Following the Final Battle, Hermione has helped Severus to survive and to escape from Wizarding Britain, but what now? How will their lives change over the years?

Notes

This is a follow-up to my story Deciding to Live. It may make more sense to you if you read that first, but to summarise, Hermione visited Severus at Hogwarts during that last year with information that helped him prepare a cure for Nagini's bite – after he was attacked, Hermione was able to portkey him away from the scene and use his potions to save his life.

Deciding to Live was a one-shot originally, but just for the hell of it, I tagged on 3 different endings set several years later. I had intended to leave it there (this was all an experiment anyway, to decide whether I could actually write or not!), but I've now decided to take the last scenario, which was the most in-canon anyway, and fill in the back story on what happens to Severus and Hermione in the years following the victory at Hogwarts. I've mucked around with the canon a bit, which means that the Potter and Weasley children are born slightly earlier and hence go to Hogwarts a couple of years earlier than in the book – there's reasons for that.

There will be SS/HG (pretty slow burning) and, of necessity, some HG/RW. But I've never
been a Ron-hater – just never thought they were well suited. That's not Ron's fault – he's got his qualities and also let's bear in mind that he was a teenager with lots of insecurities in the books. In my story, he gets to grow up quite a bit. Anyway, just my view, everyone's entitled to their own!

I should also warn that my Severus is pretty screwed up and there is some violence. When I posted this elsewhere, some of my reviewers were upset by that. There is also mention of drug abuse, though not graphic. I will warn you when those chapters come, but please don't read if you think you might be affected. And please try to be mature about it; with his tough background, it's not going to be all flowers and butterflies! If you don't think you can stand that, I'd rather you didn't read on. That's the main reason why I've rated it mature - that and it also has some fruity language!

I don't own any characters apart from a small group that appear halfway through; all main characters are the work of the wonderful JKR. Italics at beginning are also hers.
"Look … at … me…" he whispered.

The green eyes found the black…

Pain. That was the first thing. Pain. Hot, searing, throbbing… oh Merlin, can pain have a beat? And, as it ebbs and flows, the throb, underneath it, more pain – dull, radiating down his arms, legs…

Sticky lids, try to move… oh, and more pain. Ok, so don't move, then.

Try to swallow – oh fuck, the scorching agony radiating out, a mist, a mist of torture, red behind his eyelids…

Oh, and did he mention the pain?

That was the first thing. He schooled himself to keep still, try to absorb it. The pain came and went, throbbing at his face, his neck, radiating in waves down his body.

That was the first thing – pain.

The second thing was sound. An annoying buzzing sound. He tried to retreat from it, focus on the pain instead, but it persisted, cleared, became a pattern of sound. A cadence. Voices, saying words he couldn't understand – the words sounded distorted, wrong.

What was wrong with him? Had his brain finally cracked under the pressure?

He risked the eyelids again. The lids resisted, but he persisted in peeling them apart. Red light stabbed; he quickly closed them again.

The voices sounded louder now. He moved his head slightly, instinctively, trying to reach the words and make sense of them – oh fuck, mistake, mistake! - as the pain flooded him again.

He stilled and tried to do an inventory of his body, pain circuit by pain circuit. There was a raw fiery agony around his head and neck… he focused, concentrated, and traced it back to his throat. Every swallow, every breath, was a scraping of razor blades up and down, up and down…

The pain in the rest of his body was manageable, he realised, but his limbs felt dead, heavy, unresponsive. He was lying down somewhere hard and cold, but his head and shoulders felt constricted and slightly cushioned with some kind of material.

The voices again – coming and going, coming and going. He could make out individuals now – a high, female, rather strident voice, counterbalanced by a lower male tone. The rhythm of the voices was stuttering – fast, loud, punctuated with interruptions. An argument, then, or fear, or panic.

His body went on alert suddenly; he strained to hear properly without moving again or opening his eyes. The words still sounded wrong… and then suddenly they were right.

"… can't move him, Harry, surely you can see –"

"Dammit, you can't stay here! Don't you understand they'll be coming this way soon! Do you want
"I know, I'm not stupid! But moving him again might kill him… I don't even know if I'm doing any good… I don't know what I'm doing…"

"… the portkey…"

"- is spent, Ron, for crying out loud! And apparating, in his condition…"

"I'm not fucking deaf."

He thought it, tried to say it, but nothing came out except a strange, rasping gurgle.

The shouting stopped abruptly. He risked his eyes again, opening his sticky lids and squinting up at three white blobs among the red.

He frowned, tried to focus his eyes. *Ah, yes, better.* Now he could see three worried-looking blobs staring down at him. One of them seemed to be decidedly of the female persuasion, with the suspicion of long bushy hair. Another was assuredly of a ginger persuasion.

*The usual fucking trio. Oh joy unbounded.* Clearly, some *utter sod* had decided that it wasn't enough that he was going to die, oh no. Clearly, he had to die in the presence of the most moronic Weasley of them all. To say nothing of the Boy Who Lived – presumably still Lived, despite the odds not looking that great, as he recalled…

Recalled… *what?* Was he going mad? Was he back at school - was this just the result of yet another Longbottom explosion?

"Professor?" The voice was tentative. *Granger, of course.* "Professor, can you hear me?"

He tried to roll his eyes – a neat trick beneath gritty lids. *Of course I can, you stupid girl.*

"I don't think he can see us all that well." A lighter male voice – Weasley being surprisingly perceptive. "Have you got some eye drops in that bag?"

"Of course, why am I so stupid?" A rustling sound, and the girl's voice again. "All that blood, I didn't have time to clear it away… here you are, Se – um, Professor…"

Bliss. Pure bliss of the cold liquid dripping onto his lids, slipping under his lashes. The red fading away. He closed and opened his eyes several times, blinking away the stickiness, and then risked another look. Hmm, still blurry. He narrowed his eyes; tried to focus.

The pale blurs merged together for a moment, then separated into individual faces. He could make out features now. *Yes. Definitely the Golden Trio…* There he was, usual dark hair flopping over that despised face, piercing eyes behind the glasses… Although, strangely, he didn't feel the usual pulse of burning hatred. He felt… nothing. Numb.

He moved over the boy's dirty features; noted the drawn, thin pale face as if he'd never seen it before. Now he thought about it, perhaps there *was* something of his mother in the delicacy of that nose, those cheekbones…

His eyes slid sideways, pausing briefly on the smudged freckly features of the youngest Weasley boy, long enough to note the grim set of his mouth, the hardness of his eyes – *had he grown up suddenly?* – before stopping at the face bent closest to him.
A hopeless tangle of hair, pushed back haphazardly from a small face, chalk-white, with dark shadowed brown eyes in strong contrast. The eyes moved restlessly over him, assessing in a clinical fashion, before sliding back up to meet his gaze. Their eyes locked for a moment… or hours? Granger… Hmm. Something significant, but he couldn't quite…

The pain came across him again, slightly duller now, but enough to make him close his eyes.

"Professor, are you OK? Did I do the right thing?" He felt a hand on his forehead, tentative at first. The fingers slid into his lank hair, pushing it back off his forehead, combing through it. The sensation was… He felt a desire to strain up and push his head further into the warmth; repressed it. Don't move, don't move… oh, Merlin, the pain… It flooded him; he hissed and felt the scrape of that razor blade again.

"Severus, oh Severus…” It was barely a whisper, more a warm exhalation of breath against his cheek. Her hand clenched in his hair briefly, then withdrew. He felt her move away slightly – the almost tangible warmth of her body receded.

"Ok, we need to get him away from here as quickly as possible." Her voice was brisk, harder than before. "I can't do anything else here – he needs to be moved somewhere where I can wash him and assess the injury properly. St Mungo's is out, of course – no one can know that he's been found."

"Why not? Hermione, surely if they know what Harry told us…"

"They won't believe it, Ron, you know they won't. Right now, they're just elated that… V-Voldemort's gone, but sooner or later, they'll take stock… They'll get angry and they'll be looking for scapegoats. Lots of Death Eaters to track down, and you can bet they'll count him among that bunch, whatever we say."

"There's another thing." Harry's voice was hesitant. "I haven't…told you everything that I saw. There's stuff in there… that I reckon he wouldn't want anyone to know about. It must've killed him to give them even just to me – to me, especially. They're … not nice memories… I need to think about what, and how much, I'm going to reveal."

"Did you retrieve them from the pensieve?"

"I have now, yes, so no one else'll see them."

"Right… well, there's another issue too. Sooner or later, they're going to wonder where you are, Harry. And Ron, your family will be looking. Me – I'm not so important - but Harry's going to have to give an account of himself to the Ministry. I wouldn't be surprised if Kingsley hasn't already sent someone to trace you. So, what do we do?"

There was a momentary pause. Severus risked opening his eyes again. He stared upwards and began to take in certain things. It was early morning; he could see dawn light flickering through thick branches. They were in a forest somewhere. Near Hogwarts, it must be – that portkey she gave him didn't have a vast range.

He tried to take stock. He remembered the boat house. That high, cruel voice… the serpent…

So the Boy Who Lived had been right. Nagini had attacked him. Someone had portkeyed him out and had found the potions he'd created. The girl, probably – he doubted either boy would have been quick-thinking enough.

The pain scraped across his throat again. He tried to reach up a hand to assess the damage, but his
arms were stubbornly dead. He realised he couldn't move any of his limbs – was paralysed by weakness, or perhaps the poison coursing through his veins… Fresh fear assaulted him. Was this… was he still going to die?

The teenagers seemed oblivious to his situation. He strained to see them without moving his head. Hermione seemed to dance across the edge of his vision – she was pacing nervously in front of the boys, who seemed paralysed by indecision.

It was Ron who spoke up in the end. "Grimmauld Place."

"What?" The others spoke together and Hermione continued: "Ron, are you mad? We don't know who's there, or even what condition it's in now. Is it even still standing?"

"Actually, that's not such a bad idea," Harry commented, thoughtfully. "Look, who's going to look for him there? It's probably been trashed by Yaxley, but he won't be there now – no Death Eater would dare shelter at an Order house. And no one would expect us to go anywhere near the place. Wonder if Kreacher would go back and sort things out?"

"I bet he would if you wanted him to, Harry. Come on, Hermione, you know it makes sense. We can clean it up enough – and at least it's some kind of shelter. You can find a bedroom for Snape, get him cleaned up and sorted out – whatever you need to do. It'll give us time to think about what to do next."

"How will we get there?" Hermione sounded dubious. "I don't know if apparating in his condition is a good idea – it might just finish him off."

"Ok, well, there's 2 choices. Either apparate or… perhaps we could strap him onto a broomstick or something? Or across 2 broomsticks in tandem?"

Severus wanted to get involved in the conversation; to tell them that it was a ridiculous idea, that the journey would kill him, that there was no way in hell he was going back to that cursed house… but his body wouldn't let him. He couldn't speak, he couldn't move, he could barely communicate… Was this it? Was this living?

He closed his eyes, allowing his consciousness to drift away. They would do what they would do. In the end, he just didn't care. What was the fucking point?
I meant to mention that my intention is to alternate the POV of Hermione and Severus throughout. So here Hermione takes up the story. All belongs to JKR.

Hermione was just closing the bedroom door when she heard the front door crashing shut. Balancing her tray carefully in one hand and reaching for her wand stashed in her jeans pocket, she peered cautiously over the bannister. *Old habits die hard.*

"Just me!"

She relaxed at Ron's voice. At least they no longer had the problem with Mrs Black screaming obscenities – Hermione had managed to place a strong *muffliato* around the portrait, which meant that the charming woman was peacefully unaware of anyone entering or leaving the house…even Ron, who seemed genetically incapable of closing any door quietly.

He ran up 2 flights of stairs quickly and stood on the landing just below Hermione, raising his eyebrows. She sighed.

"He's sleeping. Not much change. Unless you count the fact that he's managed to keep his soup down today. Well, so far, anyway."

He winced sympathetically, stood aside to let her pass and followed her down into the basement kitchen. Naturally, the bulk of the nursing care had fallen to Hermione, and it was far from pleasant.

Two months had passed in a blur. After relocating to Grimmauld Place, clearing up as much of the trashed house as possible, installing the Professor in one of the many bedrooms (in fact the one Hermione had shared with Ginny in the past, which at least had a nice sunny outlook) and taking stock of his injuries, Hermione had fallen into a routine largely consisting of attempting to treat the appalling neck wound, trying to find something vaguely nutritious that the man could actually stomach for long enough to get some benefit from, cleaning up the unfortunate results of failed culinary experiments, and taking the occasional cat nap in between. If it hadn't been for Kreacher, she might have slowly gone mad. It seemed unbelievable really – if anyone had told her a year ago that she would actually welcome the house elf's presence, she would have thought them crazy.

Kreacher had returned to the house as requested by Harry and had thrown himself into the job of cleaning and catering with surprising enthusiasm. It was he who was largely responsible for concocting the delicate soups with mere slivers of vegetables and meat that were all that Severus could digest.

Hermione, under no illusions as to her culinary abilities, was happy to leave that to him, but she wouldn't allow anyone else to feed or bathe the professor. Her obstinacy was borne partly of the fact that it was clear that Severus would not tolerate anyone else. He barely tolerated *her* – submitting to the cleaning and the dressing and redressing of his wound with a silent grim resignation.
The pressure was starting to show. She didn't think she'd been out of the house for days. When she did venture out, it was for brief periods and always for a specific errand – usually relating to the wound that refused to heal properly. Again and again, it broke open, supporating with previously unreleased poison, and raising the professor's temperature once more. She'd spent more nights than she cared to remember pressing cold flannels to his forehead and frantically muttering cooling charms as he thrashed and moaned in his sleep.

While he slept and seemed reasonably calm, she'd spent hours with the books in the library, trying to research snake bites and making lists of ingredients that might help, and often ventured to apothecaries to collect samples and seek advice. The trouble was, it was hard to get much useful information without giving too much away.

The reality was that Nagini was clearly no ordinary serpent. She didn't know what cure Severus had come up with, but it was clearly incomplete, and he was never rational or aware enough to tell her. She'd attempted some basic tests on the residue from the vials, but lacked the necessary knowledge to work out anything from the results.

She sighed over the cup of steaming coffee that Kreacher had pressed upon her as soon as they'd entered the kitchen. Ron leaned back in his chair across the table from her and narrowed his eyes. "You look like shit."

She raised her eyebrows slightly at the language, but felt too knackered to rise to it. Anyway, it was probably true – she felt like it, too. She leaned back in her own chair and looked up at him, unconsciously mirroring his posture. For a moment, they sat in silence, giving each other measured looks. On the surface, as relaxed as two old friends can be, but with just a slight underlying tension.

Hermione broke the silence first. "So how are things?"

He winced, looking away. "Well, Mum isn't crying quite so much now, which is something. Dad and Percy are back at the ministry now – there's a lot to sort out, as you can imagine. George… won't come out of his room, not even for meals. Just isn't interested in talking to anyone – it's like talking to him through a glass wall. He just sits there, staring at you as if he can't hear or see you."

He shook his head and sighed. "I don't know, Hermione – I can't get through to him. I've tried telling him that Fred wouldn't want him to behave this way… I don't even know if I'm saying the right things. The only one who can seem to get through to him is Bill – and I know he and Fleur are desperate to get back to their home… Ginny seems OK, but it's hard to tell with her – she seems calm, but every time Harry's been gone for a while, you can see the tension. He can't help it – Kingsley's got him involved in practically every testimony at the trials."

Hermione nodded. "He's pretty exhausted too – I saw that when he popped in last week." She took a gulp of her drink. "And… and do they ask about me?" She tried to sound casual, but failed. After all, with Ron and Harry living at The Burrow, how long would it be before one of them let something slip? The Weasleys ought to be as safe as anyone but…

Ron reached across and squeezed her hand, reassuringly. "As far as they are concerned, you are still in Australia tracking down your parents."

She sighed with relief and managed to disguise slipping her hand out from under his with a yawn that was only partly faked.

"Talking of which," Ron's eyes were dangerously shrewd, "are you going to go after them?"
"I don't know. There's so much to think about at the moment." She looked dreamily off at a distant point in the gleaming kitchen, trying to avoid the compassion in his eyes. Her parents… With shame, she realised that she hadn't given them much thought since the Final Battle. They seemed as remote from her as Mars right now.

"Look - why don't you go out for a bit? Get a bit of air or something. It's a beautiful day out there."

She was startled out of her thoughts. "Out? But Se – Snape might wake up -"

"Well, if he does, he'll have to put up with me for a bit, won't he? And, from what you tell me, he won't be able to complain – much, anyway. I'm sure we can cope."

Ron stood, briskly draining his coffee. His red hair glowed in the light coming from the fire, lit even on a warm summer day to dispel the chill of the gloomy kitchen. He stretched, rolling his shoulders back, and his t-shirt rode up, revealing a thin sliver of skin above his belt. Hermione found herself staring at the line of golden hair running down his muscled torso, her stomach tightening slightly.

"Hello? Earth to Hermione?"

She realised that Ron was frowning at her, and she glanced away quickly, her cheeks burning. "Sorry. You're right - I need to get out for some air. Think I was about to drop off or something."

She jumped of her seat and hurried up the stairs to the room that was, in theory, hers, although she had spent very little time there recently. It was a small single bedroom next door to Severus's. She changed quickly into fresh clothes, scowled at her unkempt hair, scraped the hopeless mess back into an untidy bun, and hurried out again. As she passed his door, she hesitated briefly, but resisted the temptation to peek in. There was no noise – for once he seemed to be sleeping soundly and peacefully. Don't tempt fate, she told herself, sternly and went back down the stairs.

Ron stood at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at her. She stopped on the bottom step, feeling suddenly shy.

"Thank you for this, Ron. I really need the break – and I do appreciate it."

He nodded. Against her better judgement, she stood on tiptoe and pecked his cheek.

As she stepped around him, he placed a restraining hand on her arm. "Hermione? You are OK, aren't you? It's just that you seem… I don't know… sort-of melancholy. I can't describe it properly."

"Of course I am. It's just tiredness really." She forced a smile onto her face as she looked up at him. "I won't be long – see you soon!"

She found herself almost skipping down the steps of number 12, after her usual customary check that no one was looking. Ron was right - it was a beautiful August day, with a cloudless sky. A slight breeze ruffled her fringe, and she patted the wallet in her rear jeans pocket and smiled. Today, she was going to be a Muggle – it was decided.

She ran to the nearest Tube station, pulling out her little-used Oyster card as she went, and travelled on the Underground to Hampstead Heath. She strode purposefully up Parliament Hill, ignoring the squealing children, picnicking families and kite flyers – not that there were many of those on such a still day. The Lido was so packed she could hardly see the water as she passed by. A perfect day – as perfect as any in London.
She wondered idly what she'd been doing now if she'd never received that letter when she was 11. What if she'd never heard of Hogwarts? Never met Harry or Ron? Never heard of Voldemort or horcruxes or Hallows? Would she one of those teenage girls walking hand-in-hand with their boyfriends? Celebrating her A-levels, making plans for University?

Her mood suddenly soured by memories of the last year, she sat down on a miraculously free bench at the top of the hill and stared moodily over north London, her eyes focusing on the London Eye and the silver sliver of the Thames glittering in the distance.

The reality was that she had received that letter. She had met Harry and Ron; had been thrown into all the misery and pain and fear of a war that none of these carefree people laughing in the sunshine would ever know about.

She felt… old. Old and cheerless. Even the celebrations of Voldemort's downfall had been denied her; being too busy trying to save the life of a man who didn't even care if she -

If she – what? Cared about him? She palmed her cheeks with her hands and stared off into space.

What was this ridiculous obsession with her former professor? At what point had he ceased to be a formidable and frankly unpleasant individual whose constant put-downs had made her eyes sting with unshed tears? When had he stopped being a skinny, pale, rather ugly individual in her mind?

When – precisely - was it that she had first noticed the intensity in those dark eyes, hidden behind smudges indicative of deep fatigue? When had she first spotted the delicacy in those thin hands, the grace in the way he moved around the laboratory? When had she realised that, while focused on a complicated potion, her stern professor looked suddenly years younger? When, exactly, was it that her heart started beating faster whenever those voluminous robes swished past her desk or when the smooth baritone voice was aimed in her direction… and not from mere fear?

She sighed again, kicking at a pine cone under her toes. She'd never pegged herself for the kind of girl who'd develop a stupid crush on a professor. And of all people to crush on…

She'd repressed her feelings as sternly as she could. Harry and Ron despised the man, and unburdening herself to any of the girls at school, even Ginny, would have made her the object of scorn and derision – even more of a pariah than she'd already been. She'd prided herself on her ability not to linger on his face or to attempt to draw his attention any more than normal. And each fresh barb she received from him, deliberately cruel, made her heart wither even more in her, but she'd kept her face neutral, absorbed each new pain. After all, she reasoned, Dumbledore trusted the man, and he clearly couldn't show any favour to her. She'd refused to countenance the unfortunate truth that he'd probably still be indifferent to her even if things had changed and he didn't have to pretend to dislike all Gryffindors anymore.

In fact, the more she thought about it, hers had been a typical crush – filled with daydreams that she could now see were entirely ridiculous and unlikely. She groaned with embarrassment and buried her face in her hands as she recalled some of the more romantic dreams of a deeply naïve and inexperienced 17 year old.

She'd been as shocked as anyone else at first, when Snape had killed Dumbledore…but she'd also had time to think. She'd remembered Dumbledore's ruined hand and increasing frailty. And she'd also remembered the expression on Severus's face when she and Luna had run to tell him about the Dark Mark. And the way he'd pushed them firmly to the relative safety of his office as he'd rushed to the Astronomy Tower. She'd used her logical brain to work out the facts.

Her relief at her knowledge that he had not betrayed them was unfortunately dampened by the fact
that she couldn't tell anyone. Again, her ability to keep her face neutral and not react was sorely needed as Snape's name was ground into the dirt again and again by the grieving members of the Order. It was a relief to be on the run with the boys – at least she'd had the mere matter of survival to focus on and take her mind off her tumultuous feelings.

After Harry's dream concerning Voldemort's plan to kill Severus, she'd been determined to warn him – personal feelings aside, she had felt it was the least she could do, after all he'd been forced to go through to keep them safe. Harry and Ron hadn't agreed, of course. They'd been of the opinion that Snape could take care of himself, and it would be foolish to risk their own safety further. And so she'd plotted alone.

It hadn't actually been all that hard to work out how to get into Hogwarts safely, or even to slip away from the boys for a couple of hours. It had been hard to face Severus, though – to see those sharp eyes breaking through her defences. She'd been determined not to let him see her foolish romantic thoughts, but she'd crumbled all too easily.

But then, perhaps it was just as well, she reflected. Whatever else her visit had meant to him – and she was under no illusion as to his true feelings towards her – it had, at least, been a catalyst. Before then, he'd been merely existing – walking slowly but surely towards his certain death. Whatever she'd said or done, it had at least made him think about survival. He must have wanted to live, or he wouldn't have bothered to create the potions that had ultimately saved him – would he?

And since then? She gazed down at her clenched fists, unseeing – her mind crowded with visions of a thin, ghost-white, tortured body, writhing in agony, clutching at sweaty sheets as the poison overwhelmed his system, again and again. The first week in particular had been hell. At first he'd been apparently paralysed, but just as he seemed to be regaining some movement, he was wracked by pains that made him cry out. On the fourth (or was it fifth?) day, he'd fitted so violently that his heart had stopped briefly – she'd resorted to old-fashioned CPR to bring him back. His sleep was afflicted by nightmares – he'd sit up in bed, shouting out obscenities. When she tried to restrain or calm him, he'd sometimes start pleading with someone, begging them for something - she couldn't make out what or to whom his pleas were aimed. Probably Lily, she reflected bitterly.

In his quieter, more lucid moments, he resorted to an old-fashioned politeness, as if she were still one of his students. He endured her touch when she washed the more accessible parts of him (the rest she left for when he was asleep to spare his dignity and her own embarrassment) or changed his bandages and rubbed ointment into his stubbornly infected wound. He sat up obediently, opening his mouth as she spooned in the thin watery soups, swallowing them down slowly. He was silent most of the time, apart from the occasional muttered "thank you", spoken in the rough whisper that seemed to be all he had left of his remarkable voice. He made no attempt to get himself out of bed or try any exercise to strengthen his limbs. She'd been reading up on massage techniques that might help get him moving again, but didn't quite have the nerve to suggest trying them out on him. She didn't think she could cope with the intimacy that would be required. It was bad enough having to care for his body while he was unconscious – how could she control her feelings with those dark eyes following her every move?

For it was true that she was still attracted to him – very much so. Maybe it was the enforced intimacy or the fact that she hardly had the opportunity to see any men anymore. All she knew was that, even after a year of sharing a tent with two young men who'd had no compunction about changing in front of her, she blushed like a fool whenever she touched that long lean chest with its thin line of dark hair extending down over the taut stomach and beyond.

She tried to be quick and clinical, reminding herself that the man was unconscious and vulnerable, but she couldn't help lingering over certain… parts.
Her experience with men's bodies was limited, but it was clear that, even in his weakened state, Severus had a power to turn her into a quivering hormonal mess. She wanted to... wanted to... she couldn't even visualise what she wanted to do. She only knew that her stomach was a permanent mass of knots and that the dreams that she had during her brief naps were almost violent in their intensity and left her shaking with a need that she couldn't relieve. She'd even started leering at Ron, for Merlin's sake!

She sighed deeply and looked up, frowning as she saw that the sun was much lower in the sky. Forcing herself to her feet, she started to walk over the top of the hill and down into the trees to find a quiet spot from which she could apparate. It was tempting to return via the Tube, but she'd been out far too long already.

The problem, she reflected, was that she had no woman to talk to about her feelings. Mrs Weasley would have been a perfect confidante if the object of Hermione's passion had been a young man – perhaps even Ron himself. But she couldn't possibly tell the older woman – in the first place, they still didn't know that Severus was alive, and secondly, Molly would never understand the attraction and would almost certainly counsel Hermione against it. She would be right, of course, it was entirely ridiculous... and, in her present role as nurse, completely unacceptable. She had to keep reminding herself that Severus needed her to be completely objective and efficient if he was ever to make any kind of recovery. And also that she had no evidence that he returned her feelings in any way.

What was it that he'd said that night at Hogwarts? I am flattered by your feelings... I cannot say, in all honesty, that I return them... if there were time... if I could... He'd begged her not to care for him; had warned her of the consequences.

And now that she'd viewed the memories he'd given Harry, she knew there was only one woman that Severus had ever loved. Beautiful, vibrant Lily with her smooth red hair and lively green eyes...

She knew she shouldn't have done it, but the memories were there, entrusted to her by Harry to return to Severus... and she hadn't been able to resist it. She'd found a pensieve that had been stored at Grimmauld Place for the Order's use at some point (possibly by Dumbledore himself), and she'd used it, rather guiltily, hidden away in Sirius's bedroom at the top of the house. She'd emerged several hours later, promptly vomited all over the carpet and lay shaking and crying until Kreacher had called for her, concerned that she would miss dinner.

The reality was that she had behaved - still was behaving - in a highly unethical and foolish manner. This strange attraction wasn't his fault and she shouldn't burden him with embarrassing emotions. The goal was... well, the short-term goal was to get him out of bed and on the road to recovery.

After that... well, she didn't like to contemplate.
Recovery

Chapter Notes

In which Severus and Hermione receive some worrying news... All belongs to JKR.

At precisely 06:03, Severus's eyes shot open. He couldn't tell you how he knew the time or why he always woke at that time (or 3-4 minutes either side of it), but for more than 20 years, as student, as professor, as double-agent, as a patient, he had always woken at around 06:03.

Immobile, he watched the rain drops run down the window pane in rivulets. Here in Grimmauld Place it wasn't possible to hear the outside world – the Blacks had seen to it that the inferior Muggle world would intrude as little as possible – but his bed was under the window and he spent hours staring up into the grey sky and watching the water slide down the glass. It amused him to calculate by the speed and trajectory of the rain drops just how wet and irritable Potter would be when he arrived today.

Today. He'd said there'd be a decision today.

He closed his eyes for a moment, letting his other senses take over. First – touch. He took the usual inventory – neck itching with the sticky poultice that formed Hermione's latest attempt at healing; dull ache from the wound; stiff shoulders and arms. Legs – he frowned, concentrated – maybe slightly less numb. He stretched his body with deliberate slowness, focusing on the muscles running down his thighs and calves and into his feet.

Next – smell. He could smell – almost taste - the delicious aroma of bacon. The house elf would be bustling around the basement kitchen, putting on a special effort for his absent master. Potter would get a good reception, no doubt, even though he would probably have already had a big breakfast courtesy of Molly Weasley. No matter. Since his appetite had returned (and the vomiting abated), Severus had developed a taste for a full English. His tummy rumbled in anticipation.

Next - sound. The quietness of the early morning… but not for long. Hermione's bed creaked on the other side of his bedroom wall, followed by a long, drawn-out sigh, indicating that she'd woken up. Once awake, Miss Granger did not linger long. There was another creak (turning over to get out, his mind supplied), slow footsteps (collecting towel), the creak of a door (peering out to check the bathroom wasn't occupied), a more decisive door creak (on her way to the bathroom). He'd never seen her room, but he assumed it to be fairly small, as her door always opened fairly quickly. Soft steps along the landing, past his room and into the bathroom (didn't linger by my door today).

He had seen the bathroom. One of the first things he'd insisted on once he'd regained some strength in his limbs was that he be helped to the bathroom rather than having to endure the continuing indignity of having his washing and toileting needs tended to in bed. Hermione had somehow managed to acquire a piece of equipment called a walker that was used by frail Muggles, and Severus had gained an aptitude for heaving himself along on this device. Currently, his arms were much stronger than his legs, but he managed. Small steps, Severus.

There was a thump from the bathroom (she's hitting that stiff tap to turn the shower off; cursing and reminding herself to get the house elf to look at it – but she never does remember), and the bathroom door opened a minute or so later. He was frequently impressed by the speed at which the
girl operated – she must have literally jumped in and out of the shower. He should have guessed –
many staff and students at Hogwarts could attest to the experience of almost being bowled over by
an oblivious Miss Granger, usually running full-pelt to a lesson or to the library. Not him, of course
- even Hermione in full study-panic-mode had shared the universal student survival instinct of
keeping a safe distance from Professor Snape – but he'd seen it happen to others. Even, on one
famous occasion, Dumbledore himself, who had twinkled in that familiar and intensely irritating
manner on finding himself pressed into a small space between the wall and Minerva MacGonagall
by the bushy-haired 2nd year Gryffindor.

The footsteps paused by his door again. He gritted his teeth, forcing down irritation at her
customary tentativeness. "You can come in – I am awake." The scratchy, weak tone that emerged
from his throat surprised him anew. It just didn't sound like him – he couldn't connect the voice
with his former smooth baritone.

His door opened and her face appeared around it, framed by wet hair. "How are you feeling today?
Do you have any more feeling in your legs? How does the neck feel?"

Again he had to grit his teeth at the familiar mantra. It wasn't her fault, he had to remind himself.
Fucking snake.

"Not so bad. I think that last combination might actually have made an improvement."

"Really?"

More of her appeared around the door and he realised she was dressed rather inappropriately in
nothing but a bath towel, but he made no comment, realising that in her excitement about her latest
treatment, she had clearly forgotten. Hermione was usually rather prim around him – she was not
the type to dress in skimpy tops or short skirts, although the subconscious thought (that he kept
carefully concealed below layers of Professor, Patient and 20 years older, so don't push your luck,
mate) occasionally poked its head up to point out that she'd fill them out very much better than
most teenage girls of his acquaintance.

Right now, she was leaning over him in bed, biting her lower lip in concentration as she peeled
back the bandage around his neck. He kept his eyes firmly fixed on the ceiling, trying especially
hard (OK, bad choice of word there) to ignore the fact that the towel was falling away from her
slim thighs as she leaned over.

A slightly amusing thought came to mind. Better not walk in right now, Potter. Visualising the
boy's shock helped him keep certain…reactions under control.

"Swelling is down, slightly less red. I think you're right. We need to keep incorporating the hound's
tooth leaves in the poultice, but crushing rather than chopping seems to produce the best effect -.
"

She looked up, realising he was suddenly very quiet. When she saw his eyes fixed firmly skywards,
she flushed and moved away, clutching her towel. "Um, I'm sorry… I'll just go – get dressed, and
then we'll take a proper look."

He kept his expression innocent until he heard the door close, and then chuckled quietly to himself.
It amused him that she was still more embarrassed than he by their forced intimacy. In a strange
way, he was not as bothered as he thought he would be. Once he'd got more of a grip on things and
had realised how much time had passed – and more to the point, the degree to which she'd been
caring for his body – he'd been surprised at how unconcerned he was. He hated feeling dependent
and fought to assert his ability to care for himself as far as possible, but it seemed pointless to
worry about the fact that a fairly attractive teenage girl had seen him naked and washed some
rather intimate parts on more than one occasion. It's not as if you get that much attention normally – and she wouldn't be interested in you if she didn't have to care for you, he told himself firmly. Part of him remembered that she had once implied…well, more than implied…but no. That was months ago and a lot had happened since then.

He flexed the muscles in his legs and feet again. Still fairly numb; he had to concentrate to feel the sheets against his toes. A more pressing urge presented itself rather suddenly, and he sighed and braced himself for the effort ahead. One independent trip to the bathroom could leave him exhausted for two hours afterwards. Small steps, remember, small steps...

He reached for the handles of the walker, pulled it towards the bed and managed to heave himself into a sitting position. Gritting his teeth, he forced his almost useless legs into position and pulled himself up, leaning heavily on the handles. Wonderful invention, he thought, caustically. Trust Muggles to come up with something so simple and yet so useful. In his life as a half-blood with a foot in each world, he'd often amused himself by imagining what the wizarding world would have done if asked to invent their own version of a common Muggle device – a bicycle, a computer, a CD, God forbid, a television.

These thoughts gave him the impetus he needed to shuffle across the room. As always, he struggled to find the best position to be in as regards to reaching for the door handle and opening it, but he managed. Time was he could've blasted it open with one impatient wave of wandless magic, but he'd done enough testing to realise that magic of any nature was not an option right now. Not if he wanted to avoid spending the entire day more-or-less unconscious with exhaustion.

His business done, he turned and contemplated the bath longingly. He'd give anything for a deep wallow in water heated almost to the point of pain, but there wasn't time this morning. Not if Potter was coming.

He'd said today.

He ran water in the sink instead and washed quickly, wrapping a towel around his thin hips. Hermione had thoughtfully left a tall stool in place, so he was able to perch while he shaved, observing his angular face in the mirror.

There was a lot of it to observe. While he was still unconscious, Hermione had apparently attempted to keep his hair clean, but had finally been forced to give up and ask Kreacher to cut it. The house elf had been rather enthusiastic and it was still fairly short and spiky. He couldn't decide if he liked the effect or not, but he was certainly shocked by the amount of grey that had grown back. Not that he was particularly vain about his hair – it had always been a lanky mess and he'd long ago given up on trying to improve its condition. He'd only kept it longer out of laziness.

The short tufts framed a face that not even a mother would love (well, she hadn't, had she, Severus?) – long, hawk-like nose, thin lips, black eyes in stark contrast to pale skin that was almost blue-white following weeks of enforced bed rest. When the weather had been better, Hermione had pushed his bed under the window in a feeble attempt to increase his vitamin D intake, but the watery sun that made its way through the pane even on the sunniest day made little difference.

His eyes lowered. Scrawny neck covered by the usual bandage; bony shoulders; thin arms with just a slight impression of stringy muscle running down them; hollow chest with its smattering of black hair. The usual scars. He ticked it all off automatically; too familiar with the reality to be disturbed by his lack of attractiveness.

He looked back at his eyes as he carried on scraping his chin in an automatic, efficient manner. What would he do if the news was bad? Come to that, what if the news was good? For someone
who'd spent much of the last 3 months lying on his back, he'd given very little consideration as to
his next move.

Hogwarts was certainly out. He'd never wanted to be a teacher in the first place. Admittedly, when
he was younger, it'd been the closest thing to a home that he'd ever had – and isn't that depressing,
eh, Severus? – but with more recent events, he wouldn't mind if he never saw the place again. And
it was equally unlikely that they'd want to see him again, name cleared or not. Too many people
had been the victim of his enforced harsh regime.

So… what? For the first time in his 38 years, he had the freedom to choose…and now he had no
clear idea in his mind. Research would be his preference, but who'd employ him? Who'd give him
any money – who'd buy anything that he produced?

And where could he go? He grimaced in disgust at the thought of Spinner's End. He knew of
nowhere in Wizarding Britain where he'd be welcomed, or even tolerated. Nowhere except here –
in this house so heavily associated with his old enemies at school, now owned by the son of the woman
he had betrayed. What an irony.

Of course, there was somewhere. If he could get there. If he was strong enough to do what needed
to be done. They were big 'if's.

"Severus, are you OK?" It was Hermione, outside the door.

"I'm fine," he rasped out, grabbing a towel to rub his face.

She didn't linger. In many ways, she was the perfect nurse – there when needed, but sensitive
enough to recognise the need to back off and leave him some space. By the time he'd stumbled
back to his bedroom, she'd changed the bed and refreshed the room by opening the window. He
saw that the rain had slowed to a dreary drizzle. Fresh clothes had been left on the chair.

He sat on the edge of the bed and struggled into a t-shirt, sweatshirt, boxers, socks and tracksuit
bottoms – suitably comfortable and easy for an invalid to manage. He suspected that the majority
of his clothes had been smuggled to Grimmauld Place by Weasley. Judging by the amount of wear
and tear, they'd probably been through most of the Weasleys' male offspring – the taller ones,
anyway.

When Hermione returned, carrying a tray of medical supplies, she was smiling. "I think you should
have breakfast downstairs, don't you?"

"Are you serious?" He pulled the worn collar of the t-shirt down and arched his neck, to give her
easier access to his wound.

"Absolutely." She busied herself with unwinding his bandage.

He pulled back a little, squinting at her. "My memory of this house is admittedly poor, but I believe
we are about 4 floors above the kitchen. How do you propose to get me there?"

She rolled her eyes. "Am I a witch or not?"

"Ah." Levitation. Very few teenage witches had the power or control to magically move an adult
male over such a distance, but then he had to remind himself that she was one of the most powerful
witches of her generation. She wore her magic lightly – dressing in Muggle clothes, choosing to
rely on her own physical strength and ability to carry out most procedures – but the power was
there.
She prodded at the wound, frowning slightly. "Hmm. Yes, I think there may be some improvement. It's not weeping as much today."

He winced at the burning sensation as she wiped the residue of the poultice she'd applied the previous day. "That's the 6th version of this particular compound, isn't it?"

"Yes." She carefully applied a further preparation. "Let's see how this does over the next 24 hours."

Re-bandaged, he tried to relax as Hermione used her wand to levitate and convey him down 3 flights of stairs in front of her. Instead of going down the 4th flight into the kitchen, she took him towards a large oak door, chattering brightly. "I thought you might appreciate breakfast in the library. Kreacher keeps the fire lit in here, thank heavens. Doesn't matter how warm it is outside, the heat never seems to permeate this house, and when it's as cold as it is today – brrr. I don't know what Harry's going to do with this place. If it were me, I'd sell it. I can't see him settling down and having a family here."

She manoeuvred him into position and gently lowered him into an armchair. He realised suddenly that the burst of chatter about the house was her way of trying to distract him from the humiliation of having to be carried.

"Where would you live if he did sell it?" He was suddenly curious. It occurred to him that he still knew very little about Miss Granger. Before the attack by Nagini, he hadn't cared to know more than he needed to about the bossy clever young Gryffindor; since then, he'd been entirely focused on his own recovery and on Potter's efforts to get his name cleared. He didn't even anything about her family apart from the fact that she was Muggle-born. Did she have siblings, parents, cousins? Where did they – she – live?

She was silent. He looked up at her in surprise. She stood in front of him, her eyes strangely unfocused on a distant corner of the dusty library. Then, visibly shaking off her trance, she looked back at him rather intently. "Severus, um, about that – I've been meaning to tell you that I was planning -"

The front door crashed open, and they both jumped and winced. Potter shared Weasley's inability to enter any house without instantly attracting the attention of all inhabitants.

"I keep meaning to put a muffliato on that door," Hermione muttered. "Between him and Ron…" She didn't need to go on. Their eyes met and she giggled suddenly. He raised an eyebrow, but couldn't help the small smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth.

The library door flew open and he made an effort to put on the neutral expression he tried to maintain around Potter these days. He tried to tell himself that the boy was trying to help him; that he was not his father…but it was always an effort to push down feelings of antipathy whenever he saw that familiar unruly head. Just like James – he could never enter a room quietly either.

"Hello, Sir." Judging by the strained smile on Potter's face, he found it equally difficult to relate to his former professor and chief nemesis at Hogwarts. "It's good to see you up and about." His eyes darted about the room, as if trying to find something else to focus on.

"OK, Potter, I appreciate the good wishes, but we both know you're not here to discuss that." Severus realised he was leaning forward and forced himself to relax a little.

Out of the corner of his eye, he was aware of Hermione making a sudden, agitated, movement. She knew, he realised, his heart sinking. He didn't know the boy well enough to read his body language, but she did, of course. And the news wasn't good.
Harry straightened his shoulders and looked Severus in the eye for the first time. "They didn't believe me. They intend to track you down and put you on trial if they find you alive."

"On what charge?" Hermione's voice was barely above a whisper. Her hand came down onto Severus's arm and gripped it, unconsciously.

"Murder," was Harry's only response.
Chapter Notes

Time for Severus to make a decision. All belongs to JKR.

*Remember, remember, the fifth of November...* and a suitably bright, sunny day too – just right for Guy Fawkes' Night.

Not that Guy Fawkes' Night meant much to the kids here, mused Hermione, as she negotiated the stream of excited young witches and wizards hurrying towards the great oak doors, where Susan Bones, current Head Girl, was standing with her checklist, ticking off those who had permission to travel to Hogsmeade.

Susan tapped her clipboard to shrink it to pocket size, raised her head and gave Hermione a calm nod as they stepped through the door.

Not that Hermione needed permission to leave the Castle. In fact, she was a little embarrassed by the level of freedom granted to her by Minerva MacGonagall since she'd returned to Hogwarts. She had tacit permission to leave the Castle whenever she chose – as long as MacGonagall knew where she was going and for how long.

Therein lay the rub. As far as the headmistress knew, Hermione was still trying to track down her parents in Australia and therefore needed time off to visit the private wizard investigator who was currently tracking them down. But there were only so many times that Hermione could visit the fictional detective (actually a friend of Harry's from the Ministry) before Minerva would get suspicious.

Hence the deception. Many of the returning '8th years' – back to complete their interrupted N.E.W.T.s – were in on the arrangement. They, of course, did not know why Hermione had to leave Hogwarts so often, but Ron had talked certain key individuals into assisting in the covert operation (or at least turning a blind eye). Ron had proved surprisingly good at coming up with opportunities for escape – thinking back over their years at Hogwarts, it occurred to her that this had been a whole level of expertise that had been hitherto under-appreciated.

Ernie MacMillan, this year's Head Boy, had gone on ahead. Hermione and Susan walked briskly along the road to the gates, at the tail-end of the students. To anyone watching from the Castle, they looked to be chatting amiably about nothing in particular.

Susan kept her voice pitched low, a neutral smile on her face. "How long do you need?"

Hermione smiled cheerfully in the Hufflepuff's direction. "How much time can you give me?"

Susan eyed her, curiously. Hermione wondered how much the girl knew. When she'd decided that, despite her responsibilities to Severus, she needed to return to Hogwarts, she had initially left it to Ron to seek out sympathetic allies. A fair number of Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws had returned; in comparison, very few Gryffindors (and no Slytherins at all) had come back, so Hermione was rather dependent on the support of students from other houses. To cope with the influx of extra senior students, Minerva had had extra quarters installed, and all the 8th years lived together, which had
broken down some of the old house barriers. And many of them were, of course, veterans of the DA, who had been in the thick of the battle in June.

Susan had become a good friend of Ron's. Hermione wondered what excuse he had given her. Did she think that Hermione was slipping away frequently to visit Ron? She felt her cheeks prickle with heat, hating to think that someone like Susan might be imagining clandestine meetings with a boyfriend.

The girl seemed to take pity on her. "OK, I can give you until 4pm. Meet usual place?"

"OK."

As the gates clanged behind them, Susan gave her another careful nod and strode on ahead. Hermione cast a cautious look back at the Castle before concentrating, spinning and apparating away.

"Morning, Miss Hermione," Kreacher materialised from the shadows, wiping his hands on a tea towel. Either the house elf had a way of knowing when someone had arrived in the street or he moved very quickly from the basement kitchen to be at the front door whenever a guest arrived.

"Morning, Kreacher," she smiled. He was a world away from the sneering, dirty and deeply unpleasant elf that she'd first known. Nowadays, if he was still offended by having to wait on a Muggle-born, he gave no sign of it.

"Can I fetch you some tea?"

"That would be lovely." She shrugged off her coat and hung it on a peg. "Where is the professor this morning?" She wondered what kind of reception she could expect. It varied from polite civility verging on friendliness to a kind of hard, self-destructive bitterness. There was no particular pattern that she could discern in his moods.

"In the library, Mr Weasley is visiting." At her look of confusion, he hastened to expand, "Mr Bill Weasley."

The explanation was necessary. When Hermione had rather guiltily confessed to Severus that she'd applied to return to Hogwarts, it became clear that they needed more help. Back in July, when she'd answered Minerva's invitation, Hermione had assumed (or, more accurately, hoped) that Severus would recover more quickly. By September, although he'd made progress, and the wound had finally begun to heal, he'd still needed care that Kreacher alone couldn't provide. Hermione had lingered until the end of the month, stalling Minerva with excuses, before having to give in.

There was only one obvious solution. It was a relief to Harry and Ron to be able to confess the truth to the rest of the Weasleys, and once the shock, anger and emotional outbursts were over and done with, the family rallied around. Molly proved to be a practical healer, thanks to her years of managing various childhood ailments, and between them, she and Hermione worked out a much better therapeutic regime for the invalid. George's expertise at treating magically-induced injuries also proved useful.

Arthur helped Harry redouble his efforts to clear Severus's name, but they'd had little progress. In the absence of a body, the Ministry were convinced that Professor Snape was still at large, despite Harry's protests that the man couldn't possibly have survived Nagini's attack. It beggared belief that they didn't believe Harry's testimony to the true nature of Snape's role. Without viewing Snape's
memories, they were refusing to lift the charge of murdering Dumbledore – and Severus steadfastly refused to let the memories be viewed by anyone else. Harry had had to claim that he'd 'lost' the memories during the battle's aftermath. If Kingsley was in charge, Harry might have had a more sympathetic audience, but there was currently a power struggle going on at the Ministry. It was hard to say, from week to week, who was likely to become Minister when the delayed elections finally took place.

It was unusual for Bill to visit. As Hermione walked towards the library, she realised that this might mean Severus would be in a reasonable mood…or a polite one, at least.

She knocked and then opened the door, feeling the usual slight tightening of the stomach that she always associated with seeing Severus. The two men were sat facing each other. At her entry, their heads turned towards the door, their conversation halting very quickly.

"Bill!" She smiled at the oldest Weasley brother, sharply conscious all the while of dark eyes looking up at her. She felt a shiver up her spine, and sought to hide her confusion by hurrying across the room and hugging the red-head, who had risen to his feet. Somehow, living apart from Severus seemed to increase her physical reaction to him.

Bill returned the hug. As he pulled away from her, she saw an amused, rather knowing look in his eye. She flushed slightly and let go of him. She might have known that she couldn't hide much from sharp-eyed Bill Weasley.

She turned to Severus, forcing herself to focus on his condition. He looked a little better today. Still pale, of course. His hair had grown back a little but was still quite short, with silver strands apparent among the black. The bandage had been replaced by a small patch of gauze, and the walker by a black cane. He sat in his usual chair, a large mug of coffee on the table beside him and a book as usual. He didn't seem perturbed by Bill's visit, even though this was the first time, to her knowledge, that Bill had been here.

"You look better today." She tried to apologise with her eyes for her absence – it had been ten days since she'd last been able to slip away.

He nodded, a little cool but reasonably polite. *Definitely in one of his better moods.* His sharp eyes travelled over her face, appearing to take in the stark weariness she was struggling to hide. Hermione had been putting in double hours on her studies, getting by on less than 5 hours' sleep a night. She was trying to get through her school work as quickly as possible, in order to focus on her secret research into potential healing remedies.

The main concern now was Severus's continued weakness – not just physical but magical. It seemed impossible to entirely leech the serpent's poison from his veins. Sometimes, Hermione wondered whether that had been Voldemort's plan – not for Nagini to kill necessarily but to…to *neuter* his enemies. But then Arthur *had* made a full recovery, so…

"You look tired." His voice was less raspy now, but still lacked its former depth and intensity.

She shrugged and glanced back at Bill. "Am I interrupting? Should I-?" She gestured over her shoulder to the door, but Bill shook his head.

"I was just going. We've been looking into ways of releasing Severus's house from Ministry control. Can't sell it until we can get it under the radar… and while they're still on the lookout for you, they're going to be keeping an eye on it, even if you go through a Muggle estate agent."

"I can manage." Severus's face was carefully blank as he looked up at the younger man. He didn't
attempt to get out of his seat to say goodbye, but Bill didn't seem concerned, simply leaning over to
shake his former professor's hand.

In recent weeks, Hermione had developed a new appreciation for the Weasleys, if that were
possible. Here was Bill shaking the hand of the man who he knew had personally tortured his own
sister. No matter what his excuse might be, there was no getting away from the fact that Severus's
actions, particularly during the last year, had been brutal. He might have tried to take the worst of
the sting out of his punishments, but punishments they certainly had been.

The door closed behind Bill and Kreacher, who had brought in a tray of tea and biscuits for
Hermione.

She sank into the armchair vacated by Bill, letting out a relieved sigh. She gave Severus a startled
look as she realised he'd unconsciously echoed her sigh, and then giggled at his raised eyebrow.

"I'm sorry, it's just," she gestured vaguely between them, "look at us. Take me back two years, and
I wouldn't have even had the nerve to sit in the same room as you. Let alone relax." She shrugged.
"I don't even know why I'm suddenly thinking about it."

He regarded her, steadily. "Perhaps being back at school has brought back certain memories."

She met his gaze. There was no remorse in his eyes, just a slightly dispassionate interest. She knew
what he was referring to – not that last meeting between them, which seemed to have been put
firmly on the back-burner by mutual, unspoken agreement, but their previous encounters over the
years. His cruel put-downs; that comment about her personal appearance; the deliberate marking-
down of her hard work.

"I won't apologise," he continued, not taking his eyes off her. "Just so you know."

She raised her own eyebrow. He didn't seem particularly defensive – in fact, he was actually quite
calm.

"I did what I had to do, and I won't be made to grovel about that. Not to you, not to them, and
certainly not to the Ministry. I…regret what happened to Miss Weasley – and Miss Lovegood and
Longbottom too, of course – but we were at war and I had my own role to play."

"I'm not asking you to apologise."

"Good. Then we know where we stand."

A look of tacit agreement passed between them. Hermione was the first to break the silence.

"I won't apologise either…although I, at least, don't have much to apologise for."

She was referring to Harry, but he seemed to take her comments at face value. "Oh, you think so,
Miss Granger?" he burst out, incredulously. "May I remind you of those essays that you insisted on
presenting to me on a depressingly familiar basis? Have you any idea how long it took to mark
them? Double the length requested, and without a single original thought or theory?"

She bristled a little, but then caught the spark of mischief in his eye and laughed instead. "And
there was I, thinking that I could impress you with my superior knowledge. If you only knew how
many hours I spent in the library…" She supposed she ought to feel offended, but with all they'd
been through, that boat had definitely sailed. She merely shook her head in mock-sadness at the
naïve enthusiasm of the school girl she had once been.
"It's certainly odd being back," she reflected. "I feel almost as if I'm masquerading as a school girl." She smiled ruefully down at her uniform – if Severus had ever felt any attraction to her, the sensible skirt, blouse and tie would be a serious turn-off...unless he was the type to...hmm. She continued hurriedly, trying to hide her confusion at the sudden image in her mind – *thank heavens he's incapable of legilimency these days.* "Although Minerva gives us 'oldies' so much freedom, it's hardly the way it used to be under..." She broke off in confusion.

"Under Dumbledore, you mean." Severus stretched out his legs, his hands clasped together on his stomach. He threw her a slightly amused look. "You *can* say it, you know. I don't bite – anymore."

He turned his gaze back towards the log fire, and she took the opportunity to examine him under her lashes as she sipped her tea. It was true that he had changed. The injury had somehow...diminished him. He no longer seemed so tall or imposing. The lack of robes obviously had an impact. He was dressed more smartly now – Bill and Arthur had seen to that – but still favoured a Muggle style, in black suit trousers with an open-necked royal blue buttoned shirt. It seemed oddly formal for someone who never went out, but she couldn't complain, allowing herself a brief moment to appreciate the rather well-fitted outfit. Blue suited him, and she made a mental note to buy him a scarf in just that precise colour for Christmas – then just as quickly cancelled it. Who was *she* to be thinking of buying presents for *him?*

But it was more than the clothes. Some of the harshness had gone out of his face. He seemed strangely well-adjusted to his current situation. It must surely be unsettling to be under permanent threat of arrest and sentencing, especially while physically and magically depleted. Knowing that the only thing that stood between him and detection was the former home of one of his most despised enemies at school. Because no magical trace could be put on any of 12 Grimmauld Place's inhabitants, as long as Severus stayed within these walls, he couldn't be tracked down. So far, public respect for Harry had kept any busybodies from the Ministry away.

And what *were* his plans for the future? Abruptly, she remembered his words to Bill.

"So what did you mean when you told Bill you could manage?"

He continued his perusal of the flames. "Well, you can hardly expect me to stay here forever, can you? In this house, in particular?"

"But – but that would be...it would be too dangerous." The alarm rose in her. "We need to find some way of curing your...problem first."

He smiled, rather bitterly. "Hermione, I think you will find that there *is* no cure for this."

"You don't really think that?" She leaned forward and grabbed his wrist, forcing him to look at her. "That's – it's *impossible!* Why, Arthur made a full recovery-"

"Mr Weasley's injury was nowhere near as severe. I think we can both agree on that." His eyes seemed calm and his voice was flat and rather clinical. She suspected that he was making an effort to pull himself out of another of his episodes of black depression. "The reality is that no one was ever expected to survive an encounter with that bloody serpent. Two of us did – one of us got off rather lightly; it cannot be expected that the other of us should be so lucky."

She let her hand lie on his wrist and, rather surprisingly, he didn't seem to object, although he looked away from her again.

"But...," she swallowed. "Do you mean, you think that you will...*never* regain your abilities?"
The very thought was horrific. Whatever else Severus had been over the years, there was no
doubting that he was one of the most powerful wizards she had ever met – perhaps ever would
meet. She would never forget the sheer physical power of his duel with Lockhart. That incident
hadn't been the start of her crush exactly, but it had certainly left an impression of a particularly
masculine type of magic. In a way, it was the loss of his more subtle powers that shocked her more –
his efficient and easy gestures in front of a cauldron; the almost lazy murmuring of incredibly
complicated incantations. The thought that she'd never see him in that context again seemed utterly
shocking.

His eyes shot to her again. "That worries you?"

"Well, of course it worries me! What did you think – that I'm happy to see you like this?" The
anger rose in her. "Do you really think that I like having you dependent on me? That I get off on it,
or something? The great and mighty Professor Snape, reduced to an invalid?" She shook her head,
blinking away sudden tears.

He frowned at her outburst. "The thought had occurred. No, look -," he raised a hand, as she
opened her mouth again, "- let me just present my theory."

He steepled his hands again, and she subsided back into her chair, watching him. "Let's look at the
facts. I made your life hell at school. You – the three of you – spent many years suspecting me of
the worst of crimes, whatever Dumbledore said…until I did finally commit the worst of crimes. I
terrorised your school friends during that last year and perhaps before too – yes, of course you
know I had no choice, but that's your logic speaking, isn't it? What does your heart tell you? Ah
yes, your heart…"

She swallowed slightly, her eyes dropping to her hands. So they were finally going to acknowledge
that meeting.

"Your heart…" His voice seemed suddenly low and intimate, and she felt a frisson going down her
spine. Ah yes, he was starting to regain that power in his voice. "What does your heart tell you?"

She looked up to find him observing her intently. His dark eyes seemed to expand to fill her vision –
she tried to break away, but suddenly couldn't. She was aware of her pulse speeding up. This
wasn't legilimency – she was sure of it, but he seemed to be trying to work something out.

"That night, you said you wanted me to choose to live. Not for you, not for anyone else, you said. I
said that I didn't share your feelings."

"You said that if you had the time to…that you might…" The small voice didn't sound familiar to
her; it seemed to come from someone else.

He nodded slightly, his eyes not leaving hers. "I did. And we certainly have the time now. Tell me,
Hermione, did you suppose that I would always be here? That you'd keep going off to school, or to
the no-doubt highly-paid role at the Ministry that you are guaranteed to walk into, and that I'd
always be here to visit, to care for. Your little secret, your…pet project?"

"No!" The word burst out of her. "No, I'd never see you that way!"

"Why not?" he asked quietly, almost casually, but the tension was there in the set of his jaw. "You
expressed your feelings about me that night – well, actually, to be fair, you did not, but they were
easy to ascertain. Oh, not by magical means - your emotions are never very far from the surface –
ever have been, really. You wanted me." He shook his head in apparent disbelief. "The fuck if I
can work out why, but you did – perhaps still do."
The sudden obscenity jolted her – it was a world away from his usual rather professorial manner of speaking, but seemed to lend an air of authenticity to his words. It occurred to her that he was not trying to trick her; he was genuinely trying to work her out. It took her a moment to realise that he seemed to be waiting for a response.

She flushed. "Severus – I – I can assure you that I've never thought of you in that way while I've been… I've tried to… I mean…"

His eyes softened slightly. "I know you haven't. You are nothing if not a moral young woman."

She noted the slight emphasis on young and her heart sank – she knew where this was going. But it was no good dwelling on it – it wouldn't help. She raised her head and met his gaze almost fiercely. She had to convince him with her eyes if not with her words.

"One thing I can promise you, Severus. If there was anything – anything – I could do to restore you to full health, I would. You must know that. And… I meant what I said that night… I wanted want - you to survive – to live. For you. Not for me."

The tension was almost tangible as they stared at one another. Once again, as before, something she didn't really understand seemed to pass between them. Some unspoken communication.

He nodded, and then sighed, looking away again. "I believe you. I think you are a genuinely…good person, Hermione. And yet you attach yourself to me – to me."

He shook his head again, not in negation but almost as if trying to clear something from his head. "I think you wanted me to have a chance – and if I'd survived unscathed, you would have let me leave. Leave you, get out of wizarding Britain and disappear somewhere. You really are that generous – that giving. And that astounds me."

He looked at her again, and she caught her breath. The mask was gone and there, once more, was the vulnerable, misunderstood boy she remembered from the pensieve. The eyes were softer, slightly bewildered; the thin mouth curved upwards in a small, sad smile. She saw – suddenly saw – what might have been.

She leaned forward; her hand came up, unbidden and reached out, palming his cheek. She felt him go rigid and, for a moment, thought he'd brush her hand away. After a moment that seemed to stretch out into eternity, he relaxed, turned his head into her hand and sighed, his eyes fluttering closed.

She traced a route with her fingers up over his cheekbone and the curve of his brow. This was the first time she'd ever touched him in a non-clinical context, apart from the brief kiss she'd dared to drop on his cheek at that fateful meeting. The cool smooth skin fascinated her. He felt…different to Ron or Harry, or any other man she'd touched.

Abruptly, he pulled his head away from her hand. "But…it's turned out not to be quite that simple, hasn't it?"

Her hand was suspended in space. She dropped it, awkwardly. "That's true enough."

What had she expected? Probably that he'd be a bit weak for a couple of weeks but would soon recover – and then what? That they'd…stay in touch – that she'd go and visit him every couple of weeks as a friend? How ridiculous. That he'd come back to Hogwarts and be her teacher again, and nothing more? How…unacceptable. That she'd never see him again, but would always know that he was healthy and safe and happy? How unbearable.
"The reality is that I may never be wholly healthy again. I can't remain dependent on you, and on the current gratitude of Mr Potter, which will no doubt fade over time. And – frankly - I don't want to. In fact, when I made plans to survive the war, it didn't occur to me that you or your friends would play any part in them."

He looked at her again, his eyes suddenly, unbearably, gentle. As if he knew he would hurt her and was regretting it. "You do understand what I'm trying to say, Hermione?"

"I do." Her voice emerged as a croak.

He sighed. "All my adult life, I've been subject to the orders – the whims – of others. Now, at last, I have the chance to be free. To live my life the way I always wanted to live it. To be alone."

"Of course." The words were bitter in her mouth, but of course he was right. Severus deserved to have the opportunity to learn who he really was; to live his life as he saw fit, just as she did, just as the boys did. Without Voldemort dominating their lives.

He seemed to realise that she understood. "Well, then, I need to work out what to do -.

"We," she interrupted. "We need to work out what you can do."

He smiled, wearily. "I'm not sure it's a matter of cure. I think…” he clenched his fists on his thighs. "I very much fear that it's a case of relearning."

"You mean…?"

"Yes, Hermione. I am going to have to relearn how to use magic. The power is still there, it is just diminished, rather like that of a child's. And to do that without being detected…I need to get out of wizarding Britain."
New Beginnings

Chapter Notes

Just a note about where Severus and Hermione find themselves. The village of Valenzuela really exists. It's about an hour's drive from Granada and an hour's drive from Malaga in the other direction; a pretty little village set in a valley, with steep paths leading up a hill and an old stone bridge over a small river. I've stood at the top of the village and looked up the hill towards a little stone house very much like the one I describe here... although very much inhabited and in much better condition! And each morning and evening, the farmer living there drove his flock of sheep and goats, with bells clanking, down the dirt road and through the village, much to the delight of my 4 year old daughter. Having said all that, I'm by no means an expert on Spain, so I hope I don't offend anyone who is Spanish or knows the region much better than me.

January 1999

The rain had turned the dirt road leading up from the small Andalusian village to sludge. The car had stuck in it about 100 metres after leaving the village's paved road, and it had taken considerable magical reserves to shift the vehicle to its current position outside the small crumbling stone house.

"Bloody fucking hell!" Severus felt his feet slipping in the mud as he tried to concentrate. The persistent drizzle made his regrown hair lankier than ever, and he had to keep pushing strands out of his eyes as he worked on the basic renovations necessary to make the building even vaguely habitable.

Strangely, when he'd purchased this small cottage last year, it hadn't appeared to be in such bad condition. Now, he could see that there were holes in the roof and he was currently focusing on levitating tiles from the ground back into position. He continued his low-grade mutter in between swishes of his wand.

" Doesn't it ever stop bloody raining? Thought this was supposed to be the driest region of Spain… Who the fuck thought it would be a good idea to move here in fucking January…"

His only response to this last comment was a meaningful cough. He glared in the direction of Hermione, who was currently leaning against the car door, watching him with her arms folded. She was, of course, perfectly attired for the weather in a full length raincoat and wellington boots. She'd pushed her wand into the pocket of her raincoat when it had become abundantly clear that Severus would not appreciate her assistance.

The knowledge that she could restore the entire place with a single wave of her wand just made him even more determined to do this himself. Gritting his teeth, he carried on repairing the roof, tile by painful tile. It would almost be quicker to get a ladder and do it the Muggle way…

"Come on…damnit… There!"

With the last tile in place, the house was at least waterproof. He turned back to the car, seeking to disguise the tremor in his hands by striding past her to retrieve a large box from the boot and take it
through the front door, which led directly into a dark kitchen.

Hermione followed him inside, giving a distasteful shudder. The floor was sodden with rain, mud and leaves and the atmosphere dank. "Do you really intend to move in here? Severus, it's hardly habitable! Wouldn't it have been more sensible to have stayed put until the weather was better at least?"

He shook his head. "Need to get started as early in the year as possible, if I'm going to make something out of the land this year."

"What the hell was this place, anyway?" She eyed the dilapidated kitchen units and what looked to be a wood-burning stove with suspicion.

"Shepherd's house," he muttered, distractedly.

"Hmm, looks like it."

He glared at her. "Well, it's all I can afford! It may have escaped your notice, Miss Granger, but some of us have been working for the 'Light' for years, and without much financial support! And much good it did me, too," he muttered, bitterly.

She shrugged, not remotely put out by his attitude. "Well, it's your life, I suppose. But honestly, Severus, I'm not sure you could have found a more desolate spot if you'd tried. I thought Andalusia was supposed to be dry."

"It was when I was last here!" It had been the previous April and sunny, with flowers brightening the hillside when he'd last seen the place and decided to buy it. It hadn't been long after Hermione's visit to him at Hogwarts, and he'd slipped away to find the place he'd remembered from a plant-gathering expedition some years earlier. Unfortunately, he'd only ever seen the place in spring or summer.

He'd bought it the Muggle way – raiding the meagre savings left by his parents in a Muggle bank to pay the deposit on the house and surrounding land. It was the land that really interested him – a couple of acres consisting mostly of steep terraces built into the side of a steep hill, above the small village of Velanzuela. A stream of cold spring water ran across a corner of his land on its way down into the valley – perfect irrigation for what he had in mind. The house itself had once been a goat and sheep smallholding before the owner's death. No one had seemed interested in purchasing it – too much work to do, and it wasn't currently connected to the village's power supply or sewerage system – so it had been unoccupied for a few years.

He'd had to pose as a slightly eccentric English expatriate looking for a self-contained lifestyle during the interminable negotiations which, in traditional Spanish style, had involved the Mayor and what looked like half the local population. It had been an effort to maintain the image of a charming but painfully shy Englishman in front of the curious and rather amused villagers, particularly when he was aware that any prolonged absence from Hogwarts would arouse Voldemort's suspicion.

One advantage of the property's dilapidated condition and remote position was that it was cheap, but even so he didn't have enough money to cover the mortgage. He needed to sell Spinners End, but Bill still hadn't managed to wrest control of it from the Ministry. Hermione, typically seeing his difficulty, had quietly offered some of her own savings just to tide him over, but his pride wouldn't allow him to accept any further help from her. No, he'd have to try to make some money himself – perhaps by finding a job while he worked out what to do with the land.
He could turn it into a smallholding of his own, but that seemed a bit pointless. Severus was no gardener. He quite enjoyed the idea of growing things after having led such an 'indoor' life, but he lacked expertise. In any case, in this region of Spain, the land was farmed on an industrial scale and he couldn't possibly hope to compete with that. Even the smallest landowner around here kept a few hens and grew some vegetables to sell. How could he, an outsider, compete with that?

So that left the wizarding world. He was good at making potions, and thankfully that knowledge was not affected by his current problems with his magic. It might take him longer to produce some potions, but he could still do it. All those years teaching at Hogwarts, he'd wondered whether he'd eventually be able to escape and set up his own business.

The main problem, even back then, had been his reputation – who'd buy from a suspected Death Eater apart from fellow Death Eaters? He'd had no desire to have any more contact with Voldemort's followers than he was forced to by circumstances, so he'd stuck to providing supplies in secret – to both Voldemort and the Order – and he had, of course, received no payment from either of his masters.

That was going to change. He knew he had unique skills – hell, if Lupin hadn't been claimed by the battle, he'd have had to struggle on without Wolfsbane in Severus's absence, since there was no one else, in the UK at least, skilled enough to brew it. His skills couldn't be publicly acknowledged, but at least he could make some money out of them. Clearly, he couldn't sell under his own name, but Arthur and Bill were working on the creation of an anonymous business under which he'd be able to sell his potions. Now he just had to start developing them and sourcing, or growing, the necessary ingredients.

There was some basic furniture sold with the house, sodden and weathered with exposure to the elements. He muttered a basic drying incantation before setting his belongings on the table – such as they were. At present, they fit in one large cardboard box. He desperately needed his private book collections from his home and the school – assuming they hadn't already been destroyed.

As if she could read his mind, Hermione rested a hand on his shoulder briefly. Of all people, she could understand and sympathise with his love of his private library. "When I get back, I'll speak to Horace – I'll tell him I want to look through your books for a project. I'm sure he won't have disposed of them – not yet, anyway."

"He'd be too lazy to…" he murmured. "But even if he'll let you take a look, how will you get them out of Hogwarts?"

"Leave that to me." She gave his shoulder a comforting squeeze and stepped back, shivering as she looked out of the window. "This village doesn't even have a shop. I'll have to drive back to that town we saw on the way – Alhama de Granada, was it? Get some basics."

"You don't have to," he muttered.

She turned and raised a knowing eyebrow. "You've been saying that for the past week. I think we've established by now that I'm going to help, whether you like it or not. I may not approve of your decision, but I'm not trying to stop you… so don't stop me from giving you whatever basic help I can."

He cleared his throat as he eyed her, rather nervously. He knew her well enough by now to recognise the stubborn set of her jaw and the uncompromising glint in her eye, which meant that this could go one of two ways – either another bitter prolonged argument or graceful acceptance, which would, in any case, lead to the same outcome. Miss Granger was nothing if not tenacious.
He fingered the soft blue scarf at his neck and saw her eyes follow his movement. It was an acknowledgement of sorts. "OK, but no perishables. No fridge, remember – not until I've worked out how to get electricity to this place. And yes – I know you could find a way around that, but I'm doing this the Muggle way."

"OK, just tins and boxes, I promise." She turned up the collar of her raincoat, eyeing the wood burner as she did so. "I think I'd better get some more gas bottles too. Just as well we brought that camping stove, eh? Oh, and you could perhaps try to do something about making this place more comfortable. I did more than enough rough camping last year." She shivered at the memory and opened the door.

"Oh, so you're staying, then?" He said it lightly, but the truth was that he didn't know what her immediate plans were.

It had taken a week of carefully planned travel to sneak the two of them out of Britain and across France and Spain – not that easy with Ministry agents watching all embarkation points, with his name no doubt at the top of their list. They'd managed, largely due to the preparations made by Ron Weasley, much to Severus's surprise. The boy had hidden talents – clearly all those years of subterfuge at Hogwarts had paid off.

She turned and smiled at him. "For a couple of days, anyway. I need to be back for the start of term." She hesitated, as if planning to say something else, and then appeared to think better of it. The wooden door slammed shut behind her.

He stood at the window and admired the easy grace of her slim, long-legged figure as she walked over to the rather battered car she'd bought in France. She turned it with surprising ease and bumped back down the muddy path, eventually disappearing between 2 white buildings. She wouldn't be long – Alhama de Granada was only a 10 minute drive away.

He turned away, touching her scarf again. It had become a habitual gesture before he'd even realised.

The first meaningful present he'd received for years, perhaps ever. He didn't count the dutiful rather meaningless gifts provided by Dumbledore, Minerva and the other professors at the school or the expensive offerings made by the Malfoys each Christmas and birthday. The only other person to give him a present with any kind of genuine thought behind it had been Lily, over 20 years ago, and that had only been for a couple of years.

Hermione hadn't been there when he'd opened her present. Molly and Arthur had generously offered to relocate their family Christmas to Grimmauld Place, since he obviously couldn't leave without being traced. He'd resisted fiercely. The truth was that he'd never like Christmas much, and the thought of enforced jollity surrounded by various redheaded Weasleys filled him with horror.

In any case, it was clear from the open hostility that had emanated from Miss Weasley during their only encounter since the battle that not all Weasleys were equally forgiving. He could hardly blame her – he'd hardly treated her well during that last year. There had been definite tension between Potter and his girlfriend on that occasion, and an even greater coldness between Ginny and Hermione that suggested his presence at Christmas would be something of a dampener.

He hadn't much cared. He had been looking forward to a day by himself. Apart from everything else, there had been a new tension between himself and Hermione.

The magic depletion was the main issue. Hermione was doing her best to help, but she was a poor
teacher and Severus was, he had to admit, an appalling pupil. Surprisingly, for such a skilled witch and nurse, she lacked the confidence to provide the support he needed. Frustratingly, he retained his advanced magical knowledge – it was a case of re-teaching his stupid, slow body the necessary skills to use that magic. In that sense, he was roughly equivalent to a well-read but inexperienced first year.

Hermione was at first sympathetic but unsure; later, she grew impatient and as frustrated with his slow progression as he was. The curses and insults started to flow between them - sometimes late into the night on the few occasions that Hermione had managed to slip away from Hogwarts after the evening meal. Goodness knew what Potter's house elf made of it. Even the usually rather prim Miss Granger's language began to deteriorate under the pressure until she was swearing like a fish-wife in a manner that would have shocked her professors and fellow students. Eventually, they would both storm off in a huff – Hermione letting the front door slam behind her, while Severus sulked in his room.

Over Christmas, they intensified his training, but their friendship had deteriorated to the point that Hermione didn't even offer to spend part of Christmas Day with him. She'd stormed off to The Burrow immediately after breakfast, informing him not to expect her back until late on Boxing Day evening. He'd muttered a moody "good riddance" after her, and had spent a quiet day reading and not really sparing her a thought…

Which made it all the more embarrassing when he had finally spotted the carefully wrapped single present under the small decorated tree that she'd put up in the library. The label just gave his name and no other message, but it was in her writing – and frankly, the expensive, soft cashmere scarf could hardly have come from anyone else. Who else would have bought him a present anyway – and who would have realised that he was sensitive about the ugly scar at his neck and needed a way of hiding it?

He'd spent much of Christmas night and Boxing Day pacing around like a caged animal. It hadn't occurred to him to buy her anything – he'd not expected something, not with the way he treated her over the last few weeks. And precisely how did you thank someone for a gift anyway? Not an area in which he'd had much experience in the past.

There was another problem. He was aware of the girl's feelings for him – or, at least, he had been. He wasn't so sure how she felt now. Had it just been a crush that had thankfully passed, perhaps under the pressure of nursing him and putting up his appalling tempers and bitter depressions? He genuinely didn't know how she felt any more; she seemed to keep her feelings very carefully hidden these days. He didn't altogether understand why anyone would be attracted to him, let alone such a beautiful and intelligent young woman, but it was clear that she had been when she'd visited him last year to warn him of Voldemort's plans. The point was he didn't want to encourage her. If he was overly grateful for his present, wouldn't that make her think he was interested in developing their relationship in some way? The idea terrified him. There was nothing he could offer someone like her and, in any case, the last thing he needed was to get emotionally involved with another woman who was too good for him.

In the end, everything had been fine. He hadn't even thanked her – not verbally, anyway. She'd flooed from The Burrow directly to the fireplace in the library, where he was sitting with a large whisky. He was wearing the scarf tucked into an open necked shirt, and she'd taken a quick look at him, gave him a brilliant smile and wished him a happy Christmas. And that was it.

The incident had acted as a catalyst. They were united again, focused on preparing Severus to leave Britain. There had been another explosive moment or two when he'd admitted that he wanted
to get out of the country as soon as humanly possible, but it was probably clear enough to
Hermione that he was slowly going mad, having been effectively imprisoned in the house for seven
months. He had regained enough skill to carry out basic magical tasks – for the rest of it, well, he'd
just have to take his chances and pick it up as he went along. There were risks of course, but the
risk wouldn't go away until his name was cleared, if it ever was.

He'd have to keep a low profile and hope that he wasn't tracked down. He couldn't carry on using
his own wand – it'd been safer to destroy it. Charlie Weasley had gone to a Romanian wand maker
to pick up a generic wand, ostensibly a 'spare', and had posted it to Harry. If anyone was bothering
to trace magic signatures, there was nothing to connect the wand to Severus. So, not only was he
having to relearn his magic, he was also having to do so with someone else's wand – and his
natural magic resisted him all the way.

So, here they were. He shook himself out of his contemplation of his new property and set about
improving the environment. There was still very much a limit to what he could do magically
without tiring himself, but he set about unpacking various cleaning materials and investigating the
fireplace.

By the time Hermione returned, he'd made the kitchen at least look reasonably comfortable – the
sparse wooden furniture was clean and dry, the surfaces were hygienic enough, and there was a fire
crackling in the hearth. He'd found and hung up some oil lamps, hoping that Hermione had had the
foresight to get some oil.

She had. With typical practicality, she unpacked boxes full of tinned vegetables, fruit, meat and
fish, boxes of cereals, cartons of UHT milk, packets of flour, pasta, rice and sugar, cooking oils, the
afore-mentioned paraffin oil, toiletries and further cleaning materials, and even some biscuits,
chocolate and bottles of red wine.

She saw his raised eyebrow. "What? Can't we celebrate your move? Don't most people have a
drink or two when they move to a new house?"

He tried and failed to detect any sarcasm in her words. She seemed surprisingly upbeat, bustling
around the kitchen to find places to store her purchases. She didn't even seem to mind when he
deliberately pushed her out of the kitchen area (whose house was it, after all?), and just bounced off
out to the car again.

She came back laden first of all with a box of crockery, cutlery and glassware, and then again with
bin liners full of rather brightly coloured cushions, which she proceeded to scatter over the kitchen
chairs and a wooden bench against the wall. He eyed them with horror. They didn't appear to be in
pairs or even vaguely matching shades.

"What the bloody hell did you get them for?"

She threw him a defensive look. "Well, they were cheap. You can always replace them when
you've made some money, if you like." A pair of curtains in an extraordinarily hideous shade of
yellow and purple were hung over the window, and a flowered cloth found its way onto the table.

"Well, that's one way of encouraging me to get on with it," he muttered, ignoring her glare. While
she had been desecrating his space, he'd got on with opening some tins and was cooking some kind
of beef stew over the little camping stove.

She peered over his shoulder and he nudged her away, firmly. "Get out of it. I'm in charge here, so
don't even think about interfering."
"Wouldn't dream of it." He glanced around; she had subsided into one of the chairs, an amused smile on her face. Actually, now he took it into consideration, the strange cacophony of colour seemed to work. It gave the room an impression of ramshackle but warm homeliness. It couldn't have been further from the gloom of Spinners End or the elegant but dark furnishings of his rooms at Hogwarts… and he rather liked that. More to the point, there was no dark green or silver in sight.

"I'm not a bad cook… when I have decent ingredients, of course. You'd have no way of knowing that, not with Kreacher around, but I've spent most of my life looking after myself, so I've had to learn. By the way, you might make yourself useful by getting one of those bottles opened."

"Mmm. Well, you should definitely grow some vegetables out there. Potatoes, onions, tomatoes, herbs…" She glanced through the window as she picked up a corkscrew and started tackling a bottle. "I think you've got some cherry trees out there and probably olive trees somewhere too. They seem to be everywhere else round here, from what I can see. Keep some hens too. Maybe a goat?"

He gave her a Look. Once it would have made the hardest student quail, but now she just raised an eyebrow and gave him an unimpressed look. He was definitely losing his touch.

"Let's not get carried away. Remember you're looking at someone who spent practically all of his adult life living in an institution about as far away from domestic farm animals as possible. I know next to nothing about hens and goats. I think I might concentrate on basic gardening first. Besides which… not your business. Remember?"

She clearly chose to ignore the last comment, putting the opened bottle and two glasses on the table and picking up the bottle of paraffin oil. "It's getting dark. How do these lamps work?"

Somehow they managed to trim, fill and light the lanterns without burning the house down. While Severus finished cooking the stew, Hermione explored the rest of the cottage by wand light, frankly admitting as she returned that she had performed a few cleaning spells and removed some rats. She reported back that the rest of the building consisted of a tiny bathroom with a composting toilet and a large bucket and hose standing in for a bath/shower, an only slightly larger bedroom (with no furniture apart from a rotting bed frame and no mattress), and a surprisingly charming little sitting room with a spectacular view of the mountains. The kitchen was clearly the most used and best maintained part of the building.

He nodded, absently, focusing on his cooking. There was time enough to check the rest of the cottage, and truthfully he hadn't much cared much about the layout when he'd bought it, although he seemed to recall that the view from the sitting room might have been one of the selling points. The sunny outlook had been such a startling contrast to his gloomy rooms at Hogwarts, he'd made his decision on the spot.

"So, we'll be unrolling our sleeping bags in the kitchen tonight, I suspect," she sighed, as she returned. "Those cushions may come in useful after all. At least there's a fire – and there's plenty of wood in that shed out the back, by the looks of it."

He gave her an uneasy look as he served up the stew in big bowls, with some crusty bread that she'd also brought back with her. "You know, you really don't have to stay… There may be a hotel somewhere."

She gave an incredulous laugh. "Come on, Severus! Do you think I can't cope with this? You should have seen some of the places we ended up last year. This is paradise by comparison." At his dubious look, she subsided a little. "Well, OK, it needs a little work."
"A little?" He gave a bitter laugh, picking up his glass. "Well – cheers, I suppose."

"Cheers." They clinked glasses, sitting either side of the small table. Much to his amusement, she then proceeded to pick up her spoon and attack the stew ravenously. He could never get used to this habit of hers of eating her food as quickly as possible - it didn't seem to fit with her usual polite demeanor. But then he supposed she had got into the habit during her year on the run.

Actually he had to admit he was rather hungry himself.

They ate in contented silence. The room was beginning to warm up nicely. Perhaps this wouldn't be so bad, after all...

When she had polished her bowl with a piece of crusty bread, she gave him a rather sheepish look. "Oh…happy birthday, by the way."

"Birthday?" He stared at her. "But how could you know…?"

"Oh well…” She flushed, appearing a little embarrassed. "School yearbooks – you know… I mean, I knew what year you were born and so on, but… Anyway…” She fumbled in her coat pocket and retrieved a small parcel, which she pushed across the tablecloth in his direction.

"Well, thanks." He pushed his empty bowl aside, picked it up and unwrapped it, curiously. It was a nothing much, a galleon attached to a tarnished old chain. "What is it?"

She took it, turning it over in her hand. "It's an enchanted galleon. We used them in the DA – Dumbledore's Army at Hogwarts – to alert each other to meeting dates. I have a matching one – see?" She pulled her jumper down slightly and he saw a chain around her neck. "We can use it to send each other brief messages – you know, if you need anything, or if I have to send you a warning. Very brief ones – we'll have to create some codes."

"It's an… interesting idea." He took the coin back and inspected it with interest. He'd heard rumours of these coins, and he knew that Draco had employed something similar at one point, but he'd never actually seen one. It was typical of Hermione's advanced charms skill.

"You have to touch it here and think the message in your mind, and then my coin will go warm to alert me of a new message, which will appear here." She pointed out the characters around the edge of the coin. "Not much of a present, I know, but…” Her voice petered out suddenly.

He didn't say anything for a moment, his head bent over the coin. In the silence, he could hear only the gentle crackle of logs in the fire, the pattering of rain drops against the window pane and the hissing of the oil lamps above their heads. The world seemed to pause on the edge of something – something he couldn't define.

As his eyes were drawn upwards, almost against his will, Hermione seemed to glow – the low light picked out the russet tones in her long unruly locks and warmed those enormous brown eyes. Her skin glowed golden and her lower lip was red and slightly swollen from that habitual, almost endearing, habit she had of chewing it when nervous.

His eyes followed the line of her white slender neck to the cowl of her red sweater. It was a favourite of his, partly because she'd been wearing it on Boxing Day night, when things were suddenly sorted out between them without the need for words, and partly (or perhaps mostly) because it clung to her gentle curves in an alluring manner, and he was a man after all.

His gaze travelled upwards again. Their eyes met, held, strained together for a long moment, in which he was just Severus and she was just Hermione, and all that mattered was here and now, and
suddenly Hogwarts, and the Ministry, and the Order, and Voldemort, and Lily, and Harry, and Ron didn't exist, had never existed, would never exist… He could reach out, and just take what he wanted and give what she wanted, and nothing else mattered, would matter ever again… His heart fluttered in a strange way and something coiled deep in his stomach – it took a moment to recognise the beginnings of an arousal that he hadn't experienced for years, in fact had begun to think his body was no longer capable of.

It was Hermione who broke the spell. She broke his gaze and looked away with a nervous little laugh.

"I feel…" she stopped and shook her head slightly. "No. I don't know… Just that I… Well, it feels like the end of something. I'll… miss you, I suppose."

He gave an incredulous laugh, feeling his pulse subsiding slightly. His incredulity was almost as much about what had just passed before them as it was about her words. "I never expected to hear you – or anyone – say that. People don't normally miss me. What's to miss, after all?"

She kept her eyes averted. "I don't know… your language perhaps?" She grinned suddenly. "I know I've learnt some fairly creative curses this year – more than I ever learnt on the run with two teenage boys."

"Ah, teenage boys." He gave a dismissive wave. "They haven't lived yet. What do they know about the art of creative swearing?"

She smiled. He got the impression she was grateful to be able to change the topic. "I think they're learning a few now. Did you know that Ron's going to start training as an auror soon? He thinks George can cope with the shop alone now."

"Following Potter, as always," he sneered.

She bristled slightly. "He does have his own mind, you know."

He winced. "Miss Granger, if I'm going to be forced to discuss Mr Weasley on my birthday, then you can definitely leave and find yourself a hotel. Delightful though he no doubt is, I have no desire to lower my IQ a few points simply by association with that boy."

She sighed. "You'll never give him a break, will you?"

He eyed her. "You can't expect me to believe that you find his company stimulating?"

"He's a friend."

"He's a moron."

"Don't say that! Don't you dare say that!" She'd jumped to her feet, as if unable to keep still any longer. Her breath came in short pants as she leaned across the table right into his personal space. The brown eyes in her pale face were suddenly very dark and intense. Their faces were so close that her breath ghosted his mouth.

"Just remember something while you sit here, safe and well." Her voice was quiet, almost a hiss. "Just remember a man who spent a year living in fear of his family's safety - his sister's well-being; a man who lost his brother. A man, not a boy. Believe me, he stopped being a boy the day he held his brother's dead body in his arms. Just remember a man who helped to save your life; who provided support to me while I nursed you to health; who has helped me to keep up a deception for months…" She pulled back slightly, drumming her fingers on the table between them. "A man
whose ingenuity helped me to get you out of the country. And all without thanks."

She sighed and turned away, moving towards the window. "Just – just remember that, OK? He might not be the brightest student Hogwarts has ever produced, but he's a good person – a kind man who needn't have done any of this. Especially when I…" Her voice cracked, and she fell silent, her back to him.

"When you… what?" He stood but resisted an urge to step towards her. Some instinct told him to keep his distance.

She gave a strange sort of half-shrug. "It doesn't matter." Her voice was brisk again; she was very much the practical Miss Granger he had come to know. "Perhaps we should clear this away and then make a list of what we need to do over the next few days. I can stay for a little while, help you get the house cleared up a bit."

She stepped away from the window. He stood still for a moment, a little shaken by her outburst.

"I don't… dislike Mr Weasley," he muttered. "I am, of course, grateful for the… assistance he has provided…"

His voice faded away; it seemed rather dishonest to continue when it was patently untrue. He had never cared for Ron Weasley; the boy's proximity to Potter had not helped, of course. And if he'd had to learn to change his opinion of Hermione, it didn't follow that his feelings had softened towards any of her friends.

He realised suddenly that he'd grown so accepting of this rather strange friendship with his former student that he'd not given any thought to the other people in her life. She was usually there when he wanted her to be, and usually alone, but of course Weasley and Potter were still her firm friends. Even if she didn't spend as much time with them as she used to. He wondered suddenly what they made of this situation. Did they even know how she felt – had felt – about him? Did they care? Was that why Ron had exerted himself to help out so much?

Hermione, clearly realising there was no running water and growing impatient with Muggle methods, had magicked a bowl of hot soapy water and was washing up with her wand, bowls and pans flying into the water and out onto a drying rack. If she'd heard his words, she made no sign. It was clear that the conversation was over, as far as she was concerned.
July 1999

The road twisted interminably as the noonday sun beat down. The beat-up old hire car didn't seem to have any working air conditioning - its chief benefit was that it was cheap, and Hermione didn't have much money left in either her wizarding or Muggle bank accounts. Having to pay a month's rent in advance on a flat in central London had seen to that. Just as well she'd have a regular salary coming in by September.

She huffed out hot air, blowing sweaty strands of hair off her forehead. Thank heavens she'd finally had all that blasted hair cut off – it would've been a killer in this heat. What remained of it now lay in a layered bob, framing her thin face. She felt it suited her – it made her feel older and more elegant… and it had been a good way to celebrate her graduation from Hogwarts. She finally felt like a young woman about to leave her teenage years behind her.

Idly, she wondered what he would think of it.

It'd certainly come as a shock to Harry and Ron, along with the news that no, she was not going to spend her summer holiday in Rio de Janeiro, where the Quidditch World Cup was being held in August. The Weasleys and Harry had decamped a couple of days' ago, planning what sounded like the beach vacation from Hell.

Meanwhile, Hermione had moved into a tiny flat in Camden and had spent a few days pottering about the local second-hand furniture stores, eking out her remaining funds. It was lucky she'd had a fairly cheap year at school. Between trying to furnish an entire flat, stock up on clothes for her new position as a junior member of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, and locate the many items on the list that Severus had sent her, it had been a busy (and expensive) few days.

She was still steadfastly refusing to make a decision about whether to visit her parents and try to restore their memories. It was strange, but as time went by, her memories of them seemed to fade ever more. She couldn't really remember much about them prior to Hogwarts – and now her memories were of a well-meaning but rather confused couple, who could never fully appreciate her life at school and all the dangers involved. Wouldn't it, in fact, be kinder not to restore their memories of a daughter that they could never fully understand?

She sighed as she drove, wriggling her sweaty back on the hot leather of the car seat. Her t-shirt felt crumpled and sticky, her jeans were far too hot for this weather, and she stunk to high heaven. She considered the dirty little bathroom without enthusiasm and prayed that he'd had time to make some renovations. If he hasn't, I'll bloody well do them myself. Sod his pride.

If she'd known how hot it would be, she might have reconsidered her offer to visit Severus in July for a few weeks to bring him some much-needed equipment and to help out. As it was, she'd stepped off the cheap early morning flight at Malaga Airport, after a sleepless night at Gatwick,
and had walked into a furnace. Having to lug some heavy suitcases over to the car rental company and then to probably the most beat-up old rental she'd ever seen hadn't improved her temper. She hadn't dared to send the books and equipment ahead and apparate, in case it had drawn unwanted attention. *Bastard couldn't possibly have met me, of course."

She turned off the motorway onto the winding road that led towards Valenzuela. The hills to either side were an unremitting brown. At this time of year, it was a little hard to see the appeal of the place. Hermione didn't mind the heat as long as it involved a beach umbrella, a cool drink and a good book, but she strongly doubted that the next month or so would involve either of the first 2 items.

It was the hottest part of the day when she finally turned off the road, sweeping down the shady path, around the corner and over the bridge into the tiny village. There was no one to be seen - siesta time, of course. She manoeuvred carefully between closely-positioned white buildings and, at the top of the village, left the tarmac for the dirt road that led steeply up to Severus' cottage. She began to feel the first of the symptoms that proximity to Severus always seemed to provoke, no matter how much time passed – a faster pulse, a dry mouth, a fluttering in her stomach. Nearly six months apart seemed to have made her physical reaction worse, much to her annoyance. *Snap out of it*, she told herself firmly.

There was no sign of anyone as she parked the hire car next to the old French car that she'd made Severus keep. Her heart thumping loud in her ears, she got out of the car and looked around.

The cottage looked much the same, albeit in slightly better condition. The land lay around the building in several terraces – flat reasonably-sized strips of land clinging to the side of the steep hill. Precipitous paths, consisting of steps made from uneven rocks, linked each terrace. It was not an easy position to farm, quite clearly, but that was probably part of its appeal – at least no one would wander unthinkingly onto his land. Severus had clearly dug over some the terraces to improve the soil, and she could see that the terrace situated nearest to the house had been turned into a small vegetable garden.

She blinked the sweat from her eyes and turned towards the house. *Surely he wouldn't have gone out?* She wondered briefly whether she'd got the wrong day. But no, she'd been very clear about her plans in the code she'd put into her charmed galleon. Even if her letter had gone astray, he still would've received that.

The door looked very firmly closed but, rather to her surprise, opened easily. She wandered into the kitchen - all was just as charmingly ramshackle as she remembered, except that a newish electric oven replaced the condemned wood burner. He'd obviously found a way to link into the local current. She was a little surprised to see that her cushions and curtains had survived intact and that the furniture was essentially the same, although much more polished. She supposed she shouldn't have been that surprised at the general cleanliness – he'd always been meticulous in the laboratory at Hogwarts.

She wandered from room to room. There was a shabby but comfortable looking sofa in the small sitting room, along with 2 armchairs and a low table, none matching. Roughly-carved bookshelves covered almost all of the wall space, evidently in anticipation of the haul she'd managed to retrieve from Hogwarts and from Spinners End by various nefarious means, which occupied the whole of one of the enormous suitcases in the car, even with a shrinking charm. He'd obviously found a local source too, as two of the shelves were already full. The bathroom was improved by an enormous old fashioned Victorian-style bath with iron claw feet, which filled most of the space. This impression of antiquity was rather ruined by a shower fitted over it, but Hermione sighed with relief at the sight. Definitely her first port of call… if she ever found the bloody man. *Where the
hell was he…?

She stood in the kitchen again, at a loss. Surely he couldn't have gone out? Where would he have gone without the car?

She thought for a moment and then smiled, slowly. Of course… Taking out her wand from its usual precarious position in her back jeans pocket, she closed her eyes for a moment and concentrated. Where would it be?

After a moment's consideration, she turned to focus on the wall next to the fireplace. The solid stone seemed to shimmer for a moment and then it was replaced by a new door.

Smiling in triumph, she strode forward and opened the door. Spiral steps led steeply downwards. Carefully closing the door behind her, she walked down them slowly, focusing on the sounds she could now hear ahead of her. The unmistakable sounds of a laboratory – bubbling liquids, the tinkle of a glass pipette… One more turn of the stone steps and she found herself within a cavernous room – cavern being the word for it. It was clearly excavated into the hillside but no one would've guessed that it was essentially a cave from the modern fittings, the bright electric lights and the large central table, over which the missing individual was crouched. Glancing at the white stone ceiling, she noticed a couple of vents above the bubbling cauldrons, which must open out somewhere on his land to disperse the fumes.

"Ah, there you are. You're late," was all the greeting she received. He didn't even look up - just carried on frowning over the leaves he was currently crushing with a mortar and pestle.

Swallowing her annoyance, she stepped into the laboratory. "Well, forgive me for not having arrived earlier. Clearly, if I'd known it meant that much to you, I would of course have dropped everything in London and rushed over here before the last firework at graduation had quite faded away…"

"Hmm?" He looked up then, squinting at her in the bright light. Clearly sarcasm didn't work. He gave her a quick once-over before his narrowed eyes returned to her face, as if confused by something, and then he shrugged. "Oh yes, of course you've finished – congratulations, I suppose. No doubt you surpassed all expectations." It was a flat statement rather than a query, and he returned to his close perusal of the plant sample.

"Well, thanks… I think. As a matter of fact, I did exceed expectations in all topics," she added, rather proudly.

"Hmm. And no doubt Hogwarts will capitalise on your success to advertise the brilliance of its educational standards," he sneered.

She said nothing, and he raised his eyebrows. "Well, did you expect me to be that interested?"

"In an establishment in which you spent almost 30 years of your life, you mean?" She bit her lip. That had sounded rather sarcastic, and she didn't suppose he cared to be reminded. Well, this was going wrong already. She sighed. "Look, Severus –"

He looked up again. "Where are they? The books, I mean. And that microscope – and did you manage to get hold of the spotted frog eyes?"

"Yes – everything on your list… eventually," she added, pointedly. "It's all in the car."

"Good, good… you can't get it here anywhere – the eyeballs, I mean." He looked up at her, seemingly surprised. "Well?"
She stared back in disbelief. "Ok, I'll go and fetch everything, shall I? Where should I put the books?"

"Oh, upstairs is fine." He frowned. "What's the problem? You look like a surprised guppy."

She realised that opening and closing her mouth repeatedly was perhaps not a good look. As it became blatantly obvious that, not only was Severus not going to help, he was not even going to offer a cup of tea, she gave an unladylike snort and huffed up the stairs.

She blinked a little as she went. This was a new Severus – one lacking the formal civility of his convalescence last autumn. Clearly, living a solitary life had done for the limited social skills he'd possessed in the first place. Still, on the plus side, he equally lacked the bitterness and spiteful temper that she associated with their abortive tutorial sessions last winter. And, if she were any judge at this stage, he seemed relaxed, informal and clearly impatient with the basic niceties. Well, she could work with that…as long as she didn't make the mistake of mentioning her education again.

She dragged heavy suitcases into the cottage and dumped them in the sitting room, rubbing her hands in satisfaction. *Let him sort that lot out, the lazy sod.* She walked halfway back down the steps again. "Severus? It's all in the sitting room – it's too heavy for me to carry down. Before I do anything else, I'm having a shower..." She hesitated as something occurred to her. "Where am I sleeping, anyway? And if 'kitchen floor', 'cushions' or 'sleeping bag' feature anywhere in your planned response, I strongly suggest a rethink."

"What? No, of course not." He sounded rather insulted by the suggestion. "Just set up in my bedroom. I often sleep on the sofa anyway, so it's not a problem for me to move in there."

"Um, OK." She took a deep breath and tried to fan away the sudden heat in her cheeks. For a moment, she'd thought he was going to suggest shacking up together. While they'd slept in fairly close proximity at times in January, it'd always been on hard floors and in separate sleeping bags, so hardly conducive to seduction. She didn't think she'd be able to cope with sharing a bed. With the nature of the dreams she was having, he'd probably wake up to find her wrapped around him octopus-style.

By the end of the week, she was pretty glad that Severus had taken the time to install a reasonably comfortable bed in his small bedroom – at least she had somewhere to collapse at the end of each day. Her hands were blistered with the digging he'd set her to do, her back was killing her and she had badly burnt her face and neck. Her newly cropped hair might help with the heat, but it would also have been sensible to have brought a wide brimmed hat with her.

It seemed Severus had taken her at her word when she'd offered to come to help him. He'd already done quite a lot of work on about half of his land, but wanted to prepare the rest for planting later in the year. Whatever romantic visions Hermione had had of working on potions in the lab by day and sharing a companionable bottle of wine by night while enjoying Andalusian sunsets, she was quickly disillusioned. Severus didn't appear particularly bothered about spending time with her; he didn't seem interested in teaching her advanced potions or using her acknowledged academic expertise. All he seemed to want was a strong fit person to clear the remaining scrub of stones, dig compost into the soil and build yet more steps. And Hermione usually collapsed into bed not long after eating whatever meal was placed in front of her each evening – red wine on the terrace be damned.
Severus was remarkably unsympathetic, making caustic comments about her general level of fitness and failing to hide his amusement at her peeling nose and red cheeks. However, when she developed sunstroke, having ignored his warnings about staying out of the sun between 12 and 4 out of sheer bloody-mindedness, his amusement quickly evaporated.

"For crying out loud, didn't you learn anything practical at that establishment they have the nerve to call a school?" he muttered, as he sorted out the ingredients for a restorative remedy. Hermione moaned, resting her hot cheek against the bucket that she'd just thrown up into. "You're not a child – why bloody behave like one? You know by now how hot it gets here. Here – try this."

He pressed a cool cloth soaked in vinegar against her brow, and she moaned again, this time in appreciation. "Didn't realise how hot it was getting."

"Yes, well now you do." He squeezed out another cold cloth and replaced the one on her head with it, pressing it gently into her temple. His hands were surprisingly soothing – he seemed to know instinctively how much pressure to apply and where.

"It's the same with your headwear – or lack of it… Bad enough you cut your hair – Merlin knows why you did that…" This last comment was rather muffled, and she opened her eyes in surprise – it was the first time he'd mentioned her new look, and she wasn't sure she'd heard him right. His voice grew louder again, "– but you didn't even bother to bring a suitable sunhat to the Mediterranean in the middle of summer. Unbelievable."

