In Half-Light and Shadows
by Maegykie

Summary

Just your typical HG/SS: "She swam, for what seemed an eternity, in ebony eyes, before allowing her gaze to drift over him in his entirety. He was not at all as she remembered." Disillusioned and hurting, Hermione wanders across Europe in search of a fugitive Snape. When she eventually tracks him down they both discover that healing is easier together.
Meeting at the Moroi

She swam, for what seemed an eternity, in ebony eyes, before allowing her gaze to drift over him in his entirety. He was not at all as she remembered. His hair still framed his face in curtains, but it was shorter than it had been in her school days, cropped around his ears in a more fashionable style. It looked waxy, she thought, as opposed to greasy, as though he had perhaps applied some sort of product. Whatever he’d done, the overall affect accentuated his nose, serving to make him look perhaps as though he belonged to some great aristocratic breed. He was dressed smartly, in tidy, bottle green robes, though they were incomparable with the button-down image he’d maintained whilst teaching. She also noticed he’d attained something of a paunch, however she rather thought the extra weight had gone some way to dissipate the gauntness of his appearance, making his face fuller and healthier looking, which contrasted with his being practically hunched over in his chair, his shoulders stiff and his fingers nervously twisting a napkin into a damp paper spear.

‘You’re gawping, Miss Granger, and it really isn’t becoming of a… woman of your age,’ he said in that silky-smooth voice. Hermione swore she saw the briefest of smiles flicker over his thin lips as she stepped towards the table where he’d eventually motioned for her to take a seat opposite him. ‘Why are you here?’ he asked, without further preamble.

She realised there was to be no small talk. ‘I … you … I mean…’ she stammered. She felt the heady euphoria she had experienced at initially finding him seep away. In an instant she was at school again, a little girl slightly awed but mostly terrified of her Potions teacher, despite his countenance being completely at odds with what she was used to back then. He raised a questioning eyebrow and she thought she ought to continue, more coherently this time, lest he get bored and disappear once more. ‘I came to find you,’ she managed after a slow, deep intake of breath, ‘for Harry.’

A flash of anger crossed his features but when a waitress approached to take their order his tone was calm and quiet, conversational almost. ‘Would you like anything to drink?’ he asked simply. Hermione nodded mutely and watched as he ordered something in what she presumed was stilted Romanian, which the waitress seemed to find amusing.

At breakfast yesterday the keeper of the small inn where Hermione was staying had approached her with a short, crumpled note: Tomorrow. The Moroi. 1pm. She had recognised the spiky scrawl instantly (it had adorned many of her Potions essays) and forgot to breathe for what must have been an unhealthy length of time. The Moroi, she had seen, was a dismal looking pub in town square, and she had become no more enamoured by it when she entered just over twenty-four hours later to meet Severus Snape. This afternoon it was busy enough that they looked inconspicuous together in the corner, but not so busy as they couldn’t hear one another’s hushed tones.

As the waitress toddled off to fetch their order Snape turned his attention completely to Hermione. ‘What does he want?’ he asked, in an oddly small voice. Hermione had become momentarily beguiled by the man in front of her and it took her a moment to remember who he was talking about.
'Err, Harry? Well…' She had thought long and hard about why Harry might truly want Snape to return to England, because she wasn’t sure Harry even knew himself anymore. Five years ago his reasoning had been that Snape was a war hero, a legitimate member of the Order no less, and, as such, deserved the recognition that the others had all received. Gryffindor honour was bound up in these medals and titles that provided evidence of their bravery, but Hermione had never been convinced that this was something Snape would appreciate, never mind desire for himself. And anyway, towards the end of Harry’s three years of exhaustive searching, Hermione had come to a rather different conclusion as to why Harry really wanted this… She decided to present her weakest argument first.

‘For one, you’re a war hero, and he wants that recognised,’ she said quickly so that she could move on to her next, more considered answers, ‘two, you need to be in England to have your name properly cleared. Harry’s managed to convince the Ministry to stop searching for you themselves, but there’s a limit to how long they’ll hold off, and there’d have to be a trial of course… Harry would put a word in—'

‘You’re rambling, Miss Granger,’ Snape interrupted, as their drinks arrived and he began taking big gulps of honey-coloured beer. ‘What is number three?’

Hermione nodded, building herself up mentally to voice what was the last reason out loud. It was personal to Harry, so personal, in fact, that he had not spoken it out loud himself, not in so many words, anyway. ‘Sorry… I suppose… yes, I suppose, number three is that Harry feels a little indebted to you and he wants to… I don’t know, return the favour as best he can.’

‘What, with an Order of Merlin and a sack full of galleons?’ Snape asked, his voice still quiet but his tone now familiarly laced with sarcasm.

Hermione’s brow creased, ‘he knows it isn’t comparable to the sacrifices you made but it’s something. He’s been riddled with guilt, thinking if… if he’d just listened to Dumbledore about trusting you then…’

Yes, fundamentally, Hermione suspected, having Snape return to England and bestowing these superficial rewards upon him was a way for Harry to assuage his own guilt. It was all to make Harry feel better. Hermione felt bad thinking this of her friend, but then, why shouldn’t he feel better? In the months and years straight after the war there had been torturous dreams and sleepless nights, days when guilt at the thought of how many had died for him had been crippling, and times when sadness had seemed almost painful. They had all suffered but none so much as Harry. But Harry had had good friends, in the Weasleys had found good family, and so, in time he had made a decent attempt at re-building his life. There had been memorials and ceremonies and services for the dead and each and every one of them had received their due recognition. All with the exception of Snape, that is,
and this continued to bother Harry because as far as Harry was concerned, he owed his life to Snape.

This was why Hermione was using this as her final piece of leverage; she knew that if anyone understood the overwhelming power of a life debt, it was Severus Snape.

Snape snorted derisively though. ‘That’s more like it,’ he said, smirking, ‘he wants to put his own mind at ease, he doesn’t actually care at all that I’m compensated for my “sacrifices,” as you put it.’

‘N-no… that’s not entirely true. If he’d just known, things might have been different!’ she snapped, finding herself suddenly having to be defensive. She took a few large mouthfuls of her own beer, which was cool and sweet, though her mounting anger allowed her little time to dwell on the subtleties of it. She had been planning this moment for a very long time and now it had arrived coherent articulation was failing her and ruining everything. She supposed that the passage of time had ameliorated her memories of Snape and just how obtuse he was capable of being. ‘Anyway, it isn’t so different from what you were doing, really,’ she said, watching him over the rim of her tankard.

‘What?’

‘You were only acting your part as spy because of guilt, if I remember rightly!’

His expression darkened and he looked torn between bolting for the door and hexing her into the middle of next week. His knuckles had gone white where he clutched the chair arms. She thought perhaps she’d gone too far and the last thing she wanted to do was frighten him off. Not now that she had come so close.

‘Sorry,’ she said quickly, offering him a sincerely apologetic smile. ‘That was uncalled for. I didn’t come here to argue… I’m tired is all…’

He nodded curtly and slumped further into the chair, though she noticed he hadn’t loosened his grip and she suspected he wasn’t arguing with her because he knew she was right.

‘Things could not have been any other way,’ Snape said simply, after taking a moment to compose himself, ‘I have nothing to apologise for.’

‘The way you treat Harry in school was an act, for Draco Malfoy’s benefit,’ she stated, though her
tone belied the fact that she was trying to convince herself, as much as Snape, that this was true.

Severus shook his head, ‘no.’

‘What? You actively hated a child?’ she scoffed. His expression now fluctuated somewhere between enraged and bemused. She got the impression he was seldom challenged and despite herself she was enjoying finally being able to stand up for herself with him. Her confidence resurfaced slightly. ‘You don’t hate Harry.’

‘Oh, I don’t?’

‘No, you hate James, and with James being dead and all, you’ll settle for his son.’

‘Hmm… an interesting theory,’ he mocked, but he didn’t seem particularly invested in the argument, which again led Hermione to believe she was right.

‘Even if you do hate Harry in his own right, your opinions of him are based on the way he acted at school and quite frankly, Professor, he gave as good as he got!’ she sighed. ‘I am not suggesting you become friends,’ she continued before he could interrupt, ‘believe me, that’s not what Harry wants either, just that you’re… courteous to one another, for long enough for your name to be cleared, and Harry to honour your role in the war. Then you can do whatever you want. I fail to see how this isn’t mutually beneficial.’

Snape shook his head and gave a small shrug. ‘No one here knows of my past, so a clear name in England is going to make very little difference to me. Anyway… if all this is try about Potter, why isn’t he here himself?’

‘Harry spent three years looking for you, even while he was training to be an Auror and didn’t really have the time or money to travel, he’d make sure he searched every place there was ever a reported sighting… he tried, but finally resigned himself to the fact that you didn’t want to be found.’

‘-Just about the most sensible thought the boy ever had,’ Snape grunted.

Hermione glared at him and continued unperturbed, ‘I think he thought he could live with that, but it eats him up if he thinks about it for long enough. He just wants to thank you properly. You coming back will finally free him of all this and don’t you think he deserves that?’
'What I think is that I have done enough for him!' Snape hissed, ‘I would have thought it was obvious I wanted to avoid the limelight your friend was so eager to bask in, but… what about you, Miss Granger?’ he asked, eyeing her curiously. He sat forward in the chair slightly, his face shifting out of the shadows.

‘What about me?’

‘Why aren’t you resigned to the fact that I did not want to be found?’ he said, placing especial emphasis on the last six words as though he was speaking to a particularly dim child.

‘I…’ she hesitated. She could hardly tell him that he had become her project, he distraction from reality. Her obsession. She shrugged instead, which was followed by a long period of silence in which Hermione busied herself with her drink. Snape finished the remnants of his own beverage, his eyes now fixed on her, and slammed his tankard down onto the table with an air of finality.

‘Was there anything else, Miss Granger?’ he asked impatiently, drumming long, thin fingers on the oak table.

There were thousands of other questions Hermione wanted to ask but the most obvious, and undoubtedly the most pertinent, was the first that made it to her lips, and it was out of her mouth before she had really had chance to think about it, but she had a burning desire to know the answer and this might be her only opportunity to get it. ‘We… we saw you die, Professor, the snake and… we went back to the Shrieking Shack for your body and, well, you were gone… We saw you die!’

Suddenly his whole countenance changed. He sat further forward, seemingly folding in on himself. One hand tugged briefly at his collar, drawing Hermione’s attention for the first time to the thin pink scars of Nagini’s bite, before he crossed his arms protectively across his chest. He wore a worried frown, fidgeted nervously and glanced around the pub. His eyes narrowed as he clearly debated internally about whether or not to tell her.

‘Blood replenisher and anti-venom,’ he said finally, forcing a sad, almost nostalgic smile, and looking off into the mid-distance. ‘That’s an anti-climactic answer, I’m sure.’

She suspected there was more to it than that but said ‘the simplest plans are often the best,’ not having the energy to argue with him.
He gave a brief nod. ‘Please,’ he then said suddenly, ‘tell Potter I don’t want to go back to England and please, don’t tell anyone where I am!’

