I've said that aloud it sounds wildly suspicious."

Snape sniffed. "Everyone wanted to apologise. Everyone felt the need to tell me in excruciating detail how they should have known better." He sighed. "No one bothered to acknowledge that they'd all done exactly what Dumbledore's plan had needed them to do."

"Do you really blame them for being wise after the event?"

"No. But if they'd expressed their regret with fewer tearful declarations and lunging embraces, I'd have felt better appeased. Frankly, the whole thing was hellish."

"Ah, well, that makes sense, then." She rested her head against the wall and studied his profile. "In the face of all that, no wonder Pomona found you so relaxed."

Snape twitched a micro-smile. "I was required to undertake a certain degree of dissembling," he admitted.

"You faked it. To make them all feel better."

"To avoid an entire evening of relentless and irritating apologies."

Hermione smiled to herself. Just because Snape refused to acknowledge a selfless act of kindness, that didn't mean she had to do the same. "So you talked a lot about Mistress Bramble's book, I hear."

He inhaled sharply and then tutted. "I was asked what I'd been 'up to' of late. What should I have chosen to speak of? My amusing murder trial before the Wizengamot? Those hilarious weeks in hospital with a hole in my throat?" He turned to her and arched a brow. "My burgeoning friendship with a Gryffindor know-it-all, whose recent attachment to me had sparked quite some interest?"

She met his gaze. "Friendship?" she challenged. "Big word."

"Oh, shut up," he said and looked away.

She nudged at his arm to soothe away the tease. "So it was a difficult visit." She looked directly ahead at the opposite wall. "I get it. When I'm up there, everywhere I look I see..." Hermione stopped herself. "You know."

Snape grew still for a moment, then he lowered his head. "Yes," he said. His thumb rubbed fractiously at the edge of his wand.

At least she now knew why he'd gone to such lengths to make his subsequent visit to the school a secret. Weeks ago, during that first Lost Seventh lesson, Hermione could remember Snape talking about the year of his Headmastership. "Some of you, to my shame, have suffered because I was unable to prevent it." How the hell had she failed to work out that going back to that place would be at least as hard for him as it was for her? How had she taken Pomona Sprout's recount of that
lively and convivial school dinner at face value?

Before she even knew what she was going to do, she drew a deep breath and blurted out:

"I still get panic attacks."

All was quiet for a few, drawn-out seconds.

"I know," he said quietly.

She blinked rapidly. "You do?"

"You press your knuckles to your chest in stressful situations, as though you anticipate discomfort."

"Oh. Do I?" She'd never even noticed.

"It's all right," Snape murmured.

She looked away, at the curtains covering the window. "I thought I was getting better. Then, two of the buggers, two weekends running. First at Hogwarts, then last Saturday at Malfoy Manor..."

She drifted off.

"Bad?" he asked.

"Bad." Hermione screwed up her face. "I mean, I know it's stupid. I've done my research. I understand about PTSD. I know there's nothing to be ashamed of. But it makes me feel weak. Like-like a liability. What if I'd had one just now, when that thug showed up?"

"You maintained our cloak; you kept your head; we survived." Snape reached over and touched his fingertips to her tightly clasped hands, then he pulled away. "You have no reason to berate yourself."

There was another pause. Hermione allowed her breathing to calm, then tentatively leaned in against his upper arm once more. He didn't object.

"I need to ask you something," she said after a while. "It's personal."

Snape stiffened. "I hope I've made myself clear about--"

"It isn't to do with you and me."

"Then ask. I will either answer or I will not."

Hermione nodded. "How well do you know Narcissa Malfoy?"

A considered pause. Then:

"You are concerned about the threat she conveyed to your family last night," he said.

"Of course I am."

"You needn't be. While I am sure that Narcissa's intention was, in part, to cause you as much distress as she could, that message was meant primarily for me."

That was not something Hermione had considered. "I don't understand."

"Mrs Malfoy is a collector of information. Secrets. Rumours. Gossip. She cultivates those
connections that provide. She buys favours and influence with the profits of her labours."

"Sounds to me like she needs a proper hobby."

He breathed a laugh at that. "Perhaps. But last night, as well as unsettling the Muggle-born student whose testimony helped imprison her husband, she was informing me that I should tread carefully."

"A warning?"

"Yes. As yet, one without overt threat. It could almost be considered...friendly."

Hermione blinked. "It was written on a list of murdered innocents."

Snape shrugged. "Friendly for Cissy, anyway." A small sigh. "She was telling me that my connection to you has been noticed."

"Oh." Hermione frowned. "Is that a problem?"

"At present, no. If that changes, she will warn again."

"Why?"

"Because I saved her son's soul, and her debts are always paid."

There was peace and quiet as Hermione thought this through. "I still worry for my mum and dad," she said after a while.

"As you should. This world is far from perfect. Your security system seems effective, though." Snape turned towards her; she felt the movement in her hair. "An interesting bit of charmwork."

"I'll show you my notes."

Snape grunted agreement and fell quiet again. Hermione leaned comfortably. It was, in fact, rather nice to enjoy a time-out from rushing about or navigating confrontations.

"How's your neck?" she asked.

"Fine."

"How often do you get the wounds closed up?"

"I manage once a week. I brew a salve that slows down the deterioration."

"Oh, can I--"

"Yes, you can have the recipe."

She smiled. "You haven't tried the counter-curse, though?"

"Like you, I've found the position of the wound to be awkward."

Hermione said offhandedly, "You, er, don't have someone you could ask for help?" Like, say, the woman whose house he'd been living in for weeks.

"You are now fishing for information," Snape said. "Subtlety, Miss Granger."
"Never going to happen, Professor Snape," she retorted. "I'm as likely to become subtle as you are to become jovial. It is simply not who I am."

"Hmm."

"Don't sound so disgruntled. Earlier on you were applauding me for being myself. Does this not count too? I can't change my fundamental personality to suit you. Nor should I."

Snape sighed, long and hard. "Your ability to argue is..."

"Impressive?"

"Annoying."

"Sorry."

"And stimulating. Worryingly so."

"Oh." She smiled. "Not quite so sorry about that." A pause. "Getting back to your injury – I'd be happy to help."

He didn't say anything for a few seconds – almost long enough for her to think that she'd caused offence – before he told her, "I appreciate that. But we must leave that particular task until after your NEWT."

"Why? You did mine. We managed to make that one unsalacious."

"Hermione..." In the barely-lit room, she saw his head drop forward. "There are things, commonplace to you, that have been rare in my life. It will take time for me to acclimatise."

She thought about that. It took her a while before she cottoned on.

He was telling her he was not used to being touched.

Hermione eased up from her leaning position against his arm. "Sorry," she muttered.

"You have no need to apologise."

"For the record," she said, "being true to oneself? It works both ways."

"Hmm."

"I mean – I wouldn't want to fundamentally alter you to fit my preferences, either."

"Yes, well, it is easy to claim an idealistic position before any of the work actually begins."

She smiled. "Your innate pessimism, for instance. You shouldn't try to alter that."

Snape huffed. But if he had a reply for her, it would have to wait. The door in the middle of the upstairs hallway made a click, and they both got to their feet, wands ready.

A female patrol officer moved into the hall, followed by a male colleague.

"Professor Snape?" the officer asked cautiously.

Snape glanced at Hermione. Their quiet interlude was over. Back to work.
At the Ministry, they found Kingsley Shacklebolt looking on in impressed disbelief as Percy Weasley stood in a level one meeting room, the double-doors thrown open. Pieces of paperwork flew through the air at the direction of his wand from what seemed to be various locations throughout the administrative offices.

"He's good," Shacklebolt said. "Oh, he is so good. Why the hell did I lose him from my staff?"

"You made him Head of Magical Transportation," Hermione pointed out.

"Yes, yes, I know, and he's doing an excellent job, but look at the man go!"

Percy seemed to be conducting a symphony, his wand the baton, as papers and parchments and scrolls flew at him and were then sent to various piles on the meeting room table. His eyes darted about so fast it was as if he was in seizure. His focus was absolute as each paper presented itself, to be deemed useful or otherwise.

Hermione smiled with delight at this vision of a man indulging a genuine skill. She loved watching people who were really good at what they did.

Shacklebolt said, "Officer Vernon informed me of what happened in Hammersmith."

Her smile slipped. "Yes."

"I wish you hadn't gone in. Vernon tells me he instructed you to keep to surveillance."

"We saw a body. Someone might have needed help. Then it all sort of...escalated."

Shacklebolt sighed. "I know. I'd have made the same call. Try to understand, though, Hermione – anything happens to you or Harry or Ron–"

"I understand." She didn't want to hear how her life was considered more politically valuable than the poor man whose murder she'd witnessed. "Where is Ron, by the way?" she asked, making a clumsy attempt to change the subject.

"Dorset. Or on his way. The farmhouse isn't connected to the Floo system, but we've got patrol officers stationed at Mrs Trelore's home in Wimborne. It's only a five minute broom ride from there." Shacklebolt looked at Snape. "This man, Walsh. How did he die?"

Snape said, "Killing Curse. Not very long ago."

"No sign of young Blaise?"

"He was at the Hammersmith address at some point."

Shacklebolt nodded. "We've now got officers at every unoccupied location on the list. But no sign of Zabini."

Hermione rubbed at her tired eyes. "I suppose, once he realised his Muggle identities had been compromised, he knew to steer clear."

"Which still leaves his wizard identities," Snape said. "The vaults he owns, perhaps?"

"Goblins won't help there," Shacklebolt said. "Not unless there's evidence he's defrauding the bank somehow."
Snape sighed. "There must be some link to this Grenada business. Did you know about that?"

"Yes, Ron gave me an update before he Floo'ed out."

Snape looked at where Percy continued to conduct his paperwork symphony. "Has this Mr Weasley been informed?"

"He has. Percy already Floo-called the Caribbean. He used to work in International Cooperation. He has the contacts."

"Fortunately, it isn't well after midnight over on the other side of the Atlantic," Hermione pointed out, with a quick glance at her watch.

"They were helpful, in Grenada. Percy seemed to think so, anyway."

At that point, the symphony froze. Percy grabbed at a piece of parchment, scanned it, said, "Got you!" and then whisked his wand at all the fluttering, hovering bits of bureaucracy, sending them flapping out of the meeting room, presumably to return to their rightful filed places. The mass exodus caused air currents that made a few sheets slip from the table. Hermione was closest and picked them up. She glanced over the top one: title deeds of a property in the name of a wizard she had never heard of. She replaced the sheets on the pile they'd slipped from.

Only three tidy stacks of parchment and papers remained on the desk when the air cleared. Percy turned to smile at the group. "Hello Hermione," he said cheerfully. "You give me all the good jobs!"

"Sorry," she began to mutter, before remembering that Percy didn't really do jokes and was probably being serious. "I mean – welcome."

He nodded. "Right then. Time is of the essence, I believe, so I'll summarise. This?" He indicated the pile of paperwork to his left. "Is everything we have on one Cherish Sangster. She is the daughter of Winifred Sangster, former mistress of Antal Halfbucket. Winifred inherited thirty-seven properties around the Diagon and Knockturn Alley areas when Halfbucket died in the mid-seventies. She died in 1982, in her home town of Blaize."

"Blaize," Hermione repeated.

Percy nodded. "It's a small, historic town in the mountains of Grenada, north west of the city of Grenville. Winifred Sangster's family owned a substantial amount of land there."

Snape said, "Of course. Mrs Trelore told us that Zabini had chosen the name for his son. It would appear this plan has been on his mind for quite some time."

Hermione tutted. "I'd have put money on the name being a reference to the chronicler in Arthurian legend."

"That would have been a bad bet. I'm not sure Niccolo Zabini has ever demonstrated much in the way of literary passion." Snape turned to Percy. "How did Winifred Sangster die?"

"Natural causes, far as the paperwork is concerned. Everything passed to her daughter."

Hermione nodded as she put the clues together. "So in 1982, Zabini learned that Winifred Sangster was out of the picture. That same year, he decided to fake his own death and set himself up with a new identity. The following year he travelled to Grenada. We know that from his passport stamps." She turned back to Percy. "That takes us to June, 1983. What happened next?"
"A whirlwind romance, apparently," Percy replied. "The documents here," he pointed, "cover Cherish Sangster's marriage in 1983 to one Georgiou Botsis, a Greek herbologist who turned up in Grenada having somehow bypassed their Department of Magical Transportation. They married in August. Grenada sent over the original paperwork years ago, since the newly wedded Mrs Botsis had to change her name on the title deeds for her British properties."

He paused and glanced up, giving people chance to process the information.

"A Greek herbologist," Shacklebolt mused.

"The evil bastard seduced and married her," Hermione said. "All to get hold of her properties."

"His timing wasn't ideal," Percy added. "1983 was a volatile year for the island. Lots of political ructions. The United States ended up intervening in October that year. Mr and Mrs Botsis were actually in Yellowstone at that point, enjoying an extended honeymoon. They went back to Grenada in November."

Snape said, "We know Zabini returned to the UK shortly after that. Presumably he had done what he needed to do."

"Right." Hermione looked at Percy. "Which begs the rather horrific question – how and when did Cherish Sangster die?"

Percy frowned and fished out a dark-purple rimmed piece of parchment from the pile. "Three months after her marriage, Mrs Cherish Botsis died at the hands of Grenada's MLE officers. She attacked and killed the Grenadian Minister's husband, entirely out of the blue. Resisted arrest, fired off curse after curse according to the reports I've been sent. Apparently she acted like a witch possessed."

"Or one suffering the effects of a potent hate potion," Hermione said.

Percy winced and nodded. "However it happened, Georgiou Botsis inherited his wife's entire estate. He left Grenada later that November, though again there was no magical record of his departure."

"Where was the income from the Halfbucket properties going prior to Ms Sangster's death?" Snape asked.

"A Gringotts account, originally opened by Winifred Sangster on her daughter's behalf. Cherish Sangster had been accumulating large sums in that vault, but had never touched it. No idea why," Percy admitted. "It isn't the kind of thing that gets submitted on the paperwork."

"She was the illegitimate daughter of a man who'd never embraced his connection to her," Hermione said. "We know from Mrs Trelore that Halfbucket was controlling and possessive. Winifred Sangster had loved him, and still she'd felt the need to run back to Grenada. I'm guessing Cherish didn't want anything to do with her daddy's fortune."

"Unlike her recreant husband," Shacklebolt said. "All right, so that gives us Georgiou...what did you call him? Botsis?"

"Yes, sir," Percy replied. "Only he doesn't exist."

"Well, we know that. He's Niccolo Zabini."