"OK, OK, I'm sorry, alright! God, Severus, you can be such a… such a git sometimes." She carried on quickly, before he could comment. "I've come out here to help you, and all you do is complain that I'm not working hard enough, and it's bloody hard work, Severus – say what you like, but I'm not used to it, and that doesn't mean I'm unfit - and we don't even spend any time together, we never just talk – and now I'm beginning to wonder whether Rio wouldn't have been better after all - even with Ron's new flamingo-coloured Bermuda shorts, and God knows that was a frightening enough prospect!"

She pushed back her damp hair and glared up at him, choosing to ignore his rather blank look at her brief foray into Ron's sartorial choices. "At least I wouldn't get ordered about and shouted at – as if I'm still some stupid schoolgirl! Damnit, Severus, you can't treat me – people – like this!"

There was silence as they stared at each other. A silence broken by Severus.

"Do you feel better for that?"

"Yes, I do rather." She returned his gaze, defiantly.

He took a step closer, frowning as if at a strange specimen that he couldn't immediately identify. "And you meant it?"

"Sorry, what do you mean? Which part?" She felt her thoughts unravelling. This reaction was not what she expected at all – his body language radiated confusion.

"The bit...the bit about us not talking. What did you mean by that?"

"That...?" She thought back over her rant and winced. Trust Severus to pick up on that comment of all things. "Well, I mean...well, we seemed to be developing a friendship last year and I..." She hesitated, and then carried on bravely. "I mean, you're my friend – I'm not saying that you feel the same way necessarily – why should you, but...but I...I care about my friends, and I want to know how they are... That's all I meant, really," she ended, rather lamely.
He was still frowning, appearing genuinely confused. "Why?"

"Why what?" She was beginning to get exasperated. She was still feeling extremely unwell and his obtuseness wasn't helping, but equally she was starting to feel confused as well. What was he getting at?

"Why do you consider me your friend? I mean, naturally you befriended me last year. That was your Gryffindor nature – to support and care for the weak and the lonely. And you helped me to move here – and I am naturally grateful. You are a useful person to have around and I do appreciate the work you are doing here. But…why do you see me as a friend? What can I give you, Hermione Granger? What – and believe me, I genuinely wish to know - what can I possibly give to someone like you? What possible benefit could a clever, popular and beautiful young woman gain from being friends with… me – someone like me?"

"Are you quite serious?" She sat up straight, looking up at him incredulously, headache briefly forgotten. He leaned against a kitchen unit, his arms folded and looking at her quite solemnly. If he were joking, he was certainly a pretty good actor.

"Severus, I don't understand what you mean. Why should you have to give me anything? That's not how friendship works – not for me, anyway."

She paused, but he didn't move or speak, staring at her intently.

She sighed and tried again. "Look, friendship's not about giving or receiving anything that you can measure. Why is Harry my friend? Why is Ron? I don't know – I can't account for it in any measurable way. It's just an – an instinct. You must know this." She sought to find an example from his own life, briefly considered Lily, just as quickly dropped that as a really bad idea, and was stuck.

He was still frozen into position as she got up and moved towards him, putting her hand on his arm. "I can't account for it, Severus. Somehow, you've become more real to me as a friend than as my former teacher, former enemy even, and I do care about you. Not – not in that way," she hastened to add, mentally crossing several sets of fingers. "Just in a platonic way…and I have a natural desire to know how my friend is. That's why I'm here – not to work, although that too, but that's not the main reason I came." She took a deep breath. "I wanted to see my friend."

He stared at her. She was struck by the insecurity in his face. His eyes moved quickly over her features, until whatever he saw seemed to convince him. He gave a shuddering breath, his eyes suddenly very dark. He looked away, his mouth twisting oddly with suppressed emotion. "I'm afraid I'm not very…good at this." He gave a slightly bitter laugh and looked back at her. "I suppose you might say that I am not used to having friends. I'm not entirely sure what one does with a...friend."

He pronounced the word rather mockingly, almost in challenge. Hermione felt her cheeks go pink, but some instinct told her that this was not a moment to back off.

She considered for a moment – here stood a man who'd received very little in the way of kindness in his forty odd years. In most cases, so-called friends like Lucius Malfoy had cultivated a form of companionship for him that was based purely on the giving and receiving of favours, whether they be economic, magical or merely political. Even Dumbledore's friendship had been borne of the necessity to use Severus in his mysterious schemes – with hindsight she could see that, and she suddenly hated the old headmaster with a passion. Who had ever – ever – simply asked this lonely man how he was…and meant it? She felt tears clouding her vision and suppressed them savagely. No pity – if anything pushes him away now, that will.
She squeezed his arm very gently, and he looked down at it, seeming surprised that it was still there. "I'm still here, Severus," she told him, quietly.

His head came up again and he looked unflinchingly into those dark eyes for a long moment. Hoping to convey by her body language that she was not to be put off by comments made deliberately cold in order to protect the speaker. If he wanted to get rid of her, he'd have to try hard than that.

He blinked, and she sensed that the moment was growing a little intense for him. Abruptly she stepped back, slumping into her chair with a sigh. "You don't have to do anything with a friend. Just be. Although," she added, seeking to bring a little levity to the tense atmosphere, "this friend in particular wouldn't mind if you got on with producing that sunstroke cure." To emphasise her point, she swept a hand across her forehead. It was a little dramatic, but hopefully it would have the desired effect.

For a moment, he didn't move, but gradually his body relaxed slightly as he realised what she was trying to do. His eyes lit up with a spark of humour.

"Ah…well, in that case…" He moved over to a small shelf that she hadn't noticed before, which contained various vials. "You only had to ask." He selected a vial and held it out to her with a triumphant air. "Your cure, Miss Granger."

"Do you mean to say you already had something that would have cured me immediately?" Disbelief was followed quickly by outrage, but, not liking the glint in his eye, she grabbed the vial before he could snatch it away again. She swigged it down, winced at the bitter taste and glared at him.

He shrugged. "One of the problem with magic," he pronounced, sounding rather professorial, although he didn't really look the part in his scruffy t-shirt, jeans and bare feet, "is that one doesn't learn from one's mistakes if they are so easily cured. You've suffered and now you have a healthy respect for the Mediterranean sun. You won't make the same mistake again."

She glared even more, trying to narrow her eyes to focus on him. They suddenly seemed very heavy. "Thank you for the lesson, Professor Snape." It was hard to get the words out; they sounded slurred. *What was in that potion?*

He smirked, looking over her head, still continuing to address an invisible class. "And another problem with magic is that one tends to accept the most improbable things. Because one cannot learn *everything* about magic, one tends to rely on the…*experts*. So, for example, if one doesn't know as much as one should about potions…one tends to assume that the contents of a potion are perfectly safe…and tends to take it if told to, without even asking what the side-effects might be."

"Does *one* indeed…" she mocked, trying to prop her eyes open. The world was spinning gently in a most pleasant manner. "And will *one* explain exactly what *will* happen… in this particular case, I mean?" She had a moment to feel quite proud of the clarity of her words in the circumstances, before slumping over rather suddenly…

…and being caught by strong arms. She felt herself sliding further sideways, only stopped by a solid body. He must have fallen onto his knees to stop her fall.

"In this particular case," the voice murmured into her ear, "the potion puts the user in a coma-like state for several hours. In other words, Miss Granger, you are falling into a deep sleep. And, believe me, in the morning, you will feel very much better. It might perhaps have been better to have taken it once you'd prepared for bed, however."
"Mmmph?" Her voice was muffled by the faded blue cotton of Severus's shirt. Her limbs were completely weak – they felt as if they belonged to another person. Was this what feeling drunk felt like? She rubbed her nose against Severus's chest, briefly appreciating his unique aroma of herbs, bitter coffee and a pleasingly masculine tang of sweat, and giggled. "Who'll put me to bed, then?"

As she slipped into blissful unconsciousness, she thought she heard his voice again, sounding rather startled as if something had just occurred to him. "Well…fuck."

All in all, when she woke up some twelve hours later, feeling on top of the world, she was quite glad to raise a sheet and see that she was still dressed in yesterday's sweaty shorts and t-shirt, although he'd had the courtesy to remove her shoes and sweaty socks. And, presumably, had also carried her to bed. She flushed furiously at the thought, and then giggled. Well, you've been dreaming of being carried to his bed for years, Hermione. Perhaps not quite this way, though.

She stretched out, feeling very relaxed. The position of the sun through the curtains told her that it was at least 7 am. Which meant she'd be late starting on the digging today. The thought didn't fill her with much joy. "Bugger the digging," she muttered, mutinously.

"My sentiments exactly." Severus entered the room without knocking, a full tray balanced perilously in front of him.

"Bloody hell!" She scrambled to pull the sheets over herself, before remembering that he'd seen her dressed like this the previous night. "Don't you ever think of knocking? I might have been getting dressed!"

He raised a sceptical eyebrow. "Hardly likely, the way you collapsed last night. I know the precise effects of that potion."

He put the tray down on the dressing table. Her nose wriggled appreciatively at the steaming hot mug of tea and bacon sandwich, and she sat up, pushing her pillow behind her back. "Mmm, thank you. Yes, I meant to ask about that potion," she added casually.

His hands stilled suddenly. "Yes?" He sounded wary.

"Yes. How come you already had a potion prepared?"

"Ah, well," he looked down rather sheepishly, busying himself with an entirely unnecessary reorganisation of the tray. "I may have had a few problems myself with sunstroke in the past."

"Yes, I thought you might," she said, drily. "After all, who learns anything practical at that establishment they have the nerve to call a school?"

They looked at each other and laughed.

She showered and dressed with some excitement. It would be a relief to get out of the place for
while – not that it wasn't prettily situated, but it was a deadly quiet place, and she already missed the bustle of London.

The thought of not having to dig all day prompted her to put on a bright red sundress and strappy sandals. She realised that she had no idea what would be appropriate, but he had suggested shops might be involved, so hopefully she wouldn't be unsuitably dressed for wherever they were going. She dried her short hair quickly with a towel and combed it into submission – it had looked sleek and elegant back at the hairdressers in London, but humidity had made the curls spring back, albeit shorter and more manageable. She put on some light make-up, sighed wistfully at her reflection and grabbed her handbag.

She noticed that Severus was wearing a slightly smarter outfit – a light blue short-sleeved open-necked shirt and light cotton trousers with sandals, in place of the jeans and boots combination he seemed to have adopted since arriving in Spain. She had developed a fondness for the cowboy style herself, but he looked equally good today. He didn't always bother to cover the scar at his neck, which had faded to some extent, but today he was wearing a light cotton scarf to cover it, which looked a little old fashioned, but seemed to suit him. She noted his eyes flickering the length of her body as she appeared, and felt absurdly pleased.

He drove them north on the road back to the motorway, and then turned right, in the direction of Granada. Her excitement grew as they approached the outskirts of the city. "Are we going to the Alhambra?"

"Not quite." Noting her disappointment, he relented. "Well, not immediately, anyway." He turned off the flyover and plunged into the busy city, seeming at ease on the crowded frenetic streets. "We're going to the Albaycin. It's across the valley from the Alhambra. There's someone I've arranged to meet. But if you're really that interested, we can go there later on."

"If I'm interested! Severus, it's only one of the most amazing fortresses in the world!" She was distracted from her irritation by the increasingly narrow roads, which he was negotiating with surprising skill. It was clear he'd been here quite a few times. He reverse-parked into the narrowest of spaces on a cobbled road and grinned at her.

"To the Muggle eye, the Albaycin is the old Muslim quarter – a quaint if rather steep section of cobbled streets and old buildings. And so it is to us too, except that it also contains a small wizarding community…which we are going to visit." He got out of the car and opened her door with an old-fashioned politeness that made her eyebrows rise.

"So are they friends of yours?" she asked, as they began to walk up a steep cobbled street. The emphasis was obvious.

He frowned. "Hardly. I suppose you might describe some of them as 'useful acquaintances."

"Oh yes?"

He gave her a wry look. "As John Donne would have put it, no man is an island, entire of itself…and it's not as if I've kept entirely to myself for six months. I'd have gone mad for a start. So there are people I've got to know – Muggles - in Valenzuela, of course, and the next village along, people in shops, bars and so on. I've learnt a little Spanish along the way. But I can't entirely turn my back on the wizarding world, not if I plan to make a living from it. So, I've…cultivated a level of acquaintanceship with certain wizards and witches. There's quite a community here in Granada and in other areas east of here, in the mountains."

"And what do they know about you?" She couldn't help a niggling sense of alarm at his words as
she struggled to keep up with his long-legged stride on the uneven pavement. Perhaps the high-heel sandals hadn't been such a great idea.

He made an impatient noise. "I'm not that stupid, Hermione. I couldn't entirely hide my background – it's more than obvious that I'm an Englishman, and of course they wanted to know what's happening over there since the Dark Lord's fall. As far as they're concerned, I'm a rather eccentric – and insignificant - herbalist who tried to avoid taking sides. I suspect they think I'm rather a coward, in fact…"

"Doesn't that bother you?" She tripped slightly and put out her hands to try to stop her fall.

He turned quickly and grabbed at her elbows to steady her. As she regained her balance, he gave an impatient sigh and tucked her arm through his, matching his stride with hers.

"Bloody women and their impractical clothing choices. Which reminds me about hats… Well, time enough for that soon…" She noticed that he had cleverly avoided answering her question.

He steered her purposefully into a small, rather shabby square. In the far corner, she could see a grubby little bar, which looked as if it were closed. Severus led her towards it.

"Wait! What do I need to know about you? I mean, what's your name? What should I say about you – about me – if I'm asked?"

"Happily, the issue won't arise – not unless you've learnt fluent Spanish since we last met," was the rather caustic reply. On the flat ground of the square, he dropped her arm abruptly and now strode ahead of her.

She sighed, gritted her teeth and followed him. There didn't seem to be much of a choice, but she did wonder whether it was entirely sensible to be contacting other witches and wizards. And what if they recognised her?

Severus stopped before the bar, turned around and beckoned her on, impatiently. She took a deep breath and walked over to him, determining that they should have a serious talk before they returned to Valenzuela.
As he led Hermione towards the café, Severus had a moment to wonder at his unaccustomed recklessness. Anyone in his situation with a modicum of sense would have left Hermione behind at the cottage.

He'd worked carefully to cultivate his image as a quiet, slightly hippyish, Englishman with little interest in current politics. As far as his new acquaintances were concerned, he had hardly heard of the Golden Trio, let alone spent any time with them. It would be utter folly to be associated with one of them now. He was under no illusions as to the constancy of his new 'friends' – they might seem largely uninterested in current wizarding politics in Britain, but if they discovered they had a so-called war criminal in their midst, they wouldn't hesitate to turn him in. As far as he knew, the Ministry were as determined as ever to trace him.

So why had he brought her along?

The official reason was that he wanted her opinion on a man with whom he wished to do some business – a trader in magical supplies. He was unsure of the man himself – in fact, he wondered whether he might be a Ministry lackey working under cover, but then he was a Slytherin, and a particularly cautious one at that. He was curious to see whether Hermione would recognise the man, or whether her Gryffindor gut instinct would tell him something that might affect his decision to get involved.

There was a risk that she'd be recognised, but he strongly doubted it. As soon as Hermione had arrived a week ago and he'd noticed her change in appearance, he was convinced that the poor photograph of her that had been published in the wizarding media in Spain (it was the one taken by Rita Skeeter at the Triwizard Tournament) would not be associated with the woman he now knew. She was a world away from the frizzy-haired gawky schoolgirl he'd seen pictured in the newspapers here. Luckily, Hermione had kept a low profile after the final battle, and when she'd returned to school, Minerva MacGonagall had firmly kept the world's media away. Anyway, they'd ceased to care after a while; the intrusive media coverage of Harry and, to a lesser extent, Ron appeared to be enough for them.

The unofficial reason for bringing her on this trip was something of a surprise to him.

After she'd left him in January, he'd had a few brief moments of regret, but then he'd dedicated all his time and energy to the business of rebuilding his life. It had been a hard start – he'd had to ingratiate himself with local people, learn their language and customs and find a way of supporting himself. Hermione's initial provisions had been helpful, and he'd managed to support himself through casual labour on nearby farms and by planting a small vegetable garden. In the meantime, he'd also had to work his way through the few books on magic that he'd managed to bring with him or obtain here, painstakingly relearning his craft. He'd regained much of his former ability with potions and charms, although he struggled greatly with transfiguration (which had never been his strong point anyway) and, rather worryingly, with defensive spells. The position and layout of the hidden laboratory had taken considerable magical reserves and a lot of his time to complete. Whatever spare time he had, he'd travelled around gathering samples for experimentation.

He hadn't had much time to think of Hermione. They'd corresponded via George Weasley's joke shop at Hogsmeade, which Ron and George had purchased following the Battle in order to expand the twins' original business. She'd written enthusiastically on her studies and her plans following graduation, and he'd vaguely taken it in, but had been more interested to learn what was happening in Britain and particularly at the Ministry. He'd written back on a few occasions to ask for books,
some new laboratory equipment and some ingredients that he needed urgently, but that had been all.

In truth, he'd been a little surprised when she'd made it clear that she intended to visit – and not just to drop off the items he'd requested. He had assumed that she would wash her hands of him having more than paid him back for the help he had given the Order. Her letters had given him no indication that she intended to be anything more than an occasional and disinterested visitor in his life…and until she had returned, that had not bothered him in the slightest.

There had been that…moment in January, but he'd put it out of his mind, convincing himself that any attraction was one-sided. He was determined not to make the same mistake again – what was it about intelligent, attractive Gryffindor women?

It had actually hurt to see the sleek and stylish young woman who walked back into his life just a week ago. He didn't quite know what he had expected to see – presumably just the Hermione he remembered from January, but this… interloper wasn't that Hermione – she wasn't his Hermione.

He'd been assaulted by memories of a pale, eager face, usually free of make-up, framed by bushy brown hair that couldn't decide what style it wanted to be – hair that had a life of its own. He remembered the earnest way she would put her head on one side, chewing her lip in thought as her warm brown eyes assessed him, checking for signs of pain or weakness. The way she would hover anxiously, ever alert to the need for a helping hand, but also acutely aware of his changing moods and sensitive to his desire to be left alone. The evenings they'd spent in companionable silence – Hermione curled up in an armchair like a cat, engrossed in a book, barefoot in scruffy jeans and jumpers. Her habit of wrinkling up her little nose in deep thought whenever she came to a difficult section in her book, which he had come to recognise as a sign that she was about to ask one of her usual perceptive questions.

This Hermione felt…wrong. His nerves were jarred by her apparent assurance; her poise and elegance; the carefully glossed lips; the confidence that had led her to cut off that vibrant hair. He could hardly bear to look at her. And yet, deep in his heart, he had known it would be the case. She would grow up and she would get on with her life – just as all students did. And he wouldn't be a part of that.

But last night, he'd seen a glimpse of the old Hermione. His sparring partner, the girl who wasn't afraid to admit her feelings – who didn't hide them behind a carefully created façade of professional womanhood. The girl who had put a hand on his arm and told him that she was still there…

And he'd realised at that moment that he had missed Hermione – had missed her so deep down in his bones, in his DNA, that he hadn't even realised it on a conscious level. Hermione was just there, just him, deep in his very essence, and all this time he'd been vaguely wondering at that hollow empty feeling inside and hadn't realised what it was or why it had persisted…until it had disappeared last night when that small hand touched his arm.

Was this…friendship?

He turned towards her, aware of her steps faltering and felt a slight ache in his throat as she stood in her elegant dress - once more apart from him, and not just in a geographic sense; once more not his Hermione. He beckoned her on, in a brusque manner that hid his emotions, and saw her square her shoulders and walk towards him in her familiar, hurried and slightly school girlish manner. Even that hurt – seeing elements of the old overlaid by the new.

He held the door for her. It was cool and dark inside the bar – a relief from the harsh mid-morning
sun beating down outside. He led her towards the counter, a warning hand on her elbow. Her gait was uncertain; it was clear that she did not know the norms of a Spanish café-bar, but he could explain that away easily enough. He was already coming up with a cover story in his mind – 
daughter of a cousin back in England, just graduated and wanted to specialise in herbology, had come to see the particular challenges of horticulture in a hot country, typical English girl, speaks no Spanish. He nodded at the barman, ordered coffee for them both and led her to a table.

As their drinks arrived, her gaze passed curiously over the smoke-stained wood-panelled walls, the scuffed old tables and the tiled floor. At this time of the morning, there were few patrons – just 3 old men sitting at separate tables and a middle-aged woman, apparently selling lottery tickets, but in reality chatting enthusiastically to the bored-looking barman. In that respect, it looked exactly like a normal bar – there was no obvious sign of magical influence as there might have been in an entirely wizarding village like Hogsmeade.

"So…is this a bar for wizards only?" She spoke barely above a whisper, leaning close, and he shivered involuntarily at the warm breath that stirred his hair. As always, when disturbed by physical sensations that he'd repressed for too long, he took refuge in the provision of practical information.

"Yes, but as you can see, they don't like to advertise themselves too much. It's a different scenario here to what you're used to in Britain. In many ways, it's quite easy to hide our world from Muggles there – the average British Muggle would laugh at the very idea of magic actually existing outside their mythology and children's books. In Spain, they're not so cynical – and particularly in rural Spain. They have more of a recognition – an acceptance - of occurrences that cannot be explained away by logic. So, the magic community has to be a little more cautious. You won't find entire magical villages, apart from small hamlets in the mountains disguised as private communities. You'll find a hidden community rather like Diagon Alley in cities like Barcelona and Madrid. And there's a bigger population living in the Basque country to the north. In cities like Granada, it's a case of knowing where to go. There are shops here with entire sections at the back only visible to witches and wizards, and bars like this one, which gives the illusion of being permanently closed, just in case any Muggle pays attention to it."

"Are there no wizarding schools?"

"There's one boarding school hidden away in the countryside near Salamanca – as I say, there's a much bigger magical community up in that area. But nowhere near the size of Hogwarts. Many families in Spain send their children to Bauxbatons, the nearest of the 'real' schools of witchcraft and wizardry."

He could see she was taking in the implications. "So you can see why...he didn't pay much attention to countries like Spain. He genuinely didn't see them as a threat – his main goal was to take over Britain and, through it, to control most of Europe."

She gave him a knowing look. "And the Ministry doesn't pay much attention to Spain either."

"No, it doesn't," he agreed.

They sat in silence for a few moments. She sipped her coffee, making a slight face at its bitterness – the strength of the Spanish version was clearly not to her taste.

"So who am I here to meet?"

He flashed her a look of surprise. His breath caught in his throat at the sudden dazzling smile she gave him, her eyes sparkling with amusement.
"Well, why else am I here? It was obvious you wanted me here for a reason, and not just to buy a hat. You want my impression of someone, am I right?"

Before he could respond, the door opened and a small, unassuming-looking businessman entered with a briefcase in his hand. He greeted the barman enthusiastically, waved in the general direction of the old men, who seemed briefly enlivened by his appearance, and only then turned to acknowledge Severus.

"Tobias! Good to see you again, my friend." He spoke a fluent, heavily accented English with Severus. He usually ignored the Englishman's attempts at Spanish, his habitual excuse being that it gave him an opportunity to practice his English.

"Ah, Cesar," Severus rose to shake the man's hand. He noticed Hermione stayed in her seat, her eyes slightly narrowed at the newcomer. It was possible she was still reacting to his assumed name, but he was impressed that she gave no outward sign of surprise. In fact, she was playing the role of bored young woman rather well.

"Lucy, may I introduce to you my friend Cesario Martinez? Cesar, Lucy is my second cousin, here to help me with some work over the summer before she starts work at the Ministry."

It was a risk to mention the Ministry, but he wanted to see if the man reacted to this. As far as he could tell – absolutely nothing. Not a flicker of interest in the Ministry. Cesario was focusing his rather weary charm on Hermione. His smile as he leaned over her hand seemed genuine.

"Ah, how nice to make your acquaintance…is it Miss Prince? Do you share my friend's family name?"

Hermione shook his hand with impressive calm. "That's correct, Senor Martinez, but do please call me Lucy." Severus couldn't help an admiring glance in her direction – that response was almost Slytherin.

"And you must call me Cesar." With a sigh, he subsided into the third chair at their table and smiled at Severus. He really wasn't that bad, actually – Severus could almost count him as a kind of friend. The charm was genuine, but he worked far too hard, having a wife and six kids to support. To the outside world, he was the stereotypical Spanish salesman, and so he was to the magical community too, but he didn't trade in the usual stationery or medicines. Instead, he sold herbs and other products commonly used in magical potions across Spain. His business, run in partnership with his two brothers, spread across the entire country, with contacts through much of southern and eastern Europe.

Really, Severus had no particular reason to suspect him of anything, but the ingredients he hoped to source through this man were not the common ones, and might attract some attention. He needed to assess how trustworthy Cesar was.

He leaned casually to one side and turned slightly towards Hermione, hoping to catch her eye. She was doing that slightly sulky teenage look again, picking at her nails in apparent boredom. Cesar twinkled at her – he had teenage daughters and perhaps recognised the look.

"We must get on with our business, my friend. It seems that Lucy is keen to be elsewhere." He undid his briefcase and took out some forms, flashing a look at Severus with dark, intelligent eyes.

Severus shrugged. "She's keen to see the Alhambra." His voice dripped boredom, very much the reluctant host forced to drag a teenaged relative around with him.
"Ah," Cesar shrugged, equally expressively. "In this heat, I would recommend an evening visit. You will also miss some of the crowds, although not all, I am afraid. But I would be concerned for your well-being if you were to visit during the heat of the day, particularly with your pale English skin. I see that you have already suffered a little."

Out of the corner of his eye, Severus saw Hermione look up with sudden attention. Her mouth twitched into a reluctant smile in response to Cesar's fatherly concern for her reddened nose and neck.

"Yes, Toby has already told me off for not bringing a hat." They both laughed easily.

Severus had stiffened at her shortening of his assumed name, but relaxed as he realised it sounded suitably familiar from a young relative. Hermione grinned at him, her eyes sparkling again. She gave an almost imperceptible nod. He realised too late that they hadn't agreed on any kind of signal – for all he knew, she might be indicating that she did recognise the man as a Ministry spy. But Hermione had obviously realised that; she was now twisting a finger through the long chain around her neck. It was the chain on which she hung her enchanted Galleon, which was hidden beneath the front of her sundress, but the implication was clear. As far as she was concerned, Cesar could be trusted.

"So, Tobias." Cesar was all business now. "Do you have the list you promised?"

He made a decision. "I do." He pulled out some folded-up pages from his pocket and spread them out.

Cesar glanced down the long list, raising his eyebrows at some of the items. "Hmm. Interesting." He glanced at Severus, his eyes shrewd. "You are aware that it may take some time to source some of these? Obviously they are not all available in this country. I have contacts in Serbia… Romania…Russia…" He was muttering to himself, scribbling some notes.

"I understand. In any case, I can't afford all of them yet. I've marked the ones I'd like to get first." He leaned over the list, pointing out particular entries.

Cesar nodded. "I see. And how will you pay?"

"Cash."

Again, the knowing look. This man was no fool. Most wizards kept their gold in one of Gringotts' international branches. It was a difficult moment; Severus saw Cesar's eyes swivel momentarily to Hermione and felt his body tense. Hermione was doing a good job of looking coolly back at him, appearing utterly relaxed.

Cesar looked back at Severus for a long moment. Then, "That's fine."

That was all. The man went back to filling out his forms, noting down items and quantities on different order forms, presumably ordered by location. Severus relaxed very slightly, wondering what this might mean. Did Cesar know or guess something? Was he saying that he realised that Severus was in some way acting outside of the law and that he didn't care? Or was he trying to reassure Severus, to stop him running away? How far did the Ministry's tendrils extend? As far as a man with too many children to support and a lot of bills to pay?

Hermione shifted slightly. "Cesar, I was wondering – you recommended not going to the Alhambra until the evening? What should we do until then?"

He looked up and gave her a gentle smile. Again, she responded with one of her own, and Severus,
witnessing their affinity, felt a sudden pain in his gut, almost as if someone were twisting a knife within.

"I recommend you waste a few hours at a restaurant. There are some superb ones around here – pick one with a view of the Alhambra from a shady terrace and linger over lamb *tagines* and crepes. The time will soon pass."

She smiled. "Sounds wonderful – if you don't mind, Toby?"

"Not at all. I've been a poor host so far. The rest of the day is yours."

He thought he saw Cesar smile with approval at his words, and realised that this clever man might have seen through another of his deceptions. The man finished writing with a flourish and passed Severus's lists back to him.

"There! I will start sourcing these and meet you back here in exactly two weeks, same time and place, if that will suit?" At Severus's affirmative nod, he packed his forms away and stood up. "You'll forgive me if I hurry away? The days pass far too quickly for me, I'm afraid." He grimaced, and then focused on Hermione again. "It was delightful to meet you, Lucy, and I do hope we shall meet again."

She got up hastily and held out her hand. "Oh, so do I. Do you…" she hesitated, and then went on, rather shyly, "Are you local?"

He laughed, not at all put out by her probing. "Do you know Las Alpujarras? They are a mountain range to the southeast of here. I live in a town called Orgiva – it's a beautiful area." He hesitated for a moment, and then went on. "I do not know your plans for this summer, but if you are still staying with Tobias in two weeks' time, we could perhaps make arrangements for you to visit my family before you return to England? My wife would love to meet you."

She smiled widely. "That would be lovely, Cesar. It would be really interesting to see a wizarding community in another country."

He took both her hands in his for a moment, and again Severus felt the twist of that knife.

Cesar, seeming aware of the other man's sudden hostility, let go of Hermione and held a hand out to Severus, all business once more. "Until next time, Tobias."

"Indeed." His voice sounded gruff, and he fought to respond with greater civility. "Goodbye Cesar – and thank you."

"You are welcome." The eyes rested on him for a moment longer, and then Cesar was gone, shouting a friendly farewell to the barman.

Hermione watched him leave. "In case you had any lingering doubts, I don't recognise him," she murmured. "And he didn't appear to recognise me." She glanced at Severus, questioningly. "That's what you were worried about, wasn't it? That he was a spy? Am I right? I don't *think* he can be – not someone like him," she added, thoughtfully.

"Oh, yes?" He couldn't help the slightly acerbic tone to his voice. She looked at him in surprise, laughing.

"Oh, *please*, Tobias! What do you take me for? Come on," she grabbed his arm. "We have a hat to get, and I'm looking forward to that *tagine*."
He found himself grinning rather foolishly, his mood lightening in response. He'd taken a big risk, and seemed to have got away with it, and now here he was in a beautiful city on a sunny day, with a pretty young woman whose company he enjoyed. As they left the café, sudden realisation of his good fortune seemed to take him by surprise – his breath caught in his throat for a moment and his vision blurred briefly with – what? Tears?

He blinked them away quickly, before she should notice. She may have done anyway, as her hand tightened on his arm comfortably, but she made no comment.

The next few hours seem to fly by. They bought Hermione's hat – a big shady straw affair – and Severus took Hermione on a brief tour of the main sights in central Granada before returning to the shady lanes of the Albayzin, as suggested by Cesar. They found a suitable spot to linger over a typically long Spanish lunch, talking quietly as they sipped their drinks and contemplated the beauty of the fortress rising up before them across the narrow valley.

Hermione found the time to bring Severus up to date on events in Britain – the third of the Ministry's interim governments seemed to be on the verge of collapse, and the rumour was that Kingsley might actually bow to popular pressure to come out of his self-imposed retirement and take over. This, of course, would be good news for Severus, since Kingsley was one of the few members of the Order who had trusted him in the early days, and he was sympathetic to Harry's calls for the dismissal of the charges against him.

Afterwards, Severus had an impression of a long drowsy afternoon spent leaning back in chairs with their legs extended out in front of them, talking of past acquaintances. He made Hermione giggle with stories of the Hogwarts professors and their foibles, and didn't think he'd ever forget the peal of her laughter as she leaned back, stretching out her slim body in that red dress, her skin golden in the dappled sunshine.

Was this happiness? Was this what it was like to talk and eat and laugh with a friend, with no hidden obligations or agendas?

And then to the Alhambra. Hermione, contemplating the steep walk without much enthusiasm, made Severus drive back out on to the dual carriageway and round the city up to the fortress. They had to stand in a queue for some time, but eventually purchased their tickets and walked into the complex.

Severus, who had visited before, watched Hermione with some amusement as she perused the guide book she had bought at the entrance and chattered her way through their visit, marvelling over the beauty of the complex. They made their way to the Generalife and spent some time wandering through the water gardens, appreciating the shade and some bottled drinks, as the hot sun began to sink over the mountains.

They had purchased night tickets to the Palacio Nazaries, so walked towards to the palace at 10pm and took their time looking around and appreciating the beauty of the Islamic art and architecture.

As they left, Hermione caught her breath at the sight of Granada by night spread beneath them – a sea of twinkling lights. As she leaned over the wall to better appreciate the view, Severus was struck by an epiphany almost painful in its intensity.

I think...I think I love her.
He was frozen in place by the revelation. It seemed odd that life continued around him, like a slow-motion movie. People brushed past him, paying him no heed, children ran about laughing, and the swifts gathered about the dark tower of the fortress. Why didn't the world pause – stutter for an infinitesimal moment, just as his heart stuttered?

Hermione herself lifted her head and first smiled and then frowned at him in concern. "Severus, are you OK?"

He forced his limbs to move. "Yes, I'm fine."

In a sense, nothing had really changed. He had an odd sense that the course of his entire life had happened purely for this moment; all of his decisions and mistakes and struggles leading just to this…although his logic told him that that was a ridiculous idea.

If there was ever a moment better than this to declare his feelings, with the stars shining down on them, and the warm Mediterranean air, and the glimmer of the beautiful city behind her… and yet… And yet, something made him hesitate.

She was still frowning at him. "You look a bit pale. It's been a long day – do you want me to drive back?"

"No, no, I'll be fine." But it was true that he did suddenly feel exhausted – as if all the stresses and happiness and emotions of the day had leached all the energy out of his body. And she looked as fresh and full of vitality as she had that morning, as he stared at her rather helplessly, feeling every second of his almost-forty years. Folly…such folly, Severus.

Her eyes softened. "Let's go ho… back to the cottage," she corrected herself, hastily.

"Yes. Let's do that." And he trailed her back to the car park, thinking of her slip and wondering whether, for her, the cottage would ever be 'home'.

There's a new tension at the cottage... Usual disclaimers apply - belongs to JKR.

The next fortnight was hell for Severus.

On the surface, all seemed to go on as before. He passed much of the time in his laboratory, while Hermione diligently continued to prepare his land for planting – even joking that she'd developed a taste for the job and might offer herself as an apprentice to Neville Longbottom. Severus nodded, smiled - and felt like hell.

It might have helped if he'd had the least idea of how to talk to her about his feelings – heck, talk to any woman about them – but Severus quickly discovered that he had no idea how to proceed. He had no experience of romantic relationships – his adolescent obsession with Lily could hardly be counted.

He could talk for hours about the healing properties of plants and the importance of getting the correct speed for the clockwise stirring needed to perfect the Felix Felicis potion, but when it came to talking about personal feelings, it just needed a glimpse of those warm brown eyes focusing on his face for him to turn into a stammering idiot. So he did what he'd always done when faced with emotional situations – hid behind sarcasm or, when required, professorial formality.

And the hell of it was that Hermione seemed completely oblivious. She just moved about the place with that age-old, innocent and yet knowing, air of inaccessible women everywhere. That didn't change – that was universal, as far as he could tell.

In a matter of just a couple of weeks, Severus had moved from a position of being alone and by-and-large happy with it, or at least resigned, to one of being acutely aware of her. His senses seemed to be permanently attuned - at any given time, he either knew exactly where she was or he yearned to know, finding excuses for running up the steps from his laboratory to check on her progress or inventing reasons why she needed to be working alongside him. And that was sweet torture too – the slightest brush of an arm could cause the hairs on the back of his hand to quiver.

In her ratty old t-shirt and cut-offs, she looked perfect - peeling nose, scabby knees and all. When did that happen? How had he got through her first week without noticing the way she pushed her sweaty fringe off her forehead, that particular habit of wrinkling her nose when concentrating, the way she would stretch up, revealing a strip of pale stomach…and all without breaking out in a cold sweat and feeling his heart speed up?

At times, everything seemed OK – they'd laugh over one of Hermione's remembered mishaps from her school days, or would talk enthusiastically over a minor breakthrough in one of Severus's experiments (he was trying to create more effective treatments for wounds caused by dark spells). On those occasions, he felt an almost painful pleasure in her company, and tried to convince himself that yes, this could be enough – he could carry on with just friendship; with the precious companionship that he had developed with his ex-student - the young Gryffindor – which would have been unthinkable to him such a short time ago.
At other times, he fought against a strange biting anger towards her – half-fearing she was toying with him as part of some elaborate plan to avenge Potter's mother. At night, he lay on his back, contemplating the ceiling and straining to hear her measured breathing (for some reason, she always slept with the heavy door firmly shut, however hot it was). His sleep suffered, and he grew sallow and heavy with tiredness. It was almost like the worst periods of his time in service to Dumbledore and the Dark Lord – days spent teaching imbeciles and nights spent working on potions for Voldemort. No matter how hard he tried, he spent hours lying awake, thinking through the possibilities.

What would she say – how would she react? She had wanted him once, but then, at that stage, she'd been an impressionable adolescent, half-starved and exhausted from a year on the run, and she knew nothing of the real him. Even later, after being forced to care for him in the most intimate manner, it had been clear that there was some attraction. There'd been that moment in January – and his mind lingered on it with ever-greater intensity - but then she'd backed off…hadn't she? Had started spouting some rubbish about Weasley. Had she been trying to protect his feelings or her own? But, in any case, even if she'd had some feelings for him at that stage, she'd changed so much since then. She'd grown up in the last six months. She viewed him with an adult, worldlier, eye now – he was no longer the professor with superior knowledge and greater magical power. In fact, she was far more powerful now.

He didn't think he could bear the look of embarrassment – of pity – that he expected to see on her face if he said anything. Stupid, stupid, stupid….he rolled onto his side, covering his ears, desperate to block out the mocking little voice in his head and seek solace in sleep for a few hours.

He'd get up from a night of disturbed repose and look at himself in the bathroom mirror with disgust. Just a lanky, unshaven, skinny collection of bad habits. The face was rather less pale, but the thin lips and beaky nose remained. The hair was as lank and greasy as ever, no matter what he tried to do with it – his best bet was to keep it short, but then that just emphasised his ugly face.

But it wasn't just his lack of physical attractiveness. The face that stared back at him each morning looked far, far older than its thirty-nine years. He could easily have passed for fifty. His eyes were made prominent by dark circles; his forehead and the corners of his mouth were marked by permanent creases that spoke eloquently of his years of stress and broken sleep. The livid scar at his neck leered at him. He was sensitive of it, and sought to cover it with a scarf when he was out, but still…there it was. And it wasn't the only scar, or even the worst. Voldemort had found many ways to demonstrate his displeasure over the years…and Severus had been his favourite whipping boy on too many occasions to number.

There was also his physical health to consider. What kind of life expectancy did his abused body have? Nagini's poison had appeared to retreat eventually, thanks to Hermione's ministrations, leaving him alive and reasonably healthy, if magically damaged. But did it still remain? Would it strike him down when he least expected it? Did he want someone as bright and intelligent as his Hermione to be wasting the prime of her life caring for a helpless, worthless invalid?

But more than that…there were the nightmares that still assailed him from time to time. His bitter, destructive moods that could strike at any time – the black depression that made him curse the wall and drink himself into unconsciousness to try to forget for a few hours… His father's abuse…his mother's indifference…Lily's abandonment – and her death…the blood-spattered violence and insidious evil of his Death Eater years… All had contributed to make him what he was – a bitter, deeply damaged individual with an icy indifference to most of his acquaintances and a deep pathological hatred, bordering on violence, for some.

If she could see inside his mind, if she could see what he had seen – worst still, what he had done –
all those years… She'd *hate* him.

He couldn't, *wouldn't*, let that happen. It was folly. To corrupt that brilliant, beautiful young women – to turn her into a sad shadow of her former self… Worse still, to turn her into his mother – wasted, worn out, emotionally drained. If he did that, he would deserve the worst kind of death.

No. It was all pointless, foolish, ridiculous…and deeply unlikely, anyway.

During the day, he tried to carry on as normal. In the little kitchen, as they prepared meals, he'd take longer routes around the room just to avoid contact, ignoring her confusion over his body language – he'd been no great respecter of her personal space in the past. As they sat over glasses of wine, late into the night, he'd launch into lectures on the properties of various potions he hoped to deliver, just to avoid the conversation leading to anything more personal.

Ironically, she didn't seem to mind that at all, absorbing new information with her usual rapacity, but there were moments when she seemed slightly bewildered by his behaviour – those big eyes would be turned upon him with a sharp, all-seeing gaze. Once or twice, she seemed on the verge of saying something, but then she'd withdraw again, looking troubled.

At times, tiredness and frustration made him snippy, even cruel with her. Then the hurt in her eyes made him over-compensate – cooking elaborate meals; transfiguring flowers into bouquets for her room; squeezing lemons to make lemonade and leaving glasses of it with cooling charms on them places where he knew she would be working next; abandoning experiments to drive her down to Lake Bermejales for a cooling swim in the turquoise waters whenever she complained about the heat. He knew he was giving her mixed messages and confusing her even further, but he just didn't know how to solve the problem – his clumsy tongue would stutter over the words, even in the privacy of his own mind.

They met Cesar again two weeks' later, as planned, and Hermione talked Severus into accepting an invitation to have lunch with the Spaniard's family the following day. They made an early start, driving across the arid agricultural plains to the relatively green landscape of the Alpajurras range. Severus had never ventured this far and shared Hermione's wonder at the beauty of the high mountains and shaded valleys. They drove high into the mountains to the upper villages, collecting various plant samples, before returning to the town of Orgiva.

They found Cesar and his wife Beatrix – local nurse to Muggles and unofficial healer to the local magical population – waiting for them at a rambling house at the edge of town with stunning views over a gorge, together with their four teenage daughters and two younger sons. Lunch was the usual prolonged affair, and Severus, Hermione and the older members of the Martinez family sat on with cool drinks in the shady garden, talking quietly together as the sun began to sink behind the mountains.

Finally, Hermione and Severus made their escape, with various wrapped provisions from Beatrix, Hermione having made a promise to return soon.

As they drove away, Severus reflected on what this might mean. How long was she planning to stay? July was flying away, and then there was only August before she would have to return…if she really meant to take up her new job at the Ministry.

The very fact that she would willingly accept employment from that corrupt organisation left a bitter taste in his mouth. It didn't even *seem* like her to want to go into Ministry work. Part of him didn't believe she would actually turn up on her first day – at any time, he expected her to announce a revised plan to go into postgraduate studies (incidentally, there *was* a good institution in Salamanca which would suit very well), go into a career as a healer (the *excellent* magical hospital...
in Seville might be a possibility) or even apprentice herself to MacGonagall (which would not be his preferred option).

The atmosphere in the car was tense. In the past, they could have spent hours in comfortable silence, but the warm air buzzed with what was left unsaid. He knew she wanted him to ask her about her plans. It was possible she even wanted to sound him out on whether she should go ahead and take up the job she'd been offered, or maybe she wanted him to talk her out of it? But something – pride? fear? - held his tongue.

Back at the cottage, they wandered into the small sitting room. Hermione moved to the bookshelves and fingered the volumes rather aimlessly, as Severus threw himself into his usual chair.

She cleared her throat, breaking the silence. "She was lovely, wasn't she? Beatrix, I mean."

"Hmm." He stared ahead, looking at nothing, but caught the quick movement of her head as she glanced in his direction.

"She must be much respected locally, but it must be hard to work as a community nurse within the mainstream Muggle health care system without revealing more than she should." Her voice was slightly dreamy; he recognised the sign that she was thinking deeply about something while talking. "I suppose she brings some of her knowledge into her holistic care… I'd love to shadow her someday – see how she does it…"

"Rather pointless if you're not going into healing, isn't it." It was a statement and not a question. His voice was brusquer than he had intended – so much so that she jumped.

"Oh, so you are interested in my plans after all, then?" She spoke lightly but with a dangerous tension in her tone. "After all, I've only been here – what? Three weeks now? And you've never even asked about my new job. God forbid that my future should be of any interest to you, whatsoever."

"Perhaps I assumed that it was none of my business," he muttered.

"None of your… Oh, of course not! Why should it be any of your business what your friend does with her life?" Again, she spoke in a jokey manner, but he risked a look in her direction and saw the two red spots in her cheeks that indicated repressed annoyance. Well, here it comes, Severus.

"What difference would what I think make, anyway?" he snapped. "You've obviously made up your mind. You know how I feel about the Ministry – do you suppose I'd be glad to learn that you're about to become one of their overpaid lackeys?"

He refused to look in her direction, but he felt her eyes piercing him.

"Is that what this is about? Is it? Severus, look -."

She stepped towards him, lifting a tentative hand towards his arm, but he evaded it by getting up and stepping away from her – he didn't think he'd be able to control himself right now if she touched him. He heard a gentle sigh, and she began again, speaking carefully, as if to a nervy child.

"Severus, look, I know that things have been a little difficult for you…” He snorted, but she carried on, "but, but, don't you see? With me working inside the Ministry, there'll be even more pressure to clear your name."

"And you expect me to believe that that's the sole reason you took that job?"
"Well no, not entirely but…well, what do you expect? I need to work – I need the money."

"And you were just *aching* to work in Magical Law Enforcement, weren't you?" Sarcasm gave his words an edge.

"Well, I-"

"They head-hunted you, didn't they?" he sneered. "They'd already got two of the Golden Trio within their clutches, and now they've got you right where they want you."

She flushed, angrily. "It wasn't like that!"

"What was it, then? What made you go into law? You, of all people, who could work anywhere you choose?"

"Well, yes, it's true that I was approached for the role-"

"With a nice salary too, no doubt."

"Yes, alright! With a nice salary too! It's not as if I have endless amounts of money – I've had to live off whatever money my parents had already given me before I removed their memories! And having to fund you hasn't helped either."

The fury rose in him again – her words felt like an accusation. "I didn't ask you to spend all your money on me."

She sighed. "I know you didn't. And I didn't mean to complain. I *wanted* to help – I still *do*. Which is why it seemed like a good idea to get a job at the Ministry."

He grimaced. "Just like Potter and Weasley before you."

She laughed, but it wasn't a pleasant sound. "And here we go again. It always comes back to Harry and Ron, doesn't it? You just *can't* accept it, can you?"

"Accept what?" His mouth was suddenly dry – his tongue like sandpaper.

"My friendship with them!" Her voice rose, almost hysterically. "You just can't *bear* it, can you, Severus? You've never liked Ron, and Harry reminds you too much of his father, and you can't unbend your rigid arse enough to accept that sometimes people are not the way you paint them! You *cannot* – *will not* – see the good in - in anyone - will you, Severus?"

Shaking with sudden rage, he turned around and strode towards her. Before she could respond, he grabbed her arms and pulled her towards him.

"Can you blame me? When has *anyone* thought about *my* feelings?" He almost bellowed the words at her.

Her face was blanched white, her eyes dark with shock. "Severus -," she began, but he wouldn't hear her. He felt the familiar red mist descending in front of his eyes.

"All my life – *all my life, Hermione!* – I've been kicked, beaten, spat on, laughed at, taken for a fool, treated like the *dirt* under their feet! You think I've never heard the comments? *Snivellous - hooked-nosed greasy bat - dungeon rat – murderer - coward.*" He spat the words at her. "Even *dead*, my name is vilified by those disgustingly over-paid and under-worked minions of a corrupt, utterly inefficient and cowardly ministry. No one *cares* about me – no one has *ever* cared about
me, not even Dumbledore, for all his pretend friendship, I was just another pawn in his game with Voldemort. *Not one person.* Even your precious Potter and Weasley only helped me because they felt guilty. So why should I care about *them?*

"*I care about you."

Her voice was quiet, but her eyes were stark and her body trembling with tension. She'd tried to struggle when he'd first got hold of her, but was now still beneath his hands.

The red began to fade and he saw her face close to his. He realised he was gripping her arms tight enough to bruise. He let his hands drop in horror. His chest felt tight – *why was it so tight? Why couldn't he breathe?* Staggering away from her and twisting slightly to hide his face, he felt his knees buckle beneath him. He crashed down onto his knees, gasping for breath. He was suddenly aware of moisture dripping onto his leg and realised he was crying.

"Get away from me." His voice didn't sound like his own – it was tight and choked. "Get away from me – I mean it, Hermione. You don't know – you've never seen me like this." He clenched his fists; could feel the blackness descending, almost like a shroud. This was a bad one, as bad as he could ever remember.

"*No.*"

His eyes opened with shock.

He realised her face was still very close to him – she hadn't moved back when he'd let go of her, and now she knelt on the floor in front of him. With the slightest movement, he could grab the back of her head, press his lips against hers and plunder her sweet mouth with his tongue…or, alternatively, he could bring up his fist and smash it into her face – he could almost *feel* the shattering of bones and the spattering of blood…

He shuddered at the image, hunching up away from her. "Get away from me…*please…*"

"*No.*" Hands grabbed as his face, forcing his chin up. "No, damn you, *no* – you will *not* turn away from me this time."

And suddenly it was *she* who grabbed *his* head, and he felt dry, chapped lips on his, moving harshly across the corner of his mouth in an awkward, inexperienced manner. It was a chaste kiss and quickly over, and then she pulled his face into her shoulder, and he felt his chest expanding - exploding with the grief of years and years of loneliness, horror, humiliation and resentment. The objective part of him heard a strange anguished howling and wondered briefly who was making it.

His arms came up, seeking blindly, until she grabbed them and pulled them around her and threw her own arms around his shoulders, sinking slightly to straddle his lap. She rocked him slightly, murmuring something soothing as he shuddered and sobbed unrestrainedly into her shoulder.

They clung together for several minutes – or possibly hours; he had no real idea of the passing of time.

Gradually, his breathing eased and evened out as he calmed. She seemed to try to move away; sensing this, his grip tightened as he tried to bury his face deeper into her. Suddenly her hand came up to his head again and she pushed until his face sunk down onto her breasts. He breathed in the scent that was so peculiarly and perfectly *her* – the scent of fresh grass and parchment and the shampoo she used, and underneath it something salty and womanly that excited as much as it calmed. He felt himself harden, and knew she felt it too – she made a low indistinct sound in her
throat and her hips ground against him in automatic response.

He exhaled deeply against her breast and felt her shiver slightly, her nipple tightening as he breathed across it. She was bra-less under a sun top and he felt the blood rush to his loins as he saw its pinkness through the white cotton, emphasised even more as she gasped and arched her back, leaning her head back.

He licked across it with his tongue, watching in fascination as the wet cotton adhered to the taut flesh. She moaned and bucked against his hips fiercely. Her hand came down and grabbed his wrist and, for a moment, he thought she would push him away, but she brought it up and put his hand on her other breast, gasping as he stroked his thumb over it.

He lifted his head slightly, saw that long, white, sinuous neck that had haunted him for the last fortnight and ran his tongue up over the sheen of sweat to rest on her pulse. Under his questing hand, he could feel her heart hammering and knew his own heart had speeded up in response.

"Oh, God, Severus, do something – please…"

Her sudden exclamation brought him out of himself. He sat up, taking her shoulders to move her back, so he could see her face. She was flushed, biting her lower lip, her eyes almost black with arousal.

"What do you want?"

"I want you." To emphasise the last word, she ground her pelvis into his erection again.

He closed his eyes automatically and drew a deep breath to calm himself. He couldn't help reacting, rocking his hips in an age-old rhythm, but part of his brain stubbornly refused to play along. "Why?"

"Why? Bloody hell, Severus, what's wrong with you?" She stopped her movement, peering down at him in astonishment. "You can't pretend you're not interested, and I'm certainly keen. Why not?"

And it was a good question, and he might have taken her right then, right now, against the sitting room wall. His body was craving it – the sudden rush of emotions seemed to have woken up something that had lain dormant in him for years. His erection strained upwards, painfully restrained in his jeans, and his fingers twitched to undo the zip and release it; to pull her down onto him. Yes, this was what he wanted and, by some miracle, she wanted it too, and to hell with the whole bloody lot of them.

He might have done just that, but that she chose that moment to lean forward and kiss him. Again, he was struck by the inexperienced, slightly messy way that she mashed her lips against his. He leaned into the kiss for a moment, letting her direct it, before pushing her away again.

"You've never done this before." It was not a question.

She hesitated, putting her hand flat against his chest, and then lifted her eyes to meet his directly. "No. Does that bother you?"

He felt a sudden, hysterical desire to laugh. Hardly. "Not really. But I'm not sure what you really want. Do you want me - me?"

She regarded him, seriously, her hands dropping to his. "You think you're not desirable?"

"Hermione, look at me." He was pleading with her; trying to get her to see. "I mean, really – is this
what you want?"

His hands gestured automatically at his throat, and her eyes followed. Before he could stop her, she lunged forward and pressed her lips against Nagini's scar.

"Hermione…oh God, Hermione…"

Her lips scorched a trail over the livid flesh before her tongue came out and followed the same route, lingering on the over-sensitised nerve endings in the scar tissue and making them sing. He shuddered and clutched at her, helplessly, unable to stop the cry that escaped him.

She hesitated. "Did I hurt you?"

"No…oh God, no…don't stop, oh please don't stop," he managed to stammer out, as he grabbed her head and pulled it down again. Taking the hint, she opened her mouth again and sucked at his neck.

He moaned loudly. "You want me, you really want me…" The notion made him dizzy, and he fell back, hitting his head hard against the wall.

Instantly, she stopped again, looking up in concern. "Are you -."

It was as far as she got before his mouth descended onto hers, hard and bruising. She gasped and, as her mouth opened, his tongue plunged in, exploring her, tasting her, catching her breath. As he withdrew suddenly, her tongue followed and he sucked it into his mouth, swallowing the little breathy sounds she was making deep in her throat.

His hands ran quickly down her back to grab her hips and he lifted her in one movement up onto his lap once more. She shivered and pulled herself tightly against him, winding her hands around his neck, so they were pressed together from breast to thigh.

He released her mouth, gentling his kisses slightly. "Hermione…" he breathed against the corner of her mouth before nipping at it lightly. "Hermione, if this goes any further …"

"Don't stop, Severus, oh please don't stop," she gasped, and it was all the encouragement he needed. As he captured her mouth again, his hands came up to fumble at the straps of her top; at the same time, she began to pull insistently at the hem of his t-shirt.

There was a sudden thump in the kitchen, making them jump. His hands stilled on her top.

"What was that?"

Still hazy with lust, she pulled him back towards her. "Forget it, it's not important…"

Reluctantly, he pulled her hands off him; lifting her off. His senses alert, he jumped up, grabbing his wand from the armchair as he passed it.

There was a tiny, rather disgruntled-looking owl in the kitchen, which gave him a rather baleful look but brightened slightly as Hermione peered over his shoulder.

"Oh, it's Pig!" She reached out a hand and the owl hopped onto it, pecking very gently at her finger. At Severus's perplexed expression, she elaborated, "I mean Pigwigeon. He's Ron's owl."

"Really?" he muttered, giving the owl a sceptical once-over before looking at the table. There lay a scroll with Hermione's name on it.
"Yes. Looks like he brought a letter." She frowned, picking it up. "I'm surprised that Ron has bothered to write; I assumed they were still living it up in Rio."

She turned away from him, absentmindedly pulling up her strap as she moved back into the sitting room.

He sighed, rolling his eyes. Trust Weasley to ruin the mood. His much-abused erection subsided once more – at this rate, a cold shower might be required. Shifting uncomfortably in his tight jeans, he resisted the urge to follow her and turned to the fridge. There should be some beer in there…

She suddenly darted back into the room, her face pale. "I have to leave – I need to get back to England at once."

"What?" He felt his senses unravel. "Why, what's happened?"

"I'm not sure – I need to see…" Her mind was already elsewhere; she turned away from him rather wildly, hurrying towards the bedroom.

He turned to follow her, then stopped. Her letter had fluttered to the floor. The edges were starting to crackle; it had been charmed to burn after being read. He knelt next to it, just making out one line before the paper twisted into ashes:

-please come back as quickly as you can, Mione, I need you-

That was all, but it was enough. He felt the nausea rising in his throat; the poison burning his veins. Even after all that had happened, he'd know that ungodly scrawl anywhere. Weasley…

So, all this time, she'd been playing him for a fool. Weasley was waiting for her; Weasley wanted her, so of course she would run to him. Weasley – the golden boy, the young man, the hero of the Final Battle… Had they already kissed; was she with him? Would she laugh at him when she was back with Weasley and Potter; would she tell them that he was stupid enough to think that she actually wanted him?

He stood up, frozen into position by the table. He could hear her clattering around in his bedroom, flinging clothes and toiletries into her bag. As she brought it back into the kitchen, she muttered a charm and it shrank down to pocket size. She'd changed into more suitable clothes for the cooler UK summer and was very much the organised, practical Miss Granger that he knew so well. There was no sign of the passionate woman he had been kissing just a few minutes ago, apart from slightly swollen lips.

He stared at her in disbelief. Surely she wasn't just going to leave, as if nothing had happened?

"I shall have to apparate from here. Damn!" She hit her forehead. "The hire car, I'd forgotten…"

"I'll get it towed back to Malaga," he replied, evenly, watching her like a hawk. She didn't seem to be able to meet his eyes, looking anywhere but at him. Guilt was written all over her, and he felt the anger rise in him again as he remembered those words - please come back, I need you…

"Thank you." She sounded strangely formal.

"You're welcome, Miss Granger." He bit the words out.

She looked up at that, her eyes narrowing as she took in his dangerously calm stance. "I know you can't understand – and I can't explain…"
"Why not?" He folded his arms, leaning against the table. "I think we've probably reached the stage where we should be able to tell each other anything."

She blushed at the reminder of the last few heated moments. "I...I'm sorry, this is different – I can't..." She looked away again for a moment, and when she looked back, the mask was firmly in place again. "I must go, but we'll talk, I promise. I'll come back."

"Maybe you shouldn't."

"Oh?"

He sighed, looking away from her. "Well, you've got your new, wonderful job to plan for, and I'm sure Weasley and Potter have missed you this summer. And, after all, I'm going to be very busy here over the next few months."

"Severus?" She grabbed his arm, forced him to face her. "What are you saying? I don't understand, I thought you could see that I...that I..."

"That you what?" He took her shoulders and peered into her face. "Really, Hermione, what do you want from me? If we hadn't been interrupted tonight, what would have happened? Would you have given up your career, your life, for me?"

"I..." She was clearly struggling to work out what to say. "I don't know – I can't...I can't think right now!" This last was shouted, and she pulled away from him.

"Well, perhaps you need to," he suggested, very calmly. "Perhaps you need to take a little time to work out what you really want."

"Severus, please-" She put her hands out to him, imploringly, but he brushed her aside.

"You need to go...now Hermione. Go now, and don't come back until you know what you want. Please don't play games with me." His voice was deliberately hard, and he turned his back, not wanting her to see his face.

He heard something that sounded like a sob. Before he could respond, there was a blur of movement and, when he looked around, she was gone.

His legs couldn't support him anymore. He sank down onto the floor, amidst the charred remains of the letter. He felt numb...cold. He rubbed his forehead and looked at his thin hands, blankly.

She'd go back, and there he'd be – young, whole, perfect, uncomplicated Ron Weasley. She'd be traumatised and he'd be there to catch her. Sweet proximity and the loving arms of the Weasley clan. Oh yes, he saw it all too well...

It was six weeks before her letter arrived. Severus had just returned from a shopping expedition and was hauling a sack of provisions through the front door when he saw the owl. Pig again, of course. He found a few scraps of bacon for the creature and watched it fly away. Glancing at the scroll and seeing his name in her neat script, he turned away and carried on unpacking his food.

Having done that, he made himself a cup of coffee and then carefully cleaned the units. Only then did he pick up the letter. He carried it, along with his coffee to the wooden table and chairs on the outside terrace.
He sat down, looking at the view that had become so familiar to him. She was responsible for this – she’d transfigured the stone steps into a terrace that stretched around the cottage, taking advantage of the panoramic views and then had driven into Alhama de Granada to buy the table and chairs, arguing that he should take full advantage of the cool evenings to sit outside. She’d decorated the chairs with yet more of those infernal cushions, and they’d sat outside in the heat of July with cool bottles of beer. He remembered her laughing at the clichéd image of the English abroad…

He hunched his shoulders, mentally pushing the image away, and opened the letter.

My dear Toby, it began. He paused, appreciating the caution that compelled her to stick to his assumed name. Any lingering doubt that the letter came from Hermione was immediately dispelled. He felt a brief rush of pleasure at the word 'dear', although the logical part of his brain pointed out that it was merely a convention.

He began reading again.

My dear Toby,

I know we parted on bad terms, and I hate to think you may be thinking the worst of me. Believe me, I wanted to stay longer with you this summer, and I hope that my early departure didn't cause you too much trouble, and that the planting can go ahead as planned.

The truth is that something rather dramatic and unexpected happened. It appears that, all the time I was finishing my year at Hogwarts, Ron had a surprise up his sleeve. He and Percy have been working all this time to track down my parents! Percy, can you imagine? He even travelled to Perth to track them down. A few weeks ago, he contacted Ron to say he had found them, and Ron wrote to say he needed me to go with him to Australia and reverse my spell.

I can't believe that Ron would do that – truly he amazes me sometimes. There's so much more to him than meets the eye. I saw it during that last year on the run, but even more so now.

It was such a difficult thing to do, Toby, and I wish I'd been able to confide in you. The truth is, I hadn't decided whether or not I should reverse the spell. Part of me wanted to move on – and it felt easier somehow to do that without the past interfering. Do you understand what I mean? I think you probably do…you often understand me better than I do myself, I think. I sound incredibly selfish, don't I?

Well, to cut a long story short, Ron and I met Percy out there, and...well, I don't really want to bore you with the details. All I can say is that it wasn't much fun – they were incredibly upset about what I'd done to them and what we'd all gone through in the last couple of years. They came back to the UK with me, and that was difficult too – they'd sold our house and their business, so they had nothing left, really. They've had to take more junior positions in dental surgeries, just to get established in the UK again. I let my flat go, and we're living together in a rented house in Surrey. The atmosphere is not all that great, to be honest. They're still quite bitter, and they want nothing to do with the Weasleys or Harry. If I meet the boys, I have to make some excuse – pretend I had to work late, or something. It hurts to know they don't trust me. Sometimes, I wish Ron hadn't bothered – but then, I feel guilty, because I know he meant it for the best. But it's just that I feel beholden again, Toby, and I hate it.

Do I sound like a terrible daughter? I feel like one, anyway. Although, when I think of your own relationship with your parents, I feel bad for complaining. At least they still love me.

Anyway, I wanted you to know what happened. That last night, there was something between us
that I wanted to – well, I won't embarrass you, but I know you felt something too. It wasn't just me, was it? I know I took advantage of you when your emotions were overwhelming you, and I'm sorry – I never wanted things to happen that way. But I can't bring myself to regret it, all the same.

Toby, whatever else there might be between us, now or in the future, I want you to know that I value your friendship immensely. I miss you. It's been a miserable September – grey and drizzly - and I miss our evenings watching the sun set behind the hills, arguing about politics and philosophy over a glass of wine. I don't suppose you miss my irritating questions! But I hope I was of some use to you this summer, and I also hope you won't object if I visit you again sometime, although I'm not sure exactly when. It may depend on how soon my parents sort themselves out.

I hope you will pass on my good wishes to Cesar and Beatriz and the children. I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to see them again, and I hope they don't think me rude for not saying goodbye. I trust you to know what, and how much, to tell them about me.

Please write and tell me how the work is going. I know you'll be in touch with some very good friends of ours on business matters, but I'd love to hear from you too.

Take care, and I look forward to meeting again soon.

With love,

Hermione

He read the letter through again and then folded it and placed it in a pocket. He leaned back in his chair and gazed over the hills, unseeingly.

It was a carefully crafted letter. She didn't give much away – whether that was because she was afraid it might get into the wrong hands, he didn't know. Or perhaps she was unsure of his feelings? That soon was very ambiguous – it didn't give him any idea of when she really meant to see him again.

What he didn't know then – and it might have killed him if he had - was that he wouldn't see her again for five years...
December 1999

The frost glittered on the holly bushes clustered around the muddy field on the outskirts of the small Devon village. The village was almost silent – it was a Saturday afternoon about 2 weeks before Christmas, and most of its inhabitants were either stocking up at the large shopping centre in Exeter or busy cooking batches of mince pies and putting the finishing touches to their Christmas decorations. The only noise came from the pretty parish church, where the local choir were preparing for Midnight Mass.

There was a sudden *pop* and two young women apparated behind the bushes. The taller of them looked cautiously over the hedge, before relaxing, with a sudden giggle.

"Thank Merlin for that… I thought I was going to go *mad.*"

The other gave her a wry look. "You love it really."

Her companion shuddered. "Not when Mum is in full flow. I can't believe the wedding's in three weeks. Mum's going to be *impossible* until it's all over." She sighed. "It's at times like this that I wish I'd gone along with Harry's suggestion that we elope. Thanks for rescuing me, Hermione."

Hermione shrugged. "Well, I *did* want to see the house. Somehow, I can't visualise you living here, though, Ginny."

The two jumped over a ditch and joined the road leading into the sleepy village. The few people out and about on errands gave them a curious look. Ginevra Weasley was as striking as ever – tall and slim with that enviable mane of shining red hair hanging loose down her back – but Hermione also stood out in her trendy clothes and high heeled boots. They were obviously urbanites and stood out as such. One or two people, some of whom were oddly dressed, did a double-take at the sight and then smiled warmly at them both.

Hermione looked around with extra interest as it occurred to her that at least half of the populace recognised them. The last time she'd been here, it hadn't been a good idea to advertise oneself as a witch or wizard, but it was clear that the magical community was flourishing now, although the Muggles seemed as oblivious as ever to their presence…astonishing considering the way some of them dressed.

She'd last been in Godric's Hollow on Christmas Eve two years ago in very different circumstances. In the distance, she saw the War Memorial that she remembered from then – as she looked, it turned briefly into the famous statue of James, Lily and the infant Harry that was only visible to the wizarding community. Something struck her.

"So is Harry happy about moving here? It hasn't got very good memories for him, has it?"

Ginny frowned. "I was a bit surprised. Frankly, I'd have been happy to stay on at Grimmauld
"Why don't you, then?" It did seem a bit odd to Hermione. Harry seemed to have settled down in the old Black residence – he'd modernised considerably and had been able to spend quite a lot of time clearing the house of the old spells that plagued it. The atmosphere had changed a lot; Hermione would have been happy to live there herself. Ginny currently spent most of the week in Wales as the newest team member of the Holyhead Harpies, and Harry was often away on Auror missions, but she had had visions of the newlyweds living in cozy domesticity at weekends, with herself and Ron coming around for Sunday lunch. It felt right, somehow.

Ginny was silent. She stopped by a cobbled path, which led to a small cottage with a thatched roof, set back by itself from the main street. "Here we are – this is it." She walked down the path and Hermione followed. It was almost impossibly pretty – the cottage was blessed with a large garden, at the end of which a small stream separated the cottage from farm fields.

"Oh Gin, its lovely," she exclaimed, eyeing up the surrounding land with an eye that was slightly more expert since her experiences last summer. What Severus couldn't do with land like this – so rich and fertile, and so much easier to work than the baked earth of southern Spain! "You could grow your own vegetables here."

The younger woman shuddered. "Please – don't. Not my idea of fun."

Hermione grinned – Ginny was well-known for her dislike of anything involving manual outside work. "You'll have to invite Neville to stay every now and then, so he can sort it out for you."

She glanced at her companion with concern. The girl looked rather lost and out of place in this rural location. Since graduation, Ginny had embraced her new life as a young woman in London. Ignoring her mother's plaintive requests to stay at home until the wedding, she'd moved in with Harry and had discovered the joys of all-night clubbing. It was only when it became obvious that too much of a good thing was not conducive to a successful professional Quiddich career that Ginny had calmed down slightly.

The point was that Hermione had never known Ginny to be anything other than lively. She had an endless coltish energy that seemed far more suited to London or a muddy Quiddich field than to a quiet country village. Right now, she seemed frozen in place, looking at nothing in particular.

Hermione shivered and hugged herself. "It's a bit nippy out here," she pointed out. "Shall we go in?"

Ginny shook herself out of her silent contemplation of the landscape. "Of course." She unlocked the front door and led Hermione inside, waving her hand at the fireplace to start a blaze. "There – we'll soon warm up."

Molly had already stocked the cupboards, so the girls had no trouble locating coffee and a pack of biscuits, and they were soon curled up in cosy armchairs in front of the fire. Hermione sighed in appreciation as she took a sip.

"Now this is so much better than trying on bridesmaid outfits."

Ginny laughed. "Well, you shouldn't have left it so late. It's not as if you've not had enough notice."

Hermione grimaced. "It's not been all that easy to get away…" She stared moodily into the fire.

Ginny gave her a sympathetic look. They were all aware of the problems Hermione had been having with her parents since their return. They'd become paradoxically over-protective of their
daughter and jealous of her spare time. It was hard for Hermione to slip away without telling them where she was going to go, and they were not reconciled to the Weasleys – apparently blaming Molly and Arthur for 'allowing' Hermione to go on her year-long adventure with Harry and Ron.

It didn't help that Hermione still suffered occasionally from the after-effects of the Cruciatus curse administered to her by Bellatrix Lestrange, which gave her shooting pains in her arms and legs, particularly in cold weather. Her parents bitterly resented the boys for her capture and brief torture. Hermione was careful to keep the Mudblood scar on her arm covered with magical cosmetics all the time – even Severus was unaware of its existence. It would only make things worse. She knew her parents wanted her to turn her back on the magical world that had let her down so badly. She couldn't make them understand how impossible that would be, and how much it would hurt not to see Harry or Ron any more. As for Severus…

It had almost killed her to leave him like that. It was painfully clear that he'd misunderstood her in some way, but she was too confused, both by what had just happened between them and by Ron's news, to try to tackle him at that moment. It was just too complicated and she was in too much of a hurry to get back.

Since then, most of the time when she wasn't settling into her new job had been spent trying to sort out the mess she'd created with her own family two years previously. And then, just when things were beginning to settle down, Ginny had returned from a romantic weekend with Harry, flushed with excitement and sporting the kind of diamond that must have decimated Harry's remaining inheritance. Hermione had been thrust straight into elaborate wedding preparations, Molly clearly (and wisely) realising that the bride herself wasn't likely to be of as much help as the more practical Hermione when it came to the selection of dresses, flowers, linens and invitations. The ceremony was to take place at midnight on New Year's Eve and, frankly, Hermione couldn't wait until it was all over.

Then…what? She shied away from a sudden vision of Andalusia in January – a fire in the cosy little sitting room and Severus in his usual chair – to focus on Ginny again.


Ginny shrugged. "It's OK, I guess. Good place to bring up children."

Something her voice alerted Hermione. "You're not…?"

Ginny gave her a horrified look. "Merlin, no, not that. I'm not that stupid!"

"But Harry wants to… um, get on with it…?"

Ginny gave Hermione a wry look. "You could say that. I think he's got some kind of idea of finally having his own family now that it's all over."

Hermione didn't say anything for a moment. Ginny frowned into the fire. "You've got to see it from his point of view. Bought up by these awful people. Then Hogwarts became a sort-of home for him…except it turned fairly quickly into a nightmare for him – in just a few years, it became a place associated with death and misery. He had a chance of a family life with Sirius for a brief time…and then that was ripped away from him. Ok, he's got my family, but he really wants something for himself. And I do love him – so much. This wedding – I joke about it, but it's what I've always dreamed of. From the moment I met him…I just knew I wanted to be with him… If that means a big family, well, that's fair enough. I like kids anyway."
Hermione gave her a dubious look. "What about the Harpies?" What was it about these Wizarding families? The girl was only eighteen, for Heaven's sake!

Ginny shrugged again. "It won't happen for a while yet, anyway. And, even if it does, there's no reason why I can't keep on playing. There's a couple of mums on the team – they have child minders, créches and so on." She avoided mentioning the fact that Molly would not be amused if her daughter went back to work very soon after having a child, but it hung in the air between them. Hermione decided not to bring up the other obvious issue – if she'd inherited her mother's fertile genes, Ginny might be surprised at how quickly 'it' happened.

Hermione contemplated the tall beautiful red-head for a moment.

She'd be the first to admit that they weren't the closest of friends. Proximity had brought them closer, but they were poles apart in personality. And then there had been the tension over Severus – and Hermione, Ron and Harry's initial concealment of his survival. Ginny had been openly upset about Harry's deception and bitterly opposed to the help her family had given her former Headmaster. She hadn't spoken to Hermione for several months and had given the older girl a look of silent disgust when she'd announced her plans to visit Andalusia rather than join the family trip to Brazil.

Since Hermione's return to the UK, Ginny appeared to have decided to pretend that Severus no longer existed. Her talk had been all of her impending marriage and future plans. Hermione was confused by this – she'd never known Ginny to be selfish or self-centred, but it was as if Hermione could have no other interest in life.

Hermione had given up any attempt to talk about her summer, even though she was desperate to talk to someone, anyone, about what had happened.

While she'd been there, with Severus, it had all seemed so simple. She was attracted to him and he had definitely responded – she might be innocent, but she wasn't that unaware of male sexual responses. She was sick of being the sensible, careful one – for once she wanted to follow her instinct. Why the hell not? She'd meant what she'd said to Severus that night – if he'd had taken her virginity right there, on the floor, she wouldn't have minded at all... although she had hoped they might have moved things to the bedroom. If only Ron's letter had arrived the following morning...

But it hadn't – it had arrived at that night at the most awkward moment. But then, maybe she should be glad it had? What did she really know about Severus's feelings towards her?

She knew he'd been aware of her feelings last year and that he'd let her down as gently as possible. It had been clear this summer that he appreciated her company, even if it was only to boss her around, lecture her on potions and insult her career choices, but did his feelings really run any deeper than that?

She'd provoked an emotional response in him – their confrontation had released an anger that had been dormant in him – but she had already known that Severus was prone to bitterness and periods of black depression that broke out occasionally into passionate outbursts that acted as a kind of catharsis for him. How much of his subsequent physical response was a reaction to that, rather than to the woman who had just happened to be there? Was she... had she been just a... an outlet... for his frustration?

Ginny moved restlessly, and the fire caught her red hair, dazzling Hermione, which turned her mind on to another red-headed beauty. She remembered the memories she'd seen in the pensieve – the look of undisguised adoration on Severus's face whenever he saw young Lily Evans... his agonised sobs as he clung to her lifeless body, ignoring the infant Harry in the background.
That…*that* was love…wasn't it?

Severus's face didn't light up when she came into the room. He didn't let her order him around or listen to her in silent agreement whenever she spoke. He didn't linger on her every word. He'd hardly looked at her new hairstyle, and seemed entirely uninterested in the way she dressed or looked. Apart from that day in Granada, he hadn't asked her what she'd wanted to do. They had never gone on long romantic walks or lay in the long grass on a shady river bank – he'd driven her to a nearby lake once or twice, but hadn't joined her in the water, just sitting in the car while she swam. He didn't look as if his heart missed a beat whenever he saw her. He didn't find excuses to touch her more than necessary. He never gazed at her when he thought she wasn't looking.

He didn't look as if his life would end if she were no longer there.

"I don't know why you bother."

Hermione jumped. Ginny was still looking away from her, at the fire, picking listlessly at a thread on her jeans. Hermione was wondering whether she'd imagined it when the girl spoke again.

"You were thinking of him again – weren't you? That…*man*.

Before Hermione could respond, the younger girl turned and looked at her. Ginny's blue eyes were flat – hard.

"I don't know why you're bothering. You think that someone like him is capable of love?"

"I think anyone is capable of love." Hermione murmured. "It doesn't necessarily follow that he should love *me* though."

Ginny gave an icy laugh. "And yet you love him? Or think you do?"

"I…I don't know…" Hermione suddenly felt wary. Here it was – the talk she had imagined having with another woman – someone who would understand. But it turned out that she didn't want to talk about it after all – at least not *here* and not *now*.

The eyes were on hers, assessing, measuring. "You *do* love him."

Hermione sighed. "Yes - no. I don't know." *I think I do,* she added, silently. But what was love?

"Do you know what he did to me?" Ginny's voice was deceptively light – casual even. It was as if they were talking about the dresses Hermione had been trying on. Hermione felt her skin prickle in warning.

"I know…it wasn't pleasant," she replied, watching the girl carefully.

"But you've never *felt* it, have you." It was not a question.

"Bellatrix –"

"I'm not talking about some psychopathic murderous woman torturing you for perverted kicks," Ginny interrupted, leaning forward. "I'm talking about someone who is *supposed* to be there to protect you, to teach you, to take care of you. Someone you should be able to trust." She leaned back, her eyes still on Hermione. "Do you know how that *feels?* To be betrayed by an adult in a position of trust?" She gave a strange laugh. "You know, I almost felt better about it when I thought he was an actual enemy…"
Hermione could feel her panic rising. "I don't –"

Abruptly, Ginny stood, putting something small out of her jacket pocket. "Come with me."

Wordlessly, Hermione followed her into the cottage kitchen. A pensieve stood on the table – it was the same one that Hermione had used at Grimmauld Place. Ginny looked at her and saw the guilty recognition in her face.

"Harry's already moved some things here. He wouldn't have bothered with this, but I wanted it for a particular reason."

Hermione could now see that the small object she held in her hand was a vial, and she recognised the silvery flow of memories as Ginny upturned it over the pensieve.

"Why don't you take a look? Enjoy," she added, slightly mockingly, as she sat back on a kitchen stool, her eyes not leaving Hermione's face.

Hermione blinked a little, and then, grasping the sides of the pensieve, she leaned over and felt the familiar sickening sensation of diving down, down into someone else's mind.

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She was at Hogwarts in the Great Hall, alongside an 11 year old Ginny. She could feel the girl's uncertainty as she watched her older brother and his friends walk away from the breakfast table. Ginny picked up her books and moved uncertainly towards the door. Hermione remembered that panicky feeling of not knowing where to go or who to speak to.

Ginny got caught up in the bustle of students pushing through the door, suddenly realising they were late for their first classes. With a squeal, she was propelled through the door, straight into a tall, black-cloaked back.

"Careful, you stupid girl!" Without the voice, Hermione would still have recognised the figure anywhere. It was interesting to see that, through Ginny's memories, the face was harder, the nose more prominent, the eyes far more chilling than she remembered. The dark eyes glittered down at the frightened Ginny with recognition and undisguised malice…

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Fifteen year old Ginny Weasley brushed her hair until it gleamed. Her face was bright with excitement. She was dressed in jeans, so it must be a weekend and, judging by the general bustle in the dormitory, it was a Hogsmeade weekend. Hermione felt infected by the air of anticipation – the sun was shining and it was a perfect day for an outing.

Ginny grabbed her bag and hurried out of the room, taking the steps two at a time. As she followed the girl out of Gryffindor Tower and down the great staircase, Hermione was amused to see herself by the front entrance, talking animatedly to Ron about something – evidently yet another of the petty arguments they were forever having back then. She winced at her younger self's bushy hair.

Suddenly, Ginny stopped dead, staring down the stairs. Following her eyes, Hermione saw Harry following Severus, his face red with fury. Ginny sighed and let her shoulders slump – it was clear that there'd be no romantic outing with her boyfriend today. Severus strode along, his robes flowing behind him, forcing Harry to keep up with his punishing pace. As he passed the bottom of the stairs, he glanced up towards Ginny, and Hermione was shocked by the malicious amusement
she saw on his face. Harry followed his glance and gave his girlfriend an apologetic look before disappearing in the direction of the dungeons.

Ginny clenched her hands in an attitude of poorly concealed frustration and muttered something low that Hermione couldn't hear, but she could certainly catch its meaning…

Ginny was tied to a chair, her hair in a messy tangle that fell over her face. Hermione looked around, recognising the Headmaster's office, but not as she remembered it from Dumbledore's days. It looked…wrong. The fireplace was cold, the pictures had been removed.

"Miss Weasley, I will not ask you again."

Severus was sitting behind Dumbledore's desk, his hands folded together in front of him. He looked old – far older than she had ever seen him – and utterly remote. The evil Carrow twins stood in front of the door, smirking at the tethered girl.

Ginny lifted her head, and Hermione drew in a shocked breath at the blood dripping on her forehead. The girl had been hit around the head with a heavy object.

Severus leaned towards her, his eyes icy cold. "I know you are responsible for this campaign – you and Longbottom. You cannot protect him." He smirked at her in amusement. "Longbottom has already confessed. So much for Gryffindor bravery."

Ginny's eyes were hard. "I imagine you tortured Neville…but even if you did, I don't believe it. I don't believe he told you anything." Her voice dripped with disgust and hatred for the man in front of her.

Alectro Carrow took a step forward, and Severus reacted suddenly, jumping up. "Crucio!"

Ginny's body convulsed so violently that she fell over, still tied to the chair. She bit her lip hard to keep from screaming – the blood gushed out.

"You will scream, Miss Weasley. Believe me, you WILL scream." The voice was soft and deadly. Severus gestured again at the writhing body on the ground, this time even more savagely. "Crucio!"

And this time Ginny did scream. Hermione covered her ears, to block out both the cries of torment and the hideous, crazed laughter of the Carrows. But she couldn't take her eyes off those stone-cold black eyes…

Hermione found herself thrown back out of the pensieve, the ringing of the screams still in her ears. Her face felt wet, and she put a shaky hand up to wipe away the tears that she hadn't been aware of shedding.

"So." Ginny was sitting on the stool, her face still hard and emotionless. "Now you know how it feels."

And she stood and walked out of the room.
It was almost half an hour before Hermione felt capable of walking back into the sitting room. Ginny sat in her former position, knees drawn up under her chin, gazing into the fire.

Hermione hesitated before sinking down onto her knees by the other girl. She put a tentative hand on Ginny's shoulder.

"God, Gin, I'm so sorry. I had no idea…" She fumbled for words. "I mean, I – we – knew that you were being punished but…"

"Can you imagine having children with a man like that?"

Hermione was thrown by the non sequitur. "I'm not sure I understand – "

Ginny looked up at her. "Him. Snape – Severus, whatever you call him now. Just think about it. Can you imagine having a child with a man like that? Really? Someone who is capable of standing there, calmly inflicting the most terrible pain on a defenceless child? Someone who has the kind of psyche that permits him to torture and murder innocent Muggles – oh, don't even try to tell me that he didn't do that kind of thing – in twenty years as a Death Eater, do you think he always managed to avoid it without getting on the wrong side of his master? Someone who can bring himself to inflict suffering on the very students he was hired to protect… all just to avoid having his cover blown?"

"He did what he had to do – you know that! It wasn't a game…"

Ginny brushed this aside. "I know that. I know all about it – believe me. Harry has told me all about his memories – not willingly, but he did. I made him." She sighed. "I had to understand why the man who claims to love me would go out of his way to help someone that I can only remember as a torturer - and yes, before you say anything, I know he probably tried to go easy on us and protect us from the Carrows – a bit. But it was still – well, you saw."

Hermione sank back, wordlessly. She felt cold – numb.

"And that wasn't the worst of it," Ginny continued, her eyes still on Hermione. "Did you ever speak to Neville and Luna about what they went through?"

Hermione tried to open her mouth, tried to say something, but all she could do was shake her head slowly.

"Then talk to them. See their memories, if they'll let you. Then ask yourself again – would you willingly have children with that man… and if you did, would you be forever looking over your shoulder, wondering whether you could safely leave them alone with their father?" There was just a gleam of pity in Ginny's eyes as she looked at Hermione. "Don't give me any rubbish about how you'd never have kids anyway – even if you never want to have them, it matters. It matters how you feel about the man that you plan to wake up next to each morning. It matters that you don't see a murderer or a child torturer when you look at that man."

And Hermione realised that she had no answer to that.

"I try not to think about it," Neville muttered. He stood outside one of Hogwarts greenhouses, wiping his hands carelessly on his robes. It was strange that Neville, of all of them, had chosen to return to the place where he'd been tormented so frequently, and yet, here he was, working as an apprentice Herbology teacher. Hermione had to admit that he looked at home here. He'd been
supervising a group of first years and she was struck by the way they looked up at the tall lanky young man with admiring eyes.

He stopped from replying, stepping further out of earshot of the students first. "Why would you want to know about that now? What difference does it make now he's dead? Is it something to do with what they charged him with?"

She avoided a direct answer. "If they opened an inquest at the Ministry, would you testify?"

"What - for him or against him?" he responded ironically before stopping and considering her question. "I dunno. I guess I was a thorn in his side that last year. To be honest, I'm not sorry, even if it did turn out that he was on our side, like Harry keeps saying."

"He was on our side."

"Yeah, whatever." He seemed tired of the conversation and glanced impatiently towards his students, clearly keen to get on. "Look, what is this really about? I can't believe you've suddenly come to ask me about my experiences at the hands of a dead man – why should it matter now?"

She asked, without any real hope. "Look, Neville, is there any chance that I could view your memories of those experiences?"

He shuddered slightly. "No, you couldn't. I'm sorry, Hermione, but I'm trying to move on with my life. Bringing up memories doesn't help." At her disappointed face, he relented slightly: "Look, if it helps any, I can tell you that, as far as I could tell, his crucios were less severe than those of the Carrows, so maybe he was trying in his own way to protect us…"

As Hermione was about to seize on this, he continued, "But they were still bloody awful."

And with this parting shot, he walked away from her across the grass, not looking back.

Luna sat in an armchair, looking at Hermione thoughtfully. "You want to view my memories so you can defend Professor Snape, don't you? But it's more than that, isn't it? This isn't about the Ministry. It's about you. For some reason, you need to believe that he wasn't as bad as he was made out to be."

As usual, Hermione was side-lined by Luna's perceptiveness. She'd always found the Ravenclaw a little unsettling – those mild blue eyes saw too far for her liking. In fact, she had once suspected that Luna had been aware of her crush on Severus, so had gone out of her way to avoid the girl. Now, once more, those eyes were focused on her with alarming acuity.

"Would you consider my request?" Hermione took a polite sip of the strange beverage that had been placed in her hands and then set it aside, suppressing a grimace at the taste.

"Hmm." Luna looked out of the window in her usual dreamy manner. "The question is not whether I would consider it. It's what exactly you would gain from viewing them."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but Luna beat her to it, giving her that slightly too-hard look again.

"You know what you want to see, so you're not being objective. You want proof that Severus Snape was not the man he is popularly assumed to be. You want to prove that he was a good man
and you hope that my memories will reassure you. You are starting to doubt your own perceptions – and you, of all people, hate to be proved wrong about something – or someone."

Luna stood and moved slowly over to the window, seeming to address the air rather than her visitor. "But what would you gain by old memories? I can tell you that the Professor was not as cruel to me as he was to the Gryffindors, almost certainly because he was obliged to be harder on Harry's close friends. He could afford to show some partiality to a Ravenclaw. I can also tell you that he did not use his full power when he cast his curses on me – you know I experienced enough bad treatment from others during my captivity to be able to judge. If it helps, I can confirm that, without showing you any of my memories."

Hermione sighed with relief. "Thank you, Luna. I do appreciate it –"

"But what difference does it make – to you?" Luna carried on as if Hermione had said nothing. She turned to face her old schoolfriend. "My perception of Severus Snape has nothing to do with yours. No two people can have exactly the same experience of a person. Also…” her voice turned dreamy again at this point, "let's suppose he survived. Let's just imagine that – by some chance, with someone's help – he did manage to survive and happens to be living somewhere in hiding…"

Hermione squirmed under that all-seeing gaze. Did she know?

Luna paused, then continued as before: "If he had lived, would he be the same man? Wouldn't his experiences since then have changed him? You are wondering about the psychological make-up of a man who has never known genuine, selfless love his entire life. That level of abuse alone would be enough to cause permanent damage, but then look at his adolescence and adulthood. Being forced to carry out despicable acts on behalf of a monster. Having to live with the knowledge that he was responsible for the death of the woman he believed he loved – however irrational that belief might be. Yes, I know all about that," she added, at the look on Hermione's face.

Luna carried on before Hermione could ask her how she'd known about Severus's past. "That's not important at the moment. You are wondering whether, if he survived, such a man would be capable of living a 'normal' life – whether he would be able to leave behind his emotional turmoil and violent tendencies. Whether he would ever be capable of developing normal relationships – having friends, having lovers, possibly even a family."

"Could someone change that much?" Hermione realised she sounded rather bitter.

Luna gave a mysterious smile. "I don't know, but fortunately for me, I don't need to know. I'm not the one who has to take a leap of faith. The question is…could you – could Hermione Granger – take that leap?"

"Could you take that leap?" Hermione put the same question to Harry a few days later.

They were briefly alone in the library at Grimmauld Place. It was two days after Christmas and the Weasleys, Harry and Hermione were planning a day out in London, mainly to escape from Molly's wedding planning, which had reached fever pitch. Christmas Day had apparently been less peaceful than ever.

Hermione had missed all the fun – her day with her parents had been tense, punctuated by occasional reproaches from her mother and not alleviated by her father's almost formal politeness. It had been a relief to use the wedding planning excuse to escape her home on Boxing Day, but the
young people had been blown out of the Weasley home the following day by Molly's temper, and
didn't intend to return until they absolutely had to.

Hermione had managed to sneak Harry away during a shouting match between Ginny and George
over a prank that threatened to leave the bride with flashing purple and green hair just days before
the wedding. At her silent urging, he'd shrugged and left his fiancé to deal with the crisis,
following Hermione into the library.

Hermione was careful to leave out certain details of her weeks with Severus, but emphasised the
mood swings she had witnessed. She summarised his bitter outburst that last night and discussed
what Luna had said. Harry listened intently. Hermione had noticed this before – his intense interest
in anything relating to Severus and his current status with the Ministry, which Harry was still trying
to challenge. It was as if the salvaging of Severus's reputation had become an obsession for Lily
Potter's son.

Harry frowned – uneasy at the turn in the conversation. "Oh, I don't know, Hermione. I'm not
coming from a very good starting point, am I? I never liked the guy, right from the start. I didn't
really give him much of a chance, did I? All I remember is the stark look of dislike on his face that
first day at Hogwarts. He gave me the creeps. And he treated me like shit for years – yeah, I know
he probably couldn't help it, but…” He trailed off, looking embarrassed by his constant failure to
recognise the vital role that Severus had played during his school years.

"It's OK, Harry, you don't have to say it," she reassured him. "I know – remember? I was there,
most of the time. And I was just as clueless. He was too clever for all of us." She thought intently.
"But would you say you were actually afraid of him? Did you fear for your life?"

Harry looked thoughtful. "Afraid? No, not really. I just hated him most of the time. There was one
time…” He leaned back, reflecting. "That time I witnessed his memories when he was trying to
teach me occlumency… I was… yes, I was terrified for a moment. I thought he might kill me. But
then, looking back… I think he was terrified too. I think he was actually afraid of what he might do
to me if I didn't get out of there immediately. Yes," he repeated, more emphatically, "yes, he was
afraid of his own strength – of his own emotions. I think I was probably in more danger at that
moment than I realised at the time. Perhaps that's why Dumbledore didn't make me go back to him
– maybe that's why he told me never to come back."

"Hmm, maybe."

It was hardly comforting to learn that Severus may have been fighting his own violent tendencies
even then. She sighed, inwardly. This was just too hard to deal with. She didn't have the experience
to cope with it by herself. Severus almost certainly needed expert psychiatric treatment to help him
overcome his past experiences – either that or he needed to get himself sorted out without the
added complication of new emotional ties.

If she meant no more to him than a sympathetic, objective friend, they might be able to work
through his problems, but it was clear that she was already more to him than that. She didn't even
know how she could categorise his current emotion towards her. Was it love – 'normal' love as she,
or Harry, or Ginny, might recognise it – or something darker? She was already shaken by her
ability to affect his emotional status; she feared that his violent outburst that night had been
provoked by her presence and the things she had said to him. Was there a danger that he might
become, in some way, unhealthily dependent on her? What would that do to him – to her – to
them?

Harry was looking at her very seriously. "Hermione, I haven't asked you anything about last
summer because -."
They both jumped violently as the door burst open and Ginny's head appeared – thankfully with its normal colour restored. "Come on, guys, we're ready to go now."

Harry gave Hermione a meaningful "we're not finished" look as he got up. She followed, for once grateful for the Weasley habit of interrupting at the most difficult moments.

Ron and Hermione ran through the partying New Year crowds, holding hands to keep together. She was gasping for breath, partly from laughter and partly from trying to keep up with his longer stride. She kept tripping over the hem of her long dress. The high-heeled sandals that had given her much-needed height next to the elegant bride a couple of hours ago were not so suitable for an uneven Soho street.

"Ron!"

Seeing her difficulty, he grabbed her arm and pulled her into a doorway, out of the crowds. "What? Don't pretend you didn't want to escape. You were the one who said we were missing the Millennium fireworks over the Thames – what was it, the River of Fire, or something?"

She doubled-over, trying to stop her hysterical giggling. "But I didn't think you'd actually just grab me and apparate us away from your own sister's wedding! We have to go back – it's incredibly rude."

"Do you think they've even noticed? Last seen, Ginny and Harry were snogging in a corner and Mum was having an emotional breakdown over the remains of the canapés – why do women insist on crying at weddings, I thought they were supposed to be happy occasions? Come on, Mione, we can go back soon, but I want to see this. Muggle celebrations are much more interesting."

She giggled again, infected by his excitement. "You've brought us to the wrong area. We'll never get to the river in time."

"Oh yeah? We've got five minutes. Bloody hell, Hermione – your stupid shoes..."

Ignoring her protests, he scooped her up in his arms and spun again. They appeared in the shadows behind the Tate Modern art gallery on the South Bank of the Thames.

"Come on, quick!" He lowered her to the ground, tugged at her hand and they ran again, around the bulk of the Tate towards the new silvery gleam of the Millennium Bridge.

Hermione was laughing again; she felt as if she hadn't laughed properly for years and now she just couldn't stop.

Tonight, nothing mattered, not the War, not her parents, not Severus. Everything was just...fine. More than fine. The positive atmosphere around her was beginning to have an effect – the promise of a new century and a new life. She felt a vein of excitement coursing through her - she was young and had no real responsibilities, she could do anything. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt like this. Ron seemed to pick up on her sudden irrational happiness; his warm strong hand tightening in hers.

The bridge was packed with excited Muggles, but Ron used his muscular frame to force a way through, hauling Hermione with him up the ramp and around the corner onto the main section. Hermione looked towards the west and caught a glimpse of Blackfriars Bridge in the darkness, and the gleam of Waterloo Bridge beyond.
The crowds began to count down. "Ten… Nine… Eight…"

Ron put his arms around Hermione, pulling her in front of him. "Can you see?"

"Just about." She stood on tiptoe, straining to see over the shoulder of the man leaning on the rail in front of her.

"Seven… Six…"

"Hold on…" He turned her toward him and, against all the rules of gravity, managed to lift her up slightly.

"Ron -" She put her arms around his neck to steady herself as she felt her toes leave the ground.

"Five… Four…"

His face was very close to her; she could make out the smudge of freckles along his nose, the ginger lashes framing his bright blue eyes. His arms felt warm and firm around her; despite her fears, she wouldn't fall. With Ron, she wouldn't ever fall… Suddenly, everything seemed to fall into place. It was all so simple…so obvious…

"Three…"

His stubble grazed her cheek. She breathed in the warm, familiar scent of… home…

"Two…"

Their mouths were millimetres apart. It didn't take much effort to turn her face ever so slightly, nudge gently at his lips to part them…
OK, a bit of time has lapsed here – five years to be precise! As I've mentioned before, I wanted to try to keep this in canon to a certain extent. Several reasons, really:

1. I wanted Hermione to have kids, and having them with Severus was a definite NO as far as I was concerned (I know some writers go down that route and I'm not criticising it, but for me, he's way too psychologically damaged to be a father).

2. I just couldn't make Hermione give up her life and follow Severus at the age of 18 – she's a modern, strong-minded, young career woman and she just wouldn't let me! Doesn't mean she can't marry and have kids (as well as a career), but I couldn't see her burying herself in rural Spain at that stage of her life. She's got to make a difference to wizarding Britain first.

3. I thought it would be interesting to write my story around the epilogue-that-must-not-be-named, but give it a certain twist. After all, we know that Harry and Ginny are happy, but we don't necessarily know that Hermione and Ron are. All we actually know is that they are good parents and appear to be on good terms, but then many divorced couples fall in that category.

I've slightly mucked around with the children's ages – in JKR's version, they are born a little later and hence go to Hogwarts later than they do in my version. I've probably got the birthdays all wrong too, but it's my version anyway! Here's my timeline:
June 2000 – Hermione and Ron get married. Ron starts working as an auror, having spent the last year in training. During the next four years, Harry and Hermione rise in status at the Ministry and work to clear Severus's name.
October 2000 – Birth of James Potter
September 2001 - Birth of Rose Weasley
March 2002 - Birth of Albus Potter
December 2003 – Birth of Lily Potter
February 2004 – Birth of Hugo Weasley

Sorry about all the notes! We pick up the story again in July 2004 – when Hermione has some startling news for Severus and decides to go and see him for the first time in five years… Usual disclaimer: not mine, no money. No warnings.

July 2004
"You are troubled, my friend."

Severus raised the flap of his old hat to contemplate his friend. Cesar had the satisfied look of a man who has just seen the second of his four daughters get married, to a promising young man who looked set to become one of the finest healers in Spain's wizarding community. But at this moment, his usually contented face was rather serious.

The two men were reclining in armchairs in the salesman's shady garden on this particularly hot
and still afternoon. The perspiration ran in rivulets down Severus's face. Surely the oppressive heat would break soon – he could feel a storm approaching; could feel it in his bones.

"What, more so than usual?" He tried to turn it into a joke, but the other man gave him a wry look.

"Come on, Severus. It can't be business – sales are really taking off for you. Beatrix says that practically every household in the magical communities around here has stocked up on bottles of Revivio, and your Scar-accio ointment is selling well too. And that's just the locals. I know you're exporting it across Europe under your other name."

Severus smiled at this reference to the pseudonym under which he continued to live and trade, even though his good friends now knew his true identity.

Not long after Hermione's first letter, he had begun to realise the true value of friendship. It was Cesar who investigated when he failed to turn up for meetings on three occasions; who found his way by enquiry to the little cottage in Valenzuela; who found Severus suffering the effects of a lethal combination of whiskey and cocaine. And it was Beatrix who had stood by and suffered the verbal abuse while Severus cursed and raved his way through the agonies of going cold turkey. It was Beatrix who had generously found a corner of her overcrowded house in which to nurse the emaciated Englishman back to health, while Cesar and the children carried on digging over Severus's land, sowing seeds and making preparations for the winter.

In the circumstances (and in view of the manic ravings that Beatrix had been privy to during his delirium), it seemed a bit pointless to continue with his deception. It was clear by then that the Martinez family were not going to turn him over to the authorities. He found it a relief to unburden himself after so long. He found Cesar to be a sympathetic listener, and was humbled by the man's clear belief in his innocence.

Looking back, Severus didn't know what madness had made him fall into substance abuse. He'd always tried to be careful with his fragile health – more so since Nagini - but even prior to that, he'd rarely over-indulged in drink, and drugs were a definite no. He knew too much about what went into them; had seen first-hand the dangers of drug abuse – and yet, he found himself falling. He could only assume it was despair over the loss of Hermione. He'd known it then, deep in his heart, when he'd received her letter. He'd known she would never return – that her other life would claim her. It gave him no satisfaction to be merely proved right.

The first year had been difficult, particularly after he'd received the awkward, carefully-worded letter in March from Hermione announcing her engagement to Ron. It was no more than he had expected. He didn't reply to this letter or to any of the others that she sent every three months or so, although he did request that his formal good wishes were passed to the happy couple via Bill Weasley, with whom he kept in regular contact.