Hermione was taken aback and failed to hid it. Snape was pleading with her and looking at him sat there she realised he struck something of a pitiable figure. For all his healthier complexion and generally more aesthetically pleasing exterior, she recognised a familiar tortured look in his eyes; a look she had seen in many of the war weary. She thought how they had all had one another and how Snape had had no one; both during and after the war. This was not at all what she had anticipated. She had to admit it was rather disappointing. She was not accustomed to not getting the results she desired and it left her with an uneasy, incomplete sensation in the pit of her stomach, but she was not willing to cause Snape undue distress.

She merely asked, ‘why?’ rather feebly.

He frowned, ‘I… because I’m free here. Freer than I could ever hope to be in England whether my name is cleared or not… and anonymous, with no one to answer to,’ he replied, then, looking suddenly solemn, added, ‘I… didn’t do what I did for Potter. I thought that that was clear from my memories he’s so generously shared with everyone.’

‘I suppose it was,’ Hermione sighed, now completely out of energy for arguing and suddenly wishing she was anywhere but in this miserable Romanian ale house. ‘I’ll leave you be. I’m sorry I bothered you.’ She plunged a hand into her bag and pulled out her purse, from which she extracted a few coins for the drink and stood to leave.

‘They’re on my tab,’ Snape said, handing her the money back and standing also. She’d quite forgotten how tall he was but he no longer loomed over her as he had used to loom over her cauldron to inspect her work at school. In fact, he continued to look rather uncomfortable, determined to look anywhere but at Hermione.

‘Oh… then thanks.’

He shrugged. He was infuriating.

‘Look, Miss Granger,’ he said suddenly, ‘I had rather thought my absence would go unnoticed so… I will admit, it is… not unpleasant to think that someone was… willing to look for me,… though why you wasted two years of your life I doubt I will ever understand.’
'Me either,' she said. Her bluntness seemed to cause Snape pain and he recoiled slightly, back into the shadowy corner, looking puzzled and hurt.

'Yes, I had rather thought the dislike was mutual,' he said, recovering himself enough to respond to her in a half-baked sneer.

'Oh, it is,' she agreed, swinging her handbag over her shoulder. 'Goodbye, Professor,' she said with a weak smile before turning to leave.

~oOo~

He watched her walk away. It crossed his mind that, in the years between the Final Battle and this moment in a grimy pub in the centre of a small Romanian town, she had grown from a child to a woman, but such thoughts were only half formed. He had been thoroughly perturbed by her presence in Bolstrad ever since he became aware of it some three days ago.

'Ve've had a young lady in here looking for you,' they'd told him in this very pub. 'Brown hair, brown eyes, about so tall,' they'd said at the grocers. 'Very... how do you say... inquisitive about you,' his acquaintance at the perfumers had said.

Having determined to avoid her he had then seen her for himself whilst out shopping for potions ingredients at the market and had decided that meeting with her would perhaps be the best way to rid himself of her once and for all. He had spent the last five years distancing himself from every aspect of his past life and seeing her had immediately brought all those memories screaming back.
Renting a cramped house between a dusty bookshop and an apothecary of ill-repute, Severus had been settled in the all-wizarding town of Bolstrad, nestled in the foothills of the Carpathian mountains, for the last year or so. Prior to this, wandering like some Romantic hermit, he had drifted through Europe, resting mainly within Muggle communities to ensure he did not divulge his location to the British Ministry of Magic. He had wrongly, it seemed, felt Bolstrad was remote enough for him to live comfortably without his identity being discovered.

For the first time in as long as he could remember he was at liberty to make his own decisions; go where he wanted, speak to whom he pleased, and for five years this existence had served him well. He was under no illusion that he was anything other than a fugitive. Until Bolstrad he had spent his time lurking in shadows, casting furtive looks over his shoulder, convinced that he was being watched. And now Miss Granger had jeopardised it all.

During their tête-à-tête three days ago she had sworn she wouldn’t divulge his location, but Severus knew better than to accept this at face value. Not trusting people was habitual to Severus Snape and she had stirred within him a new restlessness. Initially he had put it down to those reminders of his old life she had represented; she had merely drawn memories, long since buried, back to the surface, and now he was going to have to try and forget all over again.

But, even after copious helpings of Ogden’s finest, he still felt an odd twang of discomfort somewhere deep in his abdomen at the thought of Hermione’s wide hazel eyes as she had implored him to return to England with her. Had he, for the briefest of moments, found himself considering it? He didn’t think so, though he couldn’t be sure and this frustrated him. His life had been defined by uncertainties but he had always been sure of himself. He was the one person he knew he could rely on, or at least he thought he was, he wasn’t so sure now… He couldn’t shake the feeling that, as much as he had protested, a subconscious part of him had perhaps wanted to be found…

No, he concluded. He was the happiest he had ever been in Bolstrad, or at the very least he was contented; happy was a strong word. Miss Granger would be leaving soon, he reminded himself, and his life would go on as it had before her interruption.

~oOo~

Hermione sealed the envelope and attached it to the owl’s leg, allowing it to nibble playfully at her hand before it swept out of the post office, bound for The Burrow. The letter it carried informed Ron of her plans:

Dear Ron,

How are you? How’s everyone?

The last time I wrote to you I’d just left Budapest with a tip-off from some Romanian travellers that Snape had been seen in the east, I’m sure you remember. They were quite right; Snape was there. I have spoken to him and he is as he ever was - miserly and uncooperative. He will not be returning to England with me and I don’t know where is now. This whole thing has been a complete waste of time and you can tell me you told me so when I see you! Tell Harry I’m sorry!

I was thinking that whilst I’m out here though, it would be a good opportunity to do a little travelling. I know I’ve been to France and Italy skiing with my parents when I was younger, and I know you think I’m on one long, extended holiday anyway, but it hasn’t exactly been leisurely looking for
Snape. I thought I might head south into Bulgaria. I’ve already written to Viktor Krum to see if he’d like to meet up.

Then I’d really like to see Greece and I’d especially like to learn more of their elf welfare! They’re so forward thinking and there might be something I can take from their Welfare of Magical Creatures Act to help me once I’m back at work.

I’m rambling with an aim to justifying myself and I know you’re not interested in all that, but really, more than anything, I just hope you understand! It’ll make me feel a bit better about this whole trip if I can get something out of it, now that Snape has scuppered my plans!

I’ll head back in a few weeks - a month tops. I really am missing everyone so, so much and I can’t wait to see you all!

Love, Hermione.

She had considered her words carefully. She refused to outright lie to Ron, but a little misdirection would do no harm. She had honoured her promise to Snape to not expose his location. Her description of her journey after leaving Budapest and her eventual encounter with Snape was a little cumbersome to read as a result, but a promise is a promise.

She also suspected that her monologue on reasons why it was pertinent she continued her travels would not satisfy Ron. Ron was supportive of Hermione searching for Snape in as much as it made her happy, but he struggled to muster much enthusiasm for her being away for what was initially months, but eventually turned into, years at a time. As a result, Hermione generally found herself writing reams explicitly stating her love for Ron and her desire to be back with him, though she had forgone that in this letter in the hope that an estimated date of return would be enough. She had never spoken of when she would return home before, despite Ron’s incessant asking, and she thought he might enjoy something vaguely tangible to hold on to.

She exited the post office onto one of Bolstrad’s narrow cobbled alleyways. The town was small but labyrinthine, with rickety 14th century buildings lining the streets, extending up the hillside and seemingly built all on top of one another. It was all steps, archways, and alcoves. It had a quintessentially Transylvanian charm, like something straight out of Bram Stoker’s novel which, Hermione thought wryly, suited Snape’s vampiric aesthetic. It was mid-September, a Wednesday, and in the dying embers of summer, Bolstrad basked in a warm golden glaze that suited Hermione’s mood of renewed hope as she made her way through the winding streets of the town in the direction of the train station. This time tomorrow she would be halfway to Bulgaria, this debacle with Snape all but forgotten.

~oOo~

Wednesdays in Bolstrad were market days and the town square, where The Moroi stood, was bustling. The air was filled with the cries of merchants and punters clamouring for profit and bargains respectively. Children wove through adults’ legs, pestering their mother’s to buy them sweets and trinkets, or surreptitiously pinching apples or cinnamon buns from the array of food stalls. Music emanated from somewhere unseen, and the strange smells of rare potion ingredients wafted through the heat.

Hermione had explored the market last week, but she had a little time to kill before her train and liked the idea of perhaps picking up a memento of her time in Bolstrad before she left. Previously she had seen a stall selling miniature crystal balls and, whilst her disapproval of Divination persisted, Carpathian Crystal was renowned amongst supposed seers as the finest crystal for fortune telling, and so it seemed fitting to buy something which had such a specific attachment to the area.
It was whilst musing this potential purchase that a child appeared out of nowhere and bounded into her, sending her lurching forward into the market stall. The fall seemed to happen in slow motion and in that time it fleetingly crossed Hermione’s mind that crystal balls made from genuine Carpathian Crystal were inordinately expensive and that she was about destroy an entire table’s worth. Thus ended her hopes of travelling; she would be charged for the lot and would be forced to return to England penniless, her savings gone.

That was when a strong hand reached out, clutched at her arm, and hauled her upright. Taking a moment to catch her breath and overcome her dizziness, Hermione turned to face her rescuer. He looked to be about the same age as her, was tall with dark hair and a smattering of straggly stubble. He wore a set of the strangest robes Hermione had ever seen; they looked to be made of cheap velveteen and had an extravagant gold trim that appeared to have been stitched haphazardly by someone with their eyes closed. Inevitably the idea behind the robes was that they made the man look wealthy and important, when in reality he looked somewhat ridiculous. In fact, he had an air of Gilderoy Lockhart about him which made Hermione dislike him immediately.

Then he said something in what was, presumably, Romanian. Hermione had picked up basic salutations and such in most of the countries she had visited, but she couldn’t understand him.

‘Sorry…’ she muttered, ‘eu nu vorbesc Romana.’

She saw a flash of recognition in his eyes and he smiled at her. She noticed his teeth were not as pristine as the rest of him. ‘Oh, you are not from here?’ he said.

‘No. I’m English,’ she said. She realised he was still holding her arm just below her shoulder and unhooked herself from him.

‘Ah, I was apologising for my son,’ he said, looking down at the child that had tripped Hermione. In contrast to the man the child was clad in merely a tattered pair of corduroy shorts, no top, and flimsy leather sandals. The man had a hand rested gently on the child’s shoulder.

‘Oh, that’s OK,’ Hermione said, smiling at the boy who merely stared up at her through wide, dark eyes. ‘And thank you,’ she said, turning back to his father, ‘you caught me just in time,’ she added, nodding in the direction of the crystal balls.

‘Lucky I was here,’ he said.

‘Yes, thank you.

‘You are buying a crystal ball?’

‘I was thinking about it.’

‘These are very expensive. I have some cheaper ones if you would come with me,’ he said, pressing a hand on Hermione’s back in an attempt to direct her.

Hermione had been similarly harassed by the merchants last week, who were keen to take advantage of a tourist, and was well practiced in fobbing them off with polite excuses. ‘Oh, no thank you,’ she said, with a pleasant smile, ‘I don’t think I want one. I have a train to catch actually.’ She made a show of looking at her watch and noticed that it was actually far closer to her departure time than she had realised.

‘That is a shame,’ the man responded, smiling and baring his browning teeth once more. ‘But come, look…’
‘No, really, I must be going…’

The debate continued for a good few minutes longer than Hermione would have liked, until she finally convinced the man that she really was not interested and managed to get away. She had run from the market, dragging her trunk behind her, all the way to the train station.