"I mean, he doesn't exist anywhere. Not even as a forged persona. He only existed for a few
Snape said, "So how does he access the wealth generated by Halfbucket's properties? That was the whole point of the sordid exercise, was it not?"

"Yes. This pile of paperwork here?" Percy indicated the stack to his right. "That's everything we've got on a wizard called Alfonso Silva. He is the current owner of the thirty-seven properties originally bequeathed to Winifred Sangster. He has owned them since 1984."

"Do you have an address for this Alfonso Silva?" Snape asked.

Percy fished out a piece of parchment from the pile, waved his wand at the supplies stacked to one side of the meeting room and cast a duplication spell.

While the quill scribbled away, Hermione said, "I take it your other pile of papers is the link between Georgiou Botsis, husband of Cherish Sangster, and Alfonso Silva, owner of half of Diagon Alley."

Percy nodded. "Mr Zabini failed to anticipate that any business matters dealing with such prime real estate would be documented, copied and sent along to the British Ministry. That was always going to happen, no matter where that business took place in the world. We might not have seen the pattern emerging, but over the years we've accumulated most of the evidence. It just needed joining up."

"So how did he do it?"

"Georgiou Botsis 'died' in Greece. His 'brother' inherited his estate, withdrew everything that Gringotts held in his name, and moved to Mexico. There, he sold the lot to a wizard named Eduardo Gonzalez. Gonzalez took his fortune to Panama, legally changed his name to Alfonso Silva, and then returned to Britain. He opened a Gringotts vault in his new name, arranged for the income from his properties to be paid in to it, and got on with life."

Hermione shook her head. "How long did it take him to do all that?"

"Just over six months."

The quill stopped scribbling. Percy snatched up the new parchment and handed it off to the Minister.

Shacklebolt said, "This address is just across the road from Gringotts."

"Hardly surprising. I think we have established what Niccolo Zabini's priorities are," Snape said. "Who are you sending?"

"Right now?" Shacklebolt rubbed his forehead wearily. "I'm about the only trained Auror in the building who isn't gainfully employed. I'm sending me."

"Over my dead body," said an exhausted voice from the doorway behind them. Hermione turned to see Amadeus Drinkwater glaring at the Minister.

"No more patrol officers?" Hermione said.

"Not unless I ask Vernon to move the ones he has stationed in the atrium or at all the addresses."

Snape looked at Hermione.
"Well you're not bloody going without me," she said.

"Neither of you are going," Shacklebolt declared. "This man and his hired thugs use the Killing Curse like it's a Lumos. I am not waking up to headlines about two brave deceased war heroes tomorrow."

An idea struck Hermione. "How many Aurors are currently walking a needless patrol around Malfoy Manor?" she asked.

Shacklebolt looked at her, then nodded. "Excellent thought. Amadeus, get word to Officer Vernon. Tell him we've got the suspect's home address and I've got four Aurors for him. He needs to assemble a team of at least six more outside the Leaky within the next thirty minutes. He can redistribute his resources as he sees fit."

Drinkwater nodded and left.

"Can we at least wait with you to see how it turns out?" Hermione asked.

Shacklebolt nodded. "Thanks to Percy here, we can stop looking for needles in haystacks. If we're lucky, we might all get to go home within the next hour."

Percy sat down quite suddenly, right there on the meeting room floor. "I don't suppose there's any chance of a cup of tea?" he asked. "Always takes it out of me, a bit of filing."

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A small crowd was gathered outside the Leaky Cauldron at the northern end of Diagon Alley. Officer Vernon had shown up with two Aurors and four other patrolmen, some of whom had since been deployed at various locations along the shopping district. Fortunately, even the late drinkers had staggered off home by this time. The alley was empty of customers.

Shacklebolt was present; the Auror in him needed to be closer to the action than his office at the Ministry would allow. Hermione stood with Snape a short distance back from the cordon established to prevent people wandering down towards Gringotts. Harry and Ron were still in Dorset, having been hastily deputised to Vernon's remaining patrol down there. Hermione worried about them; the Dorset farmhouse was the property Zabini was most likely to flee to, as it contained the bulk of his resources.

She wondered what Draco would think if he found out that she had – if temporarily – arranged for the removal of the Aurors guarding Malfoy Manor. Probably piss himself laughing, she thought, and smiled. Then she thought of the machinations of his mother and she stopped.

She checked her watch. It was five to one in the morning. She was due at work in eight hours' time. Good job she'd slept well last night.

Vernon finished speaking to his various colleagues and sought out Shacklebolt. "I sent a pair of Disillusioned Aurors down the alley to see what they could see. It's all quiet. The address we've got is above the financial services place – GalloLoans. There's a light showing at the top of the building – the second floor flat. There's movement visible through the window too. Someone's up there."

Hermione met Snape's eyes. She was relieved. There'd been a part of her that had wondered whether this would be yet another dead-end.

"GalloLoans," Shacklebolt repeated thoughtfully. "They opened maybe ten years ago?" He shook
his head. "An issue for later. Let's get this scoundrel into custody first. What's your intended approach, Officer?"

"I've sent the Aurors back to lay temporary anti-Apparition wards around the location – should be enough to keep him from bolting. Two pairs of patrol officers on the ground to keep an eye on the front and back entrances. I've got two Aurors ready on brooms, to watch the roof and the upper windows – they can come in hard and fast if necessary. Once the wards are in place, I'll lead the team and go in as quickly and quietly as we can."

Hermione said, "Um."

Shacklebolt turned to look at her. "Miss Granger?"

"Sorry," she said. "It's just – even if Zabini hasn't prepared a Portkey, which, given his behaviour to date, is kind of unlikely...even if he hasn't got that option, there's still one place he can bolt to, at a push. The vault. Have you spoken to the goblins about that?"

"Not yet. They won't answer a Ministry Floo-call outside of business hours. Not even if the damn building is on fire. Matter of principle, or something." Shacklebolt frowned. "A vault with only two and a half hours of air isn't a great place to hide out, though, surely?"

"Not at all. But it'd be a great place to hop to, maybe dump Blaise there, take a breather, cast a few defensive spells and then hop back."

Snape made a noise of agreement. "In the Pensieve we saw Zabini 'port in with an active _Protego_. Miss Granger is right. The officers should be advised that Zabini might blink out, but that he could return to the same spot at any minute."

Vernon looked confused.

Shacklebolt said, "Just take our word, Officer. If the man disappears without a sound, keep your wand pointed at the space where he did it. He won't be gone long."

Vernon nodded. "Very good, Minister. If there's nothing else?"

"Just be careful," Shacklebolt said. "Good luck."

Vernon nodded and turned away. He gathered his people together and a small group detached itself from the crowd outside the Leaky Cauldron and made their way further along the alley. After a few steps, the Aurors and patrol officers shimmered and faded from sight.

Shacklebolt murmured, "Now we wait."

One minute. Two minutes. Hermione looked around and saw every face present straining to see down the moonlit alley, searching for signs of movement past the white edifice of Gringotts. The tension was palpable. Three minutes. Time enough for the team to have moved into position, now, surely? She tried not to keep checking her watch but couldn't help it. The night air was cold. She shivered. Four minutes. What state was Blaise Zabini in right now? Had he been fed, or starved? Bribed, or tortured? Five minutes.

She wished she could hold Snape's hand. For that matter, she'd have been quite happy to put her other hand in Kingsley Shacklebolt's. A bit of human warmth and comfort would be lovely, right about–

The night exploded with sound and fury.
Hermione screamed, though no one heard her do so because most other people nearby had done the same. In the distance an orange and green fireball rose; it backlit the whole street and cast a corrosive glow. The initial bang was still echoing off stone walls when a hard, heavy, terrifying wind seemed to rush past Hermione. Dust and debris began to make pitter-patter noises in the alley closer to Gringotts, and then pieces began to rain down on the crowd of shocked onlookers.

All this happened within five or six seconds.

Snape snapped, "Booby-trap," and dragged Hermione over to where Shacklebolt stood. He cast a canopy spell over their heads, just in time for larger pieces of masonry to bounce off it. Other people were diving for the safety of the Leaky's side alley, or casting their own protective spells, or Apparating away. The two patrol officers who'd been keeping people from heading off in the direction of Diagon Alley's south side now raced towards the aftermath of the explosion.

Hermione found her voice. "Oh god. Oh god. The officers."

The sky over the rooftops of Diagon's shops remained coloured with magical fire. Shouts were emerging from the wreckage. More people decided to run and help. The rain of debris lessened. Shacklebolt looked around, wide-eyed with shock, then he grabbed a hold of Amadeus Drinkwater, who had insisted on accompanying his employer to the scene. Drinkwater was holding a handkerchief to a bleeding gash on his scalp.

"Are you all right?" the Minister demanded.

"Yes. Think so. Just a cut."

"Good. Back to the office. Right now. Inform St Mungo's to prepare for casualties then scare up as many off-shift patrol officers as you can by Floo and get them over here."

"Where are you going?" Drinkwater demanded.

Shacklebolt turned to look at the rubble-strewn, fire-lit street. "Where the hell do you think?"

He'd taken a step away from Drinkwater when another explosion rocked the alley. More screams, many from further along the cobbled street. The blast lingered, roaring in their ears.

Drinkwater yelled, "Like hell you are," grabbed a hold of the Minister's arm and Side-Along'ed him out of there.

Hermione turned to look at Snape, then at the fire. What to do? What the fuck to do? She could run towards the damage, as her instinct told her, but she'd be helping no one if she got caught in another explosion. Go to St Mungo's and wait there to see if she could help, like she'd done in the aftermath of the Battle of Hogwarts? It seemed like a cop-out. Maybe she and Snape could use some teamwork again, and scout out the damage from higher up?

She almost laughed at herself when she realised she was voluntarily considering flight.

She turned to Snape, hoping he had some ideas. "What do we..."

She stopped talking. Behind Snape, walking towards them with purpose in his stride, was a man. Snape caught her look and spun around to face whoever was coming. His wand was ready and he edged her behind him. She decided she was going to have words with him about that.

"May I help you?" he asked loudly. He had to talk loudly, Hermione realised, because his ears were ringing from the explosions as much as hers were.
The man held up his hands, wand-free, and said, "Just wanted to be sure you hadn't been hit. Lot of debris falling around."

Snape relaxed a little bit.

Someone touched Hermione's shoulder and she spun around. A familiar face: one that had contorted with hatred less than two hours ago as it spat the Killing Curse. The face smiled at her. Up close, the man's breath was foul.

She gasped, lifted her wand and was a single swish into a body-bind curse when the thug pushed her roughly to the side. He reached for Snape, who had started to turn as he heard her gasp. One arm on Snape's shoulder, one hand at the neck of his shirt: the thug smirked as he activated his Portkey and snap-cracked out of the alley.

"No!" Hermione cried. She turned back to the other man, the one who'd been set up as a distraction. The man winked at her, then dug for something in his pocket. She didn't even think; she just launched herself, trying desperately to grab a hold of an arm or a sleeve before he Portkey'ed away.

She missed, and landed heavily on her side on the cobbles of Diagon Alley. She grunted with the impact and then winced as she tried to roll herself to a position where she could get to her feet. Her arm had been trapped under her as she fell, and it now hurt like blazes. Her chin had hit the stones too, and while she'd avoided biting her own tongue she could feel the burn of a graze across her skin.

No one came to help her up. She looked around in confusion. It seemed everyone who'd been here, waiting for the MLE operation to be completed, had either Apparated for cover or had run to help.

Slowly Hermione got to her feet. She picked up her wand from where it had fallen as she'd hit the deck, and she held it in her left hand because her right was cradled under her breasts. Moving it hurt so badly it made black splotches appear in her vision. She staggered as she tried to think.

The shock of the last sixty seconds began to press. There were increasing levels of smoke in the air, making her blink moisture from her eyes. She didn't know what to do, but she needed to do something. Snape was in trouble, but every single person she might have asked to help was kind of spectacularly busy right now.

She took a few steps further along the alley, hoping for some inspiration.

A third explosion. The cobbles shook. Another shock wave, like an abrasive wind, then more debris showering from above: bricks, rocks, dust. Something clipped her temple. Right in front of her something heavy smacked down, making her flinch back.

It was a boot: a worn boot of aging brown leather threaded with brand new laces. It was still occupied by its foot. Just the foot, and a piece of sheared ankle bone.

Panic overwhelmed her. She screamed. Without any coherent thought she raised her wand in her clumsy left hand and flicked through the pattern for Apparition.

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Reach Out (I'll Be There)

"The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned."

Maya Angelou, All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes 1986

Hermione landed hard, fell to her knees, then fell to her side.

She gave a hoarse scream as something flared with agonising pain. Her body curled up into a defensive ball.

She closed her eyes. She wanted to sleep. She wanted it all to go away.

It did.

(For a while.)

"Hermione."

She opened her eyes. Everything was too bright. That was wrong because it was supposed to be night. She was sure about that...except, was she?

No, she wasn't sure of anything.

"Hermione, darling, look at me."

Something had happened. She needed to remember. Or did she? Perhaps she needed to forget. It was definitely one or the other.

"Hermione." The voice was insistent, but it sounded familiar and calm and safe, too, so she tried to focus. "That's right, can you look at me? Yes. There you are."

Her eyes found the source of the voice. It was her mother's face. "Mum?" she whispered, feeling a rush of relief and gratitude, feeling like a little girl.

"Everything's fine," her mother said gently, though the tremble in her voice made Hermione dubious. "Do you think you can stand? It's chilly out here."

Hermione blinked rapidly. She shivered, then realised she couldn't stop: shaking, shaking, everything was shaking. The cobbles had been shaking. The night – oh god – the night had been torn in two...

"Severus!" she gasped.

She looked around wildly, then whimpered as she rolled on to her arm and it answered with another blaze of agony.

"It's all right, darling," came her mother's calm voice. "Try to stay still." She was speaking slowly. There was a hand on Hermione’s good shoulder, patting, soothing.

A part of Hermione's brain registered the technique. Between short, panted breaths she said, "Oh.
"I'm in shock?" Her shaking body made the words stutter.

"That's right. But your dad and I are here with you, and you're all right." Her mother smiled at her. Hermione broadened her focus; she took in her mum's dressing gown, the lawn and the bench, all lit by the outside lights her father had installed.

"How did I get here?" she wondered.

"You Apparated. We realised when the lights came on."

Hermione stretched her senses, trying to work out if there was any sharp pain where she'd splinched herself. Aside from a burning sensation on her lower face, a serious headache at her left temple and the arm that complained whenever she tried to move it, she seemed intact.

"I don't remember." No, that wasn't right. She remembered; she just didn't want to. "I didn't even know where I was going."