He often wondered whether things would have been different if he'd answered that first letter; had made his feelings clear. But what would have been the good of that? Surely, if Hermione had really loved him without reservation, she would have stayed faithful and would have returned? He knew she had incredible staying power – she'd stuck by him through the difficult periods of his recovery when a lesser woman would have given up and passed his care to someone else. He convinced himself that she must have been sure of her feelings for Ron – otherwise, she would have returned…wouldn't she? She must have known how he, Severus, felt about her.

Bill and Arthur Weasley had kept their promise to help Severus. Prince Products Inc. came into existence in the spring of 2000. Arthur arranged distribution of the products by mail order – even, with George's help, to the more modern witches and wizards via what he insisted on calling the "Witch Wide Web". Bill handled the accounts and the payments into an anonymous Gringotts
account, from which by coincidence a regular salary was paid out to a Tobias Prince at the Granada branch. There was nothing to connect the products produced by this potions company to Severus Snape.

In fact, the search for him had lost some of its impetus. Kingsley was now Minister and was working on eradicating the corruption and bureaucracy that had dominated the Ministry for so many years. He let it be quietly known that he was not interested in the pursuit of a man who was almost certainly dead anyway, and the message began to get through. Kingsley was careful, though, to ensure that no one knew of his regular meetings with Harry, who was still spending a fair amount of his time seeking the evidence needed to clear Severus of the many accusations against him.

Materially, things were a little easier for Severus – apart from the profits that were starting to come in from his patented products, he'd been able to grow plenty of fresh vegetables in his garden and freeze enough for the winters. He did some labour for a local farmer and received his payment in meat. He was careful with his money – ploughing the majority of it back into his research. It was an expensive process; he was starting from nothing and working in isolation, so he had no opportunity to share resources with other researchers. Also, his output was relatively small – so far, he only had a couple of unique potions in production, although he was also selling his own versions of other, more common, potions.

He now made regular trips over to Orgiva, where Cesar and Beatrix would often make him stay a couple of nights. It was a long journey, and he was sometimes tempted to move nearer. There, at least, he would have more company – not just Cesar and Beatrix but among the witches and wizards that lived in the Alpajurras region; there were hardly any in his own area. However, he was loath to give up his anonymity – and his land. It had taken considerable work to get it into its current optimum condition. And there was his laboratory to consider, too. He’d made it bigger – it now extended under most of his land. No one would have guessed the size of the operation that took place under the dusty few acres that he farmed; no one but Hermione had ever seen it.

He would discuss his latest developments with his friends, and it was Beatrix who came up with the name Revivio for his patented potion that helped patients recover their strength following gastrointestinal viruses more quickly. After this early success, he focused on a product designed to minimise the worst curse scars that had proved resistant to other treatments. Scar-accio had taken some three years to develop – he'd had to experiment on himself – but it was now in full production and was expected to take the wizarding world by storm.

It shocked him to receive a letter from Hermione talking enthusiastically about Scar-accio – she of course knew through Bill that it was one of his inventions. She talked about how it had made a curse scar that she'd received during the war almost disappear. That any such scar existed was news to him. Her careful lack of detail about the scar and who had cast it had tantalised him to the extent that he was almost tempted to write to her – almost but not quite. He didn't think he'd be able to be civil. The wound was still too raw.

He was thinking about moving in a new direction. Hermione had written earlier this year about the birth of her second child - a son - but this time her happiness had been tempered by fear. She'd had a difficult pregnancy throughout – it was as well that he hadn't known that, as his helplessness would have been a torment, but she'd kept it from him. Hugo had been born 8 weeks premature and was reasonably healthy, if small, but Hermione had struggled to feed him. For some weeks, he'd failed to thrive. Hermione was usually fairly up-beat in her letters, perhaps deliberately so at times, but she'd been unable to hide her distress this time. Again, he'd almost put pen to paper… but what could he have said to comfort her? No doubt Weasley and the rest of his family were far more qualified to provide support and advice. Molly must have seen it all in her years as both mother and
Although he'd never replied to any of Hermione's letters, he'd kept her letters in a box and had spent hours reading and rereading them. He felt he knew Hermione's writing style very well by now. There was something...something about this last letter that had bothered him more than he cared to admit. Something slightly artificial about her usual bright and cheerful manner of writing – he couldn't put his finger on it, but something deep in his bones told him that she wasn't completely happy.

But the situation with her son had given him the germ of an idea – to create a product that would help premature babies catch up more quickly with full-term infants in their physical development. It would be a serious challenge, involving a lot of research, and he would have to start off by getting some comparative data from the neonatal unit at the maternity hospital in Granada to work out which areas of physiology to focus on. It would be difficult...the ethics and practicalities of getting test subjects were enormous. He'd come to visit Beatrix - official district nurse and unofficial midwife to both witches and Muggles in her local community - to get her advice.

And now, this letter...

"Well?" Cesar cocked his head at him, inquiringly.

Severus sighed and flicked the letter in his direction.

It was a fairly short note, and not in Hermione's usual style. Her quarterly letters were usually informative, running to at least 10 pages of small neat handwriting – and anyway, she'd only written the last one a month ago. This was rather terse:

"Dear Toby,

I have some important news for you and need to see you quite urgently. I can't discuss this by letter, so can we meet? I hope it will be convenient for me to visit you on 15th July – if not, perhaps you could write and let me know? I know you don't write normally, but anyway, I will turn up on that date at 9AM your time, in the usual location, and hope to see you then.

Yours,

Hermione"

"Interesting that she still calls you Toby," Cesar murmured as he returned the letter.

"She's never called me anything else. I suppose she thinks it's unsafe to use my real name, even now. You notice she's also careful about not revealing my location?" Severus folded the letter and put it back in his pocket.

"So what do you think the news might be?" Cesar gave him a sideways look.

Severus sighed. "I have no idea, really."

Again, the shrewd look. "You are not sure whether you wish to see her, are you?"

Severus said nothing for a moment. Even now, Cesar didn't know the full story. He knew Hermione's real name and that she wasn't actually related to Severus. He also knew that they had parted on bad terms, but Severus had never revealed the extent of his feelings towards her, and he didn't know how much his friend had guessed in the intervening years. Hermione often asked after the Martinez family, and Severus passed on her good wishes and little snippets of news, but he
tried to keep the details light to avoid conveying the fresh pain each development gave him - her wedding… her various promotions… her happiness over Rose's birth, and then Hugo…

It still hurt deeply. He could close his eyes and visualise her as if it were only yesterday. Most often, his mind took him to that vision of her at the Alhambra, in her red dress, silhouetted in the moonlight. He tried to avoid the sensory memories of that last night with her – the scent of her breath, the heat of her body as she leaned over him, her lips on his – but sometimes, he woke sweaty and aroused from heated dreams, gasping her name.

He'd never looked at another woman. Severus wasn't, and never had been, a particularly sexual individual. Women (and men) in general didn't attract him, and sexual responses were rare. It had been a shock when Hermione had elicited that response in him. If he'd been entirely honest, the sexual attraction had been there for him during that summer that she'd nursed him back to health. He'd tried to justify it as the natural response of a still fairly young man to an enforced intimacy with an attractive young woman. The following summer, when he'd realised the true nature of his feelings for Hermione, the reactions had made more sense. He'd hoped, during the intervening years, that they would go away and he'd return to his former asexual state, but if anything, the desire had grown more intense and his fantasies were only ever focused on one woman.

Of course, he didn't even know whether the dream Hermione that haunted him at night bore any resemblance to the current reality. When they'd last met, she'd been a skinny teenager. She'd be twenty-four now, still very young, but a mother of two. He somehow felt it likely that she would have changed quite a bit in that time, although he couldn't really visualise a curvier, maternal version of the slim girl-woman with the boyish hair cut that he'd made the mistake of falling in love with.

He had wondered a bit at the speed with which she'd married and had her children. Of course, it wasn't unusual in wizarding families – Molly had had the first of her many children by nineteen, and Lily Potter was only twenty-one when Harry was born. And look at Ginevra Potter – by all accounts, a promising career in Quiddich curtailed by the birth of 3 children within 5 years, and still only twenty-three. Even the Witch Weekly gossip column, not normally known for its liberal attitudes to either female Quiddich players or working mothers, had expressed disappointment at her decision to retire before she'd really got started. Cesar and Beatrix's youngest daughter, Meghara, herself a talented seeker, had been devastated – her bedroom was dotted with posters of the Holyhead Harpies.

But Hermione, like him, had one foot firmly in each world – magical and Muggle. Most Muggle women concentrated on their careers first and had their children later in life, and he wondered what her parents made of the situation.

He realised suddenly that Cesar was still waiting for a response. "Oh, I don't know. I suppose I'm a bit surprised that she would leave her son at this stage. I believe he's still quite sickly."

"The news must be fairly important."

"Hmm." He had a suspicion it was to do with his current status with the Ministry. It couldn't be an emergency, otherwise she'd have contacted him through the charmed galleon that he still wore around his neck although it hadn't been activated for 5 years.

Cesar sighed. "Severus, I wish you would tell me what is bothering you so much. I think I can guess. It was quite clear when you both visited that summer that there was something going on between you. I think I already knew that she was no cousin of yours…but that day in particular there was a spark between you… I don't know how far it went, but something went wrong after that day, didn't it? Can't you tell me what happened?"
Severus gritted his teeth. "Ron Weasley happened."

"Ah…I see." Cesar patted his shoulder, sympathetically. "But Hermione was not interested in Ron Weasley at that stage, was she?"

"Wasn't she?" He failed to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Cesar paused, astonished. "You really think…? Severus, listen to me. That young woman had eyes for no one but you that day. It was unmistakable – it was the first thing that Beatrix noticed about her. The way her eyes lingered on you when you weren't looking, the way her face lit up whenever you spoke to her…" He shook his head. "Unmistakable."

"More fool her, then," Severus muttered.

"What is it with you, my friend? What is it that makes you think you are undeserving of her regard… or anyone else's?"

Severus stared at him. "But… but you know my story by now, surely?"

Cesar shrugged. As was his habit when he had something serious to impart, he switched over to Spanish, a language that Severus was now fluent in.

"I know all about a seriously neglected and undernourished boy who was the product of a violent father and an indifferent mother. I know all about a boy who was bullied at school and let down by his only genuine friend there. I know that boy grew up to blame himself for her death, even though there were much deeper forces at work than the over-enthusiasm of a young man trying to impress his new master –"

"But –"

Cesar held up his hand to stop Severus. "I know that young man sought to redeem himself and that he did that by returning to his headmaster. I know that the headmaster, a much respected senior figure in the wizarding world, actively encouraged the young man's shame in order to gain better control over his actions."

Severus was shocked by the hard look on Cesar's face. He'd never seen his easy-going friend look so… angry?

"That respected senior wizard used his influence over a devastated young man to force that man into a dangerous path. A path that would involve nearly twenty years of thankless toil as a double agent, that would force the young man to carry out unsavoury, sometimes terrible deeds. A path of ignominy, hatred, viciousness…pain. A path that would almost – but not quite – destroy that young man, both physically and psychologically."

"It wasn't like that – not really."

"Wasn't it?"

Severus looked at the Spanish man, not sure what to say. How could he make him understand?

The dark eyes were very knowing. "You are thinking about how you behaved during that period. You are ashamed because you came to…enjoy your power. There were times when you wanted to inflict punishment on Harry Potter and his friends. You gained satisfaction from your treatment of them."
"No! Yes…maybe…" The memories were suddenly overwhelming. The agony of a fallen enemy, writhing across the floor, his hand raised ready to provide an extra dimension…or respite. The power to scatter terrified students in his wake. The impotent fury on the face of James Potter's son…

"But why are you surprised about your behaviour? From the age of twenty-one to the age of thirty-eight, you had to live within that world. You had to pretend to despise anyone who was not on Voldemort's side, and you had to keep that cover up for seventeen years – even during the period that he was dormant… except he was never truly dormant, was he? He lived on – corrupting people's hearts and minds with his malevolent views and codes of behaviour. And you had to be seen to support those views. Surely, over time, it had to affect you? You managed to hold out against an incredibly strong influence on your mind, my friend. Despite the horrors you had to observe, and sometimes take part in, despite the pressures of trying to serve two masters and keep one of them unaware of the other, despite never having a moment's rest in all that time… despite all of that, you managed to hold on to … to you – to Severus. But all the anger, the fear, the emotions you kept firmly locked inside you, well, it had to manifest itself somehow – and with you, that emotion was focused in a very narrow lens… to Harry Potter."

He put his hand on Severus' left arm, his eyes begging Severus to understand. "You are not evil, Severus, or corrupted by your connection to Voldemort. He was, but you are still you… and you are not."

Severus couldn't speak – his throat felt too tight. His right hand came up and blindly sought Cesar's hand; grasped it tight in a gratitude that he couldn't vocalise.

Cesar squeezed the potions master's fingers for a moment before letting his own hand drop. He sighed, gazing at the lengthening shadows across his large overgrown garden. Following his eyes, Severus saw his friend's two young sons practicing famous Quiddich feints on their broomsticks. The air was starting to cool slightly; the sounds of far-off laughter and the faintest rustle of dry grass, by now so familiar to Severus, soothed him.

"And, for this, you felt yourself unworthy of love – unworthy of Hermione. You could have pursued her. You could have written to her immediately, told her how you felt, but you didn't. You sat and waited while another man laid claim to her heart." He turned towards Severus again. "I'm afraid you cannot blame Ron Weasley for that, my friend."

"I knew she would end up with him – I always knew it." Severus's voice was tight with emotion. His throat felt sore; he was struck by the sudden grief that overcame him at regular intervals.

"Yes, you did. And perhaps that was part of the problem."

"You mean that I convinced myself that it was the right thing, don't you? That I was so sure that it would be better for her. And by thinking that way, I made it happen." Severus was silent for a moment, contemplating his hands in this lap, and then he lifted his head to Cesar. "But she is better off with him! He's young – they grew up together. They went through the war together – they understand each other. He's healthy, popular – everyone loves him. And he can give her children – a family life."

"And you couldn't?"

Severus laughed, disbelievingly. "Oh, come on, Cesar – do you really think that would have been a good idea? Even if I wanted to bring children into the world, what kind of life do you think they'd have – the children of Severus Snape, public enemy number 1?"
Cesar grimaced slightly. "Well, I admit that I cannot see you as a father, my friend. Fatherhood isn't really…you – is it?"

Severus smiled, amused despite himself. "I guess it would help if I actually liked children, but in fact I don't. Never have done."

"You make a fairly good uncle to ours."

"Oh, I don't object to them – at a distance. But I always hated teaching." Severus shrugged. "Some get pleasure out of developing young people's minds. I never have done."

"That must have been yet another challenge for you over the years," Cesar commented drily.

The two men were silent for a moment. Unseen by them, Beatrix stepped into the garden, took a look at her husband's face and retreated, just as quietly.

Cesar laughed. "Do you notice that when we talk of Hermione, we talk of your feelings in relation to her? Your views on what is good for her, what would make her happy? But we don't talk about her feelings. She's an adult – a human being as complex as any other – perhaps more so. She has desires, needs, ambitions. We are so busy assuming that, for her, marriage, children, a glittering career are exactly what she needs. And perhaps, right now, she believes that too, but…" Cesar stood up suddenly and turned to Severus. "Do not assume that Hermione has no place in your future, Severus. She is still very young, and there is far more to her than motherhood and the Ministry."

Severus stood too. "But…how? How could you know all those things about me? How could you know how I felt back then – why I did what I did? How is it that you can understand – can care, when…others did not?" He couldn't bring himself to name Dumbledore, but his friend heard what was unsaid.

Cesar just smiled, sadly. "It's quite simple, really. I am a father. Dumbledore was not."

And he walked across the garden towards his sons.

Heart beating fast, mouth dry, Severus sat on his terrace, waiting for Hermione. In truth, he had been waiting ever since he had received her letter 10 days ago. He'd gone about his familiar business, labouring on his land, working on his experiments, shopping, cooking, eating in an automatic manner, all the time thinking soon, soon, soon.

And now the day was here.

He'd tried in vain to tidy himself up a bit, wondering whether she notice any difference in him. He was now almost halfway through his 40s, but then he'd never looked that young, and he didn't think he'd changed that much. His hair was still mostly black with some grey in it, but the condition had improved – it wasn't so greasy now that he was working in his own laboratory and had greater control over the potions fumes. He kept it shorter these days, which suited him better. He would never be able to tan properly with his white skin, but there was more colour in his cheeks these days, and he was a healthier weight – fresh air, good food and plenty of manual work had strengthened his body. And Scar-accio had gone some way to reducing the severity of his scars, although it couldn't get rid of them altogether. There was no doubt that Severus at forty-four was in much better condition than he had been at thirty-eight.
Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said about his clothes. Severus was careful with his money, and didn't see much point in buying new clothes. The only social life he had was with Cesar and Beatrix, who didn't care how he dressed, and no one spared him a look when he shopped in the local villages – no doubt they just took him for a migrant farm labourer.

He was wearing his least shabby jeans and a short-sleeved shirt that he hadn't worn for years – it was more than a little tight across his chest, which made him realise how thin he must have been when he first came here.

He sat, looking around his land. He thought she might be more impressed with what he'd achieved there. The terraces were laid out and planted, with protective frames erected over them, and proper stone steps built between the steep levels. He'd extended the stone terrace around the entirety of the cottage and had built a wooden frame over it, from which vines twined their way up the poles and over the roof, providing much-needed shade. Pots and hanging baskets of scarlet and yellow flowers covered the terrace – admittedly that was Beatrix's touch, but it added to the cottage's attractiveness. Severus hadn't had the dirt track leading up from the village tarmacked, as he didn't want to encourage curious or lost tourists to drive on it, and he'd made sure to keep cultivated some existing olive and lemon trees along the track, as they partly blocked the view of his property.

He fanned his face with his hat. Even in the shade, he could tell it was going to be another stifling day. The weather must break soon…

He heard the crack of apparition, and there she was, right in front of him. Her back was turned to him, so he had a moment to look at her, to gain an impression of longer hair and a slightly more womanly figure before she turned and looked up at him, and her face took his breath away.

"Hello, Severus."
Chapter Notes

Brief warning: there is an act of unexpected violence in this chapter, so please don't read if you think it might upset you. More notes at the end, to avoid spoiling the content.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione at twenty-four was more beautiful than he remembered her at nineteen. Severus retained memories of a toothy, shaggy-haired, rather prissy child and, more recently, a skinny, boyishly-attractive girl-woman, but his visual memory hadn't prepared him for his first sight of her in five years.

The face was more heart shaped, the red lips fuller in the wide mouth, and her hair had been allowed to grow back to shoulder length; its curls framing her face becomingly. As he suspected, her figure had grown curvier, although it was hard to judge as she wore a longish, loose, blue dress. She had nothing with her, so clearly this was intended to be a short visit.

It was her eyes that struck him most - bigger than ever and framed by long, dark lashes. Her face was rather pale, and his eyes spotted the slight smudges under her eyes that spoke of sleepless nights. There was just an impression of unhappiness about her mouth before those lips tugged into a soft smile – the smile she had always reserved for him…or so he liked to believe.

"Hello, Severus."

Whatever he might have planned to say at this moment, the words deserted him. He was lost the moment she smiled – and then that voice, soft and slightly husky…

She looked up at him, entirely open and trusting, inviting his scrutiny. Their eyes met, held for a long, significant moment as they shared the emotions of the last five years. Hers were of experiences of love, joy, pain and fear, under-laid by guilt. His spoke of pain, doubt, resilience and pride. It was almost, but not quite, legilimency – a gentle giving and taking of memories, which left him shaken by an intensity of feeling.

"It's good to see you, Hermione." And he realised that he meant it – there was a joy in her presence that overlaid all other feelings, and he realised that it had always been so from the moment their strange affinity had been forged. Whatever else Hermione may have meant to him over the years, she was first and foremost his best friend - and no Ron Weasley could ever change that.

"And you," she replied, again that slight huskiness that was new in her. "I've missed…"

She broke off suddenly, her face giving a strange, beautiful shiver, as she turned her head away. He saw her eyes pass over the land, the cottage without even seeming to see them. "The place is transformed. You must have worked hard."

She turned back and looked up at him on the raised terrace, shading her eyes with her hand, and he remembered his manners.
"Please, do come into the shade." He stepped off the terrace, instinctively holding out his hand to her.

"Thank you. I'd forgotten how warm it gets here." She laughed slightly as she grasped his extended hand. He felt an old thrill travel up his arm at her touch as he led her over to the comfortable chair that he'd deliberately positioned on the terrace to benefit from both shade and breeze on this hot morning.

She sank into the chair, giving a barely-restrained sigh of relief, and it occurred to him that Hermione was not in perfect health. Standing near her as he served a glass of iced tea, he had a better opportunity to view the newer gentle curves in her body that spoke of motherhood, but, for all that, she looked too thin.

Pressing his lips together, he managed to restrain from commenting on that as he sat in his own chair, instead focusing on her son.

"How is Hugo?"

She sipped her drink, seeming to consider his question before answering. That was new too, that slight hesitation before replying. He wondered how much of her he would have to relearn.

"He's a little stronger now, thank you. Still a bit small, but that's to be expected. He was so small when he was born, it didn't seem possible for a baby that small to survive. I couldn't touch him for ages – so fragile – and that heart beating so fiercely in that tiny chest…"

Her voice faded away again. He realised the huskiness was simply prolonged fatigue. She caught his eye, and smiled slightly.

"Don't look like that. I'm fine - really. It's just weeks of feeds every hour, on the hour, day and night. And the potions and the endless weighing and screening…and me praying that he'd gain this ounce or that ounce, or gain this or that milestone…that he wouldn't have to go back into St Mungo's..." She sipped her iced tea, sighing with relief. "It's been...difficult. And then, my milk dried up, far too soon, and that was stressful too – and probably caused by stress."

He noticed that she seemed to feel no embarrassment in discussing the matter of her breast milk with him, a single man, but then with all they'd been through together, she probably didn't think he'd be bothered.

"I was surprised that you'd want to leave him so soon."

"Well, Molly is looking after him." Did he imagine the slightly bitter twist in her lips? The expression was gone almost as soon as it arrived. "And Ginny has been very helpful too, and so, surprisingly, has my mum. It's been...hard for Ron – he's so busy at the moment."

"And how is he?" The words almost stuck in his throat, but he forced them out somehow.

She glanced at him, very quickly. "Fine, thank you. Very busy, of course – they all are. Harry is deputy head of department – did I tell you? It's a real honour, but they both have to work bloody hard."

"It must be hard for you to find time for your own work – particularly with Rose and Hugo," he commented.

She smiled at the mention of her work, and he sensed her pride. "I told you that I'd moved to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, didn't I? It's been really exciting recently – there have
been all sorts of developments in the review of the pure-blood policies." Her face dropped. "Of course, it's been difficult for me to keep up recently, but I have a very understanding manager, and I've been able to work at night sometimes, while I'm up with Hugo. I'm very lucky really – Rose is no trouble at all, and Hugo is a lovely baby really. He hardly ever cries."

Seeing that her glass was empty, he waved his hand and it refilled automatically. She smiled at the sight, and it was one of her old smiles, wide and breath-taking in its intensity.

"It's good to see that your magic has come back again."

"Well, not fully," he admitted. "My charms work is probably more advanced than it used to be, and I was never that great at transfiguration anyway, but my defensive skills are nowhere near as strong as they used to be, and they don't show any signs of getting stronger."

"Really?" She leaned forward, suddenly more animated. "That's strange. Do you think it might be the new wand?"

He shrugged. "Not really sure. It makes me wonder whether magic is all about state of mind. It's not as if I have much call for defensive spells nowadays."

She frowned, considering this. "You mean that one's magic develops according to need? Or do you mean that a person's state of mind influences their skills development…so, for example, if someone grew up in a conflict situation, their DADA skills might be more advanced simply by virtue of their psyche and background?"

"Possibly."

She looked off into the distance, her eyes slightly blank. He recognised the symptoms and didn't interrupt.

"So, if that were the case, if you could somehow reduce someone's magic and then restore it gradually, so it developed as a child's magic might develop…" she murmured, "it might in fact develop differently depending on circumstance…"

He sat watching that little wrinkle at the top of her nose that told him her mind was racing through the possibilities in typical Hermione fashion. He marvelled as always at that keen mind – already, he knew she was considering the research options. It was interesting that that aspect of her personality hadn't changed. Really, Hermione was the perfect magical science researcher – tenacious and determined in the pursuit of knowledge but never anything less than completely objective – and he hoped she found time to dedicate herself to this discipline at some point in the future.

She caught his eye and laughed, self-consciously. "I bet you can guess what my 'light reading' might consist of over the next few weeks."

"Indeed," he agreed, watching her carefully.

"The possibilities are… well, there are all sorts of things you could try." She was still thinking furiously. "Just suppose there were a shortage of healers in the magical population. You could develop an environment for children which focused on that kind of magic. Or if an adult lost their ability, as you did, you could…"

"And that might be your problem," he interjected, drily.

She looked at him. "Yes, I suppose you are rather unique in that respect."
"Quite. And since I don't care to become a laboratory subject..." He let that thought hang in the air.

The atmosphere had changed very subtly. There was a slight tension between them now, and Hermione seemed aware of it – her posture grew a little defensive.

"Why are you here, Hermione?"

He spoke softly, trying to take the edge out of the question. It was very clear that she hadn't come here out of the blue to discuss her children or her career.

She looked at him, appreciating the question for what it was. And then her eyes moved away, gazing across the sun-parched land.

"Your name has been cleared," she said, quietly.

Time seemed to stop for a moment.

Whatever he'd expected, it hadn't been this. The evidence against him was indisputable. The most he'd hoped for over the years was that he might receive some leniency if he ever returned to Wizarding Britain – perhaps community service and a chance to rebuild his reputation. After all, it was not just Dumbledore. Over the years he had been responsible for the death of four Muggles, several maimings (including George Weasley's ear), the torturing of students, and experimentation with new potions on several of Voldemort's hostages. It wasn't a great record.

"How?"

She kept her eyes firmly on the horizon. "Well, we were able to prove that Dumbledore was dying. We had evidence from Poppy Pomphrey about the curse he had received from that horcrux. We were able to get proof from various former Death Eaters that your involvement in those Muggle's deaths was basically merciful by the time Voldemort had finished with them – by all accounts, they were more dead than alive."

"Who would testify for me?" he muttered, almost to himself, but she took it for a question.

"You'd be surprised. I did worry about the impact of revealing to our informers the fact that you'd been a double-agent, but Harry insisted. And actually, it's surprising how many of them are crawling out of the woodwork, eager to prove that they, too, were secretly working against Voldemort..."

"What?" he exclaimed. "Who dares to claim they were against him?"

She looked at him rather wryly. "Yaxley. Goyle. This one will make you laugh – Amycus Carrow."

"Him?" He gave a bitter laugh. "Goyle might be possible... but please tell me those idiots at the Ministry don't believe Carrow?"

"Hardly. It's pretty obvious that they're just trying to get amnesty, but it suits Harry to encourage their hopes in order to get something useful out of them. Oh, and someone else too. Your old friend, Lucius Malfoy."

"So he survived then," Severus murmured. "Hardly a surprise – he was always a natural survivor. No doubt he got his family away once he saw which way the wind was blowing for Voldemort. Was he arrested, then?"

"Still under house arrest, he and his wife." She grimaced. "In their beautiful mansion, although I
doubt they appreciate it much now. They're broke. Most of the valuables have been sold off. Draco is reduced to working at Hogwarts, as an assistant to Horace Slughorn – cleaning laboratories and collecting potions ingredients, that kind of thing. No one else would employ him, and they need the money. I believe Minerva intended to be kind to a former student, but Neville says it's clear that the humiliation of menial work is killing him. He's a shadow of his former self. When I last saw him, I suspected he was using – he's got that restless manner of a heroin addict."

Hermione grimaced slightly, and Severus wondered how on earth she knew what a drug addict looked like…and what she would think if she'd knew he'd fallen victim himself. Before he could say anything, she continued.

"Anyway, the point is, Malfoy like Yaxley and Goyle, admitted that Voldemort usually had to order you to get involved in their activities and that you never did so willingly, and usually your killing methods were clean. There were the experiments, of course, but even there it was clear that it was on Voldemort's orders and that you sought to alleviate the pain where you could and that you tried to finish experiments as quickly as possible. Lucius was able to help there – he's evidently something of an expert at potions, and I think he saw more than perhaps you realised. Funny he didn't report you to Voldemort – you'd think he'd want to improve his standing."

Severus sneered. "More likely he intended blackmail once the war was over." He considered for a moment. "Or perhaps he felt some strange loyalty to his son's godfather – who knows? Lucius was the ultimate politician – always looking to the future, and with an eye out for allies, and I was useful to him over the years."

He grinned, mirthlessly. "I'd love to see the Malfoy residence now, shorn of all its former glory."

"Would you? I wouldn't think you'd want to return after what you experienced there," she commented. "Yaxley told us about Professor Burbage – at least we were able to clear up that disappearance, which brought some comfort to her family, even if the actual cause of death was too distressing to reveal to them. But I imagine it must be hard for Lucius and Narcissa to even step into their dining room now, let alone eat there. It was bad enough for me to have to visit. Harry didn't want me to go – I was pregnant with Rose at the time - but they would only speak to me."

"Why only you?"

She shrugged. "I suppose they wanted to apologise…although they didn't make any reference to what happened when I was imprisoned there. Perhaps, when it came to it, they just couldn't bring themselves to apologise to a Mudblood." She said the word lightly, rather sarcastically – clearly it didn't mean much to her any more. "Anyway, they needn't have bothered. I really don't care anymore… but it may have influenced their decision to be as helpful as they were. Who knows?"

His mind was racing. "Apologise for what?"

She shot him a startled look. "Then you didn't know? I would have thought that everyone would have known that Madam Lestrange briefly had the Golden Trio in her grasp, but lost them before Voldemort could arrive?"

He cast his mind back – he remembered Voldemort's murderous rage with Bellatrix and Lucius over some incident relating to Potter, but he didn't know the specifics. He'd been too relieved to learn that they'd escaped before they'd been interrogated and that his cover was still secure to really consider what might have happened, but now his skin crawled with fear at her words.

"Tell me."
She tried to keep her voice light but, even at the distance of so many years, her voice trembled slightly. "Well, the lovely Madam Lestrange decided to hone her 'special' skills on the Mudblood. If it hadn't been for Ron and Harry – and Dobby, of course – well...I don't know what would have happened to me."

"What did she do?" His voice was low and very quiet; he felt his hands trembling and clenched his fists to hide his agitation. "Please tell me, Hermione."

She looked at him and her face softened. "No worse than many others have experienced, Severus. Cruciatus, of course. And she decided to mark me in her own special way."

She lifted her right arm, muttered an incantation, and suddenly he saw the letters scored into the soft skin under her arm. Mudblood. The curse scar was white and slightly raised. Hermione ran a finger over the letters, tracing them slowly.

"The scars were much worse before your product hit the market. The letters used to be blood-red, and there was nothing I could do to make them go away. I still cover them with a light magical cosmetic, but Scar-accio has definitely improved the appearance." She smiled at him. "It must be wonderful to create something that improves people's lives."

He refused to be distracted by her clumsy attempt to change the topic. "Why did I never know about this?" He instinctively reached out a finger to touch the hideous marks – and just as quickly withdrew his hand when he realised what he was doing.

She sighed. "What good would it have done for you to know? I could hardly bear to look at them myself, and it became a habit to just keep applying the cosmetic charm each day. I didn't want to be reminded – and I didn't think you'd want to talk about the past."

He stood up and walked over to the steps, seeking to hide the angry tremor that ran through him. He didn't know who he was really angry with – pathetic, ruined, murderous Bella? Hermione for her deception? Or himself for being too stupid to realise that she had suffered too? How could he not have guessed this? He had known that she'd been captured, however briefly, and he had known of Madam Lestrange's pathological hatred for Muggle-borns. If they hadn't escaped...

He shivered, despite the heat. The sky was white and he noted absently that the stagnant breeze had picked up into a hot wind, which suggested an imminent thundery breakdown.

He heard her light footsteps as she came to stand beside him, leaning on the rail.

"If it helps," her voice was very soft, "there was one thing that kept me together while she was... when she – you know. I thought there was a chance I might die... And all I could think was, well, at least I'd given you a chance. You know, we were taken only six days after I visited you that day. All I could think was, at least I managed to do that first – at least you knew the danger and I'd tried to give you a way out. If I'd died, at least I would have achieved that..."

He swallowed, his throat very tight. He couldn't trust himself to speak for a moment. Hermione might have died... unthinkable. Inconceivable. And he might never have cared. She might have been no more than just another of the Dark Lord's young victims.

They stood in silence for a long time, each lost in their own thoughts. He wondered whether her mind had turned to her husband and children; whether their existence made up for the early loss of her childhood innocence. What if she had never come to Hogwarts, never met Potter or Weasley? What kind of woman would a magic-free Hermione be – a normal, young Muggle? No. Never normal. But perhaps more carefree.
It was something of a shock when she suddenly spoke again. "I was wondering…what you intend to do now? Now you are…free, I mean."

"Free?" He gave a small laugh. "Free? Yes, I suppose I am…"

In reality, he hadn't given his status in Britain much thought for years. He'd known that Potter was still working on the case, and had been impressed by his persistence if rather cynical about the boy's motivations, but now it seemed as if Harry hadn't been alone. Clearly, Hermione had played her own part in the process. He wondered briefly how they'd managed to tackle his crimes at Hogwarts.

Almost as if she'd read his mind, she said, "No one would testify against your behaviour at the school. Ginny, Neville and Luna all refused to do so – one or two of the others considered it, but Neville was able to reason with them." She shook her head, smiling. "You know, you underestimated Neville Longbottom, we all did. He never wanted to talk about it, but in his heart, I think he always knew what you had to do. You should see him now – Professor of Herbology now that Pomona has retired."

"You're right. I did underestimate him." And yet, he had respected Neville by the end. The lanky tough young man who had openly challenged him during that last year had been a far cry from the rather fat nervous little boy who had reminded him too much of that ratty little Peter Pettigrew. Ginny had been quite right - Neville had nobly withstood the attempts to obtain information about the DA with all the courage his parents had shown, and Severus had been impressed.

"I only mention it because, well, there's an official pardon drawn up for you at the Ministry – posthumus, of course, and also there's talk of an Order of Merit…"

He shrugged that aside – he had no interest in whatever grovelling apologies the Ministry intended to make.

"I don't know, Hermione…" He sighed, looking around at all he'd worked on over the last five and a half years. "I'm not sure that I want to leave here anyway. I like the anonymity. Can you imagine the response if I suddenly appeared again?"

She grimaced at the thought. "We can try to control the media a bit."

"But you can't control the gossip. They'd never leave me alone. And I'm sure there are still some people who'd like to see me dead – parents of students I harmed, people who disagree with the Ministry… It wouldn't do you much good either."

She looked at him. "How so?"

He smiled without any humour. "Don't you think people will want to know how I survived and managed to escape?" He shook his head. "There's no way you'd ever be able to keep your name, and that of Weasley, out of it. The scandal of a rising star at the Ministry being involved in a cover-up? Not that great for your career, I would think."

She frowned at the hills in the distance. The sky was darkening and the air was eerily still – they were definitely in for a downpour.

"Don't you want to return?" Her voice sounded rather plaintive.

"Truthfully?" He shook his head. "Why would I?"

"But your home is there."
"Home?" He laughed incredulously. "What home? Spinners End? I don't think so – my only interest in that hell-hole is that at least I can now sell it without Ministry interference. Hogwarts? Hardly much of a home, is it?"

"I – I suppose not..." She couldn't meet his eyes. "I suppose I didn't think it through. I just thought..." She broke off.

"You thought what, Hermione? Tell me," he took her arm; made her look at him. "Tell me, Hermione, what do I have go back to Britain for?"

Her eyes were large, confused, and their naiveté infuriated him. "I don't know, I just wondered..."

"Wondered what? That I would go back to be your great success? Your pet reformed Death Eater? That I'd be – what? Your friend? We'd have drinks after work and I'd come to visit your little family for Sunday lunch? That everything would be nice and cosy and perfect in your perfect little life."

He spat the words out, and she blanched at the sudden anger in his face. "No! That's not what I meant!"

"Then what did you mean? What do you want from me?" He couldn't help the white-hot rage that threatened to envelop him, even as she was backing away from him, almost imperceptibly - and that was infuriating too. She didn't even have the courage to face him... "Why did you come back here?"

"You know why." Her voice sounded rough; there were tears in her eyes.

"Oh, that's right – tears," he sneered. "Just like a woman. I should have known you'd resort to them – trying to get your own way. Do they work for him? Is that why you married him? Does he do whatever you want him to? I bet he couldn't resist those big, innocent eyes of yours. Was that it? Was I too much of a challenge – did you want someone who'd roll over like some kind of overgrown puppy, and do whatever you want?"

He caught the flare of anger in her eyes and then she pushed past him and took off, unexpectedly, running down the steps and out into the hot air.

Rendered immobile by surprise, he watched her running down the track towards the village before taking off after her. He thought she'd simply apparate away, but she seemed too distracted to be able to. She ran haphazardly, blinded by the dust that blew up around her. With his long legs, he soon caught her. Grabbing her arms, he pulled her roughly around to face him.

She fought him for moment. "Let go of me!"

"No, not yet," he hissed. "You owe me."

"I owe you nothing," she screamed suddenly, still struggling. The light was darkening; he had an impression of black clouds forming. There was a distant rumble of thunder.

"Why did you leave me? Why didn't you come back?"

He could hardly recognise his own voice. The words emerged as a howl, animalistic. The grief slammed down on him; he could barely stand under its pressure, and held her arms now more for his own support than for her restraint.

She was gasping, her eyes wild. "I didn't – I didn't think it would be a good idea –"
"Not good enough." He shook her shoulders. "Not good enough, Hermione."

"What do you want from me?" she cried out, desperately. "What do you want me to say? That I didn't – don't – love you? That I didn't want you?"

"Liar – you are a liar."

"I didn't think you wanted me," she sobbed, the tears running freely down her face. "I didn't know what to do – you said you didn't return my feelings. I didn't think you cared about us. You never said."

"How could you think that? That night, you wanted me – I know you did. And you knew how I felt – you must have."

"Did I? Did I? All I knew was that you wanted a fuck. As far as I knew, it could have been anyone." She wiped at her eyes, savagely. "What was that, Severus? Did it even matter that it was me? Or was it just for release – were you just looking for a quick fuck to make you feel like a real man?"

His vision blanked for a moment, he was only barely aware of the smack of his hand across her cheekbone, and her gasp as she fell back with a thud.

The white rage cleared; he felt icy fear descend as his senses returned. She lay sprawling on the ground in front of him, her eyes wide with shock as she stared up at him.

Suddenly he was four years old again, and watching his mother staring up at his father in abject fear. For a moment, he felt as if he was going to vomit. He swallowed, gasping as he tried to control his nausea.

"Oh, Merlin, what have I done?" he muttered. "Hermione – I'm so sorry – I didn't."

He took an uncertain step towards her, unsure what to do. However, at his movement, she seemed to come back to her senses – her eyes narrowed and she half-sat up, raising a hand. He made no attempt to block the hex that he knew was coming, and suddenly felt himself being lifted and thrown back some distance. He slammed into the dirt, his head thudding against the trunk of a tree. He lay still, staring up at the stormy sky, dazed by more than just the blow to his head.

She sat up with an effort and lifted a shaking hand to wipe her face clean. Her breath came in harsh gasps as she fought to gain control of her emotions.

Again, he expected her to leave. He had no intention of stopping her now; he was still cold and numb with horror. Of all the things he had done in his entire life, to raise his hand to her of all people…

"No. It would be best for her to get the hell out of his life as quickly as possible, and never come back. For her own sake. For his.

But she seemed disinclined to leave now. She got onto her knees and brushed rather hopelessly at her dirty dress.

"You asked me a question just now, and I didn't really answer it." Her voice was so quiet that he almost didn't hear the words.

He couldn't speak or move, still staring unseeingingly at the gathering grey clouds above.
"I should have come back. I should have spoken to you before I made any decision about Ron. It was wrong, I treated you badly. And I never...never wanted to hurt you... but still, I managed to do just that."

"You almost killed me. When you wrote about Ron – it almost destroyed me." It was a sudden revelation for him too; until now, the true extent of her betrayal hadn't really hit him. He'd been hurt but not angry...or he hadn't been until she'd come back.

She gazed at the ground. "God, I am so sorry, Severus. I am so, so sorry." Her voice was choked.

He pulled himself into a sitting position, staring at her. "You're sorry? Hermione, I just – I hit you!" He crawled over to her tentatively and sank onto the ground next to her. He felt cold, numb, sickened by his own behaviour. No longer angry; his fury had fled, taking all his energy with it.

She didn't flinch away from him, as he might have expected, but the look she gave him was uncertain. "I don't think you realised what you were doing for a moment... Did you? It was as if there was a stranger standing there. It wasn't you. Did you mean to hit me like that?"

He gestured helplessly, staring at his hands. "I get... You saw it before, years ago. I get – it all goes red, and I can't seem to control my temper. When I get like that, I have to be alone. My father..." He stopped, shivering violently. Was he like his father – was it as simple as that? Nothing to do with Voldemort, with the years of torture?

"I don't think you are like your father."

He started at her voice; had he spoken his fears aloud? She went on, speaking slowly. "But that was – I've never seen you lose control like that. Angry yes, but -.

"Perhaps you don't know me as well as you think you do," he muttered, looking away. He felt ashamed, horrified by his lack of control.

She was silent, and he sensed she was looking at him, so he went on. "I knew it would happen – with Ron. I knew – I don't know how I knew – but it just made sense..." He held a handful of dirt in his hand, squeezing it savagely. "Like a novel, where the ending is obvious from the moment you read the first page. I just couldn't believe that you would ever choose me – me – over him. I couldn't believe that we – you and I - ever made any sense."

"I didn't know that your feelings had changed." Her voice was flat, miserable. "I thought it was only my heart that was at risk."

"But then, that last night – why -?"

"I – I just wanted you. I thought you just wanted a woman, any woman, and I thought it might as well be me." She gave a shaky laugh. "Is that so bad? I'd wanted you so much; you have no idea how much, for ages and ages, and you just kept being so noble about my age, like I was some kind of perfect unsullied child, and – and then suddenly there you were, kissing me and responding to me in the way I'd wanted you to for so, so long. And I thought, what the hell, at least I can pretend that it's more than just tonight."

She shook her head and seemed about to get up when there was a loud crash of thunder overhead.

The heavens opened. Warm water gushed down, turning the dust into mud within seconds. Hermione's hair was flattened against her face; her blue dress plastered to her body. Severus rubbed his hand over his face and squinted, trying to see her through the rain as he struggled to his feet. He held out a hand to her.
"Come on, quickly."

She grabbed his hand and they ran back towards the cottage, struggling through the deluge. Severus bypassed the glasses and the chair cushions, leaving them to their watery fate as he sprinted to the door, half-dragging, half-carrying Hermione into the safety of the kitchen.

"Wait here."

She stood shivering and dripping on the flagstones as he ran into the bathroom and grabbed some towels and a bathrobe, bringing them back to her. "Here. You'd better take that dress off and squeeze it out. I'll just get changed."

When he returned from the bedroom in dry clothes, he found her wearing his bathrobe and standing at the window of his sitting room, staring out at the storm.

"That was – I've never experienced anything like it." There was awe in her voice at the sheer power of the thunderstorm.

"It happens from time to time. The heat builds up in August, and the storms seem to bounce around the mountains. When we get one, it can last for hours," he commented, watching her carefully.

She turned to him, giving him a slightly awkward smile. "Well, I guess you know the truth now." It was a flat statement; it occurred to him that she was embarrassed by her honesty.

"Yes, I suppose I do," he replied, quietly. "And – and, you should probably know that I love you. That I am in love with you, and have been for at least five years. Probably longer."

In the end, it was surprisingly easy to say, and he wondered now what had stopped him saying it back then. He closed his eyes for a moment and felt the relief, just for finally saying it, flow through his body.

She gave a shaky laugh. "Well then, I've messed up both our lives, haven't I?"

There was something despairing in her voice. He opened his eyes; this was perhaps not the response he might have expected to his declaration.

She was looking at him, her eyes very dark, and opened her mouth to say something, then checked herself. "No." It was scarcely above a whisper, and he wasn't sure it was even aimed at him. "No. I won't say it, not just because I should have said it five years ago. That's an indulgence. And it's not fair – not on him, and not on you." She laughed again, her voice flat and bitter. "What is it that they say? You've made your bed, and now you must lie on it."

He was watching her very carefully. "Must you?"

Her eyes met his without flinching. "You know the answer to that, Severus." Her voice was light but perfectly steady once more.

And he did know.

"Are you happy? That's all I want to know. If you're happy, then…" his voice faded away. He couldn't bring himself to wish her well, and she seemed to know that.

She hesitated, then looked at him steadily. "Ron is a good man – a great father. And I love him. We understand each other. I'm not… I'm not in love with him, it's not the way I feel about…" she broke off. "But I think he knows that I don't feel as strongly about him as he does about me, and it's
OK with him. It works." She turned away from him. "As well as it can, anyway."

"It's no basis for marriage."

She laughed, harshly. "Oh, you'd be surprised at what passes for marriage these days, Severus. You don't know, you haven't been home since the war. The magical population is depleted; there are financial incentives for marrying, for having babies to boost the population. At least what Ron and I did was based on love – it might not be what you think of as love, but there's something there. And now we have Rose and Hugo…"

She sighed, looking towards the window. He stood, silently watching her but not daring to move any closer. The rain drummed on the windows, echoing through the silent cottage.

After what seemed like an eternity, she turned towards him again, and he could hear the resignation in her voice as she spoke again. "I can't regret Rose and Hugo. Not ever. You know – I never thought I'd want kids. I was never that maternal, really."

*Perhaps you should have considered that before you married a Weasley,* was his unspoken thought, but she carried on.

"And yet… Rose was a mistake – it certainly wasn't my plan to get pregnant while we were still working on your case, and while there's still so much more to do at the Ministry – but…but when I was carrying her, I felt such a sense of…privilege."

She looked at him intently. "Does that make sense? Can you understand that? Not everyone will have a child – not everyone will be able to…but I have. I've brought two into the world now, and they will grow up to learn things that you and I cannot even imagine. And – and they'll grow up in a world where the shadow of Voldemort is just a memory, where Muggle-borns and half-bloods have the same rights and status as pure-bloods. My Rose will grow up in a world where she has exactly the same opportunities as her brother…and she will achieve *so much!* And I – Ron and I – we will have done that. We will have contributed to making the wizarding world a better place – not just through our jobs but by how we raise our children."

"And that matters to you."

"You *do* understand." She moved slowly towards him.

"With me, you would never have had children." He stated it as a fact, not a question.

She hesitated for a moment. "No. Probably not. I would have been happy though, in other ways… I would have had you." The melancholy in her voice almost floored him, but he stood his ground.

"But there would have always been something between us. You would have given up a lot for me – a career, children, your family and friends around you. Stuck here, in the middle of nowhere, away from places of learning, away from the Ministry – the law departments. And when we argued – and we *would* have argued – you would have thrown that back in my face."

"You don't know that," she pointed out.

"I know you might not have said it," he agreed, "but you would have felt it, deep inside. It would have been there."

"If we loved each other…"

"It wouldn't have been enough. You know that. I know it."
It struck him as odd that, in a way, he was presenting her argument, while she was coming around to his point of view. It was almost as if they were trying to give each other excuses for their behaviour.

She had stopped moving towards him. Her hand was held out in his direction, but he wouldn't take it.

"You are so, so clever, Hermione. So bright, so full of conviction. You see something that needs to be put right and you burn with a desire to right it. Could you really have been content with living here – just a wife, a glorified assistant, with no role of your own?"

She seemed frozen in place, that hand still extended. He heard her shaky sigh, and then the hand dropped back to her side. "No. I couldn't."

"Well then..."

They stood facing each other as the rain continued to batter the little cottage. A lifetime seemed to have passed in the hour since she had arrived – had it really been only an hour?

"So," she cleared her throat and started again, more steadily, her eyes never leaving his. "So, where does that leave us?"

The question hung between them. He couldn't answer it then, but it haunted him for a long time after. After they'd dried out her clothes, and had had lunch in the little kitchen, just like they used to. After they'd drunk their coffee and she'd seen his latest experiments and gone through his latest theories. After she'd finally sighed at the time and left him to return to her husband and children. After that day...it still haunted him.

But at least she was back in his life again.

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to add here that when this chapter posted on another site, I was accused of condoning violence against women. I IN NO WAY condone any kind of violence - I was simply making the point that both my characters are in a very dark place at the moment. One of them has severe and unresolved issues with his temper, the other thinks she 'deserves' to be treated badly. I don't believe she does deserve to be hit, because no one does, but I'm afraid that's the nature of the mind-set she's in right now. Just wanted to clarify that!
Telling the Truth

July 2011

"Owl delivery for you."

Ron handed the scroll to Hermione as he entered the kitchen, still buttoning his shirt. He made his way to the far end of the table, pausing to plant a kiss on his daughter's head as he passed her chair.

"Funny - I didn't hear it," Hermione murmured, frowning at the neat writing, before giving her husband a startled look. "Are you going in this morning? I thought, after the late night - ."

Ron grimaced a little as he sat down. He'd sustained a minor injury to his hip during a late-night arrest and had spent a couple of hours in St Mungo's, waiting to be treated. It had been past 3AM by the time he'd got to bed. "Got to. Team meeting this morning. I'm not surprised you didn't hear the owl, the amount of noise these two make," he added, summoning the coffee pot with a wave of his hand. "Funny how two fairly small people can make such an incredible racket."

Rose grinned at her dad. "Not my fault. Hugo's totally clumsy this morning."

Hermione glanced at her son, who flushed and bent his face over his egg.

"What's the matter, mate?" Ron touched Hugo's shoulder gently.

"Oh, he's just practising for a school test, but he's rubbish at it. Honestly, Dad! All he's got to do is levitate his plate from one side of the table to the other, but he keeps dropping them."

And don't I know it, thought Hermione, wearily, as Hugo glared at his older sister.

"Eat your breakfast. And stop teasing your brother," she ordered.

Rose smiled at her mother, entirely unfazed. At nine, she was the brightest in her class. She resembled her mother to some degree, with her curly dark hair and big intelligent brown eyes, but possessed a far greater degree of confidence than Hermione had done at that age. But then she was growing up in a very different world.

Ron frowned down at his toast. "You know, I'm not so sure that this 'primary' school, as you call it, is such a great thing. I think they push them too hard. After all, we didn't go to school at all until we were eleven. Mum's tutoring was good enough for us."

Hermione shrugged, deciding not to point out that he may not have done, but she certainly had… and it had almost certainly prepared her far better for the rigours of study at Hogwarts. "Well, I think it's better this way. I could never understand why the wizarding world didn't have anything equivalent. After all, it helps to prepare them for Hogwarts. I always felt we spent far too long on the basic spells in our first year. And it means they all go in at a similar level. Otherwise you've got situations where the kids from the older wizarding families have a far greater advantage right from the start than Muggle-borns, or kids like Harry." Plus, your mother didn't go out to work, she added to herself.

She watched seven-year-old Hugo as he concentrated carefully, his blue eyes narrowing as he waved his 'kinder-wand'. This was a six-inch version of the adult wand he'd receive at eleven, with a quarter of the power. It was a relatively new initiative, invented by Seamus Finnegan in partnership with George Weasley. Initially, it was intended to be a fairly high-tech toy, but since
Hogwarts had expanded to provide a primary school education at various locations throughout the country, it had formed part of the early curriculum. She knew that the older generation were not too keen on young children having wands, which was why they came with built-in controls that restricted their power to limited applications in home or classroom locations.

She tried very hard not to wince as the plate rose and wobbled dangerously in the air; she'd already had to repair six others this morning.

The plate spun very slightly and then crashed down again hard, cracking across the centre. Rose sniggered and Hermione gave her a hard look before muttering a "Reparo" in the direction of the plate.

"You're doing very well," she said, encouragingly. "As I recall, Rose broke hundreds of plates before she passed the test."

"Really?" Hugo brightened up, encouraged by this unexpected evidence that his older sister was not entirely perfect.

"Anyway, I think that's enough practising for now," Hermione added, quickly. "If you've finished your breakfast, you both need to go and get dressed. And remember – you're going back to Uncle Harry and Aunty Ginny's for tea, so make sure you take something to get changed into – and I mean it, Rose," she added warningly. "I don't want you messing your uniform up. I remember what happened the last time you decided to carry out illegal experiments with James. Help Hugo find some clothes too."

Rose laughed, and Hermione felt a familiar warm glow as her precocious daughter bounded up the stairs. By contrast, as sturdy red-headed Hugo hurried after his leggy sister, her heart clenched.

Her eyes dropped, and she found herself taking in her surroundings with a fresh sense of surprise. This house was new enough for her to still feel the excitement of owning her own property. With Ron's most recent promotion and the salary increase that came with it, they had finally felt secure enough to leave The Burrow and buy their own house.

It lay on Watchbell Street in the ancient Cinque Port city of Rye in East Sussex. Hermione adored the view from the back garden over the marshes to the sea beyond. It was a town that she had visited with her family as a child, and she had always cherished her memories of the rambling, cobble-stoned streets and old second-hand bookshops.

She'd always assumed that they'd move somewhere nearer to Harry and Ginny in Godric's Hollow down in the West Country. They'd always loved it there. And yet, when it came down to it, she found herself drawn strongly to this aspect of her Muggle childhood. It was within reasonable apparating distance to their jobs and her parents. It was also close to Luna Lovegood, who lived in a ramshackle cottage near the lighthouse down at Dungeness whenever she was in Britain, although more and more her research into magical creatures took her abroad. The eccentric Ravenclaw had become a good friend to Hermione in recent years. It was a comfort to be able to talk occasionally to someone who knew all about Hermione's carefully repressed feelings for Severus but didn't judge.

Best of all, one of the first of the primary schools was based there, and Hermione really did want her children to gain the advantages of an early structured wizarding education. In Godric's Hollow, they were still being home-educated, which might suit Ginny, who was working part-time as a Quiddich correspondent for the Prophet, but did not suit her so well.
Ron had no particular objection, and there was a small established wizarding community in Rye itself, which seemed cautiously welcoming. And an extensive wizarding bookshop, hidden behind a second-hand Muggle bookshop, at which Hermione had spent many happy hours browsing. Severus would love it.

The almost brand new kitchen was gleaming; Hermione prided herself that it combined the best of Muggle technology with her own magical adaptations. No ancient Weasley kitchen, this. Nor did it resemble the small, cosy rural kitchen in Andalusia. She shied away from a sudden vision of Severus leaning against a unit, stirring one of his delicious stews. No. She had made her decision years ago.

Ron interrupted her musing, giving the scroll a nod. "Are you going to open that?"

Hermione sighed. "It's Neville. I think I know what it's likely to say."

She opened it anyway and read the few lines before sending it flying towards her husband.

*Dear Hermione,*

*I hope this finds you all well. I'm afraid I have some bad news. We really can't keep our mutual friend on at the school any longer. I'm sorry, but I've got to think of the safety of the kids.*

*He's away more than he is here nowadays, and when he does turn up, he's quite obviously under the influence of some kind of Muggle substance. Hagrid has done his best, but you know the problem. Minerva has made it quite clear that if he turns up again, he won't be allowed to enter the grounds – and she really means it this time.*

*I really can't think what else to do, but if I can be of any help, please let me know.*

*Hannah sends her love.*

*Neville Longbottom, Prof Herbology, Hogwarts*

Ron read this and put it to one side. "No great surprise."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know, I really hoped that he might make a go of it this time."

"Hagrid has got the patience of a bloody saint. I think if it was down to him, the gates of Hogwarts would always be open," Ron remarked as he gulped down his coffee and poured another cup.

"But it isn't," Hermione agreed. "I can't really blame Minerva; I'd probably do the same in her situation. She's got the reputation of the school to think of… and the safety of the children."

She frowned at her plate, suddenly not hungry. "The question is…what to do now? I don't suppose Lucius - ."

Ron shook his head. "No chance. He's more-or-less reclusive now. Apparently he lives in just one room these days. Malfoy Manor's practically a ruin. Literally falling down around his ears. He's lost everything. And he just sits at his window, shouting abuse and shooting *repellus* at anyone who dares to approach. No one knows how he's still alive – he doesn't seem to get any food delivered, and he's got no money."

Hermione swallowed, appalled. "Surely you could overpower him? He can't have much magic available if he's got into that state."
Ron shrugged. "And do what? We can't take him in without orders. And no one's complained about him. He's committed no crime. The reality is that no one gives a damn."

Hermione pushed her plate away, feeling sick. "That's the trouble with the wizarding world. I've been saying it for years. You need to have some kind of…detention order – something that orders his removal to St Mungo's for his own safety. You can't just leave him to starve to death – or to kill himself."

Ron sighed. "That's not the way it works, and you know it. You're suggesting that the Ministry has more control over individuals…and yet, we all remember what happened when the Ministry was all-powerful. Kingsley's not keen to go down that route again."

"It's not about tyranny," she argued. "It's about compassion. Sometimes people need to be looked after for their own good. The reality is that not everyone came out of the war unscathed. Many of us had scars – physical and psychological. And the wizarding world tries to ignore that. It's all been about looking forward – trying to forget the past. Well, some of us haven't found it that easy…"

"You mean you." Ron's voice sounded mild, but there was just a touch of condemnation.

Hermione eyed her husband. "And we're back to that again, are we?" She sighed. "I'm not going to apologise, Ron."

"I'm not asking you to."

"But you still don't understand why, do you?"

"I -," Ron looked away. "I only know that Mum -." His voice faded away.

"Your mum what, Ron? Go on, why not say it?" She observed him steadily. "You know you want to – you've been holding back for years."

"OK." There was a flash of anger in his blue eyes as he looked back at her. "Yes - why not? Mum had seven of us, and Gin has had three, and Fleur two, and Audrey two, and Angelica's got the twins – and not one of them walked out on their six-month-old child for three months. Three whole months, Hermione, and hardly a word from you in all that time. If I even understood why, it might help -."

"We've been through this before, I don't know how many times," she snapped. "Post-natal depression, Ron. It's an illness. And no one at St Mungo's understands it. That's the biggest irony of the wizarding world – they can treat any number of devastating illnesses – cancer, heart disease, Parkinson's, you name it. Things that would carry off Muggles. But as soon as they come across a psychiatric illness that's not caused by magic, they're stumped. It's just a case of 'take this potion and pull yourself together'."

She shook her head. "I felt like I was going mad. I was so alone…and your mum – I know she meant well. She tried to help, but…it was no good, Ron. I was no good. I mean, for heaven's sake, I even felt like I deserved -."

She broke off quickly.

"Deserved what?" Ron was looking down; his voice calm but his fingers clenching and unclenching in frustration.

Hermione sighed, resting her forehead on her hands. "I can't explain."
"Since then," Ron was still looking at his hands, "- since then, you've changed. You came back from that Muggle hospital and you weren't you. You were...harder. Older, somehow. I can't explain it, but it felt like the joy had gone out of you."

Hermione looked up at him in surprise. It was unlike Ron to be so perceptive – in domestic matters, anyway.

She'd been more than a little surprised when Ron had chosen to go into the Auror programme. She understood the attraction – with his best friend there already and the prospect of an exciting career – but she didn't think he would be well-suited. He wasn't exactly the best scholar in the world. And yet, somehow he'd got through the rigorous training programme and had proved to be something of a star in his own right. Ron had always been an excellent strategist. He'd risen fairly quickly through the ranks and was now managing his own team.

She ran her eyes over her husband's face. He looked...older. Older than his twenty-nine years, anyway. It was partly the job, she knew. She saw the signs in Harry too, and some of the other young Aurors that she'd got to know socially - the weariness and cynicism carefully hidden beneath the usual cheerful smiles. They'd had to grow up far too fast, these boys and girls. The post-Voldemort era was not an easy time for them – their schooling had been disrupted, and they had been thrown into a world where the population was decimated, and forced to take on senior roles when barely out of training.

Hermione knew that, even now, Ron spent a fair amount of his time interrogating wizards and witches who used to be Death Eaters. It wasn't much fun, especially when faced with desperate individuals who had tried to put their past behind them and start a new life. Worse still was trying to talk to the devastated spouses and children who had had no notion of their loved one's past. Last night's action had ended in the arrest of a young man who'd been just a kid of fifteen when Voldemort was at the height of his power...and yet there were credible witnesses who had placed him at the scene of the gang rape, torture and murder of a group of Muggle girls. It didn't seem credible.

Ron was thinner than he used to be – less obviously muscly, but the strength was still there, hidden beneath a leaner, well-trained body. His eyesight had deteriorated and he'd recently started wearing glasses. There was magical surgery he could undergo at St Mungo's to restore his twenty-twenty vision, but it was expensive, and he didn't consider it to be a priority.

He was right. The joy had gone – for both of them though, not just her. She could still remember the early days – the fun of being a young couple with no responsibilities, the late night parties, the lazy long dinners with friends. Even when Rose's arrival surprised them both, there had been the wonders and pitfalls of early parenthood to share...the giggling over their cack-handed attempts at holding a slippery infant body over a baby bath, the endless pacing up and down with a colicky child, the good-natured ribbing over who'd had the most disturbed night, the peaceful weekend mornings in bed with their infant daughter – their little miracle. The joy and the pride of first steps and first words.

It hadn't been the same with Hugo.

Hermione bit her lip. "Don't you think that things changed before I went away? When Hugo was first born and we had all those problems with his health?"

Ron frowned. "I dunno. You were anxious, of course - naturally. You didn't seem confident, not the way you were with Rose, but then Mum was there to help you - ."

"Yes," muttered Hermione, unable to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. "And don't I know it..."
Ron's head snapped up at this. "Yeah, well, it's just as well she was around, wasn't it? What do you think I would've done with a toddler and a baby and a full-time job if she hadn't been able to look after them for three whole months?"

Hermione felt instantly guilty, reaching instinctively across the table towards him. "I will always been sorry about that. I didn't want to go away, but it was the right choice, Ron, believe me. If I hadn't..." she swallowed. "If I hadn't, I might have – well, I don't know what I might've done."

"You'd never have hurt the kids." Ron looked up at her, intently. "You'd never have done that. Not you. I know you too well."

The last phrase was barely a mutter and he looked away again. Hermione felt the familiar twinge of guilt as she looked at her husband.

It had all seemed so simple ten years ago. They were friends – had become more than friends in the end. They'd grown up together, had fought, had protected one another, had been through the fear and torments of the Voldemort years, had fought the Final Battle side by side. And now, here they were, barely able to communicate. Sitting at opposite ends of the table, trying to understand each other.

"The reality is that I might have hurt them," she replied, observing him carefully. "I know you don't want to believe it, but that's what mental illness does. That's what I mean about the wizarding world. Someone like Lucius Malfoy goes completely mad, and you all shrug your shoulders and decide that there's nothing you can do. But in the Muggle world, they believe that psychiatric disorders can be treated – not just with drugs but with therapies – psychotherapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, motivational interviewing..."

She shook her head. "I just wish there was a way of incorporating such therapies into our world. I mean – some of those people in that ward at St Mungo's – years and years of just sitting there, kept sedated, no hope of a cure. People like the Longbottoms...with some form of magical occupational therapy – who knows?"

"And I suppose you're the one to introduce it?" Ron broke in, with cruel amusement. "Going to turn Healer again, are we?"

She glared at him. "Well, why not? It's not as if I'm going anywhere at the Ministry."

It was a recurrent sore point between them that, even as Ron rose higher in the Auror ranks, Hermione was still stuck in a relatively menial position at Magical Law Enforcement.

Ron shrugged. He gulped down the dregs of his cold coffee and stood up, accio-ing his tie and jacket to him. "You can hardly blame the Ministry for that."

"Really? You think I deserved all that rubbish that the Prophet wrote about me? All those 'madwomen' headlines?"

Ron gave her a bland look. "Well, it's like you say, isn't it? We wizards are too stupid to understand how the human mind works. Never mind legillimency and occlumency. Never mind Voldemort's mental control over half the wizarding world. If you've got a mental health problem, naturally you have to run back to your safe Muggle world to get the 'proper' treatment. And I suppose your therapist told you not to have any contact with your own husband and young children...because that's incredibly sensible, isn't it? To deprive two young children of their mother?"

"I understand," she replied, through gritted teeth. "And I regret it. You know how much."
And it was true – he did know. He knew her deepest fears whenever she looked at Hugo…

His face softened. "Look, I stood by you, didn't I? And so did my family, and Harry. If it hadn't been for him…"

"I know," she said, equally softly. It was largely down to Harry's considerable power and reputation that she'd been allowed to return to her job…and gradually, her colleagues had stopped avoiding her and the papers had turned their attention to other matters…

But the mud still stuck. Even now, when she dropped the children off at school or went shopping in Diagon Alley, the faces were averted, the conversation muted. She understood why. There was a fear – a deep-rooted fear in the wizarding community. Already depleted by the mad tyranny of Voldemort, it sought to reinvent itself, to restore the population, to regain the grandeur of the wizarding past. And it held no place for perceived mental weakness within its ranks.

The community in Rye seemed less bothered – they were a little more liberal and a little less concerned by media gossip – but even here, she saw the occasional nervous glance.

She had committed the grave sin of acknowledging her problems…and, in doing so, she had challenged what they knew to be true. Madness should only be caused by magic. It should not be as a result of delayed war trauma caused by torture, manifesting as puerperal psychosis following a difficult birth. That they did not understand…and like any traditional community, they rejected it utterly.

It was Severus who had, unknowingly, woken Hermione up to the danger that she was in. When he had struck her and she'd sprawled in the dust, an undignified heap, there had been a moment…a moment of almost-terrifying exultation. Yes, her mind seemed to tell her, yes, yes, you deserve this…you have earned this degradation, this pain.

With all that had immediately followed that moment, she'd had no time to analyse her reaction. It was only later, at home, that she'd recalled her response…and she'd known then that something was seriously wrong. The frenetic cleaning at 3AM, the way in which she had been able to disassociate herself from Hugo even as she obsesses over his feeding, her mood swings…they should have been warning enough. But that single slap, and her reaction to it, had been the real wake-up call.

And so she had removed herself. She'd called her parents, left the children with them, along with a note for Ron, and had voluntarily checked herself into a secure psychiatric unit. Luna had recommended it – there was a squib working there who specialised in treating traumatised witches and wizards. She had treated Luna herself shortly after the Battle and had helped the Ravenclaw recover from her imprisonment at Malfoy Manor.

With her therapist, she'd explored issues that she hadn't dealt with for years – her childhood insecurity, the bullying and name-calling, her fears for her own safety, her capture and torture, her fears and hopes and guilt over Severus. And she'd learnt to see how her past had affected her during Hugo's prolonged and traumatic birth…and that it was not her fault.

She gazed up at Ron, who was busying himself with his tie, not looking at her. "You think I'm harder now? Have you ever thought that perhaps I was supposed to be this way? That I've left behind my insecurities? What you perceive as 'hardness' is only a result of refusing to give in to their prejudices. I won't apologise for being human. And I'm not that insecure girl any more, desperately trying to fit into a world that still thinks my Muggle background makes me a less powerful witch…when it so patently doesn't."
He sighed, impatiently. "This conversation is getting us nowhere. You *know* I believe in you – I know you're one of our most powerful witches. I always have done."

"Then why must you keep on bringing up the past?"

He eyed her as he fastened his jacket. "If you have to ask that, then I guess *you* don't know *me* that well." He raised his voice. "Come on, kids, I'll drop you off at school before apparating."

As the children clattered down the stairs, he turned back to her. "I'm working late – but I guess you'll be out anyway? Trying to track him down?"

"Yes, I suppose so." She frowned, thinking carefully. "I've got a report to finish, but not much else, so I'll be able to take the afternoon off. It may take a while."

"OK. Good luck with that. If you need me to do a trace, let me know. And – and, be *careful*. You don't know what kind of state he'll be in. He might get aggressive."

She nodded. "OK, I'll be careful, although I'm sure I can manage him. He can't have much natural magic left, so I should be able to subdue him."

He stepped towards her, but she couldn't miss the hesitation before he leaned down to kiss her cheek. And she found it almost impossible to disguise her flinch at the press of his cold lips against her skin.

He stepped back, and she saw the pain in those blue eyes before his mask appeared once more. "See you later."

"Yes, OK."

As he turned away, she felt her shoulders slump. *Oh, gods, Ron, how did we come to this?*

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Actually, it took less than two hours to trace him.

Hermione stepped into the pedestrian subway. At the far end, there was a pile of what looked like rags, but turned out to be a man's slumped-over body.

Hermione walked briskly towards him. Her nose wrinkled involuntarily at the strong smell of urine and she stepped carefully around the puddles and the dog faeces.

Draco glared up at her out of encrusted yellow eyes. "*Piss off, Mudblood."

"Charming as ever, I see, Malfoy," she replied calmly, quite unconcerned by the familiar insult.

He gave a sound that might have been a snigger but it ended in a rattling cough that robbed him of his breath. As he gasped and hacked, she ran her eyes over him in some concern.

The years had not been kind to Draco Malfoy. The blond hair of which he had once been so proud hung in greasy dirty-yellow long tangles over his shoulders. He was thin to the point of emaciation, his skin unhealthily white. He looked easily double his twenty-nine years. It looked as if he hadn't been able to satisfy one of his suppliers – his nose was freshly broken and bloodied and one of his eyes was almost closed by a swollen bruise. Some of the fingers of his right hand were broken – it looked like someone had stamped on them.
He was dressed in a variety of tatty Muggle clothes, had obviously been nowhere near a bath for a long time and smelt nearly as bad as the poky subway within which he was currently sheltering.

He curled into himself, raising a shaking hand to wipe at his mouth. Hermione frowned at the smear of blood she saw there.

"What are you, some fucking do-gooder?" Draco sneered. "Come to gloat, because your life is so fucking perfect, Granger? Yeah, well, I don't need you."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Yeah, because you're coping so well by yourself, Draco." She went to sit down next to him, hesitated and then crouched down instead, trying to avoid too much contact with the stinking floor.

"So, who was it, then?" she asked. "Your dealer? Muggle, was he?"

"Didn't have the money," Draco muttered, closing his eyes.

Hermione sighed. "You know how stupid it is taking Muggle drugs, don't you? You think the stuff you got in Nocturne Alley was strong enough? It's bad, but it won't kill you. Cocaine will. And there's worst stuff out there."

"Just wanna feel warm," the man next to her slurred into his chest.

"There's better ways for that." She took his unresisting hand and peered at the oddly angled fingers. The scabs looked infected and she didn't like the sound of his chest as he breathed in and out. "So what happened with the programme?"

"Waste of fucking time," he grunted. "Just strapped me down and stuck needles in me to keep me quiet, til I begged them to let me go."

She frowned. "I thought it involved group therapy, activities…" She remembered reading the brochure before digging into her savings to meet the extravagant cost of the detoxification programme. Those people could afford to charge what they liked – there weren't many such programmes available in the wizarding world.

Draco forced out another laugh that threatened to turn into another coughing fit. "Not for me, Granger. What'd you expect? It's me – fucking Draco fucking Malfoy. Public enemy number one. You think they'd do anything to help me?"

They ought to, I paid them enough. She didn't say it, though. What was the point? The staff at the unit had probably been kids at Hogwarts when Draco and his cronies had had a reign of terror under Severus' year as headmaster. She could imagine how satisfying it must have been to have had him strapped down and helpless on a bed, especially if they'd been some of the unfortunates on whom the senior Slytherins had perfected their crucios.

She sighed. "I'm going to have to get you to St Mungo's - again. That hand needs splinting, and I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't have pneumonia."

"Sod off, Granger," he muttered, but there was no real venom to it. He was obviously too weak to object.

She bit her lip, considering the options. They wouldn't keep him at the hospital once they'd treated the infections – they didn't consider drug addiction to be serious enough for admittance. And, in any case, she didn't have the power to advocate for Draco's welfare. There was only one person who might possess it…and he was probably in even greater need of care, if Ron was right.
"We need to find somewhere for you to go," she murmured. Hogwarts was clearly out. Ron would go ballistic if she took him home. As for Malfoy Manor... "Not your dad though…"

Draco's body stiffened in outrage, roused from his stupor. "That bastard. Not going back to him…"

"He is still your father," she pointed out.

"He killed her." Draco was getting agitated, and she put a hand on his arm, trying to soothe him. "He killed her, that fucking arsehole. He killed her, she would've been alive if he hadn't – if he hadn't – he hadn't…" His voice trailed off.

"Your mother?" she ventured, tentatively. Narcissa had passed away a year ago. No one knew for certain, but the rumour was that she'd killed herself. Lucius had gone into steep decline since her death.

Draco moaned, burying his face in his damaged hands. "All his fault. If he hadn't gone with Voldemort, we would never… he killed her… she couldn't bear… he killed my mother…"

"Draco? Draco, can you hear me?" She poked at his bony cheekbone, but the man was unresponsive.

Hermione sighed. "You owe me big time for this, Malfoy." She stood up and used her wand to levitate the stinking figure into the air. "But in the meantime… where are you going to be safe, and away from all temptations? Of course, there is one place… if he'll only agree…"

She put her hand on Draco's arm, narrowed her eyes in concentration, and spun them away.

"Are you completely mad?"

Severus paused in his work and stared at Hermione in disbelief.

She shrugged and folded her arms, looking at the pipes meaningfully.

He groaned and turned back to his tinkering. As he bent over in his tight jeans, she allowed herself a brief moment to enjoy the view before hastily turning her eyes away to take in the greater view, so to speak.

There had been a few changes. Severus was branching out a little; now that he was better off, he found it easier to source most of his ingredients elsewhere, where they could be grown in greater bulk. He'd returned much of his land to its former wilder state and had started farming olives and lemons – easier to sell now that he was more accepted by the local Muggle population. They were far less labour-intensive and gave him a reasonable income; and having to spend less time on the land gave him more time for his research work.

He had published some papers on his variants of scar-accio, and was also working in partnership with some medi-wizards and medi-witches at a neonatal intensive care unit in Germany to carry out research on his experimental potion to help premature neonates thrive. He still traded and wrote under the name of Tobias Prince and, so far, no one seemed to have associated him with Severus Snape, still assumed to be dead. He wasn't so worried about being discovered since his posthumous pardon, though, which gave him greater freedom to contact the outside world. He'd contacted the facility in Germany by owl alone and had not actually met his research partners. However, they were clearly impressed enough by his background findings to accept the slightly odd arrangement.
The finished product would almost certainly make him a fortune. As Caesar and Beatrix had gone into partnership with Severus a couple of years' previously, they'd do pretty well out of it too. Even Hermione, who had a five per cent stake in Tobias Prince Inc. courtesy of the money she'd given him to set up his business in the first place, could confidently expect a windfall.

And she'd need it too. She'd got Draco into an expensive private clinic while he recovered from his bout of pneumonia. Ron would not be best pleased if he'd known how much of her own savings he'd spent trying to sort Draco Malfoy out over the years. He knew about her investment in Severus' business, but hadn't shown much interest in it – presumably he didn't expect Severus to be making that much money. She'd kept fairly quiet about the amount she'd recouped from it, especially as most of it had been frittered away on abortive addiction programmes.

Meanwhile, Severus had created an ingenious method of irrigation for his remaining plants, herbs and vegetables – and had also made the hot summers at the cottage more palatable. He had diverted the stream that cut across a corner of his land, using an intricate pattern of dams and pipes to channel it into a tank, where he could use it to water his land as required. The overflow was then re-diverted back into the stream, after going through a filter to remove any toxins. He'd have been in serious trouble with the local authorities over this illegal use of public water... if they'd known about it. He'd put a diversionary field around the structure to stop any Muggle from being able to see it.

The plus side was that Severus had built stone steps down into the side of the tank, turning it into the perfect swimming pool. He had claimed rather grumpily that he'd only done it because he was getting fed up with Hermione taking time out of the laboratory to drive down to the lake for a swim. She appreciated the gesture, anyway. He'd even cordoned off a section to create a shallow paddling pool for Rose and, later, Hugo to play in when they were younger.

Hermione had continued to visit him over the years, occasionally with Rose or both of the children, sometimes alone. Ron had never accompanied her, although he always sent his good wishes, and Severus would respond with creaky politeness. Her visits always had a purpose; she wouldn't allow herself the indulgence of a social call. Following her therapy, she'd made a decision to return to her family, to make amends to her children by not turning her back on her marriage. She felt it was the least she could do – until such time as her children no longer needed her to be at home, anyway. Severus knew that, and it would be unforgivably cruel of her to tempt him with lazy days in the countryside and romantic evenings at the Alhambra.

Instead, she'd arrive with any new equipment or ingredients that he wanted and would settle down to some hard graft on the land or, more often these days, in the laboratory. There were always ingredients that needed to be prepared – the sort of tedious and slightly unpleasant work that Severus might have once allotted to the unfortunate students who had earned a detention from him. Hermione was happy to lose herself for a while in repetitive cutting, chopping, grating or juicing. In some ways, she felt it was a just punishment for abandoning Severus in the first place... and in any case, she almost enjoyed it. It was just nice not to have to think for a while.

She often tried to coincide her visits with times when she knew Caesar and Beatrix were also visiting him, feeling that there might be safety in numbers. Severus had extended his cottage a little, adding a small en-suite guest room for such visits. Even if his friends weren't staying with him, Hermione would usually eschew the guest room for her own tent, which she'd put up in a shady corner at the boundary of his land – as it was the usual magical one, complete with bedroom, bathroom and kitchen, she was able to be quite independent.

By dint of some effort on both parts, they'd eventually managed to regain their previous friendship, although there were certain topics that they were very careful to avoid discussing. She'd never
raised the subject of Severus' destructive and potentially abusive temper. It wasn't that she didn't think it needed addressing, but the topic was too raw for them both.

It saddened her that, by continuing to cut himself off from society, he wasn't given the opportunity to get help and treatment for some of his psychological issues, which obviously went back years. It was his decision, though, and she'd been very careful never to ask anything of him over the years, feeling that she really didn't have the right.

Which made it even odder that she was standing here now, asking him for a really big favour.

He was still bent over, using his wand to ease off the problematic valve that was halting the stream's flow into the tank. Occasionally, she heard the odd muttered comment along the lines of "bloody woman, must be absolutely bloody mad…"

Eventually, he straightened up, facing her. She looked at him and tried to suppress a giggle at the sight of his greying hair, currently sticking up in sweaty spikes. He still kept it shorter but with a floppy fringe that usually fell over his forehead – it suited him, minimising the severity of his beaky nose and making him look younger. In fact, she found it downright sexy.

Her amusement must have shown in her face, as he rolled his eyes and pushed a hand through his hair. "OK. Laugh it up. So tell me why you think it's a remotely sensible idea for me to host a drug addict?"

"Because it's Draco Malfoy?"

"Is that a question or a statement? Come on, we might as well conduct this conversation in some comfort."

He left her in the kitchen preparing icy lemon drinks while he had a quick shower. When he emerged in clean clothes, rubbing his hair dry, she carried their drinks over to the table and chairs on the bougainvillea-shaded terrace.

She sipped her refreshingly cold drink and sighed at the view of the hills as framed by the scarlet flowers of the bougainvillea. God, she missed this place.

Whenever she was here, it didn't escape her attention that this might have been her home, her garden, her view. Theirs. And yet…and yet, she loved her life in Britain too – her beautiful home near the sea, walks along the shingled beaches with Rose and Hugo, the fascinating little bookshops, the coffees with Luna, the family dinners and weekends away with Harry and Ginny and the kids, even her job at the Ministry, working to make life fairer for house elves and Muggle-borns…

Could she have given all of that up for a life of anonymity in rural Spain at the tender age of nineteen? Living as the wife of a wanted man, in constant fear of discovery? Yes, she'd have had Severus and they would have been deliriously happy at first, but she would have been of limited use to him – she was no potions expert - and she might have grown bitter and thwarted by her lack of purpose. And there would have been no children, either. Also, if she had stayed here, would Harry have ever succeeded in clearing Severus' name? She sighed – she would never know.

Severus came out onto the terrace, rolling up the sleeves of his red shirt. He looked much cooler and had also taken the opportunity to shave. She knew that he often went for weeks without bothering if he was alone – in fact, he'd had quite a bushy beard when she'd visited him last year. It had suited him… but then, to her highly biased eyes, almost any look seemed to suit him.
He sat down and gave her a wry look as she passed him his drink. "OK, tell me."

She described Draco's current situation – his decline into addiction to wizarding narcotics first of all and then, when they no longer gave him the buzz he needed, to Muggle street drugs. The abortive detox programmes; the failed attempts by Neville and Hagrid to keep him on the straight and narrow; her role in rescuing him whenever he hit rock bottom.

He stretched his long legs out, gulped his drink and gazed at the horizon in apparent boredom, but she knew him well enough by now to know that he was taking in every word.

When she finished explaining her reasoning, he was silent for a few minutes. She forbore to interrupt, knowing that he needed to think it through.

Finally, he sighed, putting his empty glass down. "Why should I care?"

"Severus Snape would have cared. The Malfoys were your friends, once. He is your godson, after all," she pointed out.

He gave a dry laugh. "Yes, he was Severus Snape's godson. You said it yourself. I've not gone by that name for ten years. Why should I abandon my anonymity now?"

"I can't make you – I can't force you to," she replied, cautiously. "But it might just make a difference to Draco."

"Perhaps more to the point...why should you care?"

She tried to avoid those dark, all-to-perceptive eyes. "Perhaps I understand him a little. Yes, I know – he made my life hell. I should be happy that he's suffering. And yet...I'm not. How can I be, when - when it -."] When it could so easily have been me, she thought, but didn't say.

She didn't need to. His gaze softened, understanding her without words. He knew of her struggles, the depression, the therapy - all of it. She couldn't hide it from him of all people.

"Maybe I feel a duty of care," she confessed.

"And you think I should too? Because he was my student, my protégé?"

"Was he?"

He sighed again. "In a twisted way – yes. I was certainly expected to keep an eye on him. Lucius expected it of me."

"And he was actually a good student – to you. Wasn't he?" She looked at him intently.

He met her eyes with some surprise. "You saw that too? I assumed you hadn't been able to see beyond the arrogant little git who liked to play his teachers up and make life difficult for all Gryffindors."

She smiled. "It was quite hard to see beyond that, yes. But, I suppose you might say that I always had an eye for the good students in each subject. My rivals for the top marks, I suppose. And Draco often scored top marks in Potions. At first, I thought it was just nepotism – and, in any case, it became very clear that I couldn't expect a decent mark from you," she added, teasingly. "But then I realised that he did have a talent for Potions. An instinctive ability that I would never be able to master, no matter how hard I studied. So I guess it made it easier for you that your 'star' student also shared your passion?"
"I wouldn't go so far as to suggest that he shared my interests," Severus pointed out. "He was a lazy little bugger – always was. I used to feel sorry for Narcissa for having such a shiftless son."

"But anyway, when I was trying to work out what to do about Draco, it came to my mind that there was something that he could aim for – something that might give him a means of supporting himself. Something to give him a reason for overcoming his addiction. Half the problem is that he can't see the point of getting clean. And he could work for you, couldn't he? Earn his keep?"

"It's not quite that simple, though, is it? I mean, once an addict, always an addict. He's going to have to deal with that temptation for the rest of his life. And setting him loose in a laboratory with access to all sorts of narcotics…?"

"You could manage that though, couldn't you? Use protective spells to keep him away from the toxic stuff until he'd got through withdrawal? All I'm asking is that you offer him somewhere to live – just for a few weeks if you like. Just to get him away from any temptations. Right now, we can't keep an eye on him for long enough to get him past the difficult time – he just slips away. Here he wouldn't be able to do that. He doesn't speak Spanish, he doesn't know the country at all, and he wouldn't have the money or ability to get very far."

Severus was silent. He stood up and walked over to lean on the railing.

"There's another thing," Hermione said, quietly. "If – if there's anyone he respects, anyone he cares about – it's you. He's estranged from his father and despised by his old Slytherin friends. He resents my involvement in his life. But you… if there's anyone who might able to get through to him, to make him see it through… it might be you."

Severus didn't respond. Hermione ran her eyes over his lean back, trying to work out by the tense set of his shoulders what his answer might be.

"There's something you might not have considered."

His voice was so quiet that Hermione wasn't immediately sure she'd heard him correctly.

"My temper." He kept his back turned to her. "You, of all people, know how dangerous I can be."

Hermione couldn't think of anything to say.

He turned his head suddenly, eyeing her, his face carefully blank. "Isn't that so? You don't talk about it – we don't talk about it. But it's there – between us. It's always been there, hasn't it?"

Hermione swallowed and gave him a brief nod.

"You see, I… I'm not fit to be around people. You wonder why I've never taken the opportunity to come back? I could have come back. I could have been part of your life again. Set up a laboratory on the south coast, so I could at least be near you, even if we never - ."

He broke off and shook his head, as if he was trying to dislodge an unhelpful, possibly destructive, idea.

"But I … I've proved that I can't be in society again. I'm damaged, Hermione. Damaged beyond repair. There's no way back for me – not now. You were right to get out when you did – no, I mean it -," he raised his hand to ward off her instinctive denial, "– if you had stayed with me, back then, I might have hurt you. My dark moods… Even Caesar and Beatrix – they probably know me better than anyone except you – and even they know when to back off; when to let me alone for a few days. If Draco was living here, and he was challenging my boundaries, my patience - ," he shakes
his head. "Do you really think you could trust me not to lash out at him?"

"Back at the unit - ," Hermione cleared her dry throat and tried again, "– back at the unit, they always told us how important it was to be honest to ourselves. Not to be too proud to admit that we were victims. It's so...hard to admit that we have weaknesses. We're adults; we're supposed to know it all, so how can we be so weak? So affected by the behaviour of those around us?"

She leaned forward, intently. "You're afraid of what you might do to Draco if he angers you? I don't think you need to be...but there may be a way..."

She stood up and walked towards him, slowly. He leaned back against the railing and watched her approach, his face as blank as before... but there was something in his eyes. An old pain...

"There was something we did, back in therapy," she went on, lightly. "Something we were made to do – as a group. I hated it. It made me feel so vulnerable, as if all my layers had been stripped away – as if I'd been laid bare for everyone else to despise. But – you know what? It didn't make it go away, not completely, but it minimised it, in some way. Made the barrier less difficult to get over. Just – just acknowledging it – seeing it plain. It's not an end to it, but it is a beginning."

"Hermione, I don't - ."

She interrupted him, moving to stand right in front of him. "I'm going to try something, Severus. No funny stuff, I promise. Just... just let's try this, you and I. I'm going to say something – tell you something that I've never told anyone outside of therapy. And you have to reciprocate. That's the rule."

He made a panicky half-step back, but she took his right hand and placed it over her heart, her eyes gazing deeply into his. "My name is Hermione... I was tortured and almost killed. I was once so afraid of facing the cold facts of reality that I married a man I didn't love enough. And now I am committed to a marriage that should never have happened in the first place. And my greatest fear is that I don't love my son as much as my daughter."

Her voice choked slightly on the last words, but she smiled. "There. I've said it. Now it's your turn."

He hesitated for a moment, and then took her right hand and placed it over his heart.

"My name is Severus... and my greatest fear is that I have the potential to be an abuser... like my father before me."

He tried to loosen his hold on her hand, but she pressed it against him, not letting up.

"And he abused you."

"Hermione, please – I can't - ."

She dug her nails into his shirt. "Say it," she demanded, her eyes burning into his.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "And he abused me."

"How?"

"He – he hit me. And he – he..." He kept looking into her deep brown eyes and they centred him, making it easier to go on. "He kicked me. He broke my ribs once. He..." He stopped, fearing that if he didn't, it would all come out and he'd never be able to stop. Never be able to get rid of the pain
and fear…

She kept her hand steady on his heart. "And he shouldn't have done that."

"No," he agreed. "He shouldn't have done that."

"Because you didn't deserve it."

"I didn't deserve it."

"And… you are *not* your father."

Once more, he hesitated, but her glistening eyes wouldn't leave him. And he saw nothing there but love. Love and acceptance.

"No," he agreed. "I am *not* my father."

The hand clenched into his shirt once more, and he covered it with his own; clasped it tight against him. Their eyes were locked. And she smiled at him, as a large tear rolled down her cheek.
Draco lay on the bed, his body shaking and his blond hair dark with sweat. Severus leaned against the door, watching as Hermione knelt by the bed, trying to soothe him with cooling charms. It didn't seem to be making much difference.

He'd been very wary of agreeing to take in Draco, for more than the reason he had given Hermione.

First of all, there was his continuing anonymity. There were still only a handful of people in Britain that knew of his survival. The Weasley clan, of course, and Hermione had told Luna, after obtaining his permission – although, from what she'd told him, the Ravenclaw appeared to have known, or guessed, all along.

Somehow, and against all the odds, the small band of individuals had managed to keep his survival a secret. Since his name had been cleared, he'd made it perfectly clear that he wouldn't welcome any media attention. His life in Wizarding Britain had been hellish enough for almost forty years; he had no intention of returning and he certainly didn't want anyone turning up on his doorstep, looking for an exclusive.

So he'd been unnerved by the prospect of Draco Malfoy learning the truth. It wasn't as if the man had any reason to be loyal to his old mentor…which was Severus's second reason.

Despite what the students and many of the staff might have believed, his relationship with Draco Malfoy had never been that easy. It had no doubt been politically astute of Lucius to make Severus his son's godfather, but there had been very little affection involved in the transaction. At the time, the young Severus had been in the Dark Lord's favour, and even after Voldemort's destruction by Lily and Harry, Lucius had considered Severus to be useful to him. But otherwise there had been little love lost between the two men – Lucius despised Severus's humble origins and envied his greater magical power.

And Draco was very much his father's son. He was an intelligent and skilled student – when he could be bothered to apply himself, which wasn't often. He relied too heavily on his father's influence to keep him out of trouble. He lacked Lucius's good business sense, and both Lucius and Severus frequently had to sort out the problems he left in his wake. However, like his father before him, he did possess some skill for potions – in fact he had precisely the innate aptitude for this discipline that Hermione Granger had always lacked. Severus had often mused that if he could have combined Draco's talent with Hermione's disciplined brain, he would have had the perfect potions student.

Their tense but reasonably polite relationship had broken down completely when Draco had been given his undignifying task by Voldemort. The boy had become entirely unhinged that year – desperate to improve his family's status with the Dark Lord, alternately terrified and elated by his responsibility, and -paranoid that Severus was going to steal his glory by killing Dumbledore first.

It had been a tragedy, because, for the first time ever, Severus had felt some genuine sympathy for the young Slytherin. He'd known all too well what it was like to be a pawn in someone else's private battle. If Draco had gone to him, he would have done all in his power to protect the boy – perhaps tear him from Voldemort's grasp and send him into hiding. Instead, Draco had been caught up in the wrong side of the war that had followed Dumbledore's death. Judging by Hermione's reports of him over the years, he'd paid the ultimate price for his error.
Severus suspected that Draco might view him as a traitor, not only to Voldemort but to the Malfoy family, and that he might take pleasure in making life difficult for his old teacher. So he was quite surprised to note that, when Hermione arrived with Draco in tow, the young man showed very little emotion. Hermione had no doubt filled him in prior to their arrival, so Severus wasn't a complete shock to him. Those cold grey Malfoy eyes registered some minor puzzlement – no doubt at his old teacher's altered appearance – before growing blank once more.

They'd installed him in Severus's guest room. He had looked around the rather bare, basic room without comment or complaint – it was clear he'd been in much worse places. He'd subsided onto the bed and had passively allowed Hermione to check the bandages on his splinted hand.

He had remained quiet and rather grim-faced, his eyes apprehensive. He'd undergone drug withdrawal before, so he no doubt knew the score. And, sure enough, within a few hours of his arrival, the symptoms had kicked in.

And that had been the third reason for Severus's reluctance. He knew precisely what Draco was going through… because he had been there himself.

When Hermione had initially requested his help with Draco, she couldn't have known the full significance of what she was asking of him. She had never known of his descent into a drink-and-drugs-fuelled hell back in those dark months shortly after her betrayal of him…and she certainly hadn't known that he'd taken cocaine and that his good friends had helped him to detox. The old Severus might have suspected Beatriz of telling Hermione – it was perhaps a measure of how much he had changed over the years that he didn't once suspect the Spanish nurse of having betrayed his confidence. No, Hermione had no idea. She'd appealed to him as an old mentor to Draco, probably not realising that their relationship had never been that close.

The plan had been for Beatriz to be in attendance, but fate had intervened again, and she was busy in her own community dealing with a wizarding measles outbreak. Hermione had quietly assured Severus that she would stay while Draco went through the worst of the withdrawal process, which was probably just as well. Severus had some skills as a healer, and obviously some experience of cocaine withdrawal, but not from this side of the fence, as it were.

Draco had seemed grimly determined to get his body clean. He'd coped admirably well with the interminable itching, the blinding headaches, the agonising joint pains and the nausea. The serious cravings had begun sometime in the early hours of the following day, and his cognition and reason had started to desert him. He'd become delirious and raving; convinced that they were trying to kill him. Hermione had needed Severus to hold him down; in the end, they'd resorted to magical restraints to prevent him trying to get out of bed.

It had been…difficult. Severus had had to leave the cottage from time to time, just to get away from the endless screams and curses and pleas. Had he really been this bad? He had no clear memory of that time; not even how long it had taken him to get through the crisis. He took his hat off to Beatriz for getting through it… and indeed to Hermione too. He didn't know how she'd managed to keep sane, but somehow she did. In the end, she'd put a mattress down in the corner of the bedroom and took cat-naps on the rare occasions that Draco sank into an uneasy sleep. Most of the time, she'd sat with Draco, talking to him and trying to keep him as calm as possible while ignoring the threats, pleas and insults.

It had been six days after Draco's arrival that he had seemed to pass the danger point. Severus and Hermione had just breathed a collective sigh of relief when a nasty infection – probably the pneumonia that he hadn't quite got over - had struck his immuno-compromised body.

It had been difficult to know what to do. It would have been easier for Draco in the first place if his
withdrawal had taken place under medical supervision, but that would have meant a Muggle hospital and he'd refused. Hermione and Severus had tried to keep their medications to the minimum – when his adrenaline levels had grown dangerously high, Severus had provided a beta-blocking potion, but otherwise he had had to get through the symptoms with no help. Now they were wary of using too many potions in case they overwhelmed his weakened body.

Part of the problem was that Draco's brain was giving him confused messages. His temperature was dangerously high, but he was convinced that he was freezing cold and kept begging them for blankets. Severus had prepared an anti-pyretic potion, but he had been unable to keep anything down for long. Hermione had owled Ron, who had arranged an emergency delivery of some Muggle intravenous medication that Draco might have been able to tolerate better, but they had struggled to find a vein they could use.

Beatriz was hoping to join them soon, but in the meantime, they were trying any method they could find. Earlier, Severus had stood in the shower, holding a limp Draco in his arms as Hermione hosed them both down with cold water. That had worked for a while, but the younger man's temperature had risen once more.

Draco gasped and tried to push Hermione away, attempting to sit up. Recognising the signs by now, she grabbed the bucket and moved it into place as he heaved and vomited up whatever bile still remained in his body.

When he'd finished, he slumped back, more-or-less unconscious. While Hermione mopped his damp face, Severus took the bucket without comment, and rinsed it out in the bathroom.

"God, I can't bear this," Hermione muttered through clenched teeth when he returned. She was only repeating Severus's private thoughts. Mercifully, Draco looked to have slipped into an exhausted stupor.

"You've been through it before," he noted. That much was evident.

"Yes, twice, but I'm not sure it was ever as bad as this."

"When? Where?"

She wiped a shaky hand across her forehead. "Um, first time at Malfoy Manor, four years ago. He wasn't so bad then. There'd been rumours of drugs for years, really, but I think he'd stuck to wizarding narcotics for most of the time. I don't know when or why he started on Muggle drugs, or how they knew that that was what it was. Narcissa begged me to help – can you imagine that? She must have been desperate. They had a medi-wizard, but he didn't know how to deal with Muggle narcotics – and they thought I might have some experience. I wasn't sure whether or not to be insulted," she added wryly. "And then the second time was at Hogwarts, a year ago. We had him laid up in Hagrid's cottage and Poppy helped me."

"I see. And both times, he ended up back on the drugs, he mused to himself. So what makes her think this time will be any different? Why me?"

She stood up, swaying a little from weariness and putting a hand on the nearby chest of drawers to steady herself. "After that, well, no one wanted responsibility for him, so I got him into a longer-term programme. It seemed to work at the time – at least, I thought it had. He discharged himself, but they told me he was clear of it. That's what they said, but I'm beginning to doubt it – turns out they were not so forgiving of a Malfoy as I thought they would be… Anyway, Minerva allowed him to return to his job at Hogwarts – oh, not in the laboratory again, he lost that job after the first time - Horace had retired by then, and the new potions master wasn't particularly keen on having
an ex-junkie as an assistant. Hagrid, bless him, came up with a job for Draco helping out around the grounds, and it was this job that he'd abandoned to go off on another of his 'trips'. Maybe it was the job, or maybe losing his mother – I don't know. Anyway, Minerva would only have him back if Neville and Hagrid agreed to keep an eye on him. And then, I got the letter from Neville…”

"And here we are," he finished for her.

"Yes." Her voice sounded hoarse, giving away her fatigue.

He eyed her. "You need some rest. You've hardly slept for days."

She hesitated, but he nudged her arm impatiently. "Come on. I can keep an eye on him for now. There's no point in you collapsing too – I've got enough on my bloody plate as it is. You can have my bed… I promise not to attempt to join you."

She opened her mouth in indignation, and then caught the amused gleam in his eye and subsided, a little embarrassed. "OK. Call me if he seems agitated or if that temperature gets much higher. God, I wish Beatriz was here. We really need to get a drip in him – he's dangerously dehydrated… And antibiotics would be good…”

Her voice sounded dreamy and she swayed again as she left the room. He raised his eyebrows; it was clear she was going to crash for several hours at least. He supposed he ought to owl Weasley and let him know that he couldn't expect to see his wife for a little while longer.

But in the meantime…

He turned back to his unwanted guest, currently comatose and glistening with sweat, and grimaced. "Looks like it's just you and me, then."

Being something of a grafter himself, Severus had little patience for those who didn't try to push themselves to the limits of their endurance. He'd hated his helplessness and weakness during that long period following Nagini's attack; it had been physically tough when he'd first arrived in Spain, but at least he'd been achieving something.

Hermione had a similar approach to life. She wasn't one for lingering in bed when struck down by illness; it was something he had always admired in her, even if she had occasionally taken it to extremes. He had a strangely fond memory of her staggering from class to class in the grip of 'flu when she was fourteen, until Dumbledore had sternly ordered her to the infirmary. He'd been amused and even slightly admiring of her dogged persistence – although he had, of course, granted her no concessions during Potions even though it was patently obvious to all around her that she was about to collapse in a shivering heap.

All of which made it so much harder to deal with a man who appeared to think that there was no point in trying to exert himself.

Draco's recovery had been fairly slow, probably not helped by his poor physical condition prior to taking cocaine. He'd been in a downward spiral for years. Over the weeks, Severus had had cause to be very grateful to Beatriz, who had kindly stayed to help him once the measles outbreak had passed. If she hadn't, he would have struggled – it was late summer and a busy time of year in the garden. Hermione had done her best, but could only visit at weekends when Ron was available to take care of the kids.
Good food and medication had improved the young Slytherin's condition – physically at least. Severus had expected to have to take measures to stop Draco absconding once he was strong enough. He remembered that the temptation didn't abate just because the initial crisis had passed, and he knew perfectly well that it was possible to find drug dealers, even in a rural area like this. He'd been planning protective spells that would prevent his 'guest' leaving the confines of Valenzuela without supervision...but as it turned out, he needn't have worried.