~oOo~

Hermione could have cursed the fancy man and his filthy son to the moon and back as she stood on platform two fifteen minutes later watching her train pull out without her. She felt her shoulders slump and her bags slide off them and onto the floor.

‘Well, that’s annoying,’ a familiar voice drawled behind her.

She closed her eyes and turned around to face the owner with all the annoyance she could muster.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I came to make sure you left,’ Snape said, a smirk ghosting his lips. ‘But alas, here you still are.’
Everything Tasted Like Dust

‘Why don’t you just Apparate?’ he suggested, watching her from a few paces across the platform with an unreadable expression.

‘Because… because it’s not about the destination, it’s about the journey!’ she said defiantly, folding her arms across her chest.

He frowned at her and looked momentarily puzzled then asked, ‘what?’ in a tone of frustration.

She rolled her eyes. ‘Ugh, never mind… I’m just not in a rush, is all.’

‘Ah, well, that makes one of us,’ he said, pulling the leather satchel he was carrying more securely onto his shoulder and looking around the station. ‘I have to work but, just so I know, when will you be leaving, Miss Granger?’

‘Whenever the next train is,’ she hissed, ‘hopefully soon!’ She strode passed him and up to the train timetable that was charmed to the station wall. ‘There’s only one train from Bolstrad into Bulgaria each day, I won’t be able to leave until tomorrow,’ she said. It crossed her mind that she hoped the inn where she had been staying would still have spare rooms.

Snape stared at her hard and cold and then, without a word, stormed off the platform and out of the station. He got a few moments head start, in which she debated wildly with herself about following, before she dashed after him. The briskness of his walk and the length of his strides meant she practically had to run just to keep him within sight.

He kept to the backstreets to avoid the throngs of people still milling about the main roads heading to and from the market square and she followed him a very long time before she began to suspect that he wasn’t actually heading anywhere at all and was merely leading her around in circles, probably hoping this would make her desist. There was no doubt that he was acutely aware of her following him. Eventually he began to slow and she managed to close the gap between them and then he stopped walking so abruptly she almost ran straight into the back of him.

He hung his head and brought a his hand up to his face, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. ‘Don’t stalk behind me like that,’ he said, through gritted teeth, ‘a lifetime of having to check over my shoulder has left me with something of a nervous disposition where being
followed is concerned.’

‘Oh, sorry’ she said, making a mental note of the fact Snape had just admitted a weakness to her.

‘Bulgaria?’ he said suddenly, looking at her and withdrawing his hand from his face to reveal a furrowed brow.


‘Oh, well…’ he muttered before trailing off.

She raised a questioning eyebrow.

‘Their wizarding communities are still plagued with dark magic so… ugh… be careful… I suppose,’ he finished, avoiding her gaze.

Hermione smiled. ‘Well thank you for your concern, Professor.’

‘Old habits,’ he replied with a small shrug.

That made her smile as well. ‘I didn’t miss the train on purpose, if that’s what you’re thinking. I got waylaid at the market,’ she said, sensing that he remained suspicious of her intentions. In truth, she suspected that, for much the same reason he did not like people walking behind him, ‘suspicious’ was merely his default.

‘That was very neglectful of you but I wasn’t thinking that. As I said the other day, I cannot imagine why you came here in the first place, and so I certainly cannot imagine why you would want to continue to loiter here for a moment longer than you absolutely have to when I have made my feelings perfectly clear regarding your proposition.’

‘I was rather looking forward to moving on,’ she admitted, not untruthfully. ‘Though now I’ve been given the opportunity, I would like to apologise. I was a bit rude the other day as I was leaving. I was… disappointed and—’
‘-And you’re not used to not getting your own way?’ he said, though he did not sound particularly sneering.

‘There is perhaps an element of that, yes, Professor,’ she said, feeling her cheeks burn.

‘I am no longer your Professor… or indeed anybody else’s, thank Merlin!’

‘I suppose not. How would you have me address you then?’

‘There’ll be no more need for you to address me. I trust you can spend the next twenty-four hours until you leave ensuring there are no further encounters between us?’

‘I can try,’ she said with a huff, rolling her eyes.

He shook his head, apparently frustrated with himself. ‘Ugh… Severus. You can call me Severus,’ he conceded.

‘Severus,’ she said, trying it for size. It sounded strange coming from her lips. ‘Severus.’

‘Yes. Don’t wear it out,’ he said, with a half-smile, half-grimace.

Hermione looked up at him sharply. He had made a joke and she didn’t quite know what to do with it, but she couldn’t keep herself from laughing. What he’d said hadn’t been particularly funny, nor the way he’d said it, but she suddenly realised she hadn’t laughed in a long time, and now she’d started it was difficult to cease. When she eventually managed it though, she looked up to find him observing her with an angry scowl; stood rigidly, his mouth so tight the edges of his lips had turned white.

‘Sorry,’ she said, sobering quickly. Snape groaned and turned his back to her, marching down the street with his head down again. ‘No, wait,’ she said, cursing herself mentally and chasing after him. She managed to gain ground more quickly this time and reached out to stop him by him grabbing his arm. He rounded on her so swiftly, his face coming so close to hers, she almost tripped over her trunk as she scrambled away from him.
‘I warned you about following me,’ he growled, then, seemingly taking stock of her fearful expression he relaxed his own posture and closed his eyes, exhaling a long sigh. He opened his eyes again a moment later and continued in a more even tone, ‘and I don’t like being laughed at.’

’S-sorry,’ she repeated, quite out of breath. She wondered whether there was anything he did like.

He nodded curtly and she took that to mean that he was sorry for his reaction, though she was beginning to realise that she was not as good at reading his moods as she had liked to believe. As such, she proceeded with caution, ‘I wasn’t laughing at you,’ she said earnestly, ‘I was just laughing at the absurdity of it all.’ Indeed, it had suddenly dawned on Hermione how utterly ridiculous this was. She had traipsed halfway across the world to find a man she could barely stand to be around and once she had found him, he couldn’t have cared less. You had to laugh at that or else you’d cry. ‘You have to admit, it is rather amusing, I mean… call you Severus!’ she said, slightly incredulously, with another small giggle inadvertently escaping, ‘it’s ridiculous.’

‘Mmm…’ he said, evidently unconvinced. ‘Have you been drinking, Miss Granger? It’s rather early in the day,’ he commented, his eyebrow arching.

She sighed. ‘No. Though now you mention it, I wouldn’t mind a drink… and something to eat.’ She took a deep breath, thinking that she really had nothing else to lose, before asking, ‘join me?’

‘Like I said, it’s a little early in the day for that,’ he retorted, pulling the satchel up onto his shoulder again. Whatever was in it looked heavy.

‘You can have something soft. We’ll have a civilised conversation and then I will leave you alone.’

‘I have nothing else to say to you,’ he said with an air of finality and once again began walking down the street.

‘Severus, I have travelled a very long way-’

‘- I didn’t ask you to-’

‘- a very long way indeed, and I would appreciate if you would show me the courtesy of having
lunch with me.’

‘I did that the other day.’

‘If we could just talk, without arguing—’

‘—It wouldn’t change anything.’

‘Perhaps not, but it might mean we have a pleasant afternoon.’

‘Ha! Speak for yourself,’ he said, quickening his pace, ‘that isn’t my idea of pleasant!’

Hermione realised she had very little in her arsenal for convincing him that lunch was a good idea, and if she could not even convince him to have lunch with her then what chance had she ever really stood of convincing him to return to England?

‘I… I’ll pay,’ she said feebly.

‘You’re harassing me now, Miss Granger, and perhaps you haven’t realised but you’re still following me!’

‘I’ll stop! Have lunch with me and that will be it, forever!’

‘You’re bribing me,’ he said, an observation, not a question.

‘Very astute.’

Snape stopped walking abruptly again but she was prepared for it this time and managed to dodge out of the way before she collided with him. He looked down at her as though she was something he had trodden in for a long moment. Hermione anticipated a diatribe of caustic insults but he merely groaned, glancing around as though searching for something - anything - he could use as an excuse to get away. His brow furrowed when he clearly couldn’t think of anything and he acquiesced with a small shrug of surrender. ‘Fine’ he said, clearly still reluctant, ‘you’re paying.’
Hermione grinned. ‘Come on then,’ she ordered, ‘do you know somewhere nice we could go?’

‘The Moroi?’ he suggested.

‘Not The Moroi,’ Hermione responded. It had taken all her willpower to drink out of the tankards at The Moroi, which looked as though they hadn’t been scourgified in months, she could think of little worse than eating food prepared there.

‘Impossible,’ he muttered, though she was obviously meant to hear, ‘I know a restaurant,’ he added, more clearly, ‘follow me.’

‘So, err… you want me to follow you now?’

He scowled and shook his head, ‘perhaps walk next to me, Miss Granger’ he said, gesturing vaguely at the empty air at his side. Hermione quickly filled it and they set off back down the alleyway in the direction from which they had already come.

‘If I’m calling you Severus,’ she said as they went, ‘it only seems fair that you should call me Hermione.’

‘Alright,’ he said, not looking at her. This time she did not hear him whisper, ‘Hermione,’ under his breath, speaking it as though he had longed to say it for a very long time.

~oOo~

Fifteen minutes later they sat awkwardly across from one another in a traditional Romanian restaurant. Severus had asked for a table out of the way and they had been shown to an upstairs veranda that overlooked an expanse of dense forest and, in the distance, a large lake. More distant still, the Carpathians loaned an impressive backdrop to the scene, but neither Hermione nor Severus took much notice. Hermione busied herself with the wine menu and Severus had taken particular interest in the sleeve of his robes.

Their conversation was meaningless and stilted until after their first glass of wine. Hermione had ordered a bottle of Merlot and, in the end, Severus had taken little persuading to share it with her.
Then, with little warning, she began to tell him of the world he had left behind and, against his better judgement, and abandoning his resolve to not delve back into his past life (he would blame the wine for that), he found himself asking her about it too.

In the years straight after the war he had snatched glimpses of news from back home from foreign newspapers, but they were obviously not as invested in the stories as The Prophet was, and so the information he gathered was sparse and sporadic. As such, he listened with genuine interest as she told him about the aftermath of the war. About the people who had died and he had never realised, like Lupin, who he had sometimes thought about, imagining him with his well-deserved family somewhere rural, and all those students, children, he had strove for so long to protect.

But she also told him about the positives that had come from it, about how they had rebuilt and reassessed. Things were not perfect, but they were better. He nodded politely as she told him of Potter and Weasley’s Auror training; of Minerva taking over as head teacher at Hogwarts; of Longbottom being hired to teach Herbology and Miss Lovegood taking over at The Quibbler; of the Malfoys’ trials and those of several other Death Eaters; and of Kingsley becoming Minister for Magic and reshuffling the cabinet to accommodate for the new ideology that now governed wizarding Britain. He could not deny that this was nice to hear. It was what they had been fighting for all along, was it not?

She also told him about her personal discontentment and gradual disillusionment in her Ministry post in a subdivision of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures which campaigned for better treatment of house elves. He admitted that he vaguely recollected S.P.E.W. After a series of failed attempts to pass bylaws preventing the exploitation of elves Hermione, for the first time in her life, had merely given up exhausted. Wizards and witches the country over now championed the equality of purebloods, halfbloods, and muggleborns alike, but they were still not quite ready to extend this to other vulnerable species. He didn’t say as much but this was all a bit too much for Severus to get his head around. He certainly admired her passion for it though.