"Never mind about that now. Let's get you inside and have a look at you. Dad's going to take your weight. Just a little effort and we'll get you in the warm."

She turned her head, looking around. "Daddy?"

"Right here, Hermies," her father said from behind her. "Let's get you up."

She felt gentle arms around her and the solid presence of her father at her back. She was comforted. She tried to help, though the shaking and the pain in her arm made it tricky. Her father lifted her to her feet.

"He gave me a piggy-back," she said, breathing the words out.

"That sounds fun," her mother said. "Can you walk? That's right. You know where you are. Let's get inside. A nice cup of tea, yes?"

Hermione half-walked, half stumbled between her parents, trying to cradle her right arm against her chest because it hurt like someone had been trying to pull it off. She felt freezing cold. Could she really be that cold? She was in shock. Not the blood-loss shock she'd experienced when Rookwood had cut her leg; this was post-traumatic shock. Emotional shock. She'd studied it on her first-aid course between second and third year. Knowing what it was didn't seem to counter the symptoms, however.

She closed her eyes. Something had happened. The night had burst apart and Severus–

They'd taken Severus. He could be anywhere. He could be hurt, or worse...Zabini might be forcing a hate potion down his throat. Or De Morte Magicae, if he'd found a way to procure the snails. Zabini was capable of anything!

"I have to help him!" she cried, as memories fluttered behind her eyes like a show reel on fast-forward, there and then gone, backwards and forwards, incomplete but leaving a sense that this was time wasted. "I have to go back!"

She tried to pull herself away from her parents but she lacked any real strength. The motion jabbed at her sore arm. Her father's grasp tightened only enough to keep her from flailing, and she didn't protest further as she was walked into the sitting room. She was no good to anyone like this. Fear and shock had rendered her a trembling, useless rag of a thing; now frustration was added to the mix.
Hermione was pressed into a seat at the sofa. Her father disappeared, saying something about tea. Her mother sat beside her, still offering gentle reassurance in that slow, calm voice.

"Do you remember what happened?" her mum said. "I'm sorry to ask, but we need to know if we're in any danger. Is anyone likely to be coming? Can you remember? The Portkeys are right here – do we need to get you to the Burrow?"

Hermione frowned. The shaking wasn't easing off. She tried to straighten out her thoughts.

"I was in Diagon Alley," she said. "The officers were going in. We'd found him. Or we thought so."

"Found who, darling?"

"The murderer. So many murders. He was married to Mrs Trelore. Years ago. The woman who was here last night."

"I see, so the officers knew where he was."

"Yes. We were waiting to see how it turned out, me and Severus, and Kingsley."

"And then what happened?"

Hermione inhaled sharply, and her good hand came up to press against her mouth. She almost poked her own eye out with her wand, and looked confusedly at the way her left hand was holding on to it in a frozen grip, as if rigor mortis had set in.

"I hurt my arm," she said, frowning.

"Yes. Do you remember how?"

Hermione took a few moments. Her mother's reassurance had done its work; her confusion had cleared. She turned and found her mother's eyes and managed a nod. "Yes. Yes, I remember everything."

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Hermione sat with a fleece around her shoulders and a half-empty mug of tea in her left hand. Her right arm was supported by a sling, taken from the packet in the first-aid box. An Elastoplast dressed the gash at the side of her brow. Her wand was on the coffee table. She'd stopped shaking, aside from the odd residual tremor. The paracetamol she'd taken ten minutes ago were kicking in, to blunt the sharp edge of her headache.

She'd just finished telling her parents the bullet points about Niccolo Zabini. The exercise had been as much to straighten things out again in her own mind as to provide information.

"This man faked his own death in order to go running off to the Caribbean? To seduce and marry the daughter of another man he'd murdered?" her father summarised, aghast.

"He wanted the properties. Thirty-seven buildings around Diagon Alley." Hermione sighed. "Zabini is all about the money."

"Why did he take Severus?" her mum asked.

"I don't know. Before, I thought he needed a brewer. But Blaise has been brewing for his father again. Maybe Zabini's not impressed with the results. Maybe Blaise is being deliberately
slapdash." Hermione shook her head. "I don't know."

"You say you saw him murder another man?"

"Not him. His hired thug, the one who took Severus. God, it was so sudden. So...so casual."

"Might this thug have taken Severus to get rid of a witness, then?"

"We were both there. Why didn't he take me too?" Hermione thought back. "Anyway, we were Disillusioned the whole time. Invisible. He couldn't have seen us."

Her father huffed his relief. "So he doesn't know you saw him. That's...that's good."

She nodded. Then she frowned. "But he'll have heard Severus's voice. Whether or not he recognised it, I don't know." She squeezed shut her eyes and let her head drop back. "Look, all I know is we have to find him. And there's no one I can ask to help."

"What about Harry and Ron?" her mother asked.

"They're in Dorset," Hermione replied. "Seconded. Officer Vernon was running out of manpower. There were so many addresses we needed to keep an eye on."

"You can't contact them?" her dad asked. He was sitting on her other side. "Surely they'd help."

"That's why it wouldn't be fair. They'd come running, and they've got a job to do. MLE is their career now."

"Is there anyone else?" said her mum. "What about your friends up at Hogwarts?"

"That's another life," Hermione said with a sad smile. "No, everyone who could help will be far too busy dealing with the explosions. What am I supposed to do? Go to Kingsley and say, 'Sorry, I know there's stuff happening but Severus has been abducted!'"

"An abduction is still very serious," her dad said.

"But I've got nothing. At the moment I might as well stick a pin in a map." Hermione growled and tried to shake the fuzziness out of her thoughts. "I need to figure this out. There's got to be a way to track Zabini's location down."

"Then that's what we'll do," her mother decided patiently. "Work through the options. Say them out loud. Start from the top."

Hermione appreciated the effort, and since she had no other plan at present she went along with it. "For the last eighteen months he's been living in a flat near Regent's Park. I found the place last night, but he'd cleared out by the time the patrol investigated. He won't have gone back because there's two officers there."

"What if he returned and overcame the two officers?" her dad asked.

"If he did, he must have done it in the last hour. They're under orders to make hourly reports to the patrol desk in the Ministry."

"Right then," her mother said. "So that's ruled out. He had other addresses?"

"London flats, mainly. And a farmhouse in Dorset – that's where Harry and Ron are. Same set up, though – there are officers guarding each place he might have used as a safe house."
"Any other possibilities in the non-magical world? Might he have found an abandoned building or taken hotel accommodation or-or forced his way in to someone else's home and subdued them magically?"

"I wondered about that. But don't forget he has Blaise with him. I don't think Blaise has been a willing companion." Hermione grimaced. "At this point, simply for convenience's sake, Zabini might have done something awful to his own son – he's capable." She sighed. "But if he's holed up somewhere like you suggest, I'm stuck. There's no way to pinpoint where it might be."

"All right then. Let's set the non-magical world aside. He has a fake name and address in your world too, yes?"

"A few. Main one is Alfonso Silva. And his address just blew up. Probably taking half a dozen law enforcement officers with it." She closed her eyes against the terrifying memory of stonework and dust and severed body parts raining down on her from a fire-lit sky. "It blew up three times. Zabini must have set traps on the doors, maybe the windows. Blasting curses. So powerful. There were actual shockwaves, Mum."

"It sounds awful, darling, but it doesn't help us find Severus and there's nothing we can do to help. Let's focus on where this man, Zabini, might have gone. He had no other addresses as a wizard?"

"None that I know about," Hermione said, despairing because they'd already reached the limit of her knowledge.

"I thought you said he had thirty-seven of them," her father said.

She turned to look at her dad. "Oh. Sorry, no, those are just the properties he got when he married this woman in the Caribbean. He's the landlord – he rents them out. Doesn't matter. They're just businesses."

"But if he owns them...?" her father said, looking confused. "Have they been searched?"

Hermione opened her mouth to explain why this was not worth discussing. Then she closed it again. She was frowning.

"Businesses will probably be closed at this time of night," her mother said. "Might they provide a temporary bolt-hole, at least?"

"Zabini needs more than that," Hermione muttered. "He needs..."

He needed an empty property. Preferably somewhere the locals made a point of not paying attention to other people's business. Somewhere like Knockturn Alley.

"Oh," she breathed.

She called to mind the papers she'd retrieved from the Ministry floor after they'd been knocked off the meeting room table. She'd glanced over the top document: a formal record of property title. Nothing much had registered at the time; nothing more than a name she hadn't recognised.

"Prangle Scamps," she muttered.

"Darling?"

A slightly hysterical giggle escaped her. "Xenophilius said that the Ministry was full of them."
"You've lost me," her mum said.

Prangle Scamps. Invisible, probably fictitious creatures whose modus operandi was to draw attention to the oft-overlooked detail. The scratch on the floorboard, the misplaced keepsake...

A piece of paper, wafted off a table.

"How did I miss that?" she wondered.

"You've remembered something?" her mother asked.

"Alfonso Silva owns the Coffin House!" she announced.

"Charming," her dad muttered. "Why is it never 'The House of Snuggly Duvets'?"

"The Coffin House?" her mother pressed, shooting a look at Hermione's dad.

Hermione's brain found its rhythm. "It's right where he tried to take Severus the first time. He'll know it's all shut up. He'll know the tenant is out of the country and probably isn't coming back. Maybe he told Churlish to fake a witness from there because, technically, he could have provided one. The man practically mainlines Polyjuice."

"I don't know what that means," her mum said without irritation. "So is this place worth a look? Have you something to take to the authorities now?"

The more she thought about it, the more certain she was. Knockturn Alley was a place where no one asked questions. And as she considered the geography of the streets...yes. The rear of the GalloLoans building would be linked to the back of the Coffin House by that network of paths and snickets that the muggers frequented.

Could she take this to the authorities? She could. Shacklebolt would see her, she was sure of it. But how could she demand his attention right now? Alternatively she could Patronus Harry and Ron and, as she'd said to her parents, they'd come running. Even if it cost them their apprenticeships. She couldn't do that to them.

Who else was there? Percy wasn't a dueller. Molly was formidable in a duel, but it was almost two o'clock in the morning; Hermione couldn't just show up, yank Molly out of bed and demand she storm a Knockturn Alley building with her.

Lysander Crocus was no fighter. Nor was Dane Booth. Nor, she suspected, was Roksana Bramble.

Draco? Draco, she would have asked. He might have undertaken a rescue mission for the sake of two fellow Slytherins, especially if it earned him some goodwill. But he was in Normandy, and she had no idea how readily he'd respond to a Patronus. The business with his mother had cooled her feelings of burgeoning warmth towards him, as well.

There was no one. Not until the morning, at the earliest. There was only her.

Snape might not have until the morning.

She put down her tea mug and looked to her parents. If they had the slightest inkling that she was going to do this on her own, they'd snatch up her wand and then sit on her till the sun came up.

"It's all right," she said. "I know what to tell the Minister."
"The Minister?" her dad asked with arched brows.

"Kingsley. He's a friend of mine." She reached up and touched her grazed chin. Her father had cleaned it up with an antiseptic wipe while her mother had sorted out her arm. "Did I stop bleeding yet?"

He peered at her face. "It's nasty-looking, but it's clean and dry."

Hermione nodded. "I have to go. I can't waste time. Severus..." She closed her eyes. "I'm sorry."

Her dad sighed: an angry, impatient sound. "I wish I could come with you. Be some ruddy use."

She reached to hold his hand. "What on earth do you think just happened? The world blew up around me and all I could do was run to my mum and dad. So much for nineteen years old, eh?"

She shook her head and smiled for her father. "You got my head on straight again. Both of you. I mean – look. I've even stopped shaking."

Hermione held up her good arm and demonstrated the absence-of-tremor. She collected her wand and stood up. She was pleased to find she was steady on her feet.

"Call us," her mum insisted. "I don't care what time it is. Call us when it's sorted out. Or come straight back."

"I will," she promised. She had an injured wand-arm and terror in her heart, and she was about to walk into the den of a murderer. It was probably best to think positively. "I'll talk to you soon."

She stepped around the coffee table and walked over to the patio doors.

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Hermione Disillusioned before she began to pick her way along the cobbled street near the Leaky Cauldron, heading towards the southern end of Diagon. Any MLE officials working around the damaged building would no doubt steer her firmly away if they caught sight of her. She couldn't risk that.

The junction with Knockturn was only three buildings along from the pile of rubble that had once housed the GalloLoans company. Hermione walked carefully. The last thing she needed was a turned ankle from stepping the wrong way on some rubble.

The fires were out, at least. The sulphurous smell that accompanied Fiendfyre hung in the air, and blackened patches bedecked the nearby buildings. Broken glass was everywhere; few windows remained intact in the vicinity. The fallen timbers of the damaged building still smoked with heat, but no sparks showed. A handful of tired-looking officials kept an eye on the cooling ruin.

Hermione was very glad that there were no dead bodies to walk past. She had certainly had her fill of such things for one night.

She reached the junction with Knockturn and paused to look around. No one had noticed her moving in the darkness of these small hours. She took a firmer grip on her wand, reminded herself – not for the first time – to get some practice in with her left-handed casting, then turned into the alley.

Night-time constituted prime business hours for many of the buildings along Knockturn Alley. Even so, the explosions and their aftermath had rendered the disreputable district quieter than normal. Hermione moved as stealthily as she could, keeping to the shadowed edges where
moonlight failed to penetrate. She hadn't yet decided how she was going to gain entry to the Coffin House. Shops tended to ward their boundaries such that a straightforward *Alohomora* was not going to cut it.

When she reached the place, she examined the shop front: still dark on the ground floor, with that big *CLOSED* sign in the door. She looked up. There were two further storeys above the ground floor shop, the uppermost floor being built into the roof with windows set into the uneven slope of its tiles. There were no lights visible, but that did not mean anything. Zabini could have covered the windows or charmed them opaque.

Short of sending a blasting curse at the front door, there was nothing for her here. Hermione turned her attention to the side-passage beside the Coffin House.

It seemed to be empty. It was darker in there, high walls enclosing the space and blocking what natural light there was. Hermione gathered her courage and then stepped into the passage's cover. She paused, listened, then quickly dropped her Disillusionment. She tried to cast her night-vision spell, failed with her clumsy left hand, swapped over to her right and gritted her teeth through the pain as she used it to cast. She swapped back and raised her cloak again. The detail of the passage sprang more clearly into view. It was interesting, and a touch worrying, that some wandwork translated to her slower left hand just fine and yet some did not. Hermione decided that if she needed to cast a body-bind or something equally urgent then she'd damn well cast through the pain barrier.