The furthest that Draco ever ventured was into the small sitting room, where he'd spend most of the day sitting in an armchair apparently staring at the wall. He showed no interest in his surroundings. Every now and then, he'd haul himself out of the chair, shuffle to the kitchen door and look out rather blankly at his surroundings. The first time he'd done that, Severus noticed that a shudder had run through the younger man's skinny frame, and he'd turned away and limped back to his chair.

He never picked up a book and he didn't appear bored by his new environment. He wore a tatty selection of Ron Weasley's cast-off clothes, and didn't even complain about that. If Severus brought him a cup of tea or a bowl of soup or a sandwich, he'd accept the offering and might even eat or drink a little, but he wouldn't acknowledge it. Severus had tried not feeding his guest just to try to provoke a reaction, but on those occasions Draco wouldn't bother eat or drink at all. On the grounds that he didn't actually want Draco to starve (Hermione wouldn't be all that pleased, for a start), Severus carried on preparing meals for him.

Severus's attempts to initiate some kind of conversation met with monosyllabic responses. Each night, Draco would mutter a polite "Good night" and set off on that annoyingly slow shuffle to his bedroom – which was en-suite, thank the Gods. Severus hadn't bothered to go into the guest quarters since his guest had been fit enough to get out of bed. If Draco wanted a clean bedroom and bathroom, well, he knew where the cleaning equipment was located.

In the morning, he'd finally emerge around 10AM, or that's what Severus assumed, since he was usually either out in his garden or down in the laboratory by 8AM. Draco appeared to be only half-awake when he went into the kitchen for his mid-morning coffee at 10.30. Again, he'd mutter "Good morning" when prompted and then carry on his usual occupation of gazing aimlessly at walls.

And Severus carried on worrying and trying to work out what to do.

"He's driving me mad," he complained to Hermione, on one of her regular visits. "It's like there's no one there. It's not even as if he's his old obnoxious self – I wouldn't mind that so much – but this? It's like there's just nothing going on in his head."

She shaded her eyes, gazing out over the shimmering blue waters of Lago Bermejales. It was late September now, and he'd agreed to meet her here instead of back at the cottage. It had seemed best – he'd wanted to speak to her without Draco overhearing them. Also, he was looking forward to seeing the children, as he hadn't seen much of them this year, and he knew she wasn't keen on them being in Draco's proximity.

They were perched on a tree trunk on the shore, watching the children paddling in the warm water. Rose was about to sneak up behind an oblivious Hugo with what looked like half a dead fish in her hand, but hesitated as Hermione aimed a much-practised glare at her daughter.

"She's incredibly like you," Severus marvelled. Sometimes, he felt like he was looking at a young
Hermione; that he'd been given a glimpse of the girl she had been before Hogwarts. The tilting position of her head, the chewed lip, the concentration in her eyes as she considered her options… every inch her mother in miniature.

"Yeah, well," Hermione muttered. "She's a lot naughtier than I ever was." She huffed out a breath and fanned her hot face with her floppy old straw hat – it had been a hot autumn so far.

"You didn't have a younger brother to torment, though," Severus pointed out.

His mouth quirked with amusement as he noticed Rose taking advantage of her mother's temporary lack of attention to creep towards her brother again, the stinking handful of cold fish still in her hand. He didn't bother to point this out to Hermione – mean though it was, he took some minor sadistic amusement in seeing the red-headed Hugo Weasley entirely unaware of his sister's planned ambush. With the boy's strong resemblance to his father, it would have taken a far more honourable man than Severus not to get some pleasure out of the scene.

His eyes ran idly over the boy…and then narrowed with interest. Hugo had picked up a couple of types of weed and was examining them closely. He'd picked out two varieties from the same family. Severus wondered if it was by chance or design – had the boy spotted the similarities? He watched as Hugo ran his fingers carefully over the fronds, lingering on the bumps.

Severus had been surprised by his own interest in these two children. At first, when he and Hermione had renewed their tentative friendship, she had clearly been reluctant to talk about Rose and Hugo in front of him. Possibly she felt guilty about this most obvious evidence of her regrettable decision.

At first, he'd had no interest, anyway. He'd never been all that bothered about children. He got on well with Cesar and Beatriz's teenage sons generally because he refused to pander to them, which probably made him more interesting. Their toddler grandson had also taken an almost fanatical interest in him, following him around and tugging at his trouser leg. He tolerated this attention with a patience that would have surprised his former colleagues at Hogwarts.

Eventually, he'd found himself asking after Hermione's children; initially out of an almost masochistic curiosity about her home life, but eventually out of a genuine interest in their development. It would, quite naturally, be impossible for someone as intelligent as Hermione to produce normal children; they would have to be geniuses at the very least, even given their dunderhead of a father.

Rose's intelligence was quite obvious from the moment he met her. She had been four when Hermione had brought her alone for a brief visit at Severus's request. He had met Hugo the following year, and it had now become acceptable practice for her bring either one or both of the children whenever she came to stay and help out – she was a regular visitor at certain times of year when he needed extra help with the garden. The children were really no trouble at all – Rose possessed a strong sense of curiosity about the world around her, but an equally strong sense of self-preservation. Hugo was quieter and more cautious. Severus tended not to pay him much attention – Rose enchanted him with her strong resemblance to her mother, both in appearance and in mannerisms, and it was inevitable that he would focus most of his attention on her.

More often than not, Severus would perch Rose on a stool in his laboratory and set her to some basic tasks while he worked on his experiments, breaking off to patiently answer her many and varied questions. She had a rather scattered approach to learning and would often go off at a tangent – she seemed to lack her mother's more structured mind - but she was astonishingly perceptive nonetheless. Meanwhile, Hermione would work in the garden, Hugo trailing behind her, spending happy hours investigating the snails and worms and spiders that were disturbed by his
mother's digging.

In a strange way, it worked – the children slotted into his life in a way that seemed frighteningly natural. He wouldn't necessarily say that he missed them when they weren't around, but he didn't particularly mind their presence either.

Hugo was a strange child. He lacked his sister's confidence, and Severus couldn't imagine him fitting easily in the Weasley's family dynamic, even though Hermione had told him that her son was Molly's favourite grandchild. It appeared that Hugo had spent quite a lot of time with his grandmother over the years, for reasons that Hermione seemed reluctant to divulge. He was pure Weasley in colouring, of course, although he lacked his father's broader features – in fact, as he grew older, his heart-shaped pale face reminded Severus of Hermione.

There was … something about him, something that made Hermione's smile falter whenever she looked at him. Severus didn't actually think it was a lack of love, whatever she might fear. He suspected that it was more of a gut feeling – a feeling that Severus himself shared. He feared for this boy in a way that he couldn't explain. Hugo was bright enough – he lacked his sister's immediate brilliance, but that didn't make him unintelligent. No, it wasn't that but…

He turned his attention back to Hermione, who was still talking about Draco. "– he was like that the last time he detoxed too. I think it was Narcissa's death that finished him. It just goes to show – I never thought he was that attached to her when she was alive, but…well, anyway I don't really know what to suggest. I had hoped that as you know him better, you'd have some idea of how to get through to him."

"I never knew him that well," he murmured, still watching the boy. Hugo was currently safe from ambush; his sister had become distracted by the sight of two Muggle water skiers being towed behind a speedboat. He had gathered a variety of specimens and had laid them on the shore in a line. Severus narrowed his eyes against the late afternoon sun as he attempted to make out a pattern in the selection and arrangement of flora.

He sighed, glancing at Hermione. "You've got the wrong idea about Draco. He despised me. You know all about his family's attitude towards Muggle-borns – do you suppose they were any more sympathetic towards half-bloods? As for me, I had to be seen to be friendly towards him but, frankly, I couldn't stand the lazy little git. You're assuming a level of understanding that never existed. I probably have less of an idea about how to motivate him than you do."

He looked back towards Hugo, and was aware of Hermione following his gaze. Looking back at her, he could see her jaw tightening just perceptibly as she gazed at her son.

He pushed his shoulder very slightly against hers, comfortingly. "He's alright, you know." They both knew he wasn't talking about Draco now.

She sighed, dropping her gaze, but still pushed her bare arm back against his in acknowledgement. "Yes, I know. I just – sometimes, I wonder…" Her voice trailed away, and he felt her body stiffen as she squared her shoulders once more. Her voice, when she spoke again, was brisk.

"You're wrong about one thing anyway."

"Me? Wrong? Never," he teased, with a mock indignation that made her laugh.

"Draco. He doesn't despise you."

"Yes, he does," he hissed, irritated. "Hermione, I think I know more about him than you do -."
"Yes, but sometimes – sometimes, Severus, please listen to me! – you only see what you expect to see. When he was at school, Draco was supposed to despise you. It would have fit with his father's perceptions of the world – show contempt to the less well-born. But I used to watch him in Potions, and I can tell you something – he was proud when you praised him. It wasn't just his usual boastful posturing – you know, Slytherin superiority over Gryffindor, getting one over Harry, all that rubbish. No, he felt individual pride…and it was only in Potions. He didn't really bother to apply himself to other subjects, but even on the rare occasions when he did receive praise, I could see it meant nothing to him."

He was silent as she paused for breath, finding it a little hard to believe. And yet she seemed certain.

"Can you imagine being brought up by Lucius Malfoy? Oh, I know he was a far better father than – well, you know," she added hurriedly. "But he still must have been a nightmare. Your whole life as the only son – the only child – being groomed for great things. A life in politics – probably the Minister for Magic eventually, if his father had his way. Lucius didn't care what Draco wanted out of life. And Draco wasn't stupid – that much was obvious to me at Hogwarts. He was genuinely good at Potions. I remember envying his natural ability. But more than that – he liked it. He was too proud or vain to admit it, but I saw the way his eyes would light up in interest when you'd discuss something a little more complicated. And he admired you – I'm sure of it. It was there in his body language, particularly when he didn't think anyone was looking. You'd have your back turned for a few minutes and he'd be sitting up straighter."

"You appear to have dedicated a fair amount of your adolescent years to noticing Draco Malfoy's body language," he commented drily, but she didn't rise to it.

"Well, as I said before, I had a tendency to look out for my main rivals for the top marks. I'm not proud of it," she added defensively as she saw the small smile that he wasn't quite able to hide.

He laughed, suddenly. "Only you would be embarrassed about the fact that you hadn't been ogling him for the same reason as most of the other girls."

She laughed too, her body relaxing. "Poor Draco. He was quite the catch back then, wasn't he? Among the Slytherin girls, anyway. They wouldn't look twice at him now … I was, of course, always impervious to his charms."

"Oh, of course," he agreed, lightly.

She gave him a mischievous look. "In fact, I didn't really show much interest in anyone… until that duelling demonstration with Gilderoy Lockhart."

He spluttered in disbelief. "That early? Really?"

She grinned at his discomfort. "Well, perhaps not that early. That would've been a bit weird – I was only thirteen at the time. But I was certainly more aware of you after then. I thought at first that it was just hero-worship." She closed her eyes. "I can still remember… the way your coat flew around you, the spark in your eyes, the sheer poetry of movement." She giggled a little. "It was very Bryronic."

"Ridiculous romanticism," he sneered.

"Well, you were the most powerful wizard I'd met – although, to be fair, I hadn't met that many at that stage," she added, drily, her lips quirming upwards at the memory. He was amused to see that her cheeks had turned a little redder.
"Anyway, to get back to what I was saying," she went on, pointedly, "I genuinely think that if you could interest him in something you were working on, you might make progress. You might even benefit from it – no, you might," she added, as he snorted in disbelief. "You've said it yourself enough times – sometimes you need the input of a layman to work through your thought processes and work out where something's gone wrong. You may find Draco more useful than me as a sounding board – who knows?"

"No one is more useful to me than you," he grumbled.

She gave him a wry look. "That's because I'm the only sounding board you've ever had. You're just too used to working alone. And the only reason it works well with me is because we know each other so well – I can anticipate what you want, and I know when to get out of your way, too. You just need to learn how to adapt to someone else, that's all."

"I should have met you years ago," he said, suddenly.

She looked up at him, clearly startled by this non sequiteur, but said nothing, recognising his need to speak.

He pulled his knees up towards his chest and rested his chin on them, looking intently out over the water.

"Years and years ago. We should have pushed each other on the swings and taught each other how to make butterflies out of flowers. I would have stolen bits of your ice cream and you would have laughed and tried to push me away. We should have stolen out of our houses on summer nights to lie down by the river and talk about our dreams. Or - or perhaps we would have met first at Hogwarts. I would have made a rude comment about your teeth - ," he saw her smile sheepishly at this, "– and you would have reciprocated about my hair. We would have hated each other on sight, but somehow we would have got together – in the library, fighting over a book, working on a school project perhaps? I would have leaned over your shoulder to copy your transfiguration homework, and you would have asked me to help you with potions. We should have arranged to meet at the lake. I would have transfigured red roses out of knotweed and then thrown them away, too embarrassed to give them to you. You would have smiled anyway and kissed me…"

"Now who's being ridiculously romantic?" She spoke lightly, teasingly, but her smile was gentle.

Without looking at her, he reached over to take her hand in his; their palms clasped together tightly.

"We should have had years to know each other. I wish I could remember you better at school. I have memories of you, impressions… but they weren't the real you, were they? They weren't my Hermione. That came later."

"Yes. That came later," she agreed, her fingers moving compulsively against his.

"You were… you didn't seem to care what anyone thought about you."

"I was a better actor than I realised, then," she replied, drily. "I cared more than you realise. It's not much fun being the school swot, you know."

"Yes, I do know," he pointed out.

She leaned into him slightly. "I wish I'd known you at school."

"Why? You wouldn't have liked me much." On the whole, he was glad she hadn't seen what he was like back then – awkward, clumsy with his long limbs, and surly, in cheap, ill-fitting clothes.
She gave him a sideways look. "You don't know that for certain. I'm not Lily."

He smiled at her, his heart lightening. "No. You're not Lily."

"She was very beautiful," she went on, rather wistfully.

"I'm not even going to dignify that with an answer."

"Hmm." She drew up her knees, resting her chin on her spare hand.

He spluttered a little. "Oh, come on! Please don't tell me you were fishing for compliments."

She snorted, trying to draw away from him in pretend outrage, but he wouldn't let go of her hand – he could tell by the sparkle in her eyes that she wasn't seriously offended. "Did I just call you romantic? I take it all back."

"I already loved you when you came to visit me at Hogwarts that night."

She looked at him, slightly startled. "Now, that's what I call romantic," she murmured, and looked away again, seemingly almost at a loss.

Suddenly, it seemed incredibly important that she knew this, even if she didn't want to hear it. "I didn't recognise it as love, but it was there. I just didn't know my own heart. I – I'd repressed everything that was once Severus Snape – the vulnerability, the emotions. Pushed it all down into a – a submerged chest, locked it and thrown away the key. I thought I was saving myself. I thought that no one could touch me, ever again. But you –," he brought his spare hand up and took her face, turning her towards him and staring into her eyes as if he were searching for the answers, "– my Hermione, you – you and no one else – you saw through it all, didn't you? How could you see what no one else could?"

Her grave eyes searched his, unflinching and honest. "There were moments. Yes, when you duelled Lockhart – the sheer joy at that moment. Oh, you looked your usual impassive self, but there was something in your body language. And in Potions too, from time to time, when you had something more challenging to demonstrate. Suddenly, you weren't that dour, bad-tempered professor anymore. You were something more than that."

She shook her head in frustration, trying to find the right words. "I can't describe it. I just … knew that the real you was hidden somewhere – waiting to be found. God, I hate that – it sounds like one of those bloody awful romance novels, but it's the best way I can put it. And yet, I wasn't entirely sure. You could be so cruel sometimes and your eyes were so dark and cold... The reality was that I didn't know how I knew. And I – I hated that. I hated knowing something deep in my heart that I couldn't actually prove by bloody logic - facts or figures or experimental data. It – it didn't fit with what I understood of how the world worked. So I tried to convince myself that I was mistaking my silly crush on my professor for something more. My logic told me it was impossible. Why would you – someone like you – need me?"

"Why did you come to Hogwarts that night?" He watched her closely. "What made you change your mind about me?"

She closed her eyes, her shoulders slumping, but he kept tight hold of her hand. "$By then, I'd seen so much that challenged my preconceived ideas. I already knew the truth about Dumbledore – you know that, because I told you that night."

She sat in silent thought for a moment, shading her eyes against the glare of the setting sun. Hugo and Rose had run off together towards the small park further along the shore. He watched her
carefully, not wanting to interrupt.

"It was… I can't tell you how dreadful that year was. The physical discomfort, yes, but the constant fear too. Having to be alert all the time, even in sleep. Knowing that the entire wizarding world was dependent on the decisions that we made – a bunch of teenagers, for Merlin's sake! Knowing that even you were waiting for Harry to make a move. And we had no idea what to do – really no idea most of the time. I thought…" She cleared her throat and squeezed his hand, tightly. "I thought I was going to die. Everywhere we went, everything we did - all I could think was 'this is the last time I will see that sight, this is the last time I will use that spell'. I know it sounds ridiculous, but that's how I felt.

"I was devastated when Ron left – just devastated. Not for the reason that you may think – or Harry thought, anyway. I just thought I'd never see one of my best friends again – and I hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye properly." She shook her head. "It was the same with my parents – I hadn't said goodbye, hadn't told them I loved them. And – and I just couldn't bear to do that to someone else that I loved. I couldn't bear to do it to you."

He heard the huskiness in her voice and saw a tear rolling down her cheek. It seemed entirely natural to put an arm around her and pull her closer.

She sank against him willingly, but kept her face averted. "When I came to see you that night, the truth was that I didn't expect to see you again. I tried to be positive, to think about us meeting again in better circumstances, but I didn't believe it, not really. When I told you to choose to live for yourself, not for me or anyone else, well… my expectation was that you would survive, but almost certainly without me. I was --," she laughed, bitterly, "I suppose you might describe me as cannon fodder. Oh, Harry needed me, of course. But in the scheme of things, where Voldemort was concerned … I suppose I saw myself as no more than a distraction from the real target.

"When she – Bellatrix – got me, when she was pinning me to the ground - hitting me with crucios so hard that I could hardly remember my name - scoring my arm with that foul word - all I could think was 'hold on, hold on, just a little longer, just a little longer'. Every second she tortured me was one more second that might give Harry a chance to get away. It wouldn't have mattered if I'd died, just as long as he survived."

He wanted to pull her into his own body, but all he could do was hold her tighter, winding both arms around her body.

Her head fell on his shoulder, suddenly exhausted. "You know how it feels, don't you? To feel yourself diminishing, to feel yourself becoming less of a person, less important in the scheme of things? As if you're part of a plan that has to happen – that always had to happen. As if everything you've ever known, ever done, since the moment you were born… comes down to this. Why was I born into a Muggle family, making me an outsider? Why did Harry become my friend? Almost as if it were ordained that I should be in that place, at that time – like a chess piece.

"And then, when it's all over, you – the real you - won't exist anymore. Your purpose, your very reason for existing, will be over. Do you know what I mean?"

He said nothing. He knew exactly what she meant.

"It wasn't Harry's fault – he had so much to deal with. How could I tell him how I felt? My job – I knew what my job was. It was to support him – and I knew he wouldn't have survived that year without my help. What I felt didn't count. So, you see – coming to see you was selfish. It was for me – and me only. You were right that night – I shouldn't have come to Hogwarts. It put Harry – everything – at risk."
She turned her head, gazing up at him, her face very serious. "But I'll *never* regret it."

He took her face in his hands, searching her eyes, and her hands came up to rest on his wrists. They were so close he could feel the warm scent of her breath ghosting across his lips.

"Ten years ago, I wanted to finally make something of my life. I had survived, against the odds. Harry didn't need me anymore. And I - I wanted *everything*. I wanted to finish my education, be a rising star at the Ministry and make a difference to the lives of countless millions by passing fairer laws. I wanted to raise children who would grow up in a better world and learn from our mistakes. I wanted, more than anything, to live a 'normal' life." She sighed and lifted a hand, running it gently over his cheek. "But I know now that visiting you that night was probably the most significant thing I ever did, apart from helping Harry. If I do nothing else – *achieve* nothing else – in my life, it doesn't matter. None of it matters. Only *this*. Only *you*.

"Why? Why do I matter so much?" He felt he had to know – had to hear it from her lips.

She sighed – possibly she had misinterpreted him. "You mean, beyond the simple fact that I love you? Your life *does* have meaning, Severus, I keep telling you that. You've already made a huge difference to people's lives, both here and in Britain, even if they don't know that. And I think you can – and will – make much more of a difference in the future. You've got a unique skill that I could *never* possess." Her fingers began to stroke down his face. "You've been forced to use it for evil purposes, but now you're free to use it for good. And you *will*, Severus. You don't need me for that."

His hands tightened on her face, his thumbs stroking little circles into her cheekbones. "I might not need you, but gods, I love you *so much*, Hermione. So much… Even before I was born, you were already *there* - in my DNA. Already. I just never knew it. It's as if my body was just waiting for you…"

"And Lily?" Her hand stilled in its gentle journey towards his lips.

"That wasn't *love*; it was *possession*. I wanted her because she was the only thing in my life that was beautiful and pure. With her, I could forget it all – my father, the beatings and the insults, my whole dirty, *disgusting* life. But I never understood her, not really. She wasn't a person to me – she was an *ideal*.

He kissed the corners of her mouth – the lightest contact. "But you… It's different. I don't want to *change* you or set you on a pedestal. I want you, exactly as you are. The good and the bad. I want it to be just *us* – no one else, not ever."

He whispered the words into her mouth and felt a beautiful little shiver going through her body.

"You want me too." It wasn't a question; he knew the answer, just as clearly as he knew her, but his hands slipped from her face and gripped her arms, instinctively possessive.

"Yes," she breathed against him. "Yes. I want you too, but I…" She tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let her, his hands tightening around her arms. "I made a promise, Severus, I'm so sorry – I shouldn't – I *can't* - ."

"No, you *can't* – now," he agreed. "But, even so, *you are mine*. Not *his*. He is your husband in the eyes of the law, you live with him, you share his life, you have his children, but in every way that can possibly count, deep in your heart, in your *soul* - you *are mine*.

"Yes."
His hands gentled. "And I am yours. Always yours. And one day – one day - you'll come back, and you'll never leave me again."

"Never," she choked out.

He pressed his lips against hers briefly – a relatively chaste kiss – but she clung to it anyway. As he moved his face back, hers followed instinctively and she captured two more small kisses.

The sun was beginning to sink. They pressed their foreheads together, hands clasped tight, their breaths coming in quick gasps, never breaking eye contact. Huddling together from the world, as two children ran back along the shore towards them, laughing.
Severus lost no time in carrying out Hermione's suggestion.

He'd left Cesar and Beatriz to babysit Draco while meeting Hermione and the children at the lake – he hadn't been stupid enough to leave his enforced guest alone in a house with a fully functioning laboratory containing a number of addictive ingredients, protective spells be damned. It had meant that with the guest quarters already taken, he'd had to sacrifice his bed to his friends and kip on the sofa. However, it had also had the advantage that he stayed upstairs the following morning to linger with them over a prolonged and pleasant breakfast.

Which meant that, when they said goodbye and apparated home, Draco was just emerging from his room. He gave Severus a startled look before making his usual heavy way over to his armchair in the sitting room.

"You're not sitting there all day."

The younger man's thin shoulders stiffened in surprise and he looked up. "What?"

Severus leaned against the doorway leading to the kitchen, his arms folded, giving Draco a meaningful look. It occurred to him that he'd probably never spoken to Lucius Malfoy's son quite so firmly in his life.

"You. Sitting. There. Not today, I think. It's time you did something to earn your accommodation."

He jerked his head and Draco seemed to rise to his feet without thinking much about it, either out of sheer surprise or as an automatic response to the note of authority in Severus's voice. A second later, two little red spots of indignation appeared in his pale cheeks and he opened his mouth – ah, there it was, that Malfoy sense of entitlement - but Severus beat him to it.

"You're not going to get better just sitting there. You've got too much time to think. Believe me. I know."

I've been there was the subtext to this, and Severus saw a glimmer of astonished realisation in those pale grey Malfoy eyes. He expected Draco to call him out on it, but the man seemed to swallow down his questions with a curt nod.

"What do you expect me to do? Work in your garden?"

He couldn't disguise the horror in his voice at the prospect and Severus had to bite his lip to hide his smirk at the thought of Draco Malfoy reduced to digging over a patch of dusty ground. The little brat had always been lazy – more so even than his father. Although, if Hermione was right, he'd had to do his fair share of menial labour at Hogwarts – perhaps it was the memories of that humiliation that were currently turning his already pale face even whiter.

It was a realisation that gave him pause; he'd have to be careful not to remind Draco of his drug-addled past and what led to it if he were ever to get rid of his unwelcome guest.

"I think not. Not now, at any rate. I have an occasional assistant in the laboratory and, temporarily at least, you've taken her away from me. So you'll need to take her place. You were an able student in the laboratory, as I recall – able enough for what I have in mind, anyway."

The pale eyes narrowed. "You're serious? A potions laboratory? With my history?"
Severus sighed. "I'm not quite that stupid, Draco. You'll be working with non-addictive ingredients. And, believe me, I've made sure you can't get anywhere near the more … toxic elements. I'm telling you this in the spirit of fairness – just pointing out that if you try anything, you'll get a nasty surprise."

He fixed Draco with a hard look. "Look at it this way. You have nothing to lose – there's nothing else occupying your time and – who knows? Maybe you'll actually learn something." His tone of voice seemed to suggest a contrary expectation.

"OK." Draco shrugged, seemingly resigned. "What did you have in mind?"

The tone was off-hand, with undertones of the familiar Malfoy arrogance, but Severus didn't miss the tiniest glimmer of interest in the younger man's eyes.

Interesting, he thought, as he turned to lead his guest to his laboratory, schooling his face into blank professionalism.

Of course, it was never going to be that easy.

Severus reacted quickly to the sight of the ominously bubbling potion that was about to explode, threatening to take most of the laboratory with it. It would have been hard to explain to the honest people of Valenzuela why a good proportion of his land had suddenly surged sky-high, so it was just as well he'd been alert. He cast a quick *evanesco*.

Draco flushed angrily, picking up the now-empty smoking cauldron in disgust. "It's not doing what it's supposed to do. I swear I followed the instructions."

"Hmm?" Severus kept his voice lightly nonchalant. "Well, at a wild guess, I would say you may have forgotten to add one counter-clockwise stir to every nine clockwise stirs while chanting the incantation."

"Damnit! I should have known that. Why is it so bloody hard?"

Draco relieved his sore feelings by flinging the cauldron into the air and disintegrating it into dust with a rather neat hand gesture before reaching for a new one to start all over again. Severus carefully hid his grin, impressed by this demonstration of wand-less magic. His guest was starting to regain some of his magical abilities, which was a good sign – it suggested his body was beginning to recover its equilibrium.

He'd never been able to understand wizards or witches who deliberately went out of their way to sabotage the magical gifts they'd been born with. He'd seen enough of that during the Voldemort years – the drinking, the narcotic potions, the substances that addled the brain and dulled the ability, usually temporarily but sometimes permanently. Having seen and experienced the joys of Voldemort's tender methods first hand, he'd had some sympathy with the need to relieve the stress of prolonged proximity to the Dark Lord and his followers. However, he'd been careful to seek less harmful methods of forgetting.

The temporary loss of his magical strength after Nagini had been a terrible blow to him, more so than he'd ever revealed to Hermione, and he never lost his sense of gratitude that he'd managed to regain it. The very notion of deliberately abusing his body with drugs, depriving it of magical power once more, was now complete anathema to him; yes, he'd fallen into bad habits after Hermione left him, but he hadn't been in his right mind back then. Thanks to his good friends, he'd
clawed his way back from the brink.

So he took a lot of secret pleasure from seeing the visible evidence that the harmful substances were finally departing from Draco's system. As little as a week ago, Severus reckoned that the younger man would have been lucky to have been able to perform that spell with his wand.

Not that he had a wand anymore; it had been confiscated by the Ministry until such time as Draco could prove he was a 'responsible' citizen once more… and there was no guarantee that he'd ever get it back, even if he passed the Ministry's rigorous tests. Hermione might have to call in favours from Harry and Kingsley once more – and from what he'd gathered at their last meeting, he wondered how much longer she'd have any influence at all at the Ministry.

Actually, he had to admit that Draco wasn't that bad an assistant, even if he'd had to destroy rather more cauldrons than he'd ever had to with Hermione. OK, so this latest mishap had been a basic mistake, but in general Draco was more of a risk-taker than Hermione. That did tend to make life in the laboratory more 'interesting', but it also meant that Draco sometimes took leaps in understanding that would have taken Hermione far longer and would probably have involved a certain degree of note-scribbling and sleepless nights. Draco possessed the rare instinct of a genuine potioneer. In that, he was very much his father's son – Lucius had been skilled in Potions during his school days, although the older Malfoy had considered it beneath his dignity to pursue the profession after graduation.

When he'd first invited Draco down into the laboratory, several weeks' ago, Severus had been prepared to have to start with the basics once more, having assumed that Draco would have forgotten everything he'd taught him at Hogwarts. He'd had no assistance apart from Hermione's for years and he was used to working with her – they understood each other's body language and moved smoothly around sometimes cramped spaces. For that reason, he'd prepared himself to be irritated by his new assistant's slowness. He'd actually been pleasantly surprised – Draco moved quickly through the basics of ingredient preparation and cauldron maintenance as if the last ten years had never happened. Very soon, Severus was happy to leave him to the preparation of some of the basic potions that he produced and sold locally as a side-line to his more important work.

He always kept a careful eye on Draco, of course. The man wasn't allowed to use the laboratory alone and could not take any substance with him whenever he left. There were strong spells in place that would have made Draco very sorry if he'd tried to break that rule. The fact that none of them had had to be employed might mean that Draco hadn't even tried… but Severus equally suspected that his guest, no fool after all, had probably detected the protective spells and decided not to risk a nasty surprise.

Severus didn't know if Draco was aware of his constant vigilance. He rather thought he was aware – there was something about the half-embarrassed half-resigned look that the 'boy' occasionally gave him.

It was funny to think of a man of nearly thirty years as a 'boy' – and yet, to Severus, there was something of a boy about him. Not in his eyes of course – there Draco had lost his innocence a very, very long time ago – but there was something gauche and awkwardly teenage about his tall, lanky body, currently adorned in Weasley's scruffy old jeans and one of Severus's own t-shirts. His hair, which had been cropped short during his detoxification, was beginning to grow back in dirty blonde spikes. He looked nothing like the well-groomed boy that Severus remembered, with slicked-back hair and expensive clothes.

Draco's work was actually quite good once he'd got into the routine of producing the basic potions. Severus rarely had to discard a batch. He'd always had a natural flair in the laboratory for all his
posturing, which had admittedly made it easier for Severus to favour him as his godson and a fellow Slytherin during the Hogwarts years.

He also found, much to his surprise, that he enjoyed his former student's company. Draco was largely silent in the laboratory, only interrupting to ask pertinent questions, which Severus appreciated. And when he took the younger man out, on brief walks to collect samples from the nearby hills and on a couple of longer trips over to Caesar and Beatriz to pick up some supplies, Draco showed a surprising level of interest in his surroundings. He even charmed the Martinez family with his old-fashioned aristocratic manners, bowing politely over Beatriz's hand with an automatic grace that reminded Severus that this young man was, after all, from one of the oldest established wizarding families.

He was currently trying to teach his new assistant the slightly more challenging Revivio – the potion was still one of his most popular ones and he often struggled to keep up with demand. He hadn't yet decided whether or not he wanted to move the production of it elsewhere. That would mean sharing the potion's instructions with others, and although Bill had got it patented for him, he was wary of rival potions firms producing similar products of a lower quality.

It had begun to occur to him that, if Draco could be prevailed upon to stay for a while, he might be able to open some kind of production plant himself. They could train up a few of the local young wizards and witches – with unemployment so high in the region, there'd be no shortage of applicants - and he could put Draco in charge. Severus himself was not the 'manager' type – he disliked having to delegate and give instructions, preferring instead to do everything himself. Draco, however, was another matter. With his Malfoy sense of superiority restored, he might be just the person to run such an operation. Bill might advise him on what would be involved in the employment and day-to-day running…

"Fuck!"

Severus sighed and gestured another *evanesco* over his shoulder in the direction of the minor explosion, without bothering to look. The downside was that Draco, for all his natural skill, was nowhere near ready and might not be for some time. Revivio was one of his trickier potions, admittedly. Hermione had never even attempted it.

Talking of which… Hermione was the big stumbling point. He couldn't imagine her wanting to visit in her usual manner while Draco was still around – or, at least, she wouldn't want to bring the children. Draco, through no fault of his own, had somehow intruded on their 'family' time. There'd be no more mornings in the lab spent answering Rose's eclectic questions or afternoons in the garden with Hugo trailing behind; no more teas in the shade of the terrace or evening walks by the river or snowball fights in the winter mountains… at least, not while he was still hosting a recovering drug addict. And, call him selfish, but he was not prepared to give up his time with Hermione for anyone. If they weren't able to come to some kind of arrangement, the 'boy' would have to go.

He shook his morbid thoughts away. "You know," he pointed out, mildly. "It might not be a bad idea to perform the *steepifugo* on the asphodel leaves before you start the next stage. That way, you don't have to worry about doing it too quickly when you're about to start the final incantation."

"But, if I do that in advance, doesn't it only give me eight and a half minutes to get it into the potion?"

"That's long enough, as long as you make sure the heat is turned up to boiling point just before … and as long as you've prepared all the other ingredients in advance. It's all in the timing, like most potions. It's much easier if you think the entire process through first. Look for the loopholes and
work out how you can simplify the process, step by step."

"Easy for you to say," Draco muttered, under his breath as he fetched another jar of dried asphodel leaves.

"Yes, it is," Severus agreed, mildly. "But that's because I've been doing this for almost forty years, thirty of them in a professional capacity. You don't think I've struggled to work it out? Have you any idea how many cauldrons I've destroyed in my career?"

"Hundreds, I should think," Draco replied, absently. He was frowning as he carefully measured the asphodel into a scale. He reapplied the stopper on the jar and placed it back on the correct shelf.

Severus, watching carefully, noted the way the pale thin hand lingered for an infinitesimal period by a bottle of henbane leaves on the next shelf down before dropping back to Draco's side. A hallucinogenic - and a dangerous one. Did Draco know that? Or was it just coincidence that his hand appeared to linger? Was he, Severus, starting to see things that weren't there?

He suppressed a sigh and continued, keeping his voice light and conversational. "More like thousands. Particularly since I came here, strangely enough. I never mentioned it to you before but I lost my magic after Nagini's attack – did you know that? I regained it, but it took a while. I still knew how to brew, of course – I hadn't lost my memory – but in the early days, my incantations were as ineffective as any first year's. It was more difficult than you can imagine," he added, ruefully.

Draco hesitated in his preparation, looking up at his old mentor for a moment. "I didn't know that," he said, quietly.

Severus regarded him. "No reason why you would. I don't suppose you know much about what happened to me during the Battle, do you?"

Draco flushed slightly – they both knew exactly how he'd been occupied during the last Battle. "No, I – no. Not really," he admitted.

The men stared at one another for a moment, and then Severus smiled. "Tell you what – why don't you finish crushing those leaves, put them under a stasis charm and come upstairs. Don't apply the steepifugo yet. I'll make coffee and we'll talk."

And he turned and walked deliberately from the room without a second glance.

"I can hardly believe it." Draco clutched his empty mug in his hands and stared out over the landscape.

There was a chill wind cutting across the garden, directly from the snow-capped mountains behind; it was November and winter had descended upon southern Spain with its usual abruptness. Severus shivered and automatically cast a barrier charm around the terrace. He leaned back in his chair, saying nothing.

"I mean, how could we not have known? How could my father not have seen what you were doing – all that time?"

"Perhaps he did know – in some way," Severus suggested, delicately. He had wondered about that over the years. "After all, towards the end, he certainly knew that some of my activities, while they
didn't actually undermine the Dark Lord, were not particularly supportive either. Your father knew a fair amount about potions and he must have known about the times I dosed prisoners to finish them off humanely. You're like him, you know," he added. "He was a promising potioneer too – he could have become a Master if he'd wanted to."

Draco glowered at this discussion of his estranged father, and Severus was reminded once more of a sulky teenager. OK, clearly the time wasn't right to raise the topic of Lucius's rapidly declining health, which had been confirmed by Hermione's owl earlier that morning.

"You weren't supposed to know, Draco - that was the point," he went on, patiently. "No one did – no one but a select few in the Order. And when I killed Dumbledore, even they turned against me. Even Potter didn't guess until the end."

"And yet, Granger did." Draco's eyes were suspiciously shrewd. "Didn't she?"

"Yes. Yes, she did, that's true – but how did you know –?"

Draco sneered. "I never recall a situation where Hermione Granger didn't find out the truth. She was always one step ahead of the rest of us – I'll give her that."

Severus laughed, drily, repressing his instinctive anger. "You always hated her. I can see that hasn't changed."

Draco looked a little startled by the suggestion. "Oh, I wouldn't go that far. She's an irritating, interfering woman…and I sometimes wish she'd just left me alone to – to…"

"To what? Die?" Severus asked, mildly.

Draco's mouth curved in resigned amusement. "Well, when you put it like that…"

They sat in silence for a while.

"All the same." Draco broke the peace. "All those years, working for both sides, and nobody even guessing. I don't know how you did it – and I don't understand why you didn't go mad."

Severus smirked. "Who says I didn't? To some extent, anyway. You were there – you saw me during that last year, when I visited the Manor. Did I look like a sane, stable individual to you?"

"In retrospect, no. But then, I wasn't all there myself. It wasn't much fun being shut up at home with Mother and Father and Aunt Bella, what with the Dark Lord's minions coming and going."

"I imagine not," Severus replied, drily. "On the plus side, at least you weren't tortured to the point of death."

Draco glanced at him. "You knew about that? Well, I guess you would. It's just that – I didn't think she'd tell anyone what happened. She's always been proud, Granger. I suppose it's one of the reasons I've always found her hard to like."

"You were there, when Bella…?" Severus felt a sudden coldness in the pit of his stomach. It hadn't occurred to him that Draco might be involved, but of course, it would have made sense…

Draco gave him an uneasy look, perhaps sensing a change in atmosphere. "Yeah…for some of it, anyway. I was sent out of the room at one point."

Not trusting himself to speak, Severus got up abruptly and crossed to the railing.
"I'm... I'm sorry for what happened. I never liked Granger much, but I wouldn't have wished that on anyone." Draco's voice was very quiet. "If it's – if it's any consolation, she was very brave."

"No," Severus snapped. "No, actually, it's not a consolation."

Vision suddenly foggy, he felt, rather than saw, the movement as Draco appeared next to him at the rail. "She was, though. I wouldn't have stood it anywhere near as long as her."

"She had something worth fighting for," Severus muttered. It was true - she'd had Harry Potter. He remembered her words when she'd described Bella's torture: *it wouldn't have mattered if I'd died, just as long as he survived*. Had Draco ever felt that strongly about something – or someone? Had he - Severus?

Draco shifted slightly, his shoulder brushing against Severus and bringing him out of his reverie. "So... why here, then?" He gestured around him, at the house, the land and beyond. There was no disdain in his voice; just genuine curiosity.

Severus shrugged. "Why not? It's a good place. I like it. Despite evident appearances, I never actually liked cold, grey, damp places. They reminded me of home far too much." He shuddered at the memory of Spinner's End; long-since demolished and replaced with an anonymous block of council flats, according to Bill.

"It's scenic. I'll give it that." Draco leaned on the rail, his pale eyes turned upwards towards the top of the mountains. The snowline glittered in the pale winter sun. *Less snow than in previous years*, Severus mused, automatically, as his eyes followed his guest's, *but then it's early in the season."

He reflected, in sudden surprise, that with the exception of Hogwarts, he'd now spent more of his life here than anywhere else, even his childhood home (which he'd avoided as much as possible once he'd gone to school). It hardly seemed possible. Back when he'd first come across this little patch of dusty Spanish land and had formed a vague plan, he'd still been in the service of the Dark Lord and had expected nothing more than an inglorious death, his true aims buried with him and his name blackened forever. In all his dreams, he could never have imagined this... his land. His business. His home. His life.

He wondered what life meant to someone like Draco. His former student was thirty now, and had pretty much squandered the last third of his life. Hardly what the eleven year old Draco Malfoy would have expected when he first arrived at Hogwarts, full of his own importance. He should have had a glittering career, assisted by his powerful father. A career in politics, or some other sphere of magical influence. He should have had a beautiful, equally rich wife, probably selected for him from the close-knit aristocratic community within which he moved. At one stage, an alliance with the powerful Malfoy family would have been highly desirable – and the young Draco was not without his charms, and didn't lack for casual female companionship at Hogwarts.

And now... well. His family name was anathema within the wizarding world, and he had little to recommend him; a recovering drug addict with no money, no job prospects, estranged from his only surviving relative in a world where family and connections were all-important. It was little surprise that one of the only people prepared to associate with him was Hermione, something of an outcast in wizarding Britain herself.

"I was wondering," he began, rather tentatively, "what you want, Draco? Out of life, I mean? Career, and all that."

He had tried for a light, casual tone, but it came out rather forced and he winced.
Draco turned his pale face towards Severus, seeming a little startled by the question. He thought for a moment before responding, slowly: "You know, I think that might actually be the first time anyone's ever asked me that. I mean, ever. It wasn't a question that occurred to my parents, at any rate." He smiled, rather grimly. "It was just assumed that I would go into the family business of running – or should that be ruining – the wizarding world… well, you know. You know what they were like."

Severus nodded; he did know, and even back then, he'd felt some minor sympathy for the Malfoy boy. It had helped immensely that Draco was so unlikeable back then – Severus had been able to maintain his official role of mentor to his godson without getting too emotionally involved.

Draco was silent for a moment, and Severus forbore to interrupt, letting the young man sort his thoughts out.

"It hadn't occurred to me until now that… that's over… I mean, there are no expectations of me. I'm no longer someone's son, someone's heir, someone's role model. Who'd look up to me now? Who'd want to be me? Who'd want to associate with me; who'd want to even marry me?"

There was no bitterness in his voice; wonder, rather, and he shook his head in something like disbelief. "You know, I used to look around at the girls at school and wonder who they'd make me marry, because of course I knew, even when I was eleven, that my life was mapped out for me. Whichever family was in favour with my father at any given time – there'd be a first-born daughter selected to marry me; to give me a son – carry on the line. And I knew that it wasn't worth being interested in anything at school. What was the point? I wouldn't have been able to pursue any kind of career – gods forbid that I should do anything so middle-class as train for a profession. And if I'd failed anything, my father would have used his influence, probably would've talked to you, got my marks changed or something. I'd never be allowed to fail. That wasn't in the plan. Not for me."

Now the bitterness was there in his voice. He drew a shaky breath and dragged his hand through his hair. Severus, glancing towards him, saw the tense set of his jaw, the stiff shoulders – and was reminded once more of the miserable, desperately frightened seventeen-year-old, given an almost impossible task by the Dark Lord to redeem his father's blackened name. Draco had feared Severus then; had resented him, possibly even hated him – and yet, Severus had kept his bond with Narcissa and had stepped in to protect the boy – to stop him from becoming a murderer.

"But you were good at school," Severus pointed out mildly, trying to relieve the tension. "I didn't have to doctor any marks in potions. You were always one of my better pupils."

The shoulders relaxed very slightly as Draco snorted. "What, as good as Granger?" He didn't bother to hide his sneer.

"Better," Severus replied, calmly.

Draco glanced up at his old teacher's face. "I find that a little hard to believe – even if you did mark her down most of the time. How does she feel about that these days?"

The pale eyes were a little too knowing for Severus's liking, and he glanced away, down the path towards the village and the familiar sight of Jose moving his goats and sheep, their bells ringing, down the hill and through the village to the lemon groves where he would halt and eat his lunch.

"She understands why I had to do that. She knows that I couldn't be seen to have a favourite outside of Slytherin – particularly not a close friend of Harry Potter's. But, in any case, I was not lying. You were – you are – better at potions than Hermione. You have the skill; it's in your family."
Draco hunched his shoulders a little, apparently against the cold, but almost certainly to ward off this subtle mention of his father.

"I did enjoy potions," he admitted. "I could – sometimes, when we were working on experiments, when we had to concentrate, I could forget things – if you understand what I mean."

Severus nodded. He did understand. Losing himself in the complex arts of advanced potion making had been one of his outlets during the Voldemort era. He felt a sudden rush of sympathy for this young man, who'd spent most of that last year holed up in his family house with nothing to distract him, under the Dark Lord's constant vigilance and with his insane aunt for company. And then, in the immediate aftermath, he'd had to endure the shame of imprisonment and poverty, and had ended up begging for menial work from the very people that he'd once dismissed as unworthy to share the same air as him. Small wonder he'd sought the hollow comfort of recreational drugs.

"And now?" he prompted Draco.

"Now?" The young man shrugged. "No idea. Not a clue. No one wants me back in Britain, anyway. I'm too old to go back to school. I didn't graduate – never went back after the war, so I've got no qualifications. McGonagall offered me the chance to retake my exams when I was working there, but I just couldn't face it. I – I couldn't bear it; all those faces staring at me, the great Draco Malfoy, the traitor, crawling back to finish his education." He clenched the rail with both hands. "Bad enough I had to work there… and anyway, even if I did have the qualifications, who'd want to employ me?"

Severus held up a hand. "Wait a minute. Try, just for a moment, not to think about the realities. Forget what's already happened. If you could start out again – if you could go back ten years – no, let's say fifteen, what would you want to do? If you could do anything in the world, train for any profession. What would it be?" He'd summoned up his best 'teacher' voice – it seemed to him rather ironic that he was finally having the 'career talk' with his old student. Only twelve years too late.

"My father –"

"No. Forget your father. Try to imagine that he can't influence you now." In fact, if Hermione was right, that would be literally the case – and sooner than Draco might realise. "What do you want to do? Come on, Draco, you're pretty bright – God knows why, after so many years of trying to scramble your brain. There must be something that you want to do?"

Draco hesitated before turning to his former mentor. "Uh…well, I… well, as a matter of fact… I know it's pretty stupid, but… I suppose I'd rather hoped to do what – what you do. If I could have chosen, of course. I mean, I know it's a crazy idea; after all, you've spent years training under one of the Potions Masters, and I could never hope to emulate… There's only eight Masters left, anyway, and half of them are too old to take anyone on, and the others probably hate me and well… you did ask."

Severus struggled to hide his smirk. He didn't think he'd ever seen his former student quite so discomforted – blushing with embarrassment and stumbling over his words.

"So, you don't think it would be possible to take that path now?"

Draco looked away; his pale cheeks flushed. "There's my lack of formal qualifications. I haven't spent years studying the subject. And what Master would want to take me on as apprentice? Doesn't sound promising, does it?"
Severus turned towards Draco, leaning his hip against the railing as he counted the points off on his fingers. "Firstly, the lack of qualifications is not that important. It's merely a stepping stone to the next stage in your career and it helps you to get that first position – ask anyone. All you'd need is a qualified individual to confirm that you'd reached a certain level of competence – well, I would suggest that, as your former potions teacher, I might reasonably be considered a suitably-qualified individual. Secondly, there's no reason why you can't find enough time to catch up with your advanced studies. Let's face it – I managed, and that was while teaching full time and acting as Dumbledore's spy. And thirdly…you're missing the main point."

Draco gave him an inquiring look. "Which is?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "I'm one of the Eight."

"You mean, you're a…"

"Yes, I'm a Potions Master, you complete idiot. How else do you think I got into my elevated position?"

Draco stared at him for a moment, his mouth falling open. And then his face lit up with the most natural smile that Severus had even seen gracing the expression of a Malfoy.

The Quarter Boys were striking 11.45 as they strolled along Watchbell Street. It was a cool but mercifully dry day in Rye, a pale late-autumn sun shimmering on the wet cobbles. Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Harry and Luna had been blown out of the house by the antics of five over-lively children – James and Rose being the usual ring leaders.

Hermione could just see the back of Rose's pea green coat flying out behind her as she darted after her tousle-headed cousin around the corner of St Mary's. Lily ran after them, dragging a reluctant Hugo after her. The much more sedate Albus walked alongside his father, pointing out interesting features on the facade of the 12th century parish church.

Hermione smiled at the sight. She had a soft spot for the middle Potter child – and not just because Harry had named him for Severus. The dark-haired, dark-eyed sensitive little boy made her imagine a younger Severus … perhaps as he would have been - should have been - had he been lucky enough to have gentle Harry Potter as his father.

And perhaps so much that happened wouldn't have happened after all. But it was useless to speculate and doing so only reinforced the utterly unfair notion that James and Lily's deaths and the rise of Voldemort – all of it - had been entirely Severus's doing…

"I've always thought that myself." Luna's voice was startlingly loud in the peaceful street.

She was shocked out of her musings. Ron and Ginny had moved ahead, arguing in that usual aimless and amiable manner that she associated with the adult Weasley siblings – whenever two or three of them were in company, there were always arguments, but they never seemed that serious these days.

Hermione turned and grimaced at her friend. "I will never understand how you do that. How did you know what I was thinking?"

Luna's face was as vaguely good-humoured as ever, but Hermione had learned to see beyond the apparent absent-mindedness. The woman hadn't made it into Ravenclaw for no good reason.
She shrugged, cheerfully. "Quite obvious, really. You were gazing at Albus – *Albus Severus* – with a thoughtful expression. And you've told me before that he reminds you of that other individual." Hermione noted that Luna was still careful not to mention names; it was an old habit that they all maintained. Just because Severus's name had been cleared, it didn't mean they shouldn't respect their old Potions master's desire for continued anonymity.

Luna went on, quietly: "At first your expression was soft, affectionate and slightly amused – that of an adult in relation to a slightly unusual but much loved child. Comparing, perhaps, with quite another child. Then your face darkened, and I could tell that you were thinking of the past. Your jaw stiffened in that way it always does whenever you think of the lack of justice shown to your friend. And there was pain in your eyes … and shame. You were wondering what might have happened if certain events had turned out differently, and it occurred to you that you might never have met him … and then you felt guilty for being glad that you had met him."

Hermione made a strangled sound, something between a laugh and a groan and rubbed her forehead, distractedly. "Is it *that* obvious? Just to you – or to others too?"

She forced herself to sound casual, but Luna didn't miss the emphasis.

"You know that I have a reputation for seeing things that others don't – *and* for saying things that others *do* know but either don't - or *won't* - admit." There was a gentle humour in Luna's usual flat tone but also a touch of steel.

Hermione sighed, her eyes on Ron's back. "Well, it's not as if I don't know that, I guess… I mean, he may not know exactly *who*, but he almost certainly knows that there's *someone* on my mind."

Luna gazed towards the small group currently walking around the church, strands of her dirty long blonde hair blowing out from underneath a rather ratty knitted hat. Ron and Ginny disappeared from sight – they had followed Harry and the children around to the left and were probably heading down into the little town.

"Shall we go on to the Gun Garden?" Luna suggested, brightly. "There should be a good view today."

This suggestion, which involved walking straight on rather than turning left, meant that she wanted to talk to Hermione privately. And if Luna wanted to talk without interruption, it usually meant she had something important – and not necessarily all that pleasant - to say.

Hermione eyed her curiously. Luna was broadly unchanged since Hogwarts days. The last ten years seemed to have had no effect on her, either physically or mentally. But then, she'd always been mature in comparison with her fellow students – Hermione often had to remind herself that her friend was, in fact, almost two years younger than herself.

Luna lived a solitary life, having lost her father not long after the Final Battle. He had survived against the odds, but had been a broken shadow of his former slightly batty self and had died less than two years later. His daughter had taken over the editing of the Quibbler, which had assumed heroic status due to its stand against Voldemort and now had no shortage of eager correspondents. It was still a slightly wacky publication but fared better under Luna's surprisingly business-like leadership.

However she'd taken a back seat from the Quibbler for the last couple of years, and appeared to be abroad more than she was in Britain nowadays. Whenever Hermione asked, she would just allude mysteriously to 'research' and volunteer no further information. Whenever she *was* in the country, she lived in a ramshackle little cottage on the bleak shingled wasteland of Romney Marsh, within
the shadow of the Dungeness nuclear power station. It seemed an odd location, but Luna may have been attracted by the low price, the seclusion and the presence of a fairly liberal wizarding population in the vicinity. The cottage itself was filled to the brim with fascinating objects, many of which even Luna didn't seem to be able to identify.

It had now become a habit for Hermione and Luna to meet at the magical bookshop/cafe hidden around the back of the normal-looking second-hand bookshop whenever they were both in town. There, they would linger over tea and catch up on the latest medical theories and discoveries. Luna hadn't been the strongest Potions student, but she had a natural interest in anything to do with the magical properties of herbs. They would reminisce about the past and their former school friends – Luna often knew more about the lives and families of old DA comrades, particularly those from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff.

They passed in front of the looming Ypres Tower and stepped down into the sunken Gun garden with its panoramic view of the salt marshes stretching out towards the sea. The two women paused briefly by the low wall, taking in the scene.

Hermione sighed again. "It's a view I never get tired of. There's something so beautiful and so old about it. Even as a child, I sensed that. It's so unchanging…well, these days, anyway. Hard to imagine that this was one of the great Cinque ports and that the sea used to be right down there at the base of this wall…"

"Don't you think that there may be someone else that he thinks of?"

"What?" Hermione was stumped by this non-sequitur.

"Ron," Luna clarified in her dreamy manner. "Don't you think that you're a little self-absorbed sometimes, Hermione?"

Hermione stared at her friend, momentarily speechless. The pale eyes looked back at her, not judgmental but not especially sympathetic either. If anything, Luna looked a little amused.

"Is there – is there… Is there someone else, do you know?" Hermione managed to stutter out, eventually.

"Nothing that I can confirm. Or, rather, nothing that you shouldn't be able to spot yourself … if you paid enough attention." Again, the words were harsh but delivered in a gentle, unassuming manner.

"Oh!" Hermione frowned, trying for a moment to recall occasions where a name might have been mentioned more than usually frequently, before giving up. She felt strangely frozen, unsure of how to react. She gave Luna a nervous smile.

"Well, I couldn't blame him, could I?"

"Indeed not," Luna replied, quietly. "After all, there is more than one kind of infidelity, isn't there? Thoughts, feelings…even if you choose not to act on them."

"But you think that he does? Act on his feelings, I mean?" Who? Where? When?

Luna hesitated. "I think that…like you, he may wish that he can be with someone else. I don't say that he necessarily is – not yet, at any rate."

Hermione felt...well she didn't know exactly what she felt on hearing this revelation. Confused, mostly. Not at the notion of Ron falling for someone – she knew from her own experience that he was a normal male, and perhaps more emotional and warm-hearted than most. In fact, he was
The very same feeling that she had associated with Severus for the last fifteen years of her life.

Oh, God… She groaned with sudden realisation. Ron… how could she not have seen…?

"I've been a bit of a fool, haven't I?" she said, quietly.

"Yes, quite," Luna commented, her eyes suddenly very knowing. "The news confuses you because you weren't expecting it – and now you feel stupid for not realising. Part of you knew that he was unhappy, and that he knew you were…well, distracted by someone else at the very least … but at the same time, you can't believe that he may have looked somewhere else for affection. And yet, now you know, you can understand why. You know him better than anyone – and you know that Ron needs to feel loved and wanted… perhaps more so than most of us."

Her voice dropped slightly at this last comment, and Hermione briefly wondered, as she so often did, about Luna's personal life. Was there someone in her life – someone abroad somewhere, perhaps?

Her friend continued, with a slight smile on her face. "If I thought you might be offended – angry at his 'infidelity' - I'd be disappointed in you. But I know you, Hermione. I know that another part of you - perhaps the most important part of the Hermione that I remember – is still his best friend and wants him to be happy. You're not selfish, well, not by nature, anyway, although you've made some selfish decisions in the last ten years. Before that, you gave up a good part of your adolescence to fight in a war and a battle almost to the death. And then, while the rest of us celebrated, you had to hide away and nurse back to health a man that others despised as a presumed traitor. You supported that man's escape, financed him, helped him out and protected him by your silence, while others were still cursing his name. Those were not the acts of a selfish woman."

"You don't think so?" Hermione was startled by the calmness of her own voice. "Perhaps even then I was selfish. After all, I had ulterior motives, didn't I? I wanted to save him, because I loved him."

"Yes – and then you let him go," Luna pointed out. "He wanted to leave Britain, but he wouldn't have got very far without your help - not in his weakened state. You stayed away, you didn't interfere. You let him lead his own life."

"And then I left him again." It's a bitter, hard statement of fact.

"Yes, you did," Luna agreed, equably. "Do you remember what I said to you back then? You wanted to know what I thought of him. You had started to doubt him. And I told you that my impressions of him shouldn't influence your decision, because no individual is perceived in exactly the same way by more than one person."

"But you – you asked me to consider whether I could take a risk! You warned me!"

Luna looked at Hermione carefully. "Yes, I did, because I wanted you to be absolutely sure. I
didn't know the full circumstances then, but I knew that his situation was very dangerous. I knew that you might face years of isolation, cut off from friends and family – and from the wizarding world that you love so much, with all its politics and magical discoveries. You've always been stubborn. Once you've decided on a path, you'll stick to it, no matter what. I knew that if you took that leap of faith I mentioned back then, you wouldn't turn back … but that it might make you very unhappy in the end."

She turned, gazing down at the recreation ground at the bottom of the cliff. Hermione could see the children running across the grass with Ron, Harry and Ginny following on behind.

"Consider what you've got." Luna's voice was very quiet now. "Two intelligent, beautiful children who love you. A husband who is an excellent father – and is still a good friend to you, if nothing else. Friends, family. The satisfaction of knowing that you were responsible for overturning an unfair verdict and clearing a hero's name. And the added satisfaction of a job that actively seeks to make the wizarding world a far fairer place for minority species."

Hermione gave an ironic cough. "As to that… I may have made a difference once. These days, it's just writing legislation amendment proposals and getting them knocked back on a regular basis."

Luna gave her the steely look that so few others had ever encountered from the mild Ravenclaw. "Then leave."

"What – leave the Ministry?"

"If you're really not doing any good, then why not? If you want to do something worthwhile, then do it. It doesn't have to be big or important or famous. The trouble is, you've always thought big. You've always had an ambition to make a notable difference – to do something that will change the world forever. That's why you held back from taking that leap – and I can't entirely say that you made the wrong decision at that time… You were young and bright and burning with a sense of injustice. And look at you now. You've done what you set out to do. Thanks to you, conditions are much kinder and far more just for house elves. There's more you could do at the Ministry, I'm sure, but it's time to move on."

Hermione sat down suddenly and inelegantly on the low wall. It was damp, but she didn't care – she had suddenly felt that her legs could no longer hold her.

"Hermione? Are you feeling alright?" Luna crouched in front of her, looking intently into her face.

"Yes," Hermione waved her hand vaguely. "Just … you know. All of it, just a bit…” She stopped, hoping that Luna would understand without further explanation.

She did; her eyes softening as she patted Hermione's hand comfortingly before standing up again. "Do you understand why I told you about Ron?"

"To warn me, I suppose - about what was happening to my marriage – what would happen if I didn't sort it out."

Luna smiled. "Actually, no. It was because - and I want you to understand that I'm very fond of you, Hermione, and I don't mean to offend you, but …," she took a deep breath before continuing, "you really are a fool sometimes and you are currently driving me up the wall."

Hermione's head shot up in shock at her friend's tone. The two women stared at each other for a moment… and then Hermione began to laugh, shaking her head.

"No offence taken, Luna … but what do you mean?"
Luna gestured slightly wildly. "Look at you! Universally acknowledged to be the brightest witch of your generation – possibly of any generation for all I know. The status of a hero, a reasonably successful career, a loving family and good friends. On top of that, the unbending love of an equally intelligent man who might have moved on from you years ago and found love somewhere else – and, frankly, who's to say he shouldn't have, but for some reason, he didn't… But I digress. The point is - what are you doing with your life? You just drift along with your regrets about the past and some kind of vague and utterly ridiculous notion that you have to stand by the vows you made ten years ago, when you were hardly in your right mind. You're not happy, Ron's not happy – what's the point?"

"But I – but, but the children…"

Luna turned and walked a few restless steps. "What about the children? Look at them down there – just look. Do you see two children who are neglected in any way; who are not getting their basic needs met? I see two happy, well-adjusted children who are the product of loving parents and have the added comfort of an extended family that adores them. Do you really think that having divorced parents who are able to stay friends and put on a united front, as opposed to having miserable parents who force themselves to stay together, will change their sense of security?" She turned back to Hermione and gazed at her, very seriously. "You can't carry on using Rose and Hugo as some kind of pathetic excuse for hiding from life."

Hermione stared back at her friend, shocked. "Do you think that's what I'm doing?"

"Truthfully? Yes. I think that they have become your reason for not making a decision about what you really want from life. You know what I think?" she added, suddenly. "I look at you and I see someone whose life has been – been… interrupted, if I can put it like that. It's as if you're always thinking 'just one more year, just one more thing to do, and then I can decide', instead of just getting on with it and making a decision."

She gazed over at the view again. "Ten years ago, when I asked you to consider carefully, I could tell that you weren't sure – not then. You could have stepped back, taken a couple of years to sort your feelings out before making a decision, but you didn't. Instead, you took it as a reason for 'moving on' – for finding someone else and trying to live a different kind of life. You were too young – all of you. Barely out of school, and getting married and having children when you were little more than children yourselves.

"But you're not a child anymore, Hermione. It's not too late to live the life you want. If you are sure, this time around, you need to – to get on with it. Sort out this situation with Ron – sit down with him and be completely honest with him; you owe him that much. Work out what to do about the children – joint custody seems reasonable. I think you'll find that the Weasley clan will be supportive – in fact, you might be surprised by Molly's reaction; she's a lot more worldly-wise than you think. Hand in your resignation at the Ministry and work out what career you really want. And that's what I think you should do – the question now is… will you?"

There was a silence, which Hermione broke by laughing shakily.

"One of the many things I love about you, Luna, is that you always speak your mind – and I mean always. I'm not sure many people would have had the nerve to tell me all that."

She considered her hands, folded in her lap, and sighed. "You are right, of course. When it comes to people and their stupid complicated relationships, you always are. And you know me so well – probably better than I know myself. I… I don't know what I'm going to do about Ron, but I will think about what you've said – and what you haven't said, too. I've neglected him in all this – I've been so busy thinking about myself and Severus… But Ron – if anyone deserves to be happy, it's
him… I will think about it. I promise."

Luna gave her an affectionate smile. "Well, that's a start, at least. After all, Hermione Weasley is never going to do anything without considering all the options first. From you, that's a definite declaration of action."

Hermione grinned. "And it was exactly the response you expected from me… As for the job – oh, I don't know, Luna. What else would I do? It's too late to go into most professions – all the years of training involved… And then there's my reputation. Who would be prepared to take me on as an apprentice? Hogwarts?" she considered, and then shook her head, firmly. "No. I know Minerva would have me back like a shot, especially as she's thinking of retiring, but teaching isn't for me. And no one else would be as accepting as her."

Luna shrugged. "The worthwhile deeds are not always the visible ones. When were you happiest, Hermione? I don't mean in your private life necessarily, but when did you feel most satisfied with your work?"

Hermione frowned. "I suppose… when Severus started to get better. It was satisfying because I'd finally worked out how to treat his wound – and I'd had to do it alone, too. I was pleased for his sake, yes, but also proud of my own abilities."

Luna nodded, not seeming particularly surprised. "Because it involved pure research. You've always been good at that – taking a problem, working out its component parts, putting them back together logically. And you were doing something good, too - something worthwhile, even if no one else but Severus knew about it. Didn't he take your research notes with him? Hasn't he used them since to develop his own products?"

"Yes, he used my results as part of the process of developing Scar-accio." Hermione laughed, in sudden realisation. "That's quite funny, when you think of it. I was grateful that he developed that product because it made such a difference to my own scars, and yet I was a part of its development! And I didn't even realise until he told me, years later."

"Well, there you go, then," Luna replied, rather cryptically.

Hermione smiled, amused despite herself. "And from that, I'm supposed to assume… what?"

"Go into Healing, Hermione."

"Healing? But I've never - ."

"It's not too late. You're still young. You'd have some catching up to do, but then you've never refused a challenge yet."

Hermione shook her head. "To be honest, I've never thought of myself as the healing type, Luna. I'm far too impatient with people. I mean, I know I did a lot for Severus, but that was different."

"There are different types of Healers, though. I can't see you working at the bedside for the rest of your life, that's true," Luna conceded with an ironic smile. "But working in pure medical research – that I can see. And you'd need to go through the basic training to get there. It's quite a rigorous process. Look," abruptly, she turned serious, "I've got to know you quite well over the last few years. I've watched you poring over the science journals. There's nothing – nothing – that inspires you as much as reading about some new development, some new breakthrough, particularly in the medical world. You're not a natural potioneer, but you do have a scientific mind. You can make theoretical connections far more quickly than anyone I know."
Hermione gazed out over the recreation field. Far below, Hugo turned and looked up at her, and she waved automatically. It was tempting; there was no doubt about it. She was stale at the Ministry; her work lacked the precision and the passion of the early days, and her colleagues knew it too. They wouldn't be sorry to see her go.

But it would also mean a lot of work…

"I'll have to think about it," she murmured.

"Do that," Luna replied, her dreamy eyes suddenly as sharp as a kestrel's. "It would be hard work; you're right about that. And you'd have to start at the bottom – get your hands dirty. If you can get over the embarrassment of training alongside kids more than ten years younger than you, you'll get through. They'd probably fast-track you. I know who you should speak to – Susan Bones. She's a senior Healer at St Mungo's now. She'd be able to advise you."

Her pale cheek twitched very slightly as she said Susan's name.

Later, much later, when Hermione looked back at this conversation, she would wonder about Luna's odd response to the mention of Susan Bones ... but at that moment, she was too deep in thought, gazing down at her children and estranged husband, to pay it any attention.
"To become a Potions Master, the candidate must demonstrate excellence in the creation of at least two hundred and twenty five potions, as judged by a panel elected by the existing Masters. Potions must be included from each of the five categories, as follows –.

"What? Over two hundred?" Draco expostulated. "Are there even that many potions in existence?"

Severus smirked. "If you include all the variations, yes. In fact, there are far more, even though some of the more … traditional ones … are rarely encountered these days. Shall I go on?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, yeah, sure – sorry." Draco waved his hand.

"The categories are: healing; protective; transformative; mind-altering; and, finally, poisons and their antidotes. In addition to this, the candidate is also required to create and demonstrate at least two other unique potions, in any of the five categories. The candidate must also pass a written test and attend an interview with the panel of existing Masters."

The younger man sighed, staring at the laboratory floor. "It's just impossible. I could never perfect that many potions."

"It's not impossible. Difficult, yes, but -.

"But nothing, Severus! Look how many years you have on me – for Merlin's sake, you were practically creating your own potions before you left school!" Draco shook his head. "You had ten years more than me, and in any case, I – well, look at me! Some days I'm so screwed up by withdrawal, I can't even get my brain together enough to mix a simple Pepper-Up. You know that. And anyway, how am I supposed to learn what I need to know, when you won't let me go anywhere near half the stuff you've got stored here -.

Severus narrowed his eyes at his assistant. "And you know exactly why I won't."

They glared at one another for a moment, and then the younger man backed down, looking away.

"Yes. I know. Sorry – that was unfair of me." He chewed on a knuckle. It was a nervous habit that Severus didn't recall from Hogwarts – the skin on the back of the young man's right hand was raw with teeth marks. Either he'd concealed it better at school or it was a new habit, perhaps provoked by the cravings that still haunted him, even months after getting clean.

"Listen to me – no, really." Severus raised a hand, as Draco opened his mouth to interrupt. "Just listen. Yes, in theory, I have had a long time to achieve my position, and yes, it takes years. It took me years. I became the youngest ever Master, but even I didn't pass my candidacy until seven years before the battle – just before you started school – and that was after three attempts. Just as well I got it then," he muttered. "I certainly wouldn't have had an opportunity once bloody Potter arrived at Hogwarts…"

He shook his head slightly at the memory of those frenetic years – made even more of a headache for him by a certain Miss Granger and her pals.

"Anyway, the point is, you do have the time. You don't have to pass it in one year, or five, or even ten, and I wouldn't expect you too. You need to build up to it. It's not just a case of memorizing potions and learning how to do them by rote. It's about attaining a state of mind within which the
process of potions-making – the pattern, if you like - becomes instinctual. At that point, when you are working on potions, you don't think about what you're doing – not in a way that you can describe logically… You just – you just… it becomes second-nature. It becomes instinctive – even when I'm working on something new, some new development, I know what will happen almost before it happens. Which substances will react to each other, and how; which elements to introduce to stop, or at least alter, that reaction; what elements could be added to enhance the reaction; how and when and where and why to combine them…"

He broke off abruptly and shrugged, slightly embarrassed by his unaccustomed outburst. "It can still takes days, weeks, months even, to develop something different, some new idea, but it knocks a lot of that time off if you understand the underlying principles. How do you think I managed to produce two highly successful new potions working more-or-less alone for just a few years, with limited resources? I can probably turn out something quicker than a whole team of lesser potioneers working in a state-of-the-art facility. And that's what Mastery is about. You can know how to produce potions perfectly, what you add and when, but if you don't fully understand instinctively you're just a – a glorified apothecary, like those wizards who set up in Diagon Alley, copying everyone else's ideas, producing basic healing potions to sell to busy, stressed witches for a quick profit."

He shook his head. "That's not good enough, Draco – not for you. Oh, I could probably teach you enough to set up on your own within a year or two. You could make a decent enough living – assuming you can get the community to trust you again. You could have an easy life - a normal, boring life, with a nice tidy home to go to at the end of the day. A modicum of respectability, even. But that's not what you really want out of life … is it?"

He looked at his assistant intently, and saw those proud, pale grey eyes light up with an inner fire that he remembered, all too well, from his memories of the senior Malfoy. That spark of ambition. That determination to be the best. Oh yes, he was his father's son alright, deny it though he might.

"No," Draco breathed, almost in a world of his own.

"I thought not. Well?"

Draco blinked; looked up at his mentor. "What?"

"Do I go on?" Severus gestured at the documentation. "Am I going to spend my time on this, Draco?"

"I don't understand –.

"Because I'm telling you now – I am prepared to help you and to dedicate as much time as you need, but I will not go into this unless you are absolutely certain. You have to burn for this, Draco. You have to put aside all thoughts of a normal, easy life, the chance of a family, even your position in society. There will be no time for any of that. You will find yourself surviving on less than six hours' sleep a night; you will spend almost all of your time in that laboratory. Your 'spare time' will be spent reading and re-reading all the great works on the art and science of potions. You will spend freezing cold nights collecting the ingredients that flourish best in those conditions, and baking hot days down in that underground room, preparing potion after potion until your eyes sting and your fingers are raw. And you will curse me, and curse your own stupidity for even trying, and you will be desperate to give it all up. I know. I've been there. And you will do all this with no real confidence of gaining your Mastery… because you can pass all the exams with 100 per cent grades and produce the most perfect potions, but if the Masters choose not to accept you, then it will make no difference whatsoever."
The thin young man stared at Severus, his face frozen and paler than ever. Severus looked back, maintaining a stern expression while waiting patiently for a response.

Then Draco straightened his shoulders, a look of grim purpose on his face. "Yes. I want this."

Severus relaxed a little. "OK, then. That's all I needed to know."

He turned slightly away from Draco and fiddled with some notes. "Of course, there is one plus side," he murmured, keeping his face carefully blank.

"There is?" Draco sounded skeptical - and more than a little shaky.

"Oh, yes." Severus had to look away to avoid smirking at his assistant's perplexed expression. "I am reliably informed that some intelligent witches find Potions Masters quite sexy." Well, one witch, anyway. "Which is a quite some feat for my erstwhile colleagues when you consider that I'm the youngest of the current bunch by some thirty years," he added.

"What -?"

Severus watched as the light gradually began to dawn on Draco…

And there it was… his assistant's face cleared, and puzzlement gave way, first to annoyance and then to an embarrassed grin.

"You're a complete bastard - you do know that, don't you?" he muttered, rubbing his face. "All that stuff about lack of sleep and raw fingers and wanting to give up – you really had me going for a minute there."

Severus laughed, throwing up his hands in surrender. "OK, I admit it. I couldn't resist exaggerating a bit, just to see your reaction." He sobered again. "It's a serious point, though. You really do have to apply yourself with single-minded determination - and there are no guarantees. I was serious about that - I'm only one of a number of Masters who will make the ultimate decision about your suitability, and you have to convince us all – there's no majority vote. There's a very good reason why there's not that many of us Masters left."

"You know, it's funny, but I don't remember you joking or playing a trick even once when we were at school," Draco mused, thoughtfully. "Not even with us in Slytherin house."

"Well no, I suppose not. But it's almost as if…" Draco hesitated for a moment, and then eyed his old professor speculatively. "You're a different person, you know. This life suits you… but it's more than that, isn't it? Something – or someone – has changed you. Made you more human, I suppose."

His words brought Severus up short. Had he really changed that much? He was more relaxed, but who wouldn't be? When he'd first arrived here, all those years, he'd felt as if a huge burden had been lifted off his shoulders. For the first time in almost twenty years, he'd become his own master once more. The early days had been difficult – both physically and magically demanding – but he'd no longer needed to walk a tightrope between the Light and the Dark; he'd no longer needed to hide his true feelings twenty four hours a day.

But had he changed beyond that? Had – she - changed him? Softened him, taken away his rough edges? Made him more … himself? More the man he might have always been, had circumstances been kinder?
He blinked and picked up the documents again, trying to avoid Draco's dangerously knowing expression. "Well then, let's carry on with this, shall we? So, first of all, we need to draw up a schedule…"

May 2012

"Oh, bloody, buggering hell!"

Severus had already turned at the heavy *thud* of someone slipping and falling heavily on the ground in front of his house, and he grinned at the voice of complaint that followed it, his heart lightening.

He hurried around the side of the house to find a red-faced, green clad Hermione attempting to get to her feet as she sprawled on top of a large sack of compost that he had just acquired from a local farmer and had left there for a few moments.

"What idiot," she snarled, "leaves a sack of – of sheep's poo, judging by the smell, right by their front door? Oh, that's right – you, of course, because you really are that much of an idiot."

"To be fair, I wasn't expecting anyone to apparate right on top of it," he pointed out patiently, as he hauled her to her feet, attempting to brush her down. She swatted his hands away, impatiently.

It was a reasonable comment. It was one of those unwritten rules, handed down through the generations, that the polite way to visit a fellow wizard or witch was to apparate to a point immediately in front of their main door – and therefore, it was considered hospitable for the host to keep such an area clean and free of any unexpected obstacles. But Severus had never received unexpected guests here; even Caesar and Beatriz, knowing that he disliked surprises, had got into the habit of sending an advance patronus giving notice of their intentions.

"Talking of which, I wasn't expecting you," he continued.

"Yes, well, I was getting fed up with that bloody stupid hag telling me what to do," she muttered, brushing manically at her outfit. He noticed belatedly that she was dressed in the grey-green smock and trousers of a trainee Healer. Loose fitting and designed for practicality rather than glamour, they could render the most beautiful of witches unattractive, and certainly didn't do much for Hermione's curvy figure.

"I just had to get away for a couple of hours. Oh, don't look like that," she added, irritably. "I'm on a break – I don't need to be back on the ward for four hours. And so I thought I might just check in on my favourite potioneer."

And with a startlingly quick change of mood, she favoured him with that slightly toothy, dazzling smile of hers that inevitably made his stomach do funny things.

He grinned and grabbed her around the waist with one hand to pull her close, while his other hand cupped her face and tilted her chin up for a quick kiss. "Well, I'm honoured, I suppose. So, what's the esteemed Healer-in-Charge of spell damage done now?"

She put her hands around his neck and leaned in to nuzzle at his neck, like a cat. "Mmm? Oh, just more of the usual. My robes were slightly creased this morning, and my hair was escaping. Honestly, I'm seriously thinking of cutting it all off again. And I had the nerve to share a joke with a patient. Apparently, I shouldn't speak to them at all, beyond the necessary therapeutic
communication – it 'upsets the aura of holistic healing'. Well, you know what? She can take her fucking 'aura of holistic healing' and shove it right up her big, fat, hairy -."

"I get the point," he jumped in, hurriedly. "You know, your language has really deteriorated since you went to St Mungo's. You're getting as bad as me."

"Well, I can't help it. It's therapeutic – for me, I mean. Did you know that Healers are not allowed to swear at all on work premises? We're all supposed to maintain an air of calm authority at all times. Never rush, never look harried or stressed. Like bloody Susan – she's a natural at it. She'd have made a perfect Muggle nun. Me – I need to let off steam sometimes."

And then, just as quickly, her mood shifted again and she sagged visibly against him, burying her face in his chest.

"The truth is, I hurt," she moaned. "My feet hurt from walking literally miles around that sodding hospital, my hips ache from shoving the bloody trolley, my hands ache from all the cleaning spells. My hair aches from being scraped back the whole time. Everything hurts - for crying out loud, Severus, my teeth hurt. I swear it."

He grimaced, sympathetically. "Well, I'm not sure there's much I can do, apart from offer an old fashioned cup of lemon and ginger tea?" He let her go and stepped back, holding out a hand.

She sighed, taking his offered hand, gratefully. "That would be perfect, thank you. Have I told you lately that I love you?"

"Isn't that a Muggle song? Sounds soppy enough to be. Yes, I think you have, on the odd occasion," he murmured, deliberately standing back a little so he could observe her movements with a clinical eye. She was clearly in some degree of pain; he suspected some muscular strain to her neck or back.

As she made to sit on the terrace, he grabbed her shoulders and turned her around, pushing her towards the door.

She groaned. "Please, Severus, I just need to sit down for a minute…"

"Hmm, well I think we need to take a detour – straight into the bedroom with you. I want to take a look at your back."

"Oh yes?" She gave him an amused but fundamentally suspicious look, and he growled in irritation.

"Oh, for Christ's sake! Get your mind out of the gutter, woman. Purely therapeutic, I promise. Scout's honour."

"Yeah? Since when were you a scout?"

"I could have been – brought up Muggle, remember? Now take these towels and get in there," he ordered, briskly. "Remove the top half of your clothing and lie on your front, with one towel under you and the other covering your back. Then give me a shout when you're ready – I won't come in until then. That is, if you want to be reasonably mobile when you start your next shift."

"It's unlikely you were ever a scout – they're a pretty middle-class organisation in the UK, as I recall," she countered, limping towards the bedroom. "Um – is Draco around, then?"

It was a casual enquiry, but he understood the meaning. "No – he's over in Orgiva. Shadowing Beatriz on one of her Healer community visits. I thought it would be useful to him to get an idea of
the kind of cures they're looking for. And then he said he'd probably have dinner with them and 
might even stay the night. He gets on very well with Beatriz – employs all the powers of that old-
fashioned Malfoy charm on her, just to get a good meal."

He went into the bathroom, looking for a bottle of massage oil.

She was silent for a minute, and he could sense the relief. It was nothing to do with Draco. Their 
relationship was improving slowly – there was even some genuine warmth between the two former 
enemies these days.

The issue was a little more complex than that. Hermione wasn't keen on Draco knowing the nature 
of her true feelings towards Severus; at least not until her marriage had been dissolved. Privately, 
Severus suspected that Draco knew, or had guessed at, the truth – he was far too intelligent not to. 
Hermione already made far more informal visits to them than could be explained away by her role 
as unofficial link between Severus and his anonymous business concerns in Britain.

If Draco did know, he never alluded to it, appearing to turn a blind eye whenever Hermione 
appeared and often disappearing on some errand of his own. He was probably more understanding 
of the situation than they gave him credit for, having no doubt seen enough unhappy marriages in 
his childhood. His own parents' union had been an arranged affair and not a particularly 
harmonious one, though they had maintained a unified image in public. It was hard enough for an 
ordinary witch and wizard to get a divorce; in aristocratic circles, it was practically unheard of.

The difficulty was that a wizarding divorce didn't just involve paperwork, as in the Muggle world. 
A magical bond had to be broken – a dramatic event, which could have a strong effect on the 
magic of not just the divorcing couple, but of those around them, particularly their children if they 
had any. The Ministry strongly disapproved of divorce for that reason. While it was liberal enough 
to recognise that not all marriages would last, it tended to favour separation as an alternative – after 
so many years apart, the magical bond tended to weaken naturally and might eventually sever 
without too much disruption.

However, a formal separation required the couple to stay apart and not communicate with each 
other for a long time, possibly years even, and Ron and Hermione were not keen on that. It would 
be difficult to give Rose and Hugo the emotional stability they needed - and, in any case, they had 
been close platonic friends before embarking on their disastrous romantic relationship, and neither 
saw any reason why that friendship should not continue once they had adjusted to their new 
circumstances.

From Severus's point of view, the main problem was that, as long as the magical marriage bond 
continued, it would be impossible for either Ron or Hermione to form extremely close bonds with 
others – and they certainly wouldn't be able to remarry. He didn't actually know whether Ron had 
any plans at all in that direction. He didn't think Hermione was even sure whether another woman 
was involved – all he knew was that some dramatic changes in their domestic circumstances had 
taken place in the last few months.

He suspected that Hermione had never told him the full story. By the time he saw her just after 
Christmas in 2011, she had left her job at the Ministry to start her Healing studies. She was living 
at home at present, but now slept separately from her husband, although they were still putting on a 
united public front. She had seemed fairly subdued on that occasion, although she'd made an effort 
to be cheerful at Caesar and Beatriz's traditional Boxing Day lunch and winter walk. Rose and 
Hugo had been noticeable by their absence; apparently, Ron had taken them to George and 
Angelina's for a few days.

"So he's definitely going ahead with the Masters?" she called, referring to Draco.
"Yes, and I think he'll make it too," he replied, taking a bottle from his medical cabinet and frowning at the contents. "I really do – not that the work is any guarantee of achieving Mastery, but he's very single-minded. And has the necessary aptitude too."

"Unlike me," she teased.

"Unlike you."

He muttered a warming spell over the bottle. Grabbing another couple of towels, he walked over to his bedroom, hesitating outside the door. "Um, can I come in?"

"Yes." Her voice sounded a little stilted.

Since that abortive evening almost thirteen years ago, there had been relatively little physical contact between them apart from the occasional fairly chaste kiss. He supposed it was rather ridiculous really, but it felt somehow… indecent to take it any further. That was the power of that damned magical bond; if not for that, he'd have had no compunction at all – he'd waited long enough. But having sex with a married woman… it would almost be like inviting Ron to watch. The man's bond to Hermione would tell him what was happening. Severus might still be a bit of a bastard at times, especially when it came to Weasley of all people, but even he wasn't that cruel – and neither was Hermione.

They knew the limits of their endurance and sensibly confined themselves to situations where it was impossible to get too intimate – quiet walks in public places; dinners with Cesar and Beatriz. In fact, it was unusual for Hermione to be alone with Severus indoors – initially the children and then Draco had made effective chaperones. Hermione had taken to staying over from time to time in recent months, but she slept on the sofa – Severus had offered his bed, but she'd waved him away airily, pointing out that in her new role as a Healer working long hours, she would have to learn how to get some sleep in uncomfortable places, so she might as well start now.

By February, she was a regular presence in his cozy sitting room, sitting and reading a book quietly in the late evening as he and Draco sleepily discussed ingredients and processes. Each time he looked in her direction and saw her glance up and smile at him, the firelight gilding her long curly hair, he would feel a lump in his throat. It felt right to see her there – so right that it almost hurt. He could briefly pretend that the last decade had never happened and that they were a long-established married couple entertaining a guest. Except that, when the guest departed, it was Hermione and not Draco, which felt utterly wrong, fond though he'd become of his unexpected house guest.

He pushed open the door with his foot, shaking the bottle in his hand. She was lying on the bed as instructed, face turned away from him. He stopped briefly at the sight before shaking himself mentally and moving over to the bed. He put the bottle on the bedside table and pulled out his wand.

"OK, I suspect you've done some muscular damage, so I'm going to check first," he murmured, sitting carefully on the edge of the mattress. He ran his wand over her back, casting a diagnostic spell and frowning at the results that appeared in the air for a moment before fading away. He'd be the first to admit that, although he'd developed some necessary skills along the way – often having to apply emergency treatment to himself – practical healing was not his strong point. However, he had developed a fair knowledge of anatomy in relation to his work on healing potions, and particularly of injuries and strains.

"Well, you've strained your right trapezius muscle. Not surprising – there's far too much tension in your neck." He ran his wand over the abused area, applying the healing incantation.
She sighed her relief as the spell was completed, moving her arm to assess her range of motion. "Thanks, that's much better."

"No problem – hey, don't move yet." He pushed her arm back into place. "Stay still and be good - or you won't get the rest."

"The rest, eh?" She turned her face to give him a sideways look, her eyes glittering with amusement.

"Yes. The patented Severus Snape massage *extraordinaire*. I might not be a qualified Healer, but this I *am* good at. Much in demand, too."

"Oh, *really*?" Those warm eyes narrowed, but the glint of humour remained. "Is there something I should know?"

He smirked as he poured some oil over his hands and rubbed them together. "You might be surprised."

"Surprise me."

He was silent for a moment as he pulled back the towel, feeling her exhale sharply at the cooler air. He straddled her body, positioning himself over her thighs with the towel between them, and placed his hands lightly but firmly on her shoulders, keeping them still and steady to give her time to get used to the alien sensation.

"Take three deep breaths in and out," he instructed and waited for her to do so before answering her question. "My mother, initially. She wasn't always so… indifferent. She did try, in her own way, to protect me from the worst of my father – at first, at least. Eventually, it all got too much for her, and I suppose it just became easier to let me… take the blows. But anyway, there was a time when I would try to help her. I couldn't do much, but I used to heat up towels and apply them to the bruises. She said it helped her. And I'd rub her neck - it relieved the tension."

He stared down at his hands. They looked large on her back, long fingers spread out over her shoulder blades. He'd always hated them – when he was an adolescent, they'd seemed awkward and over-large. Lily's tiny hand would disappear altogether on the rare occasions that they held hands; he'd almost been afraid of hurting her. Later, when sleepless nights and double spy duties left him sallow and aged beyond his years, his long white fingers had reminded him of nothing so much as spindly spiders. They were just another symbol of his physical unattractiveness. Small wonder most of the students had disliked him on sight, before he'd even opened his mouth to confirm their worst fears.

Now, they were slightly less white, but rough and callused from hours spent in the garden and the laboratory as they lay against her soft skin. Hermione's back was pale in comparison with her arms and neck, but still browner than his hands; they stood out almost blue in comparison. The decade he'd spent in this hot corner of Europe had not changed his skin tone all that much.

She was silent, absorbing this new information about his family. "So you think that she knew what your father did to you…?" Her voice trailed away. It was a subject that they never discussed much.

"The beatings?" He reflected for a moment. "I don't really know. She must have suspected, I'm sure. To be honest, I try not to think about it anymore. She was … a disturbed woman, by the end. She couldn't *not* be, with all she'd been through. And – I know this sounds strange – but so much has happened to me since my childhood that it almost seems insignificant."
He bent his head slightly, focusing on the graceful curve of her back. His eyes moved down, counting off the vertebrae as he finally began to move his hands in light circles. Cervical, thoracic, lumbar, sacral – a column of 33 perfect discs. His thumbs began to follow his eyes, sliding very slowly down the spine as his fingers continued to circle, not pressing too firmly yet.

His eyes ran up her back again, lingering on features that he had never had the opportunity to see. Hermione had developed some curves over the years: motherhood and a sedentary office job had seen to that. In fact, he suspected that the skinny, leggy teenage girl he remembered had been less true to her natural shape – she had, after all, just spent a year on the run with limited food.

He’d known Hermione to complain about her weight gain, particularly after one of Beatriz’s sublime dinners, but he didn't care. He loved the wider hips, the slight padding of her stomach, the gentle curves that he could see through her clothes – they gave her a subtle strength and a maturity that she had lacked as a gawky, skinny adolescent.

Now he enjoyed this opportunity to see properly and to touch the skin that he had only glimpsed briefly from time to time. Moles and scars from various battles and from magical experiments that had gone awry. There was an old indentation shaped like a half moon just under her left arm – a childhood accident, perhaps? There was still so much to learn about her – so much to explore and catalogue. He could spend a lifetime observing and listening and touching and tasting and smelling, and still never know enough about this person – this Hermione. His Hermione.

He allowed his oily palms to slide down to the tempting dimples just above her buttocks, pulling down her trousers very slightly for better access. He was aware of a slight tension in her body before he pushed down a little more firmly, making his touch more obviously clinical in nature.

She relaxed as his fingers spread out to the side, the heels of his hands pressing down either side of her spine. He could feel her breathing begin to lengthen as he began to run his hands in large firm slow circles, all the way up the vertebrae, out wide over her shoulder blades and back down again, skimming her sides.

She sighed, blissfully. "You're right, you are good at this. I may just have to employ you to provide this service after every shift."

He smirked. "You wouldn't be able to afford me."

"Oh, is that a challenge?" She smiled up at him, sleepily, and he resisted a strong urge to bend down and press his tongue to the faint freckles on her cheekbone.

It was two in the afternoon, the hottest part of the day, and he could hear the cicadas singing and a gentle breeze rustling through the dry grass stalks outside the open bedroom window. A dispersed light flickered through the curtains as they swayed back and forth, caught by the fresh wind that habitually blew down from the hill above. It played over Hermione's back, creating golden ripples that flitted across that expanse of skin, and Severus wanted to chase after them with his tongue; to taste the remnants of the oil and the light musky scent that was uniquely Hermione. His hands stilled briefly as he reveled in the texture and smell and sight – and the silence - of this perfect moment.

Did she sense it too? Her level breathing quickened and caught on an inhalation that seemed to linger. As if they could stay in this intimate moment. As if it were really possible to make life stop just long enough to allow them to get off.

It might have been minutes, or hours even, before she wriggled slightly, subconsciously urging his hands into movement once more. "You still with me, Professor?" she teased, gently.
He smiled and tickled her sides, making her squirm again, before gentling the movement and resuming a firm pattern of strokes.

"So, I had a marketable skill by the time I got to Hogwarts – and it wasn't just my brain. You'd be surprised at how many students get neck or back ache."

"Actually, no, I wouldn't."

"Hmm," he recalled his scattered memories of a schoolgirl Hermione, usually seen dragging along a bag bursting at the seams with heavy books. "No, I suppose not. But anyway, I was useful to some students. Usually only in Slytherin House, although Lily was happy to request the occasional neck rub in the early days. Anyway, Lucius had a bad accident while playing Quidditch in his sixth year – the broken bones were treated, of course, but he never recovered entirely. And I developed a technique for relieving the muscle pain. Even after he left Hogwarts, I'd stay with his family from time to time, and would massage his injured shoulder when the weather was damp or cold."

He considered for a moment, his eyes skimming quickly, almost guiltily, over the scar tissue on the inside of her arm – scars that even his Scar-accio formula had been unable to eradicate entirely. "To this day, I'm never entirely sure why he wanted me around. He certainly didn't like me much, even back then. But I think he saw me as some kind of … sidekick. A servant, probably. In retrospect, he didn't treat me all that well considering I was a guest. He ordered me around, ignoring me when it suited him. He respected my brains, though. And going there to be patronised by the likes of the Malfoys and the Blacks and the Lestranges was still a hundred times better than going home. Believe me, once I got to Hogwarts, I embraced any opportunity to avoid going home during the holidays. I even slept rough a few times."

He sighed, remembering. "Anyway, I developed quite a reputation during those years after the Dark Lord rose again. Treating long-term injuries. Relieving pain that couldn't be managed through magic alone. Even Dumbledore, that last year. I couldn't stop the curse, but I could manipulate some feeling back into his withered arm – hold back the poison for a while longer."

He leaned forward over her, using a little of his weight to push his hands into her shoulder blades. The muscles eased under his pressure and she moaned, inarticulately.

"So you learnt something useful in those years, after all." Her voice was a little breathy, but still sleepy – and he realised that she was probably more than a little aroused but in an indolent way, with no real intention of taking it any further. This realisation went straight to his groin and made him semi-hard, and he shifted a little, trying to ease the pressure of his tight jeans. It occurred to him that there was a greater intimacy in this stolen lazy moment than there might be, perhaps, in the urgent throes of sexual passion.

He swallowed and quickly moved his hands up to her shoulders, focusing on the tension there to alleviate his physical reaction. "My skills at that time were probably not enough to be of serious clinical use. Lucius – well, he was too proud to ask Poppy for any more help with his shoulder; it's not in the nature of the Malfoys to ask. Professional Healers were hard to come by in Voldemort's exalted circles. And Albus had reasons for not wanting many people to know of his condition. So I probably wasn't that good at that stage, in retrospect. Beatriz taught me a lot of what I know today. Back when I was -."

He broke off frowning, as he realised that he had been about to reveal more than he wished her to know about his descent into drug use. It was during his prolonged recovery in Orgiva that he'd started to shadow Beatriz and learn the effective healing methods that had aided Muggles and wizards alike in her neighbourhood for many years. "Well, anyway, she was very instructive," he concluded, lamely.
"She's rather wonderful, isn't she? I've always admired her – ooh! Ouch!" She squirmed under his harder ministrations. "I take it all back. You've developed some kind of refined torture and you just needed a willing victim to test it on."

He grinned, watching her nose wrinkling in mild discomfort. "No pain without gain. Anyway, what I want to know is how you got into this state? You must have known that your back was strained – or if you were too distracted to notice, which seems very likely knowing you, why didn't your supervisor see? They are Healers, after all." He was thinking quickly. "And why should you get like this in the first place? Surely in a magical facility like St Mungo's, they could design equipment that prevents occupational injuries?"

She was silent for a moment, wincing as he dug his fingers into a tight muscle at the base of her neck and pressed the knots out, section by section.

"The truth is… I'm probably too old to be starting out as a Healer."

"Too old? Don't be ridiculous, you're hardly any age at all -."

"I meant to be an apprentice. If I'd started all this ten years ago, I wouldn't find it so hard. I was so much fitter then. Since then, I've had the children, been stuck in a desk job – and any spare time I have, I spend it poring over books. But it – it's more than that, Severus."

She paused and he didn't interrupt her, focusing instead on rubbing briskly over her abused muscles to take away the sting of his harder manipulations.

"I'm a little too set in my ways for them. I'm too old to be told what to do without knowing why. I do want to succeed at this – but on my terms. You see, I – it's about making changes. I want to make things better – to help develop therapies and good care practices - and I can't do that by blindly following orders. You know me, Severus. You know that I need to know all the whys and wherefores – the ins and outs of a problem. I'm a scientist by nature. I know I need to get through this basic training before I can be really useful, but it's not that easy."

He said nothing, his fingers lightly rubbing her neck.

"They don't understand me. That sounds pathetic, doesn't it – makes me sound like a sulky teenager. But it's true. I thought that nursing you and Draco was tough enough, but at least I could make my own decisions. And now, here I am, going through the basics alongside other apprentices who were just kids when we defeated Voldemort. To them, I'm some kind of legend, and they have no idea how to speak to me."

"And the injuries! The spell damage! Sometimes I can't believe that the wizarding population can be so stupid! No wonder Voldemort was able to gain such power without being challenged. It's informative, of course, but I just itch to be in those laboratories, researching cures or considering ways of avoiding such accidents happening in the first place. I tell you what – we could really learn about health and safety from the Muggles. But try saying that to the likes of Augustus Pye."

"And I'm assuming you have – and that it didn't go well," he muttered. She grimaced, and he bent down to kiss the back of her neck in brief comfort before sitting back on his heels and pulling the towel up over her back again. "OK, magical healing massage well and truly over."

She sighed, gratefully, reaching out to grasp his hand and press a kiss to his knuckle. "You really are a life-saver – you know that."

"You're always welcome." He scrambled off her and stood up, a little awkwardly. She turned over,
pulling the towel over her front to preserve her modesty, and gazed up at him frankly. It seemed a little pointless to hide his straining erection, and so he didn't try.

They stared at each other for a moment, both more than a little reluctant to move away from this moment. There was that unspoken possibility between them, lingering in the hot, still air…

He forced himself to step back, seeking a new subject. "Pye – he's Healer-in-Charge of creature-induced injuries now, isn't he?"

She smiled wryly, recognising the diversionary tactic. "Yes. And what he wouldn't give to see your medical notes, if he ever knew about them. I mean – surviving a bite from a snake with Nagini's power – a bite that was intended to kill…"

She sat up suddenly, clutching the towel over her breasts and gazing off into the far corner of the room. He recognised the far-away look in her eye and forebore to comment.

"Nagini…," she murmured, drawing up her knees and resting her chin, too distracted to be concerned about her nakedness. "You know, I never thought about it before, but you are probably the only person to survive attack by a horcrux. Apart from Arthur, of course, but then that wasn't really intended to kill as such. It was probably more of a warning – or perhaps Voldemort hoped to have some control over him if they hadn't been able to remove the serum. But you …" She shook her head wonderingly, and then looked up at him, quickly. "Do you still have my notes?"

He had to cast his mind back. He'd not looked at the notes in years, although he certainly still had them – it would have been folly to have destroyed them. He'd requested them of her shortly after his recovery and had never returned them. It had made more sense for him, since they could be of no value to her once he'd recovered enough to take care of himself.

In his early days in Andalusia, he'd spent hours every evening poring over her meticulous, neatly penned notes. She'd taken a scientific approach as always – all her experimental treatments had been carefully recorded, with lists of ingredients, preparation methods, dates used and degrees of success in treating his wound. At first, he'd read them almost obsessively, fearing a relapse in his condition and wanting to be prepared for the worst. After all, they had no real way of knowing whether she'd succeeded in ridding his body of all the poison.

Later, as he grew stronger and appeared to have no long-lasting effects, he'd filed them away – somewhere in a filing cabinet in his laboratory, although he couldn't remember exactly where off-hand.

Avoiding the question, he narrowed his eyes at her. "And what would you do with them? Are you thinking of giving them to Pye?"

"Well, no… although some of the information might be of use…" She was thinking hard. "Eliminating poison from magical sources. I could rewrite some of the theory anyway. He needn't know where it came from."

He noted the glint in her eye with a growing sense of uneasiness. She wouldn't… would she?

"For what? Nagini is dead – all the horcruxes have been destroyed. He's not coming back. What's the point of bringing all that up again?" He knew there was an edge to his voice, and fought to disguise it.

She blinked up at him, evidently sensing the tension. "What's your problem?"

"My problem? My problem?" He gave an incredulous laugh. "What – you think I'd be happy to just
let you have *my* private medical records and display them to the world? How long do you think it'd
be before someone like Augustus Pye realised the implications? He's not that much of a fool – he's
going to know that you're talking about someone surviving Nagini. And once he's worked that out,
he's not going to let it go. He'll *find* me, Hermione. If not him, then *someone*. And it may have
escaped your notice, but I'm getting on very well without the world knowing that I'm still alive."

She was staring up at him in disbelief. "You really think I'd risk revealing your survival? After all
these years of keeping it a secret?"

"I don't know – *would* you?" He was observing her carefully. "I mean, it would do your new career
quite a lot of good, wouldn't it?"

"*What?* What's that even *mean*, Severus? You think I'm looking for some kind of personal *glory*?
You *do*, don't you? You think that I left the Ministry because they just didn't 'appreciate' me
enough, and now I'm trying to gain some influence at St Mungo's? That I might decide to use your
notes to prove how *wonderful* I am – how *special*? How can you even *think*...?"

He sighed, rubbing his face. "I don't know, Hermione. I just don't -." He broke off suddenly and
bent to pick up her uniform and toss it onto the bed, trying to avoid her accusing glare. "Here – you
don't have much time before you need to go back. I'll go and put the kettle on."