It was at this point she had decided to take over from Harry in his search for Snape. She had started by merely visiting the places there were supposed sightings for long weekends and such, but eventually had determined that the best course of action would be to trail her former Potions Master across the continent. Ultimately she believed that perhaps in this she could do some good. She had savings, the time, and, at least initially, Ron’s support.

‘God,’ Hermione had said after her lengthy but intriguing almost-monologue, ‘you can tell I haven’t had anyone to talk properly to for a long time,’ she laughed nervously and refilled their glasses. ‘But what about you?’ she asked and he got the sense that, despite it’s length, she had hurried her own story along so she could get around to asking this.

He shrugged, ‘There isn’t much to tell. My life is… mundane. Perfectly so.’
'Oh, that must be nice after… after everything.'

'Very.' He placed his knife and fork together on his plate and sat back with a contented sigh, a hand resting on his stomach. Their food had arrived sometime in the middle of their discussion and although he had cleared his plate, Severus realised he had been paying very little attention to it.

'You enjoy that?' she asked, still slurping up her broth from a spoon.

'Mmm,' he affirmed, 'it seemed like everything I ate during the war tasted like dust. Like everything tasted like dust, everything happened in black and white, and everything felt of nothing. Sometimes now it’s like I’m experiencing things like steak and chips, fine wines and sunsets,’ - he gestured towards the mountains, behind which, indeed, the sun was just beginning to dip - ‘for the first time. And sometimes that means I partake in them more often than is perhaps good for me,’ he said, taking a sip of his wine.

She nodded slowly. ‘I’m glad you’ve found this then,’ she said after a moment of contemplating him, ‘you deserve it.’

He lifted his gaze from the wine he was swilling aimlessly around his glass and looked at her properly for the first time since they had met. He hair was untamed, her cheeks freckly and red from the summer sun, her lips plump, and her eyes glinting in a way he had not seen since before her fourth year at school. ‘I don’t know about that,’ he said, in barely more than a whisper.

‘I don’t presume to know the intricacies of your life before you left Britain, despite what they print in The Prophet, but from what I’ve heard I can’t imagine you’ve experienced much happiness,’ she said, with evident trepidation, clearly wondering whether it was too personal a comment.

Severus wondered the same thing and still wasn’t sure what he thought of it when he answered. ‘I wasn’t unhappy. I wasn’t anything. Everything was… nothingness. That’s the only way I can describe it.’

‘Well that doesn’t sound very nice. What’s different here?’

‘Primarily, like I said, I have anonymity and freedom, and it is those I value above all else.’
‘Work?’ she asked, and then remembered something he’d said earlier, ’in fact, I thought you said you had to be at work this afternoon?’

He shrugged noncommittally. ‘I have potions to brew, for… personal, not commercial, use. They can wait. I do work though, enough to get by. Perfumes, mainly. It’s dull but less taxing than potions.’

‘Friends?’

‘Acquaintances. I don’t exude a desire to socialise so, for the most part, the locals leave me be.’

‘Hobbies?’

‘I like walking in the hills and I have plenty of time for reading. I didn’t read as much as I’d have liked towards the end of the war.’

She studied him for a moment and then continued with the tirade of questions. ’Aren’t you a bit… lonely? On your own in a foreign country. Do you even speak Romanian?’

‘No.’

She frowned. ‘I don’t mean to offend,’ she said warily, ‘but it doesn’t sound like much of a life… not compared with…’ she hesitated but he suspected he knew what was coming, ‘not compared with the life you could have back in the UK.’

He felt himself stiffen as he frowned across the table at her. ‘Everything isn’t quite nothingness anymore,’ he muttered, ’and that is the best I can hope for.’

‘That’s one of the saddest things I ever heard,’ Hermione responded, running her index finger and thumb up and down the stem of her wine glass thoughtfully.

‘It’s fine,’ he said simply.

“‘It’s fine’ or “you’re fine?”’ she asked, looking at him pointedly.
He shook his head and drained his glass. ‘I’ve got what I deserve,’ he said by way of response. He had already divulged more to her than he had intended. He supposed, like her, it had been a long time since he had had someone he could talk to, someone who had been there in the war and knew just a little of what it was like for him, and it had all spilled out. But he was certainly not going to talk to her about how he felt.

‘Alright misery guts,’ she said, breaking a silence that had gone on just a fraction of a second too long. She beamed at him and he could tell she was a little tipsy. ‘There must be somethings you’re grateful for in your life… perhaps we should start small though… tell me something you’re grateful for today?’

He offered her his best scowl but a few concepts entered his mind somewhat against his will. He closed his mouth tightly so they wouldn’t accidentally escape.

‘How about I start us off?’ she said, acknowledging his unwillingness to participate, ‘today I’m grateful for the opportunity to have been able to sit down and talk to you again. There. Your turn. It’s quite easy!’

‘Fine,’ he huffed, ‘I’m grateful that you said you’d pay for the food.’ It was the most acceptable, by which he meant least revealing, of all the ideas that had come to him.

She watched him carefully for a second, apparently assessing how serious she was being. He felt his lip twitch into a smile against his will and saw her follow suit with a small laugh.

‘That’ll so, I suppose,’ she said, then, ‘hey, can you ask something?’

‘You’ve done little else all afternoon.’

‘Oh, sorry…’

‘One more question won’t hurt.’

‘I have already promised not tell people where you are, and I keep my promises, but it’s OK for me to tell them I found you, isn’t it?’
‘You already told someone, didn’t you?’

‘I may have mentioned it in a letter to Ron, but… I’ve been gone for so long… some people are a little upset with me. If I can tell them I at least found you, even if you won’t come back with me,’ - she threw him a quick, hopeful glance, but he shook his head - ‘my absence is somewhat justified.’

He sighed. He couldn’t see the harm in it. ‘Ha!’ he exclaimed, ‘I suppose you may, if you must, although…’

‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ he said, looking slightly abashed.

‘No, go on,’ she prompted.

‘Well… it might be too personal but… I rather got the impression that you weren’t so eager to return home yourself? You said you were going travelling first.’

‘Oh, well, yes. Just for a little while though… I’m rather envious of you in a way.’

He snorted disbelievingly. ‘In what way?’

‘You spoke of anonymity…’

‘Ah, yes I can imagine being the best friend of The Chosen One has it’s pitfalls.’

‘Mmm… I’ve had a long break from it now. I need to go back… Ron…’

‘You and Weasley are… together?’
‘Yeah… at least, we were when I left. It’s been difficult, you know.’

Perceptible as he was, despite his inexperience with women, indeed with any normal human contact, Severus noticed the change in Hermione’s countenance. She looked suddenly forlorn, and gazed out over the woods with a thoughtful expression on her face.

‘Perhaps we should go,’ he suggested.

‘Yeah…’

~oOo~

They left the restaurant together, Severus making a point of letting Hermione pay for the bill as she had promised, and stood facing one another on the street outside. The sky was a blur of warm oranges and reds, the moon and stars just becoming visible. Severus refused to believe he had enjoyed Hermione’s company to such an extent he’d lost track of time. It certainly seemed to have flown though. He looked down at her in the dim light and saw her expression was still consternated.

‘Err, where are staying?’ he asked, digging his hands into his pockets.

‘The inn just down the way,’ she said, pointing down one of the alleys. ‘If they still have rooms.’

‘I’ll walk you back.’

‘There’s no need, Severus. I know the way.’

‘It’s not a question of you knowing the way. I can’t have you walking around the streets on your own at night.’

‘I got to Bolstrad all on my own, I think I’ll make it a hundred yards down the road just fine, thank you!’

He sighed and shrugged his shoulders. ‘I suppose that after seven years of protecting you and your
friends at Hogwarts I really cannot escape the habit. I will walk you back to the inn,’ he said, picking up her trunk for her too.

She was not sure what the demanding tone of his voice was suggestive of, but it made her accept his proposal. ‘OK,’ she replied, hating, but unable to prevent, the breathiness of her voice. They walked back to the inn, side-by-side, in silence. When they arrived she turned to face him. ‘Are you absolutely sure there is nothing I can say to convince you to come back with me?’ she asked in a tone that suggested this absolutely would be the last time she was going to ask.

‘Hermione…’ he said, pausing as he felt himself almost losing his temper. He sucked a breath in through gritted teeth to try and calm himself before he continued with a more level tone. ‘My past is not something to be celebrated and here no one knows what happened, so they don’t judge me by it,’ he said, holding up a hand when he sensed she was about to speak, undoubtedly to tell him that if he came back to England people would no longer judge him there either. ‘Here I can be the person I chose to be a long time ago but that in England I was never allowed to be because no one, other than Dumbledore, would ever let me forget that, as a stupid eighteen year old, I’d become a Death Eater. If I came back, and presuming I was found not guilty, people would always look at me and wonder - and don’t say they wouldn’t because you always doubted, even when Dumbledore told Potter time and time again that I was on his side, you still doubted.’

‘I… but…’

‘Goodbye, Hermione,’ he said definitively and took a step away from her.

‘Fine. Goodbye, Severus,’ she muttered, taking her trunk from him and disappearing into the inn without sparing him even so much as another glance.
Hermione slept late the next morning, her head pounding and her mouth fuzzy from the Merlot when she woke. Each one of her morning ablutions felt like the most laborious of tasks, but in good time she found herself stood once more at Bolstrad’s station awaiting her train. She had half-expected to run into Snape again, sure that he’d want to ensure she had meant it this time when she said she was leaving, but there was no sign of him. Perhaps he was at home nursing his own hangover.

Looking forward to a long sit down, starting a new book she’d picked up on Bulgarian wizarding customs, and watching the scenery through the window, Hermione experienced an unannounced flutter of excitement in her stomach when her train finally pulled in.

She boarded and found her seat without issue and proceeded to make herself at home in preparation for her long journey through the mountains.

She did not see the filthy boy entering the next carriage.

~oOo~

The aromas were worsening Severus’ headache. He had run out of hangover potions at the weekend and had not had an opportunity to replenish his supply. Sat currently in the stock room of the perfumers where he had been in employ for just shy of a year, he rubbed his temples and absentmindedly stirring the stinking concoction in front of him. He could not feign an interest in perfumes at the best of times, so his employer knew better than to put him front of house when he was in his present mood. Fiers Florian, proprietor of the eponymous Fiers Florian’s Fine Fragrances, purveyor of perfumes since 1948, was, thankfully, a kind and understanding man who appreciated Severus for his mixing skills and exceptional sense of smell. Very occasionally Fiers had also had some success in enticing his assistant to join him in The Moroi for a drink.

Severus was distracted from his duty when the old man came bustling through the beaded curtains that partitioned the stock room from the shop. ‘You will stir the scent right out of that if you carry on,’ Fiers reprimanded him in his thick Romanian accent, tugging the stirring baton from Severus’ grasp.

‘Sorry,’ Severus mumbled.

‘Where’s your head at today?’ Fiers asked, summoning empty perfume bottles and, with a flick of his
wand, draining the mixing pot into them. ‘Does this have anything to do with your lady-friend?’ he enquired, eyeing Severus over the top of his spectacles.