She made her way down the path, her left shoulder inches from the looming side wall of the Coffin House. Her enhanced vision gave her more confidence, though she still made every effort to move silently. At the end of the first stretch of path, where it formed a T-junction with another narrow lane that ran behind the Knockturn businesses, she found an odd kind of camp or picnic site: an ancient battered sofa with sagging cushions, a side table, a litter of cheaper brand Firewhisky bottles, empty and discarded. This must be where the muggers waited for news of a mark.

She followed the wall of the Coffin House around to its rear. The brickwork was dirty and ill-kept. There was a robust looking back door at the top of some steps. A sign reading 'Deliveries' hung above it. The only windows into the building were higher up; Hermione couldn't think of any plan other than going back to the knackered old settee and Transfiguring it into a ladder. Hardly discreet.

Fuck it, she needed a better idea.

As she leaned against the wall, still Disillusioned, looking up at the building and trying not to growl with frustration, a better idea presented itself. The back door juddered and then opened. A man appeared, silhouetted against the candlelight within. She needed to blink a couple of times thanks to the sensitivity of her night-vision spell, before she recognised the thug who'd murdered the wizard in Hammersmith.

At this point she was done fucking around.

She swapped her wand to her right hand, breathed in and held it, clenched her teeth and then fired a voiceless body-bind right at the man. He didn't make a sound as his muscular bulk went rigid and then toppled forwards. Hermione didn't wait for the satisfaction of the smack he'd make against the stone of the steps; she was already muttering a *Mobilicorpus* and continuing her painful swishes and flicks. The body was caught inches from the ground, and Hermione used her wand to direct it to the settee where she let it slump. It was the best she could do to hide him: in plain sight, as if he'd had a skinful and was sleeping it off.
She looked at him for a moment. She felt no satisfaction, not even much in the way of nerves. She just felt relieved, because with the appearance of this man she had proof that she'd been right about the location.

She returned to the open back door. Her right arm was screaming its protest after the spells she'd cast, so her left hand took the strain again. Hermione cancelled her night-vision and reinstated her Disillusionment charm.

Inside the back door was a narrow corridor, lit by sconces on the wall. Off the corridor were doors, probably into storerooms given the absence of ground floor rear windows. She ignored them and crept past. Opening doors to check rooms would only make noise, and her single current advantage was of surprise.

One thug down. At least one more to go. And Zabini himself.

Could she do this?

(Hermione berated herself for asking such a useless and unhelpful question. Better to bloody get on with it.)

She crept along to the open doorway at the end of the corridor. Through the doorway was a backroom behind the main store front. On Hermione's left was a staircase leading both upwards and down to the cellars. On her right, a fold-out bureau and chair. In addition to the door which led to the shop itself, there were two other internal doors.

Which way to go? If she went up and someone followed her from the cellar then she'd be trapped. Better to clear the way from the bottom of the building. She checked her grip on her wand and then tiptoed over to the flight of stairs that led downwards.

At the bottom of the stairs was a door that stood ajar. Hermione pushed at it, tense against any creak it might make. She was listening so intently that she heard faint noises from within: someone breathing heavily; objects being moved about. She opened the door enough to squeeze through the gap and then stood in the room beyond, Disillusioned, hoping to work out whether her arrival had been noticed.

It had not. The breathing and thumping noises did not pause. Hermione looked around. In the flickering candlelight she could see that the walls of this cellar had been roughly plastered. Shelves lined the wall opposite the door. The floor was hard-packed dirt. In a corner over to her left were, perhaps unsurprisingly, a stack of actual coffins. To her right, the cellar stretched a short way and joined another room at right angles. It was from this corner that the noises were coming.

She checked her cloaking spell and then crept around, watching where she put her feet, wand at the ready. She turned the corner and found an archway on the wall that had not been visible from the stairway door. Looking through it, she saw a figure busying himself with stacks of boxes. The room beyond the arch was also lit by candles.

Hermione watched for perhaps half a minute, needing to know who it was she was about to hex. The man finally obliged her as he stood and stretched and turned to look at the pile he'd made. He was loading small coffers into a series of larger trunks. As he showed his face, Hermione recognised him as the other man from by the Leaky: the one who'd been the decoy rather than the grabber.

She shifted her wand to her right hand and body-bound the fucker. It hurt a lot more, this time. Her right arm was becoming as clumsy as her left. Damn it.
Bad guy dealt with, she stepped into the alcove and looked around. Small chests, sacks of gemstones, pouches of coins. It was obvious where it had come from: Zabini had been emptying out Jossinia Trelore's vault at Gringotts. Was this his back-up plan? Having missed the chance to manipulate his family with dark potions, he'd decided on the more direct route?

So why hadn't he done this to start with? In fact, why hadn't he done this ten years ago? Had the arrival of Frederick Goodwych reminded him that Jossinia might yet be a cash cow? A beautiful witch with a proclivity for extremely wealthy husbands? Maybe that was it. The years had gone by and Jossinia's beauty had provided Zabini with opportunity after opportunity.

And then along had come Philip Richmond.

Polly the house-elf would have been compelled to tell Zabini how serious the relationship was. Perhaps Zabini had been worried that his ex was going to throw off her magical heritage and live in the Muggle world, just like her mother had done. Or perhaps he'd had an eye on his son's newly attained age of majority. Or perhaps he'd simply had enough of taking Trelore's money a little at a time. Whatever the reasons, Zabini had decided to change the status quo.

The potions, Hermione considered. They had obviously been a part of the plan. What could they have achieved?

The hate potion would have taken care of Trelore and Richmond. Let them marry, dose Trelore and have her murder Richmond, and what would happen? The notorious Black Widow would be questioned. Only this time she'd have no claim to innocence. She wouldn't even be sorry; the potion would have robbed her of such feelings. Likelihood? Azkaban, and probably for life.

Draco Malfoy had told her about the legal status of prisoners in Azkaban. He'd also told her that everyone knew about the workaround. Thus, to avoid being robbed blind by an archaic Ministry law, Trelore's imprisonment would mean that her entire estate passed to her son.

It would be a neat way to get all the money in one place, wouldn't it? At which point...what? How could Zabini ensure that his son's fortune became his?

He could Imperius Blaise into writing a will that bequeathed everything to Alfonso Silva, perhaps. What else was there? And how did the De Morte Magicae fit into the plan? Zabini had clearly intended to brew it. Had it been meant for Blaise? The idea made Hermione queasy. The notion that a father would use that awful potion to magically cripple his own son...

But a squib in the magical world would require some kind of guardian or wand-bearer to continue doing business at Gringotts. It could have allowed Zabini total control over Blaise's wealth. Certainly long enough to arrange for it to be moved elsewhere.

Hermione shook her head. She was getting mired in speculation. She glanced around without interest at the fortune piled high in this cellar, checked the paralysis was holding on the man she'd cursed, then she restored her Disillusionment charm and crept back up to the ground floor.

She paused at the doorway to the front of the shop. There were no sounds to indicate the presence of anyone through there. She checked the corridor leading to the back door: it was clear. The two other doors off the back room offered nothing more interesting than an empty kitchen and a loo. She turned her attention to the stairs leading upwards.

Two thugs down. There might be more. And there was Zabini, and Blaise, and Snape.

Time to get it done.
The rickety wooden steps to the upper storeys of the building creaked with every movement.

(Of course they did. When did wooden staircases not creak?)

Hermione bit her lip as she tried to walk on the very edges of each step, going slowly, slowly, even though the urge was on her to rush. Snape was going to have to teach her his quiet-footfall charm, she decided. Also the amplification charm. In fact, any of the spells that made all this sneaking around easier.

At the top of the first flight of stairs was a narrow landing with several closed doors leading off it. Hermione decided she couldn't ignore them; she still worried about getting flanked as she made her way further into enemy territory. After waiting a few seconds to see whether the creaks of the stairway had drawn any attention, she dropped her Disillusionment and managed to cast a *Specialis Revelio* with her aching right arm. She checked around herself, looking for wards, for traps, for curses, for barriers. There was nothing. She cancelled the spell and raised her cloak again.

With no better plan in mind, she went to the closest door. She winced as the floorboards creaked, every sound enough to make her heart rate jump. Leaning in to the door, she strained to hear what might be happening beyond. Nothing. She gave an irritated if invisible shrug and then opened the door.

The room was empty. She turned and moved along the landing. Next.

Three rooms later, she finally heard a noise. It came from above her head: a series of footsteps. Quite thumping ones, actually: the footsteps of someone who felt no need to be covert. Hermione decided that she'd had enough of being ultra-cautious and that she bloody well needed to find Severus, right now, because if he got hurt while she was dithering about with empty rooms then she would never, ever forgive herself. She went to the fourth and final door off the landing and yanked it open.

A man was sitting in an old armchair, reading some magazine or other. He glanced up in surprise. When he saw only an empty doorway, he stood. He had dark, close-cropped hair and wore robes that were not a good fit. The last time Hermione had seen that face, it had been frozen in a death-stare.

She had not been expecting to come across Gustiver Walsh again tonight.

But she'd have to sort out the whys and wherefores later. She lifted her wand in her impaired right hand and cast her third body-bind of the evening. Or she tried to. Her arm seized up halfway though, the pain so bad that she whimpered. The spell fizzled as her wandwork failed, and the action made her Disillusionment drop.

Walsh's eyes widened in alarm. He lunged to one side for his wand. Hermione clenched her teeth, took her wand in her left hand and tried to repeat the body-bind. She couldn't quite do the jab and reverse swish...damn it, she gave up and tried for a *Stupefy* instead–

"*Expelliarmus,*" Walsh cast, and Hermione's wand flew out of her awkward left hand and into his.

She was halfway through an attempt at a wandless *Impedimenta* when Walsh said:

"Ah ah! Hands where I can see them or I *Stupefy*.

Hermione considered how much use she'd be to Snape unconscious, and reluctantly desisted. She
held up her left hand. "Can't do much about the other one," she said. "I thought you were dead, by the way."

Walsh actually grinned. "He did it? Excellent!"

"Not for the poor dupe who drank the Polyjuice. Who was it?"

Walsh waved a dismissive hand. "Some reporter from the Prophet. The one the boss tipped off about the ball." Walsh shook his head, as if remembering a great joke. "You should have seen the look on his lad's face! Bad enough, his mother dallying with a Muggle, but to have it splashed over the front page? Heh!"

"Zabini arranged for the story?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"Blaise was wavering. Nic needed his lad to get angry again. Not much of a spine, that kid." Walsh looked Hermione over. "What is that on your arm?"

"A sling."

"What's it for?"

"My arm is injured. Do you want to discuss Muggle first-aid? That would be fine with me." She lifted her chin. "I've got the cavalry on their way. The more time we waste chatting, the better."

"What the hell is the cavalry?"

She sighed heavily. It was very difficult to engage in bravado and manipulation when the crook you were trying to deceive didn't speak Muggle. "Aurors, you thieving lowlife tosser. They're coming here right now. I were you, I'd make a break for it while you still can."

Walsh looked uncomfortable for a moment, then he frowned and cast a Silencio at Hermione. She glared at him. He indicated with his wand that she turn around and precede him on to the landing.

"Upstairs," Walsh ordered, and prodded her in the back of the neck with his wand.

She followed the instruction, still wary of being rendered unconscious. As she walked up the flight of stairs she tried to glance back. If Walsh followed closely enough then she could tip forward and kick backwards, maybe send him tumbling down...but when she looked over her shoulder he'd left enough of a gap that she was no physical threat to him.

There was a closed door at the top of the stairs. Hermione stopped in front of it. Behind her, she heard Walsh mutter an incantation. His spell prickled over her as it touched the door. Some kind of ward signature, she deduced. It seemed she had reached the part of the building that was deemed worthy of protecting.

"Open it," he said.
She did so.

"Nic!" he yelled. "We have a visitor. I'm coming in. Don't get hex-happy, all right?"

She turned around on the top step to look at Walsh. He sneered at her reluctance to move into the room beyond, though Hermione thought she could hardly be blamed.

"Everta Statum," Walsh muttered, and flicked and swiped.

Something that felt like a punch hit her in the centre of her gut, right where her arm was cradled in its sling. It lifted her off her feet and threw her backwards into the room. She would have screamed with the agony of the blow, even before she landed, but the silencing charm remained in place. When she hit the floor, the new, smaller hurts of bruising and winded breath were actually a welcome distraction. She tried to look up, get a sense of what was in the room. Where lay the threat? Where was Zabini?

Walsh had followed her in. "It's Hermione Granger," he said, as if these circumstances allowed for conversational introductions. "Harry Potter's friend." He glanced down at where she was trying to catch her breath, then looked away. "She's sort of famous, but she's a mouthy little wench. I think it was her that scuppered your plan to grab Snape the f--"

Walsh stopped talking. Abruptly. His eyes went wide with shock. Hermione struggled to push herself into a sitting position using her one good arm.

"You," Walsh said.

"Me," said Severus Snape, armed and free and thankfully, wonderfully, joyfully uninjured. He stood there, tall and composed, his oh-so familiar wand at the ready: hawthorn, twelve and a half inches, dragon heartstring core. He turned to look at Hermione, black eyes, effortless poise. Her heart had never felt so full. "Excellent timing," he offered, and returned his attention to Walsh.

From the corner of her eye she saw Walsh remember himself and begin to cast. Snape actually found the time to give a snort of derision before firing off a *Stupefy*. Walsh fell backwards to the floor.

Hermione managed to tear her eyes away from Snape for long enough to check the rest of the room. To one side, Niccolo Zabini lay slumped on the floor in a full body-bind, eyes locked on the events taking place and somehow, in spite of his paralysis, exuding outrage. In the furthest corner, Blaise Zabini lay on his side on a camp bed, his hands clasped together in front of him and wrapped at the wrists in a cable tie. His ankles were bound too. His lips moved as he tried to speak but he was also suffering the effects of a *Silencio*. His eyes were wide and furious as he tried to shout past it.

She winced in sympathy for the ordeal Blaise had experienced. Yes, many of his problems had been of his own making, but no one deserved that.

In any case, it seemed there was no further threat; Walsh was down for the count and Snape had clearly managed to get the better of Zabini only minutes before her arrival. Hermione scrambled to retrieve her wand from where Walsh had dropped it. She removed the silencing charm from her mouth.

"Thank you for the assistance," she said, as politely as she could while her breathing still laboured. She got to her feet using the slightly unconventional means of jacking herself upright against the wall a few inches at a time using her good shoulder. "And in the interests of not looking like a
"Two?" Snape said, lifting his eyebrows. She'd surprised him. His eyes flicked over her face and then down to her sling. "And while injured."