As he walked away, he was troubled by the fact that he did not know for sure. At one time, he
would have trusted – in fact, *did* trust – Hermione with his very life.

But now... He sighed again, waving impatiently at the kettle to fill it with water. He pulled out a
box filled with one of his own creations – black tea leaves infused with lemon, ginger and herbs –
and measured them into an old teapot. Severus tended to do most things in the kitchen manually,
and particularly tea or coffee – in his view, magic interfered with the subtleties of the taste and
aroma.

She passed quietly through the kitchen behind him and went out onto the terrace, moving a little
more easily now. He prepared the tea tray and sent it flying out after her onto the terrace table.

Before following, he leaned against the unit and rubbed his face again, feeling suddenly quite
weary. Did he really - *genuinely* - trust her now? He knew that he'd always had trust issues – no
surprise *there*. Even now, with his friends - even with Cesar - he would automatically assess every
casual conversation, looking for criticisms or for potential threats to his well-being or privacy. He
could rarely relax entirely. It felt like a weakness in his nature that he couldn't overcome, no matter
how much time had passed since the war – a long-suppurating sore that he could never quite heal.

She was stirring the contents of the teapot when he came out, and poured the tea into the mugs
without looking at him. The deliciously fresh and spicy aroma from the hot black tea tickled his
nostrils and she sighed with pleasure, breathing it in.

"That is *perfect*. You could patent it. Which I don't intend to do, by the way," she added, drily.

"I'm sorry."

She said nothing, giving him an inscrutable, sideways look.

"I mean it. I really am. I shouldn't have reacted like that. Of *course* you wouldn't risk my security –
not even if it meant... but in any case, I don't think that of you. I could *never* think that of you."

"I know you don't." Her voice was quiet and neutral, as she picked up a mug and sipped at the
scalding contents. "But the fact remains that *that* was your instinctive first reaction. You weren't
"Well, it's not... Look, sometimes—just sometimes—you get this look in your eye, some kind of spark, which usually means that you're on a mission. Some crusade. And then you bulldoze your way through everyone around you. You know I'm right, Hermione. You were like it during the war, even in the early days at Hogwarts, and it didn't matter who got affected by your convictions, just so long as you were right. When you look like that, I get nervous. I can't help it—I know it's irrational..." He trailed off.

She stood up, moving towards the rail. "Severus, you have to let the past go. If we're going to carry on in this relationship, you have to trust me. I know you blame me for leaving you all those years ago. I know you feel betrayed. I do understand. But if you can't let it go, then..." she shrugged her shoulders and turned to face him. "Then there's nothing I can do."

"What do you mean—nothing?" He felt a sudden coldness deep inside. "You wouldn't— you wouldn't leave me?"

"Oh for heaven's sake—." She shook her head angrily before glaring back at him. There must have been something in his face—some vulnerability—because her face softened and she reached out a hand to him. "No. I don't mean that. But I want us to move forward in our relationship. Don't you? At the moment, we're a bit unequal, aren't we? I'm made to feel guilty for the mistakes I made, and incredibly grateful that you stood by me so loyally all these years."

She took his hand and pulled him towards her slightly, squinting a little in the glare of the afternoon sun. "And yes, I know that I owe you a debt for that. But— but, I can't go on feeling absurdly grateful and unworthy of your love. I want us to be partners. At the moment, this is all going by your rules. I mean, all this," she gestured at the garden with her free hand, "it's wonderful, but it's your dream, isn't it? Not mine. I'm not asking you to move from your home, leave your work behind, turn your life around for me, am I?"

"What are you saying? Do you want me to move back to Britain? Come out of hiding for you? Is that what equal partnership means?" He shook his head, frustrated. "I can't do that—not even for you. You can't ask it of me."

She sighed. "I'm not asking you to do anything, Severus. That's the whole point, don't you see?"

"See what? I've offered you my life, my home. Isn't it good enough for you?" He could feel the anger building in him, irrational or not. "I have a good life now; I've built it out of nothing—nothing, Hermione! I scratched a garden out of the dust, a world-class laboratory out of a scrubby hillside. And now you want me to give it all up? Because I'm telling you now that I'm not leaving."

She took a deep breath, obviously fighting to stay calm. "Could we please not fight about this? You're trying to turn this into some kind of conflict—why?"

He subsided, feeling the cold sweat trickling down his back. "I don't know why. I just—can you explain it to me?"

She sighed, looking out at the scenery. "OK, I'll try. I'm starting a new career right now, and for all my moans about the work, it's great. It feels challenging—fresh—and you know how much I love getting my teeth into something new—even when it's a challenge and things don't go my way. But I can't go on just visiting you in-between shifts, can I?"

"What's the alternative?" he asked, bitterly. "Move in here now? You'd never do that—not while you're still married to him. And I wouldn't want you too—not until you can come here without
anyone holding you back. I'm sick of sharing you with everyone else."

She frowned at him for a moment, then her face cleared. "Is *that* what it is? Do you think that I want you to move to Britain to be my – my *what*? 'Bit on the side' – or some other kind of euphemism for a 'companion'? To just hang around while I lead my busy life, and wait for me to be 'free' to give you some attention - and have to endure all the gossip and all the stares? Oh, Severus…"

"Well, what else is there?" he muttered, not meeting her eyes. Not wanting to see the pity that must be there. "I can't see any end to this. I can't bring myself to go back. And *you* won't come here…"

She was silent for a moment. When he looked back at her, a little cautiously, her expression was surprisingly tender.

"Look, at some point, Ron and I *will* get our divorce. No – *listen to me,*" she waved away his automatic denial. "Even now, Harry is putting pressure on the Ministry. He doesn't want either of us to be unhappy – why would he? We're his two best friends, and he wants the best for us. You shouldn't underestimate the amount of power he holds behind the scenes."

She shook her head in the face of his disbelief. "It's not just for show, you know – all that old stuff about the great and powerful 'boy who lived' and saved us from Voldemort – going around opening schools and businesses and giving speeches. It's *more* than that. He heads up the Aurors and has some influence in almost every department these days. He doesn't flaunt his power, but it's *there.* I wouldn't be at all surprised if he doesn't become Minister one day."

"Anyway, when the divorce *has* gone through, I'd like to think that we might – well…" She smiled at him, a little shyly. "What I'm trying to say, and not very eloquently, is that I'd like to think that you and I will be together a little more permanently."

"Well, *yes.* That's what I want too." Of course, was the subtext, and she gave him an understanding smile.

"I know. So, I have to face the fact that I will be living here." She looked around and sighed. "Don't get me wrong – I *love* it here. I really do. It's beautiful and peaceful and you have your mark on everything, and that's just…*wonderful.* But you're not always going to be here with me, are you?"

"There'll be days when I'll hardly see you because of some new development in the lab, or you'll be off with Draco looking for ingredients, and the children will be away at school, and I'll be here by myself, with nothing much to do. Become a housewife? That might be OK for Ginny or Molly, but it's *not* good enough for me."

She squeezed his hand tightly. "I *need* a career, Severus. I *have* to be doing something, or I'll go mad. But what? Whatever I do will be fraught with difficulty. I couldn't work in Britain. It would be too risky for you – I wouldn't be able to tell anyone where I was living. I *did* think in terms of pure research, writing papers and so on, but again that raises my profile, and people will start asking why I've buried myself here in rural Spain. And we can't risk that level of curiosity."

"So…," she turned slightly away from him, "so I'll have to start again. Build my life up again, somewhere new, where I don't speak the language, where hardly anyone knows me, and where my friends won't be able to visit me. And I'll have no career – nothing to aim for."

He grimaced. "Put like that, it doesn't sound very attractive."

Rather to his surprise, she laughed lightly. "Not, it doesn't – does it?" she teased, pulling him
nearer by his hands and standing on tiptoe to give him a reassuring kiss. "But, well… you're here… so here is where I need to be. For some strange reason, and I can't imagine why, I have the strongest desire to live wherever you happen to be."

He let go of her hands to put his arms around her, but she resisted, putting her hands on his shoulders and looking up at him seriously. "But if I am going to do this – if I'm going to give up the life I know for you - I need to know that we can put the past behind us and move on without any resentment or trust issues. Because, we won't always be blissfully happy, will we? I'll get bored and resentful, you'll get irritated by my little habits… We'll fight, Severus. Every couple does. And when we do, I need to know that you're not going to hold anything against me. Can you promise me that?"

He stared at her for a moment… then grabbed her almost roughly and pulled her into a deep open-mouthed kiss. The sort of kiss that could leave her breathless and shaky in the knees – and usually had the added advantage of distracting her.

But even as he devoured her mouth, swallowing her gasp and tasting the sting of the ginger tea on her tongue, he wondered…

Could he trust her again, without reservation?

And what would Hermione do, stuck out here in the middle of nowhere?

As predicted, Draco returned the following day. He turned up in the morning, with the contented expression of a man who'd had an unusually large breakfast. He'd taken the car, as he wasn't currently able to apparate with any great accuracy. He must have left Orgiva quite early to have made it back by 8AM.

"You look relaxed," he commented, when he saw Severus sitting on the terrace, drinking his morning coffee. "Hermione been visiting, has she?" he added, slyly.

"I don't know what you mean," Severus replied, trying to look unruffled.

Draco smirked and began to pull a box out of the boot. "New samples from Cesar," he said in response to the unasked question. "And a cake from Beatriz. She's still trying to fatten you up."

Severus snorted. "More like you, Mr. Malfoy. You're her new favourite adopted son, you do realise that? I'm surprised to see you back so early, actually – I meant to say that there was no hurry.” He drained the last of his coffee and stretched his legs out, idly.

Draco heaved the box onto the terrace and sank into a chair, mopping his brow and looking up at the bright blue sky. "It's going to be a hot day."

"Early summer," Severus agreed. "It's the start of the real heat. I forget that you weren't really exposed to it last year – not until later in the season. You need to take things easy, with your pale skin. Anyway, how did yesterday go?"

Draco frowned. "Ok, I suppose, but… well, that's the reason I came back so early today, actually. There's a new virus going around in the community over there. I suppose it's a kind of… flu?"

Severus put down his cup and narrowed his eyes at him. "You sound unsure."
Draco shrugged. "Well, Beatriz didn't seem too certain. Said she'd not seen it as bad as this before. A fever that her potions won't touch. Sweats. Vomiting and diarrhoea. Delirium." He counted the symptoms off on his fingers. "Convulsions in the worst cases. And a pale rash."

Severus frowned. "Sounds more like measles to me."

The younger man shook his head emphatically. "Beatriz says definitely not – she's done diagnostic spells and it's nothing that's ever appeared before. Some new strain. It's appearing in children and old people and adults with other illnesses. Seems to be attacking the weaker sections of the population."

"Which doesn't sound much like flu - *that* normally picks on healthy adults," Severus commented, thinking quickly. "Does she want me to go over – take a look?"

"I think she might." Draco stood up, rolling his shoulders to stretch them. "Didn't say it in so many words, but I think it was on the tip of her tongue. She's worried, Severus. I can tell."

He didn't bother to challenge Draco's assessment – he'd learnt by now that his assistant was a good judge of body language. And if the unflappable Beatriz was worried, there must be a good reason.

"Well, I'll pop over there this morning. You can catalogue those samples while I'm away."

"Another thing," Draco added, picking up the box to carry it into the house. "Six people have died in the last week. Mostly older people, who were ill anyway, but also a healthy five-year-old boy. He hadn't been ill before – just went down really suddenly, within a matter of days. And Beatriz noticed that this virus is only affecting *us* – the magical population. Even where the kids are mixing with Muggle kids, it's only the wizarding families that are affected. Not a sign of it among the Muggles."

The door closed behind him with a bang.

Severus stared at the view, suddenly quite unable to see it.
July 2012

"OK, step back for a moment please, Healer."

Hermione stood by obediently, holding a freshly rinsed cloth, as Hester Perowne, the Healer-in-Charge of Magical Bugs and Diseases, bent over the patient and frowned at the diagnostic data that briefly appeared in front of her nose before dissolving into thin air.

The patient on the bed in front of them writhed in pain, her face beaded with sweat as she clutched her stomach. Hermione grimaced in sympathy; there was little they could do to help the poor woman. Any pain killer they administered was forcibly ejected within minutes, and even the most powerful anti-emetic potion that St Mungo's possessed failed to prevent the body's strong rejection of all and any medication.

They'd already learnt the hard way that any treatment administered by wand had the effect of increasing the severity of the mysterious virus's symptoms. It was almost as if magic itself helped the virus replicate itself even faster.

It seemed that all they could do was make the sufferer as comfortable as possible. If her constitution was strong enough, she would pull through in a week or so. If not… well. The mortuary, located down in the basement, was busier than it had been since the war.

Hermione had been assigned to her care almost the entire shift and had spent most of that time applying cold compresses, greasing cracked lips, trying to keep some water down her patient - and generally feeing no more useful than a quack from the Middle Ages.

Healer-in-Charge Perowne muttered to herself, obviously frustrated by her inability to manage the virus, which still didn't have an official name. It defied any kind of classification – a type of wizarding influenza was the closest anyone could define it. All that was known so far was that it spread rapidly, that the incubation period was 15-20 days and that the virus seemed to attack the weaker sections of society – the children, the elderly and those with prior diseases and injuries that left them magically depleted. Or maybe it was just that they were more weakened by the pain, fever and dehydration that the healers were powerless to treat. Who knew?

The virus had spread rapidly from the very early cases in North Africa that had almost gone unnoticed to southern parts of Europe, but the authorities in Britain hadn't sat up to take notice until an unofficial notification had been made by Bill Weasley, courtesy of his rather shadowy associate, the potioneer Tobias Prince who was rumoured to live somewhere in Morocco. By then, it was too late – it had probably always been too late, with the amount of international travel going on these days. The wizarding community in Britain had sought to improve its global reputation following Voldemort, so there were a fair number of international exchanges in the interest of research and education, particularly in Europe. By the time the memo had been brought to Kingsley Shacklebolt's desk, there were already a dozen cases admitted to St Mungo's and at least forty other possible cases being managed at home.

One of the Ministry's toughest jobs had been to conceal the epidemic from the Muggle world. Many young wizards and witches were still educated in Muggle schools, despite the rise of specialist schools at the primary levels, so it must have caused some confusion when a number of them disappeared suddenly; their parents wanting to keep them at home away from the risk of infection. Fortunately, Kingsley had a reasonable relationship with his current Muggle counterpart,
who'd only recently been elected and was running a coalition party, suggesting he wasn't all that popular. He seemed a decent enough chap and quite prepared to be cooperative, unlike the last one, who'd had a tendency to try to influence policy. He was also quite obviously relieved when Kingsley reassured him that no Muggle was affected by the virus. The current economic crisis that the Muggles were experiencing meant that their attention was easily diverted onto other matters, but it was still a struggle when people were collapsing in the street, keeping Arthur Weasley and his team busy.

Hogwarts closed its doors, sending its students home early. They missed the practical components of their exams, but had been sent written scrolls to complete at home under exam conditions and return to the staff, who had stayed on at the school. The primary schools had closed, of course. With Ron practically living at the Ministry while the crisis went on and Hermione equally busy at St Mungo's, they'd closed up their house in Rye and moved the children to Harry and Ginny's house. Ginny worked from home, and with the Quidditch league more-or-less suspended, she had no matches to write about, anyway, so it was easy for her to look after all the children together.

Hermione followed the Healer-in-Charge to the corner of the private room.

"You've done some good work today, Healer – Mrs Weasley, isn't it? Well done. If Mrs Perring doesn't fare so well overnight…well, it won't be due to any lack of effort on your part."

"Thank you," Hermione murmured. She privately considered that a Muggle intravenous method of administering antipyretic and antiemetic potions might be worth a try, but was wary of making the suggestion. She'd been on the receiving end of too much criticism for constantly referring to her Muggle origins.

She couldn't understand this almost violent rejection of Muggle medicine – as if there was no merit at all to be found in any of it. The fact that she, a Muggle-born witch, had received Muggle immunisations and medicine right up to the age of 11 without knowing anything of wizarding medicine, and yet hadn't suffered any ill effects seemed to be of no interest whatsoever.

Hester gave her a quick nod and left the room. As the senior healers went, she wasn't so bad. She was a massive improvement on Hermione's previous mentor, Pandora Byle, the unpleasant Healer-in-Charge of Spell Damage, who appeared to have taken a very personal dislike to Hermione. She had been more than glad to be transferred to Magical Bugs and Diseases, even though she knew it was only because that department had suddenly become very busy and needed the extra support.

Hester was a diligent and caring healer who would probably be prepared to listen with some patience to Hermione's suggestions, even if she would be likely to revert to mediwizard orthodoxy in the end. Just like all of them. Susan Bones was a sympathetic figure - she was one of the youngest ever Healers-in-Charge, heading up the Department of Artefact Accidents, and was a half-blood herself, but she lacked the necessary influence to challenge the status quo. And Augustus Pye had been known to try Muggle remedies in the past, but he'd been well and truly burned over his failed use of Muggle stitches to manage Arthur Weasley's bite from Nagini. Anyway, his interest in 'alternative' therapies had dwindled as he gained greater seniority.

Hermione sighed and returned to her patient, trying once more to reduce the fever. After ten minutes, the door opened again and she looked up.

It was her shift replacement and fellow trainee Healer, Jacinta Whitehead. The girl smiled at Hermione and then looked at Alice Perring, her brow creased with concern.

When she'd first met Jacinta, Hermione had not thought the girl would last more than a couple of weeks. She was a frail young woman who cared a great deal about her patients and took it badly
when their conditions worsened or they died. However, she must have found some personal resources somewhere, because she'd persisted and had become one of the stars of the trainee programme. Hermione found her a useful person to revise with, and Jacinta was one of the few trainees who treated her like any other student.

There wasn't much to say – Hermione's shift had been emotionally exhausting and Jacinta's was clearly shaping up to be the same. She handed over to the other Healer and left the room, with one last glance at Alice Perring.

She walked slowly up the long corridor. Emergency measures had had to be taken to artificially increase the size of the department. Ahead of her, Hermione saw dozens of Healers coming and going from small rooms on both sides of the corridor. There was an air of nervous energy and tension – she saw Hester Perowne talking to group of senior Healers. Susan Bones was among them; she'd obviously been brought in from Artefact Accidents to help. All looked extremely grave as they listened to Hester's quiet comments.

Hermione slipped past them and into the ladies' shower room. As had become routine now, she stripped off her scrubs just inside the first door and pushed them into the flap of a sealed bin. She grabbed a standard towelling robe to cover herself before stepping through the second door. As she did so, she felt the invisible protective spell surrounding her disappear.

These protective spells used a great deal of magic, so were only used to protect healers in immediate proximity to the affected patients. It was impossible to extend them to the population at large. In any case, there was no more guarantee of protection from the shielding charm than from any of the other precautions recently employed by the hospital. Together, they might just prevent the healers from becoming infected by the mystery virus. The next stage was to take a thorough shower with a strong disinfecting soap.

"Hermione!"

She hesitated at the entrance to a shower cubicle and looked around. Susan Bones had just come in, also clad in a robe. Hermione's heart lightened slightly at her familiar face.

"Oh, hi Susan. I didn't like to interrupt you – it was looking rather serious out there."

Susan sighed. "It looks like there's little more I can do, anyway. I was just going to go back to my department; I've got patients waiting. Anyone can sit by a bed and mop a brow – Hester's got plenty of Healers to help with that. I just hope the lab comes up with something soon, so we can all be useful."

"Well, you know what I think, don't you?" Hermione kept her voice low; there were other Healers present in the communal changing room.

Susan grimaced. "Yes. I think that much more of this and they might just be prepared to listen. But you have to understand that we've no more notion of how the virus might react to intravenous paracetamol or codeine. It might make things worse. So there'd have to be tests first."

"And in the meantime, more people are dying," Hermione objected, her voice rising a little. A couple of Healers glanced their way in surprise, and then looked away again when they saw the Healer-in-Charge.

"Sometimes -," Susan gave her a strangely intense look. "Sometimes things are not as straightforward as you want them to be, Hermione. How's your family?" she added, abruptly.
"OK, I think," Hermione replied, flustered by the sudden change of subject. "Ginny would have called right away if something was wrong with the children. And I haven't seen Ron for days – he's more-or-less camped at the Ministry right now, with all these emergency meetings."

"Oh, I see." Susan moved away from her. "Try to keep them all safe from this, Hermione."

"And your fam... er... you – they're all OK too, I hope?" Hermione stammered. In truth, and rather embarrassingly, she had no real notion of whether Susan had much of a family. Most of her relatives had been killed during the Voldemort years, and Healer-in-Charge Bones was not the type to talk about possible relationships.

Susan stopped for a moment, her back to Hermione. "Um – yes, fine, thanks." And she carried on towards one of the private shower cubicles without looking back.

Hermione shrugged and headed towards another.

After a wash with the strong-smelling disinfectant and a scalding hot shower, she dressed in clean robes and hurried back to the student residences, attached to the hospital. As a wife and mother, she hadn't been obliged to live here, but had moved in after the pandemic started. It made things easier when her on-duty hours were increased. She had just worked a twelve hour shift and would need to be back on duty in eight hours.

Even following the necessary artificial extension of the interior to accommodate extra personnel, the single rooms were very small and basic. Hermione's contained just a bed, some hooks over the door to hang clothes up and a small wash basin. There was a toilet and shower room located down the corridor. All bedrooms had fireplaces, though and they had been connected through the floo network to the occupant's normal place of residence.

In Hermione's case, this had been set not to her house in Rye, but to Ginny's and Harry's little cottage in Godric's Hollow.

Hermione pulled off her robe and changed quickly into ordinary clothes before preparing to transport. She prepared herself mentally (floo-ing was her least favourite method of transport) and then stepped into the fireplace. As always, the flashing fireplaces she travelled through made her head spin (she'd given this up altogether during her pregnancies) before she stopped, mercifully, in Ginny's kitchen fireplace.

"Mum!"

Rose, sitting at the end of the table nearest to the fire doing some work in her school exercise book, looked up with a wide smile. She rushed over to give her mum a bear hug so fierce that it nearly knocked Hermione over. At ten, her daughter was leggy and very strong - she took after her father and would easily tower over Hermione one day, although her colouring was all Hermione.

At the other end of the table, Hugo gave her a chocolate-y grin. He was sat next to Ginny, with Lily on the other side, and all three were dipping slices of apple into a jar of Nutella. Of Albus and James there was no sign.

Hermione gave them a mock stern look. "Before tea? Really, Ginny?"

The redhead shrugged, unrepentantly. "Just a quick snack – honest. I'll think about tea in a minute."

Hermione smiled, amused. Motherhood had not improved Ginny's attitude to housework in general and cooking in particular. It was amazing that she continued to stay so slim the way she ate –
snacking on and off during the day and cooking beans on toast every night, if she didn't order in a takeaway. Strangely, the children seemed to thrive…which may have had more to do with the fact that Molly regularly delivered casseroles and soups and pies with extremely clear instructions on how to warm them up.

"Try some, Mum?" Hugo held out a sliver of green apple, half dipped in the chocolate. Hermione took it and closed her eyes as she put it in her mouth. The sour clean taste of the tart apple was perfectly complemented by the sticky sweet Nutella. One of the advantages of Harry's and Ginny's cottage was that the land surrounding it produced the most wonderful fruit and vegetables, even without much tending from either of the Potters, who were not natural gardeners.

"Mmm. Needed that after the day I just had."

Above Lily's head, prominently hung on the wall was the official Ministry notice, giving a description of the virus's symptoms and advice on what to do and who to contact. Hermione turned her head away and distracted herself by pinching another of the apple slices, digging deep into the jar to find the last dregs of the chocolate spread.

"Where are the boys?"

"Out in the garden." Ginny saw the look on Hermione's face and carried on, defiantly. "Well, you try keeping five lively kids inside the whole time. They've got strict instructions to stay in the garden, and they're not to play with anyone else."

Hermione sighed. "I'm sure it must be hard, especially with James."

She sat down, wearily. Rose, seeing this, bustled around the kitchen area, making a pot of tea.

"Thanks, darling." Hermione sipped the tea. "What have you been up to all day, then?"

Rose showed her the exercise book. "Writing exercises, mostly. I think Mrs Angell is trying to keep us busy; sort of doing our exams even when we're not doing them, if you know what I mean. I s'pose we're not going to go back before the end of term, are we?"

Hermione met Ginny's eye. "No, love, probably not now. There's only a few days of term left, anyway. Why do you ask?"

Rose sighed. "Oh, nothing…only there was supposed to be a party to say goodbye to those going to Hogwarts this year. You know, like Alice and Freddie and Gaia. Aunty Ginny, was James supposed to have a goodbye party too?"

"Oh – well, James doesn't go to school," Ginny replied, cautiously. "I've always taught him at home."

"Like you're doing with us now? 'Cept you're not, of course, cos Mrs Angell sends her patronus out telling us what to do each day, doesn't she? And I can get on with it myself, but Hugo needs a bit of help, doesn't he cos he's not very good at working by himself."

"Hugo is doing fine," Ginny said, firmly. "He's been helping Lily with her numbers. She's enjoyed having someone her own age around, haven't you, Lil?"

"Aunty Ginny, will you miss James when he goes to Hogwarts? I can't wait to go. I can't believe I've got to wait whole year extra, even though I'm nearly eleven!"

_Hogwarts_. Hermione knew that Harry and Ginny had been looking forward to proudly waving off
their first-born son for years. It seemed inconceivable that there might not be an express departing from Kings Cross this year, but the parents had been sent letters informing them that they should await further instructions before travelling to Diagon Alley to purchase their children's uniforms and equipment.

"I will certainly miss him, although it'll be much quieter around here." Ginny carefully changed the topic by getting up and wandering towards the oven. "There's a stew keeping warm – mum floo-ed it over and we were just waiting for you to arrive."

"Wonderful," Hermione exclaimed, gratefully. "Shall I call the boys in? I take it Harry and Ron won't be here?"

Ginny grimaced. "Not likely, although I've not heard recently. Think they're waiting to hear about the vaccine development at that lab in Germany."

They said no more; Hermione shouted for Albus and James and got the children to wash their hands, while Ginny served up the beef stew and dumplings, with steamed pudding to follow, also courtesy of the tireless Molly.

After dinner, it was baths, story time and beds for Lily and Hugo, while Rose and the older boys decamped to James' room, with Ginny's warnings about bed times and not getting up to anything dangerous echoing up the stairs after them.

The two women sank down onto the sofa with coffees and heaved identical sighs of relief.

Ginny glanced at Hermione. "Will you be going out again?"

She spoke casually, but Hermione knew exactly what she meant. "Well, I ought to pop in, I suppose. Check he's still alive, if nothing else. I haven't been for a week, and you know that no one else goes."

Ginny snorted. "He won't let anyone else go in. Why you, I wonder?"

"Well, I suppose he wants to hear about Draco." Hermione gulped her still-scalding coffee and winced at the burn. "He's still his father."

"I'm surprised he even remembers his son's name."

"Oh, he remembers alright. He might wish he didn't." Hermione sighed. "Ironic, isn't it? All these people dying and the one person who wishes he was dead just keeps on going, like some kind of curse. One thing's for sure – if there is a god up there, he's got a bloody funny sense of humour."

Ginny gazed out of the window, over her pretty garden to the meadows beyond. "This vaccine they keep talking about… Do you think there's anything in it?" she asked, quietly.

Hermione paused for a moment. "There might be. It's a bit soon, though. I have a horrible feeling that they're clutching at straws. I'd rather see them focus on how to treat it, how to reduce the mortality rate. Usually, it would take a few months to develop an effective vaccine to something completely new, like this is. It's not something you can speed up with magic."

Ginny nibbled her fingernail; an old nervous habit. "I see. So, no real hope yet, then?"

"I didn't say that. I'm not a scientist – only a trainee healer. There may be something in it."

"Does he know?"
Hermione didn't need to ask who 'he' was – it was clear from the slight hostility in Ginny's tone – she had never really forgiven her old headmaster and now had new reasons for detesting him.

"You mean, does he know about the vaccine? I imagine so – he keeps in touch with all the laboratories through a friend of his. He's got his own people to work with. The rate of infection is worse in warmer countries – at the moment, anyway." She grimaced. "There's no shortage of bodies to get samples from in Andalusia, I'm afraid."

"So he is working on something, then?"

"Of course he is – they both are," Hermione snapped. "What did you think, that they were just carrying on as normal, turning out scar lotions, in some kind of protective bubble? Severus and Draco are working day and night to come up with something."

She pulled at her ponytail and stood up, restlessly. "I need to go before it gets too dark – I won't be long. I'll floo back to the hospital for a quick rest and then I'm back on duty at 2AM. Off again at 2PM, so I'll come over. Give my love to the guys if you hear from them."

Ginny stood and followed her to the bottom of the stairs. "He could come up with something, couldn't he?"

"If anyone can, it would be Severus," Hermione muttered, as she walked up the stairs to say goodnight to Rose.

"Hermione?"

She paused, turning to look down at her sister-in-law.

Ginny gave a small smile. "I've put a basket by the door with some bits of food for Lucius – tins and so on, and some apples from the garden. Could you - ?"

It was an attempt at an apology, even if the concession was aimed at Lucius and not Severus. At least, Hermione chose to see it that way.

She looked down at Ginny. The youngest Weasley had changed very little over the years. She was still leggy and coltish and whip-thin – it was hard to believe that she'd had three children. In many ways, Ginny hadn't really grown up. She had a devoted mother to help out with the children and her house. Life had been kind to her since the War; she was popular and married to a hero and her job basically involved watching and writing about the sport she loved.

And yet, there was a hardness about her and an inability to forgive and forget. It was why she hadn't got involved when Draco's life took a turn for the worst and why she now refused to help Lucius, a relatively close neighbour. Hermione knew better than to ask her to try harder with the older Malfoy.

"I'll see he gets it," she promised, referring to the basket of provisions.

When Ginny didn't move, Hermione relented, walking back down the stairs to pull her into a brief affectionate hug. "Everything will be OK. I'm sure it will. They'll find that cure."

"I hope you're right." Ginny's voice was very small. "Only, Terry Boot's son Callum died yesterday. And Angelina told me that he plays – played - with Fred sometimes."
Hermione apparated into the grounds of Malfoy Manor. They were unrecognisable as the perfectly landscaped gardens that had been here during the war, with the elegant driveway and the shrubs carved into peacocks – a good symbol for the vain and imperious Lucius Malfoy that Hermione remembered from those dark days.

As she approached the crumbling, ivy-covered mansion, she called out.

"Lucius? It's just me, Hermione – no one else."

The wards shimmered as she walked through them. He claimed that they'd been set to keep anyone but her out, but she had begun to suspect that they weren't as strong as Lucius thought. Passing through used to be as difficult as wading through thick sticky treacle; nowadays it was more like walking in a swimming pool. The more likely truth was that no one else had ever bothered to try.

She muttered a spell to open the door, listening as the rusty bolts inside slid back, one by one and the door creaked open. The passageway beyond was dark in the summer evening twilight, but she knew his habits well enough by now and walked through into the study.

She never quite knew what she would find next time she visited. While part of her felt it might be a relief to find that the man had finally passed away, she didn't really fancy encountering his rotting corpse. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the skeletal creature sitting in his armchair, still very much alive.

"Lucius? It's Hermione."

Lucius Malfoy didn't turn in his chair, but as she stepped around it, his crusted eyes peered up at her from under his long dirty yellow hair.

"Oh, you've come back then, have you? I've got nothing for you. It's all gone. They took it all."

"No, Lucius, it's me." She moved around to stand in front of him, so he could see her clearly in the fading light. "It's Hermione. I've brought some food for you. When did you last eat?"

She took in the bony wrists sticking out from the sleeves of his dirty frock coat. Lucius clung to his old style of dress, which was rather like that of a Victorian gentleman, complete with cravat. However, his clothes didn't appear to have been washed for a long time judging by the smell. His face was sunken and frighteningly skeletal, and he seemed to have lost most of his teeth. His skin was covered in unhealthy sores that might or might not be as a result of scabies - Hermione had never got close enough to find out.

She eyed him, wondering how it was that he was still breathing. Lucius Malfoy had never been a handsome man from her point of view – in truth, he had always given her the creeps - but he had clearly taken pride in his appearance and had at least been striking. Now, it was hard to believe that he was only in his fifties, just a few years older than Severus and still relatively young for a wizard. The contrast between the two couldn't be more striking.

Perhaps worse still was the decline in his mind. Severus had described him as clever; had even implied that the older man's skills in Potions had almost matched his own. Hermione had certainly formed an impression of intelligence when she had first met him, even if that intelligence was being used in the wrong way. Nowadays she had the impression that he was still fairly sound of mind - indeed at times he could sound quite lucid - but that the intellect was being nibbled at the edges by a madness that took hold of him every now and then and left him rambling and frighteningly paranoid.
His spell in Azkaban hadn't helped of course; even with the removal of the Dementors, it was easy for a wizard or witch to go mad in that place of horror. When Hermione had first been called in by the family to take care of Draco, Lucius had been largely absent, leaving Narcissa to make contact with Hermione. Now she began to wonder whether it wasn't in fact the case that Lucius had been going slowly insane during the Voldemort years, and perhaps Narcissa had been the only person capable of keeping him together. Small wonder Draco had had such an unhappy childhood and wanted nothing to do with him now.

"I'll go and make you some tea," she murmured, turning away and walking up the hallway to the large kitchen, now covered in cobwebs. She looked around, screwing up her nose and cast a quick 'scourgify' before turning to the old-fashioned hearth.

The Malfoy's maids must have had a hell of a time of it, because there was no electric equipment in this kitchen, just a large fireplace with a cauldron hung over it and an Aga which must have been fired by wood.

She got the fire going and boiled some water in the cauldron; while it was boiling, she emptied the contents of the basket on the table. Ginny had included a bowl of leftover stew with a warming charm on it among the tins and fruit. The fresh apples from her garden were a nice thought, but Hermione suspected they would be left to rot – it didn't look as if Lucius bothered to stir himself between Hermione's visits to get something to eat.

The tin of tea that she'd bought last time was sat by the fireplace and clearly hadn't been disturbed in her absence. She prepared a teapot and put it on a tray together with two cups and the bowl of beef stew. There was no milk or sugar.

"Here you are." She placed the tea on a small table by Lucius's chair and placed the bowl in his hands, with a spoon. "Can you try to eat a little?"

He muttered a bit and glared, but began to spoon the food into his mouth. He chewed slowly and experimentally with the few teeth he had left, as if he couldn't quite remember how the process was supposed to go. She took the opportunity to cast a silent cleansing charm, which at least took away the unwashed stink even if it didn't do much for his tatty coat, shirt and trousers. If he noticed the non-verbal magic, he didn't say anything.

"OK, how is he, then?"

Hermione perched on a stool nearby and stirred the tea in the pot before pouring it into the cups. "Be polite, Lucius."

He sneered. "What would someone like you know about manners? You think I don't know why you're here, girl? Hoping you'd find me dead, so you could steal what I've got left, eh?"

"Why do you keep letting me in, then?" Hermione asked, unperturbed.

He pushed the empty bowl to one side. "Don't care about you. Only interested in my boy. It was you that got him into those filthy Muggle habits. Knew it would happen if they let Mudbloods into the community to pollute us…"

Hermione didn't bother to rise to the illogical arguments of a bitter man, old before his years and muttering his obscenities into an empty room.

"Yes, I know you only let me in because you want to hear about him. He's very well at the moment. He's still off the drugs and is working hard."
"But you still won't tell me where he is." The spindly hands clenched into impotent fists.

"I can't do that. He doesn't want me to. I'm sorry."

"Spare me your platitudes," he spat. "We both know that you're just waiting for me to die. Well, I'm sorry I couldn't oblige you on this occasion, Madam."

She pasted a smile onto her face. "Come on, Lucius, I don't want you to die – I wouldn't keep coming here if I did."

It was a weak lie and he smirked at her, shaking his head. "You must think I'm stupid, mmm? Don't know why you bother with me. Should just leave me to die alone. Why'd you bother with my boy? Bad enough we lost – do you think we wanted to become your project? You think my boy would've had anything to do with you if we won? He'd have stamped your face in the dirt and scraped the stench of mudblood off his shoes after…"

She glanced at her watch, as he rambled on. Already 8.30PM.

"Look, I'm sorry Lucius, but I've got to go," she said, breaking into his speech. "There's some food on the kitchen table – fruit and tins and so on. Try to feed yourself. I'll come back when I can."

"There's no message from him then?"

She hesitated, hearing the plaintive note in his voice. "No, but I haven't seen him lately. He's been very busy – there's a pandemic of wizarding 'flu, a new strain - ."

He waved this away as so much irrelevance. "Tell him he'd better get in touch with his old man soon if he wants to be remembered in the will. I have money, you know, hidden away where you won't find it. They come here, looking for it, but they never take it…"

"Goodbye, Lucius."

She took a deep breath of fresh air as she always when leaving the close confines of Malfoy Manor, then walked back along the overgrown driveway, shaking her head sadly. He couldn't go on much longer, surely…

She'd tried many times to interest Draco in his father's condition, but the younger Malfoy refused to discuss it. She did her best to keep Lucius going with news of his son, but the truth was that there was probably only one person who could save him now. Or perhaps two… Lucius might just listen to Severus, if only his old school friend and associate might be prepared to help. But Severus was adamant that he would never return to Britain, so it was hopeless to speculate.

Ginny was still up when she arrived back, but the children were all asleep, so she floo-ed straight back to her hospital room. She stripped bare and got under the sheets, not bothering with pyjamas. She had about four and a half hours before she needed to get up again, put on her robes and get back onto the ward. And, naturally, she couldn't sleep.

She lay, staring up at the plain white ceiling, her hands behind her head. There'd been no owl from Severus for nearly two weeks now, but she knew he was still unaffected by the virus which had almost decimated the Orgiva community. They had got into a habit of sending a signal to each other via the charmed galleons once a day – just a short signal to reassure that all was well. But he'd clearly not had time to put pen to scroll, and neither had she.

She muttered her now-familiar prayer, as she turned over to attempt to get some sleep. "Please, Severus. If anyone can save us, you can."
Severus didn't feel he could share her belief, not at the moment, anyway. That Hermione would be relying on him was a given. She knew, as he did, that there were very few wizards left with the requisite skill in healing potions to find a cure. And even he was struggling to find anything useful.

The trouble was that the virus kept mutating. Severus had developed some treatments that seemed to work initially – or at least they seemed to briefly reduce the severity of the illness for some of Beatriz's patients. But then, the virus would take hold again. When Severus examined blood samples taken from those patients and compared them with earlier samples, he could see that the virus had adapted to his intervention and overcome it.

He needed to find a way to stop the virus from replicating. Essentially, if he could stop it in its tracks, he might be able to prevent it from learning from his potions and adapting to them.

Not for the first time, he cursed his insufficient knowledge of Muggle science – obviously he'd been taken out of Muggle school when he went to Hogwarts and what basic microbiology he knew he'd taught himself from Muggle books. He knew the basics about viruses and antiviral medications, but really he needed to be working alongside a Muggle scientist to combine the best of both traditions. Beatriz had some connections with Muggle medical professionals, but all witches and wizards were strictly forbidden to involve any Muggle in this crisis.

He had realised very early on that magic seemed to make the illness worse. Unlike Hermione, he had a healer who was sympathetic to Muggle methods, and Beatriz's use of intravenous antipyretics had helped with the fever. As a result, the survival rate in Orgiva was a little better than that of other wizarding communities in Spain. Between them, Severus and Beatriz had come up with extremely strict infection control processes, which had also helped a bit, but the overall picture in Spain and in neighbouring southern European countries was not good. In North Africa, the impact on the few wizarding communities based there had been nothing short of catastrophic.

Severus was able to keep in touch with laboratories and individual researchers across Europe and, to a lesser extent, in North and South America through Cesar and his associates. He knew about the German vaccination and was privately doubtful as to its likely effectiveness, but without seeing the work in detail, he didn't feel able to comment. He knew that his work was held in some esteem by his fellow experts and that more than a few of them had contacted Bill Weasley requesting his help and advice. All that Bill could tell them was that Master Tobias Prince was aware of the situation, was working on a solution and would publish any useful findings when he could.

Severus leaned over his desk, flicking through a large dusty tome. He'd sent Hermione to Minerva McGonagall to request that entire sections of the Hogwarts library be sent to him for research purposes. He hadn't had any great expectations, and consequently had been somewhat surprised when Minerva apparently agreed quite readily to surrender her valuable collection to the unknown Tobias Prince. He couldn't help wondering whether the wily old professor had guessed at the truth. She must have always wondered what had really happened to her nemesis from that last year, with no body to bury. Anyway, whatever Hermione had had to say or do to achieve the favour, large crates of books arrived.

He glanced up from his current volume, his train of thought disturbed by a sound. He blinked wearily in the early morning light and murmured a spell to turn out the lamps.

The sitting room was changed beyond all recognition. He'd artificially expanded the inside to accommodate a thousand large volumes, now piled in teetering heaps around the walls, while his sofa and armchair were pushed out of the way. He'd magicked up a large table to work from in the
middle of the room. A dozen or so books on the history of magical populations lay open on it, and he was moving systematically from book to book, looking for possible links between this outbreak and former epidemics that had affected wizarding communities over the years. He really needed Hermione for this kind of work - no one was quicker at spotting the salient facts - but she had her own duties and problems to face.

He'd fitted his laboratory with strong protective spells. He'd never been one to sit down in there with a cup of coffee while conducting an experiment at the best of times – he had always preferred to keep his laboratory hygienically clean and as clear of any potentially contaminating agents as possible. Now he used the area strictly for practical experiments and nothing else. There was a shower cubicle at the bottom of the steps and he and Draco wore protective robes and masks while testing their samples. All theoretical research took place upstairs.

That crack he'd heard had been Draco portkeying back into the kitchen. The young man wandered into the sitting room, looking exhausted. His eyes were pink-rimmed and his face paler than ever.

Travel between Britain and other European countries had been severely curtailed in a rather pointless attempt to reduce the spread of the disease. Draco still couldn't apparate with any great accuracy, but in any case, apparation into the UK from abroad without special Ministry permission was forbidden. Severus had had to privately petition Harry to get permission for Draco to travel to the Ministry. Eventually, a portkey was delivered with strict instructions for Draco to travel at a certain time to allow him to visit the Ministry archives. Despite all the disruption ten years ago, the records at the British Ministry of Magic were still second-to-none and had an international reputation for their thorough coverage of the global wizarding population, including births and deaths. Draco's cover story was that he was doing some work with healers in Spain and they wanted some information on the original and early spread of the disease - that part, at least, was true.

Severus stood up and stretched his aching spine, looking at Draco. "Anything useful?"

Draco pulled out his scribbled notes. "It looks as if the disease originated in Egypt – somewhere around Aswan. I couldn't trace anything before that. The first known fatalities were among a community of traders from Port Sudan. It spread across the country and then up the Mediterranean coast before jumping across at Gibraltar. And, of course, through the Middle East into Turkey and Greece, although that route was slower for reasons unknown."

"So far, just as we suspected," muttered Severus, looking back down at his book in disappointment. "But it doesn't get us anywhere, does it?"

"This might," continued Draco, frowning down at his notes. "The virus is stronger in hotter countries – well, we knew that – but also seems to do quite well in temperate climates. However, it doesn't like cold weather at all. It has taken hold in most of Africa and South America, Australia and so on. But there are hardly any cases at all in the lower half of New Zealand's South Island, where they've been having an unusually hard winter this year. Likewise in Patagonia and parts of the Cape in South Africa. And there are fewer cases in sub-Artic parts of Canada, Scandinavia and Russia even though it's summer there – and where there are cases, the mortality rate is lower. At the Ministry, it's presumed that that is because communities tend to stay at home more in colder weather, so there's less opportunity for infection."

Severus sneered. "Typical Ministry reaction – looking for any glimpse of a silver lining. Even if it's blatantly obvious that it has nothing to do with community behaviour. This is not some common cold or stomach bug that you can avoid by keeping away from the obvious sufferers."

Draco shrugged. "Well, that's the general view. I can't say that Ron sounded all that convinced by..."
"He's developed some brains after all. Well, it's something to look at." Severus was thinking quickly. "Ask Beatriz about rates among those communities living higher up in the mountains. I know it's not cold there, but it's a little cooler and maybe there's a slight decrease in severity if not in rate. We need to think of ways in which the virus might be exposed to the conditions found in colder regions – if indeed it is something in the environment."

"It could just as easily be genetic," Draco pointed out. "Certain populations that tend to live in colder regions…?"

"There's little genetic connection between the indigenous populations of Canada and the European-originating inhabitants of New Zealand. No, this is more likely to be environmental. That, or perhaps some kind of antibody that tends to be present in people living in colder areas… but that's slightly less likely, because I wouldn't expect to see such a response in southern New Zealand, where the winter is usually more temperate than it has been this year. If it is environmental, that might just explain the slightly slower spread through Turkey to Greece and beyond - there's some high mountains for it to cross in Turkey as opposed to the flat coast around the Med."

"So, a cold temperature then? Could it really be that simple?"

"Hardly simple, Draco. And it's more likely that the virus finds it harder to replicate - not necessarily that the cold weather actively kills it off. It's just slowing it down, that's all." He sighed. "If we can't find anything to stop it, then once spring arrives in the southern hemisphere, I would expect cases to increase in that region. On the other hand, this might give us some clue of how to reduce the effect on the body just enough to improve chances of survival. It's not actually a very long-lasting virus; the only reason it's so successful is that it replicates relatively quickly and is able to jump between hosts quite effectively. If we could stop or severely impede the replication, I'm fairly certain it can be controlled and eventually eradicated."

He stretched again, groaning slightly. "Well anyway, it's something to work on. Well done. We need samples from survivors in New Zealand, Patagonia and the sub-Artic regions - and I need a map showing me exactly where they live and the environmental conditions - altitude, plant life and so on. I assume the Coromandel Institute in Whitianga has been keeping an eye on the New Zealand scenario, and I have corresponded with Healer McGill over there in the past. I'll owl him today. We may be able to scrape up some connections in the other areas – we'll see if Cesar or Bill and Harry can help. And I'd like you to pop over to Orgiva this afternoon and check on those communities I mentioned; see if you can get samples from anyone who has had it more mildly – Beatriz should be able to identify some individuals. But, before any of that… let's get some food, and then you need to take a quick nap. I'm assuming you've been up all night? You need your rest - you're no good to me if you're going to fall asleep over the test tubes."

"You've been up all night too," Draco commented, looking speculatively at his face. Severus could only imagine what he looked like these days - he hardly spent enough time in the bathroom to check his reflection.

He shrugged, wryly. "I'm more used to working without any sleep than you are, my boy. If I could control a combined class of fifth year Gryffindors and Slytherins back in the day, after a night spent trying to appease the Dark Lord while simultaneously spying for Dumbledore, I'm fairly sure I can cope with a sleepless night or two now."

He glanced at Draco. "Did Ron mention Hermione and the children?"

"They're OK – Hermione is working hard, of course, and Rose and Hugo are in Godric's Hollow."
They're unaffected, so far, although Ron sounded worried about George and Angelina's boy Fred – seems that some of his friends have been infected."

"But the Weasley boy is unaffected so far?"

"Apparently."

Severus grimaced. "You probably remember what the twins were like – I sure as hell do. If George Weasley is anything like he used to be, he probably didn't pay *that* much attention to the rules about keeping away from public places. But Hermione's hardly the type to take any risks."

"It might make no difference," Draco pointed out. "If you're right and the Ministry's precautions about keeping away from public places are not that effective."

And to that, Severus had no reply.
"The UK mortality rate's increased fourfold in the last week."

Severus grunted as he frowned down at the results that had just been owled to him from New Zealand's Coromandel Institute, via Bill.

"And cases have increased rapidly over in the States," Draco continued. He was leaning against the kitchen table, reading snippets from the Prophet. It was a pretty thin publication these days, and contained more far more heavily biased Ministry facts and dictates than it did independent journalism. He folded the paper and flung it down. "The US Ministry of Magic has declared a state of emergency. Closed all wizarding schools and universities, and as many public places as possible."

"And much bloody good it'll do them," Severus muttered, as he stabbed a finger viciously at the scroll. "This doesn't make sense!"

"What doesn't?" Draco pushed himself off the table edge to look over his mentor's shoulder at the test results.

"This confirms that there's no increased immunity in New Zealand. And we already know that's the case in Scandinavia, the Baltics, northern Russia and Canada. And other parts of the Southern Hemisphere. No previous disease to which specific populations might have developed immunity."

"You didn't think there was, did you? It was always a long-shot for there to have been some disorder only affecting those populations that we hadn't already heard of."

"True. I had put more hope in finding something in the environment or flora that was common to all the regions, but there's nothing. And no common lifestyle-related factors. Nothing in the diet, the water, the air, the altitude… No clue."

"So… all we know is that some populations resist the virus better than others?"

"No, what we know is that the virus doesn't work so well in some populations – it has nothing to do with the strength of affected individuals. It still attacks the weaker sections – the children, pregnant women, the elderly, the ill… It's just that, in some communities, the virus doesn't last so long and is not as infectious." Severus was thinking fast. "We know that it replicates incredibly quickly and jumps between hosts extremely fast. Presumably because it has to. In those who have survived, the replication rate was somehow slower and the virus was eliminated before it had a chance to spread. But why?"

The headache was back. A vicious stabbing pain right between his eyes that no generic pain potion seemed to touch. He found himself rubbing at the spot rather pointlessly.

Draco moved to the door, grabbing a chunky key from a hook. It was the spare key to Beatriz's healer clinic, and a couple of weeks' ago, Severus had charmed it into a portkey with a limited range. With Draco's apparition skills still so shaky, although they were beginning to improve, this gave him a speedier way of travelling between Orgiva and Valenzuela.

"Thought I'd pop over this morning," he said in reply to Severus's questioning look. "I mean, you don't need me to do anything with those samples until this afternoon, do you?"

"No, but I thought maybe -." He jerked his head in the direction of the small sitting room, and
Draco groaned.

"Come on, Severus, what's the bloody point? We've been looking through those dusty old history books for days – and have you found a single useful reference to this current virus?"

"That doesn't mean there isn't something useful. Statistically, it's quite likely that this virus has hit before – and maybe we don't remember, or it was passed off as something else."

"I just don't think you're going to find the answer there."

"Oh, and I suppose Beatriz has the answer," Severus muttered, uncharitably. He had his own suspicions as to why Draco took off over there as often as he did – it almost certainly had as much to do with the middle Martinez daughter as with her kindly mother. Normally the knowledge of Draco's infatuation would have amused him; now it was just an additional irritation. The boy had no responsibility – give him a real crisis and he'd just crumble. Just like his father...

At the thought of Lucius Malfoy, Severus felt a stab of agony go through his skull like a laser. His vision blurred for a moment and he had to grab the kitchen unit to avoid swaying.

Draco was flushed with annoyance and didn't seem to notice. "She's short-staffed, and you know how badly the community has been affected."

"Yes, yes, I know. I hate to break it to you, but it's just one of many communities as badly affected, all around Spain – across Europe and beyond," he interrupted. "But that's not my point. Any nursemaid can hold someone's hand while administering cures that don't even work. I need you here."

"To do what?" Draco clenched his fists, squeezing the portkey tightly. "Carry on reading without the least idea of what I'm – we're – looking for? We've been doing that for long enough, whenever we're not working on cultures of every plant and animal species known to man or beast – I swear – and still we're no nearer to knowing what this is, or what we can do about it." He shook his head. "Face it, we're getting nowhere. And you know it – you just don't want to admit it."

"We are getting somewhere – or we would be if you stopped dashing off, playing silly buggers," Severus snapped. "Bit by bit, piece by piece – that's how you carry out research. Find out what is irrelevant, eliminate it, and then keep on looking. For as long as it takes. There's an answer in there, somewhere –," he nodded towards the sitting room and the piles of books, "- I know it."

"Yeah? Well, if there is, it's very well hidden. And, in the meantime, I'll take myself off to see if I can't do some good." Draco turned towards the kitchen door.

"Is this what it's going to be like?"

The younger man stopped dead, and the tension was clear in the set of his thin shoulders.

"Is that what your reaction is going to be, every time?" Severus stepped closer, his voice dangerously soft. "Running away as soon as things get a little too complicated or boring for you? Leaving someone else to do all the mindless but necessary research while you go off to be - what? The worthy healer - holding hands, mopping brows – and doing a damn lot of good in the process?"

Draco spun to face him, suddenly very angry. "I happen to think it might actually help. Comforting people isn't worthless, despite what you may think. I'm not looking for some personal glory, but what else can I do?"
"Getting off your arse and being some genuine help to me would be a start!" Severus's voice rose.

"The point is, I'm not doing anything to help you," his assistant shot back. There was nothing of the cool, calm aristocratic Malfoy about him now; there were spots of red in his pale cheeks and his eyes flashed with unaccustomed rage. "You just bloody well sit there and mutter about things not adding up, not being right, but you can't even stop for a moment and explain to me exactly what you mean by that. And so I read, and read, and read until I can't see properly, not really knowing what is significant and what isn't - and there's just nothing of use there, Severus. Nothing. Don't you understand? If there was some hope – something to work towards… but there isn't. And I can't just go on sitting here when there are people out there trying to do something."

"Hermione would understand," Severus muttered. "I wouldn't have to explain everything in words of one syllable to her -.

"I'm not bloody Hermione!"

The words seemed to echo through the suddenly silent cottage as Draco and Severus glared at each other.

"I'm not stupid, Severus. I know you wish I was her. And I know -," Draco took a deep breath before continuing. "I know you sometimes wish I'd never come here. I see it in your eyes when she is here. You don't want me around. I – I can understand that, I really can." He gave a slightly bitter laugh and dipped his head in a self-deprecating manner than only served to irritate the other man further. "I mean, I wouldn't want me around either…" he added, barely above a mutter.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake… It's not that," Severus snapped. "I don't know why you have to be so bloody sensitive all the time. If I didn't want you here, I'd have kicked you out long ago. Believe me. I'm not a fucking martyr. And when it comes to making mistakes, it's not as if I have a leg to stand on."

He took a deep breath and mentally counted to ten. "You need to stop acting as if you're worthless. It's pathetic – and not worthy of your name."

"My name?" Draco gave a dismissive snort.

"Yes, for f'ck's sake – your name. You come from the Malfoy line, and it's a distinguished one. You're the last of that line and if you have even a modicum of respect for your ancestry, you'll pull yourself together and live up to the name of Malfoy. I'm not talking about your father here, Draco."

He sighed, irritably. "Look, I don't have time for this. Right now, I need your support, more than ever. You're no good to me if you just run off and play nursemaid – leave that to those who are qualified to do it."

The younger man ran his hands through his sweaty fair hair until it stuck up in dark spikes. "Hermione's the one you need to go through all these books – she probably knows the content of half of them, for Merlin's sake. She'd be able to make the kind of theoretical connections that I'd never be capable of."

"Yes – you're probably right." Severus turned his head away, feeling suddenly, unutterably weary.

"How long has it been since you last saw her?" Draco's voice sounded softer.

"She can't possibly come here. You know that. Her work – her family –." His voice sounded rusty to his own ears.

Draco hesitated. "Look, neither of us is doing any damn good right now. We both need a break –
from each other as much as anything – or one of us is likely to say something that we'll both regret. I'm going to Beatriz to see what I can do for a couple of hours. I know that seems pointless to you, but it matters to me. I'll be back as soon as I can." He started to turn away, but hesitated. "While I'm away, why don't you take a rest – try to get some sleep? You look all in."

Severus stared at him coldly. "I'll sleep when I need to, thank you."

"I mean it, Severus." Draco stopped by the door, utterly undaunted by his mentor's glare. "When did you last get a few decent hours' sleep? And don't say last night, because I was up a couple of times in the early hours, and I saw you poring over those sodding books both times."

"Alright, alright." Severus stretched his neck, wearily.

Draco gave him a sharp look, seemingly suspicious of his sudden compliance.

"Look, just go." Severus waved him off. "Just make sure you're back by one, so we can go over those samples in the lab. And, Draco, remember the precautions. Wear gloves and a mask all the time, and try to avoid direct contact with any fluids."

His assistant rolled his eyes and gave a mock salute. "Yes, Sir." He spun the portkey anti-clockwise three times and muttered an incantation, instantly disappearing from view.

Severus rubbed his forehead again. His assistant was right, of course. He felt drained, his body aching with exhaustion. Unless he concentrated, he felt as if his limbs were moving through treacle.

But extreme tiredness was better than the voices.

They came to him at night. Taking him back to the years he would far rather forget…

Where are you, you useless waste of space? …. You get out here now, or I'll make you regret it…

You stupid, clumsy boy! Bad enough I have to put up with your pathetic lump of a father…

Did you see Snivellous trying to talk to Lily?… Like she'd want anything to do with a loser like that… Dunno how she puts up with him – he gives me the creeps… Thinks he's so clever, but it's just from books – he's so dull and useless in class…

Can't understand it, why does Dumbledore trust him? … I think he's dangerous to have around – remember James and poor Lily… Devious and untrustworthy…

So where's your pet, Lucius?… Why on earth do you keep a little oik like that around … Isn't he a half-blood?... How can he be any use to you…?

And, worst of all… Murderer… Coward…

Waste of space… Clumsy… Stupid… Dull… Untrustworthy… Useless… Murderer… Coward…

He would lie awake, staring at the ceiling while the words went round and round in his head, like a mantra. He dared not try any sleeping potions lest he fall into a nightmare from which he might not fully emerge.

No, it was far better to drag his unrested body out of bed and carry on with the research. Far better than lying awake, facing his demons.

He gulped down his third black coffee, feeling the buzz of the caffeine energising his blood. It was
a false energy, he knew, and he would pay for it later. He could take a potion to keep him awake, but in his heart he knew that was a pathway to a worse kind of addiction.

He had just logged the data from this latest report in his meticulous notes when he heard the familiar "crack" of the portkey. Draco burst into the sitting room, his face chalk white.

"Meghara's got it!"

Meghara was the youngest of the three Martinez daughters, now nineteen, and the only girl still living at home, along with her younger brothers.

Severus jumped out of his chair, spinning around so quickly that it fell over. "How bad?"

"Well, is it ever good?" Draco gabbled. "She's definitely got it. Beatriz has diagnosed it magically – it's the same disease. I didn't see her. Maia was there. She wouldn't let me in – just shouted through the door at me, telling me to keep away and to let you know."

"Maia? What about Lucio?"

Maia was the middle of the girls - something of a favourite of Severus for her intelligence and quick wit - and Lucio was her two-year-old son by her husband, who had died very suddenly a year ago of an undiagnosed aneurism. Severus knew that Draco had developed something of a friendship with this pretty young widow. He didn't know how far the affection went, or whether it was returned, but he had his suspicions - the frequency of visits that the young man had paid Cesar and Beatriz even before this crisis began had spoken for themselves.

"He's there too." Draco choked out. "Maia wouldn't let me in. I tried, but they'd barred the door… They're all there – Cesar, Beatriz, Pedro and Gabriel too. I don't think Elena and Jose and the girls were there, but all the others have gathered together and locked themselves in. I tried so hard to get in…"

He turned away abruptly, his breath hitching.

Severus considered for a moment. "She did the right thing. You can't do anything to help them, and she knows it."

"She could have let me -.""Let you what? Go in and risk getting infected too? Or were you thinking of just standing outside the door, shouting words of comfort. How will that help them?" Severus took a deep breath. This wasn't helping Draco - right now, the boy was too panicky to think straight.

"At least they'd know we were thinking of them."

"You can only help them now by helping me -.""It's not bloody enough!" Draco yelled suddenly. He picked up one of the priceless Hogwarts leather tomes and flung it hard against a wall. The dry binding cracked and sheets of paper, yellowed by age, cascaded over the floor. "They're your best friends! Don't you even care…?"

He grabbed another book, preparatory to throwing it, but, in a sudden fury, Severus grabbed his wrist and snatched it out of his hand. He pushed Draco hard against the wall, holding him in place with an iron grip on his arms.

"Don't you presume to tell me whether or not I care," he hissed, pushing his face close. "You have
no right to judge me."

The younger man squirmed, fighting to get out of his hold. Severus stepped back, letting go of him abruptly as his anger subsided. "I can't afford to think of them," he muttered. "Not right now – not with so much at stake. I need to clear my mind and try not to care."

"What? You can't mean that! Even you're not that inhuman."

There was a silence as the words echoed in the space between them. Words that couldn't be retracted.

It shouldn't have hurt. That was the stupid thing. The lump that hardened in his chest, expanded like a fist and threatened to rise up in his throat… The memories came flooding back once more – of the years and years of insults. Of walking down the halls of Hogwarts as a student and a professor and a headmaster, and seeing the same expressions on the faces of staff and children alike. Fear. Hatred. Disgust. The assumption that he did not – could not – care. Was incapable of caring. Was, somehow, different in his nature. Less than human.

Draco cleared his throat, uncomfortably. "That I didn't mean."

The words seemed to come from far away. The buzzing that had sounded in his ears for hours suddenly increased its volume and tempo.

"Well, why not, after all?" He heard the words, harsh to his own ears, and realised they had come from his own mouth. They sounded like dry barks of laughter. "It's not as if I have given you any reason to think otherwise."

"Severus -," Draco reached towards him and Severus jerked away violently. The movement made the other man flinch automatically and Severus lowered his hands slowly, noting that they were shaking.

_Breathe through your nose. Slow deep breaths now, Severus._ It was Cesar's voice, speaking quietly in his ear - many years ago, as Severus, recovering from addiction, struggled to overcome one of his black moods. _Close your eyes. And breathe. Count beats of five on each inhale and each exhale…_ He remembered that steady, almost fatherly hand on his shoulder.

He closed his eyes, feeling that hand heavy on him, centering him, and breathed deeply, counting the beats as he had been taught. _In, out, in, out…_

After a few minutes, he was able to open his eyes and speak quietly. "I've known Cesar for years. I didn't trust him at first – I didn't trust anyone. You know why. I only trusted Hermione back then. But she liked him. She made me talk to him – and to Beatriz – she made me befriend them. I didn't want to at first – I thought I only needed my own company. Then things changed, and they became…"

But he couldn't tell him what that ordinary, unassuming, middle-aged Spanish couple had become to him – to the unloved and unwanted Severus Snape. The usual definitions of _family_ didn't come into it.

Perhaps something of his feelings showed in his face, because Draco risked stepping forward again, looking appalled. "I'm sorry Severus – Merlin, I am so sorry. I never should have said that – and it's not true anyway. You do care about people – God knows you've cared for me more than my parents ever did. And the only people who matter will know that."

He put a tentative hand on his mentor's forearm and this time Severus didn't shake it off. He felt his
shoulders slumping with exhaustion. "The reality is that you can have no idea how much they mean to me. They were my friends for a long time before you knew them. We've been through things I can never tell you about… You have to understand - I'm trying to help them the best way I know. The only way I know."

He turned away, feeling Draco's hand fall from his arm. He couldn't fight any more. His feet were heavy as he walked over to his fallen chair and placed it carefully in front of his desk.

Draco pushed himself off the wall and stepped towards the desecrated book. He picked it up gently, almost reverently and began to collect the pages together. Severus watched as he gathered them, page by page – a job he could have done far more easily with magic. There was something almost self-sacrificial about the act.

Having collected all the pages, he murmured a *reparo* over the book and then placed it on the table. He cleared his throat. "So, tell me what you need me to do."

Severus rolled his shoulders, willing away his fatigue. "I want to look at the physiological effects of magic. The virus feeds off it, but more effectively in some wizards than others - and we need to work out why."

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Severus stared down at his scribbled notes, his aching head in his hands. The letters were starting to blur together, to meld into an unreadable blot on the page, but still he stared.

Draco had left the table some time before. It was night-time - well, it was dark, anyway, which would make it very late in a Spanish July. No doubt he'd gone to bed.

The answer was *there* in his notes… he just *knew* it was there. The cobweb of an idea, fluttering in the breeze, tantalisingly out of his reach. He just wasn't *thinking* the right way…

He felt his shoulders hunching up defensively, his body tensing automatically for attack. He hadn't felt like this for years, not since his year as Headmaster, when he might expect peril from almost every quarter. From the students who despised him; from the staff who feared and hated him in equal measure; from the Order who had named him their sworn enemy; from the Death Eaters who jostled for power. Even from Voldemort himself, who pronounced himself proud of his protégé, even as he planned his murder.

He knew why. It was because it was the first time since that dark year that he felt entirely helpless. Not just physically weak or bitter or grieving, but actually helpless. Knowing that there was something he must do - that *only* he could do – and yet fearing that he could not see a way forward. It was not mere egotism; he knew instinctively that there were very few wizards left alive with the necessary potions knowledge and, of them, he was the best placed to come up with the answer.

Under pressure, the demons that he had never entirely defeated had come back to assail him... *Stupid boy… Look at Snivellous … He's too thick to do his shirt up right… Too slow… Clumsy idiot… And later, The Dark Lord is depending on you to get this potion right… Things will not go well for you if this doesn't work… You must get it right, Severus, the Order is depending on you… How can you trust him, Dumbledore? We can't rely on him…*

He shuddered, the sneering loud in his ears. The dark thoughts had returned. No matter how hard he tried to eliminate them once and for all, back they would come at his worst moments. Threatening to tear his mind apart.
Severus shook his head violently, and took deep, slow breath. *Stop this.*

He bent his head to read again.

Out of sheer desperation, he'd turned to Bathilda Bagshott's *A History of Magic*. It was an unutterably dull tome – he'd secretly sympathised with the students he'd seen trooping off to their history of magic lessons – but then, the history in magic in general had never interested him much; he'd only been interested in the specific history of potions-making.

He'd set the book to flick through automatically while he scribbled down anything that seemed even vaguely useful. He was searching for any hint of a similar illness centuries ago. One of the difficulties was that, even by the usual standards of magical historians, Bagshott was particularly biased in her approach. She was obviously far more interested in politics and society than in scientific history, and her descriptions of epidemics were sketchy to say the least – even the Black Death was considered worth only two paragraphs, one of them concerned mostly with the impact of the catastrophe on a truce being negotiated between the British and Romanian ministries at the time.

As his eyes blurred with exhaustion, he stopped the page-turning spell for a moment. Rapid blinking seemed to help a little and he found himself reading a section about the founding of Hogwarts.

"...The perceived purpose of a thorough wizarding education was at least partly political in nature. It was clear, from the witch trials of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, that there was a lack of consistency in the practice of this art. Also it had become apparent to the leading families, by that stage, that there was considerable danger in allowing pure, uncontrolled magic to flourish. It might lead to more serious conflict between the Wizard and Muggle worlds..."

And the sneering in his ears grew louder; turned into a roar. He stood up in a sudden panic and felt himself sway. He put out his hands to save himself, and scattered notes scribbled in his awful, spidery writing across its surface as he did so.

"...that children should receive an education that would, above all things, teach them how to control their magic..."

*Stupid... clumsy... slow... unreliable...* The logical part of his brain knew that they had all – all! – been wrong about him. All those people, known and unknown, who had dismissed him as worthless throughout his entire, miserable life. Even his first primary school teacher, whose nose had wrinkled up at his unwashed, ill-fitting clothes. Even his own *mother*. Unloved almost from the moment of his birth, he had become unlovable.

"...pure magic was far more common in young children, who had been untrained. For this reason it became illegal in 1901 to provide children under the age of eleven with a full strength wand..."

In all that time, there had been just one glimmer of cautious hope. One chance at love. And cruel fate was going to snatch it away from him, yet again. He knew it. If he couldn't do this; if he couldn't find that link...

Why couldn't he just *love*, and *be* loved, without having to fight for it? What kind of creator, if there was one, had decreed that he shouldn't be allowed to be happy just for *once* in his pathetic little life?

In this despairing frame of mind, it was perhaps hardly surprising that he suddenly imagined Hermione standing before him. At least, he was sure it was a vision of Hermione – this apparition
had her hair and her figure and her pale, serious face, which he could see more clearly when he
narrowed his eyes at her.

"I am trying," he told the hallucination very seriously. "I am. There's a solution here –
 somewhere." He gestured helplessly at his scattered papers. "There's a clue, hidden amongst these
facts. I know there is. If I could only find it, I would."

The hallucination's face went in and out of focus before his eyes – it seemed as if he was looking at
this vision of Not-Hermione through water. Her mouth was open and she seemed to be speaking to
him, but above the roaring in his ears, he could make out no words beyond his own.

"I'm sorry. I know I've let you down." He spoke very slowly and clearly, determined to get his
point across. "If I could, I'd do it for you, Hermione. I'm just so, so tired, and nothing seems to
make sense any more. I wish… If I could only see you again…"

A warm hand reached out and gripped his shoulder. It smelt of Hermione, sun-dried grass and the
rosemary in her shampoo and ink-stained fingers, diluted a little these days by the tang of
antibacterial hospital soap.

Not-Hermione was talking again. It sounded like her voice, but the warm, familiar consonants
flowed past his consciousness like a trickling stream. Comforting, but they could not penetrate the
roar.

He swayed; felt the hand tighten to hold him up.

"I just wanted to see you again, one more time. I can't do this without you. I can't. Nothing…
there's nothing there anymore… Without you…"

Both hands were on his shoulders now; the voice was more insistent. He felt his body being pushed
back, away from the desk. Part of him felt certain that he should resist this force, and he would
have tried if the scent hadn't been so comforting and familiar. He allowed himself to be turned and
supported firmly by more hands as he stumbled towards the bedroom. Scribbled notes seemed to
dance before his eyes.

"Magic is more pure and less controlled in the vulnerable … children … pregnant women (earth
magic?) … speed of replication…"

The pillow felt marvellously cold against his cheek and so, so good. He sighed, rubbing his face
into the cotton with gratitude, and then gazed up at the pale blur, not quite certain whether he was
still looking at Not-Hermione.

"No good, though," he felt bound to point out. "Can't sleep."

A strong hand lifted his head, holding it steady as a bottle was held to his mouth. He wanted to
resist, but a few drops of cool liquid trickled down his throat. Her familiar presence reassured him
again, and he swallowed without hesitation. The hand lowered him gently onto the pillow.

"All I … wanted was … love you. Was't so bad? That Sev'rus got something t'make him happy?
Jus' f'once?"

He looked up at Hermione, suddenly seeing her clear. "Sorry. So sorry. Wasn't good enough."

The lashes flickered over achingly familiar brown eyes and he saw a single tear falling as darkness
descended.
He felt cool fingertips sweep slowly over his brow once… and then nothing.

Hermione portkeyed directly into her bedroom at the hospital – and jumped at the sight of Ron standing near the window, gazing out at the scene below.

"My god, Ron! You startled me. What are you doing here?"

He turned around, slowly. "A better question might be: where the hell have you been?"

She eyed him cautiously as she placed the spent portkey – a pen – on her bed. She hadn't seen him for ten days; even then it had been in passing at Harry and Ginny's house, with him departing just as she arrived. He looked haggard, bad-tempered and more than usually scruffy in his creased suit – it looked as if he'd slept in it at some point. His red hair was ruffled and his eyes were red with tiredness. Well, they were all sleep-deprived these days. She knew that he spent a fair proportion of his time travelling around the country, trying to bring order to the removal of dead bodies from houses and impose the strict quarantine regulations, with varying degrees of success.

Belatedly, she realised he was holding the scroll from Draco in his hand. She'd dropped it on the floor when she'd rushed a patronus off to Harry, begging for permission to make a time-limited apparition to Spain.

She tried a counter argument. "How'd you find out I'd been anywhere in the first place? I only asked Harry… Ah…"

"Yes – ah. Perhaps you could explain to me why I had to find out that my wife had gone abroad by spotting her name on a list of portkey applications in my boss's office? Didn't it occur to you to tell me? What about the children?"

"What about them?"

"Well, what if you've caught something and brought it back with you? What if you take it into my sister's house to affect my children?"

"Your children?"

"Oh, so they are yours too? Have you finally remembered that you're their mother?"

Her temper flared. "Don't be so ridiculous, Ron! You know how important my job is right now. You know I hate being away from them."

"Do I? Is that why, when you had a couple of hours off, instead of going to see Rose and Hugo, you chose to spend it in a dangerous location, visiting your lover?"

"Oh, is that what this is about?" She ran a hand through her tangled hair, angrily. "Do you ever actually think, Ron? Didn't it occur to you that there might be a good reason why Draco contacted me?" She sighed and pulled off her jacket, flinging it down. "It was only for a short time, and I didn't go anywhere near anyone with the disease. And in any case, I get exposed to it on a daily basis here."

"Yes – under controlled conditions – and it's your job. Babysitting Severus Snape isn't."

She laughed, angrily. "You're being deliberately offensive. Just trying to provoke a fight for some
pathetic reason of your own. I'm too tired for it, so what do you really want, Ron?"

His face was hard, implacable. It was the old Ron of their school days – stiff chinned and obstinate and angrily defensive – and she hated seeing that expression on him. This was not the warm, loving man she had married.

"Why did you take so long? I've been waiting for you here for nearly two hours."

"Well, I didn't spend them with my lover, as you put it. I was talking to Draco, finding out what they're working on. They've done an incredible amount of work – sample testing, data-gathering from around the world…"

"And are they any nearer to a solution?" When she hesitated, he gave a short, hard laugh. "I thought not. He thinks he's got all the answers, doesn't he – Severus Snape. I don't know how you can bear to be in the same room as that ugly bastard, let alone let him touch you -.

"Is there actually any point to all this, because I'm tired and I'd really like you to go now -.

"All I know is that you work here for hours on end, and in the meantime, my sister is looking after our children -.

She felt her blood pressure beginning to rise. "Oh, don't start that again! I've had it up to here with your comments about my responsibilities as a mother! It was your decision to move us over there. I wanted Mum and Dad to come and look after them in Rye instead – it was you who said they'd be better off with Ginny because, as a witch, she'd know what symptoms to look out for. And anyway, how long has it been since you last put your kids to bed or sat down for a full meal with them?"

"I've been very busy -.

"Oh, bloody hell, Ron – so have I! I don't think you appreciate how difficult it's been here." She gestured in the general direction of the hospital.

"Then leave."

"What? I can't possibly do that…"

"Why not? What's more important to you – our children or your patients?"

Hermione stared at him in disbelief. Had she ever – really – known this man? How had they ever been friends? Or was it possible that he had changed – become hardened by bitterness and a sense of betrayal?

"You can't possibly lay it out like that – as if there were a genuine choice to make," she managed to reply. "If every Healer made the decision to put their family first, we'd have no one left to nurse the patients."

"Not every Healer has children. Not every Healer risks bringing the infection into their homes, where other people can get infected. And not every Healer travels willingly to a 'hot zone'," he added, obvious disapproval in his hard tone.

She gave a snort of laughter. "You really think it's that simple? For God's sake, Ron, wake up to yourself. Look at what's happening around you. We can't control this – the regulations and the strict control might be making a minor difference, but fundamentally they're not going to stop you or me or Rose or Hugo getting this disease, if fate falls out that way. Are you really so stupid as to think -."
"Don't call me stupid! I'm not bloody stupid!"

She stared at him, her mouth open, as he turned away with a violent movement. "I'm sick to death of being dismissed all the time! 'Stupid' Ron Weasley – well, I wasn't too 'stupid' for you to marry me, was I? Or maybe I was the stupid one – eh? Stupid to marry you, to think it meant anything to you. Stupid to think that I'd ever be good enough for perfect little Hermione Bloody Granger," he sneered.

She eyed him nervously, wondering whether he wasn't slightly inebriated. Ron was generally quite good at hiding his drinking habits, but he came home late from time to time, eyes red-rimmed and his breath smelling of firewhiskey. It wasn't a habit yet, but it threatened to become one.

She tried to calm things down. "You're not stupid – I didn't mean that. And I'm sorry to sound harsh, but I just don't know what you want me to say."

He sighed, seeming to subside all at once, and she realised that he was simply very tired and stressed. "I know I'm not clever like you or him, but I'm not stupid either. Whatever else we are to each other these days, I'm still the father of your children. So don't try to keep me out of things or just assume I won't understand. If there's something I need to know, explain it to me."

"OK, fair enough." She took a deep breath. "Well, you know my views on the quarantine regulations and why they won't work. There's a lot of talk about that German immunisation, but it won't work either. No one says anything at work, but I'm pretty sure we all feel the same. The virus will just mutate – adapt and start infecting people again. The Ministry is just trying to keep everyone calm, but they're clutching at straws. The only real hope is an actual cure. And that's why I had to see Severus -.

"Why? Does he think you can help?"

"Has it ever occurred to you that he might be feeling under pressure too? He knows that the entire population is depending on him, even though they don't know it. He's not an unfeeling monster. He'd never admit it, but he's scared."

"The great Severus Snape - scared? Somehow, I can't imagine that."

She tried to ignore the bitter undertone. "Really? After all these years? Knowing what he went through?"

She paused, remembering that, unlike Harry and herself, Ron had never actually viewed Severus's memories in the pensieve. Like everyone else, he had had to rely on Harry's testimony to the Ministry, giving the facts about Severus's true role during the Voldemort years. And that was the point. They were just that – hard facts. Harry had carefully avoided descriptions of the more personal memories, in an attempt to preserve Severus's dignity. Ron had heard all that, but he had never seen the abuse, the misery and the tragedy of those dreadful years – memories that had since been returned safely to their owner's mind. All he could remember of Severus was the tyrant from his school days and, later on, the taciturn ex-professor, recovering from his injuries. The same man that Ron had helped to escape from Wizarding Britain – an act of bravery for which he'd received very little thanks from the recipient.

She tried a different tack. "You know the biggest irony? Years ago, I defended you to him. I told him that he didn't know you. That he didn't understand how much you had sacrificed. And now I'm saying much the same thing to you about him. You don't really know him."

"No, and of course, you do." Surprisingly, there was no real vitriol in the words this time; just an
air of unhappy resignation.

"It's got nothing to do with my personal feelings towards him," she went on, softly, and raised her hand as he seemed about to object. "No – really. It's just that I know him, about as well as anyone does. It frightens him to know that we're relying on him once more. All his adult life, he's had to endure a quite terrifying level of responsibility – to Dumbledore, to Harry, to the Order. He thought he was through with all that; that he could just go away and be allowed live out the rest of his life in peace. But now it's coming back to him…and he can't cope. He's not been sleeping. He's gone almost mad from lack of rest. That's why Draco contacted me. He wanted me to administer something to help Severus sleep - and he thought that Severus would be less likely to lash out at me than at anyone else. That's all."

She shook her head, remembering the scene. "You wouldn't have recognised him if you'd seen him. He was – I can't even describe it. He was so scared…" The look of despair – of an utter lack of hope - in those dark eyes had horrified her far more than his physical appearance.

"I'm sorry about that… but I'm scared too." Ron had turned towards the fireplace and his voice was muffled.

"Ron."

"No, let me say this first. I have to say this." His head was sunk, his chin almost on his chest as he stared at the floor. "I travel around the country and I see the little bodies and the crying parents and the fear…and it terrifies me. Every time I order the removal of a child's body, I see Rose or Hugo lying there. And all I can think of, when I try to comfort a grieving parent or give advice to someone on how to protect their family when the virus has spread to the houses all around them, is that it could be me or you standing there. Trying to decide what to do; knowing it probably won't make a damn bit of difference. And that scares me – you have no idea how much."

"Oh, Ron." She stepped towards him, reaching out a tentative hand. "I'm scared too."

Her fingers found his forearm; his other hand came up and grasped them tightly.

"Not in the same way." His voice sounded a little choked. "You have something worthwhile to do, something that keeps you busy. Me – I don't even know what to tell people when they look for help. I don't know what to do for the best, so how can I tell them what to do?"

She leaned forward and gently pressed her cheek against his back. "Knowing doesn't make it any easier."

He was quiet for a moment. Then: "No, I suppose not."

They stood together for a few minutes, silent and unmoving, her face still pressed against his shoulder.

Suddenly the fireplace crackled into life. They sprang apart as Ginny's face appeared, pale and worried.

"Hermione, Ron? Thank Merlin you're there. I didn't know what else to do. It's Hugo…"
He was lying on his bed in the early morning, still in his t-shirt and jeans, with a thin blanket draped over him. It was cooler, thank Merlin, but the level of humidity he could feel in the air threatened another unpleasantly hot day.

How had he got here? The last thing he remembered was feverishly studying his notes. Had Hermione been there? He seemed have a vague memory of talking to her, however ridiculous and illogical that might seem.

He turned his head on the pillow and groaned. His mouth tasted foul and on his bedside table, he spied the reason why. A bottle of Dreamless Sleep stood there. It was mostly full, so he could only have taken a mouthful.

Well, *that* explained things a little… although with his level of resistance, it wouldn't have affected him to any great degree. Judging by his level of fatigue, he probably hadn't been knocked out that long – a few hours at most. What had woken him so suddenly?

He would never have dosed himself with the stuff – he hated the thought of being essentially unconscious and helpless for several hours. Even in the deepest of natural sleeps, he could waken at the slightest noise – his body was still attuned to danger. So, it must have been forced upon him by… who? Draco? Hermione – if it *was* her last night?

He groaned and rubbed his eyes as he sat up. Impossible to get his thoughts together at this time of the morning. He needed coffee – the stronger the better. That was the worst thing about these humid Spanish summer days, they seemed to make his brain sluggish as if everything moved much slower -.

He paused and stared into space, unmoving.

*Ah*....
"OK, run that by me one more time."

Draco leaned against the kitchen table, arms folded in his habitual position, having just boiled the kettle and poured Severus the biggest, strongest cup of coffee possible at his mentor's heartfelt request. Severus had been up for several hours already, carrying out some preliminary tests in the laboratory to confirm his suspicions.

Severus sipped the strong, acrid brew and grimaced as he felt his blood sing. There was no doubt about it; he would suffer for this new addiction when it was all over, one way or another.

"It's perfectly obvious. So obvious I can't believe I didn't think of it before."

"Well, clearly not that obvious, since none of the finest minds in wizardry have stumbled upon it yet," his assistant pointed out.

"Apart from me, you mean," he responded, icily. Without waiting for a reply, he gulped half of the mug's contents, scalding his mouth in the process, and set it aside.

"The virus," he began, "feeds on magic. That's why it only affects wizards and witches. That much we already know – otherwise, why aren't Muggles affected?"

"Yeah, I'm with you there. But where does that get us?"

"Well, that in itself is not really news…and in a sense it was so obvious that we just discounted it as a factor. There have been lots of diseases in the past that have only affected wizards, so we're used to that. In fact, we're not all that interested in Muggle diseases – not as interested as we ought to be, anyway. There's a lot we could learn about virology from them… Anyway, what I quickly found from my tests was that the virus is not actually all that strong, but it replicates quickly, using magic to do so. And that's why it affects children and other vulnerable people more than it affects healthy adults. I should have realised the implications sooner."

"Why children and ill people? Because their magic is… stronger? That can't be right, surely?"

"No – because it's purer. Less controlled. Just think about it Draco – think about what happens when you go to Hogwarts as an 11 year old. Before then, as a young child, you might have used your magic indiscriminately, without thinking much about it. One of the most important lessons you learn at school is when not to use it – and how to control it. That's why we passed a law over a hundred years ago to prevent children from having wands until they go to school, as Madam Bagshott very helpfully reminded me. As an adult, your magic is more disciplined, more controlled. As a child, it is not – your body almost fizzes with magical energy. And that's what the virus wants – not just magic itself, but uncontrolled magic."

He waved towards the sitting room. "As it happens, I was right in that I sensed that the books held the answer… but for the wrong reason. I was looking for examples of similar illnesses, hoping to find out how it had been tackled in the past, but there aren't any other examples. This really is a new virus – or a new variant, at any rate. And it was purely by chance that I picked up A History of Magic and just happened to stop at that page about the dangers of pure, uncontrolled magic."

"OK…" Draco mulled this over. "And the pregnant women? And the elderly, the ill?"

"The first group is easily explained. In pregnancy, hormones have an impact on the woman's magic
they make it stronger. Probably to do with passing magical ability to the fetus – or maybe it's a defence mechanism. Either way, I would suspect that there is a great deal of pure Earth magic in the body of a pregnant woman. The elderly and chronically ill – well, we'd have to investigate further, but it's highly likely their control over their magic is weaker and that it fluctuates strongly based on their current condition."

"But the virus still affects healthy adults, like Meghara?"

"Yes, but not to the same degree. Again, it may depend on the degree of control over their magic. An Auror, say, is probably pretty much immune, whereas someone with less training is more vulnerable."

"And the lower rates in Scandinavia? Russia and Canada?"

"Ah, yes. That's what struck me as odd at first. Not necessarily those populations, because their environmental conditions are quite similar. There might have been some unidentified factor – a plant common to northerly regions, perhaps, or something common to their diets. But the one place that struck a false chord was New Zealand. It's at the other end of the world; an isolated group of islands in the Pacific Ocean. A sub-tropical and maritime climate. Unique flora and fauna. Absolutely nothing like the Arctic regions… except in one important way, and this year in particular. Normally, their winters are very mild, but this year they had a big freeze in the South Island. And that narrowed it right down to one thing – temperature."

"But what difference does the temperature make to magical ability? It's not as if wizards in Arctic regions are any less powerful."

"No… but I would be willing to bet that if you did some research, you'd find that, on balance, their magic is more controlled. It has to be. If you live in a cold region, your body has to build up its defence mechanisms to survive. And magic will be more defensive and much more controlled. Not 'trained' control, but natural control, even in children. And it was the same in New Zealand this year. The cold had an impact on the local wizarding population's magic. Not a big effect – just enough to affect the rate of infection. Just enough to be noticeable."

Draco stared at him. "So, that's it – that's the reason for the variation? As simple as that?"

Severus shrugged. "Yes. As simple as that."

His assistant thought this over for a moment. "OK, so where does that get us? I mean, it's possible that some of the other researchers have already noticed that effect, like you did, but it hasn't helped them come up with any solutions. How could we turn this information into a cure?"

"By stopping the virus's ability to replicate. And we'd do that by removing the source – the pure magic."

"Merlin." Draco exhaled sharply.

"Well, quite," Severus responded, drily.

"But can you prove all of this?"

Severus grabbed his mug and downed the rest of the contents rather wildly. "That's the problem. I'm as sure as I can be that I'm right about this… but there's no definite proof. I'd have to obtain some blood samples from patients in the early stages of the disease, apply some kind of formula to remove the magic from that sample and see what impact that would have on the rate of replication. As I said before, the virus itself is not that powerful. It's just very good at replicating - and at
jumping from one exhausted host to the next decent source of uncontrolled magic. If we could slow down or even stop the rate of replication, I don't think it could survive for very long."

"Right… so we need to remove the source – the magic…" Draco frowned. "How would you do that? Removing the natural magic from a sample is one thing but… from a living human? Is it even possible?"

Severus sighed. "That's the biggest problem of all."

"You mean because you can't do it?"

"No. I mean because I can. That's just it. There is a way… but I'm not sure how acceptable it would be. It wasn't particularly acceptable even back then…"

He looked meaningfully at Draco, who paled in sudden realisation.

"I heard … I heard rumours of… something, but I never thought it could be real. There was talk… but I never saw anything…"

"I don't suppose you did. Even he had his secrets – knowledge and actions that he kept from most of his followers. Many of the senior Death Eaters knew, but I suspect that they were too shocked to talk about it to others. I knew – and I never told anyone. Not even Dumbledore."

"Did my father know?" Draco asked, suddenly.

Severus hesitated, unsure of how to proceed. "Yes, he did. But… it may be of some comfort for you to learn that he did not approve… and that he sent for me on more than one occasion to… to try to alleviate the suffering." Even if alleviation basically meant euthanasia, he added to himself.

Draco stiffened. "It's of no comfort to me."

"Fair enough."

The younger man shook his head a little, as if to throw off disturbing memories, and squared his shoulders. "So… what do we need to do?"

"Not us – me. This is a job for an old Death Eater. There's someone who might be able to help us. Then again, he might not wish to, or he might not even be able to. And I have only a shaky idea of where to locate him."

"Assuming he's still alive," Draco pointed out.

"Oh, he's alive," muttered Severus. "I'm quite sure of that. There are certain people who manage to survive against the odds, no matter what happens to their masters. Rather like cockroaches after a holocaust. The question is, will he help? I'll have to tread very carefully."

"Hang on a minute – what will you do if you can get hold of this…solution? Wouldn't it be worse than suffering from the virus? I mean, taking away their magic -.

"It would be, but I have a remedy for that. It's a bit experimental, but as the antidote is my own work, it'll be easier to sort that out than it will be to get hold of the potion in the first place."

"And what will you do if you can get hold of it? Where will you take it? To Beatriz first?" Draco's eyes were speculative. "Or would you be prepared to go to Britain?"

Severus hesitated briefly. "I hadn't really thought. Let's worry about that when we've got hold of
There was a sudden tapping at the window, making both men jump. Draco opened the door and a tawny owl flew in.

"That's Potter's owl," Severus commented, eyeing the bird. As he saw Harry's ungodly scrawl on the scroll that the bird had dropped on the kitchen table, a cold and terrible certainty came over him.

It was funny how time seemed to slow down.

The Weasley and Potter adults huddled together at the far end of a corridor. It was kind of Healer Perowne to allocate the end room to Hugo, thus giving the Golden Trio a vague sense of privacy. Even if anyone had cared to approach the extended family, they would have been prevented by the invisible repello charm that George had erected. It served to keep away curious onlookers to some degree.

Time itself seemed endless; but the actual hours and minutes of the intervening days and nights had whizzed by. Hermione sat and stared through the glass window fixedly as if she could will Hugo's recovery by gaze alone. She felt fused to her chair, as if she had been there longer than two days. Nearby, Molly held out a cup of steaming hot coffee; at the edge of her vision, Hermione saw her mother accept it tentatively.

The tense, silent group consisted of both sets of parents and Bill, Charlie, Percy, George and Harry, besides Ron and herself.

Rose and the Potter children, still healthy at present, had been placed in isolation; Ginny had stayed with them. Fleur, Angelina and Audrey were at home with their own children.

Hermione hardly noticed. Her full attention was on her son's small body, shaking violently with fever, as the appointed Healer wiped him with cooled, dry towels. Her palms itched with the need to do something, anything; her hands clenched into impotent fists. Perowne wouldn't allow her to nurse Hugo herself; she was sympathetic, but wouldn't yield on the 'no parent' rule.

She remembered only brief snapshots of the last seventy-two hours. Ginny's panicky message; calling the on-duty Healer; trying to care for Hugo at home; giving in as his temperature rose and failed to fall again; transferring him to St Mungo's. She found it hard to piece certain elements together. Much later she would struggle with her treacherous memory and would end up having to refer to his hospital notes for her own sense of closure.

Healers came and went. George's repello charm was programmed to allow them unrestricted passage. Used to the sight of green and blue robes, Hermione paid little heed. She heard one Healer talking quietly to Molly, answering her questions, but the words flew past her ears unheard. She knew exactly what the man would be saying, having had this very conversation herself with other worried families, far too many times. Wait and see... it depends on the patient's individual strength... every chance of survival... just a matter of time... All those platitudes came back to her. How meaningless they were, when you were facing the death of your own child.

Hugo's chest moved little faster, and Hermione's breath hitched in automatic response. The Healer talking to Molly moved quickly into the little room; there was a brief flurry of activity around the bed as some diagnostics were taken and extra oxygen was applied with a medi-wand. The pace of Hugo's respiration eased again.
More time passed. Charlie, George and Bill left. Bill returned after a while and stood a little way off, talking quietly to Arthur and Percy. Molly leaned over Jean and Andrew Granger with her usual instinct for compassion and offered to take them back to The Burrow for a brief rest. At Hermione's urging, they took her up on the opportunity. Harry passed behind Hermione and squeezed her shoulder, muttering something about checking on the children, before moving off down the corridor.

Hermione kept her gaze on Hugo through the little family window, her fists clenched helplessly in her lap. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of blue and turned slightly to see Susan Bones standing by Ron, who was sitting near the window, and talking quietly to him.

There was an odd intimacy about this scene that captured her attention. The overhead light made Susan's auburn hair glow as she bent her head towards Ron, murmuring in his ear. Her hand rested momentarily on his shoulder in gesture of comfort - a casual physical act that Hermione did not normally associate with the reserved young woman. As she watched, Ron's hand came up almost automatically, as if to cover it, before dropping away again...

And suddenly it all made perfect sense.

She remembered Luna's slight evasiveness and her hints that Ron might have moved on from Hermione. Susan's occasional discomfort in her presence and their slightly stilted encounters came back to her now... and she knew.

Ron did not appear to notice his estranged wife's attention, but Susan stood up and looked directly into Hermione's eyes in mute apology before she slipped away. Hermione averted her eyes as the Healer passed her, directing her attention back towards her son. It didn't matter. None of it really mattered, in the scheme of things.

More time passed. Bill and Percy took their leave some time in the early hours to return to their own families. Ron moved his chair closer to Hermione's and their hands met and clasped together in mute comfort.

"If he can get through the next few hours..." She said no more. They both knew that this was the crisis point. There was nothing more anyone could do; if his little body was strong enough to ride out the fever until it broke, he might survive.

Ron shifted his hand slightly, and she felt the rough callouses of his warm palm as he squeezed her hand tightly. "He can make it. I know he can."

The strangely calm assurance in his voice comforted her. She sighed and leaned her cheek against his shoulder for a moment.

"Hermione."

Only one person could have stepped through the bounds of George's repello charm, ignoring it as if it were not there. Hermione sprang up, turning towards the familiar voice, and saw the slim, pale woman with the familiar expression of calm serenity.

"Luna!"

She flung herself across the space between them, throwing her arms around her friend. Luna staggered back a little under the onslaught and caught at Hermione's shoulders, pushing her back gently to look at her.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't get here sooner." The soft blue eyes sharpened as they looked over
Hermione's features and noted the fatigue and anxiety before Luna pulled Hermione close again and wrapped her arms around her.

"I thought you were abroad." As she raised her eyes, Hermione saw Harry standing behind Luna, giving her a shaky smile.

"I was. I was in South America." Luna extricated herself again and gave Ron, Arthur and the Grangers one of her vague smiles. "I couldn't get back, we were in the jungle and by the time we realised what was going on, they weren't letting anyone back into the UK. And then Harry managed to arrange something this afternoon."

"I knew you'd want Hugo's godmother to be here," Harry added.

Luna let go of Hermione very gently and moved over to the window to look in at her godson. Hermione followed her.

"It's not good, is it?" Luna murmured, too quietly for anyone else to hear.

Hermione shook her head very slightly, her throat too choked for words. Her chest felt over-tight and, for a moment, she felt as if she couldn't get enough air into her lungs. Her vision swam and she felt her legs beginning to give way.

Her friend's thin fingers moved to grasp hers and Luna pushed her slight frame against Hermione, as if she could hold her up by sheer force. "Steady," she breathed and then, raising her voice, "Ron, could you bring the chair over?"

As Hermione was helped into a chair, she grabbed Luna's arm and pulled her down, putting her mouth to her friend's ear.

"Nothing matters," she whispered. "Nothing – none of it – matters, if only he'll live. Do you understand? Me and Ron and Severus - all those stupid little things that I've worried about for years… so petty. So - so unimportant. Just as long as he lives."

Luna's eyes flickered towards Ron and then Hugo, and she nodded.

More time passed. Arthur left to check on Ginny and the children. Hermione, Ron, Luna and Harry sat on in silence. Hermione watched the Healers like a hawk; as far as she could tell from this distance, her son was holding up well. His breathing was easier and he looked cooler and less distressed.

At around three in the morning, Hermione rose and stretched her aching limbs. Ron half-stood, but she waved him back. "It's OK. I just need some fresh air for a few minutes."

He nodded and resumed his vigil.

Hermione walked slowly away down the corridor, passing other rooms and other small groups of worried families. She was one of them now, she realised. No longer an anonymous Healer and potential source of information or comfort, but a fellow sufferer. It made her feel strangely exposed. As far as was possible, she had tried to keep herself and her family out of the public gaze, but she was still a famous figure in this strangely insular world of wizardry, and she was uncomfortably aware of some speculative glances as she walked past.

Hearing footsteps, she half-turned, expecting Luna. Much to her surprise, it was Harry who had followed her.
"You OK?" he asked, quietly. The looks from the other families grew more blatant, but he paid no heed; years of celebrity had taught him how to ignore the endless public attention.

She didn't answer immediately, choosing instead to carry on along the corridor. There was a "Staff Only" door to the left and she pushed it open, stepping through. Harry followed her, and no one challenged them.

This narrow dark passageway led to a small staff room. Not used much at the best of times, due to its dark and cramped conditions, it looked completely abandoned now. There were some French windows that led out onto a small balcony, and it was to this that Hermione headed.

She opened the doors and stepped out, gratefully taking a deep lungful of fresh air. "God, I needed this. This is going to make me sound like a terrible mother, but I'm so sick of sitting in that corridor with nothing to do."

He laughed. "It's OK. I know what you mean."

"Good. I never had to explain my feelings to you, at least. You always understood me, didn't you, Harry?" She closed her eyes and turned her face up into the humid, sticky air of an unusually hot summer night in London. "To answer your question, I'm about as OK as I can be, I suppose. It's the waiting… And I hate feeling helpless. It would be easier if I could nurse him."

"Yeah, I suppose it would. I know Gin would feel the same."

"Every day," replied Hermione instantly.

He looked up at her in surprise. "How did you know what I was going to ask?"

She sighed. "You were going to ask if I ever wondered what my life would have been like if that Hogwarts letter had never arrived. I knew that because it's a question I ask myself almost every day. I could have been one of those people down there, going about my life, completely unaware of the world of magic…"

"…And Dumbledore and Voldemort and the Hallows and the Horcruxes…and all the rest of it," Harry continued.

She smiled at him. "But then, I would never have met you. Or Ron or Ginny or Luna or Neville or the wonderful Weasley clan."

"Or Severus," he teased, with a wicked glint in his green eyes.

"Or Severus," she agreed, good-humouredly. "So…what about you? Do you ever think about what your life might have been like? Just imagine if you'd never received that letter. No Voldemort, no battles to fight, no scar, no pain…"

"Me?" He frowned, thoughtfully. "I suppose it's different, in a way. I mean, you had a nice childhood – caring parents and all that. But for me, life didn't really start until I was eleven. I
was… escaping to something, rather than leaving something behind. And anyway, even without the Dursleys…this life suits me. I can't imagine ever living in the Muggle world again. It was my parent's world, and now it's mine. Even living in Godric's Hollow… I know you thought it was a bit mad for us to move there, but I wanted to. It made me feel closer to them."

He straightened up, giving Hermione a knowing look. "You miss it a bit, the Muggle life - don't you?"

She looked out over the city. "Yes, I suppose I do. You're right, of course – it was easier for me living in the Muggle world...and harder to leave it, even with all the wonderful things I learned about at school. I could've stayed in the Muggle world and had a perfectly happy life if I'd never heard from Hogwarts." She paused, considering. "I even thought about going back to it after the War. Did I ever tell you that, by the way?"

"No – really? You seriously would've given magic up?"

Hermione hesitated again, wondering how to phrase it. "It was after I finally finished at Hogwarts. During those few weeks in London, when you'd gone to Rio and before I went to Andalusia, I wandered around the city. I remember looking at all the other young people, so full of hope, and thinking that if I'd never met you and encountered Voldemort and Bellatrix and all the rest, I'd be just as naïve as them – and just as hopeful about my future. Doesn't that sound dreadful? There I was, nineteen years old, in good health, with excellent results and a good job to go to...and yet I was so envious of those Muggle kids."

She caught the strained expression on his face and grabbed his hand instinctively. "Please don't look like that. You know that I've never blamed you for anything that happened to me. You would've kept me out of it, if you could – it was me that insisted on going with you. And I'm glad I did – I'm glad that I was able to help you... Anyway, it occurred to me... I remember walking past UCL and picking up a prospectus at the entrance, looking at the law degree courses." She laughed. "I know it sounds absolutely mad now. I would never have been able to fit in and would probably have given it all up after just a few weeks. In any case, it was the thought of Severus that stopped me. The thought of never seeing him again..."