‘No,’ Severus replied quickly, perhaps too quickly for Fiers looked at him utterly unconvinced.

‘I will take that as a yes,’ he said, with a wry grin, ‘you tell me nothing of your life before you came to Bolstrad, Severus, and now you have beautiful women turning up here looking for you. It is very suspicious, very suspicious indeed!’

‘She’s gone,’ Severus replied. Then, to his relief, a bell rang from above the door in the shop, signalling a customer had entered, and Fiers was forced to abandon Severus to his own devices once more, though he did manage to issue a look that suggested this conversation was not over as he swept away.

Severus sighed and looked down the ‘to do’ list Fiers had issued him with that morning, hoping there might be a perfume with a less innocuous odour than the last batch had had. Severus wasn’t sure he could stomach stirring anything else so potent today. He scoured the shelves for the right components and had settled himself back down at his workbench when the tone of Fiers’ conversation with the customer caught his attention.

Despite what he’d told Hermione he had picked up a smattering of Romanian while he had been here, enough to determine, from what he could hear, that something bad had happened. ‘Atacat’ and ‘răpit’ he hadn’t heard before but in the context of ‘vrăjitoare’ and ‘vânători,’ which he had, he thought he could deduce their meaning. It was only when he was sure he had heard ‘tren’ that he was stirred into action, however.

He stood, suppressing a wave of nausea as he did so, and made his way through into the shop. Mrs. Deleanu, one of Fiers’ regular patrons and favourite sources of Bolstrad gossip, stood across the counter.

‘Did I understand that right?’ Severus asked, addressing Mrs. Deleanu, who stared at him blankly.

‘Mrs. Deleanu does not speak English,’ Fiers explained, ‘she was just saying there has been another attack by the witch hunters, on a train leaving Bolstrad station this morning. It was far out of the town when it happened, but still, a terrible business. It has been a long time since there was an attack. People thought it was over, that the vânători de vrăjitoare had moved on from here.’
Severus merely nodded. This was a lot to comprehend in his hungover state but his head was swirling with the possibilities, none of them good, of what he had just heard. ‘Did they say who it was that was attacked?’ Severus asked, his mouth suddenly very dry.

‘Just someone travelling through, not a local,’ Fiers said as though this would be a comfort, ‘are you alright… oh!’ he exclaimed suddenly, realisation dawning on him, ‘your acquaintance?’

‘I…’

‘They were… how do you say… intercepted by Muggle police.’

‘Then what?’

‘I do not know,’ Fiers replied, then turned to Mrs. Deleanu and said something in Romanian. She replied promptly and Fiers turned back to Severus, ‘I do not know,’ he repeated.

Severus debated wildly with himself. He reasoned that there was little evidence to suspect that it was Hermione that had been attacked, and even if it was, the police had stepped in. She was fine, maybe sat in the waiting room of the local police station in the next town being given copious helpings of comforting tea. She was probably fine. Had she not said just last night that she was capable of looking after herself, that she had got herself to Bolstrad all by herself without any mishaps worth mentioning? Had she not demonstrated time and again that even as a teenager she was more than capable of looking after herself?

She was probably fine…

‘Fiers… may I take the rest of the afternoon off?’ Severus asked, cursing those ‘old habits’ he had spoken of.

‘Of course, as long as you need… go.’

And with this Severus swept out of the perfumers and disappeared with a loud crack.
What was that incessant beeping noise? It sounded mechanical; distinctly Muggle. She didn’t yet feel she had the energy to open her eyes and lay instead merely listening. She could hear muffled voices; the squeak of shoes on rubber flooring; telephones ringing, and the opening and closing of doors. Even laid perfectly still, Hermione’s body ached and her head pounded for reasons she suspected were not related to her hangover. There was also something odd in her hand; something simultaneously fleshy and coarse.

Waiting just a moment longer she opened her eyes and saw immediately that she was in a hospital and that Severus Snape was holding her hand. He was sat in an uncomfortable looking chair next to the bed; slumped low with one arm folded across his chest and the other stretched out limply towards Hermione, his hand resting under her palm. She felt herself recoil but stopped when he stirred. He looked exhausted, she noticed, with dark rings around his eyes and what appeared to be a few days worth of stubble growth. Taking a moment to come round from his nap and noticing Hermione was also awake he snatched his hand away.

‘Sorry,’ he said quickly, his cheeks flushing pink, ‘you were… upset. I don’t know… it seemed to help. Sorry…’

She shook her head slowly and it hurt her neck, ‘what happened?’ she asked, her voice croaky from disuse.

Severus filled the plastic cup on her bedside table with water from a nearby jug and handed it to her. She drank deeply and then placed the cup back on the side, Severus watching her concernedly throughout as she winced with every movement.

‘I’ll fetch the nurse,’ he said, ignoring her question and making to leave.

‘No,’ she rasped. He turned back to look at her, a deep crease between his eyebrows. ‘What happened to me?’

He shook his head, then muttered, ‘they said not to distress you when you woke,’ and swept out of the room.

Feeling marginally more alert now, Hermione looked down at her arms, the only exposed part of her body, and saw there was bruising on her wrists as though they had been bound by rope. Raising an arm slowly she probed at the pain at the back of head, which was gradually beginning to sting more acutely. It was bandaged and extremely tender. Next she lifted the bedsheets and looked down at her
legs. There were similar marks on her ankles as those on her wrists. She was just about to sit up a little higher on the bed when Severus returned with a nurse who demanded Hermione remain still.

~oOo~

Following a prolonged period of prodding and poking, throughout which Severus vacated the room, the nurse left, prescribing, in broken English, bed rest and observation for at least the next few days. Barely a second after the door had closed there was a knock and it was pushed open again slowly.

‘Can I come in?’ he asked.

‘Ahuh,’ she replied, finally able to readjust herself on the bed.

Severus stepped into the room but remained loitering by the doorway. ’Are you hungry?’ he asked, ‘I didn’t know what you would like, but there’s tangerines, biscuits…’ He gestured towards the bedside table but stopped as he realised she was crying.

‘What happened to me?’ she implored.

He moved further into the room and sat back down in the chair, his elbows rested on his knees. ‘You don’t remember anything?’ he asked, with a sigh of resignation.

She shook her head.

‘I can’t say for sure myself,’ he said after a brief moment’s deliberation, ‘but I have a suspicion.’

‘What?’

’Vănători de vrăjitoare,’ he said, ‘witch hunters.’

She frowned. ‘Witch hunters? I don’t understand,’ she said. He seemed to hesitate and she felt a familiar panic welling in her chest. She had clearly been attacked and some of the nightmares she had had whilst unconscious were starting to come back to her - being bound, being carried, everything
blackness. It was all too uncanny. She needed to know what was going on.

Severus ran a hand through his hair and sat back in the chair, watching Hermione through tired eyes. ‘It’s complicated… Wizard-Muggle relations in Romania are somewhat difficult at present,’ he began to cautiously explain, ‘the Statute of Secrecy isn’t adhered to properly. The magical population is the country’s worst kept secret and as a result there is an almost folklorish status attributed to witches and wizards. They’re feared and reviled and kindly requested to hand themselves over to Muggle authorities.’

‘To what end?’

‘Diminishing magical populations. They have their wands snapped and they live out the rest of their days as Muggles. Not fully in Muggle society, you understand, just sort of floating on the periphery. It’s no life at all really.’

‘What… and they expect magical folk to offer themselves up for that willingly?’

‘Yes, and many do. The alternative is a lifetime of persecution and the government, citing a supposed desire for peace, offers significant financial compensation. Not that those who choose this path are given much opportunity to put it to any use.’

‘I can’t imagine…’

‘No, me either.’

‘And where do the witch hunters come into it?’

‘They’re a pack of disgruntled squibs living like outlaws in the Carpathians,’ he spat, as though the words tasted sour, ‘ironically the worse the situation gets between the Muggle government and the Ministry of Magic, the more united a front the wizarding world presents, and to be a part of this magical community one obviously needs magical abilities.’

‘So where does that leave the squibs?’
‘Exactly. It’s difficult enough in Britain for squibs to integrate into wizarding society. Many of them will live quite happy Muggle existences, but in Romania, in fact, this is all true for a lot of central Europe countries, the Muggle communities won’t take them either. Not even those ex-witches and wizards. They think they’re tainted or something I suppose. So they’re left with nothing, except a burning hatred of all things magical.’

‘In many ways this seems like almost the opposite problem to what Britain has recently started to overcome,’ Hermione commented.

Snape nodded. ‘In some ways yes,’ he agreed, refilling her cup of water and handing it to her again as he continued, ‘so the witch hunters understand enough about the wizarding world to blend in almost seamlessly. They befriend witches and wizards who merely presume they are speaking to one of their own kind and then they kidnap them and force them to hand themselves over to the Muggle government and take all the aforementioned compensation for themselves! It’s a sort of revenge, I suppose.’

‘That’s just awful!’

‘Quite, and you came very close to being their next victim, Miss- Hermione! Attacks are rare in Bolstrad because most people are aware of what they’re trying to do. They must have recognised you for a tourist and taken advantage.’

‘That’s what they were trying to do yesterday, at the market…’ she pondered.

‘Yesterday?’ he said, raising an eyebrow. ‘You do realise you’ve been in hospital for three days? They put you in some sort of induced coma because of your head… I didn’t really understand…’

‘Oh… then the day before the attack, when I missed my train and we went for lunch. There was a strange man talking to me about crystal balls in the market. He was dressed in the most garish robes and wanted me to follow him but I told him I had to catch my train… he had a little boy with him…’

‘Mmm… they think nice robes will make them seem more trustworthy, but they’re just Muggle made, and they have been known to use children, abandoned squibs, to help lure people in.’

‘Oh!’ she exclaimed suddenly, causing Severus to jump slightly, ‘I just remembered something. I saw the same boy on the train the other day… he was crying and asking for his father and saying the name of a station… at least that’s all I could make out… and I recognised him so I said I’d help him
look. I followed him off the train when we arrived at that station and…’

‘And they attacked you?’

‘Yes,’ she said, weakly. Her eyes beginning to tear up again. It was all too reminiscent of before and then another horrid realisation dawned on her, ‘I trust no one here knows we’re magical?’ she whispered anxiously, glancing over at the door.

‘No, they don’t.’

She felt herself relax and it crossed her mind that it was Severus that had caused this. It was peculiarly reassuring to have him there when she was feeling so vulnerable.

‘Hermione, can I ask you something?’ he said suddenly.

‘Yes.’

‘What’s that?’ he asked, and she followed the direction in which his finger pointed; her left forearm where the word ‘Mudblood’ was spelled out in thin silver scars.

Suddenly the panic that had dissipated returned with a vengeance. Bellatrix LeStrange was leering over her, her wand pressed into Hermione’s ribs; they were on a platform at a train station and a child was weeping… no, that wasn’t right, Hermione knew that wasn’t right… the two memories were jumbled but evocative of the same pain… She looked between her arm and Severus and something of her thoughts must have registered in her eyes because he was suddenly apologising profusely and telling her it didn’t matter, she didn’t have to tell him if she didn’t want to.

‘I should go,’ he said, standing and edging towards the exit. ‘No, wait… I- I know,’ he backtracked suddenly, in voice so uncharacteristically soft and soothing that it startled Hermione and stifled her sobs, ‘let’s play that game…’ he said, evidently trying to distract her by her making her think of something else, ‘you have to think of one thing that happened today that you’re grateful for.’