"I've got pluck. Or something."

She cast a cautious look back at Blaise. He was still mouthing words at her. Probably something like, 'Get these fucking cable ties off me, Granger!' Well, he could wait a moment. She looked around at the room. It was built into the eaves of the roof and was large, spanning the whole footprint of the building, dormer windows to the front and back. The floorboards were strewn with rugs. Candlelight flickered from shelves and wall-mounted sconces. There was a brewing station set up on a counter near Zabini's paralysed body, and a wooden table with a pile of Galleons atop its surface and three mismatched chairs.

"Right then," she said. "What now?"

"That depends," Snape replied. "Are we expecting others?"

"I'm afraid not." She glanced at Walsh. "I told halfwit over there that we were. I was lying, though. Kingsley has enough on his plate at the moment."

"So you came here alone?"

"What else was I going to do?" she asked, with a small, weary smile.

Snape smiled back. For a few seconds the smile lit his face. It didn't look so very awkward, as she'd imagined it would. Hermione was used to his expressions of humour being fleeting at best; a proper, meaningful, lingering smile on that sharp-lined face, with its hooks and shadows and severity, should have been as ill-suited to Severus Snape as...well, as Neville's grandma's clothes. And yet there it was. The man was alive and well and smiling at her.

She shook her head. "I was so worried." She stepped closer. After hours of tension and trauma, she felt drained. Snape took in her appearance, let his gaze linger at the grazing over her chin. His expression softened as he saw her weary relief. He lifted an arm towards her–

A thump, behind Snape. He turned around and looked, as did Hermione. Blaise had rocked himself off his camp bed and was now squirming on the floor. She wondered what had him so upset. Was he arrogant enough to believe he should be their immediate concern? (Actually, knowing Blaise Zabini, he was definitely that arrogant.)

She glanced at Blaise's father as he lay to the side. Zabini's petrified gaze was locked on her as he watched the proceedings. He could not move, could not blink, but still he managed to intimidate. In an odd kind of way he was making Snape look friendly.

Snape turned back from where Blaise struggled. He gave a shrug, another smile, then opened his arms. "He'll wait. It's all over. We won. Come here."

She almost fell for it.

She wanted to fall for it. She wanted those arms around her...

...but she knew in the space of a heartbeat that it was utterly, unequivocally wrong.

Hermione had no need of Prangle Scamps when she already had a painstakingly acquired total damsel in distress – I've already taken care of two of that tosser's thugs."
understanding of the man standing before her. When Severus Snape was surprised he didn't betray a single flicker of it. When he was pleased or amused he might smile for a handful of microseconds but no more. And he absolutely, without a single shadow of a doubt, would never offer her a victory hug. Especially not when there was an audience present.

This.
Was not.
Severus Snape.

Even as her heart threatened to judder to a stop, she drew in a deep breath, pretending it was of relief. She could detect the burnt-hair smell of bicorn horn. But Polyjuice could only change the appearance and voice of the imbiber. It couldn't replicate behaviour.

She thought as fast as she could. Her right arm wasn't good enough to cast. Her left was clumsy. The speed with which 'Snape' had launched a *Stupefy* at Walsh was something she couldn't come close to matching. Ergo: no point in raising her wand. And she couldn't expect to incapacitate him physically when she was only half-functional herself.

She was taking too long. The man's expression morphed into a frown. He lifted his arms higher in invitation. Snape's wand was still clutched in this interloper's right hand.

"Hermione?" he prompted.

It appeared that she was going to have to be sneaky about this. Perhaps even subtle.

She stepped closer. She lifted her left arm up, wand and all, and wrapped it over his shoulder. She stood on tiptoes to do so; it gave her the ability to see behind him. She locked eyes with the panicked, squirming Blaise and sent a left-handed, voiceless *Finite Incantatem* at his head. Fortunately he had the good sense not to make a loud noise as the *Silencio* was released. Since she couldn't manage much else with her left hand, she did the only other thing that she could: she held up her wand to Blaise and then tossed it to the floor, as close to him as she could manage.

Not-Snape's arms surrounded her and pulled her in close. She was almost rigid with disgust. She wondered how long he'd wait before he cast, and whether he'd try anything less than a Killing Curse.

Her wand had made no sound as it hit the rug. Blaise was already shuffling to grab it with his tied hands. She hoped he had enough manoeuvrability. If he didn't, if he alerted not-Snape before he could cast, she was quite sure she would not survive this night.

Not-Snape's hand soothed over her back: his right, the one still holding Snape's wand. Which meant his left hand was ready to do something else. She tried to get a sense of his movement, and saw that hand creep towards a coat pocket. With that, her suspicions were confirmed; this interloper wearing Snape's body was Niccolo Zabini himself, and it seemed she was about to be whisked off to Gringotts. Damn it, and she'd just given up her bloody wand! Which meant no chance of casting a Patronus, no chance of defending herself if--

"*Tarantallegra!*"

The Dancing-Feet jinx hit not-Snape square in the back. Hermione had to concede that this was a good, solid, simple choice, given Blaise's restricted mobility and the fact that he was using a wand that was not his own.

Hermione pushed not-Snape away and staggered backwards. As not-Snape's feet began to blur
with frenzied jumps and hops, his expression became furious. He did his best to turn and raise his stolen wand at Blaise. His arm couldn't stay still, though. Every jerk and twist that the jinx produced nullified his attempts to cast.

Blaise, still prone on the floor and keeping one wary eye on not-Snape, said, "Knife at the brewing station, Granger."

She skirted the maddened dancer in the centre of the room and hurried over to the potions area. A decent wooden-handled knife was set to one side. She grabbed it and went back to Blaise.

"I really hope you're who you seem to be," she muttered as she sliced through the cable tie binding his ankles. "I've had enough surprises for one bloody day." She scooted around and sliced the bindings on his wrists, then glanced up into his face. He looked hollow-eyed and slightly manic, seething with hatred as he watched not-Snape dance. "Um – if you really do need to kill your father, can I ask – very nicely – that you don't use my wand to do it?"

Blaise blinked at her. Then he got to his feet, cast a body-bind curse on not-Snape and watched dispassionately as he toppled to the ground. He then turned to the paralysed form of not-Niccolo Zabini and cast the counter-curse.

For a moment, all was still. Then not-Zabini stretched with a wince. He got to his feet. The eye that didn't have an ugly scar slashed through it glared at Hermione.

"You came on your own," he said. Just as not-Snape had said a few minutes earlier.

She tutted. "Yup. Been over this."

"You are a reckless, irresponsible, imbecilic dolt. What the hell were you thinking?"

She sighed her relief. "Well at least I'm now sure of who you are. I don't like your new outfit, though," she said, as mildly as she could. "It's just not you."

Behind her, Blaise managed to huff a laugh. She turned to look at him, actually rather grateful for the reminder that she and Snape were not alone. She went to put the knife down. Blaise handed her wand back to her without any show of hesitation.

"Thanks," he managed. Though he probably had to force it through clenched teeth.

Hermione puffed out her cheeks and looked rueful. "Thank you. I was about out of options there."

"My mother...?"

"Safe and sound. Thanks to the professor."

Blaise breathed out his relief and closed his eyes.

Hermione turned back to Snape in his Zabini disguise. "So why the hell didn't he just hex me the moment I came through the door?"

Snape looked exasperated by the question, as he shook out the kinks from his muscles.

"Right," she said, after a moment. "Intruder in the villain's lair. Weirdly – one injured woman rather than a team of Aurors. So – does he need to scarp right away, or is the situation still contained?"

Snape said, "Would you have answered him truthfully if he had revealed himself?"
"Obviously not. But he could have Imperius'ed me," Hermione grumbled.

Blaise snorted. "He gets other people to do the big spells. The ones that might attract the attention of Improper Use."

Hermione turned back to Snape. "Did he do an Imperius to make you drink the Zabini-ade? 'Cause I've seen what that stuff looks like."

Blaise said, "My father threatened me, actually." He was looking at Snape a touch incredulously. "That seemed encouragement enough." Blaise stood straight and put his shoulders back. He cleared his throat and then said, rather formally, "I thought I'd lost every single ounce of goodwill you might ever have had for me, sir."

Snape twitched a scarred eyebrow and said, "Not every ounce."

"I, er..." Blaise glanced awkwardly at Hermione then returned his attention to Snape. "I apologise. For my behaviour in your class."

Snape nodded without speaking. Leaving it open to interpretation whether the apology had been accepted or not: now that was proper Snape behaviour.

"Without wishing to use this as an excuse, sir, the thing is – I was having a very bad day. My father had acquainted me with a recipe that morning. Another hate potion he wanted me to brew."

Snape said, "There are better outlets for anger and frustration than a potions class."

"Yes, sir."

A pause. The two men considered each other.

Snape said, "Mistakes are only justifiable when they teach. Will you learn, Mr Zabini?"

"Yes, sir." As if he wanted to demonstrate this, Blaise added, "It was my fault. That he came after you last week." He flinched at the memory. "I didn't want to brew for him anymore, but I didn't want to say no, either. Not at first."

Snape nodded slowly. "You told him the potions needed a more experienced brewer. You volunteered my services. No doubt you piled on my infamous moral ambiguity."

"I thought if I could get you here, get you close, you'd realise what he was doing and..."

"And make everything all right again?"

Blaise looked sheepish but, oddly, not humiliated. "Yes, sir," he said simply.

"Things so rarely go according to plan, do you not find?" Snape said, apparently to the world at large.

Hermione frowned. "Why did Niccolo Zabini swap faces with Professor Snape in the first place?"

Blaise shook his head tiredly and went to sit down on his camp bed.

Snape said, "He's been waiting for something. I believe his intention was to go to Italy, and very soon."

"He's emptied out the vault," Hermione said. "Probably been at it all day. He had a hired-hand in
the cellar, loading it all up in transportable trunks."

Snape nodded. "In the meantime, I should imagine his preference was for a face that might buy some time if MLE arrived. He could claim to be me, claim to have overcome the villain, avoided a hex in the face."

"No one would have doubted," Hermione said, nodding. "I didn't doubt it. It's the kind of thing you'd have done." She considered his borrowed face and then winced. "Okay. Who brewed the Polyjuice and how long is it likely to last? This is very unsettling."

"I brewed it," Blaise said from his corner. "I've been brewing the stuff for weeks. And for the last five days I've been coarse-grinding the bicorn horn. I'm surprised it's lasted the hour it has."

Hermione turned back to Snape. "Up to you, Professor," she said self-consciously. "I can Patronus Kingsley right now or we can wait until you look more like yourself."

"Get someone over here," Snape said. "The sooner that man and his cohorts are in custody, the better. And a little privacy would not go amiss for a few minutes. I'm about to put on several inches in height, and I'd prefer not to be wearing these trousers when I do so."

She nodded, hiding a smirk, and turned to head down a level and cast her Patronus.

Snape said, "Oh, Miss Granger?"

She turned back.

"You may be a reckless dolt, but that was a reasonably well thought out strategy."

Hermione tried not to look too confused. "You think so?" she replied, as neutrally as she could.

"Hmm. Convincing my pretender to behave in a way that was so out of character? That was, I will admit, borderline clever."

Ah. Now she understood. "Well. That was the plan," she pretended to agree. She glanced at Blaise, who was looking between them with a certain glint in his eye. "I saw Blaise trying to tell me something. I knew the whole thing didn't feel right."

Blaise looked pleased at that. Perhaps he was already making a mental list of all those mitigating factors that might see him avoid Azkaban. The idea seemed to distract him from his glint.

Hermione glanced at Snape. She tried to say, 'Subtle enough for you?' with her eyes. It then struck her that trying to do this was not the act of a subtle woman. Ah well.

She went downstairs to cast a Patronus. Kingsley Shacklebolt was going to be pleased. Hopefully, he'd be pleased enough that he didn't feel the need to lambast her for her independent spirit.

Once her otter was sent off with its message, she fished out her mobile phone and booted it up.

"Hi mum," she said, when her call was answered. "Just checking in. All is fine."

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Blaise was walked out of the top floor room between two Aurors. He was the last of the Zabini gang to be guided out of there, and the only one to do so on his own two feet.

Snape had become himself again. Since he never tended to give much away, Hermione hadn't
been surprised when the transition prompted little more than a grunt and a few stray flinches. (She suspected Snape had learned to downplay discomfort when he was far too young to have even known what the words meant. A heartbreaking thought.)

All that was left was for MLE to sort out the actual case and evidence. Hermione was glad it was someone else's job. She'd had enough of criminal investigations.

"Hey," she called out, as an Auror shoved Blaise in the back to encourage him down the stairs. "Gently. That man saved my life tonight."

The Auror looked back – tired, grief-stricken, angry – and managed a nod. Blaise looked back too, and she saw the desire to spit 'I don't need your help, Mudblood!' in his expression.

Beside her, Snape murmured, "Mr Zabini."

Blaise took a breath, nodded, then turned back and allowed the Aurors to lead him off downstairs.

She went to follow.

"Miss Granger," Snape said.

She looked back. They paused, gazes locked, listening to the footsteps of the Aurors clatter away down the stairs. It felt odd to suddenly be alone together.

"Usually," Snape told her, "when I am lost for words, I choose not to speak."

"And you do it very eloquently."

"I do not believe a pointed silence will cover this, however."

Hermione sighed. "I'm not sorry," she said, feeling stubborn. "And I'd do it again. Even with a useless arm."

Snape studied her for a moment, then gave a curt nod. "I was...concerned," he said. "He seemed to have fooled you."

She breathed a laugh. "For maybe thirty seconds."

"And yet you moved into his arms."

"It was the best way to get to Blaise without him seeing."

Snape gave a weary sigh. "You are..."

"I know." She rolled her eyes. "Reckless and stupid."

"All those things and more." He shook his head slowly. "Hermione, you make me glad that I still live."

Time slowed as those words settled over them. It felt like a profound moment.

"At some point," Hermione said, trying to keep her voice steady, "I'm going to kiss you for that."

"But not now," Snape said.

She wasn't sure if he was forbidding, or simply requesting. "Not now," she agreed. "Still, I'll be
counting the weeks. See you after Christmas, Severus."

His eyes narrowed at that, and for a moment they seemed to burn with a promise of his own.

She turned back to the doorway at the stop of the stairs.

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"Hermione!"

It was Harry's voice. Of course. When her name was called like that, in panic or excitement or just plain need, it was only ever going to be Harry or Ron. And this was not her first time, sitting in a hospital ward as Harry shouted for her and led with his shoulder, moving around crowds of people to make his way over.

Actually it wasn't even her second time. By now it was pretty much a habit.