"You were in love with him even back then."

She looked at Harry, but there was no accusation in his eyes, just compassion. "You were...weren't you?"

She sighed. "I loved him before I even left school, I think. I was too ashamed to admit it at the time. It seemed like such a cliché. Schoolgirl falls for teacher. And he was hardly pin-up material, was he?" She laughed, a little tremulously. "You would've all thought I was mad. Or bewitched by someone. And if you had thought I was sane, you'd have probably never spoken to me again. You hated him back then."

"Yeah, I did." He frowned, obviously thinking back. "He didn't make it easy for me to feel anything but hatred. I don't really understand how you could've seen past all that. I had no notion of his true nature until I saw those memories."

"I don't know either. He wasn't very nice to me either, if you remember... That's part of the reason why I was so embarrassed by my feelings. I tried to pass them off as some kind of mad crush. And then later on after the War, when he did know, he made it clear to me that there was no place for me in his life. God, that was so humiliating – knowing that he could see what I felt for him, but didn't return my feelings. He was so nice about it, so polite – that was the worst thing."
She paused, considering. "It was during that summer that his feelings towards me changed. I don't know exactly when - or how, or why. Only that there was a change in the way that he looked at me. And, one night, things came to a head... but we were interrupted. And, in the cold light of day, I just didn't know how to respond. Do you remember me asking you for advice that following Christmas, just before the wedding?"

He was silent for a moment, and then burst out, all at once: "I hate to say it but... I was glad you didn't go back to him."

"You were?" She gave him a surprised look. "So, you don't approve of us?"

"No – it's not that." He paused, giving her a slightly ashamed look. "The truth is that I was afraid of losing you. You and Ron were my two closest friends and I was scared you would move away and grow out of our friendship. I think I had some stupid adolescent idea that the two of you would get married and move into the house next door to us, and that we'd always be together – Ron, Ginny, you and me - living in perfect harmony, our children growing up together. Looking back, it sounds so naïve." He laughed, quietly.

"I see... I didn't know that," she replied, quietly. Harry had grown into a solidly-built young man, partly due to his tough job and partly due to Molly's cooking, but suddenly she could see that pale, undersized and insecure boy that she had first known. "I mean, you had Ginny and there was all the stuff going on with the Ministry immediately after the War – the trials and so on. I thought you were too busy to even think about me."

"Yeah, but... the fact is I wanted a family so bloody much. I loved Ginny of course – I love her still, more than ever – but before she came into my life, there was only you and Ron." He took a deep breath. "After the War, it seemed unreal for a while. I was alive – I didn't expect to survive, even before I saw Severus's memories and found out what I had to do. All that last year, it felt like I was walking to my death – like I was just trying my hardest to take Voldemort with me. I only got through it because the two of you were with me, but particularly you. You were like the sister I never had."

"Then, after the War, it felt like you were gone immediately. I know you were only looking after Severus, but while we were celebrating, you weren't there. And you grew up during those few weeks while he was so ill. Whenever I saw you, I felt like your much younger brother. Later on, when I saw you and Severus together at Grimmauld Place, I think I knew even then. There was something between you – something intimate - and I suddenly saw the future. I knew he'd take you away from us – from me."

She wasn't quite sure how to respond to this revelation. "God, Harry, I never would have guessed you felt that way! I don't remember you trying to influence me when I asked for advice, though."

He gave her an incredulous look. "Why would I? I'd had enough of people telling me what to do with my life. Why would I do the same to you? That's why I felt so awkward when you confided in me. I was so pleased when you and Ron got together. It felt right – kind-of like a story where the endings have all been tied up together, all neat and secure. But... I guess real life's not quite that cut-and-dried, is it?"

"No." She considered his words for a moment and then squeezed his hand. "Thank you for telling me. It took guts to do that. I would never have cut you out of my life though – never. I would have found a way to keep in touch, no matter what."

His smile was warm as he squeezed her hand. "Yes. I know that now."
She fidgeted a little, her thoughts returning to Hugo. "I need to get back and see if there's any change."

"OK." He looked back down at the street with a wry grin. "Bye, bye, Muggles. How weird to think that you might have gone back into their world."

"I could never have gone back for good," she mused. "I would've missed our world too much. Although I do like to straddle both worlds… I sometimes wonder if that's what drew me to Severus in the first place. We're both outsiders. We've lived in both worlds and have been influenced by both. Oh, I know he's more like you in the sense that he was also escaping a miserable childhood, but… worthless monster though his father was, he was still a Muggle, and it makes a difference. It's hard to explain, but when you have at least one Muggle parent, you can't help but have one foot in each world. I just wish -.

She stopped, but Harry took her up on it. "You wish what?"

They stepped back into the little dark room and she closed the French windows. "Well…if you really want to know, I do wish that we had more respect for the Muggles as a community. You know, respect for their knowledge and scientific advances. If we could have involved a Muggle medical scientist or two in our research, we might have come up with a cure for this disease by now. Who knows?"

"That might have been a little dangerous," Harry pointed out.

"That's only because we assume they couldn't cope with knowing about us. People conveniently forget that there are loads of Muggles who do know. For example, the parents of Muggle-borns, like my Mum and Dad, who know all about us – and they are able to carry on with their lives without being driven mad or trying to undermine our community. Or the Muggle psychiatrist who helped me – and just look how much trouble that caused." She shrugged. "Even now, when I'm not entirely convinced that they're doing the best they can for Hugo, God forbid that I should be allowed to suggest something with a Muggle origin that might help him, like simple paracetamol or ibuprofen."

"Do you really think those drugs might help him? Do you want me to back you up?"

She shook her head, wearily. "I don't really know for certain – Susan was right about that. And I don't want my son to be become some kind of test subject."

She turned towards the door, but before she could open it, he put a hand on her arm. "It's… not good, is it?" he murmured, ironically using the same words as Luna.

"It's…" the lump rose in her throat as she hesitated, wondering how to tell him. "It's…oh, Harry…"

The tears came then, and she buried her face against his shoulder as his arms came around her.

Early in the morning, Hugo's fever finally broke and he grew pale and unnaturally still. Hermione, seeing the sudden change, rose in alarm and moved towards the door. Ron and Harry had begun to rise also, when a Healer left the room and approached them.

"The fever has broken. However, Hugo is very weak at the moment."

"Then he… he's going to be OK?" Ron's eyes were unnaturally bright. "He's come through it?"

The Healer shook her head, her face very grave. "I'm afraid it's not over yet. The virus is still active
and the fever is likely to return – and he is now in a weakened state. And when the fever does return... Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, I'm afraid you must prepare yourselves for the worst."

"He can fight this," Ron muttered, fists clenched. "He _can_ – I know it. He's strong."

"Ron -," Hermione began, putting her hand on his arm, but he threw it off, glaring at her.

"He _can_ do this. I know it. He won't die..."

The Healer looked at him with compassion in her eyes. "Your son is very weak, Mr. Weasley. He's so young and he's been through a lot. To ask more of him..."

Ron looked at her in disbelief for a moment, and then turned towards Hermione, seeking the reassurance that she couldn't give.

"What does that even _mean_? 'Mione – _tell me._"

"Ron, _please, _" she choked on her words. "Don't you understand? He's got no more to give. His little body can't take any more. He's – he's dying."

"No – _no_! I won't – I won't -," he backed away from her, his eyes looking around wildly. "I won't _accept_ that."

He turned and ran headlong down the corridor.

"I'll go," Harry muttered, and took off after him.

Hermione sank back into a chair, putting her head in her hands.

Luna crouched next to her, rubbing her shoulder. "The main thing to remember is that Hugo needs you now, more than ever," she whispered. "Forget the regulations – you should go into his room. He'll know you're there and it may help him."

"What can I do, Luna?" Hermione stared up at her friend, feeling numb. "What can I do? I've got to sit here and watch my son _die_. I can't do that. There has to be an answer, there just _has_ to be..."

She was aware of a sudden flurry of activity, of a gasp of surprise from the Healer, and then a voice that she _never_ expected to hear – certainly _not here_.

"There _is_ an answer."

Her head whipped around.

There in the corridor, his hooded cloak pulled back off his head, stood Severus Snape.
Hermione sprang to her feet, staring at him in disbelief. He gazed back at her, his face impassive. She was aware of noises in the background, of Healers whispering urgently to each other, of some figures running up the corridor towards them. None of it registered entirely.

"You… you're here." Her voice sounded like someone else's, although she was distantly aware that she must have opened her mouth and said something. "Here – in this country," she added, rather stupidly.

"I am," he agreed and continued staring at her, as if he had never seen her before. His face was strangely neutral. It was not cold, and yet there was not a trace of affection in it. Her heart sank a little.

She ran her eyes over him. He was dressed for travel in a cold region, in thick dark trousers, a lined jacket and a worn, slightly stained, hooded cloak. The impression was that he had been apparating long distances and hadn't had time to change. For all that, he actually looked very much better than he had three – or was it four? – nights ago. Still pale, his eyes dark with fatigue, but without that awful air of helplessness that had frightened her so much. If anything, he exuded confidence and a quiet determination that she had not seen in him for a very long time. It was as if he had finally made up his mind about something.

Luna broke the spell by stepping forward, in her usual vaguely cheerful manner. "It's good to see you again, Professor Snape."

Severus's eyes lingered on Hermione before moving away, almost reluctantly, to acknowledge his former student. "Indeed, Miss Lovegood, and it is good to see you also. Although Mr. Snape might be more appropriate these days. Or possibly Mr. Tobias Prince, the name I usually go by now."

He raised his voice slightly with the last few words, and Hermione suspected that they were aimed at the Healers and security wizards currently surrounding them. Letting them know his professional name, before they even thought of throwing him out – Tobias Prince's potions were very well-known at St Mungo's these days.

"I thought it might be you." Luna sounded as unsurprised as ever. "I've just returned from Peru. We were able to gather some very interesting samples to send to you."

"I thank you, Miss Lovegood – and Mr. Scamander too. Your work is much appreciated." He smiled suddenly – a wide, genuine smile. "More than you know."

Hermione looked towards Luna in surprise. "What? You know each other?"

"By name only," Luna explained, calmly, "and all I really knew was that Rolf and I were collecting plant samples for Tobias Prince Industries. But it wasn't a great stretch to realise that the company was run by someone who knew his plants and insects very well – and also that a number of effective potions were being turned out by Tobias Prince Industries. No one knew exactly where he was based, but there were rumours about somewhere in Southern Europe…and who did I know in Southern Europe with that level of expertise?" She smiled with her usual serenity.

Hermione frowned. There was a great deal that she needed to know about all this – not least what Luna had been doing during her mysterious travels around the globe – and who was this Rolf, anyway? The name seemed to ring a bell… But her mind turned back towards Hugo in his
You said that there was an answer. Something that could save Hugo's life? A cure?"

"Yes." Severus looked at her, now very grave, with no trace of the smile. "But it won't be an easy
choice for you to make."

"Or for anyone," came another voice.

Belatedly, Hermione realised that Draco was standing just behind Severus, and that he had a large
plastic box suspended in front of him.

Severus followed her gaze and then looked around at the group of Healers, picking out Hester
Perowne, who he appeared to know. "Healer Perowne, I have a proposition to put to you. It's not
going to be a popular one, but I am convinced it can save the entire community from this virus. Are
you willing to listen and let me explain?"

"Mr. Snape." Hester Perowne fixed her eyes on him firmly, seeming entirely unsurprised by the
appearance of a man who had been presumed dead for more than a decade. "I will listen to
anything that might stop this disease in its tracks. Shall we adjourn to my office?"

She made to move in that direction, and her fellow Healers shifted to follow, but Severus put a
restraining hand on her arm.

"There isn't a lot of time. Hermione – Mrs. Weasley – needs to make a quick decision. Can we talk
here?"

She frowned at him and her eyes flickered to the crate. "Precisely what is in there, Mr. Snape?"

Severus hesitated for a moment, glancing at the other Healers. Perowne waved them away,
impatiently, and they backed off some way along the corridor, still watching intently.

Severus nodded at Draco, who gestured at the box. The lid sprung open.

Looking over Severus's shoulder, Hermione saw a large number of tiny vials, each containing just a
miniscule drop of black glossy liquid. She was none the wiser, but judging by the nervous look that
Draco gave the contents, it was clearly very toxic. A shimmer over the vials indicated the presence
of a protective charm.

Healer Perowne gave a startled gasp. The women's face paled as she stared at the liquid.

"Is – is that what I think it is?"

Severus inclined his head, giving her a look of respect. "I am surprised that you recognise it,
Madam Perowne."

"Oh, believe me, sir, I have seen what it can do." There was anger in Perowne's voice now.

"Then you can understand why I have been very careful with the dosage." Severus spoke with a
quiet urgency. "Each of these contains the precise amount for a child of 5 years old. You need to
double the proportion for an adolescent and triple it for a fully grown adult. Too little and it will
have no effect. Too much and…"

"Yes, I have seen the effect that too much can have," Hester Perowne snapped. "What I'm interested
to learn is how you obtained this illegal substance…and precisely what you expect to achieve by
administering it."

"I have developed an antidote."

He watched her carefully, as her eyes moved to the vials once more. "I see no antidote here."

"I didn't have time to produce it – my laboratory is not big enough. I need the entirety of your laboratory here, and a team of at least thirty potioneers." He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a scroll. "I have my notes here."

"I see." She looked at him, grimly.

Hermione could wait no longer and jumped into the tense silence. "Please, can't you explain what it is?"

Hester Perowne looked up and seemed to be assessing her for a moment. She glanced at Severus and over her shoulder at the Healers standing some distance away, and then sighed. "Mrs. Weasley, this is pure distilled sap from Black Spotted Labellum. It is a type of orchid that is grown in very controlled circumstances. It is also a banned substance – has been banned for many years, in fact. I was not aware that it is still in circulation."

She looked questioningly at Severus. He shook his head.

"It's not mine, I can assure you. I wasn't even sure that it was still being grown – but I remembered who did grow it back then – who supplied the Dark Lord with it - and I had a feeling he might have survived the War. I had to take that risk."

He glanced at Hermione as he said this, and she had a strong feeling that there was a lot more to be said on this topic.

"Hermione, it's a dangerous substance – which is why you have a difficult decision to make. It is my belief that if this is administered to Hugo, it will kill the virus inside him."

"But…?"

"But it will also remove his magic." Severus looked at her, steadily. "Voldemort used it on his enemies as the ultimate punishment. Worse than death – worse even than the cruciatus. He would remove their magic from their bodies. That's why it's a banned substance."

"But why have I never heard of this substance? It never came up at school."

Severus and Hester shared a look laden with meaning. It was the Healer who responded. "Knowledge of its existence was suppressed. You would have to go to Hogwarts and ask some of the portraits about it – Dilys Derwent might be a useful source of information. I suspect that there was a great deal of shame about its origin – because the Black Spotted Labellum isn't a natural plant. It is a hybrid, created in artificial conditions. It was used during one of the many wars between the wizarding clans, but many enemies were united in their disgust at its use."

She looked at Severus and he took up the story. "Voldemort knew of it, of course. Not from books; all references to it were removed years before he went to Hogwarts. No, I suspect he met the plant's supplier while he was travelling in Eastern Europe after leaving Hogwarts. It was the perfect weapon for him. The removal of a wizard's magic is a highly traumatic experience – it can send them slowly mad. It did send Voldemort's victims mad. Most would eventually kill themselves, after suffering terrible agonies that would sometimes go on for days. He liked to watch. He'd put them into cages and observe them – like laboratory animals." His voice cracked and he looked
down. "I… I was sometimes called upon to put someone out of their misery. It was a mercy killing, they would be smashing their skulls against the bars, but that made it no easier…"

Hermione reached out instinctively and took his hand, uncaring of the curious faces around them. "Don't, please. Just focus on now. How can this possibly help Hugo?"

"What Mr. Snape is suggesting, if I understand him right," Hester broke in, "is that we administer this substance to your son to prevent the virus from replicating further. Am I right?"

Severus nodded. "The virus feeds on pure magic. Remove the source and it cannot replicate – and cannot survive."

"And then, once the virus has been eliminated, you would administer the antidote to this…poison."

Hester looked at him. "Have you tried this before?"

"No," Severus admitted. "I was working on the antidote during the last year before the Battle, but it was hard to find the time to work on it. I narrowed it down to a solution that should work, but has never been properly tested. I managed to carry out some in vitro testing on the bodies of its victims, and was able to restore some degree of magical presence post mortem." He flourished his scroll at Hermione. "Do you remember me asking you to retrieve some private notes from Slughorn's office, when you went back to school after the War? You said you didn't think he'd even bothered to look at them. It's probably just as well, since this was among them."

Hester grabbed the scroll from his hand and perused it quickly, with a frown of concentration. "With your help, we can produce this within the next twenty-four hours, I think. How long do you estimate that the patient would have to be subject to the Labellum before the antidote is administered?"

"That will depend on the individual – their body weight, their age and the degree of pure magic residing within them." Severus looked towards Hugo, lying very still on his bed. "With a younger child, you have a greater degree of pure, uncontrolled magic. You would have to run some diagnostics to gauge the magic level, but I would estimate sixteen hours or so. With an adult who possesses a more controlled magic, probably about seven or eight. A pregnant woman may present some degree of difficulty. In all cases, it will be very traumatic – I would recommend that the patient be placed in an induced coma beforehand."

Hester nodded, grimly. "I think you are right. And – and you are absolutely convinced of this?"

"As sure as I can be."

"Hmm. The main difficulty is going to be convincing any next-of-kin to give it a try. There will be a great deal of opposition."

They looked at one another, and Hermione was aware of something complicated passing between the two. Hester was clearly trying to suppress her revulsion at the idea of the Labellum. Quite possibly her revulsion extended to Severus himself, due to his prior knowledge of and experience with the substance.

Hermione wasn't too sure of her own feelings – there was her own revulsion at the revelation to be worked through, and she'd always felt a little uneasy about Severus's extensive knowledge of dark magic, but she was occupied by a more pressing matter. Any minute now, they would be looking to her for a decision…and she didn't know what her answer could possibly be. How could she subject Hugo to such a barbaric treatment? Knowing that he might never fully recover – or that it might kill him before the virus could?
"Have I got this right? Are you suggesting that you turn my son into some kind of medical experiment?"

Hermione jumped at Ron's voice. He'd come up behind Draco and was staring at Severus and Hester blankly. She had no idea at what point he had joined the conversation or how much of it he had heard. Harry stood further back, watching them warily.

She opened her mouth to answer, but Severus got there first. He turned towards Ron, giving the youngest Weasley son his full and serious attention for perhaps the first time ever. "Yes. That is what I propose."

Ron gazed at him for a long moment. He ran his eyes slowly up and down Severus, looked over at Hermione quizzically and then back at the man she had chosen over him. Severus bore the examination stoically. Finally, Ron looked back at his face.

"I consent."

"What?" Hermione stared at him in disbelief. "Ron, you don't understand the risks -.

Ron sighed. "Oh, I understand the bloody risks. As I understand it, the choice is between having a son who may become a Squib…or no son at all. What choice do we really have? He's our son, Hermione, and I've been pacing up and down this damned hospital wondering if I would ever get to hold him again, kiss him goodnight, read him a bedtime story…" He choked a little. "All those little things that ordinary fathers do. All those things that I should have done each day and never had the time to, because of my bloody job. I should have been there every night…"

He blinked a couple of times very quickly, before continuing. "I love him. I've always loved him and I always will. It's unconditional. He could have been born a Squib and it would have made no difference. I don't give a damn if he can never cast another spell, just as long as he's alive. I'd rather live with that than face the alternative."

He turned to Severus. "So, go ahead, Mr. Snape. Do what you have to do."

And, without another word, he gave Hugo a long look and then turned and walked away.

"Well." Hester broke into the silence that followed this outburst. "I suggest that you get down to our laboratory and speak to the on-duty head potioneer. We need to start working on that antidote immediately. And, in the meantime, we must do some very precise tests on Hugo's magic levels. Come with me, young man."

She slammed the lid back onto the box with a flick of her fingers and gestured to Draco to follow her, as she stalked away towards the curious group of Healers.

Severus barely glanced at Hermione before following Healer Perowne and Draco.

Severus stood in his dark corner of the little room and watched Hugo Weasley's tiny body, still by an induced coma. The enforced sleep was a relief; the unconscious child's limbs had trembled and jerked uncontrollably for twenty minutes after the tiny drop of Labellum had been administered to his tongue. It was impossible to tell what Hugo would have been aware of – whether he had been in actual pain or whether the movements had just been his body's impotent attempts to rid itself of the poison.

Hester Perowne hovered near the bed, watching Hugo intently. She hadn't been present for the entire sixteen hours, seven minutes and thirty four seconds that they had calculated to be the
maximum time before the antidote must be applied, whether or not the virus had died. She had come and gone, checking on her other patients while they waited.

Another Healer held a wand over the small boy's body and concentrated on the image that floated in front of her face – an x-ray scan that showed the progress of the virus through his system. Occasionally, Severus or Hester would step forward to check the progress. For the first couple of hours, there had been hardly any change at all, but by now, it was clear to everyone that the virus's replication rate was slowing down. It was an incredible relief to receive confirmation that Severus had been right - about the first stage of the treatment at any rate.

Now he just had to make sure that the second part of the procedure was successful.

His body sang with fatigue. He'd slept very little for weeks now and hardly at all for the last three nights apart from a handful of snatched naps. He'd been able to take a quick rest during a passive stage in the production of his anti-Labellum potion – which was just as well with the need for added concentration now. The rest of the time, he'd been in the laboratory issuing instructions and watching every step carefully to ensure the batches weren't damaged. The laboratory workers were well-trained and followed his commands with commendable fortitude, considering the fact that it must have been a shock to have had their facility suddenly taken over by an ex-Death Eater who had been declared dead over a decade ago. Nevertheless, he'd produced the batch that he intended to use on Hugo himself, for added safety. He'd left Draco to supervise a second group of workers in the production of more batches of the anti-Labellum.

One of Hugo's hands was held loosely in his mother's hand. Hermione half-lay across the bed, her head resting by her son's hip. From this angle it was hard to tell, but he thought she might have dropped off to sleep. Ron sat next to her, awake but clearly lost in his own thoughts as he stared down at his son. His hand was on Hermione's neck and he was rubbing small circles into her spine; an automatic gesture of comfort that he was probably scarcely aware of. Nevertheless, Severus found that he had to look away.

It was utterly irrational and he knew it. He knew their relationship was long dead, and yet there was something that bound them together for life. Their children. A bond that he and Hermione would never share, no matter what level of intimacy they might reach. Not now. It was too late for him, even if it weren't for Hermione. He knew himself to be far too psychologically damaged for fatherhood.

He looked back towards Ron and Hermione. In sleep, she looked terribly young and he was reminded not so much of the young woman who had first captured his heart but of the student that had preceded her. That was another way in which Ron and Hermione shared a bond. How many times had he seen them together at school – along with Potter? As thick as thieves, so the Muggle saying went. United over their fear of Voldemort. United over their dislike of their unpleasant Potions Master, too.

He'd sensed that old unity from the moment he'd arrived at St Mungo's, when he'd stood some distance away, disguised in his hooded cape. He had watched the little group for a while, as Draco had stood by patiently. The trio were sitting together, united once again by fear… and he had wondered…

That was why he'd been careful to keep a safe distance from Hermione. He had no place here. In this world of anxious parents and supportive families, he felt more of an alien than ever.

The last couple of days had been some of the most physically challenging of his life, in some ways, but the adrenaline had kicked in, much as it had in his days as an Order spy and Death Eater.
Harry's message about Hugo had given him a new urgency. He'd given Draco some instructions on where his notes on the antidote could be located and had apparated away as quickly as he could. He had only a very basic idea of where the man he was seeking might be located.

The last he'd seen of Frederic Palekowsky was a couple of years before the Final Battle, when Voldemort had sent him to collect some Labellum sap from the wizard's house in a small village in Hungary. Although he knew it was a poison, he'd been unaware of Voldemort's purpose at that stage and had listened with genuine interest when the rather slimy little individual instructed him in its distillation from the plants he produced in his greenhouse.

After he'd experienced the full horror of Voldemort's experiments, he'd somehow managed to avoid further contact with Palekowsky. The Dark Lord had probably conceived some idea of Severus growing and distilling the stuff himself, but fortunately had been too distracted by other events, not least the debacle with the prophecy at the Ministry. It was lucky for Severus that he had – the former spy might have stood by calmly, maintaining his cover while the vilest of curses flew, but to have been forced to produce such an abomination might have broken him altogether. He hadn't even told Dumbledore of its continuing existence.

He had no real idea of whether Palekowsky would still be living in that village. He didn't think the wizard was actually Hungarian, but he'd probably lived there because it was a quiet, anonymous corner of Europe – handy for Britain and Voldemort but not too handy. However, Severus had no other lead, and it was a place to start.

Apparating there was no problem – with its unpleasant associations, he could hardly forget the location. It didn't take him long to discover that Palekowsky had moved away; it took just a little longer to find someone who remembered him from Severus's description – and recalled that he had moved some five years previously. He'd gone to South America, the man thought, but he could be no more specific than that.

Severus had returned to Valenzuela and done some sketchy research on the plant to try to work out its optimum growing conditions. He had a couple of books on very dark magic for this purpose – books that had never been anywhere near the Hogwarts Library.

He was quite sure that Palekowsky was still growing it; the plant had made him rich before and a cunning little weasel like him would just lie low until another dark lord arose, wanting his services. The question was: where? And then he remembered the soil samples that had been sent to him by one Rolf Scamander.

This Mr. Scamander had contacted him out of the blue a couple of years ago. He'd written to Tobias Prince through Hermione, who still acted as his contact with the wizarding world at large, although she obviously had no idea that Luna was involved in this particular case. Scamander was something of an expert on the magical flora and fauna of the Patagonian region of Chile and had discovered some strange malformations that he had not been able to identify. It seemed to him that something magical was corrupting the soil, something he had never come across before – and perhaps Tobias Prince had?

Severus had written back to him, requesting soil samples, which he had received over a period of time. He'd investigated, had discovered high levels of toxicity from some substance that he had never before encountered and had filed his findings and samples carefully, in case they would be of use to him in the future. Scamander had proved a useful contact, and Severus had since paid him to obtain some plants and insects from the Amazon Basin that were usually hard for Cesar to source.

It now occurred to him that there might be a link between the soil changes and Palekowsky's plants, and he dug out his notes. After all, although the plant was grown in laboratory conditions, it
was quite possible that the wizard was not all that careful with the disposal of defective plants and other by-products of his industry. Severus was able to locate the exact region where Rolf had first noticed the abnormality and decided it was worth a shot.

He had apparated there in stages – which had been tricky, with international travel limited in many countries these days. He’d had to avoid the USA and Mexico altogether, but had managed to pass through the Canaries, Tobago, Suriname, Brazil and Argentina without being traced. He hadn’t apparated those kinds of distances for a very long time, and collapsed from sheer exhaustion when he arrived in Patagonia, sleeping curled up under a bush in his travelling cape for a good six hours before completing his journey.

Some judicious questioning had led him at last to Palekowsky. Knowing instinctively that bribery, negotiations or just plain begging wouldn't work, he’d sneaked up on the little worm and hit him with a strong *stupify*. The spell was designed so he would recover a couple of hours after Severus had departed with the entirety of his prepared sap. He also took a good number of the existing plants, which he carefully placed into stasis, not sure exactly how many doses he would need. As an extra precaution, he placed a strong confounding spell of his own devising over the remaining stock – with any luck, Palekowsky wouldn't be able to detect the plants after he came round and, if he could, he wouldn't be able to touch them.

The journey back was one that Severus would never want to make again. He'd managed to shrink the plants to some degree, but dared not do so with the finished product, and so had had to make his several apparations with a large crate suspended in front of him. This took considerable magical resources. Arriving back at Valenzuela, he'd collapsed on his bed fully clothed, and an alarmed Draco had had to wake him with a dose of *Revivio*. He and Draco had then donned protective suits and masks and gone into the laboratory to divide the sap up into several hundred carefully-measured portions. The plants he placed under a very strong protective spell and left them in his laboratory.

Getting into Britain had been risky. He'd apparated himself, the crate of sap, Draco and a couple of broomsticks to a remote location in the Scottish Highlands. They'd flown very quickly in the direction of Hogwarts, riding in tandem with the crate balanced across the front of their sticks. There, they had found Minerva McGonagall, one of only a few members of staff still in residence at the deserted school.

As he had hoped, his old colleague had recovered fairly quickly from the shock, had listened to their story and had hidden them from the team of aurors who had arrived shortly after to investigate the traced illegal apparation. As soon as the coast was clear, he and Draco had flown at high speed to the outskirts of London, where they shrunk and pocketed their broomsticks and boarded a normal suburban Muggle train, attracting a fair number of strange looks due to the large crate.

From then on, it was relatively straightforward; they'd entered St Mungo's and had managed to slip undetected through the crowds and confusion in the reception area to get to the Department of Magical Bugs and Diseases.

In retrospect, the process of getting back into Britain had been a lot simpler than he had thought it would be, psychologically as well as physically. Long-neglected instincts had come to the fore; he’d known exactly where to apparate to and how to creep into Hogwarts undetected. Even the old secret passageway he’d used so often when returning from Death Eater duties was still there. He also remembered the various departments at St Mungo's surprisingly well, having spent some time here both as a trainee potioneer on professional visits and later on while helping to treat Arthur Weasley's snake bite. He'd never been a patient here, however – his various injuries had been managed either by himself or by Poppy at Hogwarts.
And then there was Minerva. She'd found him and Draco in the abandoned Professor of Potions office almost immediately. Not that he had intended to hide from her; indeed he knew that he could not – the current Head was usually granted the ability to sense when someone new entered the school and trace them almost instantly. It had seemed pointless charging over to her office, when she would clearly be on her way down.

She'd seen Draco first and seemed only slightly surprised to see him – but then, he had worked there until relatively recently. And then Severus had stepped out of the shadows and, for all that she jumped and pressed her hand over her elderly heart, there was a gleam in her eyes that seemed to indicate that she was not as shocked as she should have been. He had wondered whether Hermione had been quite as discrete as she thought she had when she returned to school after the War – perhaps that wily old Gryffindor had known of his survival all along.

She'd sealed them into the Potions office. While they'd waited impatiently for the aurors to give up their search, Severus had looked around with some interest. The office was changed out of all recognition from his days as Professor. Slughorn's tastes had leaned towards the classical, with statues and old pictures dotted around, whereas he'd never seen the point of decoration; for him, the office was a merely a place for hated but necessary paperwork. His true home had been his private laboratory, adjacent to the Potions classroom, and he had had a small bedroom and a private library set up just off it.

Slughorn had retired some two years previously, but his successor, a young former Ravenclaw student with skills sufficient for teaching up to NEWT level, clearly hadn't yet made his own impression. It seemed that Minerva had struggled to find someone to take over the post.

Severus had had hardly any time to talk to the Headmistress, and she'd let him leave with strict instructions to come back and see her properly as soon as he could. They had never got on particularly well, and the last time they had met, her face had been contorted with rage and disgust… and yet he felt that he might have to go back. Just once, before he returned to Spain. For years, he'd hardly given this place a thought; had often told Hermione that he never wanted to see it again… and yet. He'd spent nearly twenty years of his adult life here, and he found that he couldn't dismiss that quite so easily – not now that he was back in Britain.

Ron interrupted Severus's musings by standing up suddenly, stretching his long body. Hermione stirred as he removed his hand from her neck and lifted her head with her eyes still closed, grimacing as her stiff neck clicked. Her head sank down again, turned towards Severus this time, but she didn't sleep for long. After a few minutes, her eyelids flickered quickly and then opened quite suddenly. Her large brown eyes sought out and fixed upon his, at first with obvious disorientation and then with greater focus.

As awareness came back into her face, she lifted her head and looked towards Hugo, then back at Severus inquiringly.

He shook his head. "Not yet," he murmured, and she seemed to sag.

The Healer with the medi-wand had set up a virtual clock, which was counting down the hours, minutes and seconds. Hester Perowne stepped forward again and frowned at the data on the virus. It had definitely stopped moving now, but was still present.

Perowne moved over to Severus, speaking quietly. "There are still three hours to go, but I would rather not leave this until the last minute. We have no way of knowing how quickly your antidote will take effect."

"I agree." He looked at Hugo's calm face, acutely aware of the fact that both Hermione and Ron
were looking at him with an air of expectation. "Not yet, though. We need to be sure that the virus is definitely eradicated first."

Perowne sighed. "Another hour, then?"

"I…think so." Once more, he was conscious of his inability to be certain, but this time the ghosts didn't haunt him. He didn't quite know how he would ever look Hermione in the face again if he left her son permanently damaged…but he would at least know that he had saved Hugo's life. The thought comforted him, and it gave him the physical strength he needed to stay on his feet despite his extreme exhaustion.

*If I get through this, he thought to himself, I will sleep for a week. Or possibly a month.*

Perowne left the room again, but only for a short while before returning, clearly anxious. Another two Healers entered the room with her; one of them took over the medi-wand readings. Severus glanced towards the family window. It was growing increasingly crowded out there; all the Healers in Charge were present, along with both sets of Hugo's grandparents, Bill Weasley and Luna Lovegood. Potter was there too, along with his wife Ginevra, who appeared to be able to look anywhere but at him.

He paced the room, trying to calm his nerves. Draco came to the window and gave him a nod to indicate that the second batches had been successfully brewed. He paused and glanced towards the tray in the corner of the room that contained the vial of antidote, currently under a stasis charm, just to reassure himself that it was still there.

More time passed – how much time? How long would it *take*? He could feel his heart starting to beat a little faster. The adrenaline was surging through his veins again, just when he needed it. He would suffer for it afterwards, though; would probably disgrace himself by dropping where he stood, unless he had the presence of mind to crawl to an unoccupied bed first.

He paced again. Hester Perowne and her two Healers stood together now, muttering to each other about the readings. Eventually, one of them turned and gave Severus a calm look – *where did these Healers learn their clinical objectivity?*

"The virus is dead," she announced in the most neutral of tones.

Hermione seemed to have turned to stone where she stood. It was Ron who stepped forward and took Hugo's limp hand.

Severus turned towards the vial, removing the charm and clutching it in fingers that trembled almost uncontrollably. He took a moment to calm himself before turning back to the bed and that sea of expectant faces.

*Now for the moment of truth.*

Perowne took the vial from him and, with no hesitation, dripped the substance onto Hugo's tongue.

For a few agonising minutes, there was no response at all… and then the boy moaned and began to shiver violently.

Hermione gasped and sprang back into action, leaning forward to try to soothe him, but Perowne placed a restraining hand on hers.

"Just a moment, Hermione," she murmured, her eyes on the flashing medi-wand data. Hugo's moaning grew louder; he was clearly returning to consciousness. His limbs began to thrash about,
and the two Healers moved to restrict his movements and protect his head.

"What is it – what's happening to him?" Ron's voice sounded shaky. "Please tell us – is he alright?"

Hester Perowne didn't answer him immediately, but Severus knew already. He could tell by the way her assistant's shoulders relaxed.

Perowne squeezed Hermione's hand tightly as she smiled at Ron. "Hugo's magic is returning to its normal level. This is just a natural response to that process. It's early days, of course... but I am confident that your son will make a full recovery." She turned her sharp face in Severus's direction. "I congratulate you, Mr. Snape."

Severus was only vaguely aware of the cheer that went up beyond the window at her words. In the background, he could hear Ron's stammered thanks and Hermione's sobs of relief. His vision blurred for a moment and he blinked rapidly, trying to restore his sight.

The scene swam back into focus. Hugo was gradually emerging from his induced coma and the Healers seemed happy with his level of consciousness. Hermione and Ron were bent over their son, trying to soothe him, their heads together. He backed up and turned away from the bed, forcing his leaden limbs to propel him towards the door.

Draco, seeing this, moved to intercept him as he exited the room.

"The Labellum and antidote need to be distributed," Severus managed to rasp out of his suddenly dry throat. As he feared, his last reserves of energy were starting to desert him, and he spoke urgently to Draco. "Can you help them? Healer Perowne and her assistants know the process. And keep an eye on the numbers; a third batch may need to be brewed. But the potioners will be able to do that now without direct supervision... And Draco -," he grabbed the other man's arm as he turned away. "When you've done that, get Potter to give you a portkey to Orgiva. Take a hundred doses of both to Beatriz and explain how to treat Meghara and anyone else who needs it. Stay with them... she may need your help."

Draco squeezed his arm in silent gratitude and hurried off.

"And will somebody please find me a bed?" he said to no one in particular. "Before I collapse," he added, rather plaintively. Just at the moment, no one seemed to be paying him any attention, which seemed a little unfair in the circumstances.

"I can do that. I'll take you to Hermione's room; I don't think she'll need it for a while."

He turned to see Luna Lovegood, who was looking at him with an odd expression that might or might not have indicated amusement – he couldn't really tell with her. It made a welcome change from the awestruck or nervous looks that had been directed towards him by all and sundry since he'd arrived in Britain.

She grabbed his arm and hauled him off down the corridor. "Come on, Professor."

And this time he was too tired to correct her.
Meetings

Chapter Notes

I need to acknowledge a specific idea in this chapter: in a wonderful story called Post Tenebras, Lux by Loten (which I read on another fanfic site), Severus made the suggestion that the houses at Hogwarts should be treated more equally, including removing the Slytherin students from the dungeons and giving them their own tower. It was something that always annoyed me about the original books – an 11-year old wouldn't be fundamentally bad when they arrived at Hogwarts, so what hope did they have if they happened to be Sorted into Slytherin, perceived as 'the bad house' and ended up spending their spare time in some airless dungeon? Very child-friendly, I don't think. And I'm sure Severus didn't enjoy it much either!

When Severus finally woke, feeling as if he had indeed slept for a week, his cheek was stuck to something cold, hard and smooth. This seemed a little odd, as he was vaguely aware that when he'd slumped into unconsciousness, it had been on a soft, slightly worn cotton pillow that had smelt comfortably of Hermione.

He moved his head slightly, and the pillow crinkled. He opened one sticky eye. In close proximity, he could see a flowery, old-fashioned script. Dear Mr. Snape, I was so delighted to hear...

He drew his head back, frowning in confusion at the letter on his pillow. Turning over on the bed, he seemed to dislodge some more paper – it cascaded onto the floor with a series of light thuds. He sat up cautiously.

The bed was liberally covered in scrolls. More were piled up on the floor. As he scratched his head, wondering just how long he'd been asleep, an owl flew through the window that he'd incautiously left open the previous night to try to catch a breeze, and deposited yet one more on his lap.

He opened it curiously. Mr. Snape, The Ministry said you were innocent, but we both know the truth, don't we...

He read on, in growing disbelief. Then he picked up another, and another. They were a sorry mixture of threats, hate mail, sycophantic expressions of support, heartfelt thanks and pleas for information about missing loved ones. Even blackmail from individuals who claimed to have seen through his defence...as if it had been he who had petitioned the Ministry and not Harry.

He vanished a particularly nasty note full of poorly-spelt vitriol and pushed the rest of them off the bed onto the floor. This was exactly what he'd sought to avoid by staying away so long. Sighing, he leaned back against the headboard and peered at the window, trying to work out what time it must be. The light seemed to suggest late afternoon, and he hoped he had only slept about 12 hours instead of 36.

Another owl flew in, but this one was more welcome – it was Pegasus, his long-eared owl. He swooped gracefully over the bed, dropped his scroll and perched on the headboard.

Severus reached up and scratched the owl's head as he opened the scroll, and quickly scanned the
contents. It was from Draco, and he was relieved to hear that Meghara was still alive. Beatriz was currently administering the treatment, and Draco was busy assessing the local community and working out how many would need treating. He had also been in touch with the local magical hospital in Granada and explained the principles. He would be in touch again soon.

Pegasus gave him a little nip to remind him of his presence. "Don't have anything for you," he murmured to the owl, but then he suddenly noticed a mug and a plate containing a pleasing pile of bacon sandwiches on the bedside table, kept warm under a stasis charm. The enticing aroma of coffee assailed his nostrils as he lifted the charm and snagged a large piece of bacon for Pegasus. The owl accepted it with gratitude and flew out of the window, heading in the direction of the roof. He would probably linger for a while in case his master had a reply.

As he lifted the coffee mug, he saw a folded note stuck firmly underneath. Recognising the writing, he put the mug down again and picked it up.

The note was to the point:

Severus,

I know you'll be busy once you wake up and you certainly need to sleep as much as you probably can. I didn’t want to disturb you, so this is just a note to say that I'll be staying on the ward with Hugo for now. The Healers say that he'll probably need to stay in for a couple of days, but his recovery is truly remarkable! When he's well enough to come home, I'll be taking him and Rose back to Rye. My parents will come to help me, and I'll be taking a leave of absence until he's fully recovered.

I know that you don't want gushing thanks (and you'll probably get enough of that from hundreds of people in the weeks and months to come), so I won't say any more about it – yet. But I just wanted to say that I know what it must have cost you to come out of hiding after so long, and I will never forget what your unselfishness has meant to Hugo and to the whole family. That's all I'm going to say right now.

I don't know when we'll get a chance to meet again, but there's one thing I want to make clear. These last few weeks have helped to concentrate my mind. There's no looking back – not as far as I'm concerned. Wherever you choose to be, that's where I will be too. I don't mind if it's here or in Spain - or in Outer Mongolia for all I care! What I'm trying to say, so badly, is that it makes no difference. Do you understand what I'm saying?

The truth is, I've spent far too many years worrying about stupid, unimportant little things - the gap between us, your past, my career, my stupid reputation. I've been a complete fool about it all. Nothing - NOTHING - matters except that I love you, Severus. Everything else we can work out as we go along, but I'll never fix anything as long as I keep on hesitating and putting things off.

While I was sitting there, watching while Hugo was so ill, I finally came to realise that all I want out of life is to live it the best way I know how. The simple truth is that I've never been alive the way that I am whenever I am with you. So - that's all. Can I live with you, Severus? Will you let me? I know that I've kept you waiting for far too long, but I want to put the past behind us and move on.

I want to finish off my studies, but I'll stay with you as often as I can until Rose and Hugo go to school, and then I'll move over permanently. I'm sure Beatriz would be happy to have an assistant! Eventually, I want to go into research, but we'll work something out between us.

Well...anyway, we can talk about it all when we meet again. You know where I'll be, so come and
see me and the children when you can. Regarding Ron, it's over. If the Ministry makes us go through a formal separation then I'm prepared to do that – whatever it takes. He won't be returning home; we've agreed that it would be best if he moved out. That's not important right now, because I know you'll have tonnes of things to do and to think about, but I just wanted you to know my current situation.

Regards,

Hermione

P.S. You may wish to see Lucius while you're here? I haven't had a chance to see him recently and I'm concerned that he may be ill.

He read the letter through three times before leaning his head back and gazing out of the window. He felt a little light-headed – with relief, he supposed. On reading the first part of it, he had half-feared that she would say that her family came first or that she was calling it off with him to make another go at her relationship with Ron.

He glanced at the ending again, a little surprised by the cold formality of the 'regards', but then he suspected that Hermione was probably embarrassed by her confession. She was not normally the 'hearts and flowers' type and he imagined that she'd found it hard to word the letter. It also seemed a little tentative, as if she was unsure of his current feelings…but perhaps she had been picking up on the slightly distant mood he had had since he arrived.

Suddenly, he felt very much more cheerful, and realised equally suddenly that he was starving. He tackled the rest of the bacon sandwiches with gusto, feeling as if it had been weeks since he'd had more than a few snatched bites between experiments.

When his plate was clean, he leaned back against the bed board, picked up the mug of coffee and sipped, thoughtfully. He really needed to get up and find out what on earth was happening out there in the real world. He'd slept in his worn old travel clothes and they were beginning to smell pretty rank – he desperately needed a hot shower.

He glanced at the small sink and saw that there was a shaving kit, toothbrush, toothpaste, comb and some clean towels laid out for him. There was also a bathrobe, and he got out of bed, feeling the stiffness of his joints, stripped out of his clothes and put it on. There was a small leather wallet by the sink and he picked it up, curiously. It was oddly heavy and when he opened it, he realised why. It had clearly been shrunk by one of Hermione's charms: reaching in, he was able to pull out several changes of clothing and a pair of shoes, all brand new and in his size. He smiled when he saw the blue silk scarf – it was exactly the same shade as the one she'd bought for him that long-ago Christmas.

He encountered no one on his journey down the corridor, trying to identify the bathroom, where he stood under a high-powered jet of scalding hot water for at least 20 minutes, feeling the tension lifting from his shoulders. There was soap and shampoo and he scrubbed away the accumulated dirt of apparating halfway across the world and flying from Scotland by broomstick.

Back in Hermione's room, he lathered up and started shaving. As he did so, he gazed a little blankly at his face.

It occurred to him suddenly that he in no way resembled the Severus Snape who had left Britain in 1998. That might go some way to explaining the rather uncertain looks he had received from people since his dramatic arrival a couple of days ago – as if they were trying to convince themselves that it was really him.
The face that greeted him these days was fuller and far healthier. Years of eating fresh food and of working outside in a hotter climate had removed some of the pallor, although he would never be as tanned as his Spanish friends. His complexion was rougher too, from sun and wind and hard work. His lank black hair was turning grey but he kept it short at the back, with thick locks falling over his forehead, which suited him much better and served to de-emphasize his over-large nose. The scar was a little less livid, although he still kept it covered in public as much as he could.

He finished his shave and turned away from the mirror, resigned if not entirely satisfied.

He dressed in a light pair of trousers and a blue cotton shirt, which were far more suitable for a warm summer's day. As he tied the scarf around his neck and tucked the ends into his open-necked collar, he wondered how he was going to find his way back to the hospital. He wasn't familiar with this part of it, and had only vague memories of being escorted here last night. Should he apparate to the wards? Was that even allowed around here?

First things first. He wrinkled up his nose at the untidy heap of scrolls on the floor and was initially tempted to incinerate the lot. As he contemplated them, yet another owl flew in to add to the pile. He muttered a rude word under his breath and closed the window behind it. Clearly, what he needed was someone to take this lot over for him – possibly Bill might be able to control any communication…and it was becoming clear that there was going to be lot of it. Evidently, his unexpected return and his cure for the virus had captured the imagination of the wizarding world, and it hadn't taken them long to react.

He rolled up his sleeves and began sorting the letters out.

In the end, he incinerated all but four of them: an official-looking missive with the Ministry seal on it, a note with the Hogwarts seal, and the letters from Hermione and Draco, which he folded up and put into his new magic wallet. The Ministry letter was from Kingsley: in coldly official words, it congratulated him on his survival and requested that he present himself at the Ministry at 2PM on Wednesday 27th July. The Hogwarts one was a slightly terse note from Minerva – she trusted that he would be able to make his way to the school to see her at the earliest opportunity. He deduced the warmer subtext beneath the slightly severe tone and grinned. Trust that gruff old Gryffindor to be sentimental.

He added both letters to the wallet, along with his remaining new clothes and the bathrobe and toiletries, and put it in his pocket. He had incinerated his dirty old clothes with the pile of scrolls. Glancing around to make sure the room was neat, he set off to find out what was going on.

It was actually not too hard to find his way back to the wards. Various Healers and other staff were bustling around and paid him no attention. He saw Healer Perowne surrounded by a knot of Healers and Aurors, clearly issuing instructions, and decided to keep out of the way.

It was strange to be able stand back and watch the fruits of his work in progress. There was an air of efficient activity about the place now; just over 24 hours ago, there had been plenty of activity, but it had had a desperate edge to it. Now, the bustle was one of optimism and purpose.

He strolled towards Hugo's room. He was keen to see Hermione, of course, but was also in no hurry, much to his surprise. He felt…content. It was as if something had finally been settled, and he was happy to let events progress at their own speed.

He stopped by the family window. It was a casual, peaceful scene that greeted him. Hermione was on the bed, with Hugo cuddled up next to her looking very much better. They were working at some game or puzzle on the side table. Rose was reclining in an armchair, her long legs propped up on the bed, nose buried in a book. There was no sign of Ron.
He put his hand on the door handle, but something about the scene made him hesitate.

"Ah, Professor."

He looked around to see Luna Lovegood approaching, looking more vague than usual. She was dressed in a quite extraordinary floor-length dress, which seemed to have been made from patchwork pieces of material of almost every fabric and every colour in the rainbow, sewn together quite randomly.

"Do you like it?" She twirled around, holding out her skirt. "It seemed like a good outfit to wear on a day when everyone is celebrating."

"Are they?" he asked weakly, trying to avoid answering her question directly.

"But of course they are, Professor." She peered up at him, that vague smile suddenly turning a little wry.

"I'm not your Professor now, Miss Lovegood," he reminded her.

"I keep forgetting," she replied, serenely. "But, you see, you have never been anything else to me, and I'm afraid I can't shake the habit."

And she put her head on one side and peered up at him so intently that he became embarrassed by the scrutiny. "Miss Lovegood, this may sound a little odd, but can you tell me what day it is? And the time?"

She blinked, apparently taken aback by the question. "Tuesday 26th July and it's -," she consulted her watch, "- half past four in the afternoon."

He relaxed. "My apologies. I wasn't quite sure how long I had been asleep."

"Ah." She gave him a dazzling smile. "You have certainly been busy, Professor."

"So I gather." He regarded her for a moment. He'd never paid an awful lot of attention to the eccentric Ravenclaw. Her performance in Potions had not been notable, although she certainly hadn't been his worst pupil. He remembered being mildly irritated by her illogical belief in mythical beings, but that was about it.

"Well, I..." He coughed, embarrassed by her continued scrutiny. "Thank you, Miss Lovegood. I'm just going to..." He turned back to the door, beginning to turn the handle.

"I wouldn't do that, Professor."

The voice was so hard that it didn't seem possible that it had emerged from this vague young woman. His head swung back towards her in disbelief.

She glanced meaningfully towards the family window and his eyes followed. Hermione didn't seem to have noticed his appearance outside the room.

Her voice was softer when she spoke again. "You've done a wonderful thing here, Professor. That family will be strengthened by their experiences," She nodded towards the room, then tilted her head to one side and gave him a strangely intense look. "They should be left alone for a while, though – don't you agree? Let them recover first."

He felt a sullen anger rising in his chest. "With respect, Miss Lovegood, you have no right -."
"And neither do you," she interrupted. "Not here. You don't belong here. This is a place for families."

He was struck by the way that something subtle had shifted in Luna's persona – there was just a touch of steel in those vague blue eyes and the tone of that light sing-song voice. Despite his fury, he began to appreciate what it was that Hermione saw in this odd friend of hers.

She softened at the expression on his face. "She's not going anywhere, Severus. Give her time. She needs to focus on her children at the moment."

He noted the sudden use of his first name, and wondered just how much this strange young woman knew about him and Hermione.

"You are probably right," he agreed, reluctantly, his anger receding somewhat. He gave Hermione and the children a last longing look and moved with Luna a short distance along the corridor.

"Well," she gave him a cheerful smile. "I must go. It was good to see you again…Professor."

He nodded at her, a little curtly, and stood watching her go, at a loss. His cheerful mood had evaporated. He knew she was right, really – he had no place here. He had to wait for Hermione to come to him.

Not sure what to do, he walked slowly up the corridor, trying to find Perowne. He didn't succeed in tracking her down, but spent the next couple of hours questioning various hurried people and piecing together the information.

The Healers were all focused on administering his treatment; all the other departments had been closed to all but urgent cases. Even trainee and retired Healers had been called in to help, along with those working at other organisations. He spotted Poppy Pomfrey in the distance at one point; she gave him a cheerful wave and seemed utterly unsurprised by his appearance, as if he'd been working at Hogwarts for the last decade.

The Aurors had already started to distribute the potions across the country. Their counterparts had arrived from countries around the world to transport samples of the plant and copies of Severus's antidote to laboratories in their home countries. Harry had gone to Valenzuela earlier in the day to ask Draco to retrieve the plants from Severus's laboratory. And Ron had taken a team of Aurors to South America to collect the rest.

Severus wasn't too worried about the plants themselves – one plant provided a lot of sap. He was more concerned that production of the antidote was kept up and, to this end, he visited the hospital laboratory. It was quite a relief to enter the sanctity of the laboratory; he was getting a little fed up of the curious stares. At least he could talk to fellow potioneers. He was relieved to see that they were on top of production.

It soon became clear that, although they were pleased to see him and have a chance to talk to a Master potioneer, they were also too polite to point out that he was in the way. The antidote brewing was taking up a great deal of their time, and they had other specialist potions that needed to be prepared also. He would have offered to help out, but it was obvious to him that this wouldn't be welcomed.

He wandered towards the exit, glancing at the clock. It was approaching six thirty, and he had absolutely nothing to do and no idea where to go until his appointment with Kingsley the following afternoon. He could go back to Spain for the night, assuming that the apparition ban had been lifted, but he felt strangely reluctant to return home now he was back in Britain.
He fingered the wallet in his pocket, thinking of the letters.

*What the hell, why not...*

He apparated a short distance from the main gates. The sun was still shining quite strongly in the west. It made the high turrets of the castle glow in the peaceful summer evening. He found himself closing his eyes and taking a deep breath of pine-scented air.

Some of his happiest times at this school had been during the summer months when the students had departed, taking their noisy exuberance with them. During other holiday periods, there might be some students staying put, but in the summer, when everyone had gone, the staff could finally relax and lay aside their teaching robes for a couple of months. It wasn't incumbent upon staff to remain at the school, of course, but many did if they were working on some research. Some travelled. Severus would often divide his time between longer potions projects and ingredient-seeking tours. He would spend as little time as possible at his house in Spinner's End, which he detested. And, on warmer summer evenings, when he wasn't at Voldemort's beck and call, he would stroll through the grounds and take in the peaceful night sounds and scents of Scotland.

He didn't realise he had missed it so much.

He hesitated at the gate, unsure of what wards were currently in place on Hogwarts Castle or whether he would be able to enter by this route. However, he didn't need to worry. A small determined figure was already hobbling towards the gates, which swung open as she approached.

"Severus," the headmistress greeted him, rather curtly.

"Good evening, Minerva."

He inclined his head, watching her carefully. There was a strange look on her face, as if she could not decide what expression should be residing there at present. Her lips twitched a little.

"Well, not much point in standing around here, is there?" she snapped suddenly and turned back towards the great doors.

He smirked as he followed her, matching his steps to her slower pace. She walked with a stick now, but her back was as straight as ever. He'd heard rumours from Hermione that she was thinking of retiring, which seemed a little surprising as he estimated that she was only in her mid-seventies, relatively young by the standards of previous heads. However, she had received her fair share of injuries during the Final Battle, and it might simply be that she'd had enough and wanted a quiet life. He could understand that.

The last time they had met, she had screamed the word *coward* at him, as he fled the castle rather than continue to fight his colleague and fellow Order member. The insult had stung. She'd been his transfiguration teacher once and he'd respected her abilities. Later, as colleagues and heads of rival houses, they had sniped at one another, particularly over Quidditch results, but it had always been good- spirited and they had shared a strong loyalty to Dumbledore. Minerva had been one of the few people who had known of Severus's work as a double-agent. It had hurt him deeply during that last year not to be able to tell her the truth; to have to watch her face contort with anger and hatred whenever he spoke to her. It would have been a comfort to have been able to confide in at least one colleague, but he couldn't take the risk. And Minerva had always been a typical Gryffindor – far too obvious about her likes and dislikes. In that sense, she'd been a useful 'enemy' during that last year; her clear enmity had kept the Carrow's suspicions about his loyalty to Voldemort at bay.
He wondered whether she was also thinking of that last night. She seemed disinclined to talk, so he followed her down the long pathway, looking around with interest.

Very little seemed to have changed in the grounds – on this side of the school, anyway. He could see some newer greenhouses just to the side, some distance from the castle, and remembered that Longbottom was now the resident Herbology professor. He hoped fervently that his former student was better with herbs than he had been with potions – he'd lost count of the number of cauldrons that had been blown up by that incompetent boy.

The biggest change that he could see so far was to the castle itself. There seemed to be something slightly odd about the towers. He squinted at them, trying to work out what it was.

She noticed his confusion. "When the Castle was rebuilt after the Battle," she said, quietly, "it became apparent that we needed to give some consideration to the needs of the new and returning students. In particular, we were concerned about the well-being of those members of Slytherin that remained. There was a possibility that we might lose that house altogether. No new student wished to become a member of it."

"You surprise me," he muttered.

She chose to ignore the sarcasm and stopped walking, leaning a little on her cane as she gazed up at the castle's profile against the blue sky. "We decided that it would be more sensible to house all the students in towers. Ravenclaw Tower was reasonably unscathed following the Battle, but Gryffindor Tower had to be extensively rebuilt, as did the DADA Tower, the Stone Bridge Tower and the North Tower. We needed to put in extra quarters for the returning '8th years' too. Anyway, as we rebuilt these towers, it made sense to change their use. The DADA Tower became Hufflepuff Tower and the North Tower became Slytherin Tower – we no longer offer Divination as a subject here. The towers had to be enlarged, of course, which is why the roof looks different. We kept the Potions classroom and laboratories down in the dungeons, but all the other areas were closed off. DADA was moved to the Stone Bridge Tower."

"I see."

She glanced up at him. "You don't disapprove of the changes?"

He shrugged. "Why should I? It makes perfect sense. You needed to rebuild the reputation of Slytherin and this at least gives an impression of equality. I hope you've been able to back it up by treating them fairly?"

He was subjected to the patented MacGonagall glare. "Are you suggesting that I was even-handed in my treatment of the students?"

"Let's just say that it was not all that easy dealing with new students who had been made defensive from the first day by the unnecessarily hostile reception given to their house by the other three houses combined," he replied, drily.

"Hmm," was her only comment, and she led the way to the main doors.

He realised with dawning amusement that she was deeply uncomfortable...and he was beginning to glean the possible reason why. It might be considered that he was still the Headmaster here, since he had never formally resigned. Of course, it had been assumed that he had 'left' the post by dint of being dead. Usually, when a Head died, a blank portrait would be hung in the Headmaster's office and the deceased individual would inhabit it. In situations where the Head had resigned, the portrait would remain blank until their death. He wondered whether there was a blank portrait
intended for him, and whether she had wondered why he had never appeared in it.

She led him through the empty castle and up the spiral staircase to the Headmistress's tower. As he looked around curiously, she clapped her hands to summon a house elf and gave instructions for tea. He couldn't see a blank portrait with his name on it; he could only assume that if Minerva had considered commissioning one, Harry or Hermione must have talked her out of it.

"Is anyone else here at the moment?" he asked, as he sat in an easy chair by the window, deliberately ignoring the chair she had indicated.

She frowned at this slight, and shook her head. "I sent the rest of the staff home. It seemed best, especially as it didn't look as if the children would be returning this year. Hagrid is here, of course, since he has nowhere else to go. And some of them have only gone as far as Hogsmeade."

"Filius?"

"Gone to his daughter's." She hesitated. "I'm not sure he'll return. He's not getting any younger, and the war took a lot out of him. It may be time for him to move on."

"Who would you replace him with?" It seemed impossible to imagine a Hogwarts without Filius Flitwick in it.

"I'm not sure. I had rather hoped that Hermione Weasley might be prevailed upon to return to the school, but it would seem that she is not interested in teaching."

She shrugged in her usual brisk manner, but he could see the disappointment in her face. It was clear that she had always got on well with Hermione and had hoped that her protégé would eventually take over from her. Hermione would have made an excellent teacher for Charms, which had always been one of her strongest subjects; equally she would have done well in Transfiguration or Arithmancy. Almost any subject but Potions, and even there she would probably have been competent enough to teach to NEWT level. He could understand why Minerva would have wanted her to return.

He was just wondering whether she knew of his connection to Hermione and whether or not he should raise the topic when the house elf reappeared with a tea tray.

He watched, interested, as it fussed around, placing the tea, sandwiches and cakes on a table. The legislation that Hermione had helped to bring in had led to better working conditions for house elves. They were paid salaries now, which might explain why this one was dressed (one might say over-dressed) in a variety of clothes. It appeared that the Hogwarts elves were as subservient as they ever were, however, as he (or was it she?) bowed deeply before disappearing.

As Minerva poured the tea, he suddenly realised that he was starving. The bacon sandwich seemed a long time ago. Before that, he couldn't quite remember when he'd last ate properly – he seemed to remember Draco giving him some kind of Muggle snack bar at one point, but it was all a little hazy. He leaned towards the table and grabbed a plate, piling it high with sandwiches and muffins.

His old colleague raised an eyebrow but made no comment. It was possible she'd never seen him show so much enthusiasm for food before. In the Voldemort days, he'd had little appetite for food and at times had simply consumed the bare minimum to prevent himself from collapsing.

"Well, you've been busy," she commented, as she stirred her tea.

"I have," he agreed as he bit into a sandwich.
He was aware that she was observing him closely as he ate. Her eyes were running over his features, as if she was mapping the changes that the last twelve years had brought. Strangely, of all the people who had been staring at him today, hers was the only attention that he didn't really care about.

Eventually, she gave a short laugh and turned her attention to her tea. "The irony is that I was thinking of you a few weeks' ago. I was thinking 'if there is anyone who could have got us out of this mess, it would have been Severus Snape'."

He chose not to respond to this. It might seem a little impolite, but he was more interested in the scone to which he had just applied large spoonfuls of jam and cream. And, in any case, she knew him of old – he knew perfectly well that he was not known for his social skills. He was about to bite into it, when she startled him with her next words.

"So how did you do it?"

"Do what?" He stared at her, the dripping scone halfway to his lips. "Brew the potion?"

She rolled her eyes. "Survive. How did you?"

He sighed in a deliberately put-upon manner, but she was not to be brushed aside, merely raising one perfectly plucked eyebrow. He put the scone down. "Before I answer that, can I ask you a question? Did you know I was still alive?"

She lifted her cup to her mouth and sipped delicately at the fragranced tea. "I had some suspicions, yes."

"Was it Hermione?" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he realised his mistake.

She threw him a startled look. "Hermione Weasley? What did she have to do with it? Are you telling me she knew?" She shook her head. "It wasn't any person. I had the portrait commissioned – I didn't tell anyone at the Ministry, because I wanted it to be a surprise. I kept it in a private room, waiting for you to appear."

She gave him an uncertain look. "I wanted to speak to you first, before you saw anyone else. Wanted to ask you – oh, so many things. Why you did it, how you managed to keep your secret. What your true feelings toward Dumbledore and Harry were. Well, anyway. I waited and waited for weeks, until it became apparent that you would not return. I thought I might have driven you away permanently by my parting comments…but then I remembered that you'd never been happy at home as a boy, and that Hogwarts was the first happy place for you. For all the bad memories, I was sure that you would have returned to Hogwarts if you could, which suggested to me that you were not in a condition to 'return'. And they had never found a body. I simply kept the portrait hidden and never mentioned it. I felt sure that you had a good reason for not coming out of hiding."

She gave another short laugh, which he recognised as the tough Gryffindor's way of masking emotion. "So Hermione knew, did she? She certainly kept that little fact hidden during her last year here."

He briefly explained Hermione's role in his survival and escape to Spain, and the fact that Harry and the Weasleys had also known. He tried to minimise her role, speaking of her as dispassionately as he could. She sat listening intently and looking at him with her piercing, all-knowing eyes, and he had a horrible feeling that he wasn't fooling the sharp old witch one bit.

She nodded as he finished. "I see. And so you've made a life for yourself out there in Spain."
He smiled. "Yes. I have." He thought of his little cottage and the surrounding land with affection. It was hard to believe that it had been little more than an unwanted ruin on scrubland when he'd first arrived. The early years had been physically tough, but they had paid off. The local villagers had accepted him in their quiet but warm-hearted manner. And he loved Andalusia. He loved the seasons, the gentle springs, the hot summers, the warm, sleepy autumns, even the winter gales. He loved the soil that he understood so well, the sound of the bells as the sheep and goats made their way down from the mountains...closing his eyes, he could almost feel the lemon-scented hot dry breezes of a Spanish July.

"I see..." He opened his eyes to find her looking at him speculatively over her cup. His eyes narrowed at her next words. "You wouldn't consider coming back, then."

"Minerva --," he began, warningly, but she raised a hand.

"Just listen to me. Your name has been cleared. You are a Master potioneer, one of the last of your, or any, generation. There is a great deal that you could do back in Britain. You were always a competent teacher --." He couldn't let that pass. "I was not! I was a terrible teacher -- as you well know. I disliked the role intensely. It just gave me an excuse to work alongside Dumbledore." He glared at her. "Don't even think of offering me my old job, Minerva."

She shrugged, casually. "You can't blame me for trying. You'd bring a big reputation to the school. They'd be falling over themselves to send their children here -- from abroad too."

"Reputation? More like notoriety," he muttered. "And I have no desire to be your... pet project. I run a successful business, and I'm happy over there. Why would I want to change anything?"

"Well...but even if you didn't come back here, why not come back to Britain?" She gave him a thoughtful look. "You could do an awful lot of good, Severus."

"In what way?" He couldn't understand her logic. "Precisely what good would it do for someone like me to be in the public eye?"

She shrugged. "Well, you have quite an astonishing tale to tell, haven't you? How you came to work for Voldemort; how you moved your loyalties to Dumbledore. People are interested in that kind of story, and it'll give them hope." She stopped when she saw his face.

"No. Just, no." The very thought of pouring his heart out to some awful journalist, like that Skeeter woman, made him want to vomit.

"Don't you think you have a duty?" She regarded him seriously. "You played an important role during the war. The fate of the wizarding world rested as much in your hands as in Harry's -- don't you think people have a right to know?"

He grunted out a bitter laugh, shaking his head. "I'm not about to become some kind of mascot for the battle between good and evil. People can go on wondering."

She picked up a scone and crumbled it between her fingers. "It could raise morale. And challenge discrimination. You're a Slytherin -- a 'good' Slytherin. You're proof of what can be achieved. I think you could make quite a difference to public attitudes. You might even make a difference to other Slytherins."

He looked at her in disbelief. "You don't really believe that, do you?"
She grimaced. "I suppose not. I know you too well. I'm only telling you what the Ministry will think. Kingsley will have asked you to visit, hmm?" At his nod, she continued, "I thought so. That's what he'll want you to do. Become a public figure. Be an example of the fact that it is possible to have been a follower of Voldemort and be redeemed. Look at it from his point of view. He's dealing with a population that's still extremely divided in many ways. He deals with endless cases of people reporting their neighbours for supposed war crimes. And many of the leading families were implicated in some ways. They're in a mess. Lost their status; lost their wealth. After the war, no one would employ them; no one would buy from them, for fear being accused of collaboration. No one will elect them to office. Some of them have even had to sell their houses. You're a Slytherin – you must know how desperate such a family must be to give up their property."

She paused, taking an unladylike gulp of her tea. "Some might say 'good riddance to bad rubbish'. I'm not sure that I don't agree with them. But Kingsley would point out that you don't build up a population through accusation and division. And you need your leading families to support the Ministry. The reality is that we need Slytherins. We need their political power and business instincts."

"So things are not well for the old Slytherin families, then," he murmured, draining his cup. It didn't come as an enormous surprise; he'd surmised as much from little bits of information that Hermione had let drop. And of course, Draco was a case in point.

Almost as if she'd read his mind, she carried on: "That was a sad case - young Draco Malfoy. Drugs. We employed him for a while, but he was in a terrible state when he left us." She shook her head. "I hated to let him go, but I had no choice. The children…"

"Draco is fine," he interrupted. "He's with me now. Got clean and is now training to be a potioneer. And will, I suspect, be getting married soon."

Assuming all is well, he reminded himself, his heart clenching as he thought of that beloved little family. There was no point in Owling Draco tonight – Meghara's treatment wouldn't be complete until the morning.

She looked up at him in surprise. "Is that so? Well, I'm glad to hear it. He wouldn't have had long to live if he'd carried on that way. Hermione, I suppose?" When he nodded, she gave an approving smile. "I thought so. She's a good girl. Never turned her back on anyone who was suffering. But the harsh reality is that he's by no means the only one."

She was silent for a moment and he didn't interrupt her, instead silently accepting the second cup of tea she poured him. When she spoke again, her voice was so quiet that he had to strain to hear her.

"You know, I never thought I'd be advocating for the rights of Slytherin students. Never thought I'd have to," she admitted, with a sniff. "Not with you around to stick up for them. You were a worthy opponent, I'll say that for you." She gave him an unrepentant smile, but sobered quickly as she carried on.

"Since the war, it's been difficult for the house of Slytherin. Many of the older students never returned. Those that did…well, they were different. Quieter. Less sure of themselves. Do you know, in the first year after the war, not a single Slytherin passed their OWLs. Not one. And only half of that year returned anyway. And, even now, you should see the faces of the children who are sorted into that house. You can see them almost praying to be Sorted to another house – even Gryffindor rather than Slytherin. They're scared. Scared of what the other students will think of them. They haven't won a single Quiddich match since the war. The attrition rate is twice that of other houses, and the pass rates are on average thirty per cent less than for the other houses."
"Are you surprised?" he demanded, angrily. "That's what happens when you demonise a group of children from the age of eleven. Did you suppose Draco Malfoy was bad from the moment you saw him step into the school for the first time? Arrogant, yes, and possessing some suspect views courtesy of his father, but evil? No. But what do you think it is like to be booed on your first day at school? How long do you suppose it takes for an eleven year old to become defensive and outwardly hostile to the students from other houses? One thing you can always say for a Slytherin was that they are loyal to one another - because they have to be. Who else can they turn to? And don't say their teachers," he added, as she opened her mouth to speak. "Who on the staff would they be able to turn to? Who will really understand? Since Horace left, do you have a single Slytherin on the staff? Who's their head of house?"

"Well, Filius has been filling in -," she began, and he nodded.

"Precisely. You haven't even found a new head of house for them."

"Well, I can't help it if no one applies!" she snapped, furiously.

He raised a hand. "I'll stop you right there, Minerva. You can help it. You have to help it. You're the head of this establishment, which means that you have a duty of care to all its students. If the students of one house are uniformly under-performing, that is your fault, not theirs."

"I do try to be even-handed," she replied, with a frown.

"I'm sure you do try…but it's the little things. A slightly dismissive tone of voice. A lower expectation. Slytherins are sensitive to mood and atmosphere – they pick up on such things. And how many cross-house positions of responsibility have the members of Slytherin held in the last decade or so? How many head boys or head girls? I'm assuming none. Well, that's not good enough. You can't expect children to develop pride in their house, if their own headmistress doesn't have any pride in it."

She sighed. "You are right, I'm sure. So what I am to do about the head of house position? I've tried advertising."

He leaned back in his chair, observing her without much sympathy. "You can't just sit back and wait for replies to an advertisement in the Prophet. No one will apply that way. Your problem is that Slytherins don't reply to adverts – not unless they're absolutely desperate. That's not how they operate. They're all about family connections, friendships, past loyalties. They recommend one another. Most Slytherins would consider themselves above merely applying for a post, like any common witch or wizard. They expect their worth to be known – they expect to be applied to. And, in any case, most of them are trying to disassociate themselves with their past, so you've got that additional barrier to overcome. To get a Slytherin into Hogwarts, you need to think like a Slytherin. Get out there, seek out contacts - talk to people. Find out who might be interested and contact them directly."

She looked decidedly displeased by his words, but gave a stiff nod. "I'll try."

He nodded. "You need to. And, for Merlin's sake, try to find someone they can look up to. Not another lazy old duffer like Horace. Someone they can be proud of."

"Like you?"

"No, damnit, Minerva, not like me!" He took a deep, calming breath before continuing. "Not like me at all. They do not wish to be reminded of the past. They need to move on – to claim back what the house of Slytherin stood for before the days of Voldemort. Some of the finest minds in politics
and business came from Slytherin, and some of the finest thinkers and philosophers. Find someone from that background - a self-made man or woman, perhaps. Someone who hasn't been tainted by Voldemort – they didn't all follow him, you know. It wasn't a given that just because you were in Slytherin, you had to support him. They may not have stood against him either, but some of them defied him in small but important ways. That's the kind of person you need to appoint. Someone who knows how to work the system to his or her advantage – and to the advantage of the students. It's not cheating. It's just the way the Slytherin mind works – assess the situation, look for the advantages and exploit them."

"And that can't be you?"

He shook his head, suddenly feeling quite tired. "I don't want to become the poster boy for a brave new world. I've had enough. I just want to be left alone to live my life."

She stared at him for a few minutes, and he braced himself for a further fight, but much to his surprise, she finally nodded. "I can understand that."

He glanced out of the window and realised, with some surprise that the sky was beginning to darken. With the long Scottish summer, it would be a while before night fell completely, but it was clearly getting late.

"I should go." He stood, wondering whether Hermione's bed would be available again. She would probably be sleeping in Hugo's room.

She stood up too. "You would be welcome to stay, if you wish." She gave him a wistful smile, and it occurred to him that she was rather lonely. "We could talk of... old times," she finished, lamely.

"Really?" He gave her a dubious look. "You think that's a good idea?" He had visions of a cosy chat deteriorating into an all-out fight over who was right.

She nodded. "Or... you could tell me the truth about you and Hermione Weasley."

He opened and closed his mouth rather dumbly, unsure of what to say.

"Come on, Severus." Her face was wry. "I may be an old woman now, but foolish I am not. It was quite obvious that you were not giving me the full facts earlier. Remember, I've known the both of you for a very long time..."

She put a tentative hand on his arm. "We were friends once - of a sort. Well, colleagues, anyway, but I think we respected each other. Am I right? Is it possible to put the past behind us now?"

And he decided that, after all, perhaps it was possible to put the past behind them.

And so he sat down again and, over a fresh pot of tea, he talked. Talked about Hermione, about his feelings for her. About their fights and misunderstandings and moments of perfect happiness. Talked at length about his land and business and his plans for them. Talked about Cesar and Beatriz and their family, about how they pulled him through the hardest of times. Talked about Draco and his hopes and fears for the young man. He even talked about his past — about his abusive father and uncaring mother and how he felt coming to Hogwarts for the first time; about James and Lily, about Voldemort, about his true feelings for Dumbledore and for Harry. He talked on and on, as the night drew in and the house elves hurried about the castle, extinguishing lights and shutting doors.

And she sat and nursed her cup of tea, her sharp eyes on his face, and didn't say a single word.
He finished talking at last and leaned back in his seat, gulping his cold tea down. He felt exhausted and yet somehow a little lighter. It was a relief to talk to someone who had no reason to judge either him or Hermione. He had wondered whether Minerva would come out in support of one of her little cubs, but he had no real fear of that. She had spoken the truth earlier: she had always tried to be even-handed in her dealings with others and had never given preference to her Gryffindor students except during Quiddich matches.

"Well," she said after a period of contemplative silence. "You've certainly lived quite the life, my boy. Little did I know when I first saw that thin pale unhappy-looking eleven year old in my class just how significant an individual you would be for us all. And I never would have connected you with that bright-eyed, intelligent, passionate young lady that entered my house twenty years later. And yet..." She stared at her hands for a moment, and then laughed. "And yet... Yes. Perhaps it does work, after all. Now I think about it, there's a good deal about you that matches. Interests and so on. Well, it's not necessarily the life I would have chosen for her...but she knows what she's doing."

He sighed; this was no more than he had expected. "You don't think I'm good enough for her, of course."

She laughed again, looking up at him with mirth in her eyes. "Actually, I had been beginning to wonder whether she was good enough for you. It occurs to me that I may have underestimated you to a considerable degree."

"She's good enough for me. She's perfect for me," he said, a little gruffly.

She leaned forward, put her hand over his and gave him perhaps the first genuine smile he had ever received from her. "Yes, Severus. I rather think she is."

Minerva was, of course, quite right about the tenor of his conversation with Kingsley.

After some further discussion about fellow colleagues and acquaintances, he had excused himself to send school owls to Hermione and Draco, letting them know where he was, and then spent a peaceful night in one of the guest suites. He had breakfasted with Minerva and then had spent a pleasant morning, wandering around the school with her, discussing her plans. He'd met Hagrid and endured the half-giant's excitement about his survival. After a quick lunch, he'd promised to keep in touch with Minerva and had apparated to the Ministry in time for his appointment.

Kingsley had been gruffly welcoming, clearly torn between relief about Severus's appearance and recent activities and anxiety about what the news would mean for the wizarding world. They had had a slightly heated discussion about Severus's responsibilities to wizarding Britain, but Kingsley eventually accepted defeat when Severus made it absolutely clear that he was not about to sacrifice his privacy for the good of the population. Kingsley seemed to accept that he had done more than his fair share for the well-being of wizarding Britain, and let it drop.

After he had offered Severus an advisory role at the Ministry and invited him to tell his story to the Wizengamot, both of which Severus politely refused, the Minister sat, his hands folded, frowning at his guest.

"The truth is, I'm not sure what to do about you," he rumbled, in his usual deep voice. "Or, more to the point, what you want from me."

Severus frowned. "Why on earth would I want anything from you?"
"Well, perhaps you should tell me. You're the Slytherin here." Kingsley eyed him narrowly. "Naturally, you would be eligible for decoration by the Order of the Phoenix. First class, of course. And you may require compensation. An arrangement can be made."

Severus looked at him in disgust. "I don't want compensation, and I certainly won't accept any kind of decoration. I didn't do any of it for the Ministry. My sole loyalty was to Dumbledore. And I don't need your money. From what I hear, you'd be better off putting it into rehabilitation programmes for Slytherin families."

"Fair enough," Kingsley conceded. "Then all I can do is offer you the Ministry's most sincere gratitude for your actions in saving our population from the full effects of the virus." He hesitated, before adding quietly, "And my personal thanks, too. It will go on record that Master Severus Snape was instrumental in developing a cure. And we also congratulate you on your new potion, which you will presumably be patenting? I understand that Bill Weasley acts as your business partner – and will continue to be your liaison with the Ministry's office of patents? If there is any assistance we can offer, you shouldn't hesitate to ask."

"Actually," Severus leaned forward, his hands on the desk. "If you are genuine in your wish to help, there is a favour you could grant me…"
Together again

6th August 2012

It felt good to be home.

Hermione leaned on the wall at the end of Watchbell Street, her chin in her hands. Rye drowsed in the lazy warmth of an August evening, rather like one of the sleek cats that lay in sunny doorways along the cobbled street. The unusual English heat wave showed no sign of abating. Before her, the squat silhouette of Camber Castle seemed to shimmer in the heat haze over the salt marshes. To her left, the Quarter Boys chimed half past seven; the sound echoed through the upper town. The day tourists were starting to depart and peace had once again descended upon the ancient Cinque port.

Hermione sighed in contentment as she turned back along the street. Hugo was being put to bed by his doting Muggle grandparents, who had arrived for a visit the previous day. She strolled past her front door with the carefree air of any parent who had just been relieved of the tedious bath-story-and-bed routine.

As she reached the other end of Watchbell Street, she hesitated, listening intently. Any minute now…yes, there they were. She heard Rose's eager voice first, following by the vague sing-song tones of Luna. She smiled, straightening up, and strolled towards the church to meet them.

The two were pushing bicycles. This was a recent Muggle hobby that had been adopted by Luna goodness-knew-where. Probably South America - courtesy of her partner, or whatever he was. Hermione had heard certain rumours of this Rolf Scamander – apart from being related to the great Newt Scamander, he was said to be obsessed with the Muggle Green movement.

Anyway, they had only been home for a couple of days, and Rose was already obsessed with her mother's oddball friend. Hermione had noticed this trait in her daughter recently – an apparent fascination with anything or anyone who was less than traditional. There was a tendency among the Weasley youngsters to be obsessed with all things Muggle, to the distress of their grandmother (and the secret satisfaction of their grandfather), but Rose appeared to want to go one step further. Muggles were, in her opinion, boring (although an amused Hermione had been careful to conceal this view from her own parents) and the wizarding world was hardly any better. Luna represented something new and untraditional, and could do no wrong in Rose's adoring eyes.

She called to them. "I was beginning to think you'd got lost. Or that the bikes had given up the ghost." She ran her eyes over the ancient contraptions dubiously. Luna had turned up with them unexpectedly this morning, having apparently bought them from a second-hand shop.

Rose dropped the bike and ran up to her, face glowing. "Mum, it was brilliant! We cycled all the way to Dungeness and went up the lighthouse. And we went on that little steam train. And we swam at Camber Sands on the way back, and had tea at Betty's – the section at the front."

"Sounds good," Hermione commented, picking up the discarded bike and smiling at Luna. It never ceased to amaze her that a girl living in the extraordinary world of wizards and witches and surrounded by magic should be so excited by a perfectly ordinary Muggle day. Even going to Betty's and eating in the nondescript Muggle café/second-hand bookshop at the front, when there was a far more interesting magical section hidden in the back.

"Do you think I could take a bike when I go to Hogwarts?"
"Well, I don't think -.

"Only they could be magical, couldn't they? I mean, I could ride a flying one instead of a broomstick – sticks are sooo boring. And Luna says that Rolf says they're not eco-friendly with all the magic you need to power them -.

"Oh, thanks," Hermione muttered sarcastically to Luna, who only grinned. Ron would be horrified. They had promised Rose a new broomstick for her eleventh birthday and he'd already started perusing the catalogues, even though it was still two months' away.

She raised her voice as her daughter sprinted up the street. "I'm not sure Madam Hooch would allow that. And anyway, you're not going to Hogwarts until next year."

The only response was the crash of the front door opening, as Rose hurried in. Hermione could hear her talking enthusiastically to her Muggle grandmother.

"Where on earth did you pick up these things?" she asked, as she swung her leg over the ancient bicycle and pedalled it slowly over the cobbles. It was an old fashioned sit-up-and-beg style and put her in mind of the sturdy old bottle-green Raleigh bike that she had ridden to primary school. She remembered the occasion when her mind had been so full of a maths test that she hadn't been concentrating on being 'normal', and had consequently ended up free-wheeling up the steep hill to home. It was just one of the many oddities that had made other children and parents a little wary of her and had led to a rather isolated childhood.

A happy childhood though, she recalled - a childhood full of parental pride and love. As she drew up to the front door, she felt a sudden rush of affection for Jean Granger, standing in the doorway. It seemed hardly believable that at one stage she had been seriously considering never bringing them back into her life. Right now, they could have still been living in Australia under assumed names if it hadn't been for Ron.

Ron… He'd be coming tomorrow to stay for a couple of days, giving Hermione the change to take a quick break, although she had no idea where she would go or what she would do with her unexpected free time. By mutual consent, he had moved out and had taken a flat in north London. She wondered, rather cynically, how long it would be before Susan moved into it.

She shook away such thoughts and looked up at her mother. "Has he gone off yet?"

"Out like a light." Jean frowned in concern. "He still tires quite easily, doesn't he?"

She dismounted the bike. "Hester said he would for a while. Coming in?" She looked over her shoulder at Luna.

"For a while. I might leave the bikes with you, if that's OK," her friend replied, in her usual serene manner.

Hermione shrugged. "We can put them in the shed for now." She gave her friend a sly look. "Not going home tonight, then?"

Luna only laughed and walked past her through the relatively cool house to the large lounge. It was situated at the back, with views over the shady garden that sloped away steeply down the cliff towards the South Undercliff. Hermione loved this room for its cool airiness and panoramic views of the harbour and marshes.

She prepared a large jug of Pimm's and lemonade and sent it flying through to the lounge along with some tall glasses. Following behind, she saw her friend sitting and talking amicably to Jean
and Andrew Granger. Rose had already grabbed a can of Coke from the fridge, so she claimed her usual corner seat and promptly stuck her nose in a book, ignoring the adults. Hermione smiled when she saw it was Anne of Green Gables, one of her own favourites as a girl.

She sat down in an armchair, pushing it back slightly to catch the slight breeze from a nearby open window. Through the window, she could hear a blackbird singing and the gentle clanking of the masts from the boats in the harbour below. She closed her eyes for a moment, focusing on the soft rhythm of the boats and letting her mind float away, as it so often did, to Severus.

He'd Owled her twice since Hugo's recovery. Both were brief communications: the first to say that he was at Hogwarts, and the second the following evening to tell her that he'd apparated back to Valenzuela to help Draco with the distribution and administration of the potions. That had been ten days ago. Since then, she'd heard nothing save for a longer letter from Draco, in which he described the work that was happening in Orgiva, Granada and the surrounding wizarding communities, and just happened to mention that Severus had been working hard in his laboratory. One of the side-effects of the virus was extreme fatigue, as she already knew from Hugo, and it appeared he was busy developing a variant of his Revivio potion to alleviate the symptoms.

It was ridiculous to feel disappointed. After all, everyone was very busy at the moment, and she could fully sympathise with Beatriz, trying to organise local treatment while looking after Meghara, who was recovering slowly. In fact, she seemed to be just about the only person with nothing to do right now, having been given a leave of absence to look after Hugo. However, with her parents settling in for a lengthy stay, she supposed she ought to go back to work.

She just wished she could settle things with Severus. It hadn't escaped her that before the crisis hit, the last time they had met, they had been in conflict over their future. She hated the fact that he might still think she didn't want to move to Valenzuela, which was why she had penned that awkwardly-worded note. She assumed he had received it...so why did he persist in staying away? Had he changed his mind? She remembered how evasive he had looked when he'd turned up at St. Mungo's; how he had kept his distance from her. Perhaps the uncertainty over all the years had finally diminished his affection for her. Perhaps she had made a fool of herself with that letter.

The truth was that, for all her bravado, very little had changed. OK, so Ron had finally moved away, but they were no closer to a divorce than before. If the Ministry was intent on forcing them to undergo a gradual separation of the bond...well, for practical reasons, that would have to wait until the children were much older. And, in any case, she wasn't really sure that she wanted to separate herself from Ron for that length of time -- she clung, however hopelessly, to the hope that they could at least retain their friendship. Losing contact with him would mean also cutting herself off from Molly and Arthur, George, Bill and -- worst of all -- Harry.

"I saw Molly yesterday. She tells me that Hogwarts is likely to reopen a month late this year -- is that right?"

Hermione opened her eyes at her mother's query. "I've not really heard, but that does make sense. Better if all the kids go back together -- there's no point in the healthy ones going first. Still...Harry and Ginny must be glad that the uncertainty is over."

"Will you go to see James off?" her father asked, with apparently casual curiously but also a slight note of warning.

"I hadn't thought about it," she mused, before giving him a wry look. "You don't need to worry, Dad - everything will be fine."

"Can we go this year, Mum? Please. I want to see the Express." Rose lowered her book and looked
pleadingly at Hermione.

"Depends on when it is. Don't forget you'll be back at school yourself by then," she pointed out.

"I could get the day off, though."

"Oh, could you? Well, that'll depend on whether or not you finish off that coursework that you were given when the school closed early. And, no, you can't use Hugo as an excuse anymore."

Her daughter glared at her as she jumped up and left the room. Hermione grinned as she heard Rose's bedroom door slam. Still, at least it might give her the impetus to get back into her studies. The trouble was that Rose was fiercely bright and had very quickly grown bored with the limited curriculum offered at the local primary-level wizarding school. Hermione was beginning to wonder whether it would be worth enrolling her in a Muggle school for the next year. Ron wouldn't approve but, after all, it hadn't done her any harm when it came to catching up at Hogwarts.

She fell silent, thinking of her father's words. The Weasleys were a generous-natured, forgiving bunch – it was one of their greatest qualities as a family. She didn't think it was likely that Molly or Arthur would ever cut her out, and Ron's brothers had always loved her as an extra sister. Her main concerns were Ginny and Angelina – the former had become rather hostile since the separation, and the latter might do so out of loyalty to Ron, who was a particular friend of hers. The other sisters-in-law, Fleur and Audrey, couldn't see what all the fuss was about and Harry seemed to be determined to treat both his old friends exactly the same as before.

She tuned back in to Luna's conversation with her father; she was currently talking about her travels in Peru, and a certain name came up.

"OK, then, so who is this Rolf?"

Luna looked over at her with a smile. "I did wonder when you'd ask. I'm sure you've been impatient to know."

"I looked him up," Hermione admitted. "So he's a naturalist too, like his grandfather?"

"To be exact, a magizoologist. But yes, we travel the world searching for mythical creatures. Peru is a good source for them, actually," Luna continued in her usual calm manner.

"Have you discovered the Crumple-Horned Snorkack yet?" It was mean, but she couldn't resist it.

"Oh, not in the jungle," Luna replied, airily. "They're mountain creatures, really. We plan to revisit the Andes this December. It's the best time of year for sightings."

But how can you possibly know, was on the tip of Hermione's tongue. However, she'd learned a very long time ago that there was no point in arguing with Luna about the existence of certain mythical beasts. The Ravenclaw couldn't be shaken on this point.

"So…Rolf?"

"Oh, yes." Luna paused, seeming to consider her words. "We met at a conference in Norway, five years ago."

"Five years? And you've only just told me?" Hermione sat up a bit.

"Well, there wasn't much to tell at first. I was only doing what I always did when I went away – searching for magical fauna. But it began to make sense to travel together – pool resources and all
that. The truth is -," Luna hesitated a little, "– I was getting short of money. Travel costs so much –
not getting there, but being able to support myself for several weeks – food and so on. The
Quibbler's profits aren't that great – although the team tend to run it without me these days, which
is wonderful and gives me more time for travel. Anyway, Rolf was often going to the same place.
We started supporting our explorations by collecting samples for potions companies."

"Severus's being one of them."

"That's right, although I didn't realise it was him at first. Anyway, I…" She looked down at her
hands and seemed as close to discomfort as Hermione had ever known her. "I'm supposed to be
going to Rolf's family estate tonight – for the first time. It's in Dorset, just outside Kimmeridge.
He's expecting me."

"You're not worried, are you?" Hermione eyed her friend. She had never once known Luna to care
what anyone else thought of her.

Luna shrugged, looking up again. "I don't know. It's just a different place. They're very rich, you
see. His grandfather left a lot of money. Rolf's mother and father live there now. I've seen photos of
the house."

She looked at her hands again, and Hermione knew she was thinking of her little cottage in
Dungeness – no more than a shack, really. It was cosy, full of interesting artefacts and suited Luna
perfectly.

She wasn't sure what she could say, but Jean leaned over to squeeze Luna's hand with instinctive
sympathy.

"You say that your young man travels around with you in the jungle. Has he been to your cottage?"
At Luna's nod, she continued, "Well, then, what difference does it make? In a cottage or in a
mansion, he's just the same man, isn't he? If you can travel the world together, you must be well
suited."

"I haven't met his parents yet."

"And they will love you. If they don't, then there's something wrong with them," Jean assured her
firmly.

Hermione opened her mouth, about to add her own assurances to her mother’s when an unfamiliar
owl flew through the open window and deposited a scroll on the coffee table before flying straight
out again.

"Looks like a Ministry stamp," she commented as she opened the letter, wondering whether Ron
wanted to change their arrangement for the next couple of days.

However, it was not from Ron.

_Dear Mrs. Weasley,_

I am pleased to inform you that the Ministry will grant your request for a termination of the
marital bond you currently hold with Mr. Ronald Bilius Weasley.

You are both required to attend the Department of Magical Law Enforcement at 10.00am on
Monday 15th August 2011, at which time a bond severance ceremony will be carried out. You must
bring your children with you, as their magic must be monitored during the procedure.
Following this ceremony, your divorce will be complete. There will be no restrictions placed upon your contact with Mr. Weasley in future.

Many kind regards,

Bertha Catchpole

Hermione looked up at her mother, wonderingly. "I don't believe it! The Ministry has agreed to the divorce."

Jean held out her hand to the scroll. "Can I see?"

Hermione handed it over in a dazed manner, vaguely aware that the doorbell had gone and that Luna had gone to answer it.

"Well, it certainly seems clear," Jean commented, passing the letter to Andrew.

Hermione paced up and down, unable to keep still. She felt frighteningly numb. After all this time – all the paperwork and the accusing looks and the stress…could it really be as simple as that?

"Darling, are you alright?" Jean gave her a worried look. "This is good news – surely?"

"I – I suppose so," she muttered, almost to herself. "The question is – why? What could they possibly gain from letting us get divorced? They must still disapprove of it – officially, at least."

"They gain quite a lot by it, in fact," came a new voice.

Hermione spun around to see Severus by the lounge door, with Luna peering over his shoulder. The world seemed to cease turning for a moment. She blinked, slightly unsure whether her eyes were deceiving her or not…but there he stood in her doorway. She had never expected to see him here; part of her didn't seem to be able to process the evidence.

And yet, there he stood. He looked tired and a little travel-stained, his hair ruffled and wearing a shabby old black t-shirt over his usual jeans. His eyes were blacker than she had ever seen them and his face was strangely blank. It took her a few moments to realise that he was uncertain too.

She opened her mouth – what she had intended to say, she was never sure, but what actually came out was: "Did you have something to do with this?"

Before he even replied, she knew…and she raced across the room, flung her arms around his neck and kissed him on the mouth enthusiastically. His hands came up to grip her shoulders in surprise, but she persisted, running her tongue along his bottom lip until his mouth finally parted, and then devouring him as if she hadn't kissed him for years. Which was, after all, what it had felt like. After a moment of hesitation, his hands slipped around to her back and he began to reciprocate enthusiastically, pulling her tight against him and pushing her head back to get a better angle.

When she eventually stepped back from him, breathless, she was gratified to see the high colour in his pale cheeks.

"I thought you were in Spain."

"I was. I have just taken a short break for a few days. There isn't much I can do there now; the process just needs to run its course."

Her hands cupped his face and she looked up at him, intently. His eyes met hers – no evasion in
them at all now. Just a guarded happiness and some other emotion that she couldn't immediately identify.

His eyes flickered towards Jean and Andrew Granger and she realised that the emotion was embarrassment. Her father was looking bewildered and her mother looked as if she was trying very hard not to smirk.

"Oh - Mum, Dad, this is Severus Snape. You remember, from the hospital -.

"Yes, of course." Andrew shook his hand, looking between his daughter and the stranger with some confusion. "We didn't meet then, but Jean and I are very grateful for what you did for our Hugo."

"As is Hermione, quite clearly," her mother added, sotto voce.

Severus shook his hand solemnly before turning to Jean. "My apologies, Mrs. Granger. I hope I did not offend you."

"Hardly." She shook his hand, giving him an assessing look. "So you are the man that Hermione keeps talking about. We always knew there was some mystery – some reason why she kept skipping off to Spain at every opportunity."

"So, you don't mind?" Severus looked between them, disconcerted.

Andrew shrugged. "Why should we mind? If you can make our girl happy, then we have no objection at all. Where did you meet?"

"Ah… Well, there are a few things you probably need to know, Dad," Hermione admitted, uncomfortably. What would they think when they connected Severus with what she'd told them about the war…and when they realised that he had been her teacher once?

"But let's talk about that some other time," Jean interrupted, smoothly. "Can I fetch you a drink, Severus?"

"Thank you, a small glass of red wine, please," he replied, seeming to relax a little. Hermione dragged him over to her armchair and perched next to him on the arm. Now she had him here, she was loath to let him go.

"What did you mean when you said that the Ministry gained something out of our divorce? And how did you change their mind?"

Severus shrugged. "It's simple, really. You're a high profile couple and Weasley is highly placed in the Auror office. They had two choices – well, three actually. They could force you to stay together and run the risk of a potentially very messy and very public break-up. They could make you go through the magical separation and not see each other until the bond severed naturally… but then they'd have the problem of two fairly high profile individuals who would not be working at their best due to stress over the situation. And that would lead to public sympathy and indignation – for him if not for you. Or, they could be sensible and get it over quickly. By doing so, they prove that they can be sympathetic…and also prove that a magical divorce does not mean that the sun won't rise in the morning."

"And you told them that?"

"I pointed a few things out, yes. But basically, I called in a favour. Kingsley appears to be labouring under the impression that he owes me. For making me Public Enemy No 1, I suppose. I couldn't care less, but it's been a useful bargaining tool."
"Why would he make you a public enemy?" Jean asked, after passing him the glass. Hermione sighed. "That is a very long story. You might need to sit down, Mum."

"But before you do, I need to go," Luna put in, quickly. "Thanks for the hospitality."

"Thank you for putting up with our granddaughter for the day." Jean smiled at her. "And don't you let your young man's parents put you down."

"I won't."

Hermione saw Luna off at the front door, and they hugged, whispering a fervent "good luck" to each other. Luna gave her a last sympathetic smile before apparating away.

When Hermione returned to the lounge, she saw that her parents had sat side by side on the sofa facing Severus, who, having stood up when Luna left, was still hovering rather awkwardly in front of his chair. She pushed him back down in it easily, perched on the arm once more and twined her fingers with his.

"Before we tell you anything," she said, "you should understand one thing. Whatever you think will make no difference to my feelings for Severus. We are going to tell you, because you have a right to know, but don't forget that we were living in a dangerous situation. It seems easy now – here." She looked around at the peaceful surroundings. "But back then – well, I didn't know how long I would survive. None of us did."

She shuddered slightly, looking at Severus. He looked up at her, understanding in his eyes as he squeezed her hand.

Jean had gone a little pale. "I do understand that…but it would be helpful for us to know the full story. We've only ever heard little snippets of it and I – we – sometimes feel rather remote from your life."

It was probably a little unhelpful for Hermione to recall that her parents had once made it perfectly clear that they didn't want to hear anything about Hermione's adventures during their absence, so bitter were they at what she had done. There was no point in recriminations, though. She took a deep breath, clung to Severus's hand and began.

Later, they would recall that it was the longest time they had spent talking about the War and the events that had led up to it…and that in a strange way, it was therapeutic. Hermione led off by describing Voldemort's early years, as recounted to her by Harry from Dumbledore's pensieve memories. Severus took over to talk about Harry's parents, their resistance to Voldemort and his part in their downfall. He didn't spare himself and talked openly of his past support for the Dark Lord, his horror at Lily's death and the deal he had made with Dumbledore. Hermione was pleased to see his lack of shame. He spoke of the young Severus's twisted ambitions dispassionately, as if he were describing a different man – as indeed he was. He skated fairly quickly over the next ten years, highlighting a few points about his double life here and there.

Hermione then took over again, reminding her parents of some of the events of her early years at Hogwarts, as they led up to Voldemort's return. She didn't mention her romantic feelings for Severus at that stage – simply stating that she had guessed that he was spying for Dumbledore and had felt that he deserved to be protected from Voldemort's plan for him. She dwelt a little on the year on the run – remembering as she did how lonely and hopeless she had felt at times and how she had often thought of her parents and yearned for their presence. The scenes with Bellatrix at Malfoy Manor and Nagini's later attack were difficult to get through and her voice wobbled a little
as she described trying to heal Severus's bite.

Severus squeezed her arm firmly and resumed the narration, describing his escape to Spain and the early years there. Sitting on the arm of the chair and leaning into Severus as he described the cottage, the happy memories of those early days came back to Hermione vividly – sitting over a candle-lit table in the kitchen, that wonderful day in Granada, the strolls by the lake, the peaceful evenings spent reading books and drinking wine... It only reinforced her determination to return to Valenzuela for good one day. She'd miss Rye and the life she had built here, but there was no real choice to be made. She felt her arm push sideways into Severus's warm, solid presence and relished a feeling of pure happiness.

When Severus's voice finally died away, her parents sat still for a moment, seemingly frozen by the long tale. The sun had long since set. Rose must have taken herself off to bed without disturbing them, probably still in a sulk.

A cooler breeze blew through the open window and Hermione shivered a little, suddenly afraid by her parents' silence.

Her mother moved a little, rubbing her hands together – a nervous habit. "And – and that's it, then? Is that the whole story?" Her voice was trembling.

Severus gave her a long, very serious look. "As much as we can possibly tell you."