She looked up at him, the flow of tears stemmed and failing to suppress a weak smile. ‘I’m grateful that I woke up,’ she said after a moment, and then heaved a little laugh that hurt her ribs. ‘You?’
He studied her intensely, almost penetrably it seemed, and then simply said, ‘you stole mine,’ in a whisper, and left the room.
A Game of Gobstones

Hermione was required to remain in the hospital for a further week in the end, and Severus visited everyday. She assured him he was under no obligation to do so, but he insisted for reasons unknown even to himself.

On the first day he had arrived somewhat tentatively, well aware that he had departed in a rather melodramatic fashion the previous evening. It was because he had suspected what it was causing that haunted, panicked look in her eyes and knew there was nothing he could do to help. He knew because he suffered similarly and there was nothing he could do to help himself. So, on the first day, he had stood outside her door daring himself to knock, wondering whether his presence would be welcome.

‘Come in,’ a small voice sounded from within the room and he pushed the door open slowly. ‘Oh,’ she said with a look a mild surprise and embarrassment, ‘I thought it was the nurse.’

‘I can go,’ he said instantly, retreating back out of the room slightly.

‘No…’ she replied, urging him back in with a wave of her hand, ‘I’m just surprised to see you, is all… Did you bring me flowers?’ she asked, raising a questioning eyebrow.

Severus felt the colour drain from his cheeks. ‘God no!’ he assured her quickly. Although he was indeed carrying a pleasant bouquet of tulips, this was at the insistence of Stela, Fiers’ wife. Severus dumped them unceremoniously on the bed at Hermione’s feet, hoping to convey some distance between himself and the gift. ‘My employer’s wife sends her regards. She said that’s what people do when they’re visiting people in hospital, they bring them flowers.’

‘So you’re merely imitating what someone has told you is appropriate behaviour?’

‘Not even that. I outright refused, so she sent some from herself.’

That made Hermione laugh a little, though he noticed her wince and clutch her ribs at the same time. ‘Well tell… Stela,’ she said, picking up the flowers and checking the tag, ‘thank you very much indeed. They’re lovely.’

Severus shrugged and took a seat in the chair he had occupied for the last three days. After leaving
the perfumers, the day of the attack, he had Apparated to the train station and checked the route for Hermione’s train to Bulgaria. Then, as far as his knowledge of said route and Romanian landscape would allow, he had Apparated to each known stop. He was over one-hundred miles from Bolstrad, in a remote Muggle town, when a ticket warden informed him that an attack had indeed taken place nearby that day. From the station he had travelled by foot to the local police station where he was told the victim had been transported to the hospital in Bucharest. If asked, Severus would neither confirm nor deny whether Confundus Charms had been used on hospital staff to allow him in to see Hermione. He had situated himself in the hard chair on the first night and had seldom moved until she had woken.

‘I can’t find my wand,’ she stated suddenly, in a hushed voice.

‘Hm,’ he said by way of response. He had known that Hermione’s wand was not among her personal affects. The clothes she had been wearing had been neatly folded by a nurse and placed on the floor in a corner of the room; her handbag lay next to them, gaping open to reveal the contents without any impolite snooping being required - it was obvious there was no wand in there. ‘Where is your trunk?’ he asked.

She sighed and her shoulders slumped. ‘Probably in Bulgaria by now. I left it on the train.’

‘And your wand wasn’t in your trunk?’

‘No… I always keep it on me… oh, they took it didn’t they? The witch hunters.’

‘Mmm… they will have wanted to separate you from it as quickly as they could. They wouldn’t have been able to overcome you if you got access to it. However… it might be something to be thankful for…’

‘Thankful?’

‘If the police had saved you and found the wand in your possession, you might not have been in a much better situation than if the witch hunters had forced you to hand yourself in. You would just have been a little more politely coerced. Without your wand, they think it was a Muggle mugging.’

She looked solemn and he worried that she might be about to start crying again, but then she was nodding in agreement with him and when she spoke her voice was thankfully steady. ‘We’d been through a lot together, me and that wand,’ she said, ‘and I feel rather vulnerable without it.’
‘You can get another wand,’ he said, hoping that it sounded reassuring. It wasn’t a tone of voice that he had had much practice at cultivating.

‘Yeah,’ she said, offering him a small but appreciative smile.

Following that, and a brief discussion on the impracticality of her not having any clothes save those she had been wearing, they had sat mostly in companionable silence, Hermione reading her book on Bulgarian customs and Severus flicking through a Muggle newspaper he had pilfered from the waiting room outside. He wasn’t convinced that she had taken the loss of her wand as well as she appeared to have. There was something about her countenance that suggested she was making a concerted effort not get upset about it, or at least not visibly. He did not say anything but settled for casting furtive glances up at her every now and again to check her wellbeing. They did speak occasionally, her to tell him something bizarre that Bulgarian wizards enjoyed to do with their weekends, or him to tell her whatever he could decipher of the news with his limited understanding of Romanian.

‘I should go,’ he announced late in the evening, realising it was growing dark outside. ‘You need to rest. Err… do you mind me coming here?’

She took a moment to reply and he braced himself for the usual rejection. ‘No,’ she said, after what seemed like an age, and he felt himself relax.

‘Very well, then I’ll be back tomorrow,’ and with that he had left her to sleep.

~oOo~

On the second day Severus was barely through the door when she accosted him.

‘I need to get out of here,’ she said urgently. ‘I’m going stir crazy. There’s nothing to do and now they’ve told me I might be in here for a week. Isn’t there a magical hospital somewhere where I could be healed more quickly?’ she asked, with a hopeful expression that gave him those odd pangs in his abdomen again.

‘Muggle medicines mend Muggle maladies,’ he had replied, a little surprised at himself. ‘Something my mother used to say,’ he muttered, sitting himself in what they both, unbeknownst to the other, now considered ‘his’ chair. ‘Here though,’ he continued, glancing around at the door before thrusting
a hand into his pocket and withdrawing a small vial, ‘Dreamless Sleep,’ he clarified in response to her confused frown. He shrugged indifferently. ‘I thought it might help.’

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘how did you…’

‘As I said before, you seemed… upset in your sleep. I thought maybe… but if not, then…’ He had debated with himself at length about the Dreamless Sleep Potion. Perhaps she wouldn’t want him acknowledging that he knew too much about her nightmares; indeed, he could not presume to know their content, but he was being conservative when he described her as being ‘upset’ during them. She had cried, screamed and thrashed about in her bed those three days she had been comatose, trapped in her head by whatever medicines they were using on her, with only these dreams for company.

‘No… thank you, Severus.’

‘Mmm… I, err, brewed it myself, it’s especially potent.’

‘Thank you,’ she repeated.

‘Put it away quickly before anyone sees.’

~oOo~

On the third day she greeted him with a smile such as he had not seen at any point since she awoke.

‘The potion worked then?’ he asked, sitting down and depositing his leather satchel, which was particularly heavy today, on the floor beside him with a relieved sigh.

‘Like a charm,’ she said, still beaming.

‘I have more for you,’ he assured her, ‘and something else which might help relieve your boredom.’ With that, he reached down and pulled three heavy tomes from his satchel, hesitating only slightly before handing them to her.
‘Travel books?’ she said, spreading them out across her knees.

‘Mmm… I picked them up while I was crossing Europe. You can keep them.’

‘Oh, I can’t do that,’ she protested, though he sensed she was just doing it out of a sense of politeness. The eagerness in her eyes betrayed her true desire.

‘They’ll be more use to you now.’

‘Thank you. They will be useful. That is very… thoughtful of you.’

He shrugged, by which he meant she was welcome.

~oOo~

‘Why did you come looking for me?’ she asked on the afternoon of the fourth day.

She had seemed unusually quiet and a little pensive all day. They read, as they had done every other day, but she was not as forthcoming with sharing the contents of her book today as she had been previously. He took this to be not a good sign. She had also kept sighing intermittently, and he got the impression she was building up to asking him something when she had finally said, ‘Severus, can I ask you something?’ and then proceeded with her question.

‘What?’ he said, marking his place in his book with a finger and looking up at her over the top of it.

‘When you heard that someone had been attacked, why did you come looking?’

The safe answer, it occurred to him, was to default to his ‘old habits’ line, and though that had certainly been the initial impetus, it had occurred to him while he had sat by her bedside for those first three days, fretting about whether or not she would wake up, that there was, perhaps, slightly more to it than that. ‘Because you came looking for me,’ he said cautiously. ‘It only seemed fair to repay the favour.’
She closed her own book and swung her legs off the side of the bed. He noticed the bruising on her ankles was now a deep purple colour, like plumes of purple smoke rising up her calves. ‘You know, when people do something for you, they don’t always expect something in return.’

‘Not in my experience,’ he said, his mind involuntarily drifting to think of Dumbledore. He wrenched his thoughts back to the present with some effort.

‘My motives for coming to look for you weren’t exactly selfless.’

_Nor were mine in coming looking for you_, he thought, but quickly shooed that from his mind also. ‘You still haven’t told me why you came looking for me,’ he said instead, ‘other than your sentimental prattle about helping poor Potter sleep a little easier. You haven’t told me the _real_ reason.’

She sighed sadly and considered her reply for a prolonged moment. ‘You have to promise not to mock me. You’ll think it’s silly.’

‘Try me.’

She eyed him sceptically but then quietly spoke, ‘if I don’t keep busy, if I don’t have something to focus my attention on, then I start to dwell.’

‘Dwell?’ he asked, suspecting he knew the answer.

‘Dwell on… what happened.’

She clearly wasn’t willing to state it explicitly and he certainly wasn’t going to press her; he could surmise that she meant the war. The parallels between what she described and his own experiences were not lost on him.

‘I… think I understand,’ he said, barely audibly, and immediately regretting it.

Hermione had been staring intently out of the window since she finished speaking but she turned back to Severus now. ‘What?’
‘I said I think I understand,’ he repeated, only slightly more loudly, and he couldn’t bring himself to meet her gaze.

‘Everyone else just seemed to brush themselves off and get on with it,’ she continued, ‘I mean, Harry struggled, really struggled, and everyone rallied round him, but…’

‘But there was no one to rally around you,’ Severus stated, finally looking up. Her eyes were red and filled with unspilt tears and she looked at him with the expression of someone who had thought they were the only one and was suddenly recognising that they were not alone.

‘That’s it exactly,’ she said, a weak smile flickering across her features, ‘and it must have been so much worse for you… you were all alone!’

He waved a dismissive hand, ‘don’t deflect. Though, I’m the wrong person to offer sympathy if that’s what you’re after.’

‘Not particularly,’ she replied, ‘it’s nice just to know there’s someone who understands.’

‘Mmm…’ he said, and he couldn’t disagree. He had truly believed isolation was what he needed after the war, with no one knowing who he was or what he had done, but over the last few days he had slowly begun to admit to himself that having Hermione around, someone who tacitly appreciated what he had been through, had unburdened him. There was no need for pretence and the relief he had experienced left him feeling more liberated than he ever had in his life. This was normality, he thought, talking to old acquaintances about the most mundane of things. This was not what happened to people like him, this was stuff for other people.