St Mungo's was busy. Off-shift personnel had been brought in to deal with numerous injuries, some very serious, in the aftermath of Zabini's blasting curses. Hermione had needed to wait for medical attention, but her shoulder had eventually been repaired. It had suffered a partial separation, apparently. Whatever that meant.

"I'm fine," she said, as Harry hurtled towards her. She stood up in time to meet his embrace, then braced for impact as Ron followed along. Their usual post-traumatic three-way hug ensued.

"Um – are we staying like this all night?" she asked after a few seconds.

They pulled apart. Both Harry and Ron checked her over, looking for injuries. (At least, that was what she hoped they were doing.)

"So," she said brightly. "How was Dorset?"

Ron snorted. "Seriously? You get blown up, still manage to track the villain to his lair and then rescue a pair of Slytherins literally single-handed, because, you know..."

"Only one working hand," Harry said.

"Yeah, one working hand."

"Yes, yes, I was there. I don't need the summary," Hermione grumbled.

"And after all that you want to know how Harry and I spent the evening in a nice farmhouse with our thumbs up our arses?" Ron finished.

"I hope sincerely you've washed your hands since," she said primly.

Harry said, "So Zabini, he'd switched with Snape? Polyjuice?"

"Yes. He was looking for a way to get out of the country without attracting attention."

"Right, 'cause Snape never attracts attention," Harry scoffed.

Ron said, "He doesn't unless he wants to. Lurk-age. That's where his talents lie."

"It definitely is not in dance moves," Hermione said solemnly. "Jiggly-feet is not a good look on him."
Harry groaned. "Oh, I want all the details. Right now. Can we take you home?"

Hermione glanced at her watch. "I'm perfectly capable of seeing myself home, but yes. I have been excused until my briefing with MLE tomorrow."

She smiled at her friends, took a step towards the ward's exit, and almost fell over. Her knees were like jelly. She had been avoiding acknowledging her fatigue.

"Bollocks," she said.

Harry took one arm. Ron took the other. Together they marched her out of the ward.

"You can see us home, then," Harry said.

"Fine," she agreed. Her legs tried to move as if she was walking, but didn't really pull it off. Fortunately, her weight was being shared by the broad shoulders of her two best friends, and her feet didn't quite touch the floor anyway.

"Yes. Thank Merlin you're here," Ron added.

"Very funny."

"Actually I wasn't being funny."

She glanced at him. He gave her his warmest and most relieved Ron-smile. Harry's arm squeezed briefly.

She got the message. And they were right. It was time to stop being such a stubborn idiot when it came to accepting help.

Hermione let the boys take her home.

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Epilogue - Wrapping Up

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I wonder if the snow loves the trees and fields, that it kisses them so gently? 
And then it covers them up snug, you know, with a white quilt; 
and perhaps it says, 'Go to sleep, darlings, till the summer comes again.'"

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* 1871

Excerpts from the *Daily Prophet*, Friday 18th December 1998

Front page headline:

WIDOW-MAKER GETS LIFE

Yesterday evening the Wizengamot, by unanimous verdict, found so-called 'Widow-Maker' Niccolo Zabini guilty on sixteen counts of murder, one count of wanton destruction of sentient property, nine counts of voluntary manslaughter, and a further twenty-three serious criminal charges.

In a move that has shocked many traditionalists, the Wizengamot allowed the Prosecutor to submit evidence of a Muggle's death at the hands of a wizard on an explicit charge of murder. Hitherto, such incidents have been presented as infringements of the International Statute of Secrecy.

 Appearing alongside Zabini were his co-conspirators, most notably his own son (see lower article) and the disgraced former Deputy Head of Improper Use of Magic, Jasmine Churlish. Churlish received a two year prison sentence, reduced from her original sentence of five years following submission of Pensieve evidence.

Since Zabini came to trial, the country has been gripped by the catalogue of his crimes. Followers of the story will remember how a splash of continental glamour was added to the early proceedings, thanks to evidence presented by the Contessa Zabini, Elettra D'Agostino. Niccolo Zabini's older sister described how her brother's childhood was idyllic, and Zabini himself was a model son and brother until, in 1963, the Italian Ministry voted to modernise the country's inheritance law and allow titles to pass to female children.

Thus supplanted, Zabini received the lesser title of Nobile, though he remained heir to a handsome manor house and several hundred acres of parkland and forest. Outraged by the manner in which he perceived his birthright had been denied to him, the seventeen year old Zabini made a vicious attempt to poison both his sister and his father, Conte Antonio Zabini, a man who had for years been a leading advocate for equal inheritance rights.

The attempt fortunately failed due to Zabini's poor brewing skills. As Zabini was still a minor in the eyes of the law, and the family wished to protect their well-respected and scandal-free reputation, Zabini was quietly stripped of his inheritance and encouraged to move abroad. His influential family procured for him an apprenticeship with Gringotts and considered the matter dealt with.

Following the death of the Conte and the succession of Zabini's sister in the early nineteen-
seventies, Zabini successfully campaigned to win the forgiveness of his family, professing deep sorrow for his youthful ‘moment of madness’.

It seems that Niccolo Zabini had allowed his thirst for acquisition and revenge to take the form of a much longer game, however. Another early incident which demonstrated his disregard for the law stretches back to 1968, when a priceless artefact known as a Quickstep stone – a reusable Portkey with a blood-soaked history – was stolen from the International Artefacts Archive in Alexandria. For thirty years, the item on display there has been no more than an accurate replica.

In 1982, Zabini fabricated his own death after deliberately triggering an avalanche in the Italian Alps: an event that killed several Muggles. Leaving his wife without a husband and his infant son without a father, Zabini established a secret life for himself in Muggle society. It was during this time that he travelled to the Caribbean island of Grenada and implemented the next part of his plan, the details of which were analysed in Tuesday’s edition of the Prophet.

More recently Zabini has obsessed over the considerable wealth of his former wife and son. A plot to arrange the death of Muggle businessman Philip Richmond, ensure an Azkaban life sentence for his ex-wife Jossinia Trelore and, perhaps most obscene of all, mutilate his own son's magical ability had observers in Courtroom Ten transfixed as the details emerged.

All through the Prosecutor's examination, Zabini refused to speak a single word. The only time the court heard the voice of this killer was, surprisingly, in response to a throwaway question born mainly of frustration: "Why this convoluted plan, Mr Zabini? Potions? Azkaban? Why not just kill your victims? You're clearly ruthless enough!" To which Zabini replied, "Kill Jossinia? Oh, but my son would never have forgiven me!" Even as the public galleries wondered whether this showed a glimmer of humanity, Zabini added, "I wanted his money, not his rage."

We now know, thanks to the diligent work of the MLE investigation team, that Zabini could have raided his wife's vault any time he liked. Yet Niccolo Zabini, in both Wizarding and Muggle societies, had a lavish income of his own courtesy of an illicitly obtained property empire within the Diagon shopping and business district. Zabini was also the founder of the GalloLoans Company, and owned a beautiful Dorset home set within several acres.

Niccolo Zabini passed no further comment during his trial, nor at his sentencing. The Contessa Zabini has offered a formal apology to the British Ministry for her family’s part in failing to predict the crimes her brother would go on to commit on British soil. […]

Lower front page headline:

BLAISE ZABINI SPARED AZKABAN

Blaise Zabini has escaped a prison sentence after standing trial for his part in his murderous father's criminal activities. While there will be few who feel sympathetic towards a young man who systematically poisoned his own mother, opinion in the public galleries was quietly supportive of this outcome.

Acclaimed war hero Severus Snape, presenting arguments for the defendant, painted a vivid picture of the manner in which Blaise Zabini’s father returned to his son's life after a sixteen year absence. Professor Snape spoke eloquently of Niccolo Zabini’s strategy for control: encouraging his 'pawns' to commit minor infractions and then using fear of discovery to force them into greater misdeeds.
The court was captivated as Professor Snape teased out the details of Blaise Zabini's ordeal. When the early plots to sabotage the romance between Jossinia Trelore and Philip Richmond failed, each new idea suggested by Blaise's father ramped up the harm. Upon being given a recipe scrawled on parchment without title or description, however, Blaise Zabini hesitated. He recognised the structure of a hate potion, and knew the cited ingredients indicated a powerful concoction. Pressing his father on the details revealed the potion's source: a banned dark text.

Blaise refused to brew the potion: testimony that was independently confirmed by Zabini's cohort, Gustiver Walsh. Unwilling to take 'no' for an answer, Niccolo Zabini attempted to change his son's attitude. When all other options failed, Zabini gave up the pretence of a cordial relationship and held his son captive at a Muggle address.

The most shocking moment of the exchange was doubtless the revelation that Blaise Zabini had been subjected to an Imperius curse by his father in order to continue brewing these injurious concoctions. Having been threatened with this measure on several occasions, however, Blaise had cleverly prepared for it. He sabotaged his stocks of ingredients, thus ensuring that though he might be forced to brew the dark potion, the results would be unusable. This act of defiance was considered pivotal in the Wizengamot's eventual decision to spare Blaise Zabini a custodial sentence.

Professor Snape concluded his persuasive defence of his former student's actions thus: "Witches and wizards of the Wizengamot, in the last few months Blaise Zabini has rejoiced in the miraculous return of a father, only for that father to betray him. His admitted mistakes led to an ordeal in which he demonstrated the wit and courage necessary to prevent much greater harm. Imprisoning this young man would serve no one. It would also cause distress to one of the victims of Niccolo Zabini's litany of harm: Blaise's own mother." Professor Snape paused then, and took in the entire courtroom. "Eighteen year olds make mistakes," he said. "Sometimes very bad ones. No one will ever punish Blaise for what he did more than he will himself. Believe me – I am in a position to understand this all too well."

Blaise Zabini was convicted on seven counts of Administering a Malicious Substance. He was also found guilty of infringing the International Statute of Secrecy and failing to report a crime. His sentence has been suspended for a probationary period of three years.

Page 8, upper right quadrant:

MINISTRY ANNOUNCES REVIEW OF CRIMINAL PROPERTY LAW

[...] based on what has become known colloquially as the 'Azkaban Slip': a legal loophole by which a convicted prisoner's property is transferred by deed of gift to their proposed heir. It is designed to prevent automatic seizure by the Ministry of the prisoner's property, should the prisoner die mid-sentence.

Zabini's attempt to exploit the 'Azkaban Slip' to gain access to both his wife's and his son's separate fortunes created some discussion regarding the current state of the law. There is a growing sense that denying prisoners access to a document as important as a will is unjust. Minister Shacklebolt himself, at his appearance before the press following his recent landslide election, was asked about his thoughts on this matter.

"I believe we must make clear the difference between property that has been acquired through criminal activity, and property that is owned legally. The former, I would suggest, should be forfeited by any criminal successfully convicted of wrongdoing. The latter, however, is nothing to
do with the Ministry."

When pressed on how this distinction might apply to situations such as the Ministry's ongoing attempt to seize control of the abandoned Malfoy Manor, Minister Shacklebolt replied that until the scene of a crime has been thoroughly investigated and then declared clear of evidence, Magical Law Enforcement should have sole access.

It remains to be seen whether this means that Malfoy Manor will eventually be returned, intact, to its current owner, Draco Malfoy. [...]

Page 12, lower left quadrant:

EXPLOSION SITE REOPENS

343 Diagon Alley South has finally reopened following weeks of accelerated rebuilding.

Much discussion has taken place regarding the best way to use this location in order to recognise the officers of MLE who sadly lost their lives there in October. In talks chaired by newly-elected Minister Shacklebolt himself, a solution was agreed upon by all parties invited to contribute. The building that occupies the former site of the GalloLoans Company will now house a new impartial advice service, accessible to all. Ministry-trained consultants will be available to provide financial, business, legal and even personal advice to any witch or wizard in need, with absolute discretion mandated and at no cost to the petitioner. A novel idea indeed!

An anonymous source present during the talks indicated that the initial idea came from Hermione Granger: a young woman almost as famous now for her part in apprehending the villainous Niccolo Zabini as she is for her friendship with Harry Potter.

The new service has already procured funding for the next ten years. With the consent of the bereaved families, a plaque has been installed above the door of the newly built 'Wizarding Advice Bureau', commemorating the service of those five officers who were killed.

Page 17, upper left quadrant:

SHAKE-UP AT ST MUNGO'S

In the wake of revelations made during the trial of Gustiver Walsh, St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries has issued the following statement:

"St Mungo's Hospital would like to announce that Mdm Amanda Crossley, a board member for the last twenty-nine years, has voluntarily stepped down from her position. We thank her for her service and wish her well in future endeavours."

The hospital declined to comment further, though a respected source in a senior position informed the Prophet that Mdm Crossley's departure was far from voluntary and, indeed, was notably acrimonious. A vote of no-confidence in Crossley's propriety had been tabled, and passed with a significant majority.

Mdm Crossley's role in preventing a timely investigation into Gustiver Walsh's illicit activities at the hospital was unwelcome publicity for St Mungo's during the recent trial coverage.
The vacant seat on the board is to be filled by Senior Healer Gloria Montague, whose efforts alongside her herbologist son Joseph Montague alerted Hermione Granger to the thefts at the hospital, and led directly to the successful apprehension of Niccolo Zabini.

Mdm Crossley was unavailable for comment when contacted.

Page 24, upper left quadrant:

BRAMBLE TEXT TOPS BESTSELLERS

Reclusive potioneer Roksana Bramble's latest book, *The Art of Experimentation*, has topped the monthly bestsellers' list at Flourish and Blotts: a feat never before achieved by an academic text.

Mr C. Gadfly, the bookshop's manager, informed the Prophet: "The book has been selling very well since its publication in the demographic you might expect: older students, educators and those involved in all facets of the potions business. Of course, the additional publicity garnered during the recent trial hasn't hurt at all. People are intrigued by the connection with Professor Snape, the author of the book's foreword, and the fact that Mrs Trelore and her Muggle companion took refuge with Mistress Bramble when they were in such terrible danger."

Mistress Bramble declined the offer of an interview when approached, though she has issued a written statement:

"The sales of my recent book are naturally very gratifying. I will, however, defer judgement on the success, or otherwise, of 'The Art of Experimentation' until I have evidence of its true legacy: the inspiration and assistance it might offer to the next generation of potions professionals."

~*~

The wintry air at Upper Flagley stung Hermione's cheeks. The sky overhead was white with snow clouds. Wood smoke drifted on the air from the chimneys of Mistress Bramble's house.

Hermione waited outside the barn conversion in which Bramble's potions research business was housed. For the several minutes since she had arrived she'd been doing her best not to stare at a specific place on the pathway between barn and house: the place where, ten weeks ago, she and Snape had ended a shouting match by kissing each other breathless.