Hermione had minimised the extent of Bella's torture, as much for her own sake as for her parents', and she suspected that Severus had similar gaps in his part of the story. She leaned forward. "There are experiences that we can't talk about, not now. But you must believe us, Mum, we've told you all the important things."

Her mother gave her a hard look before turning to Severus. "I am sorry, Severus, you are going to think this terribly rude of us…but would you mind going out for a bit? We need to talk to Hermione alone."

Hermione opened her mouth indignantly, but Severus rose easily.

"Of course, Mrs. Granger. I entirely understand – and I need a walk anyway after all...that. I'll go for a stroll around the town."

And before she could even react, he left the house, with hardly a backward glance.

"Mum – I told you –."

"Just wait, Hermione." Jean held up a hand. "Before you start shouting at us, just listen to what we have to say. You have to understand that this is a shock for us. We didn't know anything about Severus before tonight – and we didn't fully understand what you'd been through."

"We have nothing against him," Andrew continued, as her mother nodded. "It's not for us to judge what he did or didn't do. We have no real understanding of his life – and no right to condemn him. But you...we have to understand what you're telling us. You say that you fell in love with this man, despite all that he put you and Harry and Ron through?"

"It wasn't him, Dad. Don't you see – he had no choice. Nothing could be allowed to jeopardise his mission." She took a deep breath. "It hurt at the time. But we've both moved past that. I understand his behaviour now."

"He seems like a – a damaged individual," her father continued slowly, appearing to feel his way
cautiously. "Or, if he isn't, then he ought to be, after all he has been through."

She wondered how much her father could guess of Severus's childhood. He had skirted over the
details, only mentioned what pertained to his experiences at Hogwarts, but her father had always
been quite perceptive.

"He has ways of coping," she replied, equally cautious. Her father's brown eyes, very serious
behind their glasses, peered at her anxiously and she had to quell the rising irritation within her.

"It's just that you've only just emerged from one destructive relationship," Jean added. "Are you
sure that you're not in danger of falling into another one?"

"I love him." It came out as a whisper through a throat that was suddenly dry. She coughed and
spoke again, more insistently. "I do, Mum. That's why my marriage failed. I know you think I'm
damaged in some way…and perhaps I am. But it's Severus that holds me together -.

"And that's what worries me," her father broke in. "It seems to me that your relationship is a little
co-dependent – and that's dangerous. If one of you suddenly broke down because the memories of
the past became too much to bear, what would happen to the other? What would you do?"

"If it happens, we'll cope. We'll have to." Hermione looked between her parents. "The reality is that
I can't live without him, so I have to live with him – for better or for worse. That's all I can do. And
I know that we'll be happy. There are no guarantees – I also know that. But as much as I can be
sure of anything, I'm sure of this."

She found him in the Gun Garden. His tall thin outline was unmistakable against the twilit sky and
the twinkling lights of the little villages on Romney Marsh in the distance. Although he must have
heard her feet on the steps, he continued gazing out at Camber Castle and the flashing lights of the
power station and the Dungeness lighthouse in the distance

It was right here that she had stood when Luna's words had shaken her into action. Was that really
only last autumn? So much had happened since then. It seemed only appropriate that she should
meet him in the same place – in fact, it had been the first place that she had thought of looking.

He looked around at her, inquiringly. "OK?"

"I think so." She put her arm around his waist and leaned her cheek into his shoulder. "Or it will be,
anyway. They like you, I think."

He gave a gruff little laugh and put his arm around her shoulders. "I can't imagine why."

She hesitated for a moment. "They're good people, Severus. I don't think I always appreciated that
as much as I should have done. They don't judge people on first sight – they quite often see beyond
the obvious."

"Now that I can believe," he murmured, his arm tightening. "Knowing their daughter the way I
do."

She smiled and kissed his collarbone lightly. "What I mean is, they are worried for us – for you as
much as me, I think," she added, wonderingly. "But, I think we'll be alright…do you?"

His reply, when it came, was no more than she had expected, but the calm confidence in his tone
still gave her a glow of warm satisfaction. "We will be."
She smiled. "So…Kingsley? What did you really have over him?"

He shrugged. "Buggered if I know. He appeared to think I was about to sue the Ministry for defamation of character. As if I give a damn about what they thought of me…"

"They think you did give a damn… because they would," she commented. "They can't conceive of the idea that a wizard can live without the approval of the Ministry. Even Kingsley – and I thought he'd be different…" She pulled a face. "It's the same old story. I thought things would change after the war – we'd all have a fresh start and they'd learn from the past. But the same people get to the top each time. They just adapt to each new Minister and it's the same old crap."

"That's rather a cynical view from you, Hermione."

She smirked. "Maybe you're rubbing off on me at last. Remember – I worked there, so I've seen how it works first-hand. So…you used his misplaced guilt to get our divorce?"

He shrugged again. "It seemed like an opportunity too good to miss."

"It was good of you – and I do appreciate it," she said, softly.

"Well, why wouldn't I? I benefit too. I've no interest in you being miserable for years over this. I wouldn't even wish that on Weasley. And it'll be easier to move on if you get this out of the way."

"Yes, I know you benefit too." She couldn't keep the humour out of her voice. "All the same… you've saved us a lot of trouble. You rather showed your hand too – and that couldn't have been easy. There'll be rumours about you and me."

"Screw them," was his somewhat inelegant reply.

And there seemed nothing to say after that.

They stood quietly for a while, looking out over the marshes, as the sky darkened and more lights appeared.

Eventually, Severus stirred, taking a deep breath of the salty air. "I can understand why you like this place so much. What was it that made you move here?"

"Not sure, really. Childhood memories, I think." She leaned into him, considering for a moment. "I was probably trying to find happiness – in the wrong place, as it turned out. Things had already turned sour between Ron and me, even then… And I was trying to get back to an earlier time – before Hogwarts, before any of it, when it was just me and my parents. We stayed in Watchbell Street when I was about seven or so – in that hotel at the far end. I loved it here back then… I love it now."

"But you'll leave it – for me?"

She was silent for a moment and he turned to look down at her face. "I received your letter, by the way."

"And what did you think?" She felt the butterflies in her stomach again, ridiculous though it might seem.

He was silent for a few minutes before responding. "And I would, of course, be extremely honoured if you were to consider moving to Valenzuela on a permanent basis."

She peered up at him, a little confused by the formality of his tone. His face, as far as she could make it out in the twilight, was carefully blank, but there was just a suggestion of a twitch about the lips...

"Oh, you sarky old git!" She swatted at his arm, scowling as he burst out laughing.

"I'm sorry – couldn't resist it." He grabbed her flailing arm and placed it behind her back, pulling her close again in the process. "I mean, what did you think I was going to say? No? I've only been trying to get you to move in with me for, oh...eleven years or so. I was hardly going to turn you down now." As if to punctuate his point, he leaned over and kissed her very briefly – first on the nose and then, a little more lingeringly, on the corner of her mouth.

She subsided, leaning in against him and chasing his lips for another kiss. "Mmm...well, I wasn't sure. At the hospital, you seemed... I know this will sound silly, but I was wondering whether you'd changed your mind about us."

He sobered immediately. "It was...difficult. Your family was all there and I didn't want to get in the way. I tried to see you the following day, but...well, you were with Hugo and Rose, and I didn't like to interfere."

She smiled. "It would have been OK with me if you'd dropped in, but I appreciate the thought."

"It's an important point, though." He looked out over the view again and sighed. "This is your home – and it's a beautiful place. I should feel happy here, shouldn't I – if you're here? And yet, I don't feel that I belong here in Britain anymore. I have thought about it a lot over the last few days, which is why I haven't been in touch. I wanted to be sure before I saw you. Some people want me to return. They feel that I have something to offer – and they're probably right. And I do like Britain, especially Scotland - and places like this. There's no reason why I couldn't buy some land in a quiet spot, build a new laboratory and run my business from here instead of Spain. I suppose I could try to settle here again, if it's what you want...?"

"But you don't really want to," she added, softly. "Do you? You said it yourself – you don't belong here anymore."

He frowned. "It's strange. I don't know why I feel so strongly that I just can't stay here..."

"I do." She reached up and placed a hand on his cheek, turning his face towards her. "You left Britain because you had to, not because you wanted to. If you could have returned then, you would have done so. But once you'd settled in your cottage, you found a real home – in Spain. The first real home you ever had – you can hardly count Hogwarts or Spinners End. And, with Cesar and Beatriz, you found a real family too. And then there's Draco..." She stroked his cheek and he leaned into her touch. "And I won't take that from you."

She smiled and stood back a little, looking up at him. "So, Spain it is. I'll commute if I need to."

"It'll be hard on Rose and Hugo."

She sighed. "I know it will. In fact, it'll be bloody difficult for the next few years. I have to provide a stable environment for them until Hugo goes to Hogwarts... After that, I don't quite know what I'll do, but I'll probably keep the house here, so they've still got a base...although between staying with Ron or Molly and Arthur and coming over to Spain, they probably won't be home much for holidays. I should be able to afford it once I'm qualified – it's not as if we'll need much to live on in Valenzuela. If not, I might ask Mum and Dad to move in and share the bills. They love Rye and the house is big enough. I know they were thinking of selling up and moving here to be nearer to
"Give it time," he suggested. "You'll work out what to do. And until you do, I can wait... as long as you visit me as often as you can."

She laughed and hugged him around the middle, rubbing her cheek against his chest. "Not sure what poor old Draco will make of it. He'll be permanently going out for long walks."

"He might not be living there very much longer." At her enquiring look, he elaborated. "I think he may be about to ask Maia to marry him."

"Really?" She thought about it for a minute, visualising the lively, clever young Spanish woman. "Well, if anyone can keep Draco in line, I suppose it's Maia. I'm pleased for them both. So, you'll be losing your house guest. You'll probably miss him more than you expect to."

"Oh, I'll see quite enough of him during the day," Severus replied drily. "More than I'll want to, I expect. There's something particularly odious about a sickeningly happy newly-wed."

She laughed at him again and stepped back, tugging at his arm. "Come on, you - let's go back. Mum and Dad want to see you – I suspect they're feeling a bit bad about asking you to go away. You will stay tonight – won't you?" She looked at his raised eyebrow and giggled. "In a spare room, I mean. I don't much fancy spending our first night together under the same roof as my parents – not at my age. And certainly not at yours, either."

"Indeed." His voice was as dry as ever as he allowed her to pull him away from the view.

She slipped her arm through his as they walked back up past the church and along Watchbell Street. "Can you stay for a couple of days? In the UK, I mean? Here would not be a good idea – Ron's coming tomorrow. I was thinking of going away and letting him have some time with Rose and Hugo. It would be nice to get away somewhere – just the two of us."

"Yes. It would." She couldn't see his face in the darkness, but he sounded almost startled by the notion of a brief holiday. She wondered how many genuine holidays he'd taken in his life.

"Where could we go? I don't really mind, although probably not London. I've had enough of cities for a while, and I don't suppose you want the publicity anyway."

"You're quite right."

They walked on in silence for a few minutes. By common consent, as they approached her front door, they continued past to the end of the street. They halted at her favourite spot, at the wall overlooking the marshes, just in front of the Hope Anchor Hotel. She jumped up onto the wall and pulled him in between her legs, enjoying the height advantage this gave her to kiss him more easily.

"I feel like a bloody teenager," he grumbled, but he acquiesced easily enough, putting one hand on her hips to steady her as he leaned in.

It was different this time. Not quite as frantic as in the house earlier – in front of her parents, for Merlin's sake! – but also not quite as carefully chaste as during the years since her marriage. It reminded her of that last night in Valenzuela so many years ago – the night that was so fatefully interrupted by Ron's message. There was a sense of no holds barred as he proceeded to explore her mouth in an almost leisurely fashion. His free hand wandered up her spine and she shivered at the light touch, moaning into his mouth and grabbing fistfuls of his t-shirt. She felt a spark of excitement rush through her body and her thighs tightened around his waist automatically.
He had been careful to keep his lower half slightly away from her body, but when he pulled back to look at her, his pupils were dilated, showing he was as affected as she.

"I'm going to stop right there," he said, his voice a little croaky. "Because if we carry on, I'm not going to want to stop. And I'm certainly not going to do anything under the same roof as your parents… and not before that bond termination either. I'm not having the bloody Ministry monitoring your bond and knowing what we've been up to."

"Point taken," she agreed reluctantly and let go of him. As she jumped down from the wall, she couldn't resist rubbing her body against his, and she felt the evidence of his arousal.

He groaned and rocked his hips against her for a moment. "Bloody tease."

"Sorry," she murmured in genuine compunction, making to move away, but he pulled her back and kissed her again, hard enough to make her head spin. His hands came down to cup her bottom and he pushed her firmly against his erection in a way that left her gasping.

As he let her go, he said, quite naturally, "Would you consider Scotland?"

"Mmm?" She looked up at him hazily and he rolled his eyes.

"For a holiday."

"Oh." She recalled their previous conversation. "Hogwarts, you mean? What about Minerva?"

"She knows all about it – the whole story. She'd like to see you, I think. And she's got ideas – plans for the school." He explained briefly.

"Well, why not? It'll be good to see her again – and Hagrid, and Neville and Hannah, and all the teachers." She had often considered visiting the school, but to walk around the castle and grounds with Severus was something she had never imagined. "Yes, let's do it. We can apparate tomorrow morning, before Ron arrives. It's not a problem – Mum and Dad will be there."

"Fine," Severus agreed, taking her hand to lead her towards the house. "But before we do… there's someone else I'd like to see."

The following morning had been a muddle of hellos and goodbyes, with Severus and Hermione keen to get away before Ron arrived. Rose had been ecstatic to see Severus again, and was equally outraged that he was leaving again almost immediately. She left Hermione in no doubt of the fact that her father would be hearing all about his overnight stay. Hermione shrugged her shoulders; her parents would be able to put Ron right, but she didn't care what he thought. She hadn't told Severus, or anyone else either, but she'd been able to detect through their marital bond that he'd slept with someone else the very same night that he'd moved out – Susan, presumably. She didn't particularly blame him, but it seemed a bit ridiculous for her to be avoiding sex with Severus out of some kind of misplaced loyalty to Ron, when he clearly had no such concerns. It occurred to her that she could just let that fact slip during their holiday – particularly when they were alone somewhere and unlikely to be disturbed...

She was a little worried about leaving Hugo, but he was visibly better today and her mother would be able to keep an eye on him and make sure he didn't over-exert himself. So, having thrown a few items into her bead bag and put together a basket of food, she made her final farewells, took Severus's hand and apparated them both away.

They arrived just outside the gateposts. The gates had long since rusted through and hung
haphazardly, half buried by the long grass.

Severus looked around him at the overgrown grounds and crumbling wall in apparent disbelief. "Christ, he's really let the place go. I knew it would be bad from what you said, but…this?"

"Bit of a change from the glory days, eh?"

He looked towards the ivy-strewn house with distaste. "Just a little."

They walked silently up the driveway. He glanced at her bare arm. As usual, she had used a charm to cover the scarring, but he knew where the filthy word was. "You don't have to come in if you don't want to."

She waved away his concern. "Oh, I've been here loads of times since. I don't give it a thought anymore." She frowned. "To be honest, I haven't given him much thought since Hugo got sick. No one else visits him – I hope he's alright."

He grimaced. "I don't quite see why you'd care. He wouldn't worry in the slightest about you."

She gave him a dry look. "If I spent all my time resenting people who've insulted me over the years with names like Mudblood, I wouldn't get very far. There's not much point in punishing him now, anyway. He's a broken man – it's only a matter of time."

"If it's not already too late," he muttered, as they reached the door. "Look."

The door was slightly open. It looked as if Lucius's locking charm had finally failed.

Hermione put down the basket and pushed open the door with a sense of disquiet. She'd been expecting to discover his body each time she'd visited. Would today be the day?

"He's usually through here," she whispered to Severus, wondering why she did so. As they approached the study door, Severus pulled her back and stood in front of her, wand drawn. There was no sound to be heard.

He pushed open the door gently… and froze in the doorway. "Oh, Merlin…"

Hermione, looking over his shoulder, saw the still body on the floor. She pushed Severus aside, impatiently, and hurried over.

Lucius was lying near his chair, on his back, his glassy eyes fixed on the ceiling. His face was white and livid, his lips drawn back in a painful grimace. He stank – it was obvious that he'd lost control of his bladder. His limbs were splayed out awkwardly –it looked as if he had literally dropped where he stood.

She took a deep breath and put a shaking hand on his neck… and then stiffened in surprise. "He's still warm! Quick, Severus – do a diagnostic."

As she moved her finger to the pulse in his neck, Severus extended his wand over Lucius and his findings only confirmed what she'd already realised. "Christ! He's still alive! Barely, but there's definitely a pulse."

Severus frowned down at the medical data that had appeared, reading quickly. "It's his heart." He vanished the data and used his wand to lift the unconscious man. "Quick, there's no time to lose."

He tried to apparate himself and Lucius away, but nothing happened.
"The wards," Hermione realised. "They must still be in place."

Severus cursed as he quickly directed Lucius's limp body back along the passage and out of the house. Once there, he grabbed Hermione's arm, put his hand on Lucius's leg and apparated the three of them to St Mungo's.

As they arrived at the reception, Severus's legs buckled under the weight of supporting Lucius and he fell to his knees. Hermione grabbed Lucius's falling body and lowered it gently to the ground. "Someone, quick, help me!"

Healers rushed over at her shout to help lift Lucius onto a stretcher. As he was carried away and Hermione started to follow, Severus caught at her sleeve, his face grim and strained.

"I must fetch Draco."

She nodded and watched as he apparated away. Wondering whether they would return in time.
Lucius's Healer was new to Hermione. This wasn't entirely surprising, as her accent was East Coast American and she wore the blue and white striped robes of a senior specialist Healer from the USA. However, whatever it was that she specialized in, there was one thing that Hermione knew for sure – after only a short acquaintance, she disliked the woman intensely. She rapped out a liturgy of curt questions that Hermione felt ill-equipped to answer.

"Known heart conditions?" The Healer had barely glanced at her comatose patient, so focused was she on adding data to her mediwand record.

"I don't know of any, but then I don't -.

"He have a history of losing consciousness?"

"I've never seen it myself, but -.

"Ever been diagnosed with high cholesterol?"

"I've really no idea. Don't you have his medical records?"

The Healer didn't even look up from her virtual notes. "It would seem that the gentleman was never a patient here. He musta had a private Healer, but we have no idea who that might've been."

Hermione had her suspicions, but said nothing. She might have been wrong anyway – surely Severus wouldn't have attended the Malfoys for every illness? She couldn't imagine him helping to deliver Draco for a start. It was possible that there'd been some other private Healer, perhaps someone who died in the war. It would have been just like Lucius to scorn the public healthcare provided by St. Mungo's.

"He have any allergies that you know of?"

"How the *hell* would I know?" Hermione demanded, goaded beyond endurance. "I'm not his bloody daughter! I hardly know the man."

The Healer looked up at her sharply, seeming to notice her for the first time. "You're not his next-of-kin?"

"No - that's what I've been trying to tell you -.

"Then, with respect, what the *hell* are you doing in here?" The words were rapped out like bullets as the Healer glared at her.

Hermione didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Put it this way, I'm the closest you're going to get to a next-of-kin – at least until his son shows up." *If he shows up.* "You do know who your patient is? Where were you twelve years ago?"

The woman seemed taken aback by this question. "If you must know, Ma'am, I was at the Salem Institute taking my Advanced Healing qualification."

"That explains it," Hermione muttered. Aloud, she said, "Well, this is Lucius Malfoy, former Death
Eater, probable murderer, certain criminal, widower, father of a man who strongly wishes he was an orphan, and All-Round Bad Egg. Very much so. You're not going to find many people with a good word for him. I'm probably the closest approximation to a friend that he has – and it just so happens that he despises me," she added.

"Excuse me?" The woman's bewilderment appeared to increase.

Hermione sighed. "In other words, right now I'm all you've got... Ma'am. You could tell me to bugger off, of course. I've got no legal right to be here, as you've probably realised by now. However, if you did, you'd have no one to advocate for him. And if you decide to bring in a so-called neutral proxy to make decisions on his behalf, they'd probably tell you to let him die. Believe me." She glanced over at Lucius and continued more quietly, "And no one deserves that, no matter how badly they've behaved."

The Healer looked at her with rather more interest. "They really hate him that much?"

"What he represents – yes."

"Hmm." The woman seemed to consider for a long moment, and then shrugged her shoulders, returning to her notes. "Well, you might as well stay. It's not really my decision anyway. They just brought me in to treat him." She made it sound like an imposition.

"Yeah... and where were you twelve years ago?" It was uncharitable since it was hardly this woman's fault that the wizarding population in the USA hadn't really got involved in what was happening at the British Ministry. However, as Hermione looked at the stocky woman, probably in her early forties, she felt a sudden surge of anger that she had to smother.

"Is it very bad?" She glanced at the bed, trying to hide her antipathy.

The Healer didn't spare her a look; just gave a mirthless smile as she manipulated some data. "What do you think? They tell me you're a trainee Healer, so you gotta have some idea."

Hermione peered at Lucius, doubtfully. The senior Malfoy was currently held under a life support charm. It wouldn't last forever, but it bought the Healers some valuable time to work out how to treat him. Numbers and charts shimmered in the air above him, recording his vital signs. The graph lines were moving in a way that did not bode well for the former Death Eater.

In his induced coma, he looked younger, and she was reminded of the fact that he was only in his mid-fifties – just a few years older than Severus. It was far too young to die of something as ridiculous and pointless as a myocardial infarction.

"Well, if it's just a first incident -..."

"It's a little more than that." The woman frowned at the fast-moving numbers hovering in mid-air. "It's a massive first 'incident'. Your deeply popular friend there has severely narrowed arteries. It was only a matter of time. He must have been experiencing symptoms for years."

"He may not have realised." Hermione thought of Lucius, isolated in his grief and humiliation, sitting alone in his crumbling mansion, hurling insults and hexes at anyone who tried to come near him.

She blinked quickly, fighting the tears that suddenly came into her eyes. "How will you treat him?"

"I have a specialist potion that will manage the immediate condition – the focus is to reduce the risk of further clots and limit the strain on his heart." She gave Hermione a dry look. "They tell me
that you'll probably say that there's a Muggle therapy that'll be better. Well, in this case, there isn't. The problem with Muggle drug regimens is that the optimum combination will vary depending on a number of variables: the type of infarction, the degree of damage, the condition of the patient and the on-going treatment required. For example, certain Muggle drugs are usually recommended as first-line therapies, but they can cause adverse outcomes if the patient then requires surgery after the initial treatment. My potion works a little differently. It contains a variety of drugs and can adapt the relative strength of each to the specific needs of the patient."

Hermione noted the focus on the word 'my'. This Healer certainly thought a lot of herself.

"And that will help him?"

Again, that mirthless half-smile. "That depends on what you mean by 'help'. It'll keep him alive for a while at least."

"And then – what?"

"Well..." The Healer tapped her mediwand at some of the flashing numbers. "I may be wrong - although, quite frankly, I rarely am in these matters – but these figures suggest that the level of damage is such that Mr. Malfoy is likely to have suffered congestive heart failure."

Hermione bit her lip. "So, not good, then."

"Not really." The Healer put her mediwand away in a business-like manner. "Put it this way – that affectionate son of his might just get his wish a bit sooner than he probably expected."

And with that parting shot, she left the room.

As the hours went by, Hermione's antipathy towards the new Healer, a Connecticut-based witch called Pamela Knott, didn't decrease. However, she grudgingly came to respect her. Not that the woman had bothered to introduce herself, but Hermione picked up the gossip from colleagues during quick breaks from her watch at Lucius's bedside.

It seemed that Knott was a quite extraordinary Healer. She was Muggle-born, in fact, but she had firmly turned her back on her ancestry many years ago. Unlike Hermione, she viewed her connection as an inconvenience – in her view, magical healing had the potential to be far more effective than Muggle therapies. She had devoted her adult life to researching the magical healing of severely ill individuals, which was why St. Mungo's had summoned her to take on Lucius's care. It was actually quite unusual for them to see a wizard or witch with heart problems – chronic illnesses tended to be less prevalent among the magic community.

Hermione had to admit to being impressed by Knott's dedication to her patient. She wasn't entirely sure when the woman slept or ate, but she seemed to be around for most of the next 24 hours. Even when Hermione dozed off on a staff room sofa for a few hours, when she returned, Knott was still there. Her communication skills were appalling – she looked at Lucius only to assess his clinical condition and made no attempt to talk to him – but there was no doubt that her treatment was working. By the following afternoon, he was clearly more stable, although still on life support.

The other interesting thing about Pamela Knott was that she treated Hermione like a qualified Healer, which made quite a change from the other Healers who could be a little patronising towards the trainees. She was quite happy to discuss Lucius's condition and treatment and appeared to assume that Hermione was informed enough to understand. She was abrupt to the point of
rudeness and openly scornful of any mention of Muggle therapy. She appeared to be equally
dismissive of regulations and patient confidentiality. Someone like Hester Perowne would never
have discussed a patient so freely with someone who had no legal right to be present. But Knott had
accepted Hermione's explanations at face value. She also appeared to trust Hermione to monitor
Lucius's vital signs whenever she had to leave the room and to report back on any significant
changes.

In fact, after a while, Hermione found the Healer's frankness rather refreshing. She was also
grateful for the fact that Knott's acerbic behaviour towards the other Healers, even the senior ones,
meant that Lucius was largely left alone – and as a result Hermione's presence wasn't challenged
either.

There had been no word from Severus. She wasn't sure what she had expected – her initial vision
was that Draco would rush to his father's side, pale and remorseful. As time went on, and it was
clear that he was *not* prepared to drop everything, she assumed that he would, at least, come to St
Mungo's to discuss what would happen with Lucius's treatment. After all, he was the official next-
of-kin. Every time she left Lucius's room, she kept expecting to see him in the waiting room – or
that there would be a message giving a practical reason for his delay.

It was frustrating because they were fast approaching a point at which serious decisions would
have to be made. At the moment, Knott was treating the myocardial infarction itself, focusing on
stabilising Lucius, but she was also monitoring the damage and would soon have to decide whether
a magical bypass procedure would be possible. This would be major surgery, albeit not as risky as
the Muggle version, and Hermione certainly couldn't make such a big decision.

The difficulty was that Lucius could quite easily die during the operation. Without it, he would die
anyway - eventually - but there were potions that could prolong his life to a degree, and at least he
would then have the opportunity to get his affairs in order prior to his death. The question was,
which would he prefer to happen?

"Still no sign of the loving son?" Knott asked her at one stage and frowned at the negative reply.
"Can't wait much longer," she added.

"Will you be able to operate?"

Knott considered for a moment, checking her data. Hermione waited patiently; she'd learned by
now that it wasn't wise to interrupt the woman. Finally, the Healer replied. "I'm willing to give it a
shot. I can't guarantee it'll be successful, mind you. The damage is pretty bad. But on the other
hand," she shrugged, "Frankly, he's got nothing to lose."

Hermione was silent, looking towards the silent man on the bed. "The trouble is… I'm not sure he
really wants to go on living."

"Yeah, sure, I get that. Not my problem though." She caught Hermione's expression and rolled her
eyes. "Oh, c'mon, don't look like that. Like I said, not my problem. This isn't my country, it's not my
responsibility if you've got a bunch of middle-aged guys who've led such shitty lives that they want
to shuffle off this mortal coil earlier than they need to."

"I just might have put it a little more sympathetically, that's all."

"Yeah?" Knott looked Hermione up and down in a slightly offensive manner. "Well, I deal in facts
and figures, not emotions. I'm good at what I do - hell, I'm fuckin' brilliant at it. If anyone can help
him to live, it's *me* – but that's as far as my responsibility for him goes. The tough reality is that I
got my real job to get back to – and a family. It surprises you that someone like me has got
children? Well, I have, and I'd really like to see them again soon, so some kind of decision would be super. How you reach it is up to you."

"Me? I don't even have power of attorney -."

Knott gave her an 'oh honey' look. "Why'd you think I've been keeping those stiff-assed Healers off of your back? You might not have power of attorney, but you said it yourself: probably just about anyone else would've told me to pull the plug. You didn't, so you must care – presumably. Who better to make the decisions?"

"I…" Hermione tried to pull herself together. "I need to think. Decide what to do."

Knott rolled her eyes again, but her expression was not entirely without sympathy. "You do that. I'll be here when you've made your mind up."

Hermione nodded her understanding and left the room, pondering what to do. She could apparate to Valenzuela herself, but she didn't want to undo any grand scheme that Severus might be currently working on. It had been just over 36 hours since they had brought Lucius in.

In the end, she sent a short message on her charmed galleon. Over the years, they'd developed a code for this method of communication which was quicker than an owl and less disruptive than a patronus. She sent the equivalent of a question mark.

Almost instantly, the coin glowed with a reply. It was merely a 'hold on' symbol, which meant that Severus was unable to talk right now. And that was that. Not very informative.

"Damn it." She leaned against the wall and pressed her cheek into the cool paintwork, ignoring the curious looks of other staff and visitors. "Damn you, Lucius – you and your bloody family. How can I possibly decide?"

Just how had it come to this? It seemed only yesterday that Lucius Malfoy had been a distant figure to Hermione at Hogwarts. The father of a much-despised fellow student, an arrogant figure of wizardly authority, and the representative of a foul philosophy that sought to exclude Muggle-born. To say nothing of the man who had stood by coolly and watched her being tortured to within an inch of her life without lifting a finger to help.

"By rights, I should let you die and have done with it," she muttered under her breath. After all, it was no more than he'd have done for her – and probably with no compunction at all.

But then, that was the difference, wasn't it? What was it that Knott had said – that she must care, presumably? And therein lay the problem. She couldn't not care, however hard she tried. Stupid, soft-hearted Hermione, with her 'causes' and her ceaseless support of the underdog! Harry and Ron had been amused by the various campaigns, Severus was tolerant of them. Draco hated being the recipient of her largesse – it had humiliated him. And Lucius? Who knew what he truly thought of the presumptuous little Mudblood who had interfered in his life?

Hermione stood up, nodded briskly and made her way back into the room. She knew now that she was going to have to make a decision on Lucius's behalf. Whether she – or indeed he - liked it or not.

Severus had not had an easy few hours.
He'd apparated directly to Valenzuela, but naturally the cottage was locked up and silent. The village was equally quiet; it was approaching siesta and the August heat was extreme. He might have guessed that Draco wouldn’t have been there. Sighing, he span once more, concentrating on the Martinez house.

Most of the family were present, apart from Beatriz, who was out on her rounds and would be back shortly. The atmosphere was fairly relaxed in the midday heat. Meghara was recovering slowly from her ordeal and was sitting in an easy chair in a shady part of the garden, looking a little pale but otherwise happy. The 3 teenage boys were playing a fairly desultory game of Hide and Seek with their young nephew, while his mother Maia fussed devotedly around her younger sister. In common with most people in this part of Spain during the summer vacation, the Martinez family would start their leisurely lunch in an hour or so and then sleep it off through the hotter hours.

After checking on Meghara, assuring Maia that he didn't need a drink and swinging an over-excited Lucio around a few times, he learned that Cesar and Draco were down by the gorge.

Orgiva was blessed with stunning views overlooking a steep gorge. Severus strolled along the promenade, briefly enjoying the warmth and the smell of the lemon trees, despite the gravity of his visit.

At the far end of the promenade, there was a small bar, a little shabby, but made popular by its view and its proximity to a popular mountain cycling route. Severus spotted Cesar and Draco sitting at a table overlooking the view. They appeared to be in a deep discussion and judging by the burst of occasional laughter, it was a pleasant one. A half-empty carafe of red wine was on the table in front of them along with a dish of the deliciously juicy olives that the region produced in abundance.

He stopped, partly because he didn't care to interrupt what was clearly a private conversation, but mainly because he was a little enchanted by the sight. The shortish, stocky, middle-aged Spanish man and the tall, pale, young Englishman. So different in appearance and personality and social background, and yet Draco was eagerly hanging on the older man's every word. From Cesar's mannerisms, he could tell that they were speaking in Spanish and he wondered how Draco had managed to become fluent in so short a period.

He looked at Draco's head, cocked attentively in Cesar's direction and saw the flash of a wide, honest smile. It was entirely different from those world-weary smirks and calculated half-smiles that had graced the young Malfoy's face during the Hogwarts years. His eyes sparkled with good humour and the long fringe of his gleaming fair hair flopped over his thin, handsome face. He was immaculately dressed in an open-necked white shirt and charcoal-grey suit trousers. Severus had no idea where the new clothes had come from, but he suspected that Draco might have asked Potter to retrieve some money from his vault during their visit to London. He had some gold of his own, which the Ministry had seized from the Malfoy family following the War, but Potter had never approved of this punishment and would probably have been quite happy to assist Draco. He was attracting a certain degree of discreet attention from the girl serving behind the bar, but these days he seemed completely oblivious to his good looks.

As Draco laughed and pushed his hair off his forehead, Severus realised that he was the type of man that any father would be proud to call their son.

*That could have been you, Lucius.* He felt a lump in his throat as he looked at them. *Sitting where Cesar is now, sharing wine with your son. Laughing together, talking about his girl, offering him advice, being proud of him…and just look at you now...*

And suddenly he didn't want to go any further. Didn't want to disturb them; didn't want to see the
quiet happiness drain from Draco's face.

He was almost resolved to walk away, but it was too late. He had only just half-turned away when Draco caught sight of him, and the young man stood up, waving at him. He walked over, slowly.

Cesar smiled up at him. "Been to see my girl? She's very much better, thanks to you, my friend."

Severus replied in Spanish. "Yes, I'm very pleased to see it. She's a strong young lady, your Meghara."

Draco pulled over a third chair and, because he was suddenly unsure how to go on, Severus sat down.

"I didn't expect to see you here today. Hermione get tired of you already? Smart girl, that one." He grinned at his mentor, to take away the sting of his comments. "Do you want some wine? There's plenty to go around and it's a good vintage. In fact, if I have any more, I might not make it back up the hill for lunch." He turned to gesture at the bar-girl.

Severus shook his head. "It's alright, thanks Draco."

"What is it, Severus?" Cesar was looking at him attentively, a little frown between his eyes.

Severus noticed that the Spanish man had switched over to English and followed suit. "It's your father," he said, looking at Draco. "He's had a heart attack."

He wasn't sure what reaction he had expected to get from Draco, but it certainly wasn't the one he got. The young man merely poured some more wine into his and Cesar's glass.

"Was he still alive when you left?" he asked in a calm voice. It seemed casual, but Severus saw a muscle twitching in his jaw and realised that Draco was more shaken than he seemed.

"Barely," he admitted. "We took him to St. Mungo's. Hermione is with him. I'm so sorry, Draco."

"Is she? Oh well, that's OK, then. You must have some of this wine. Just a small glass at least." He turned and gave his order to the bar-girl with an urbane fluency that made her blush and smile at him before rushing off to fetch another glass.

"What do you mean – that's OK?"

"Well, who better than Hermione to decide what to do? No one's better qualified. And she's been looking after him from time to time, I gather." Again, there was that tone of almost forced objectivity.

"But – but you must go and see him! You need to be there…"

He trailed off as Draco looked at him, frowning a little. "Why?"

Severus stared at him for a moment, before continuing rather weakly. "Well, you know - decisions about his treatment, practical arrangements and so on -.

Draco took a deep gulp of his wine and looked out at the view, leaning back in his seat. "The way I see it," he said, slowly, "- either he is already dead. Or he is currently being treated. In either case, there's no rush. In the former case, I won't be able to do very much. In the latter case, I'd only be in the way. I don't know anything about heart attacks. Hermione is the expert – she'll know what treatment choices are the most appropriate."
He looked around and smiled at Severus, his cheek still twitching. "In any case, I can't go rushing off at the moment. Last night, I asked Maia to marry me – and she said yes, thank Merlin."

"Congratulations," Severus croaked, not sure how else to respond. His throat felt dusty and he poured some of the wine into his glass and raised it in Draco's direction before gulping it down. It was mellow and fruity, and he felt some of the lassitude of the hot Spanish afternoon sinking into his body. He fought to shake it off as Draco continued.

"We've just been making plans. We were thinking of an October wedding. Maia loves the autumn, with the cooler weather. Oh – and there was something I wanted to ask you, Severus. You will be my best man – won't you?"

"Me?" Severus's mouth dropped open and he took another quick gulp. He hadn't been expecting that.

Draco laughed. "Of course you. Who else?"

"Draco…” But what else could he say? "I'd be extremely honoured."

Draco grinned at him and drained his glass. That done, he put it down on the table and stood up. There was a manic energy crackling through him that was quite at odds with the lazy atmosphere.

"Well, I'm heading back. I think I've probably had more wine than is good for me. Maia will not be pleased. I think she wanted me to help out with lunch, too." He gave a short laugh and turned away.

Severus leaned forward and touched his arm.

"Draco, please. You really do need to go to the hospital."

The younger man shook off his hand and glared at him through slightly red-rimmed eyes. "No. I really do not."

He walked quickly away from the table, heading in the direction of town rather than towards the rambling Martinez house on the outskirts of Orgiva.

Cesar, who had been quietly attentive throughout the entire conversation, shook his head sadly as Severus half-stood to follow him.

"Let him be, Severus. Just for a while. Let him be."

Much later, Severus found him by the riverbank.

Draco had not returned to the Martinez house that afternoon. Severus had tried to conceal his anxiety while chatting to Beatriz and catching up on the health of the local community. After lunch, while the others dozed or played in the garden, he had followed her into her small home-based clinic and made a list of the potions she was running low on. As he wandered back out into the garden, Beatriz had stayed on in her office. She had a heavy workload, both as a Healer and as a Muggle district nurse, and would quite often forego the siesta in favour of catching up on her Muggle paperwork.

Then, rather to his own surprise, he'd dropped off for a couple of hours. He hadn't really expected
to; he'd slept well in Hermione's guest room the previous night and had been buzzing with adrenaline since finding Lucius. Possibly it was the wine that he and Cesar had finished off before walking back for lunch.

When he woke, the garden was silent, save for the light snores coming from Cesar, stretched out nearby. No one else was there, but he could hear some voices through an open window and the sound of some Muggle music coming from the TV. He lay on his lounger, looking up at the late afternoon sunlight flickering through the tangle of overgrown trees and tried to imagine where Draco might have gone.

How distressed was he by the news? Severus couldn't believe that he was entirely unaffected. That wouldn't fit with the Draco he had come to know – the Draco who had shown himself to be funny and generous-spirited beneath his often sarcastic exterior. This new Draco was kind and loyal and warm-hearted and emotional - and really very sensitive when one looked beneath the smooth image he presented to the world.

And also vulnerable, he reminded himself. Only a year out of withdrawal. Still frighteningly vulnerable. But surely he wouldn't…

He sat up quickly, muttering an incantation and some numbers flicked in front of him. It was four thirty.

He got up and tapped insistently at Cesar's shoulder. "I must go. Got to get home and see if he's there."

The other man muttered sleepily as he stirred. "He'll be OK, Severus, I'm sure of it. He just needs some space."

Severus wasn't so sure, but he tried to hide his fear as he made his farewells to Beatriz and the rest of the family. As always, he gave Maia a hug. He wasn't usually all that tactile with the adult Martinez children, but she had always been a favourite of his. If he held her a little more tightly than usual, neither of them mentioned it.

"He'll be fine," he whispered in her ear. She kissed his cheek and gave him a slightly anxious look before stepping back.

As he prepared to apparate away, he briefly remembered that normally Draco couldn't apparate; his only method of magical transport between Orgiva and Valenzuela was the portkey Severus had created. And that was very limited in scope; he could only use it from the Martinez household. Since he hadn't been anywhere near the house this afternoon, perhaps Severus had got it wrong? Had Draco hit the bars of Orgiva, seeking to drink his troubles away? Or, slightly more worryingly, had he gone to the shabby, hippyish streets of the upper town where there was regular supply of illegal substances if you knew where to look?

He cursed under his breath and decided to apparate anyway.

As soon as he arrived, it was clear what had happened. Outside the house was parked a scruffy-looking hire car from an Orgiva-based company. The cottage door was closed but unlocked.

Severus entered the kitchen and could tell by a glance at the wards that no one was currently in the hidden laboratory. He let out a breath that he hadn't been aware of holding. The rest of the house was silent and empty, but there was an unwashed coffee cup on the kitchen table and Draco's portkey was hung in its usual spot. He couldn't be far away.
Severus put the kettle on as he tried to work out where Draco might have gone. He didn't have any particular friends in the village or surrounding area. He had, of course, charmed the local old widows effortlessly with his good looks and cheery willingness to carry heavy shopping bags, but they were hardly likely to be suitable confidantes.

He drank his coffee and contemplated contacting Hermione. He genuinely didn't know how to approach Draco in his current state of mind, and wondered whether she'd have any ideas. He stood on the terrace for a while, shading his eyes against the early evening sunshine and trying to spot the younger man's pale head in the streets of the village below.

Unsure of what to do, he took refuge in his laboratory. He lost himself for a time in the demands of Beatriz's list, measuring quantities, chopping ingredients and preparing cauldrons in an automatic manner. None of the potions were particularly demanding to prepare, which was probably just as well given his current state of mind.

It took him a couple of hours to guess where Draco might be.

The road leading out of the village crossed a stone bridge over a narrow river at the bottom of the hill before climbing back up to the highway. The next village, Santa Cruz del Commercio, was ten minutes away by car, but there was a path by the river that also led there. It was a 45-minute stroll along a reasonably attractive path, although there was not much shade so it was more pleasant in the autumn or spring.

Last autumn, after Severus had shaken Draco out of his lethargy, this trip had been one of their earliest excursions. Severus hadn't been keen to take Draco to the bigger towns, in case he encountered anything that might be dangerously tempting to a recovering drug addict. However, Santa Cruz was a safe bet - it was slightly more lively than Valenzuela but strongly family-orientated.

Draco would sit in the quiet square and watch the children playing in the municipal park as their parents sat chatting on the benches. He seemed to gain some measure of satisfaction from this simple activity. Severus, watching as his charge's eyes moved almost greedily over the happy dyads of parents and children, was never quite sure whether the younger man was regretting his fatherless state or mourning his own childhood. After all, it was extremely unlikely that the young Draco had ever known the easy pleasures of playing on the swings with other local children. But anyway, the younger man seemed to enjoy these excursions and always ate and slept better after them.

Later, when he was a little more certain of Draco's recovery, Severus began to send him off alone on little errands to Santa Cruz – usually to fetch fresh meat and cheese from the weekly market there or wine from the local vintners, as there were no shops in Valenzuela. On particularly cold or wet days in the winter, Draco would drive Severus's battered old French car, but when he could, he would walk and would return hours later, looking refreshed.

It was past seven when Severus shut his door and walked down the stony path into the village. Valenzuela was as lively as it ever got in the early evening, with elderly men and women standing at their front doors, talking to each other across the street, and the young people preparing to drive off to more exciting locations for the evening. Severus shared the occasional polite nod with those he knew. He didn't usually mix much with the local Muggles, having never quite shed his image as a rather taciturn English eccentric, but he was well tolerated – and his reputation had improved since Draco had arrived. It had amazed him just how quickly the aristocratic Draco had slotted in here; he clearly shared his father's diplomatic abilities.

At the bottom of the hill, he climbed over a stile onto the dusty path by the river. It took a wide
curved, occasionally meandering away but generally following the bend of the river, which at this time of year was little more than a stream.

He found Draco at about the halfway point. He was sitting cross-legged on the grassy verge of the path, careless of his fine trousers. He had taken the time to retrieve his floppy wide-brimmed hat, though – he was always careful of his pale skin in the Spanish heat. As Severus quietly walked up and sat down next to him, he continued picking dry stems of yellowed grass and ripping them to bits, rather viciously. There was a pile of torn stems on the ground in front of him.

They sat side by side, watching the sluggish water trickling over the stones in the river bed. Eventually, Draco sighed and threw a handful of the grass into the water.

"Why should I care?" he asked, suddenly.

"I can't really answer that," Severus responded, cautiously.

Draco glanced at him. "Would you have bothered for your dad? He was a bit of a git, wasn't he?"

He didn't answer – his initial reaction being that his own father had been a little more than a 'bit of a git'. The truth was that he had sought to forget Tobias Snape once he'd started at Hogwarts, initially to quell his fear, but later due to his arrogant belief that the man was as irrelevant as any other Muggle. During the holidays, he had stayed with Slytherin 'friends' – if not with Lucius, then on a variety of floors belonging to students who were reasonably amicable towards him, if not exactly warm. In later years, if no invitations were offered, he would stay in a homeless hostel during the colder months and in a tent during the summer, and had often found short-term labouring jobs to support himself. By the time his father had died, he hadn't set eyes on the man for years and the brutish Muggle had seemed as remote as the far side of the Moon.

"I mean, why the fuck should I even care?" There was a hard, unpleasant edge to Draco's voice that Severus had not heard for months. "I was less than nothing to him. Just a means to an end."

"I don't think that's quite true."

"Isn't it?" Draco glared at him. "Isn't it? We all were, to him. Pawns in his game. Me, my mother, Aunt Bella. All his cronies. Even you. You were a part of his schemes, weren't you? That's why he made you my godfather. I can forgive him the rest, but I can't forgive him for mother. He destroyed her."

"What makes you say that?"

Draco shrugged. "Oh, I suppose Hermione told you it was cancer, but I know – I know – she would have been alright if it hadn't been for him and his ambition. She was a shell when she died. Humiliated, poor, locked up in that mausoleum of a house. I couldn't bear it. I couldn't bear to see what his mistakes had reduced her to. That's one of the reasons why I -." He broke off and carried on tearing up stalks.

His voice was trembling a little and Severus wondered whether he'd been drinking since lunch.

He felt his way carefully, not wishing to offend Draco. "I think… No. I know… Your father did love your mother."

"Yeah, of course he did." Draco gave a bitter laugh.

"No, he really did. I know you just think of it as an arranged marriage – and it was. But he loved her all the same." Severus paused and considered. "There was something… calming about her. She
was always very quiet in public – very self-contained. But she was powerful for all that." He smiled in reminiscence. "She could shut your father up with nothing more than a well-aimed look."

"Yes. She could." Draco's voice was quiet as he gazed across the river, but there was just the hint of a smile at the corners of his unhappy mouth.

"He trusted her implicitly. I think she probably knew more about him than anyone else, even the Dark Lord. And he never regretted marrying her. Not even when…." He hesitated, before going on, gently. "Did you know that she had problems carrying a child to full term?"

Draco was silent and Severus feared he might have gone too far. But eventually, the younger man sighed. "I suspected it. That was probably why she only had me. They would have wanted at least one more heir to be on the safe side."

"True… but it was more than that. She wanted more children for herself, not just for the Malfoy line. She really did. Everyone assumed she was a cold woman who had been reluctant to give Lucius an heir. But she loved children, and she had a few pregnancies after you, but miscarried each time. And even when people were talking about her – suggesting that she must be using magic to stop the pregnancies because she was too wicked to want children – he always stood by her."

Draco seemed to ponder this. "She always seemed a bit remote when I was young. I spent more time with my nanny than I ever did with her. I just thought she was busy with her social life, or that she was unhappy at home."

"That's probably what she wanted you to believe. She had too much pride to admit to her problems. But, the point is, you were her miracle. A miracle for your father too." He shook his head, remembering. "You have no idea… the night you were born, when Lucius told me he had a son… He had tears in his eyes. I'd known him since I was eleven and he was sixteen, but I don't think I'd ever seen him show any emotion in all that time. Not before that night. And he was so proud of you."

"Me?" Draco sounded incredulous.

"Yes. He'd often talk about you – ask me how you were getting on at school, and so on. I could tell that he was delighted to hear how intelligent you were."

"He never said anything."

"The thing is," Severus continued, carefully, "your father was brought up in an old-fashioned family. He was schooled from an early age not to show emotion."

Draco huffed out a short laugh. "And look where it left him."

"Indeed," Severus agreed.

They sat for a little longer as the sun began to sink in the west.

Severus fidgeted a little. "You know, I'm beginning to think that I'm getting too old to sit on the ground. Why don't we go home and get some coffee?"

"Or better still…" Draco nudged with his toe at a plastic carrier bag containing a couple of bottles of wine. "I got it on the way home. Was going to sit here, knock it back and get slowly and comprehensively drunk." He grimaced. "But somehow, I never got around to it. I guess I thought about it, but after all, it's just another type of addiction, isn't it?"
"That's true," Severus replied. "Well, I'll be happy to help you drink a moderate glass or two … back at home though."

"OK." Draco stood up and grabbed the bag, wobbling a little. "Merlin! Anyone would think I'd already been drinking."

"I don't suppose you've eaten anything all day," Severus commented as he reached out to steady the other man's shoulders.

Draco was silent for a while as they walked back, and Severus didn't like to interrupt his thoughts.

Eventually, the younger man sighed. "I don't know how I feel. I have no genuinely happy memories of my father. There were moments where we shared some kind of victory over Potter or Dumbledore, but… looking back, I was never happy. And neither was he. It was all just a hollow victory, intended to improve his standing amongst his Death Eater cronies."

They passed onto the village bridge and Draco lingered for a moment, leaning on the parapet. "All I knew was that, if I wanted his approval, I had to do whatever he asked of me without complaint. I didn't want to join the Death Eaters. I was terrified all the time during those last couple of years before the Battle for Hogwarts. Just terrified."

Severus leaned next to him. "I know."

Draco glanced at him. "And I hated you too. You knew that, didn't you? I was jealous. I was afraid that you would do the job that Voldemort had given to me… And my father would never have forgiven me if I'd let him down. I had to do it for him – and for mother – to improve their status. And you were going to take my chance away from me." For a moment, hostility flashed in his face, and Severus got the unsettling impression that Draco was having a flashback to that traumatic moment of Dumbledore's death.

"Seventeen year old boys should never be expected to kill for their family." He said it loudly, almost harshly, as if to break into Draco's dangerous mood.

Draco slumped a little. "I know. And I'm glad you intervened. Even if it did mean that Mother and Father ended up as prisoners of the Dark Lord in their own home."

"I did it for her," Severus replied, suddenly. "Narcissa. She asked me. And I couldn't refuse her. I made an unbreakable vow. Partly because your aunt was there and I needed to demonstrate my loyalty to your family as well as to the Dark Lord, but also because I… Well, I suppose I was taking my godfatherly duties seriously for once in my life." He laughed, drily.

Draco was silent as they turned back onto the path into Valenzuela. "I didn't know that."

"About the unbreakable?" Severus shrugged. "I would have done it anyway. Dumbledore already knew he was dying by then and we had agreed that I should kill him." He laughed again, without any amusement. "Well, I say 'we', but as usual with Dumbledore, I didn't have an awful lot of choice. But one thing we had agreed on was that you shouldn't be forced to bear that burden of guilt."

"But it was alright for you to bear it?"

Severus was silent as they walked up the hill through the now-quiet streets. As they turned the corner of a narrow lane and the last of the village houses were left behind, the cottage stood above them on the steep stony hill.
Severus contemplated his home as he answered Draco's question. "I… had already killed on the Dark Lord's orders. It seemed only fitting that I should agree to kill on Dumbledore's instruction. Even if the victim was Dumbledore himself. But even then, knowing what he wanted… there was still that moment, just before… when he seemed to be pleading with me. I – I hated him at that moment. For putting me through it – for leaving me behind, to carry on with his blood on my hands. I think, if I hadn't felt that pulse of hatred going through me, I wouldn't have been able to do it." He touched Draco's arm, looking at him very seriously. "I didn't want that for you. I didn't want you to become a killer. Don't underestimate the long-term effects of carrying out such a terrible act as terminating someone else's life. My… crimes… are still with me. They always will be. You don't have that burden."

He smiled and pulled at the younger man's arm, encouragingly. "Come on, let's get that wine open."

They walked up the familiar path to home, as the stars twinkled in the clear skies above them. It was a beautiful calm summer's night, which seemed somehow wrong. There should have been a hurricane to match the tumult in Draco's mind.

He opened the kitchen door and searched for glasses, leaving them with Draco as he went to the bathroom. When he returned, Draco had uncorked one of the bottles and had carried it and the two glasses to the table on the terrace. Severus lingered in the kitchen to get together some bread, cheese and fruit, which he carried out.

He took a sip of the wine that Draco passed him, and grimaced as the rough liquid went down his throat. "Where the hell did you pick this up?"

Draco sighed. "Petrol station. Wasn't really in the mood to seek out the good stuff. Just wanted something that would get me drunk as quickly as possible."

"Well, this'll do that, no problem. Probably strip the lining off your stomach too." Despite that, he took another gulp of the strongly-flavoured red wine, feeling it warm his throat as it went down. He nudged Draco and nodded at the food. "Better get that down – especially if you're planning to drink some of this."

The younger man picked at his food in a desultory manner. "I was thinking. What you said about a burden of guilt, and how you didn't want me to know how it felt. How do you live with the knowledge of what you did?"

"It's not easy," Severus admitted. "I started off by trying not to think about it. After the war, I wanted nothing more to do with any of you. I wanted to become a new person – with a new job and a new home. Even those who helped me – Hermione and Weasley and Potter – all I wanted to do was to escape and never see them again."

He paused, frowning at the horizon, as he remembered sitting in the library at Grimmauld Place and telling Hermione that she had no place in his future plans. And he had meant it. Severus Snape was dead; he would stay so – and he wanted to play no further part in their lives. His duty was done; it was finished.

He took another gulp of the wine before carrying on, noticing as he did so that Draco had topped it up. It wasn't so bad, actually, once one got used to it.

"Anyway, that was a mistake. You can't escape your past. It comes back to bite you – as it did me. The memories made me bitter – angry. I had to strike out at someone, make them hurt… and in the end, that person was me."
"Drugs?" Draco murmured and Severus nodded. "I did wonder – you said or implied that you had some understanding of what happened to me. I thought… well, I thought it might have had something to do with Hermione marrying Ron."

Severus shook his head, feeling a strange wooziness as he did so. "I thought that too, for a long time. But, really, she was just the catalyst. If I'd been more stable back then, I would have coped far better when she left me."

"So, how did you cope in the end?"

"Bit by bit. Little by little. You just get on with things. You try to be honest with yourself. You try not to blame yourself for things you can't change." Severus shook his head. "I used to think it was entirely my fault – what happened to Lily and James Potter. It wasn't – the reality was that they would have died sooner or later, as soon as Voldemort heard the prophecy. I wasn't his only spy. But Albus Dumbledore saw that sense of guilt – and he exploited it. Used it to make me do whatever he asked of me. I hated it, but I never challenged him – not once."

He sighed, taking another big gulp of wine. "I knew he had good reasons for doing what he did. It was all part of some grand plan of his – to prepare Potter to face Voldemort when he was at his strongest, and to protect him until then. It didn't make it easier to deal with, though. I had no support, no sympathetic ear. Dumbledore was no confidante – he had no interest in me as a person. Only as a tool. I see that now. Back then, I just assumed that I deserved to suffer."

"And now?" Draco's voice seemed to come from far away. Severus squinted at him. He was sitting forward in his chair, studying the horizon intently as he nursed his glass of wine.

"Now? I don't blame myself any more. There's a difference between responsibility and guilt. I feel responsible for the people that I hurt or killed, but I no longer feel guilt over what happened."

"Do you think my father has ever felt any guilt – or responsibility – for the lives he destroyed?"

The bitterness was back in Draco's voice again.

"I… don't know. I suppose he might. I mean, his behaviour over the last few years seems to suggest that he might be suffering in some way, and just not dealing with it very well." Severus rubbed his eyes, trying to clear his vision, which was growing hazy. He put his wine glass down; clearly he'd already had too much. "Anyway, the point is, we all have responsibility for someone. Whether that's someone we have wronged or someone who is thrown in our direction by some twist of fate… or whether it's someone we just happen to be related to, whether we want to be or not…"

"Meaning me." Draco gave a dry bark of a laugh. "That wasn't even subtle, Severus."

"No, probably not." Severus rubbed his head, grimacing. "I'm in no condition to be subtle, so I'm going to have to be frank. Look, try to see my point of view. Right now, Hermione is probably making decisions that you should be making. It's not her responsibility, but she's had to take it on because no one else will. And also because she will – because it's in her nature to help. You know Hermione. She'd take responsibility for anyone. She'd even try to help the man who insulted her and sought to have her excluded from our world due to an accident of birth. The point is…" he wavered at this point, shaking his head to try to clear it before continuing, "- the point is, she doesn't have to. Does she? Because he has got someone to be responsible for him, however unwilling that person might be."

Draco stared into the wine that he had scarcely touched. "It's not a responsibility that I want to acknowledge."
"I know." Severus leaned his heavy head back against the wall, blinking up at the stars. He felt no desire to push the point any further.

Draco broke the silence that had fallen between them. "You know, I'm going to miss this. You and me – sitting right here. Talking about nothing in particular, taking in the view over a drink. It'll be different when I'm married. I won't be here so much then."

"Yes." Severus stared up into the heavens and watched the stars gently swaying from side to side. Or was it his head moving? He blinked rapidly and wrenched his focus back to Draco's words. "Yes, I know. I'll miss you."

He was surprised to realise that it was true. There had been a time when he would have been glad to have got rid of Draco Malfoy, having perceived him as an unwelcome chaperone - a third wheel whenever Hermione came to visit. But the young man had grown on him. It had been nice to have a fellow Slytherin around, too – someone who understood instinctively how his mind worked and didn't try to judge him.

"I'll miss you too." Draco continued to stare intently at nothing in particular. "In fact, it occurs to me to wonder what my life might have been like if you had been my father."

Severus snorted. "I'd have made a terrible father. You'd have been even more neglected than you actually were."

"Would I? I don't know. Wouldn't you have been different too? If you'd had someone back then – a child who loved you, who depended on you? Wouldn't that have made a difference?"

"Yes. Maybe. I don't know. Can't think about it now." He felt his head slump sideways and tried to sit up straighter. "Damn paint stripper. I have no tolerance for that cheap rotgut. I need to lie down."

He made an attempt to get up. Draco's voice came from far away again, as he fell back into his chair. "Well, whatever you may think… I wish you had been my father. I wish you were my father now."

"Perish the thought," he muttered, a little ungratefully. He was uncomfortable with the topic, which only served to remind him that Hermione, as well as Draco, was quite young enough to be his child.

Draco seemed frozen in his seat and Severus, seeing this, relented a little. He reached over to pat at Draco's arm and found himself patting the table instead.

"Look, we're friends, aren't we? I'm proud to call you my friend. And something else… any man – any man – should be proud to call you his son. I'd have been a useless father. You deserve much better than me."

"Thank you." Draco seemed to huddle in his seat, as if cold despite the night's muggy warmth.

"Well, I'm definitely off to bed." Severus got up with an effort and stretched. His head span and he staggered, putting out a hand to steady himself. How much of that wine had he drunk? "Are you coming in now?"

Draco didn't move. "In a minute."

"Well, alright then. Don't be too long, and make sure you put out that deck lamp."
If he'd been feeling less sleepy and less addled by cheap alcohol, he might have hesitated. As it was, he stumbled, heavy-limbed, into the kitchen and through the house to his bedroom, bumping into a door as he went. He had enough presence of mind to wonder just what the hell had been in that wine, but any half-formed suspicions fled as his head span, making his stomach roil uncomfortably.

He retched violently into his wastepaper bin, over and over, expelling what must have been a fair amount of what he'd drunk, if not all. When the turmoil in his stomach finally retreated, he leaned back on his bed, trembling and sweating. Damn cheap wine…

Lying down on the bed carefully, only half undressed and still feeling a little nauseous, he told himself that he'd definitely return to London in the morning, taking Draco with him – whether the younger Malfoy liked it or not. And he'd contact Hermione and let her know that all was well. It would be fine, he told himself, as his heavy eyes started to close.

But by the morning, it was too late. When Severus finally staggered into the kitchen, still feeling terribly sick, he noticed that the hire car had gone.

At some point during the night, Draco had packed up his meagre possessions and departed. He had left no note behind him and no indication of where he might have gone. And Severus, usually a light sleeper, had slept through it all, having – as he later discovered - been drugged by a heavy wine laced with a sleeping potion.
Old Friends

Wednesday 15th August 2012

The Weasleys were early. They sat in a small, slightly dusty waiting room at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, waiting for their appointment. It was clear that they would not be seen until the correct time. The Ministry would not put itself out for anyone.

They were the only people in the room apart from a wizened old witch sitting behind a reception desk, who kept throwing them rather baleful looks. Fortunately, these seemed to go over the head of Hugo, who was currently being entertained by Arthur Weasley's demonstration of Muggle magic tricks. It evidently amused him inordinately that someone might perform tricks based on sleight of hand rather than actual magic. Rose, as usual, had her head buried in a book.

The atmosphere was not helped by the fact that Molly was bristling with suppressed indignation at the unfriendly treatment.

"Well, she's a ray of sunshine, isn't she?" Ron muttered to Hermione after a particularly nasty glare.

"Do you know her?" she muttered back, eyeing the sour-faced witch. She felt she ought to be familiar with the woman herself, but couldn't place her.

Ron shrugged. "Looks like someone they dragged out of retirement especially to deal with miscreants and troublemakers like us."

"You could be right. Maybe it's a last-ditch attempt to persuade us to give it up and go home."

He sighed. "No chance. Typical Ministry attitude. Why change a thing, when it's so much easier not to? It's just as bad in the Auror office; you should've seen the look on old Bertie Baggott's face when Harry brought in the mandatory five-year retraining policy. 'When I first started, we never had all this retraining rubbish.' Yeah, and when he started, none of us were even born – not even Voldemort. Load of bloody dinosaurs."

Hermione gave an inelegant snort of laughter, and clamped her hand over her mouth in embarrassment as the old crone glared at her again. It was hysteria, she knew – caused by nerves.

"Was thinking of jacking it in, actually," Ron went on, hesitantly.

"What – your job at the Ministry? Really?" This was news to Hermione. She had assumed that he was happy in his job. "What would you do?"

"Well..." He was even more hesitant. "I was thinking of setting up on my own. You know, finding missing wizards and witches. Solving mysteries. That's the part of my job that I enjoy most."

"Like a sort-of...private investigator?" She laughed. "Actually, that makes a lot of sense. I bet there are enough wizards out there who'd rather deal with things privately instead of involving the Auror department."

"Yeah, that's what I thought." He paused. "The thing is, I hate toeing the party line. Telling people what they have to do. The epidemic was the last straw – I spent most of my time forcing people to stay in their homes in infected zones, when even I would have been tempted to move away. Oh, I'm not denying that someone has to keep law and order – I just wish it wasn't me. I'm much better
working alone."

"What does Susan think?" she asked, curiously.

He gave her a quick, slightly embarrassed look. "She doesn't mind. She knows that it might mean I wouldn't be bringing in much money, if any, at first. But she's got a good salary and is happy to support me until I get things going."

He was clearly too polite to mention the fact that, with Hermione's career change and drop in salary, he wouldn't have been able to leave his job while they were still together. Now that Hermione's parents were going to sell their house and move in with Hermione and the children, she had more money and less need of his support, so it was no longer a problem. She smiled to show that she wasn't offended.

"Would you work alone?"

"Well, not quite alone." Ron grinned. "Actually, I was reminded of that year when Percy and I tracked down your parents. We weren't that bad a team, actually. You know Percy – he's meticulous and he loves his paperwork. He'd be able to keep the files and help me with the research. And George would also be involved – he's been thinking of branching out, you know. He already supplies the Ministry with some of his inventions, but he wants to work on tracking spells. So he'd be helping out – and he's the perfect person to promote the business too."

"He certainly is." She laughed. "It's perfect, actually. You always were the strongest of the three of us at strategic thinking, Ron. You must let me know if I can do anything to help. We – Severus and I – might be able to invest some money, if it would help. And of course I'll advertise your services." She hesitated. "Um…what about Harry? What does he think?"

"Harry? I haven't told him that I'm going to give my notice yet." He shrugged as she raised an eyebrow. "Well, you know him. I did think of asking him to join me, but there's no way he'd leave the Ministry." Ron frowned. "You know, back at school, when it was us against… well, against almost everyone, I never thought he'd end up as some Ministry lackey."

"Hardly a lackey, is he?" she pointed out. "Let's be honest, he calls a lot of the shots around here. Chief Auror by the age of thirty? It's a fairly rapid career rise."

They were silent for a moment, lost in thought.

"Do you think Kingsley is…nervous of him?" Ron asked, tentatively.

Hermione sighed. "I don't really know. I haven't seen the Minister for a long time. But Harry has a lot of respect for him, Ron, you know that. I don't think he'd want to be Minister for years yet."

"But you think he will be Minister – one day?" Ron asked. "Do you?"

"Well, don't you? It's inevitable, I should think."

"What's inevitable?"

Ron and Hermione jumped at the new voice. It was Harry, putting his head around the corner of the door, before coming in, grinning. "Ah, you are here. Might have known you'd be here early. Hermione panicking as usual, I suppose?"

"No comment," Ron replied, drily. Hermione didn't deign to reply.
"Yes, well." Harry clapped his hands together, looking very much as if he were trying far too hard to treat the occasion as an everyday, normal occurrence. "I'm sure it'll all be over very soon."

"Of course it will," Arthur agreed, equally heartily.

"Anyway," Harry went on, glancing over his shoulder at the witch, who was watching them with interest, and lowering his voice slightly, "I just wanted to let you know that the procedure will be witnessed by Miranda Hopkirk and Reg Poulter. Their jobs are to monitor Rose and Hugo and call a halt if they trace any adverse magical reactions."

"Not you?" Hermione asked. "They'd feel more comfortable if it was you."

Harry shook his head, looking uncomfortable. "I'm considered to have a vested interest in the divorce. I suppose they think I might not monitor carefully enough or hesitate to call a halt until it was too late."

She laughed bitterly. "That's…quite insulting, really. As if you would consider doing such a thing."

He shrugged. "It's probably for the best. I've taken care to choose two people who are known to be fairly neutral on this issue. They're good people – diligent but fair."

Ron nodded. "I'd trust them both with my life."

"Mum, why do we need to be monitored?" It was Hugo who had spoken, but Rose looked up from her book with sudden interest.

It was Ron who replied. "It's just a precaution. They want to make sure that your magic won't be affected by Mum and me not being married anymore."

"And if it is?"

Ron looked at his daughter. "They'll stop the divorce immediately. You don't need to worry."

She looked insulted by the reassurance. "I'm not worried. It just seems a bit unfair, that's all. I mean, you want to marry Auntie Susan, and Mum would rather be with Uncle Severus. What's wrong with that?"

"It's just that they want to make sure that you're safe, love," Molly broke in, soothingly.

Rose set her jaw in a manner that strongly reminded Hermione of Ron. "You mean they think that mine and Hugo's magic will be less powerful if Mum and Dad split up. That's just rubbish. They don't know what our magic is going to be like when we grow up. It's got nothing to do with who our parents are or whether or not they live together. I mean, my magic might change anyway. I might be good at Charms now, but who knows what I'll be good at by the time I get to Hogwarts? Maybe my magic's changing now – how will they know whether it's the divorce or just natural? It's stupid. Why do they have to be so stupid about it?"

She raised her voice very deliberately and the unfriendly receptionist gave a huff of disapproval – and received another glare from Molly for her pains.

Hermione sighed. "I really don't know, Rosie."

She expected her daughter to glare at the much-hated diminutive, but Rose simply gave her a grave look before returning to her book.
"Well, I need to get back to work." Harry gestured towards the door. "Good luck – although I'm sure it'll all be fine. Oh, and I don't want to see you at work afterwards, Ron. Take the day off. You – um, you may need a few hours' break."

He gave them a last, slightly shaky, smile as he left.

"God, it's not going to be as bad as all that, is it?" Hermione said, nervously.

"We have no idea. No one has – that's the point," Molly pointed out, reasonably. "This doesn't happen very often, you know."

"What – are you trying to tell me that no one ever gets divorced in the wizarding world?"

"Of course they do, but it's usually considered quite shameful. Mostly, they go for the separation. They just move into different communities and no one talks about it. It's the same for Ministry divorces, isn't it, Arthur?"

Her husband nodded. "I've heard of cases, but people don't tend to discuss it. In any case, the outcomes of each termination of magical marital bonds are usually different. It depends on the nature of your relationship and so on. My main hope is that it won't be too traumatic for you and the children because you had a close friendship for several years before, and because you're on good terms now. It might be different if you weren't."

"Mr. and Mrs. Weasley?"

They all turned as one, to look at the sour-faced witch. She favoured them with one final glare.

"You may go in now."

"Well." Ron took a deep breath. "I guess we're about to find out.

An hour and a half later, the Weasleys stood in a small, silent group in the Ministry's great atrium. Various minions hurried around them, apparently quite oblivious to their shaken emotions.

"Well, that's over then," said Hermione, breaking the silence rather lamely. The truth was that she was feeling a little cast adrift by the events of the morning. She might have continued "so what now?", but it seemed a little presumptuous in the circumstances.

"I'm just relieved that you got through it all right. You do feel OK, don't you?" he asked his son, worriedly.

Ron hesitated. "Yes, I suppose so." He looked as if he wanted to say more, but wasn't sure whether he should. Instead, his eyes flickered to Hermione questioningly. "What about you – Miss Granger?"

It sounded far stranger coming from him than it had when the Minister for Magical Law Enforcement had said it. "Miss Granger," she repeated a little uncertainly, sounding it out on her own tongue. "I suppose I am, now." She laughed. "Sounds a bit odd after so many years, doesn't it? Makes me feel like a schoolgirl again." If this had been a Muggle divorce, she would probably have retained her married name for ease, but it had been made clear to her that this wasn't acceptable. She was no longer a Weasley and that was that.

She wondered for a moment whether she and Severus would ever marry. Mrs. Snape. It sounded equally odd – it was tempting to consider sticking to Granger from now on, whatever happened.
Not for the first time, she wondered why a professional woman should be expected to abandon her family name following marriage.

"Well, I think that this calls for a trip to Diagon Alley." Molly suggested, brightly. "We need something to cheer us up after the morning we've had. After all, we're up in London, so we might as well make the most of it. What do you think?"

"Yes, can we, please Mum?" Hugo pleaded. Rose tried to look bored by the idea, but her true feelings were given away by the acquisitive gleam in her eye. Hermione envisaged an expensive hour or two in Flourish and Blotts.

But, to be fair, the children rarely got to visit the famous wizarding shopping street. And, in any case, Arthur and Molly were looking after them for the next couple of days and probably relished the opportunity to spoil them. In recent years, the fortunes of the older Weasleys had improved to some degree and they were now able to give their grandchildren the treats that they had not been able to provide to their own children. Arthur and Molly were making up for the years of poverty.

Hermione eyed her son speculatively. It was his longest outing since getting out of bed, and he still got over-tired far too easily. "I don't see any reason why not – just as long as you don't get too tired. Straight back to Grandma Weasley's as soon as you do."

She glanced worriedly at Molly, who smiled, putting her arm around her grandson. "He'll be fine. I'll keep an eye on him. Arthur can always take him home after lunch while Rose and I do some shopping."

Hermione nodded. She still felt a numb from the marital bond severance – more disturbed by it than she liked to admit. She glanced at Ron, wondering whether he felt the same way.

The procedure had taken almost an hour. They had had to sign some paperwork first and then the incantations had been halted at regular intervals to check on their status and that of the children. While it was taking place, Hermione had felt odd, as if she were floating out of her body and observing events from above. Each time the spell was halted, she had felt herself slamming back into her body with increasing violence.

As she looked at Ron, she reflected on the fact that she didn't actually feel all that different. Ron was still Ron, she was still Hermione, and the world was still turning. She had expected to feel emotionally distant from her ex-husband immediately afterwards, with their magical bond severed. In theory, he should mean no more to her than any other wizard. However, in a strange way, she felt warmer towards him than she had for years. Perhaps that was the magic of the incantation? Perhaps the purpose was to restore what they had been before their ill-conceived marriage?

Anyway, right now, she felt a strange reluctance to walk away from him. It was almost as if she sensed that if she said goodbye now, it might be very difficult to rekindle their friendship when they met again. And, judging by his hesitation and the slightly pained expression on his face, he felt the same way.

With some delicacy, Arthur and Molly drew the children away from their parents, distracting them with descriptions of the shops in the Alley.

Ron smiled at Hermione, a little uncertainly. "We didn't do so badly in the end. Did we?"

"No, we didn't." She looked him up and down, noticing for the first time how much better he looked these days. He'd lost that pinched, strained, almost bitter expression she had begun to associate with him. He'd put on a little weight too, which suited his broad frame. He looked more
confident too – no longer the Weasley who had lived permanently in the shadow of older and more brilliant brothers. He seemed utterly at ease in his own skin, and she attributed this new assurance to Susan.

"I'm sorry – for everything," she added, hoping he would understand without further explanation.

He did. His eyes softened. "I'm sorry too. We both made mistakes." His eyes went to their children, and he smiled. "But some things I can't regret. I'll never regret having Rose and Hugo."

"Neither will I." She continued, cautiously. "I'm just glad that I didn't ruin… that you… Well, you seem much happier now."

"I am." He didn't elaborate further, perhaps out of consideration for her, but his smile widened and she had no doubt that he was already planning his future. "And you? Are you happy?"

She hesitated before lifting her head and meeting his gaze. "I will be."

"Good." He also hesitated, looking down at his hands for a moment. "You know, with all that happened, I never got a chance to thank him – for what he did for Hugo. I regret that. Will you tell him that I – that…" He cleared his throat and looked at her. "Will you give him my best regards?"

She smiled. "I will, I promise." She shifted, as the silence between them grew uncomfortable. "Well, I really must go."

"Must you? Do you have to get back to work?"

She was startled. "Well, no, but I suppose -.

"Because, you know what I'd really like, right now?" He raised his voice, looking over at his children and parents to include them in the conversation. "An ice-cream. A real one – at Fortescue's."

The deceased ice-cream maker's famous parlour had reopened a couple of years after the war, under new management but its name had remained, out of respect for Florean.

Hugo's face lit up. "Yeah, brilliant, Dad! I want a banana and raspberry and chocolate and peanut butter sundae."

"That sounds gross and you'll probably be sick," Rose grumbled, but mildly, as they were ushered through the atrium by Arthur and Molly.

Ron grinned and looked back at Hermione. "Will you come too? For old time's sake?"

She opened her mouth to make an excuse - she really needed to get back to the hospital as soon as possible – but looking up into his familiar, friendly face, she couldn't bring herself to refuse. 

What the hell, why not?

She grinned back. "OK. Yes, I will."

She took the arm that he offered to her in a gesture that was both old-fashioned and ironically knowing, and they followed Hugo, Rose, Arthur and Molly out of the Ministry.

When Hermione arrived at the hospital, a couple of hours' later, she found Severus sitting in a small relative's room, just outside Lucius's door, contemplating his knees. He looked up as she
approached.

"Everything OK?" She gestured at the door and he nodded.

"No change. Just an assessment. I thought it might be better to wait outside in case he wakes up."

She nodded. "And how are you feeling now."

He winced and rubbed the back of his head. "Still a bit of a headache."

She grimaced sympathetically. It had been over a week since Draco had made his bid for freedom and it hadn't been a pleasant time for Severus. He could have told his apprentice that sleeping potions didn't mix well with cheap wine at all… or perhaps Draco had already known that? Not only had the concoction knocked him out for most of the night, the adverse effects had kept him effectively immobilised with severe headaches and vomiting for a couple of days – long enough to ensure that he wasn't capable of following any trail while it was still warm.

Once he'd worked out exactly what substance Draco had mixed into the wine, he'd known he was going to be in for a tough few days. In fact, when Hermione had contacted him by her galleon later that day, he'd been too busy throwing up to answer her properly. There was nothing to be done and no potion would help; he just had to endure the unpleasant effects while the poison worked its way out of his body. He had refused Beatriz's help – she was busy enough as it was. All he knew was that Draco hadn't been in touch with his new fiancé or any other member of her family. The man seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth. He couldn't even been traced by his wand, which the Ministry still held in its possession. Severus could only assume he was living as a Muggle to avoid detection.

Hermione couldn't do anything to help him. She'd taken the decision to go ahead with the bypass surgery. Lucius had got through that and had been kept in an induced coma while he recovered. Hermione had been busy trying to negotiate power of attorney in the absence of his only surviving relative and trying to work out how – and where - Lucius would live if he made a full recovery. There was no question of him returning to Malfoy Manor.

Healer Knott had carried out the magical surgery, pronounced herself satisfied with the initial outcome and taken her leave. Since then, Lucius had been cared for by other healers at St Mungo's. As far as Hermione could tell (and she'd made certain to keep an eye on his care), he had been accorded the same respect and level of care as any other wizard.

Knott had returned that morning to check his current condition, and Hermione was keen to hear what she thought. Lucius had eventually regained consciousness, but remained very weak, unable even to feed himself. He slept most of the time and, when he was awake, was quiet and sullen, refusing to speak unless absolutely necessary. He wouldn't even look at Hermione.

When Severus had arrived a couple of days ago, still rather pale and plagued with headaches, Hermione had hoped that his presence would cheer Lucius up. What she hadn't considered was that Lucius still had no idea that Severus had survived – he'd cut himself off from wizarding society before his heart attack and probably hadn't heard the news. The healers were wary of the potential impact of such a shock, so Severus was kept out of his room.

In any case, the point had become moot, as Lucius's condition wasn't improving. He now spent most of his time sedated, making it safe for Severus to be present from time to time. Hermione had considered trying to pass her power of attorney to him – it made sense being as Severus could, at least, be considered an old 'friend'. However, it had been enough of a struggle to get the Ministry to give her control of his affairs, and Severus was not keen anyway.
If only Draco would appear…

She glanced around the waiting room, looking for a spare chair. The room was particularly busy this afternoon with several worried-looking parents (a group of teenagers had got themselves into trouble while trying to replicate one of George's spells), an elderly man with a long white beard in the corner, apparently fast asleep, and a large young witch, looking harassed as she tried to control several young and very noisy children. One of them trod on Hermione's foot as he ran past, and she glared at him as she summoned a spare chair across the room. She positioned it next to Severus and sat down.

"Any news?"

He shook his head, wearily. "He hasn't been in touch with Maia."

She squeezed his wrist in silent sympathy. She knew he was currently feeling rather useless. He could do nothing to help the father and was feeling deeply betrayed by the son. She could sense his humiliation – after all, a Potions Master should have detected that there was something wrong with the wine long before the damage was done. He'd let his guard down; he'd trusted Draco. She feared he might slip into one of his black moods. Since he'd returned from Valenzuela, he'd been as morose and as bitter as he'd been during the days of his recovery from Nagini's bite.

It was on the tip of her tongue to mention Ron's change of career. It had occurred to her that they could ask him track down Draco in a private capacity, but before she could say anything, he looked up at her with a sudden change of mood.

"So, it's all over then? How was it?"

"Fine, actually. I mean, I felt a bit shaky afterwards. Weak in the legs – you know. But apparently that's quite normal, and there was no damage to our magic or the children's."

She felt some of the tension go out of him, as she frowned at her hands. "The odd thing is that I don't feel all that different. I mean, I liked Ron before – even loved him, in a kind-of errant brother way. I feel the same way now. We went to Fortescue's for ice cream, and it was fine. More than fine – it felt good. Like spending time with a good friend – you know?"

"That's probably just as well," he commented, after a pause. "I mean, it's working now, isn't it? With the children, and so on. You don't really want that level of accord to disappear."

"True. Oh, he sends his regards, by the way, and his thanks - for Hugo. I think he was trying to wish us luck, in a slightly awkward roundabout way."

"Was he? Hmm. Well, I wish him much the same. He deserves to be happy."

She turned away to hide her smile. There was a time when it would have been impossible for Severus and Ron to be in the same room without some simmering tension. Even before her marriage to Ron, the two had had little respect for one another.

The situation with Hugo had changed matters significantly. Ron was mature enough to recognise his debt of gratitude to his former nemesis, while Severus was grateful for Ron's support at the hospital – if he had not agreed to Hugo's treatment, Severus might have struggled to convince the healers of its worth. She now had hope that they would be able to treat each other with a modicum of civility at least. It was important that they all got on, her and Susan as much as the two men – otherwise it would be difficult to make the next few years work.

The door opened and Knott's head emerged. "Mrs. Weasley? I was hoping you'd be here."
"Miss Granger," she corrected, wincing a little. She could tell that she'd be doing a fair amount of that over the next few weeks.

"Oh?" Knott shrugged her disinterest. "OK, Miss Granger, or whoever you are. Come in. You too." She gestured peremptorily in Severus's direction before disappearing again.

Hermione snorted her amusement at the look on Severus's face as she stood up.

Knott was busy with the data on her wand as usual, as they went in. Lucius appeared to be entirely unresponsive. Two other healers stood by, looking a little unsure whether they should leave or not.

Knott looked up at Hermione and Severus after a minute, her face carefully blank. Her gaze fell on the hovering healers and she glared at them and jerked her head towards the door. The two young women slipped out, gratefully.

"Well," she began, looking at Hermione. "You're not stupid, so you, at least, will have begun to realise that things are not looking good."

Hermione sagged a little. "So the bypass failed?" It wasn't entirely a surprise to her. She'd been able to see Lucius slipping away more and more as the week had passed.

"No, the bypass was successful in terms of the original infarction. But the overall damage was too great. He's gone into cardiac failure." She wriggled her hand from side to side, as if to adjust her calculation. "I give him twelve to twenty-four hours. Probably nearer to twelve - if that."

Severus stared at Lucius in horror. "I didn't think – I just assumed…"

"Yeah, most people do just assume," Knott commented, frowning at her data once more. "They think a bypass is the be-all end-all. Well, it's not. Sometimes it works – if the initial attack was treated quickly enough. In this case -.

"- we don't know how long he'd been lying there," Hermione finished for her.

Knott nodded at her. She glanced in Lucius's direction for a moment, her clever eyes running over her unconscious patient with clinical dispassion.

"Well, it's clear that there's nothing more I can do for him. This just has to run its course. No sign of the missing son, I take it?"

They shook their heads in unison.

"Yeah, well, it probably wouldn't make any difference if he was here. I wouldn't expect Mr. Malfoy to regain consciousness – not now. He'll just drift away until his heart stops. It'll take a while. All the healers can do is make sure that he's comfortable. I'll leave that to them."

Hermione stepped towards her, seeing that she was preparing to leave. "I want to thank you – for trying."

She held out a hand, not really expecting a response. To her surprise, the Healer shook it, giving her a wry look. "Do you? I can't imagine why. You said it yourself – that man doesn't want to live. To all intents and purposes, he's probably already been dead for a long time."

She sighed, looking at Lucius again. Just for a moment, they could see the human being behind the efficient Healer. "It's my job to wave my wand and mutter my incantations and just carry on patching up and patching up… and sometimes I wonder why the hell I bother. I'll be honest with
you, Miss Granger… this is one of those occasions. You can't heal someone who just plain doesn't want to be healed."

She nodded briskly at the two of them and left the room. As the door closed, they could hear her giving her instructions to the healers, her voice clipped and efficient.

Severus drew a deep breath. "Well. That's that, I suppose." His voice sounded odd even to his own ears.

Hermione didn't answer immediately. As he looked over at her, he could see she was not particularly surprised at the prognosis. She was looking at Lucius with an odd, slightly speculative look on her face. "Draco got what he wanted then," she commented, softly. "Do you – do you want to sit with him for a bit?" she added, tentatively.

Severus shot a startled look at her. "Do you really think that that's a good idea?"

"Why not? He's not going to wake up now anyway. If he does, it hardly matters if he gets a shock, does it? It might speed things up. In any case, even if he did wake up, he'd probably be confused. He might think you're both young again and that Narcissa is still alive. It might be a comfort to him."

She looked down at her hands, still with that strange, indefinable look on her face. It reminded him of the expression she had whenever she had just solved a mystery or worked out a new theory, and wasn't entirely sure what to do with her discovery. He could almost see the thoughts racing through her mind, rejecting or accepting each possible course of action.

"Are you all right?"

She jumped, looking a little guilty. "Me? Yes, why shouldn't I be? Um - I think I should pop along to the duty Healer's station and find out what his plan of care will be. You might as well stay here."

"What? But, Hermione, I can't -.

But before he could stop her, she hurried out of the room. As the door closed behind her, Severus stared at it rather helplessly before looking around for a chair. Failing to see one, he transfigured an empty potions cabinet into an armchair, making sure it was well-upholstered – he supposed he might as well be comfortable if this was going to take a while. He summoned it forward to a position next to Lucius's bed and sat down, facing his sometime friend sometime nemesis.

"Well, what the hell am I meant to say?" he mumbled.

Severus had never coped with illness all that well. He was good with healing potions and reasonably efficient at managing wounds (including his own), which was why he'd often been called upon to minister to the Dark Lord and his followers. But when it came to bedside care, he was hopeless. He lacked the natural sympathy that one needed to nurse the sick – that and the ability to be falsely cheerful.

It was ironic that he had all-too frequently been called upon by his fellow Death Eaters to deal with general family illnesses as well as the injuries for which they did not care to call in an 'official' Healer. In this capacity, he had often advised Narcissa on the health of the young Draco. Lucius did not approve of the free care provided by St Mungo's – they would not attend him at home, and he refused to mix with ordinary wizards and witches at the hospital. At a pinch, he would call upon a private Healer who had attended his family for an exorbitant fee when he was a child, but this individual was not always available when needed.
Equally, Poppy had occasionally called Severus in for advice on a particularly difficult case at school. As with the families of the Death Eaters, while he wouldn't refuse to assess and offer an opinion, he would not linger by the bedside. It reminded him too much of his own mother, who frequently took to her bed with real or imagined maladies. As a young boy, Severus had made a poor nurse; he was hardly better now.

He looked at Lucius's sleeping face now, a little unsure of what to do or say. He was acutely conscious of the fact that he probably wouldn't have been the man's first choice to be keeping watch at his death bed. Precisely who his preference would be, if not Narcissa, Severus had no idea. Draco, presumably…but if he were here, would it really bring Lucius any comfort? Or would he just look at his adult son and see the child's failures – or perhaps his own failures reflected back at him? Would he harangue Draco or order him to leave his bedside? Was Draco right to stay away? And what could he – Severus Snape - say to Lucius, to ease the other man's journey towards death?

He laughed very slightly, looking around the drab room. "Never thought you'd end up somewhere like this, old friend."

Old friend? Was that what he was? Would Lucius look at him and see a friend? Despite it all, despite the years of suspicion and betrayal, despite the wall that had fallen between them during Voldemort's reign… would Lucius look beyond that and remember that once the two of them had been friends?

Admittedly, it had hardly been the most equal of friendships, but by the time he was eleven, Severus had learnt to take friendship wherever he could find it. The rich, loyal companionship that bloody arrogant James Potter enjoyed was not for the likes of Severus Snape. All he knew was that, on his first day at school, for the first time in his life, he had been applauded by the Slytherins when he sat down to join them… and that a sixth year student had put his hand on his shoulder in a friendly manner.

During his first two years, he'd followed Lucius around like a dog, pouncing on the little scraps of kindness that the arrogant young man saw fit to toss his way. At first, it was probably merely amusement that made Lucius accept the tiny, scruffy boy into his exalted circle. It was a circle that had included the beautiful if remote Narcissa Black, who was, it was rumoured, being groomed to marry the heir to the Malfoy fortune. Most of Lucius's friends, rich purebloods like himself, looked upon Severus with scorn. Narcissa alone appeared to have a vague sympathy for him – quite possibly due to the fact that she too had had to endure humiliating gossip behind her back, due to her older sister Andromeda's recent marriage to a Muggle. Anyway, he grew to like her while continuing to worship Lucius.

As time passed, the nature of Lucius's friendship began to change, and Severus realised that Lucius had recognised his exceptional gifts, particularly for potions and dark magic. Ever the opportunist, Lucius began to cultivate Severus's friendship in earnest. What his exact plans had been, Severus had no idea, but it was possible that he recognised that Severus might be extremely powerful at some future stage. Whatever the motivation, it was strong enough for Lucius to keep in touch with Severus after graduation, and he frequently invited the younger boy to stay at Malfoy Manor.

As age and experience made Severus more cynical, it became clear to him that the aristocratic young man didn't actually care about him at all. However, he'd kept up the pretence of friendship, not least because, like Lucius, he'd become something of an opportunist. People who appeared to offer genuine friendship couldn't be trusted; Lily had taught him that when she went off with that detestable Potter. But if one were prepared to offer something in return, an appearance of friendship could be obtained. And, if nothing else, Lucius offered a free comfortable bed.
And so the companionship between Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape had developed – a complicated friendship of public smiles and private barbs. As Severus matured and left Hogwarts, Lucius seemed to seek him out more frequently and even appeared to take his advice seriously. He had been genuinely emotional over the birth of his son. Severus had been rather touched at being asked to be godfather, even though he knew that Lucius's choice was almost certainly political, as Severus was known to be a favourite of the Dark Lord by then. That night, as the two men toasted the health of Draco Lucius with copious amounts of firewhiskey, they had come as close to genuine friendship as they ever had – or ever would again.

For, of course, it was only a few weeks' later that Harry James Potter had been born, and Severus was then forced to divide his time between swearing loyalty to Voldemort in return for sparing Lily and begging Dumbledore to protect her. He'd had little time for Lucius over the next year or so; and then, after Lily's death, had had no stomach for the Malfoys' foul views on blood purity. He had been particularly disgusted with the way that Lucius had avoided imprisonment following Voldemort's downfall.

For all that, he'd retained some affection for Narcissa and a vague interest in the well-being of his young grandson, which forced him to keep in touch with the Malfoys over the years. But he and Lucius would never be close again. They spoke of each other in positive tones in public, but avoided private meetings. He suspected that Lucius was offended by Severus's loyalty to a mudblood and that he, at least in part, blamed Severus for Voldemort's defeat.

Later on still, after Voldemort's resurrection, they'd become occasional, if unacknowledged, allies against the madness and violence that surrounded the Dark Lord. There were occasions where the two of them were probably the sanest individuals present, and certainly the cleverest, apart from their master. From time to time, Severus would catch Lucius's eye, perhaps at a meeting where Voldemort had launched into one of his fantastical, hate-filled diatribes, and fancy that he could detect just the tiniest degree of fellow-feeling in that smooth expression. And there had been the times when Lucius may have spotted more than Severus wanted him to – and had appeared to turn a blind eye. He wouldn't go so far as to describe Lucius as a co-conspirator; it was merely that even Lucius Malfoy could be shocked by the depths to which Voldemort was prepared to go.

"So, here we are, then," he said, rather lamely.

There was no response from the man lying on the bed – well, he supposed there wouldn't be, really. In a funny way, this gave him a sense of freedom. He smirked and leaned back in his comfortable chair a little.

"I bet you're surprised to see me. Well, not see as such, since you haven't opened your eyes, and I'm not sure that you can even hear me...but then I heard somewhere that the hearing is the last sense to go, so maybe you can hear me? Or was touch the sense that goes last? God, I've started rambling."

Somewhat to his own surprise, he leaned forward a little and placed his hand over Lucius's. It lay limp on the blanket, but when he touched it, he fancied that the fingers twitched very slightly.

Having laid his hand on the dying man's, he felt that removing it might be churlish – especially if Lucius was aware of him. He kept it in place, clasping Lucius's limp fingers rather awkwardly.

"Your son," he continued, "managed to make a fool of me the other day. He managed to drug me – me! Have you ever known me to be anything less than entirely vigilant when it comes to food and drink? All those years under Voldemort, endlessly having to watch out in case one of my fellow conspirators decided they wanted to take my place... Even you – I wouldn't have put it past you to slip something into my drink if you thought it might be worth your while. And then I get tricked by
a man twenty years younger than me! Must be getting soft in my old age."

He looked carefully at Lucius's face, but there was no trace of awareness in that blank expression.

"He's very clever though, your boy. I know that Hermione wouldn't tell you where he was. Well, he was with me the entire time. He got himself clean, he's got a goal to aim for, and he's even managed to find himself a girl who is prepared to marry him. I think you'd approve. She's bright and very beautiful – and she loves him. I suppose that's the main thing."

He shook his head and gazed out of the window for a moment. Almost without being aware of it, he'd started to squeeze Lucius's hand comfortably.

"He's a fine young man, Lucius. I don't know what else I can tell you. He – he's very like you. Diplomatic, ambitious, logical, driven. A true Slytherin. But, in some ways, he reminds me of Narcissa more. You remember those days at school - how she could turn on the charm when she needed to, just to get what she wanted? That's pure Draco. And he has her sense of humour too. He can be sharp with his witticisms, but he just needs to turn on that smile to get away with it. Looks like her too. He's got her smile and some of her mannerisms."

He paused. "I didn't appreciate him properly when he was at Hogwarts. For me, he was just another responsibility, and I had enough problems. Even before then, I didn't visit him as often as I should have, especially as his godfather. I know that you only selected me because it seemed like a prudent choice at the time... and I know we had our differences. But that wasn't his fault. If I'd paid more attention, if I'd tried to be a more positive influence..."

His voice faded away and he looked out of the window again, at the London skyline.

"But then you weren't a very good father, were you, Lucius?" He sighed as he looked at the face of a wizard who should have been in his prime; a man who looked decades older than his fifty-six years. "I probably shouldn't say that. I should be offering meaningless words of comfort. That's what you're supposed to do, isn't it? When someone's dying, you're supposed to tell them that they had a good life and that they'll be missed."

He realised that he was rubbing his thumb gently along the inside of Lucius's wrist. His hand stilled and he had to resist the urge to snatch it away as if it were burnt.

"Trouble is, I can't do that. Never could. That's why I'd make such a terrible Healer. I can't modify my words to make someone else feel better. If Hermione were sitting here, she'd probably think of something nice to say. If Draco was here... well, actually, I don't know what he'd say..."

"See, the thing about you, Lucius, is that you're honest. You hate sycophants. You hate them because you were one yourself for years –and you know what it's like to pretend something you don't feel. You convinced yourself that you were doing it for your wife and son, but you hated it every bit as much as I did. So, I don't think you want those meaningless platitudes – not now. You want me to be honest with you, in a way that I wasn't able to be back then."

He rubbed his free hand over his face.

"Where to start? Well, you probably want me to confirm that you were a terrible father – and not much better as a human being either. You want to hear it from me, because no one's ever taken the trouble to tell you. And yet it's something you've known for years, haven't you?"

He heard the door creak behind him and looked around to see Hermione standing in the doorway. She put a finger to her lips and backed out again.
"Yes, Lucius, you already know that you're a failure. I suspect you've known it since the end of the war. Certainly since Narcissa died. You just can't admit it. Slytherin pride…"

He squeezed Lucius's hand again and then stood up, moving towards the window. "You want me to tell you the story of your life. A privileged boy, brought up in a secure but emotionally cold household. Your entire life arranged for you. A career in politics, an organised pureblood marriage, the heir you needed after so many false hopes. The power you craved." He shook his head. "You had it all, Lucius. The world at your feet. How did you let it go so wrong?"

He paced the room. "Do you have any idea how much I envied you? I used to lie awake at night in that tiny servant's room that you used to put me in – oh, and by the way, how you loved that, didn't you? That you could treat me however you liked, knowing that I couldn't refuse. You could shove me into a poky room, and I wouldn't be able to call a taxi and leave with my pride intact. You knew that I had no choice; that I'd be sleeping rough if I left. You loved your power, even then. And I'd lie there and look at the ceiling and think of what I'd do if I had just a fraction of your money and privilege. And yet – and yet, it was never enough, was it? You always wanted more. You grew too greedy… and you wonder why you lost it all?"

He sat down again and laughed, rather bitterly. "Merlin, just look at us. A couple of old Death Eaters. The last two… are we the last two? What happened to Goyle and Avery? Anyway, who'd mourn our passing? We caused nothing but misery under Voldemort. Misery and fear. And you thought you were building a better world."

He took a deep breath. "But I escaped. I – well, I ran away, I suppose. And I started again, from scratch. Living in a leaky old cottage, moving rocks with my bare hands and living on tinned soup for months, just to get a fresh start. But I made it. You could've done the same, Lucius. Why didn't you? When they released you from house arrest, why didn't you just sell your house and everything you owned and get the hell out of Britain with your wife and son? What did you think you were hanging on for? You had your chance - and you blew it. You just sat there in your decaying house, railing at the world and ignoring your wife as she grew sick with despair and your son as he sought comfort in all the wrong places."

He leaned forward, gazing at Lucius intently. "No wonder you ended up hating yourself so much. I'd have despised myself if I'd been you. I would've wanted to die too – so much so that I'd have probably ignored the warning signs too. The chest pains, the breathlessness, the nausea. Hermione thinks you might not have realised, but we both know the truth, don't we? You had too much pride to kill yourself, but this way was all right, wasn't it? You would join Narcissa in that family vault and you wouldn't have gone down in history as the coward who ended his own life."

He squeezed Lucius's hand again. Well, it looks like you're going to get what you wanted."

"Nnnnnngh…"

Severus's head shot up and he stared at the unconscious man intently. The lips were twitching and the eyelids twitching rapidly.

"Lucius? Can you hear me?"

"Nnnnnngh…" The noise was louder this time. Lucius appeared to be struggling to say something. His lids flickered more restlessly and he seemed distressed.

He jumped up out of his chair and backed towards the door, hoping to find Hermione or an on-duty Healer. As he opened the door, he saw Hermione sitting in the waiting room, over by the wall near the old man, who had buried his nose in a copy of the Prophet.
Severus half raised his hand to get her attention when Lucius spoke.

"Nnnnot…quite."

The words came out slowly, but quite clear. Severus walked slowly back towards the bed and leaned over the old Death Eater.

Lucius opened his eyes and looked at Severus with no sense of recognition before repeating his words with an effort that was clearly painful: "Not… quite…what…wanted…" His lips curved in what might have been a smile or a grimace.

And then his eyes closed again, his face slackened and he seemed to lapse back into unconsciousness. When Severus touched his fingers again, they didn't twitch.

In fact, it was the last time that Lucius appeared to have any awareness of what was going on around him. As the next few hours passed and the machines continued to beep, reminding Severus that the patient was still alive in body if not in mind, he continued to talk to Lucius. He reminded him of incidents from their schooldays, of his wedding, of the day that Draco started to crawl and of his first words. He tried desperately to keep to the happy memories, but they were few and far between and after a while he found he was repeating himself. It hardly seemed to matter. He had no real notion of whether Lucius could still hear him and yet he carried on talking until his throat ached. There seemed nothing else to do.

And then, when he'd run out of shared memories, he started to talk of Draco, and of his life in Valenzuela and his work as Severus's apprentice. He related amusing laboratory accidents that he had had to rescue Draco from and impressive breakthroughs in his son's understanding. He described Maia at length — her beauty and grace, her good humour, her lively young son, and Draco's happiness when he was with them both. And he talked about the tough times too — the withdrawal and Draco's depression. The only thing he didn't relate was Draco's reaction to his father's heart attack.

Hermione stepped in briefly a couple of times, bringing him a coffee at one stage. She didn't linger on either occasion; it became clear that she had decided that he should be the one to stay with Lucius until the end, whether he liked it or not. He didn't have the heart to leave the dying man alone for long enough to argue the point.

The Healers came and went, checking the readings and tiptoeing around him as he kept talking to Lucius. On one occasion, as Severus paused for breath and gulped down the last of his cold coffee, a Healer leaned towards him and whispered "Not long now" before she left the room.

Severus took a deep breath and peered at Lucius's face before continuing. He could see no real difference in the man's condition, but the woman must be able to see subtle signs that were beyond him.

"Well, I suppose this is it," he murmured. "Can you even hear me, Lucius? For all I know, I could be talking to thin air. I suppose I'll never really know...and perhaps it's just as well."

After talking to the on-duty Healers, Hermione walked slowly back towards Lucius's room. When she looked in and sensed that she shouldn't disturb, she backed out and looked around the waiting room before carefully making her way to a seat near the wall.

She sat quietly for a while, watching the Healers come and go. Around her, families arrived and departed regularly; she sat on in silence. Nearby, the old man rustled his newspaper.
When she spoke at last, it was just above a murmur as she stared at her hands. "When were you planning to come forward?"