‘I miss home,’ she said softly, ‘but I can’t stand the thought of going back and everything being the same as it was before… I wonder if, maybe… no…’

He looked up at her. ‘What were you going to say?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘No, please, go on!’ he implored. He would not use Legilimens on her, but he could tell there was
something pertinent sat right at the front of her mind, yearning to be said out loud.

‘Well… maybe I could write to you? I don’t think I’d really even care if you replied.’

‘That might be… acceptable,’ he agreed.

‘Thank you.’

~oOo~

‘I can’t take another day of your maudlin,’ he said as he arrived on the fifth day, placing a wooden board on her overbed table. ‘Have you ever played Gobstones before?’

‘Err… no,’ she admitted.

‘I happen to be very good at Gobstones,’ he said, pouring fifteen red and fifteen green gobstones out of a small pouch and onto the board. ‘Red or green?’ he asked, purposefully ignoring her stunned expression.

‘Red.’

‘Very Gryffindor. My mum taught me to play. She was excellent, she could have played for the English National Team if… well…’ he trailed off and stood up to ward the door so that any passing doctors or nurses would suddenly remember something absolutely critical they had forgotten to do and would rush away to do it, leaving him and Hermione undisturbed.

‘Oh, yeah,’ Hermione said, something apparently having just dawned on her, ‘your mum was captain of the Hogwarts Gobstones team, wasn’t she?’

He turned back to her, ‘how do you know that?’

‘I… I must have read it somewhere,’ she replied uncertainly, ‘maybe on a trophy at school.’
He nodded but he suspected there was more to it than that. ‘It’s easy enough to learn,’ he said, determined to keep the mood a little lighter today, ‘fifteen stones each, we take it in turns to roll our stones into these circles,’ he indicated the four concentric circles painted onto the board, ‘and try and knock each other’s stones out. The person who knocks all of their opponents stones out of the circles, wins.’

‘Seems straight forward enough,’ she said, sitting up a little straighter in her bed and scooping the fifteen red gobstones into her hand.

‘Usually we’d toss a coin to see who goes first, but as I’m about to absolutely thrash you anyway, I’ll give you the advantage of me going first.’

‘We’ll see about that,’ she said, and against his will he enjoyed a little jolt of pleasure at her renewed high spirits.

He rolled his gobstone and they watched with bated breath as it came to a stop right in the middle of the circles.

‘Hmm…’ she said.

‘I told you I was good!’

She laughed - another jolt - and shook her head, ‘let’s see…’ She rolled her gobstone, a little too hard and it overshot the mark, coming to a standstill within the outermost circle. He looked at her with a raised eyebrow and she glared at him as if daring him to comment. He refrained and readied his next gobstone.

He rolled it, flicking his thumb slightly as it departed his hand, the way his mother had shown him, and watched as it collided tidily with Hermione’s attempt. The red gobstone rolled just out the parameters of the circles, spitting a putrid, though ultimately innocuous, cloud of fluid into Hermione face as it did so.

‘Eugh!’ she exclaimed, wiping her face with the back of her hand.
'Oh, yes. I forgot to mention they do that when you get knocked out,’ he said, schooling his features which were threatening a mischievous grin.

‘Forgot indeed!’ she said, not fooled, ‘I’m going to end up stinking if I carry on like this!’

‘Then you had better make sure you don’t.’

By the end of the afternoon Hermione was covered in the gobstone’s juice and the whole room smelled rancid. Severus had taken his fair share of losses too, he had decided to let Hermione win a few games; it was worth it just to see her smile.

‘This was fun,’ she said as he was packing up to leave, ‘I needed it. Thank you.’

~oOo~

On the sixth day they made plans. It was decided that Hermione would return to Bolstrad for a few days so that she could get her bearings and a new wand before she forewent Bulgaria and returned straight to England.

‘Oh, Ron will be pleased,’ she said a little glumly. She was sat on her bed, her legs cross under her and now her arms folded petulantly across her chest.

‘I’m sure all your friends will be pleased to see you,’ Severus replied, though the words meant very little to him.

‘He’s going to want to marry me.’

‘And… that is not what you want?’ he asked hesitantly. This was outside the realms of what Severus considered his business.

‘I don’t know,’ she shrugged.

As someone who had loved another and had it not reciprocated, Severus suddenly found himself
feeling sorry for Weasley. A most disconcerting feeling indeed. He looked at Hermione pointedly, hoping that she would catch his meaning without him having to spell it out. ‘If you are unsure, I suggest you be honest with him,’ he advised.

Hermione seemed to be watching him carefully and eventually began nodding slowly. ‘Yes… you’re right of course,’ she said, and he could tell she had understood is inference, ‘advice on my love life from Severus Snape,’ she added, chuckling slightly.

~oOo~

When he arrived on the seventh day he found her, already dressed and apparently ready to leave, but sat hesitantly on the end of the bed, staring out of the window. She had been deemed well enough to be discharged by the doctors, but to Severus she still looked pale and oddly frail. She did not hear him enter.

‘Ready?’ he asked, careful not to startle her.

‘I’m not sure,’ she replied, looking up with a slight frown.

‘Only the other day you were practically begging me to break you out of here!’

‘The reality of it is a little different.’

He nodded. He could appreciate her reservations. It had taken him a week to fully stem the blood flow from Nagini’s bite. With his last ounce of energy, mere moments before he was sure death would have overcome him, he had Apparated from the Shrieking Shack to Grimmauld Place. It was a risky place to go, he knew it, but it was the first place he thought of, and he could at least be sure he would be alone there.

In his semi-conscious state he had been oblivious to the dust-formed Albus Dumbledore that had greeted him and had laid on the hallway floor, in a pool of his own blood and vomit, fumbling with unsteady hands for the replenishment potion. He must have drifted off and when he awoke there was a warm summer’s sun filtering through the stained glass window of the front door, casting warm coloured shapes onto his face. It crossed his mind that it was beautiful. He had made is way upstairs to Regulus’ old bedroom. He’d liked Regulus when they were at Hogwarts, they had shared a mutual disdain of Sirius that had given them unique bond. He lay once more, on the bed, and festered, weak and delirious for how long, he did not know.
With every day that passed he had expected a member of the Order to arrive and his cover be blown. But no one had come, and in time he had felt his energy increase, his wounds, at least those of a physical nature, begin to heal, and eventually came the time to leave. In a perverse turn of events Grimmauld Place had become a kind of haven, and the thought of leaving the relative safety of those four walls was daunting.

He did not know, but he imagined this was similar to what Hermione was experiencing.

‘Let’s take it a step at a time,’ he suggested, thinking about what he’d done… Apparate to the coast, Dover, where on a clear day you could see France, then Apparate across the water, and then disappear…

She nodded and stood and he suddenly realised he was holding his hand out for her.

‘I’ll side-along Apparate us to Bolstrad,’ he said, to justify his hand. She reached out and grabbed his sleeve. ‘Ready?’

She nodded mutely and with a loud crack, that echoed down the hospital hall, they disappeared, reappearing a moment later outside the Bolstrad inn where Hermione had been staying previously. She looked like she was about to throw up, the last of the colour having drained from her face and he wondered whether Apparation had been an altogether good idea with her in such a fragile state. They were stood far too close for his liking, he could smell the clinical scent of hospital shampoo in her hair, but she was still clutching at his arm for support.

‘I’ll see if there are any rooms available,’ he offered, edging away from her slightly, but her grip tightened.

‘Don’t lea— I mean, I’m fine. I’m coming,’ she said. He did not miss her casting a worried glance over her shoulder.

He nodded and with her small hand still wrapped around his forearm they entered the inn only to be informed that their last room had been taken that afternoon; they were fully booked. Two larger hotels and a B&B later, Hermione was still without anywhere to stay.

‘Unusually busy for this time of year,’ Severus said, realising how useless a statement it was and regretting saying it.
‘It’s fine,’ she said, chewing her bottom lip.

‘What do you intend to do?’

‘Erm… maybe I could get a train out of here today? To anywhere.’

‘Alone and without a wand when your face is already known to the witch hunters? They won’t be happy that you got away from them if your paths do cross again.’

‘Then what would you suggest?’ she snapped.

He could see tears in her eyes again and he knew what he had to do. There was nothing else for it, he told himself. Old habits, he told himself. ‘Perhaps… perhaps you could stay with me? Just until you’re sorted?’ he said, looking at his feet.

‘Stay with you?’ she asked, looking at him slightly bewildered, ‘at your house?’

‘Unless you would prefer a night on the streets, yes,’ he said. He took a few steps away from her, before stopping and looking back. She had not moved. ‘I, at least, am going home. You may come with me if you wish.’

She nodded slowly and jogged a little so they were walking side-by-side. ‘Thanks,’ she said, glancing up at him.

‘I wish you would stop saying that,’ he grumbled, sticking his hands in his pockets and striding on.

‘Well, I’ve had a lot to thank you for lately,’ she whispered and he suspected she thought he hadn’t heard.
The Security of Routine

It took a moment, when she awoke the next morning, for Hermione to remember where she was. She lay on a brown leather settee, perfectly still under a thin blanket, blinking confusedly around a cramped and messy living room, until recollections of the previous evening came back to her.

Snape’s house was narrow and crooked with two downstairs rooms, the living room and a kitchen, and small bedroom and bathroom upstairs. It was sparsely furnished, the settee, an armchair, and coffee table all mismatched, with dark mahogany flooring and walls decorated in dull blue-grey hues. The mess consisted primarily of piles of old books, journals, and newspaper. But it was clean and comfortable, oddly homely, and Hermione felt at once safe and secure.

Righting herself into a sitting position she examined her bruises. For the most part they had faded to various shades of yellow and brown and, though she still felt a little stiff, the aching had ceased. That just left her with the uncomfortable sense of unease that effervesced in the pit of her stomach every time she allowed thoughts of the attack to resurface. She stretched her limbs before standing and padding over to the window. The curtains were drawn and she surreptitiously peered through the gap in the middle of them. The street outside was deserted and she felt herself relax a little.

She turned when she heard floorboards creaking above and the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs, quickly at first and then more slowly when he saw her standing there. He looked bleary eyed, his hair ruffled, and was wearing a pair of tartan flannel pyjamas. The neckline of the shirt exposed his scars more-so than his robes, or indeed the Muggle shirt he had worn in the hospital had, and Hermione felt her eyes unwillingly fall on them. He noticed immediately and pulled a hand up to his collar in an attempt to conceal them.

‘I forgot you were here,’ he said gruffly, his morning voice hoarse, ‘coffee?’

‘Please,’ she replied, following him into the little kitchen and sitting herself at the table. There was something calming about watching him make the coffee. He did it without magic, with ground beans in a percolator, water boiling in a kettle on the stove. The domesticity of it was an amusing juxtaposition to the man completing the task. She wanted to ask him why he did it the Muggle way, but she sensed he would not appreciate an interrogation before he had reaped the rewards a caffeine hit.

‘I have to work today,’ he said, after taking a few sips of coffee, which did indeed seem to revive him somewhat.

‘Oh…’ she replied, unsure why she felt so disappointed.
'What will you do with your day?' he asked.

She thought she would quite like to curl up on the settee and read one of the books she’d seen lying around the living room. The thought of leaving the house was not appealing, but then she knew she ought to start making preparations to move on, Severus’ hospitality would surely have its limits.

‘There’s a wand makers at the top of the hill,’ he suggested when she didn’t reply for a while. ‘It’s no Ollivander’s, but you might find something to suffice until you get home.’