This was the first time she'd been back here since that night. Until today she'd successfully reined in her libidinous impulses, and concentrated instead on getting to the end of her *Lost Seventh* Potions course. Snape had made it easier; in recent weeks he'd barely acknowledged her presence in his classroom beyond the occasional unimpressed grunt, a bite or two of sarcasm, and of course the necessary marking.

(Her final tally on the brewing practicals stood at twelve Competents and eighteen Adequates. This had required only three early morning starts on a Friday. Indeed, she'd requested the final morning session in order to improve on an already solid Adequate: a feat she had achieved. When Snape had muttered, "Ridiculous over-achiever," in deliberate earshot, it was the closest they'd come to conversation in two months.)

And now, here she was: North Yorkshire. On a snow-threatened December afternoon, preparing for the final lecture of her *Lost Seventh* course. It was to be delivered by guest-speaker Roksana Bramble, so Hermione had brought along her copy of *The Art of Experimentation*. Hopefully Bramble had forgiven her for the unfortunate scene last October, because Hermione was keen to
get the book signed. In the last month her copy had become one of her very favourite possessions. The woman was brilliant.

Hermione's fellow students waited with her. Three of them had their noses buried in the Daily Prophet as they read all the gory details on Niccolo Zabini's decades of murder, manipulation and acquisition. Hermione's own part in the investigation and trial had exhausted her curiosity, however. She didn't need to know anything more about the harm Zabini had caused.

A distant door opened: the front door of the house, the one with the Hufflepuff door knocker. Snape preceded a veiled Mistress Bramble outside. The two walked together towards the barn, their hands tucked into their sleeves against the chill. Snape's head was bowed slightly to listen to whatever Bramble was saying.

Hermione swallowed and looked away. The two of them looked right together, truth be told. Bramble might have turned Snape down once, but that information had been current a whole ten weeks earlier. A lot could have happened in that time, and as far as she knew, Snape remained a house guest.

"Hey, Hermione," Terry said as he read the newspaper over Michael's shoulder, "can I ask you something?"

"You can ask," she said, and added silently to herself, 'I will either answer or I will not,' because she'd got into the habit of revisiting her exchanges with Snape. Just to keep herself company during this period of abstinence.

"Zabini. Our Zabini, I mean, the slightly less psychotic one. Did he really help out at the end as much as you said?"

Hermione looked steadily at Terry. "You're suggesting I might have been economical with the truth when appearing in front of the Wizengamot?"

Terry startled. "Oh! No, course not. Just, you know, it doesn't sound like Zabini. Playing the hero."

"Heroes sometimes come in the oddest packages," she said.

Michael said, "You're not kidding. Hermione Granger takes on the criminal mastermind in the heart of his lair, and with a dislocated shoulder. All five foot four of her."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "One – I had quite a bit of help. Two – my shoulder was not dislocated, it had suffered a partial separation."

"Oh, well–"

"And three – I am five foot five, and I'll thank you not to forget it."

She watched Michael chuckle, shaking his head, and was surprised to hear Theo Nott give one of his rare snorts of amusement over to her right.

Terry said, "I take it Zabini hasn't had the good grace to say thanks for saving his arse, eh?"

Hermione shrugged. "I haven't seen him to speak to. Can't imagine he'll want to change that, any time soon."

"He's probably alive because of you."
"Maybe. I'm probably alive because of him, too. I think it best that we both quietly call it quits and go back to ignoring each other."

And that was two snorts from Theo in one day. Hermione was on a roll.

"Is everyone here?" Snape drew up with Mistress Bramble and looked around, as though he hadn't already accounted for the six students he was expecting. Then the professor did a theatrical double take. "Ah! Miss Bulstrode. I thought we were one too many. I'm not sure why you're here."

Bulstrode blinked at Snape. "Um," she managed.

"Perhaps you did not receive the owl I sent this morning?" At Bulstrode's slack-jawed confusion, Snape cast his gaze heavenwards in search, apparently, of patience. "Miss Bulstrode, you have been expelled from my Lost Seventh course. Please remove yourself from Mistress Bramble's private property."

Everyone else went still as they waited to see what Bulstrode would do. (Everyone except Bramble, who tut-tutted and muttered something about a 'dramatic so-and-so' and proceeded to make for the main doors into the barn conversion.)

Bulstrode finally spluttered out a demand for Snape's reasons.

"Plagiarism," he said. "Obviously."

"Pl...what?"

"Plagiarism, Miss Bulstrode. The theft of intellectual property."

"Theft? What am I supposed to have stolen?" she demanded.

"Essays, Miss Bulstrode! You have represented another's work as your own. This has been apparent in every single piece of written coursework you have submitted to me in the last three months. Upon reviewing everything you submitted to Professor Slughorn during your year six studies, the strategy is clearly not a recent one for you."

"Oh, that," she said. Then, almost as an afterthought, she thrust her shoulders back and added, "Um, you've no proof!"

Over to her right, Hermione noticed Draco rolling his eyes at this spectacular incompetence from a former housemate.

"Admittedly," Snape said, "you took the trouble to copy out your cousin's original essays in your own hand, for my course. You didn't extend the same courtesy to Professor Hobday, however. He was struck by the difference in handwriting when you submitted your end-of-term test paper."

Bulstrode was developing a head of steam. "He had no right to spring that test on us!"

"Oh, indeed, a teacher assessing the progress of his students – what nerve! What temerity!" He sighed. "You can expect some correspondence from Professor Hobday, and a great deal more free time when term begins again. Really, Miss Bulstrode, do you believe teachers never consult with each other? Or that we are blind imbeciles when it comes to cheating?"

Bulstrode drew herself up, pink of face, and said, "If you're so smart, why did it take you fifteen weeks to work it out, then?"
Snape gave one of his micro-smiles. "It took me fifteen seconds, in fact."

Bulstrode frowned at that. "Then why didn't you say anything sooner?"

"Call it generosity of spirit. You got fifteen weeks of lessons, free and gratis. You might even have learned something during all those tedious hours you spent laboriously copying out endless essays."

Bulstrode's outrage got tangled up in her throat, and monosyllabic sounds were all that emerged.

Snape turned away. He glanced around, as if the last two minutes hadn't been rather entertaining, and gestured for his remaining students to precede him through the doors of the barn conversion.

"I need those NEWTs!" Bulstrode finally yelled at him.

Snape tossed a disinterested look over his shoulder. "I suggest you set about earning them properly, then. You are trespassing, Miss Bulstrode. Good day."

Hermione followed Michael and Terry into the barn. They entered through the main double-doors that opened out into a large space set aside for bulk deliveries. Behind her, she heard Bulstrode stalk off down the path, growling obscenities along with each stomp of her feet. Draco and Theo were a quiet presence behind her, but she'd learned to be less wary of them in the last three months. Snape's rearguard prickled at her skin, but only because the change in their location had made certain suppressed memories spring sharply into focus.

Draco sighed and said, "I ought to feel badly for her," to Theo Nott.

"Why?" Theo asked. "Girl's an idiot." He moved past Hermione to take a seat along the bench Mistress Bramble had set up for her lecture.

Draco paused. He looked at Hermione, moved closer. "I suppose we can talk, now Milly's no longer here to have her worldview shattered..." He glanced around, saw Snape refastening the double-doors against the chill, leaned in. "So go on. Tell me. Why did you do it, Granger?"

"Bulstrode? I had nothing to do with that."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "Zabini. Why did you save him?" he said, as though it hurt his facial muscles to speak so directly.

Hermione smiled. "Because I could."

"Narcissism, then. Your hero's complex."

'Sometimes he is,' her mind put in obliquely. Out loud she said, "Let's call it that, shall we? I wouldn't want to shatter your worldview."

She moved off to join Terry at the space on the bench he had saved for her, bless his misguided but hopeful little heart. Not before she heard Snape give a low murmur of amusement, however.

She'd known he was listening, of course. He always was, if he possibly could.

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A smidgeon over two hours later, Hermione emerged into the Yorkshire winter to see that the snow had begun to fall. The flakes were small and frail and drifting for now, but the sun would be going down in less than an hour. The snow would probably thicken up, enough to stick for the night.
She and her fellow students had enjoyed an informative lecture. So captivated had Mistress Bramble's audience been that even the usually awkward Terry had put aside the self-conscious way he kept trying to avert his eyes from the scarring on Bramble's hands. After the lecture, the potioneer had led them on a tour of her research facilities, conducting her question and answer session as she went.

It had been a fantastic afternoon. Hermione only wished she could stay another hour, and pepper Bramble with even more questions.

As Draco and Theo headed off down the lane towards the main road, Michael said, "Me and Terry fancy a swift one at The Candles before we Floo home. Join us, Hermione?"

Even as she racked her brain for a polite excuse, Mistress Bramble said, "My apologies, gentlemen, but I must borrow Miss Granger for a while longer."

Michael shrugged. "Come and find us after, if you like," he said. He and Terry left with a wave.

"Join me for some tea?" Bramble asked her.

"I'd be honoured," Hermione replied, entirely without hyperbole. She looked over Bramble's shoulder, but the main doors to the barn were closed and there was no sign of Snape.

"He's tidying up for me. Then he'll settle in for the evening, I expect," Bramble said. "I shouldn't think you'll see him again until your exam – which, I believe, is scheduled for next Monday?"

"That's right. Monday afternoon." The two of them began to walk along the path towards the house. "I'm sorry, I...settle in where?"

"In the flat. Where he lives."

Hermione blinked. "The flat."

"Yes."

"In the barn annexe."

"That's the one."

"He lives there."

"He does. He needed somewhere to stay while he emptied out the place he calls his 'ancestral hovel'."

"Ah. I see." Hermione frowned. "He was in your house, the last time I came."

"Hmm. The flat was providing witness-protection services." At Hermione's startled look, occasioned by an unexpected Muggle reference, Mistress Bramble explained, "Half-blood."

"Oh. I see. About the, um, the flat, I mean. Not your parentage." She tut-tutted. "I do get my words in an awful tangle sometimes."

"Things were a little fraught, last time you were here."

"That's definitely one way to put it," Hermione agreed.

"Severus told me he explained. That there is no understanding between us."
Hermione nodded, feeling odd about discussing this with a woman who was all but a stranger. "Yes, he did. Um, sort of."

Bramble huffed a laugh. "Yes, that sounds like Severus." She shook her head. "I hear he took his time about it. Clarifying things."

Hermione considered all the occasions when Snape could have made things clear and had chosen not to. "I think he felt it was not something we should discuss. He and I, I mean. As professor and student."

Bramble rolled her eyes. "Yes, well, I'm sure that's what he told himself."

They paused by the gate. Hermione looked curiously at the potions mistress. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"We all do it," Bramble said with a sigh. "Human beings. We're all terribly good at finding reasons to do the things we want to do, and excusing the things we know we shouldn't do, but do anyway."


Bramble pushed the gate open and gestured Hermione through. "Yes. I've studied the subject. Just as a layman. Quite some time ago, something happened to me that prompted a desire to understand the way the mind works a little better." She smiled tightly as Hermione looked back at her. "You'll know something about how traumatic events cast a shadow across your mental well-being, of course."

Hermione nodded slowly. "I do."

Bramble followed Hermione into the front garden and then closed the gate. "The point I'm making is that Severus had numerous reasons for failing to set your mind at ease regarding his presence here, with me. And none of those reasons were very flattering, so he did what people always do in such situations. He made up a few that sounded much, much better."

"I see."

"Do you? Good. Because forcing Severus into some genuine emotional honesty is going to be as necessary for the two of you as it is going to be difficult."

Hermione felt herself bristle. "I'm not going into this with my eyes shut," she said.

Bramble reached for the latch and pushed her front door open. "Apologies. I'm sounding patronising, and that is far from my intention. The fact of the matter is that I care very much for Severus, and I anticipate that the road ahead of you both will not be an easy one."

"I think he's worth it," Hermione said.

"Oh, he most certainly is." Bramble nodded Hermione into the house. "Now then. He's informed you of the unfortunate misstep he made regarding his friendship with me, I understand?"

Was Hermione finally to learn the details of the 'proposition' Snape had made?

"He, er, said he felt guilty about it," she ventured.

"As well he might. It isn't much of a compliment, when someone makes a pass at you as a trial
"run."

"A trial...I'm sorry, but I don't understand."

Bramble led Hermione off down the hall. "Let's have some tea, and I'll try to explain."

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"That can't be right," Hermione said, a short while later.

"No?" Bramble settled comfortably into the corner of her armchair. The warmth of her smile and the wryness of her humour had combined to make what would otherwise have been an excruciating conversation bearable. "Then let me ask you this. Do you feel you have an understanding of how romantic relationships work?"

"Um, well, I couldn't say how complete my understanding is, but I suppose I feel I have some."

"You were lucky enough to grow up in a house where your parents care for each other, I'm given to understand."

"Yes."

"And you have had romances yourself?"

"Blink and you miss it, but yes."

"Would you agree, then, that this is the main way we learn of such things? By observing and by doing?"

Hermione considered this. "That's applicable to most behaviours."

"It is." Bramble sipped at her tea; her veil had been cast aside, apparently with some relief, and her facial scars were partially covered only by her silk head-scarf. For a while, she seemed quite taken with the rim of her teacup. Then, finally: "You are aware, I take it, that Severus's home life as a child was not filled with good example?"

"I know the broad strokes. If I ever learn more, I think that should be down to Severus."

"Indubitably." The teacup seemed to provoke a weary sigh before Bramble looked up at Hermione. "And over the course of his adult life, you're aware that opportunities have been limited for him? Partly because of an emotional block instigated by himself. Partly because his circumstances did not lend themselves to the inherent vulnerability of caring for someone."

"That sounds...plausible. You've gone beyond the scope of my experience, though."

"The scope of one's experience is exactly what we are discussing. What do you usually do when you feel you need to correct an absence in your knowledge?"

"Well...I suppose I research."

"Quite so. Is it unthinkable that Severus would do the same?"

Hermione frowned. "He used you, a friend of his, as research material?"

"I'm sure the opportunity was irresistible." Bramble smiled, clearly finding the whole issue more droll than insulting. "I'd already invited him to use the flat here. I was on hand; he trusted me
more than most. And I am famously scarred and reclusive – this no doubt conjures up a woman so
desperate for a bit of attention, she'll go along with anything.” A glint in her eye. "Perhaps that's
unfair. Perhaps it is not. Either way, I appeared unencumbered by other attachments. At least, so
far as Severus understood things.”

"He was wrong about that, I take it?"