The old man pushed his hood back very slightly, and Draco's grey eyes met Hermione's briefly. He looked faintly ridiculous with the long white beard and vein-lined face of an eighty-year-old, although she had to admit that it was an impressive transfiguration.

"How did you know?"

Hermione looked away casually, trying not to draw any attention. "Families come and go from waiting rooms. As a visitor, you tend not to notice, because you're too focused on your own journey through the hospital. But Healers do notice. We're used to noticing the people who don't move on. We're trained to notice; there may be a reason. Are they ill, are they distressed, or are they just homeless and looking somewhere warm to spend the night? I first noticed that you didn't look particularly anxious for a 'relative'. My suspicions were confirmed when I left your father's room and you were still there, even though most relatives move on to other hospital departments fairly quickly."

Draco was silent for a moment. Eventually, he muttered, "So what are you going to do?"

"Nothing." Hermione looked up and smiled casually at a passing Healer that she knew well. "Why would I? It's not my job to drag you into his room."

Lucius's door opened. Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Severus peering out, anxiously. Draco lifted his paper quickly.

"Looks like he's trying to attract your attention," he murmured as he pretended to read.

At that moment, Severus's head turned around, clearly distracted by something, and he went back into the room, closing the door behind him.

Hermione folded her hands together. "Don't you have even the slightest curiosity about what's going on in that room?"

Draco continued to read his paper. "He's dying, isn't he? What more is there to know?" His voice had hardened in a way that she associated with his school days.

"You're not prepared to see your father before he passes away?"

Again, another silence, even longer than the first. "I…don't know what to say to him. Would you expect me to lie? I can't tell him that I love him."

"You could just hold his hand," Hermione suggested.

Draco let out a sigh. "I don't think I could even bring myself to do that."

She paused. "Don't you think you're being a little selfish? Do you suppose Severus wants to be in there – in your place? He's only there because someone has to be – and it's probably better that it's him rather than me. Can't you bring yourself to lie just for the last few hours of his life? What would be the harm in that?"

"It's not that simple. You don't understand. You can't understand…so don't judge me." There was an edgy quality to his voice, and she feared he might jump up and rush out if she were not careful.

"Why are you here then? If you don't intend to see him, why did you even come?"
He put his paper down, straightened his back with something approximating dignity and looked her in the eyes, no longer attempting to hide his identity. "I have a responsibility to the remains. It's my job to see that he is buried in the Malfoy vault. I wouldn't expect you or Severus to have to deal with that." At the look on her face, he faltered. "Please – please don't look at me like that. I know what you think of me; I know what Severus must think. I don't know if he'll ever forgive me for what I did to him."

His voice faded away at these last words and he looked at the floor. It hadn't escaped her notice that Draco cared more for Severus's good opinion than he had probably ever cared for his father's.

She hesitated before carrying on, very gently. "Your father always loved you. I'm sure of it."

"So I've been told." Draco sighed and clenched his hands, which she could see were shaking slightly. "It's just a little hard to believe sometimes. You don't know… you never saw him, all that last year…"

"I can imagine… but, you know, he was a victim too."

"Of what?" Draco gave an incredulous laugh. "Of his own stupid ambition? Why are you trying to understand him? What's the point in you even trying? I don't understand – can you explain it to me? He treated you worse than the dirt under his foot – and yet you've taken him on as some sort of… pet project."

She coughed, meaningfully. "You also treated me that way."

Draco was quiet for a moment. "I… I'm sorry for it. I'm sorry for the way I treated you. And I'm sorry for the stupid things I did at school – all those petty little acts that made life more difficult for Potter."

"Don't you think he's sorry too – deep down?" asked Hermione. "Not so much about me - he's always detested me, and probably even more so since I started trying to help him. But I think your father might be sorry for his part in the war. It's only his pride that stops him from saying so. I don't he really wanted any harm to come to the wizarding community - not at the start, at any rate. In some kind of twisted way, he thought he was making it stronger. He just got dragged into a madness that he couldn't overcome. And… I genuinely believe he's sorry for the way he treated you and your mother."

She leaned closer and put a hand on his arm. "Would it really hurt to spend a few hours comforting a dying man, when you've got your whole life ahead of you?"

"I – I don't know."

She heard the anguish in the whispered words and sighed. She feared all too well that, one day and possibly quite soon, he would come to regret not making his peace while he could…but it was not her place to judge.

She squeezed his wrist before withdrawing her hand and standing up. "If you change your mind, let me know. I'll be right here."

Severus drew a hand through his hair and glanced towards the door, distractedly.

"I'm entirely the wrong person to be doing this. Who'd want my voice to be the last one that they hear? I'm sorry about that, Lucius. Really, I am. I know you probably wouldn't want me to be here at the end – well, I'm even less keen to be here. Trust me on this. I – I know it should be Draco. I'm
sorry I'm not Draco."

He drew a deep breath and clutched the limp hand again. "I don't know where he is, so I'm afraid you'll have to make do with me. I told you before that I couldn't be less than honest... but I also pointed out that you wouldn't want me to be less than honest either. A while back, I said some things - things that you probably didn't want to hear, even though deep down you knew that they were true."

He squeezed the other man's fingers. "And now I'm going to tell you something that I believe to be true as well. I – I don't believe in any kind of god or in heaven or hell, as you well know. I've never held with human superstitions or psychological crutches. We get one life and that's that. No second chances. We die, and our remains rot in the ground. End of story."

He leaned forward, looking intently at the other man's face. Was it his imagination or was there just a tinge of blue about the lips?

"It's what we leave behind that really counts. Our legacy. It might be some useful spell or invention or a law that makes life better for those we leave behind, or it might be a whole generation of children and grandchildren who will weep at our grave. So, what's your legacy? I'm not going to lie to you, Lucius. You won't be remembered for the good you have done, but you already know that. What I do know is this: you will be leaving behind one of the finest young men I know. I'm not just saying that to comfort you. A year ago, I might have done - but I didn't know him then, not properly. I know him far better now – the real Draco, not that ghastly impression of him that attended Hogwarts. He's not perfect, but none of us are. He's made mistakes, perhaps more than most, but he's come through them too. He's going to be a good husband and a good father. He may even be a great man one day. He may leave his own significant legacy. And he's already a good friend to me."

He smiled, as he realised how true that statement was, the poisoned wine notwithstanding.

"And that – that – is your legacy, Lucius Malfoy. You gave the world Draco Malfoy – and that's something to be proud of. You wanted him to be powerful – and he is... just not in the way that you imagined. Perhaps you even wanted him to be a power for good. Well, he is – again not quite in the way you wanted. But... well, I just wanted you to know that there was something worthwhile in your life. And I hope that, somewhere inside, you know that."

He stopped, drawing another breath as he bent his head, pressing his forehead into his arm. He felt suddenly quite exhausted – drained of all energy.

He was never quite certain of the exact moment that Lucius Malfoy breathed his last. He didn't speak to the dying man again; just sat holding his hand as the life support data continued to flicker in the air above Lucius's head. His head drooped back onto his arm, and he may have even dropped off for a few minutes or more.

At one point, he lifted his head as he became aware of a Healer standing at the other side of the bed. She flicked her wand and the life support data disappeared; before it did, Severus saw the flat line. Then she lifted Lucius's arms, gently moving Severus's hand away and crossed them over the dead man's chest.

Severus stood and moved away from the bed, feeling his joints creak. He muttered a quick incantation: it was just after 3AM on the morning of Thursday 16th August.

He walked stiffly to the door. Beyond it, in the dimly-lit waiting room, he could just make out Hermione standing near the door, with a hooded old man standing next to her. They seemed to be
waiting for him to appear.

"Well, that's it," he announced, his voice sounding raspy to his own ears, before stopping dead and staring at the old man in disbelief.

He stepped forward, pushing his hood off and transforming his features back to those of a much younger individual. Grey eyes looked up at Severus from a familiar pale face.

"Thank you, Severus," said Draco Malfoy, very soberly. "I want you to know that I appreciate what you've done for him today."

His eyes moved to the open door, and he squared his shoulders as he took another step forward. "And now, I suppose it's my turn to take responsibility."

Numbed and shaken, Severus stood back as the last of the great line of Malfoy passed into the room to give his formal respects to his late, unlamented father.
Highgate Cemetery was one of those tucked-away locations in leafy north London that seemed to draw a certain crowd on a Sunday morning. Literary types, students of politics and history, and tourists in their droves made the pilgrimage up the pathways between the elaborate tombs and gravestones as dutifully as they might once have walked to church in an earlier era. Most, of course, would be paying their homage to that great son of German philosophy: Karl Marx.

This much Hermione knew. Being the daughter of intellectual atheists, she had been brought here at the age of ten. She had peered with vague interest at the square, rather stark, sculpture dedicated to the Father of Communism, but even as her father explained Marx's legacy, her eyes had wandered to the tangle of overgrown trees beyond. She had wondered why she could see a strange shimmer between two of the sturdier trunks, but before she had been able to draw her parents' attention to the oddity, they had led her to the next tomb.

If they had lingered for longer, she might have been surprised to see a rag-tag bunch of people, dressed unusually even by north London's arty standards, step into the shimmer between the two trees and disappear from sight. She hadn't on that long-ago occasion, but she couldn't help wondering what the large group of Japanese tourists made of the number of people walking up the hill, singly or in small groups, on the morning of Sunday 19th July. Perhaps Muggles couldn't – or wouldn't – see them?

And there were a fair number of them too. She had assumed that Lucius's funeral would be ignored by all but the very few who felt obliged to attend - including his reluctant son. But here they were – the old wizarding families, the Ministry officials, the great and the powerful. All those who hadn't acknowledged him once during the last few years of his life were here to pay their respects after his death.

"But why? That's what I don't understand," she asked Severus, as they walked slowly up the hill, arm-in-arm.

"You're looking at it from a Muggle point of view. You think that a funeral is a way of celebrating and remembering the person who has died. Wizards don't see it that way. It's a time for renewing connections, both between the old families and within the community as a whole. When a patriarch dies, unpopular though he may have been, the entire community will turn out. It's an opportunity to be seen. It used to be an opportunity to re-draw the lines of influence – to check out the family heir and so on. Some might be looking for a suitable match for a son or daughter. Some might be trying to sound out the heir's politics – can they be influenced this way or that? It's as important to a small community as a wedding."

Hermione wrinkled up her nose. "I might have known it would be something like that. I keep forgetting just how old fashioned we witches and wizards are."

He gave her an amused look as they dodged the camera-clicking tourists by Marx's grave and continued into the trees beyond without a backward glance. Hermione briefly wondered whether they'd show up in the photos – and how the tourists might explain it if they did.

"So, I take it you've never attended a wizarding funeral?"

"Not this type. I've been to a few lower-key events. I've never been here, though. Didn't even know it existed until Draco's invitation arrived."
They approached the two tree trunks, and Hermione felt the familiar slight pull of an invisible magical ward, which would repel any Muggle who tried to walk this way. As they passed between the trees, the land opened out in front of them. They were suddenly standing on the side of a large, gently sloping green hill.

It looked strangely empty at first. It took a while for Hermione to realise that there were actually a number of large tombs dotted across the vast space, but that they were partially hidden behind disillusionment charms. It appeared that it was traditional for these tombs, within which the ancestors of the wizarding aristocracy were interred, to be hidden during a funeral being held at another tomb as a mark of respect.

The only visible monument was that of the Malfoy family, which was rather Grecian in appearance with its white marble pillars and carvings of entwined dragons and snakes: the Malfoy symbol.

Glancing around, Hermione was amazed at the sheer number present, and also how many faces she recognised. Old colleagues from the Ministry; students from her Hogwarts days, including some Slytherin students that she hadn't laid eyes on for over a decade. The Weasleys were present, naturally, as they were distantly related to the Malfoys – as were most of the old families in fact. She saw Ron standing near his parents with Susan by his side. Noticing her, he gave a slightly stiff nod. She attributed this more to embarrassment than to hostility, and gave him a quick but friendly smile in response. Harry and Ginny were there too, but she noticed that Percy's wife Audrey was not; presumably due to her Muggle status. There were no young children present at such an event; she had been forewarned of that, and Rose and Hugo had been collected from the Weasleys by her parents and were now on their way to southern Brittany for another brief holiday.

Teddy Lupin was there with his grandmother, Andromeda – there to honour a great uncle by marriage who had probably never acknowledged him in his entire life. Once more, Hermione was struck by the magical community's ability to forgive – or was it mere pragmatism and politics, as Severus suggested? She wondered what kind of greeting he would receive from his cousin once removed.

Talking of which… Draco cut a lonely figure as he stood by the crypt where his father already lay, waiting for his guests to approach. He was, rather surprisingly, dressed in a well-cut, dark Muggle suit – this was in stark contrast to the traditional wizarding robes worn by older members of the community. It was as if he sought to distance himself from the traditions that he was being forced by familial duty to undertake. She had seen little of Draco during the last few days – she didn't even know where he'd slept or ate. She had gone back to Rye for a rest, while Severus had returned to Valenzuela to try to restore some order to the home he'd had to abandon very quickly a few days before.

The families had moved forward a little, in their clustered groups. Hermione would have stepped forward too, but Severus kept a hand on her arm, holding her back. They took a position at the back of the mourners, out of sight of the other groups. Hermione wondered whether this was due to Severus's usual dislike of large crowds or for a reason connected to the funeral itself.

One-by-one, the heads of each family stepped forward to join Draco, while the other members stayed back. Arthur Weasley was one of the first, but he was soon joined by others that she vaguely recognised: some were the fathers or mothers of the Slytherin students she used to know.

"Each stands as a representative of the remaining pure-blood families," Severus explained, predicting her question. "Although these days, most are no longer really 'pure-blood' as such. It's usually the senior member of each clan, although not always. The family will decide who should stand for them."
Hermione was surprised to see Molly follow Arthur; again, Severus explained: "He stands for the Weasley family while she stands for the Prewett family, as the last surviving member of that clan."

She saw Andromeda step forward for the family of Black and Neville appear for the Longbottom family, on behalf of his grandmother, who was now too ill to leave her bed. And, of course, Harry came forward for the House of Potter. The family representatives formed a large circle around the crypt. They seemed to mix indiscriminately; Neville was standing next to Daphne Greengrass's father, while Harry looked rather uncomfortable between Marcus Flint and an elderly, wheezing Horace Slughorn.

Something occurred to Hermione. "Shouldn't you be up there too, to represent the House of Prince?"

"The families don't have to submit a representative," he replied. "They're not obliged to do so. Most will, either out of respect or – more usually – because they want to re-emphasize their family's importance to the community. Even Arthur and Molly – you think of them as mild-mannered and easy-going but, believe me, they're proud of their heritage and as highly conscious of its importance as any pure-bred Slytherin."

"And you don't share that sense of entitlement?"

He shrugged, not taking his eyes off the gathering. "I have no particular pride in the Prince family and no desire to promote its continuing influence within the community. It'll die out with me, anyway… at least, I assume you have no plans to talk me into reluctant fatherhood at this stage?" He smirked at the look of horror on her face. "So, you see, it scarcely matters."

"Will he mind that you didn't join? Draco, I mean – not Lucius."

"I'm not in the least bit interested in whether young Mr. Malfoy minds or not… but I shall be talking to him. And soon." His voice had turned hard and, looking at him, she could see that his mouth was set in a thin line.

"You won't be too hard on him? He has had a hell of a time."

"That's not really the point," he muttered in response, as one of the female mourners just ahead of them turned and shushed them irritably.

When the circle was complete, Draco took a deep breath and pulled out his wand, which had been returned to him by the Ministry. He held it out in front of him at shoulder height, and the other members of the circle followed suit.

Draco began to recite the ritual spell, his voice shaky at first but gaining in confidence as other voices joined his. The words were familiar to Hermione from other funerals. Although most wizards would not be buried with the same pomp and ceremony as the rich pure-bloods with their private cemetery and family vaults, the incantation was the same: calling upon the dead to rest undisturbed and to intercede with the gods on behalf of the living.

There was a rather beautiful cadence to the words – a poetry that Hermione found herself mouthing silently on her own lips. Gradually, she became aware that Severus was staring at her, one eyebrow raised. "What?"

He looked back at the ceremony, his face apparently serious but his lips quirking in a way that was familiar to her. "Nothing. Only, I thought you said that this was all superstitious rubbish."

"Well, maybe it is. But that doesn't mean I can't appreciate the language and the sentiment behind
it. I mean, I don't personally believe in a Christian God, but if you play me Bach's St Matthew Passion, I'll be in floods of tears by the end, every time. It's just the emotional impact that the music and words have on me in that particular moment. I don't have to believe the story."

She kept her voice low, conscious of the woman in front of them. As the voices from the circle grew louder, a blue glow appeared around it, indicating that it could now not be broken until the incantation was complete. A chilly breeze blew across the field and she felt the hairs stand up on the nape of her neck. She found herself shifting closer to Severus for no apparent reason, but he seemed to understand; catching at her hand and squeezing it comfortingly as he kept his eyes focused on the circle.

Hermione could no longer make out the individual members of the circle; the blue glow had risen to hide them from sight. She realised that the ceremony was drawing to a climax. Finally, the last words were spoken and the blue light flashed three times before disappearing with a loud clap.

The gathered mourners seemed to breathe out a collective sigh of relief. There was a sense of a difficult job well done – a certain degree of self-congratulation. And yet, Hermione thought, rebelliously, not one of you would have passed the time of day with him while he was alive. Hypocrites! She was suddenly heartily sick of the entire event, and would have stepped forward to give her farewells to Draco so she could escape, but Severus held on tightly to her hand and refused to be moved.

"Wait," he breathed in her ear, and she subsided, reluctantly.

She saw that the family representatives stood in front of Draco, one-by-one, and gave him a deep bow, which he returned with an equally deep bow of his own. As each family head returned to his or her clan, the entire group would move off down the hill, leaving quietly. Some farewells were a little friendlier; Mr. Greengrass shook Draco's hand and his daughters, Daphne and Astoria, came forward to hug their former school-friend. Molly also leaned forward and kissed his cheek with her usual instinctive sympathy; he received her good wishes in a slightly dazed manner. Andromeda brought Teddy forward and Draco received his teenaged relative with polite cordiality. The two talked for a few minutes before shaking hands warmly in farewell.

It didn't take long for the mourners to disappear. Severus and Hermione waited until Draco had acknowledged the last guest and then stepped forward to meet him.

His pale face was set in stone by the pressure to stay quietly dignified at all times during his father's burial. He must have been under some pressure since Lucius's death early on Thursday morning; Sunday was considered an auspicious day for a wizard's funeral, and there would have been a lot to plan during the intervening days. The mask stayed in place as he nodded at them but all of a sudden it slipped, and Hermione found she was staring into the tired eyes of a bewildered child.

"Can we go somewhere… somewhere quiet?"

The question was addressed to Severus, but Draco continued to gaze at Hermione almost desperately.

"Of course we can, you silly boy." Severus's voice was gruff with emotion, and Hermione could see Draco's shoulders sagging in relief.

As they walked down the field, Draco looked over his shoulder at his family's tomb one last time. As he turned away again, the disillusionment charm fell over it. Hermione wondered whether the last of the Malfoys would ever return to this place of ghosts – dead or alive.
As they apparated in Valenzuela, Hermione felt the full force of a Spanish July. The midday heat hit her with almost physical force and she let go of Severus's elbow and staggered into the relative coolness of the shady terrace.

"I keep forgetting just how hot it gets here this late in the year," she laughed, fanning her face.

Severus grinned. "You'll get used to it again." He followed her more sedately, seemingly unaffected by the heat even in his dark funeral suit. "Just remember to wear a hat and you'll be fine -," he added, teasingly, "- unless, of course, you want some more of my sunstroke cure."

"You forget that I have delicate English skin."

He snorted. "This from the woman whose skin is naturally several shades darker than mine even in the depth of winter."

"A vampire's skin is several shades darker than yours," she retorted. "Anyway, my skin is much softer – yours must be like leather by now. Coming in, Draco?"

For Draco was still standing in the same spot, staring at the cottage as if he had never expected to see it again. Severus and Hermione paused in the doorway watching him until he shifted a little and shook his head as if to clear it. He smiled up at them, a little sheepishly.

"Feels like I'm seeing a mirage."

"Oh, it's very real – I can assure you of that," Severus said, grimly.

Draco looked up at him, his face uncertain. "I just didn't think I'd be welcome here again."

"That depends on what you are about to tell me." As Draco continued to hesitate, Severus went on impatiently: "Oh, for heaven's sake, come in! There's nothing to be gained by just standing there. You owe me a bloody good explanation…and I have absolutely no desire to be uncomfortable while you're providing it."

Half an hour later, the trio were sitting on the shady terrace underneath a cooling charm, with tall glasses of iced lemon tea. Hermione usually kept a few old clothes here, so had been able to change into a light blouse and a pair of denim cut-offs, while Severus was in his usual uniform of shabby jeans and a frayed t-shirt. Draco had taken all his clothes with him when he'd left, so had to make do with removing his jacket and tie and rolling up his shirt sleeves.

"OK," Severus prompted him. "Out with it."

Draco leaned forward, his forearms on his thighs. "What do you want to know first?"

"Why you ran away might be a good start," his mentor growled.

Draco didn't answer for a minute. Hermione, taking pity on him, asked, "Were you so afraid that Severus would force you to see your father?"

"Don't prompt him," Severus snapped, but Draco looked over at him.

"She's right. I knew that you'd convince, or force, me to go with you in the morning, for all your
kind words. If I hadn't come back here that night, you'd have tracked me down. If it had been anyone else looking after him, you wouldn't have been so insistent, but it was Hermione. You cared too much to leave her to cope alone. You let me go that day in Orgiva, but I knew it would only be a matter of hours before you started tracking me down. What could I do? I couldn't apparate halfway across the world. Even if I could, you'd have been clever enough to trace me. The only way I could think of ensuring that I could get away was to incapacitate you for long enough to give me a good head start."

"Well, you certainly did that," Severus muttered. Hermione linked her fingers with his, giving them a gentle squeeze.

"Yes." Draco gave him a guilty look. "I – I can't tell you how sorry I was about that."

"Did you know what impact the potion and wine would have?" asked Hermione.

"I didn't know how severe it would be," Draco admitted. "I knew it would knock you out for a few hours and maybe make you a little unwell for a day at most. The trouble was, I only had a few minutes to act while you were out of the kitchen. You know you've always kept a few handy potions in the kitchen? Well, I had to grab whatever was there. I'd only just come up with the plan, so I hadn't had time to check what would be best to use. The sleeping potion seemed best, but then I heard you coming back. My hand was shaking, and I inadvertently poured almost half a bottle in instead of a few drops."

He sighed. "You don't know how close I came to 'accidentally' knocking that glass of wine out of your hand. I think I hated myself more at that moment than I ever did before. One of the few people in my life who has ever bothered to hold out a genuinely friendly hand… and I did that to you." He shook his head. "I've done some nasty things in my time, but…"

He fell silent again for a few minutes. "I realised how hard it had been on you when I saw you at the hospital."

"Yes, that's what I want to know about," Hermione jumped in. "How did you get there – and why?"

"Well, I didn't really know what I was going to do, of course. I hadn't had any time to plan – it was all spur-of-the-moment. I briefly thought of just driving up through Spain and crossing the border, but I dismissed that idea pretty quickly. It would have only turned me into a fugitive from the Muggle authorities too – and I had enough on my plate. Also, I didn't know how much Severus would remember about the hire car – for all I knew, he might remember the registration number. So, after packing up my stuff, I drove back to Orgiva. I slept in the car just outside town until it was light and then returned the car to the hire company and paid up the fees.

"As you can imagine, I was pretty tempted to go to the house and see Maia. I wanted to tell her what was happening and what I was planning to do, but I knew she'd talk me around and make me go back to Severus." He paused. "To be honest, I suppose what I really wanted was for her to come with me. Everything would have made more sense with Maia there. But I knew she wouldn't have come. She would never have left Lucio behind, and he couldn't have come with us. Besides," he added, with a faint smile, "she's far too sensible to do anything so stupid."

"She is that," Severus agreed, with a note of pride in his voice.

"Yes. So I just hitched a lift out of town. Hitch-hiked my way to Barcelona. I had a small amount of Muggle money with me – I'd got Harry to release some of my savings while we were in London during the epidemic. Some of it went on a ring – I'd already planned on asking Maia to marry me – but then I also had some converted into Euros so I would have some ready cash if I ever needed it.
I tried to save as much as I could, though – hitching rather than buying tickets and so on. In Barcelona, I dossed down in a fairly dodgy hostel for a couple of days while I tried to work out what to do next." He grimaced. "That was a mistake, as it turned out, because I was robbed of pretty much everything one night while I was asleep. Someone took my backpack – it was pure luck that all they got was my spare clothes and a bit of food. I'd had enough sense to hide my wallet under my pillow.

"Anyway, that decided things for me. I had been considering going east through Italy and the Balkans to Turkey, or perhaps south and over the straits to Morocco. Somewhere out of Europe, anyway. And now, here I was, with nothing but a handful of Euros and the clothes I stood up in. All I could think was 'well, you're a bloody fool, Draco'. I thought I'd lost everything – not just my bag. You'd never forgive me, and Maia would throw that ring back in my face. As far as I was concerned, I'd burnt all my boats. There was no point in going back now…"

"See, I'd been living in cloud-cuckoo-land, hadn't I? When you took me in and gave me a second chance at life, it felt like I was in a dream. I could forget my past. I wouldn't have to give my father another thought if I didn't want to. I guess that, if I'd thought about him at all, I'd just assumed that he'd drop dead one day and be found a few days later. I'd have to bury him, of course, but that would just be a mild inconvenience and then I could get on with my shiny new life."

He paused, reflectively, and gave a harsh laugh. "I even thought of changing my name. I mean, can you imagine? Who'd want to take the name of Malfoy? This was before I realised that there was a woman generous-spirited enough to accept me in spite of my past. I wanted to be a new person – someone who didn't have the baggage of pure-blood fascism and war crimes in the family.

"But when you came with that news…well, I panicked. I couldn't bear to face him again – even if he'd been unconscious, just looking at his face would've brought it all back. I would have felt…dirty. Corrupted again."

He looked down at his hands, which were clenching and unclenching rapidly. "Well, anyway, there I was in some flea-bitten dive on the seedy side of Barcelona with nothing left…and I thought 'well, you've sunk just about as far as you can go – you've already hit rock-bottom'. No home, no possessions, no friends. And I told myself 'you might as well see him now – what difference will it make?'. I was already a nasty little worm who'd had no compunction about poisoning his friend and had crawled away from his family responsibilities. Maybe I even thought I deserved my father…"

"Having made my decision, I hitched across the French border up to Avignon, where I got a cheap train ticket to Paris. Got another lift to Calais, courtesy of a British truck driver. He wouldn't take me over the Channel though – probably thought I was an illegal immigrant despite the English accent. I managed to sneak onto a ferry anyway – I knew I couldn't get a ticket without a passport, but I joined a group of noisy, slightly drunk tourists and managed to slip on board in the confusion. Dover was tricky – I nearly ran into Immigration, which would have been disastrous without a passport. I've been practising my apparation skills again recently – they're still pretty bad, but I'm just about good enough to transfer myself a few hundred feet, which is what I did – to the other side of passport control. I then hitched my way to London, which was surprisingly easy."

He took a deep breath. "I wasn't sure exactly what to do when I reached St. Mungo's. The problem was that the closer I got to my father, the more nervous I got – and I wasn't entirely sure that I could go through it after all. I transformed my appearance and hung around for a bit, hoping to spot Hermione either coming from or going to his room. I couldn't really ask where he was – not if I was then going to refuse to see him. Finally, I saw you going in, Severus, and I followed you. I didn't stay nearby at first. I went out and walked around London for hours, trying to make up my mind. I slept rough in Regent's Park and went back in the morning. Hermione had gone, but you were there,
I sat in that waiting room behind my disguise, trying to get my courage up. When Hermione came back and I saw you both being called in by that specialist Healer, I knew that things were bad. And from then on, it seemed stupid to go in. What good would it have done? I felt he might as well die in peace."

Severus had stood and walked over to the rail. He turned and eyed Draco, his arms folded. "And it didn't occur to you that it might have comforted him in his final hours to know that you were there?"

Draco looked back at him, steadily. "Do you really think it would have helped? He had nothing but bad memories of me. Disappointment, disgust – perhaps even guilt for all I know – but nothing positive. At least, with you, he might have some sense or memory of an earlier time – a time before he messed up his life and that of two other people."

He shook his head, emphatically. "No, I'm not sorry that I didn't see him. I genuinely believed then – and still do now – that it would have done no good. But..." he looked away, uncomfortably, "I'm just sorry that you – the two of you – were dragged into this mess. I would never have wished it upon you. You didn't deserve the burden of having to care for my father – or for me."

Instinctively, Hermione took one of his restless hands in hers. "No one blames you for his mistakes or behaviour since, Draco. In the end, he was a human being like anyone else. Flawed, yes, and perhaps he made more mistakes than most...but still only a human being. And his son wasn't responsible for the way he turned out."

He looked at her, incredulously. "You can say that of him – you? You can forgive the man who wanted your 'type' to be eradicated? The man who stood by and watched calmly while you were tortured by that evil witch to within an inch of your life? Can you explain that to me? Please? Because I don't understand it." He buried his face in his free hand.

"No – not forgive." Hermione grabbed his other hand and forced him to face her. "I could never forgive him, Draco. And he wouldn't have tolerated my forgiveness anyway. But I couldn't stand by and watch him suffer like that – not even my worst enemy, and he was never that. Does that make me weak? Maybe it does – in your eyes. But I don't think like a Slytherin. It's not all about justice and the balancing of rights and wrongs. Trying to help him took nothing away from me and might just have given something to him." She sighed, taking her hands away and rubbing her face. "I suppose we'll never know now."

"No. We won't." Severus's voice was strangely calm. Hermione looked up to see him leaning against the rail, arms still folded, giving her a warm look of the utmost admiration. His eyes were gleaming with pride and love... and with something else too – something more predatory...

She was suddenly reminded that they were finally at home again, that she was no longer married, that she would almost certainly be alone in the cottage with him tonight, and that there was nothing standing between them now... and as she gazed at his heavy-lidded eyes, she wondered if the same realisation had also struck him.

She shivered a little despite the heat. It was ridiculous to be nervous, but she couldn't help the slight frisson of excitement in the pit of her stomach. She had schooled herself for so many years not to think of Severus in sexual terms, to try to avoid the temptations of intimacy... and now the barriers were gone. A physical relationship was no longer anyone's business but their own... Now that the moment had come, she wasn't sure how she felt.
She was sure that she loved him - that she was in love with him, and that there would never be anyone else for her. She knew she was physically attracted to him, and she had seen the evidence of his own attraction. And there had been those moments over the years...the heated glances, the lingering touches, that massage when there had been that hyper-awareness in the air – of a temptation resisted. And yet, she found herself flushing at the thought of finally sleeping with him... and the question was why?

Draco coughed, breaking an atmosphere that had suddenly grown a little intense. "Well, anyway, you know the rest. I know I messed up. When the chance came for me to prove that I was a better man than - well, than my father – I blew it. Totally."

Severus removed his heated gaze from Hermione with obvious reluctance. "Doesn't mean you can't put it right again."

Draco looked up at him, smiling. "That's why I wanted to come here. I mean, I owed you an explanation, but I could have given it to you in London and then walked away. You wouldn't have stopped me. I could have started my life again, perhaps a little wiser and a little sadder. But it wasn't enough. I'm here because... because I have to make amends. I didn't know if you'd even let me into the house again, but if it had come to it, I would've willingly slept on the ground outside." His face sobered. "Whatever it takes – whatever I can do to make it up to you – I'll do it. If you send me away, I'll go. If you want me to do hard labour, to move rocks until my back breaks – that's fine. If you'll do me the honour of taking me back as your apprentice, I'll never let you down again. I swear it."

Hermione saw the corner of Severus's mouth twitch, even as he returned Draco's solemn gaze. "I must be some kind of fool, but...I will take you back as my apprentice. On one condition, though," he added, as Draco's eyes glowed.

"Anything. I'll do anything."

Severus sighed. "For God's sake, man, get yourself over to Orgiva. You've got a fiancée to apologise and explain yourself to. That's my one condition – to sort out your private life. Don't forget you asked me to be your best man. I'm very happy to stand up with you, but there needs to be a bloody wedding for me to stand up at."

Draco stared up at him open-mouthed...and then laughed and laughed. There was an edge of hysteria to his gasps, and Hermione realised afresh just how much strain he had been holding in for the last few days. She wondered whether she would ever understand these Slytherin men and their need to maintain 'face' at moments of the greatest pressure. Well, she'd have all the time in the world to find out. An entire lifetime, with any luck.

She quickly summoned a glass of water and offered it to Draco, but he waved it away as he wiped his eyes, still chuckling. "Sorry. I'm fine – it's just relief. But Severus is right – before I can relax, I have a fiancée and some in-laws to mollify. I'd best get on with it."

He stood up and went to the kitchen door to fetch his portkey. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Thank you. Thank you to both of you for all you've done. You will never know just how much I appreciate it."

Severus watched him disappear and then drawled, "And don't hurry back."

She laughed nervously, suddenly very aware that they were alone. "You said that with a great deal of conviction." As he looked around at her, with that same heated, heavy-lidded gaze, she swallowed and hurried on: "You know, you amaze me. Just when I think that you're never going to
forgive someone who has wronged you – well, you turn it around, just like that." She clicked her fingers. "You're just a big softie at heart, aren't you?"

He glared at her, the seductive look disappearing in an instant. "I am not. It's simply logical to forgive him, that's all. He will make an excellent potioneer and we need to encourage the art among younger wizards and witches. I would gain nothing by turning him away, no matter what my personal feelings. As for my conditions – well, a happy Draco is an efficient and hard-working Draco. So, again, I benefit."

"Oh, of course you do," she murmured, throwing him a wicked glance that he deigned to ignore. "You know, you Slytherins drive me mad. At around the point at which Harry or Ron would be building up a nice head of steam, you've already skipped ahead, considered all the options and made your mind up."

"Ah, well, I always thought you were wasted as a Gryffindor," he teased. "Just think what we might have achieved if you'd been Sorted into Slytherin."

It was her turn to give him a mock-glare. "You thought no such thing. If anything, you thought I was an irritating little pest who got in your way. And I'd have made a terrible Slytherin."

"You would," he agreed, equably. "You'd have never toed the line – in fact, you'd have been under my feet even more if I'd been your head of house. Most annoying."

She smiled briefly. "So, what did you make of Draco's story?"

He shrugged. "He seemed sincere. I don't know if we'll ever get the full story of what he did after he ran away, but I'm sure he was honest about the important points. It took a lot for him to confess that he'd felt corrupted by his own behaviour and somehow deserving of his father's vile influence over him."

She sighed. "Poor Draco. His story made me realise that he's still a great deal less self-confident and more fragile than I had thought. That's the trouble with him – he's so busy trying to look carefree, with his cheeky smile and his witty comments and so on – that we tend to think that everything is OK when often it isn't. Do you think he'll be able to sort things out with Maia?"

Severus hesitated. "I hope so. I don't know how I feel about it, really. She deserves to be happy, and it does concern me that she's picked someone that is still so traumatised by his past. But she's smart. I wouldn't be at all surprised if she saw beneath the veneer before any of us did. Despite that, she still decided to give him a chance. I suspect that she won't be all that surprised by his story. As for him – well, I think he's had a real wake-up call, and I hope he'll use the experience to sort himself out."

"I'm still a little surprised that you let him off so easily."

He raised an eyebrow. "Who says I have? Just wait until young Mr. Malfoy gets back. The lab could do with a good clean."

"Really?" She grinned at him. "You expect me to believe that you've allowed your precious laboratory to become anything less than pristine?"

"Well, what with all the work associated with the epidemic and so on..." Severus's face was carefully blank. "The cauldrons certainly need a good scouring."

She giggled. "And without magic too, I bet. That was one of your detention favourites, I gather. Poor Draco! Still, he did rather ask for it."
"Yes, he did..." His eyes widened suddenly. "Can you explain to me why we are still talking about bloody Draco Malfoy? I finally get you alone, for the first time in Merlin knows how long, and we're still going on about him."

She smiled up at him. "I know. We never seem to get a break, do we? Even now, I keep expecting for Harry or Ron or goodness-knows-who to suddenly burst in with some fresh crisis for the magical world requiring your specialist expertise."

"I'll hex them if they do," he growled, and she felt the full heat of his gaze. "I'm getting just a little tired of being interrupted every time things get...interesting." Much to her astonishment, he then flushed slightly and looked away. "I mean – I don't mean to imply that... I don't even know if you're staying tonight and even if you are, it doesn't mean -.

"Severus," she interrupted, standing up and walking over to him, very deliberately. "I'm staying." She cupped his cheek and forced him to look at her, to see the conviction in her gaze. "I'm not going to leave."

She noticed the insecurity in his eyes, and it occurred to her that she wasn't the only nervous person in this situation. "I... good."

She leaned away from him, frowning a little. "We don't have to rush into things, you know. I wouldn't expect -.

"Hermione," he groaned, leaning his forehead against hers. "Please tell me you are joking."

She relaxed and giggled, burying her nose in his neck. "We're hopeless, aren't we? After all these years and all we've been through, you'd think I'd be able to tell you the truth." "Which is?" His arms came up around her and he turned his cheek into her hair. She could sense the tension trembling through his body despite his calm response.

"Which is that I'm suddenly really bloody nervous about having sex with you, because I just want things to be right the first time – which is ridiculous anyway, because it usually takes time for any new couple to get used to one another... And, I'm also nervous because well, frankly, after two kids, my body isn't quite what it was. I mean, there are some saggy bits involved. I feel it's only fair to warn you." She tried to keep her tone light to hide her uncertainty.

He took her by the shoulders and held her back a little, so he could look at her face. She had half-expected him to be smiling at her confession, but his face was serious. "And, after all we've been through, I should be able to tell you that I'm nervous too, Hermione. I'm fifty years old. I'm...not much to look at. I have a lot of scars – but then you've seen enough of me to know that, and for some reason, God knows why, you still seem to be attracted to me. But... the scars are not just skin-deep. I have very limited experience of physical intimacy – and none whatsoever of a loving relationship. The only... willing liaisons I've had were brief ones, usually fuelled by alcohol, and none with anyone I know as well as I know you. The...mechanics are not unfamiliar to me, but the emotions... It's different this time."

"And you are afraid that you won't be able to open up to me – to let go of your emotions?" She ran a finger down his cheekbone and lightly across his mouth.

He pursed his lips, chasing her fingertip with a kiss. "I haven't really tried. I have never wanted to try. Before you, there was only one person that I ever considered having a relationship with. When it became obvious that it wouldn't happen, I cut off such feelings to focus purely on the physical act. It didn't happen often. Sexual impulses were something to be controlled. I could control my
responses with the power of my mind or with potions - or, if all else failed, a brief assignation with some woman encountered in a bar. Even with my level of physical attraction, there were women who could be convinced - or paid. Not for a very long time," he added quickly, as he saw the expression on her face. "Not since before the War. I was too busy during those years to even think about such things, and afterwards – well…” He stroked a trembling hand down her neck. "There was only you. If I couldn't have you, there wouldn't be anyone."

She stood in the circle of his arms, thinking this through. "So, just to summarise: I'm anxious because I've grown older and feel less attractive and also because I want our physical relationship to be special in a way that it wasn't -." She broke off quickly – now was not the time to highlight the essential sense of wrongness that she had always experienced with Ron. "And you," she went on quickly, "are worried that your past traumas mean you won't be able to respond emotionally in the way that you think I deserve. Is that a fair description, would you say?"

"Sounds about right to me." He watched her carefully, his eyes narrowed.

"It seems to me… it feels as if we might be over-thinking this," she said, slowly. "Don't you think? I mean, we know how we feel about each other. You know that I've been attracted to you for a very long time, and I know you feel the same way... Can't we just try? I know why you're worried – and I am too – because this isn't just about meeting someone and deciding to give it a go. You and I have too much invested in each other. We can't just walk away from each other if the sex doesn't work out. I do understand that… But," she smiled at him, a little shakily, "the more nervous I am about wanting it to be a success, the more likely it is that it won't be. And as for you worrying about emotional openness – well, maybe that will come later on, when we know each other better?"

He continued to watch her silently, but his hand tightened on her shoulder.

She laughed. "This is going to sound ridiculous, but… how about if we try to start again? Without all the baggage. Just imagine we'd just met in a bar. I looked at you and obviously liked what I saw. You got up the courage to buy me a drink… What would you say to me?"

She ran her hands slowly up his chest, not taking her eyes off his. "Hello. My name is Hermione."

He looked a little confused, but responded readily, his lips quirking slightly in amusement. "Hello. I'm Severus."

She leaned closer, letting her tongue run over her lips very slowly; she noticed his eyes following the movement intently. "I've had two kids. I have a scar on my arm, and stretch marks, and a flabby bottom, and hair that is just… insane first thing in the morning. Oh, and by the way, I happen to be very attracted to tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed strangers."

He smiled slowly, his eyes running down and up her body in an obvious manner than left nothing to the imagination. "I'm fifty. I've got just a few more scars than you have got stretch marks. I'm not very experienced with relationships. And I happen to be extremely attracted to women with warm brown eyes, and a curvy body, and curly brown hair. In fact, I'm particularly partial to hair that is just insane first thing in the morning."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's OK then," she murmured as she raised her mouth to his.
And in the end, it was easy. Easy in the way her body responded to his as if they had been lovers for an eternity. Easy in the way the bed welcomed them into its tangled sheets as if it had been doing so for years. All she had to do was to turn off her mind, dismiss her doubts and listen to her instincts – age-old instincts that she had never known she had, instincts that showed her how to touch him this way and kiss him right there… the innate knowledge of how to make him gasp and moan and clutch at her, as if the sensual memory had always been there, dormant inside her and waiting for the right moment to emerge.

There was one moment of pure revelation as he rocked into her, gasping, face flushed and dripping with sweat in the afternoon heat, his dark eyes boring into hers, never looking away for a moment as if he wanted to commit this to his visual memory. It was just a single moment of revelation, of awareness: but of course…so this is how it should have been, right from the start… and how could I ever not have known… And then his lips claimed hers again and she clung to him almost desperately, wrapping her arms and legs around him.

Much later, curled up next to him, sated and content, with a late afternoon breeze cooling the sweat on their bodies, she gazed up at the ceiling. "So easy…"

"Hmm… that's not the response a man likes to hear. Not immediately afterwards, anyway." There was a gentle humour in his tone. He was sprawled across the mattress, looking every bit as boneless and un-inclined to move as she felt.

"No, not that, you prat." She nudged him and then made a vague gesture in the air above, indicating the two of them. "This. Us. It's so perfectly simple. So perfectly obvious. Why didn't it seem that way ten years ago?"

She could almost feel his eyes rolling. "It took you this long to work it out? You can be bloody slow sometimes."

"Oh, and you were so fast to work it out yourself? There I was, practically offering myself to you on a plate and – what was it you said back then? That you didn't plan on me playing any part in your future?"

He was silent for a moment before reaching for her hand and linking his fingers with hers. "That was a very long time ago."

"Yes. It was." She smiled to herself, thinking of how young and naive she was back then. She had felt so old – so aged by the war – and yet… She tried to imagine her nineteen-year-old self lying naked and unselfconscious on a bed next to this man, but the image seemed wrong. "Maybe things worked out for the best."

"What – ten years of misery for both of us?" His sleepy voice was laced with irony.

"Well, no, maybe not that," she admitted, sheepishly. "But I was just thinking… would we have lasted if we'd got together back then? We neither of us knew much about each other. Would we have been able to cope when things got bad? You were still so traumatised by the war, and I scarcely knew what I wanted out of life. I suppose it might have been more sensible if I'd been honest with myself – and with you - back then. We could have just waited a few years, sorted a few things out…"

He sighed. "Instead of which, you bugger off to get married to Weasley of all people. Typical bloody Gryffindor, you are. You just go rushing into things without stopping or thinking about what you're doing."
"Oh, ha, ha." She rolled and butted her chin against his shoulder, smiling all the same. "You can shut up with the insults about my house of choice. I notice that I'm only ever a 'typical Gryffindor' when I get something wrong."

He laughed and kissed her head. "But of course."

They were silent for a while. She lay with her head on his chest, listening to the regular thump of his heartbeat. Her fingers wandered idly across his ribs, feeling how thin he was, and how scarred. She recalled his scars from nursing him years ago, but back then she'd tried not to stare out of respect for her reluctant patient. Now, she felt free to trace the outline of a long rough scar that ran horizontally across his ribs.

"Primary school playground fight," he commented as she lifted her head for a better look. "I was trying to get away from a gang when I slipped getting over a fence and nearly impaled myself on the metal post. I gave as good as I got though," he added reminiscently. "One of the benefits of being a wizard among Muggles."

"How is it that you do that? Know what I'm going to ask?"

He chuckled low in his throat. "I know you. Do you ever stop investigating?"

"Never," she murmured, moving her hand to pinch his nipple lightly, smiling as his breath hitched at the sensation.

Gradually, she became aware that his breathing was growing heavier. She nudged him in the ribs. "Oi! You're not dropping off, are you?" Not that she wasn't a little sleepy herself in the turgid afternoon heat, but she had also found herself wondering how long his recovery period might be. It was something to find out sooner or later, purely in a spirit of scientific inquiry of course, and now was as a good a time as any…

He groaned. "I'm an old man with very little stamina, and I need my rest. You'll have to make allowances."

She snorted at that. Old man indeed… She gestured towards the bedroom door. "You do realise that Draco could come back at any time, and we've left the door open."

He gave his own snort. "Bollocks he will. If I know that boy at all, he'll be gone for the best part of three days. He'll be buying himself a brand new set of clothes for a start. Anyway, if it worries you, why don't you close it?"

She half-raised a hand, but then dropped it again, grinning. "You close it – it's your door."

"Yours as well. Too late to back out now. And if you think I'm going to bother to summon up the necessary magic right now, you don't know me as well as you think you do. If, by some miracle, he does come back -," he gave her a lascivious smirk, "- we can give him a nice show."

"Oh, god." She shuddered at the thought. "The shock will probably kill him. We'll be responsible for the death of the last surviving Malfoy."

"Well…in that case…" He grabbed her shoulders and rolled her over onto her back with a lightning speed that made her gasp. "…We'd better make sure it's worth it."

He knelt up, trapping her body between his thighs, and leaned over her with a smirk that was decidedly Slytherin, holding her hands over her head as he bent to nip at her collarbone.
"Really? Again?" She raised her eyebrows as she pushed a thigh up against him, feeling his arousal. "And here was me thinking that you were an old man with no stamina."

"Hmm…" he raised his head for a moment, appearing to consider this with some seriousness, but there was a certain glint in his eye. "But then again, I could be persuaded. I mean, I'm obviously not going to be allowed to get any sleep. And, after all…" he bent his head to kiss along her neck again, nuzzling at a spot that he seemed to find particularly alluring, "…we do have a lot of catching up to do."

"Well, I can't really argue with that." She laughed and ran her hands teasingly down his spine.
Platform nine and three quarters was packed. Far more so than usual, Hermione realised.

It was as if their recent close brush with death had reminded the magical community what life was all about. As well as the usual parents and younger siblings, the platform was crowded with extended families – grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins.

Hermione felt she could understand a little. It was part of the reason why she and Ron had travelled here accompanied by Rose and Hugo to wave James off. She was sure that George and Angelina and Percy and Audrey had similar motivations, even though George's son Fred and Percy's older daughter Molly would not be going until next year. Even Charlie had travelled from Romania for the occasion and was standing in the background, chatting to Arthur. Bill and Fleur were slightly further down the platform with their daughter Victoire, on her way for her second year – clearly, it wasn't cool for her to be seen with her younger cousin.

The train was departing a month later than usual. Not all the students were returning on the Hogwarts Express; some who had come down with the virus would have to join the school later on once their period of recovery had been completed.

Looking around, Hermione also spotted wizards and witches who didn't have a specific child to wave off. The bereaved were present too – she saw Terry Boot standing in the shadows with his wife Penelope, and her heart ached for them; Callum had been the oldest of their three children and would have been going this year.

She nudged Ron, gesturing towards them. He was close to Terry these days and she knew he'd want to speak to them. Just as she did so, she became aware that Ginny was surreptitiously trying to get her attention.

"Excuse me," she murmured and moved down the platform. Ginny had already turned away from the sight of an embarrassed and reluctant James receiving a tearful hug from Molly, and was walking slowly away along the platform.

"What is it?"

Ginny turned slowly to face Hermione, her face white and set, but her eyes blazing with some kind of long-repressed emotion.

Hermione looked at her former sister-in-law, her throat constricting painfully. They had had a difficult relationship over the years. In theory, they should have been best friends, having been thrown together by fate and shared experience, but they had always been too different in their natures and interests.

She'd liked Ginny, perhaps even loved her once, had admired her from time to time, envied her occasionally, hated her sometimes… but had seldom understood her.

She remembered the shy, unconfident little girl who had travelled to school for the first time with a hopeless, unrequited crush on Harry – who had confided in Hermione on more than one occasion. The girl who had come through a terrifying experience with Tom Riddle and had gone on to become one of the liveliest and most popular students at Hogwarts. A beautiful, passionate young
woman – no wonder Harry had fallen in love with her. Whatever else Ginny had become at school, she'd always been caring and emotional – had always worn her heart on her sleeve.

What had changed? The warm-hearted girl had become hardened by the war. She'd rekindled her relationship with Harry and they were obviously very happy, but she would never again be that affectionate, artless girl that Hermione remembered from before their year on the run – the girl that it had been so easy to love.

"What is it, Gin?" she repeated, frowning in confusion.

Ginny's face was hard and cold, as it often was these days whenever she contemplated her former sister-in-law, but there were certain signs that the hostile veneer was thin. Her large brown eyes were slightly tearful, her mouth was trembling slightly.

She seemed almost reluctant to speak, stumbling over her words in an awkward manner that Hermione didn't usually associate with the confident and assured Ginny Potter. "Just wanted to say…these last few weeks and all that happened… seeing Terry and Penny makes me realise… Well…I'm grateful, that's all. You know what I mean, don't you?"

The last words were almost aggressive, but she looked intently at Hermione from under her lashes.

"I do know," she replied, slowly. "But Gin, don't you think you should be thanking Severus, not me? I didn't have anything to do with it. And it was my son he saved, so can you imagine how grateful I feel? I know Ron feels the same way."

"Yes, I know that…" Her head was bent and slightly turned away, as if to avoid Hermione's gaze. "Merlin, I am so bad at this."

The last phrase was no more than an agonised mutter. Hermione waited quietly, knowing that Ginny was struggling to make sense of something.

She didn't have long to wait. Suddenly, Ginny lifted her head and looked her boldly. "It's just that, for years, I thought… I thought that nothing could touch me – nothing. I made sure of it. You have no idea what it was like that last year, trying to endure the punishments and wondering if I'd ever see Harry again. For all I knew, he might already be dead or Voldemort's prisoner – we didn't know anything when we were at school, and then I was taken out and went into hiding…"

She closed her eyes at the memory, and then opened them again with the air of someone who was determined to get through a rehearsed speech, no matter what the cost.

"So when it was over – when Harry was back and alive against all the odds – I told myself that nothing would ever hurt me again. I wouldn't let it, no matter what the cost. That's why, years ago, when you needed a friend to help you make a decision, I tried to influence you. And I was wrong – I know that now."

Hermione stared at her old friend, not sure how to react.

"I was blind. All I could think of was that you'd apparently fallen in love with the same monster that haunted my worst nightmares. I hated him so – so much. I couldn't bear for you to be anywhere near him, and I wasn't prepared to listen to anyone who said he wasn't what he seemed - not even Harry. And so I put you off…"

She gave a humourless laugh. "I know that it's made you unhappy over the years – and I'm not sure that I even care about that. I know that sounds bad, but I have to be honest, I guess. And I suppose he's been miserable too – and I don't care about that either. In fact, I almost hope he has suffered.
Payback, I suppose. But I do care about my brother. Merlin, when did I become so bloody selfish?"

She shook her head.

Hermione gaped at her. How typical of Ginny! Assuming a heightened level of importance, as usual. She sighed, trying to hide her impatience. She had to put a stop to this before it went any further.

"Ginny, listen to me. You alone didn't put me off Severus. You mustn't blame yourself for that - it's entirely unnecessary."

"Really?" Ginny looked sceptical.

"If I had been so sure of my own feelings," Hermione stated, slowly and clearly, "I wouldn't have been put off that easily. Luna was right all along. She told me back then that I needed to be clear in my own mind. And I wasn't clear – not then. I made the correct decision in not going back to him at that stage, although I should have made my feelings clearer to him. I was incredibly unfair to Severus – although, in my defence, I didn't realise how much I actually meant to him back then. I thought it was only my own heart that I was risking."

She gazed down the platform towards her ex-husband and bit her lip. "Where I really went wrong was in marrying your brother and making him unhappy too. I'll always regret that. I never wanted to hurt Ron and it was wrong to marry him knowing that I didn't feel the same way. But then again..." her eyes moved to her children and she smiled, "...something good came out of that too. So maybe things aren't so bad after all."

"Maybe not," Ginny replied, quietly, following her gaze.

For a moment the two women stood together, looking at their extended family. Just for once, they were in agreement and they lingered a little, both reluctant to break the spell. Knowing that they were unlikely to ever be that close again.

Hermione's thoughts turned to Susan, who had diplomatically kept away from the family reunion. She had no doubt that Ron wouldn't wait too long before getting married again, and she wondered with some amusement, how Ginny would get on with her new sister-in-law. Would their relationship be more harmonious? Was she secretly glad that Hermione was out of her brother's life? Hermione had long suspected that part of the tension between them had been Ginny's jealous resentment of the influence that Hermione had over her brother and husband. She didn't envy Susan the challenges she would face in fitting in with the Weasley clan – but then, quite possibly, the quiet and reserved young woman would toe the line far better than she ever had.

Ginny shifted slightly and looked back at her. "I still think you're making a big mistake with him." Her voice was low, but her gaze was unapologetic. "I know that the community owes him a big debt – I'm not denying that. But a leopard can't change its spots. I know they all say that he had to do what he did, but nothing will convince me that he didn't enjoy it. Still -," she shrugged, "I guess it's your mistake to make."

Hermione repressed a sigh. There was little point in trying to convince Ginny that she was fundamentally wrong about her former enemy. She would never understand – not without knowing facts about Severus's past that Hermione was not prepared to provide. Life was too short – and there was Ron, Rose and Hugo to think about. Nothing would be gained by making an enemy of her children's aunt.

She gave Ginny a wide, cheerful smile. "Well, we'll have to agree to differ. I hope it won't affect our ability to be friends in the future. We always used to be," she added, softly.
"Yeah… that's true," Ginny replied slowly. She looked a little surprised by the smile; her own lips quirked automatically in response. She seemed to relax – Hermione had the impression that she had finally said what she wanted to and that the subject would never be raised between them again.

She shook herself out of her reverie. "Come on – your son will be leaving any time now. Surely you want to embarrass him with one last blubbery embrace?"

"I think Mum has that covered nicely," Ginny replied, drily. She met Hermione's eyes and the two laughed. One thing they had in common was that neither woman enjoyed revealing their emotions. Hermione sensed that Ginny was as relieved as she to move to a lighter topic.

"Oy, you two! Get back down here, so I can take a group photo."

It was Ron, with his latest acquisition – a genuine Muggle digital camera.

Ginny moaned; she was already fed up with being forced to stand still for a stationery photograph. "For Merlin's sake, Ron, what's the point? We look ridiculous when we're not moving."

"It's a classic piece of kit. Did you know they used to be in black and white?"

Hermione smiled to herself as the brother and sister launched into one of their familiar rows – Ron and Ginny had always been the most combative of the Weasley clan. The amiable argument continued as Ron tried to chivvy everyone into position.

"You OK?" Harry murmured at her elbow.

"Of course," she replied, smiling over her shoulder at him. He was glowing with pride today, and her heart warmed at the sight. If any of them deserved happiness, it was Harry.

"I just wondered." There was some concern in his eyes. "It must be difficult, now that the divorce has gone through…"

She shook her head. "Molly and Arthur have been wonderful. They all have, especially Bill and Fleur. And Ron and I are fine. Or we will be, anyway. It's not his fault that we live in a community that has Victorian attitudes when it comes to separation and divorce."

It certainly wasn't her imagination that some of the glances she'd received had been decidedly unfriendly. Even some people that she might have counted as friends were looking embarrassed and trying not to catch her eye. It evidently confused many of them to see her still very much a part of the extended Weasley clan – almost as if they had expected her to disappear from her children's lives.

Ron looked over at them. "Come on, you two. We've got about two minutes before the train goes and Harry needs to be in the middle with James and Gin."

Harry and Hermione laughed and pushed forward through the crowds.

Hermione really hadn't expected to be walking down this gravel driveway with its overgrown hedge ever again. The grounds looked as unkempt as ever and the house rising out of the tangled shrubs on this misty autumn afternoon resembled nothing so much as a mausoleum.

She felt a strange reluctance to enter the sad, abandoned house. Once, it had stood for all that was
smart and glittering in the magical community – before the Dark Lord had come to power and taken the aristocratic Malfoy family down a darker route. Once, it would have welcomed some of the most powerful politicians and families in Wizarding Britain. In an earlier, more enlightened period, it had also welcomed Muggles. It was even rumoured that Elizabeth I had been a guest here.

Whenever she had visited Lucius, Hermione had half-closed her eyes and tried to visualise it in those far-off glory days. Had tried to visualise a younger Lucius as a confident oldest son and heir, and a young and glamorous Narcissa as a newly-wed, dressed in the finest and most fashionable robes that money could buy. She had strained her ears trying to catch the clink of champagne glasses and the murmur of conversation and laughter. And always, she had glanced up at the upper windows and imagined that she could see a sulky dark-haired adolescent, an unwilling guest, gazing down at a party that he hadn't been considered good enough to join.

Judging by his stationary pose in front of the door, looking up at the walls, Draco Malfoy was equally unwilling to step inside and claim his inheritance.

She walked up quietly and stood just behind him, not wanting to break his reverie. However, he looked around at her almost immediately, seeming unsurprised. "I suppose Severus told you I would be here."

"He mentioned it. I just saw James Potter off on the Express at Kings Cross," she added.

He looked away from her, back up at the ivy-covered walls. "Yes? Was it OK?"

"Mmm." She moved a little closer, standing close enough that her shoulders touched his in mute comfort as they both gazed up at the imposing house.

"Severus used to come here, you know," she told him. "When he was still a schoolboy, I mean. Your father invited him."

"Did he? I didn't know that, although obviously I saw him here quite a lot in the later years, usually on business. I might've guessed, though - of all the people they could've picked to have been my godfather – politicians, rich landowners, influential people… And yet, they picked him. There must have been something there, between my father and him. Something more than a professional relationship. It's not as if they could have approved of his mixed blood or lack of social standing. It's just ironic that, in fact, they couldn't have picked a better man for the job, even if they didn't realise it at the time."

"Perhaps he saw something in Severus that was worth more than money or power," Hermione mused. "Subconsciously, I mean."

Draco laughed, a little bitterly. "It would've had to have been subconscious in my father's case. Well, let's get on with it, shall we? See what delights my old man has left in store for me."

Hermione hesitated. "Are you sure? I don't want to be in the way."

He looked at her, his brow furrowed. "How could you possibly be in the way? Unless, of course…" he flushed a little, "you don't want to go in? I'm sorry, I hadn't thought about…"

"Oh, don't worry about that – I've been here enough times since the war, and it doesn't bother me anymore."

She took a deep breath and pushed open the door. It hadn't been locked, as no one had been here since she and Severus had made their mercy dash with Lucius to St Mungo's, when they'd both
been too preoccupied to lock the door behind them. It hardly mattered; no wizard or witch would have dared to enter, and the place was invisible to Muggles.

"I'm surprised it's taken you so long to come here."

He shrugged. "Been busy. Wedding plans and catching up in the lab."

Their feet clattered noisily on the floor as they crossed the large hallway with its dusty flagstones. Draco shivered as he looked around the house that he had grown up in.

"Some things don't change. Even in the middle of summer, it could feel pretty chilly in here. In winter, there was always a roaring fire, over there." He pointed, and Hermione saw a large stone fireplace surrounded by carvings of the inevitable intertwined snakes and dragons. "But it didn't seem to make much difference."

His pale eyes flickered towards the room that led to the library and he shuddered once more. It occurred to Hermione that she wasn't the only one for whom that room held terrible memories.

By common consent, they turned and walked in the opposite direction. Draco led her up and down flights of stairs, through cold and empty bedrooms, bathrooms and guest apartments, with their musty furnishings. She was familiar with the old-fashioned kitchen, of course. The tour didn't make her feel any better about the house; with each dismal room, her spirits sank even further.

Eventually, they ended up in the small study in which Lucius had spent most of the last years of his life. It was considerably more cluttered in here than anywhere else. Clearly, at some point, the senior Malfoy had decided to move anything he cared about into the small room – furniture, ornaments, portraits and so on, many of the latter just piled up haphazardly in the corners.

"Well, I think we've just located the majority of your inheritance," she commented.

Draco looked around the room with little enthusiasm.

It was strange, Hermione reflected; whenever she'd visited Lucius, she hadn't felt inclined to take in her surroundings too closely. She'd been too conscious of the paranoid man before her, who'd spent half the time accusing her (or some imaginary figure) of trying to steal from him. As a consequence, it felt as if she was visiting this room for the first time.

Looking around at the piled-up treasures, she could see that they were of good quality. The furniture was finely carved teak and the wall hangings were richly embroidered, albeit covered in dust at present. There were oil paintings on the walls that looked as if they would fetch a few million pounds at a Muggle auction. She suddenly realised, with some surprise, that many of the expensive objects were Muggle in origin. It was almost as if the Malfoys had deliberately sought to fit in with the Muggle community around them. At certain times in history, she supposed it would have been politic to do so – particularly when witches and wizards had come under attack during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

She moved to a side table to pick up a small and rather exquisite china vase, wondering how Lucius and Narcissa had managed to hang on to these objects when they had had to sell most of what they owned following the War – and also why they had bothered to do so. It was more likely, probably, that they hadn't been able to find a market in the wizarding community for such objects, and they had been too proud to sell to Muggles.

"So what are you going to do with all this?"

Draco wrinkled his nose, with the easy familiarity of someone who had grown up with the furniture
and ornaments and portraits. "Don't know. Burn them probably."

"What? You can't be serious – all this? It's worth a fortune. If you sell it, you might never need to worry about money again."

"Yes, because, of course, a shit-load of money is all I need to be really happy, isn't it?" he replied, in a sarcastic, slightly sing-song tone, as he picked up a book and blew the dust off it.

"Well, if you put it like that…" In fact, he had a good point – probably the last thing he needed was a large amount of money and nothing useful to spend it on. Once an addict, always an addict…

Draco was skimming through the red leather volume. "Hah! Never thought the old man would keep this."

Hermione wandered over. "What is it?" She'd seen the book before; Lucius had kept it on a table by his armchair.

"It's a family tree. To be more specific, my family tree."

"What – a whole book? I thought family trees were normally on wall charts - or tapestries," she added, with a sudden vision of the defaced Black family tree at Grimmauld Place.

Draco grimaced. "Well, in our case, it was a book. Of heritage. A…record, if you like." He smiled, a little bitterly. "Most proud parents would keep old photographs, certificates of achievement, records of exam results, that kind of thing. I bet your parents did. Mine kept records of my birthright. My antecedents, all the way back to Tudor times. My genetic makeup, my physical attributes, my wealth, all set out in meticulous detail. My…selling points."

"Selling points? You mean, for marriage?" She laughed, disbelievingly. "Do people really still do that these days?"

"They did." He shut the book with a snap and chucked it back onto the table. "Funny that he kept it so close – as if he thought it still meant anything. As if he would still be able to marry me off as unsullied goods. As if any pure-blood family would want to tie themselves to a Malfoy." He spat the last word as he turned away.

"He never disowned you," she reminded him, quietly. "He used to rant and rave, but he loved you, in his own strange, twisted way." Looking at him, she saw a spasm of pain cross that pale face, but persisted. "Maybe that's why he kept it by him, simply as a memory of you - without any particular intentions. He was proud of you."

"Yeah, I'm sure he was. Proud of my ancestry at any rate." His eyes were caught by something else, partially hidden behind a shabby curtain. "Wow, look at that!"

She turned as he darted across the room and pulled the object from its hiding place. It was a large black and silver broomstick.

"I don't believe it! My old Nimbus 2001!" He dusted it off with his sleeve, a look of almost-reverence on his face. She mentally rolled her eyes; she'd seen that besotted look more than a few times over the years. Boys and their toys…

"I rode this when I joined the Quiddich team. Nearly beat Potter with it that year – would've done too, if he hadn't got lucky, as always." He ran a finger over the inscription at the top of the broom. "I didn't get to ride it long - by the end of our fifth year, Father had decided that Quiddich was below me – and, well, there were other things going on by then of course… But I loved it. I was
bloody good at it too."

"Really?" She couldn't help herself. She'd been conditioned during her teenage years to listen patiently as Harry, Ron, Ginny and almost every other Gryffindor Quiddich 'expert' slated Draco's performance and accused him of nepotism.

"Yes, I was." He caught her expression and frowned. "Well, OK, I wasn't as good as Potter, but then again, who was? I was pretty good at flying, anyway."

He laid the broomstick down almost gently, as he looked around. "So, Granger. What do you think, then? You've had the tour… what would you do with a crumbling stately pile like this?"

She noted that he'd reverted to his old title for her in their school days; strangely, this cheered her a little.

"Well," she stood for a moment, considering the options. "I know you don't want any of this stuff, so it might as well go. I wouldn't burn it, though." She had a sudden inspiration. "Why don't you turn the Muggle stuff over to my mother? She's an antiques freak – loves pottering around at markets and auctions. I'm sure she'd be in her element, getting it all cleaned and valued and sold. You could put the money into a trust, perhaps, if you're not keen to spend it yourself. Or give it to charity. Or Maia may have some ideas about what to do with it."

He stared at her. "You know, that's not such a bad idea, Granger. Maybe you're not as stupid as you look."

She snorted, indignantly. "As for the rest of it – I wouldn't be so quick to get rid of the house and land. You could really do something with it. The building is reasonably solid still – it obviously needs some work on it to counter the neglect, but the foundations are probably sound. I know you don't want to live here, but you could turn it over to some good cause – I don't know… Maybe a school or an orphanage?"

He laughed, scornfully. "Who'd send their kids here? It doesn't matter how many renovations I make – it'll still be tainted with the Malfoy name. And an orphanage seems a little sick, in view of the many orphans my own dear father helped to create."

"Well, you're going to have a problem with the Malfoy reputation whatever you do," she pointed out. "What about a hospital, then? Something small and private, for rehabilitation rather than critical care?"

"A hospital…," he repeated slowly. "A…psychiatric hospital?"

"Well, I hadn't thought that far. Do you mean like a Muggle psychiatric hospital? We don't have them in the wizarding world -." She stopped, as she realised what he was getting at.

"No, we don't, but perhaps we should? All we've got is the Janus Thickey ward – and they hardly even try to cure you there. Did you know that at one point, my mother was thinking of having me admitted there? She really believed that my heroin addiction was some kind of spell damage." He shook his head. "I'd have probably never got out."

"So, you're thinking of some kind of psychiatric rehabilitation facility." Hermione was thinking quickly. "Specifically for drug addicts?"

"Not necessarily just addiction. Look around you," he gestured round the room and at the view beyond the dirty windows. "It's perfect for psychiatric rehabilitation of any kind. Right out in the country, with lots of surrounding private land. Plenty of rooms; we could convert them into private
bedrooms and therapeutic units. We could get Healers working here on a permanent basis."

"Muggle therapists too," added Hermione, her excitement growing. "They're streaks ahead of us. When I was ill after Hugo, it was a Muggle facility that I ended up at – and my therapist knew all about the wizarding community. It's what I'm thinking of doing," she added, a little tentatively. "When I graduate, I mean. I'd like to work in that field – combining magic with Muggle therapies to come up with effective treatments for various mental health problems. Heaven knows there are enough wizards and witches that still need help, even years after the war."

"So, you would be combining the best of each tradition?" Draco looked at her,thoughtfully. "But you wouldn't want to work here – or would you?"

"Well I'd probably want to work more on the research side of things. Clinical trials and so on. But Healers would come here. There are enough of them at St Mungo's who aren't too keen on the status quo. Even Susan – she won't admit it, but I'm sure the idea of introducing Muggle ideas would appeal… Oh, it's genius, Draco!"

Without thinking about it, she grabbed his arm and he grinned at her obvious excitement.

She flushed and let go. "Sorry. I get carried away…" She giggled suddenly and for no apparent reason.

"Something funny?" But he didn't seem offended and smiled softly.

"Not really. But…well, it – it is funny, isn't it? Us, I mean. This." She gestured between them. "After all those years at Hogwarts… You hated me back then. I represented everything that was repulsive to you. And I wasn't too keen on you either – remember when I punched you?"

"I remember." He smiled. "It's simple, really. We grew up."

"Is that all?" It seemed too easy.

"Yes."

Something – some lingering tension between the former protagonists – evaporated like a wisp of smoke. Perhaps the passing of Lucius, as the last remaining symbol of the past, had cleared the way. They stood together, equals at last. She'd seen him at his lowest moments, had nursed him through his degradations and had both pitied and hated him for it. He'd despised her from the start and had resented her intelligence. None of it seemed to matter anymore.

Hermione took a deep breath and laughed, rather shakily. "You know what? I feel – I finally feel – that we're going to be alright. All of us, I mean. Not just you and I. We were supposed to feel like this at the end of the War, weren't we? Voldemort was defeated, Harry survived and we were finally free. But we didn't feel free. Not you, not me, and not Severus. And not Harry, or Ron, or Ginny, or your father, or so many others who fought and either won or lost. People expected us to be happy, and so we tried to be, but it just didn't work. It's taken us this long to recover…"

"And that's why this institute could be important." She moved slowly over to the window, gazing out at the view. "While I was struggling to understand what had happened to me and trying to move on, I ended up making the worst decision of my life. There was no one there to help me. No one understood. A Muggle psychiatrist might have been able to help if I had dared to speak to one, but there was nothing equivalent in the wizarding world. And so, I got stuck. I put my life on hold."

"And I had no one to turn to either." He moved over to stand next to her. "Everyone hated me and what I represented. And – and I hated myself. There were times that I wanted to die – and I used to
curse when I came round from yet another attempt at an overdose. I cursed you too, for trying to prolong the agony."

She sighed, running a finger down the cracked pane. "I thought I was doing the right thing. Getting you a job at Hogwarts. Trying to keep you on the straight and narrow."

"But it didn't work – and again, maybe if I'd been able to see someone, like one of your Muggle psychiatrists... It took Severus, of all people, to wake me up and make me realise that I had another chance at life."

"Yes. He turned out to be rather important after all, didn't he?" she commented, thinking of the many, many ways in which the despised ex-Death Eater and Order spy had saved her own life.

"Do you suppose he'll get some kind of recognition from the Ministry for what he's done? The cure, I mean. Some kind of award or medal?"

She laughed. "You know Severus. Do you really think he'd accept it, even if they offered?"

"I didn't think so. It's just that, I was thinking about this institute," he went on, quietly. "And it seems to me that it shouldn't be associated with the name of Malfoy. I was wondering what you thought of... the Snape Institute for Rehabilitation?"

"Really?" She frowned, mulling the name over. "Actually... I think it's a lovely idea, but you'd have to run it by him. I don't know how he'd react – he's still so private, isn't he?"

She glanced around. "You know, we ought to get started. We need to do an inventory of what you've got here and arrange for the Muggle artefacts to be stored somewhere in London. My mum could sort it out and get it sold – the money will be very useful for the renovations. And we need to make a list of the repairs – and get an architect in to look at the structural changes we'll need. We may want to build an annexe too. What about putting in some sports facilities - a swimming pool even? And we'll need to start thinking about a project manager. If you and I are going to be in Spain most of the time, we'll need someone on site to oversee the work..."

She waved her hand at a table, replacing the clutter on it with a fresh scroll and two fountain pens and ink wells. However, before she could go any further, he grabbed her arm.

"Later, maybe." He had a dangerous glint in his eye. "It's a nice afternoon – the mist has been burnt away by the sun. Looks as if we can expect an Indian summer after all."

"So?" Reluctantly, she turned away from the table and followed his gesture towards the window. The clouds had cleared to reveal an early autumn sun shining brightly in the light blue sky.

Draco flicked his fingers and the Nimbus 2001 flew across the room and into his hand. "Fancy a quick flight?"

Oh... "Ah, no, actually," she muttered. "I always hated flying – it was my least favourite class at school."

"Yes, I know." He smirked. "You were terrible, Granger. Worse than Longbottom – and that's saying something. It's quite shocking that such an able pupil performed so badly at such a key element in the curriculum. It's high time we put that right."

"Are you serious?" She stared at his carelessly handsome face. There was something different about Draco today. It really seemed as if a shadow that had hovered over him for most of his life had finally gone. That pinched, slightly bitter look that she had associated with her nemesis during
those far-off school days had vanished, and she could see now how much it had affected his looks.

"I probably haven't been on a broomstick for about ten years," she muttered, but she was wavering a little. It would be fun…

She had a sudden memory of teenage years – of laughing with Harry and Ron by the fire in the Gryffindor common room; of feasts in the hall and walks to Hogsmeade; of lazy summer days at the Burrow, watching Ginny and the boys playing Quiddich – and occasionally being talked into joining them, usually with disastrous consequences.

Draco, seeing her wavering, put the broomstick under one arm and pulled her towards the door. She allowed herself to be dragged, still protesting weakly.

"Come on, Granger, stop being such a wuss. Anyway, I thought couples shared everything – didn't you know that Severus is a pretty accomplished flyer himself?"

"Is he? He never said."

"Of course. He refereed a Quiddich match once, didn't he? You can't do that if you can't play the game. He was on the Slytherin team once – played Chaser. Just think – if you pick up a few tips from me, you'll be flying off into the Spanish sunset together in no time."

"Oh, ha ha. I don't think Severus and I need any tips on romance from you, Malfoy. And anyway, haven't you got your own relationship to focus on? I'll have to ask Maia how romantic you are."

Deflection clearly didn't work on Draco – he just laughed. "Oh, we're fine. Maia is currently very happily occupied with designing the dress and working out the menu for the wedding feast. As far as she and Beatriz are concerned, the groom's role is to keep well out of the way of any preparations. Which suits me just fine."

He led the way outside and mounted his broom. "Come on, then. Hop on behind me and hold on tight."

"Draco, I really don't think this is a good idea," she said, desperately. "You have no idea just how bad I am at this."

That was an understatement; she had ridden pillion with Ron once and when he'd finally set them down, he'd vowed never to take her up ever again. She was an awkward passenger; she had no instinct for when to lean or in what direction and he'd spent most of his time correcting their balance.

"I think I have some idea – remember I saw your pathetic efforts at Hogwarts. Every Tuesday morning for a whole bloody year. It made agonising viewing – there's only so many taunts a Slytherin can yell before it gets boring. Your trouble is that you've only ever been up with Weasley or Potter – am I right? One of them was never as good as he thought he was; the other was too busy showing off to pay any attention. Well, get on, woman!"

Grumbling, she straddled the broom, struggling with her long skirt before she had the sense to transfigure it into a pair of jeans. The broom came up to meet her, and she felt her feet leave the ground.

Hold onto the broom in front of you - or onto my waist, whichever you prefer –," he winked over his shoulder in a flirtatious manner that made her want to kick him, "– but don't grab my shoulders or arms, or we'll be descending a little more quickly than we want to. I'll shout 'left' or 'right' when I want you to lean a bit more, but in general, just keep an eye on my shoulders and try to align your
"As I'll ever be."

As the broom suddenly shot forward, she gave an undignified squeal and grabbed at his waist. Draco took the broom on a steep climb to avoid the overgrown shrubs of the garden and swept over the tall old oak trees in the main park with a whoop of pure joy.

"Merlin, I've missed this! I'd forgotten how much fun it can be."

She hugged his waist tightly and laughed out loud, feeling her hair streaming out behind her. The wind whipped strands of it across her cheeks, stinging her face and making her eyes water, but it didn't seem to matter in the face of Draco's boyish enthusiasm. She felt affected by his excitement; flying had never appealed apart from as a method of getting from A to B, but for the first time, she began to understand the attraction of simply hurtling through the air.

Draco took the broomstick into a gentle curve up into the blue sky. They flew south, over the edge of the Malfoy estate and across the fields of nearby Muggle farms. Far below, Hermione saw cars and tractors on the narrow lanes, a group of children playing in a garden, a herd of cows grazing peacefully. No one looked in their direction; as always, Muggles failed to notice something that their logical brains would never understand.

"Lean left. Focus, Granger."

Hermione realised that Draco had taken them into a sharp turn, and she panicked and leaned out a little too far. She felt the broom slipping between her thighs, and Draco risked taking one hand off the broom and wrapping it around her upper body, pushing her more firmly into position. She felt his muscles strain as he struggled momentarily to balance the broom, taking them out of the turn as he did so.

"Draco!"

They had lost some height and a small copse loomed immediately ahead. Draco kicked back and the broom soared, skimming the leaves of the nearby trees.

"She hasn't lost it! All those years, and she's still got some kick to her! Haven't you, my girl," he crooned, bending low over the front of the stick. Hermione resisted the movement for a moment, lifting her head up into the rushing wind, shutting her eyes and letting her hair fly out behind her. The cold air rushed into her lungs and she gasped and leaned forward over Draco's back as the broomstick speeded up even more.

For a few moments, Draco pushed the broom to its limit, as if testing its abilities, and there was little Hermione could do but hang on, her cheek pressed into his shoulder. And then he gentled the speed a little and took the Nimbus into a series of lazy circles, swooping down towards the ground before pushing back up again. They were over a deserted field alongside a slow-moving muddy-looking stream, and he took the broomstick lower as he went through the manoeuvres. She began to see that he was right – he was a good flyer. He might lack Harry's single-minded determination, but he still rode his broom as if it were an extension of his own body. He twisted and turned and swooped over the ground with the lazy assurance of a man who had probably starting flying before he could barely walk.

Hermione began to 'feel' the movement in her own body and was soon starting to lean before each shouted command. At last, she was beginning to feel a fledgling instinct for something that hadn't made any sense at all for the past twenty or so years – and she realised why. Flying wasn't about
thinking. It couldn't be taught from a book about aerodynamics. It was pure instinct. All this time, she'd been approaching it the wrong way.

As if he sensed an increase in her confidence, Draco began to speed up again. After another gentle roll, he kicked off once more and the Nimbus soared towards the heavens. Without warning he rolled 360 degrees. Hermione screamed at the sight of the land appearing above her head, and gripped his jacket tightly.

He laughed, pulling them out of it, and leaned back to shout in her ear. "Did you enjoy that?"

"No!"

He laughed again and dived fast towards the ground. Hermione panicked once more as her sweaty hands slipped on his leather jacket. She grabbed for his elbow, clutching his arm tightly.

"What -?" He was distracted and the Nimbus began to slip and twist, a little out of control. He cursed and tried to correct, pulling his arm out of Hermione's tight grip, but it was too late.

The broomstick finally pulled out level just above the stream. Draco strained to lift the front up again, but the bristles brushed on the rocks and the Nimbus stalled, dumping them both sideways into the shallow muddy water before crashing a few feet further downstream.

"Merlin's sake!" Draco struggled to his feet and staggered a few feet down the stream, trying to retrieve his downed broomstick. He slipped on the mud and fell forward onto his face with a soft **glug**.

She tried to stand up, but her heels slipped and she fell back onto her sopping wet bottom, starting to giggle. The more she giggled, the harder it became to extract herself. Giving up, she leaned her head back against a rock and let the sluggish water flow over her as she gazed up at the endlessly blue sky, listened to Draco's impotent cursing, and laughed and laughed until the tears ran down her muddy cheeks.
Three years later

Severus woke with a start.

He knew without opening his eyes that it was sometime around 6.03. He didn't always wake up at that time these days, but just occasionally the habit re-asserted itself, particularly on significant dates.

He lay motionless for a while, wondering where he was, why he was under such a thick soft duvet and what was so special about today that his old habit felt the need to re-surface. He felt nicely warm and loath to move in case he lost that comfortable sensation. Gradually he became aware that he was curled around a warm body. His arm was draped over Hermione's side and his hand lifted and fell fractionally as she breathed slowly and regularly.

He moved his hand to her stomach; she murmured in her sleep and wriggled back into him. He nuzzled at the nape of her neck as he tried to work out why he'd woken so early this morning.

Of course. September 1st. And Hugo was joining his sister to Hogwarts this year. They'd spent the night in Rye, which was why he was feeling disoriented.

He sighed and nuzzled his nose into Hermione's hair. It seemed to have a life of its own first thing in the morning. He closed his eyes, inhaled the smell of her shampoo and cast his mind back over the last few weeks.

They were at the end of a particularly mad summer. He'd been busy with Draco in Valenzuela – after much dithering, his assistant had finally decided on the unique potion he would be developing to gain his Mastery. The Snape Institute for Rehabilitation and the Treatment of Addiction was up-and-running now, and Draco had decided to design some potions to work in conjunction with the psychological therapies being provided by a team of Muggle and magical psychotherapists. The two of them had spent much of the last few weeks discussing the actions and parameters of the potions. Draco would have been happy to launch into initial testing, but Maia had put her foot down – she had spent the entire summer looking after Lucio and their lively one-year old twins by herself, and didn't want him working on a long project until they'd had a chance to take a holiday.

Meanwhile, Hermione was working on a spell damage research project at St. Mungo's which had reached a crucial stage; she'd been putting in as many hours as possible and had spent what limited spare time she had hopping over to France, where her parents had recently bought a holiday home. Rose and Hugo had grown tanned during the month they had spent around the countryside and beaches of southern Brittany and when he'd collected them from their grandparents yesterday, he would have sworn that both had grown another inch at least. He hadn't seen much of their mother for five weeks.

When Hermione had finally staggered back in the early hours, she'd been almost dead on her feet. She'd given him a perfunctory kiss, muttered something about "bloody patent office, just give me a chance to hex them" and more-or-less collapsed on the bed. His only consolation was that they were going on holiday immediately after waving the children off on the Hogwarts Express.

She shifted backwards again, and he felt his body beginning to respond. He began to draw lazy circles on her soft, slightly rounded stomach. He knew she hated the fact that, as soon as she gained any weight, it went straight to her tummy and hips, but he loved her curvy shape. It was such a
contrast to his own skinny form; he didn't seem to be able to put on any weight however much he ate.

She stirred, sleepily. He felt her body tense in confusion and then relax again as she realised where she was. Her hair tickled his nose as she shifted slightly. "Morning."

"Good morning," he mouthed against her shoulder.

"Been awake long?" Her hand skated down his wrist to rest over the hand on her stomach.

"Just a few minutes."

"Mmm." He waited for a minute, but that seemed to be all she was capable of at this early hour. Hermione was always a little slower to wake than he was, and he was often successful in distracting her into other, more pleasurable, activities before her brain caught up with her. Right now, she seemed to approve, as her hand moved his very deliberately lower on her stomach. His other hand was current trapped under her body, but he managed to wriggle it through enough to cup a breast, and she sighed and turned her head over into a lazy kiss.

"Please tell me you're finished with St Mungo's for now."

"Mmm?" Her eyes opened, more alert now but still heavy-lidded with sleep. "Oh yes. Nothing to do now until the next stage. Few weeks maybe?"

"So you can definitely get away?"

She smiled lazily, rolling over fully and pressing her thigh into his half-interested erection as she stretched up to kiss him again. "Oh yes."

This was what he loved most – the early mornings, with slow unhurried kisses and teasing touches, knowing that there was nowhere to go and no rush…

This morning, though, he doubted he had that much time. Even as his arousal increased and he began to rock automatically against her thigh, he began a countdown in his head.

Any minute now…

"What time is it?"

…and there it was.

"Oh, about quarter past six," he said, trying for nonchalance.

"Quarter past six?! Quarter past six?! And it's the first today! Oh Merlin, why didn't you wake me? We'll be late!"

He sighed, regretfully feeling his erection subside a little, as she flung the duvet off and jumped out of bed. "There's hardly anything to do, and we've got hours yet. The kids won't even be awake."

That earned him a glare as she pulled on a dressing gown. "Well, wake them up then! We've got to pack -.

"We have packed," he pointed out, sitting up and wincing as he adjusted himself. "I sent them to pack yesterday when we got back from France."

Again, a narrow-eyed look. "You sent them to pack. You sent Hugo and Rose to pack, without any
supervision. Rose, who's probably only packed books and hasn't bothered with any clothes at all, and Hugo, who's probably only packed his broomstick and Quiddich posters. Do you really think they're competent to be left to pack alone?"

He smirked at her. "Give me a little credit. I gave them each a list of things to pack, and no ice cream until they finished. And I checked afterwards."

She subsided a little. "Still… there's packed lunches to be made, and I wanted to write a note for Rose to pass onto Neville…" She grabbed her towel and hurried into the en-suite shower room, banging the door shut unnecessarily loudly.

As he heard the shower turn on, he groaned and lay back down. His only consolation was that, by tonight, they would be in a little cottage tucked away in a remote cove in western Nova Scotia. Officially, they were attending a North American Healers’ conference being held in Lunenberg, but Severus had also arranged a private boat trip at the Bay of Fundy as an early birthday surprise, having recalled Hermione once saying rather wistfully that she’d never seen a humpback whale.

He couldn't wait to get there. It was rare that the two of them got to spend much time alone, and the last few weeks had been particularly tough in that respect. He knew that Hermione stayed with him as much as she could, but too often that might coincide with a time-consuming project with Draco. Plus the fact that Draco and Hermione had become close friends themselves and were often to be found with their heads together poring over plans for their rehabilitation centre. Hermione, having graduated from her Healer course, had established her reputation as an excellent researcher very quickly and was now in demand.

It was ridiculous to feel jealous of a job, but sometimes he felt a little as if she was leaving him behind. He knew it was pure paranoia. The reality was that they were both well-established in their careers. However, while she moved from project to project with dazzling speed, sometimes working for more than one research team at a time, his potions work tended to come and go depending on the circumstances, including the seasonal availability of ingredients. Right now, he wasn't working on anything new, in preparation for the fact that his laboratory would be taken over by Draco in a couple of weeks' time, and he felt restless.

"Severus! I'm going to school today!"

He hurriedly pulled up the duvet to cover himself as Hugo darted into the room and bounced on the bed. "Going to schoool, gooooing to schoool…" he chanted as he bounced up and down.

"Yes, so I've noticed," he said, drily. "I hope you'll always be this keen."

"I'll be in the Quiddich team!"

"No you won't." His teenaged sister stood in the doorway, her arms folded. "Don't know how many times I've told you, Hugo, first years don't get places on the Quiddich team."

"Uncle Harry did," Hugo retorted.

"Your uncle was exceptional," Severus commented. And didn't he know it, he added to himself, uncharitably.

Hugo was beginning to look a little sulky. Very much like his father, Severus thought as he chivvied them out of the bedroom. "Get dressed, you two. Your mum's on the warpath, so you'd better have everything packed and ready."

Rose gifted him with one of her dazzling smiles before pulling Hugo away.
Severus chuckled as he leaned back against the headrest. They weren't such bad kids really. Rose was shaping up to be as pretty as her name but, thankfully, was far too sensible to care about the male attention she received as a result. In James and Albus, she had a couple of staunch champions who treated her like a sister and protected her from any unwanted attention. She was as bright as a button, just as he had expected she would be, and – much to his delight – had a particular aptitude for and interest in potions. She had happily managed to combine her mother's intelligence with her father's gut instinct and promised to make an excellent potioneer one day. Severus was already looking forward to the day when he could make her his new apprentice – although Draco kept teasing that he would steal her away to work in the large laboratory that he intended to set up over in Orgiva once he achieved his Mastery.

Hugo was very much like his father. He had that Weasley friendliness but fortunately lacked Ron's insecurity, which was, in any case, more to do with being the youngest of six sons. Severus didn't anticipate that his stepson would make an outstanding scholar, but he was a reasonable all-rounder with some aptitude for Charms. He certainly wouldn't shame the Weasleys, just as long as he didn't get too obsessed with Quiddich to get his homework done. Lily Potter was a sensible, good-natured girl, much quieter than James and not as sensitive as Albus, and would be likely to keep an eye on him and make sure he got on with his studies.

Assuming, of course, they were in the same house. It wasn't a given, just because your parents were both from one particular house. Severus had been quite surprised that Rose hadn't been Sorted into Ravenclaw rather than Gryffindor…but then, of course, her mother hadn't been either. Hermione had told him once that the Hat had wanted to place her in Ravenclaw and, in fact, she had been quite keen and had been rather disconcerted when it had unexpectedly veered off into a different direction. Severus often wondered whether Rose had been offered a choice and whether she too was secretly disappointed in the Hat's decision. He didn't recall any such debate – he had wanted to be in Slytherin, no matter what. He didn't know where that early conviction had come from. Hermione had often speculated as to what might have happened if he'd ended up in Ravenclaw instead, but he'd never given that much thought, having come to the conclusion that it was impossible to argue with fate. He was fed up with 'what if' questions.

Hermione came back into the room, draped in a towel. "Are the kids up? I thought I heard them.” She peeled off her towel and started getting dressed with a ruthless efficiency that really shouldn't have been that arousing. She didn't help matters much by giving him a dangerously knowing look that promised much later on.

"How are we getting to King's Cross?” he asked casually, trying to hide his renewed interest.

Fully dressed, she sat down at the dressing table to tackle her unruly hair with a wand. It straightened out and twined itself into an intricate bun. Hermione didn't always bother with using magic to tame her hair; she often complained that it made matters worse when the spell wore off, but today she was clearly in a hurry.

"That's why we haven't got much time. Ron and Susan are coming over for breakfast. The kids wanted to go in his new car. I was a bit worried about the North Circular on a weekday morning, but Ron seems to think it'll be OK.”

She sounded a little anxious, but Ron and Susan had been living in Finchley for five years now, and Severus assumed they knew the London roads well enough to be able to get Hugo and Rose there in time.

"Come on – get up." Hermione threw her damp towel at him as she rose and prepared to go downstairs.
Severus didn't move. "Why should I? We've still got plenty of time, and I've got nothing to do – unless you want me to make the packed lunches."

Hermione shuddered at the idea. "Ron and Susan will be here at seven, and we're all going to sit down to a *civilised* breakfast. That does not mean black coffee and the remains of last night's takeaway warmed up – oh, don't think I didn't notice the smell of Chinese when I came in last night. It means cereal and juice and proper coffee and fruit – and a full English breakfast if that's what they want. And *you're* going to cook it."

"*Really?* And what do *I* get out of it?" he drawled, watching her carefully.

She hesitated for a moment before crawling across the bed towards him in a seductive manner. Her lips brushed lightly against his cheek, and he felt her warm breath as she whispered in his ear. "*Oh, I'll make it up to you. Later.*"

And then she was gone, sweeping out of the door and shouting for Rose and Hugo.

He groaned, grabbing his towel. Time for a cold shower.

Despite Hermione's predictions, Ron and Susan didn't turn up until 7.30. Ron brushed off Hermione's concerns ("*Merlin, Hermione, it doesn't go until 11.*" "*Yes, but it takes two and a half hours to get there, Ron!*"), hugged the children enthusiastically and whistled appreciatively at the sight and smell of a full English breakfast, laid out on the table.

"Wow, you went all out, didn't you? You didn't have to do all this, you know. Not that it's not appreciated."

"I know," Severus replied in his dry manner. He gave Susan a sympathetic look; the second Mrs Weasley was due to give birth in a couple of weeks and was looking very uncomfortable. He pulled out a chair for her politely, and she gave him a grateful smile. He rather liked Susan. She was cool and sensible, and made the perfect ally when Ron and Hermione went off on one of their rants – as they did now.

"For heaven's sake! Of all mornings to be late."

"How long were you expecting breakfast to take? As long as we leave by half eight it'll be fine."

"But what about parking? You know what it's like around there."

"It'll be fine." Her ex-husband heaped bacon, eggs, sausages, mushrooms and baked beans onto his plate and winked at his daughter. "*If* we have any problems, we can just pull over and apparate to the station while Susan can just –."

"No. Susan *cannot* just," his wife interrupted serenely but with just a hint of steel in her voice as she buttered a piece of toast. "You know I'm not allowed to drive."

"Everything all right?" Hermione asked, running her eyes over the heavily pregnant woman. Severus recognised what he thought of as her healer's expression as she assessed Susan's condition in a clinical manner. She might not actively practise her profession, being too focused on research, but she still possessed the knowledge and skills of a healer, which had proved somewhat useful at times, particularly after the occasional unforeseen laboratory accident.

Susan smiled cheerfully. "I'm fine. Just a bit large and getting rather fed up with it. My healer told me not to 'mess around' with Muggle contraptions, as she put it."
Ron snorted. "As if it's any safer to travel by broomstick."

"And apparation can't even be contemplated," Hermione murmured and Susan shuddered in silent agreement as she helped herself to honey.

Breakfast passed reasonably peacefully after that, although Hugo was too sick with excitement to eat and Rose was constantly distracted by the need to go and pack another book that she'd forgotten about and 'absolutely had to' take with her. Severus privately wondered how she'd managed to find space for her compulsory school books. His step-daughter's tastes in reading were eclectic and wide-ranging, and she also liked to 'read around' the core topics. He suspected that Hermione may have magically expanded the space in her school trunk to accommodate this interest.

The four adults chatted amiably on a variety of topics. Severus found he could tolerate Ron very well these days – in fact, he would even go so far as to admit to liking the other man. Ron had grown in confidence since setting up his private investigation business with his brother Percy. Away from the restrictions of Ministry work and with his new-found happiness in his personal life, he'd shaken off the immaturity and bitterness that had dogged most of his early life. In his field of interest, he was well-informed and witty, and Severus found himself laughing at Ron's stories of the funnier cases they had investigated and the various scrapes they had found themselves in. They had built up a reasonably successful business in a short time – it appeared that Ron had been quite right to suspect that there were plenty of wizards and witches out there who really didn't want to draw the Ministry into their private affairs. Initially, Harry had been disapproving when Ron handed in his notice, but eventually even he had to concede that the Auror department was less over-worked with more of the petty cases of absent family members and mysterious disappearances of valuable property being dealt with elsewhere.

At the other end of the table, Hermione and Susan were deep in conversation about the Snape Institute. Although Susan had been very interested in moving into psychiatric rehabilitation, she'd stayed in her senior position at St Mungo's. However, she had decided to resign her job to start a family, and was considering a part-time post at the Institute when she returned to work. Severus suspected that the link with Muggle therapies, an extremely controversial issue, may have been a problem for her. Although she was not entirely against the idea, it was difficult for an established senior Healer to publicly admit to an interest in it. This break in her career was giving her a chance to consider a change of direction.

They managed to leave promptly at half past eight, squeezing everything and everyone into Ron's orange Mini, which was, of course, bigger on the inside. Severus wondered what the Muggle commuters thought when they saw the Mini pull up right outside Kings Cross and a large number of adults, children and luggage emerge from it. The general detritus included broomsticks and two cages, one containing a cat (descended from Crookshanks, of course) and the other a little short-eared owl. Ron quickly placed a disillusionment charm over the car, leaving it parked on a double-yellow line, and they hurried into the station.

Harry, Ginny and their children were already on platform 9 and three quarters, having travelled in a more conventional (and quicker) manner. Rose and Hugo hurried over to Albus and Lily, and the adults greeted one another.

Harry shook Severus's hand firmly, with a smile, and Severus was struck afresh by his resemblance to certain Muggle politicians. With his neat haircut and smart suit, he was every inch the young Ministry employee looking for promotion. He had already headed up the Auror division for six years and rumour had it that he was looking to move on to bigger and better things.

Minister Shacklebolt, with his traditional robes and stubborn focus on wizarding traditions, was
looking dangerously out-of-date in comparison with young Mr. Potter with his Muggle suit and radical ideas. In fact, had they but known it at the time, Hermione and Ron's very public divorce had been something of a catalyst. It had shaken up traditional wizarding ideas about family life and the degree of control the Ministry still held over society. Eyeing Harry now, Severus wondered whether he had foreseen that. He might be being unfair on Potter - he was obviously very fond of Hermione and Ron and wanted them to be happy – but it certainly hadn't done him any harm to show his public support for them.

As always, Ginny Potter somehow managed in the general bustle to avoid greeting him personally, although she gave him small, slightly stilted smile. Severus noticed that Susan positioned herself between Hermione and Ginny, acting as a buffer between the two women as she gently drew small talk from them both, and his admiration for her grew.

The train whistle blew, and there was a general panic as parents began to bustle their children on board, with various bags and pets. In the hubbub, Severus, Hermione and Hugo found themselves separated from the Potters and Weasleys. Slightly off-balance, Hermione inadvertently barged into an older woman.

She turned around, and they recognised Esmeralda Curry from the Ministry, clearly here to see off her grandson.

"Oh, sorry about that. Hello, Esmeralda," Hermione greeted her politely, having worked with Madam Curry some years before.

"Good morning," the woman responded, icily, her pale green eyes sweeping over Hermione's left hand. "Still Miss Granger, I see."

She swept past them haughtily.

"Still an interfering old busybody, I see," Hermione replied cheerfully, not bothering to lower her voice. "Aha, there they are. Come on, Hugo, let's get you on board."

With a final flurry of hugs and kisses, Hugo and Lily stood side by side in the train window, their faces suddenly very pale and young. Hermione sucked in a breath and clutched at Harry's arm.

"Never gets any easier, does it?"

"Nope," Harry replied, quietly. "Third time for us, and it really doesn't. I just try to imagine the excitement of arriving and seeing Hagrid standing there with his lamp."

Severus and Susan had stepped back diplomatically to give the parents more room to say their farewells. As they watched, Ginny took Harry's hand and Ron stepped up on the other side of Hermione, pressing his shoulder against hers in mute comfort.

Once it might have bothered Severus – this strong friendship, bordering on love – but not now. He had begun to suspect that the Hat knew what it was doing when it placed those three young children in the same house so long ago now. In fact, he had a strong feeling that it would never be possible to separate the 'golden trio' entirely. However much their lives and relationships changed and pulled them into different directions and to different locations, the bond could never be fully severed. Every now and then, Hermione would feel the tug of that connection – that shared history - and he knew by now not to comment if she got that faraway look on her face and said she needed to meet up with Harry and Ron for a while.

He didn't mind. He understood the nature of love far better now. It wasn't about possession, about ownership. That was the kind of emotion he had felt for Lily Evans – and she had been right to run
away from him. And Lucius had loved his son in his own twisted way, but he had also wanted to own him – and look how that had turned out.

Hermione would always be her own woman. There would be times when he felt left behind; when the demands of her job and her children and her other outside interests would take over, but he was confident that she would always come back to him. And there would be times when she needed Harry and Ron more than she needed him, just for a little while...but that was the price of loving one of the golden trio.

Judging by the little smile on Susan's face, she understood too. Sadly, the one who would always fight against that bond was Ginny. He fervently hoped that she would find some peace from the demons that still haunted her from time to time, and he deeply regretted the part he had played in her trauma, but there was nothing that he or anyone else could do now.

The four stood in a huddle as the train carrying their children puffed out of the station. As it disappeared around the corner, Ron let out a shaky breath.

"Well, that's that."

Harry half-raised his hand to his scar, in an imitation of his old habit when it used to hurt him, and smiled.

Hermione turned around, seeking Severus. When she saw him, her face lit up and he felt himself drowning in the warmth of those large brown eyes.

All was well.

**The end**

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