Bramble gave a sigh. "He was always on a hiding to nothing, Miss Granger. I'm forty-five years
old. I have neither the patience, the energy nor – frankly – the time to mentor someone like
Severus Snape in the ways of grown-up romance. But even if I was inclined to take on such a
project, I am at present in a very happy and decidedly monogamous relationship, and therefore am
not free to do so.” A small smirk. "For the record – even if that were not the case? Severus Snape
is, in the most fundamental way I could describe, not my type."

Hermione tried to take all this in. "Oh," she said. "I see."

"Don't get me wrong, now. I adore the man. He has a fierce and creative intelligence, a
delightfully dry sense of humour and a sense of loyalty and courage that deserve respect. He has
flaws, of course. Don't we all? But he's ready to identify them and learn better." Bramble made
an expression that could have been an arched eyebrow, had she possessed such things. "And by the
way – Severus has led me to understand that much of what I just said about him could also be said
about you."

"I don't know if that's right," Hermione said, quite honestly. "But it sounds like something worthy
of aspiration."

"Too true." Bramble shrugged a shoulder. "I probably know him better than most. He certainly
seems to think I do. Ours has been mainly an epistolary friendship down the years, but a valued
one. A long time ago, we found in each other a quietly kindred spirit, given to voluntary acts of
isolation."

Hermione considered these words. "I'm not sure whether to celebrate or commiserate," she said.

"Oh, a bit of both, but that's life, isn't it? What happened to me in Orkney...happened. I can't
change it. I wouldn't if I could, because my own life was not the only one affected. It's a shame
that the incident has since defined the extent to which I can deal with other people." Bramble
smiled at Hermione. "You're in the minority, Miss Granger. Few are the people who meet me,
look me over, accept my appearance and proceed henceforth to converse with me quite normally,
person to person. Direct eye contact that does not constantly wander, expressions that do not flinch
– these are rarities in my life."

"You bear that burden with grace," Hermione said.

"You're kind to say so. Sometimes I do; sometimes I don't. You are no stranger to navigating the
burdensome reactions of others, of course. But we're getting away from the subject in hand."

Bramble sipped her tea. "After the furore over his trial, my correspondence with Severus resumed.
He needed a place of privacy. I had the space."

"I'm glad," Hermione murmured.

Bramble gave her the smallest look of amused doubt: just a glimmer in those expressive eyes.

"No, I am," Hermione insisted. "I can be glad Severus has a good friend like you to help out. And,
simultaneously, I can wallow in insecurities about that friend having more to offer than I have."
She sniffed. "I'm multifaceted like that."

Bramble snorted a laugh. "Quite right too." She set her cup down. "I'd be giving you the wrong impression if I told you Severus and I spend long, talkative evenings together. But we talk sometimes. Sometimes he assists with work. Back in late August we were on the edge of Bilsdale, ingredient gathering. Pre-dawn, it was. And he said to me, quite out the blue, 'Roksana, it's the oddest thing but it turns out I am not dead.'"

Hermione shifted in her chair. "Unlike Severus, to state the obvious."

"That's just it, though. At that point the comment wasn't obvious. Not to him. Anyway, the conversation took a few twists and turns over the days that followed, and no, I'm not going to embarrass you with the details because they're private. But the upshot is – Severus is a man who is painfully aware of his inexperience in the area of committed romantic relationships. He saw me as a way to correct this."

"How can you be sure you were just a – how did you put it? 'A trial run'?' Hermione hated herself for saying this, but intellectual honesty always had to be served. "Maybe he saw the potential for more between you."

"I know, because I called him on it and he admitted it plainly."

"Oh." Hermione pinched her lips hard and glanced at the parlour window. "Does he know you're telling me all this?"

"Of course he does. I'm not in the business of betraying personal confidences without permission." Bramble looked rueful. "This conversation you and I are having, right now – Severus considers it his comeuppance. For a misguided attempt to seduce me, and an equally misguided attempt to use the hint of a rival to assess the depth of your feelings."

Hermione thought about this. She finished her tea and used the delay this bought her to try to formulate a careful reply. She set her cup and saucer down, quite delicately, and then sat back. Her hands were folded with studied poise. She looked across the low table at Roksana Bramble, who waited patiently for a response.

Hermione cleared her throat. "If you like, I'll hold him steady while you kick him in the balls."

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Mistress Bramble signed Hermione's book with a thoughtful, personal message of encouragement. They talked for a while about Bramble's philosophy regarding patents. The potioneer showed genuine interest in an Arithmantic matrix Hermione was developing in an attempt to prove a consistent, perhaps even predictable, relationship between brewing variables and their effect on recipes. Bramble asked some interesting and constructive questions.

Finally, Roksana Bramble offered Hermione a part-time job beginning in the new year. (Hermione hadn't realised she was being interviewed. Perhaps Mistress Bramble hadn't realised this either.)

"You're no doubt very useful to the Muggle-Worthy Excuse lot," Bramble said, "but my goodness, they're no use to you at all. Come and be an egghead here for a while. You might find you like it."

At a little after five o'clock in the evening, the sun was already going down. Hermione stepped outside into the crunch of new-fallen snow. Over to the right, the barn conversion showed a warm light upstairs, in the flat where Hermione had heard Jossinia Trelore say that love demanded sacrifice.
Such bollocks. Love required patience and consideration and good-humour. Hermione might well be a relatively inexperienced nineteen year old, but she thought that this was a sensible starting place.

Not, of course, that she was allowed to use the word...

The door closed behind her. Hermione walked up the path, smiling as thickening snowfall attempted to colonise her eyelashes. She let herself through the front garden gate and then took the time to hoist up her coat collar against the cold air.

"Hermione," Snape said quietly.

She jumped. Pleasingly, she managed not to yelp, though she needed a couple of breaths before she said, "Are you trying to frighten me to death?"

Snape gave her a steady look. "It's never worked in the past."

"Too bad, then. On the day I finally irritate you beyond your tolerance levels, you'll have to jolly well brain me with a hammer, like normal people."

He did the exhale that meant he was amused. Hermione wondered whether being able to interpret his breaths meant that she had it very bad indeed. She looked him over. His overcoat was buttoned and a scarf was tucked around his neck, hiding his scars. He'd meant to come out here and lurk, then.

"Mistress Bramble didn't think I'd be seeing you until Monday," she said.

"Naturally. To seek you out would demonstrate a foolish disregard for boundaries." He looked disapproving. "That doesn't sound like me at all."

"Perhaps you're not you, then." Hermione stepped in closer and inhaled theatrically through her nose. "How odd. No burnt hair."

He gave her the briefest twitch of his lips, then indicated the lane. "May I walk you to the road?"

"If you like," she said.

They strolled slowly, eking out the time. The gathering dark and the thickening snow felt a bit like a screen between them and the rest of the world. A privacy curtain.

"I suppose," Hermione said, when it seemed that Snape was not going to speak, "that it would be absurd for me to hope that completing the written paper next week will signal an end to this wretched distance between us."

"Indeed." Snape nodded. "You may lack subtlety on occasion, but you are rarely absurd. Fortunately for us both."

"Hmm. Lucky, lucky us," she said gloomily.

He was right, though. If they were going to do this, it would have to happen organically and at a careful pace. They were still in the process of recovering from traumas, some recent, some less so. This was a complicated, transitional time for them too: she and Snape were both working out what the coming years might hold for them. Everything else besides, whatever was to happen between them should probably develop with a sense of timing that others – strangers, people who didn't know them and shouldn't matter but damn well did because no man was an island – might consider
acceptable. Things were going to be tricky enough without the additional need to deal with sly
insinuations and outraged disgust.

Of course, that was the rational, sensible part of her brain talking. The more hormonal, lascivious
part was also busily engaged, considering how far she might get if she tugged Snape close and
began to explain, in unexpurgated detail, the finer points of the erotic dream she'd had earlier that
week, in which he had very definitely taken a starring role...

Hermione took a deep breath and shook the idea away.

As slowly as they were walking, they were getting closer to the junction. Contemplative silence
was not doing it for her. "I'm very glad I've had the chance to talk to Mistress Bramble," she said.

He nodded, but made no reference to the events that had prompted Hermione's conversation with
the potions mistress. Which was very Snape, of course. In giving Bramble permission to explain,
he had already made the most overt and genuine apology that he could. Hermione knew by now
that the best way she had to acknowledge this was to refrain from humiliating him further on the
subject.

"Roksana did not invite you to use her name?" he asked.

"She did. Then she offered me a job. My mind did its usual recoil in the face of authority. She's
back to being Mistress Bramble, now."

Snape turned to look at her. "That rather begs the question of how and when my own authority
failed."

"It never did. But I separated you out. I told you, the night you sort of came to my party – we
aren't monochrome, you and me. You're my professor. You're a fellow Order member. We've
saved each other's life a couple of times; that seems to complicate things. And..." She shot him a
sideways look. "Okay, this probably won't come as news – I'm attracted to you. Perhaps even
enamoured of you."

Snape hummed. He didn't offer a more coherent response, though.

"Having said all that, first and foremost you're my friend," Hermione decided. "I think that's the
most defining thing, right at this moment."

They were nearly at the road. Snape inhaled deeply. "I find I look forward to resuming
our...friendship."

"I do too," she said. "This last ten weeks I've missed nothing more than I've missed talking to
you."

"Speaking of which," he said. They paused, tucked inside the junction. The snow was making the
landscape around them soft-lined and pristine. Snape dug in his coat pocket and then handed
Hermione a small phial.

"What's this?" she asked.

"You're the advanced student of potions. You tell me."

She shot him a mock-glare, but dutifully examined the phial. In the gathering dark, under a sky
blanketed by snow, there was insufficient light to perceive colour or sheen. She unstoppered the
phial and breathed the scent in. It was a flat, matt kind of fragrance, unprepossessing, like a dull
but nutritious meal. But out of the flatness rose the hint of crisp acidity. A fruit – a berry? – with undertones of something sharp and leathery...

"Boom berries," she said. "Sopophorous beans..." Her brain caught up with her sense of smell, which always meandered into unexpected cul-de-sacs as it tried to tell her what a scent felt and looked like, as well as its technical notes. "Ah. Eve's Drops?"

There was a lengthy pause. She'd learned when to wait, though.

Snape cleared his throat. "It occurred to me that there are things we should discuss."

"Yes."

"About the way forward."

"I'm all for being forward," Hermione agreed.

Snape rolled his eyes at the comment. "We should probably not be seen together in any social setting. Not for a while."

"Perhaps not. But there are non-social settings that are perfectly respectable."

He cleared his throat again. "It also occurred to me that our discussions might be easier with some...separation."

Hermione tilted her head as she considered his increasingly snow-bound form. "Are you worried about having to bear witness to the horror that is my face? Or merely concerned that I cannot be trusted to keep my hands to myself?"

"And thus you prove my instinct is correct."

"What?"

He glared, briefly. "You are being provocative. What you expect to provoke in the middle of a blizzard is beyond me, but nonetheless you are infusing an innocuous conversation with innuendo."

"Innocuous? I'm offended. You'll be calling me banal next."

"And still you provoke me."

She gave a tiny smile. "Is it working?"

"It is." He stretched his shoulders and looked up at the falling snow.

She'd pushed far enough. Perhaps too far, but she'd missed him, and those weeks of constantly smothering her longing had taken their toll. "Eve's Drops, then. Okay."

"If I have presumed too far..." He stopped. His chin dropped. A suspended moment, then he met her eyes again. "There will be things I misjudge. Advise me of them." His formality faltered and his voice became no more than a whisper. "Please."

Academically, his attitude was spot on. Still, they were not researching glasswing beetles here; this was life. This was messy and subjective and prone to their all-too-human foibles. Hermione could see that these words were costing him, because admissions of ignorance felt too much like admissions of weakness, and Snape's background had not allowed for weakness. Not in him. Not ever.
The only thing she could offer was an equal footing. "Likewise," she said.

His inhale was broken by a hitch. She decided to put it down to the cold air. Snape stepped close to her, brushed aside a heavy curl that had grown damp with melting snow, then leaned down to press his lips to her forehead.

His kiss lingered. Though it was chaste, he was giving her a run for her money when it came to being provocative. Her knees gave an encouraging shiver.

After he'd moved back, she lifted the phial. "When?"

"We should delay until after Tuesday next week. At that point I will no longer have any jurisdiction over the marking of your paper."

Hermione nodded. His values were his own, and they were immutable. "Wednesday, then. What time?"

"Whenever we can both claim some privacy."

Wednesday was curry night. "Late evening. Ten o'clock."

He nodded. "As you suggest."

Hermione offered a wan smile. "I should go."

"Safe Apparition."

She turned away, tucking her phial into her pocket. Then she turned back. "Did I get offered a job because of you?"

"I doubt it. I noticed a glint in Roksana's eye when you were talking about researching the magical signature of potions."

"Yes, well, we obviously need to come up with a way to discern whether someone is acting under the influence of a hate potion!"

"Undoubtedly. Shall we do that right now, here in the snow?"

"I'd rather just kiss y--"

"Enough," he said quietly. "There will be time."

She breathed her frustration out. "Just so long as you realise that when you start murmuring straight into my ear, in the privacy of my bedroom, I'm going to be about as functional as a wet noodle."

Snape regarded her a moment longer, then he blinked the snow from his eyelashes. "An interesting prospect," he said. "Go home before you freeze."

He turned his back and was walking away before she could think of any means to extend their reunion further.

No matter. She focused, cast and wrenched herself back to Islington. The sky was lighter here. There was no snow in the air. She cloaked and then dashed around to the front door, brushing displaced snowflakes from her coat.
Once sequestered in her bedroom, she placed the phial of potion in the top drawer of her chest. "Talk to you soon," she whispered. Then she closed the drawer and turned her back on all the delicious ideas it wanted her to entertain.

She'd waited ten weeks already. Five more days wasn't going to kill her.

Chapter End Notes

I'd like to take one final opportunity to acknowledge again the invaluable input DHW provided during the development of this story. She made herself available for lengthy email conversations investigating every imaginable element of plot and sub-plot, was my go-to for canon detail when my own knowledge of the novels failed me, and of course she beta-read and compiled useful feedback for not just one draft of this lengthy story, but two. The time and effort she has invested, helping me with this project, deserves huge recognition.

She's also an excellent writer in her own right, across numerous fandoms. Go and check out her works - you'll find something wonderful, I guarantee it.

Without wishing to make this sound like Oscars night...

I'd also like to offer a big thank-you to the group of readers who have tagged along with me as I have posted this story over recent weeks. Your enthusiasm for, and engagement with, the story have made me feel very appreciated. I'm grateful to all who took the time to write.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!