Ah, so he definitely wanted her out of here.

‘Oh… yes,’ she said equivocally, then ‘you said you make perfumes for a living?’ she asked, suddenly remembering him having mentioned that the day they went for lunch together. He nodded. ‘I imagine it’s quite interesting, thinking up new scents and smells.’

‘I’m more of an assistant. I just do as I’m told,’ he said, sounding a little resentful, ‘much as in my last job,’ he added as a sardonic afterthought.

‘You don’t enjoy it?’

‘I enjoy it more than teaching,’ he replied with a smirk, ‘but no, not particularly.’

‘I can see why it might get boring. If that’s all you’re doing then it does seem a little like a waste of your talents,’ she responded.

He looked up at her suddenly, studying her through the steam rising from his drink. ‘Ha!’ he exclaimed, ‘you’re one to talk about wasted potential!’ he snorted, pushing his chair back and standing abruptly. He seemed suddenly angry but Hermione didn’t get the impression it was directed entirely at her. He stood by the table watching her for a moment, looking as though he might be about to say something venomous but then sighed and said ‘I need to get ready, I’m going to be late,’ instead, rather anticlimactically, before dumping his dirty cup in the sink and disappearing back upstairs.

She gaped after him for a moment; delighted and bewildered in equal measure. On the one hand, she was fairly certain that Severus Snape had just paid her a compliment. It may have been thoroughly backhanded and diluted slightly by his remark about her wasting it, but he had just admitted that he
thought she had potential. All those years of yearning for his approval in potions class had finally come to fruition and the nectar was sweet. On the other hand, however, his fluctuating moods were disconcerting. He had spent the best part of the last week cajoling her out of dark places, and he had been a steadfast guide in his task, now he seemed to need cheering himself.

Half an hour later she heard the front door slam shut and presumed that was him gone for the day. She sighed and looked around the kitchen, drumming her fingers on the tabletop as she pondering her situation.

Still feeling a little buoyed by the notion of Severus paying her that compliment she decided that she might go out after all. She made her way upstairs and into the tiny bathroom where she showered contentedly for a long while, relishing the warmth of the water over her bruised skin, then dried herself on the soft, warm towel Severus had laid out for her. In light of Hermione still only having one set of clothes, Severus had offered her one of his shirts and the choice of three woollen jumpers, which, once she’d rolled up the sleeves, she managed to make look half-decent. Thankfully, she thought, her cosmetics and toiletries had been in her handbag during the attack and after brushing her teeth and applying a subtle layer of make-up, she made her way downstairs.

She thought she ought to wash the breakfast pots before she left. She felt it would help repay Severus’ favour of letting her stay if she helped around the house a little, and with that in mind she also busied herself tidying up her makeshift bed, sorting through some of the piles of books, placing them in neater piles, and putting the journals in date order. Then she dashed back upstairs and spent a little longer pulling a brush through her tangle of curls.

A little while late, her handbag slung over her shoulder, ready to leave the house in body, if not in spirit, she slumped at the bottom of the stairs, staring at the door. All you have to do it open the bloody thing and step outside, her mind screamed at her, it’s really quite straight forward. What is wrong with you? Every now and again she would stand and place and hand on the door handle, then quickly retreat and sit back down on the step. She didn’t realistically expect the witch hunters to be waiting outside, standing watch, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that if she left the safe confines of Snape’s house, something bad was going to happen.

No, what she needed was distraction. This was Hermione’s safety net; if she distracted herself for long enough, she might forget. And so it was with that, and a sigh of utter frustration, she kicked off her shoes, selected one of the books, and lay back down on the sofa to read as, she now realised, she had intended to do all along.

~oOo~

She was so engrossed in her book that she quite lost track of time, only realising it must be quite late when her stomach growled to remind her she had missed lunch and it had become too dark for her to
see the pages properly. She marked her place in the book and wondered into the kitchen, thinking that perhaps something nice to eat might cheer Severus up a little when he returned from work. *That is the way to a man's heart after all,* she thought, before quickly reminding herself than in no way was she trying to find her way into Snape’s heart. There wasn’t much food in the cupboards but with eggs, potatoes and few vegetables she thought she might be able to put together a Spanish omelette. She wasn’t much of a cook but this recipe was fairly fool proof and inoffensive. Surely he couldn’t object to Spanish omelette.

‘Hi,’ she said, a little tentatively when he arrived home a little after eight-thirty. ‘I’m making Spanish omelette, I hope you like it?’ she added, a little worriedly.

Severus looked her up and down from where he stood in the doorway and then nodded. He placed his satchel on the floor carefully and Hermione heard the distinct clink of what sounded like small potions bottles rubbing up against each other inside it, but in her eagerness to rectify whatever it was that had happened that morning, it didn’t really register with her.

‘It isn’t quite finished, I wasn’t sure what time you would be back. Do you always finish work so late?’

‘No. I was… making up some hours. I didn’t know you would be cooking.’

She flipped the omelette and then turned to him, ‘you were making up hours because of all the work you missed while you were at the hospital with me?’

He shrugged and pulled two bottles of beer from a cool box, ‘want one?’

‘Thanks,’ she said, taking the bottle from him, ‘you shouldn’t have missed work to come and sit with me.’

Another shrug, ‘it seemed more important,’ he replied dismissively, throwing himself unceremoniously into a seat at the kitchen table, rubbing his eyes tiredly, ‘did you get yourself a new wand?’ he asked, after a moment.

Hermione turned her attention back to the omelette so that he wouldn’t be able to read her discomposure. She shook her head.
‘Nothing suitable?’

‘Err… I couldn’t quite face going out in the end.’

She heard him sigh and place his beer bottle down the table with a solid thunk. ‘Look… I’m sorry for the way I spoke to you this morning,’ he said quietly, to the back of her head.

‘It’s fine,’ she lied, ‘I imagine you were probably right and I also realise I must be something of a burden… I’m bound to get on your nerves. I will be gone soon,’ she said. Then, when he didn’t contradict her, she added a quick, ‘food’s ready!’ and began serving the omelette before sitting down opposite him.

He looked exhausted she now realised, the vibrancy she had detected in him when she had first come to Bolstrad seemed to have seeped away, and in looks he seemed more reminiscent now of the way he had when she was at school. Hermione felt a little guilty at this, suspecting it was entirely her fault. She had bouldered into his life without warning and so far had caused him nothing but grief.

He was currently devouring his dinner with apparent satisfaction, but she doubted an omelette would make up for the stress she had caused over the past two weeks.

‘Have you ever considered self-employment?’ she asked, studying his face carefully for signs that he was about to react disproportionately again, ‘considering your history with previous employers?’

He shrugged. ‘It’d have to be something with potions for anyone to take me seriously, and there’s isn’t much call for it in Bolstrad. In fact, after all those years teaching, I’m rather off potions for the time being,’ he said, still sounding a little miserable, but at least more talkative than he had been earlier.

‘You said you still brewed for your personal stores,’ she commented. He looked up at her suddenly and she was worried she had said something to offend him, but he just seemed to be frantically searching his memory for a recollection of having told her that. ‘When we went for lunch,’ she reminded him, ‘I asked you about your work and you said…’

‘Oh, yes, I remember. Just hangover cures and Pepper Up mainly.’

‘Oh…’
‘Food’s good,’ he said, seeming to want to change the subject.

‘Err… thanks.’

And for the remainder of the meal they ate in silence.

~oOo~

For an hour or so after they had finished eating the sat in dim candlelight in the living room. Hermione resumed her position on the settee and Snape took the armchair, his long legs stretched out before him and rested on the coffee table. She wasn’t sure what time it was when he eventually broke the silence but she supposed it must have been late.

‘I have a potion brewing upstairs which I need to attend to, and then I think I’m going to have to go to bed,’ he said, with a yawn for emphasis, ‘do you need anything?’

‘I’m fine,’ she replied.

He nodded. ‘Perhaps you’ll feel well enough to go out and get a wand tomorrow,’ he suggested, watching her carefully.

‘Perhaps,’ she replied, knowing that she wouldn’t. ‘Oh, before you go…’ He was already halfway up the stairs but he stopped and looked down at her expectantly. ‘One thing you’re grateful for today?’ she asked, remember how he had used this very technique to successfully cheer her up in the hospital.

He looked up at ceiling exasperatedly and then back at Hermione with an arched eyebrow, ‘I am grateful for the fact my lie detection skills are still functioning sufficiently,’ he said, and with that he drifted up the remainder of the stairs soundlessly.

~oOo~
Hermione supposed from Severus’ parting words that they had reached something of an agreement regarding her leaving the house, and on this premise, over the next few days, she set about establishing herself a little routine. Each morning she woke to the sound of Severus emerging from his bedroom at seven sharp. He remained grouchy and monosyllabic until he was at least two thirds of the way down his first pot of coffee. At some point over breakfast he would ask her what she intended to do with her day and she would always reply that today would be the day. She would head up to the wand makers and purchase herself a new wand, then she might wander down to the dressmakers by the square and buy enough clothes to see her home, then she would pop into the station and pick up a train timetable so as to effectively plan her departure. Severus would nod as though he believed her and then would leave for work.

Once he was gone, Hermione showered, pulled on one of Severus’ sweaters, and settled herself on the settee with a book. She would have his tea ready for him when he returned from work. There was, she came to realise, security in routine. Nothing bad could happen if she could anticipate every aspect of her day well in advance.

That was until Saturday afternoon. Hermione was situated in her usual place when Severus came downstairs. He had said he had potions to brew that morning and she had seen nothing of him since he’d disappeared into his bedroom.

‘Come on,’ he said suddenly, throwing one of his knitted jumpers onto her lap.

‘What? Where are we going?’

‘For a walk.’

‘Oh… no,’ she said, ‘I’d like to finish my book. You go.’

He reached down and prised the book from her grasp and she gasped in mock horror as he snapped it closed without marking her page. Then he reached out again and pulled her up into a standing position in one swift motion. ‘We’re going for a walk,’ he said, in that same, apparently irresistible, tone of voice that had made her allow him to walk her back to her inn that time. She merely nodded and tugged the mustard coloured jumper he’d handed her over her head before following him out of the door.

It was early October now and the weather was turning. The warm mountain breeze of the Romanian summer was a thing of the past and there was a slight chill in the air as Severus and Hermione made their way out of the town and into the woods. The trees were dense and seemed almost ablaze where the leaves were changing to an autumnal spectrum of oranges and reds, falling from their branches
like burning embers.

He walked beside her, though a few paces away, his hands in his pockets and his gaze trained to the ground. He seemed deep in thought and Hermione daren’t speak lest she interrupt him.

It was rather peaceful out here, she realised, the sound of the wind through the tree tops, the unseen trickle of a nearby stream, the dappled light filtering through the canopy; all were quite soothing. He lead her, always at a steady incline, along a winding dirt path. His long strides made easy work of the uneven terrain but Hermione soon found herself out of breath and suffering from a stitch in her side.

‘Can you wait up?’ she gasped, realising that Severus had got ahead of her, sometimes going out of sight where the pathway twisted and turned. As beautiful as it was, she did not like the thought of being up here alone. It crossed her mind that this was some sick joke on Severus’ part, perhaps he was so tired of her in his home he was leading her right into the witch hunters’ layer. Had he not told her they lived in the mountains?

‘I’m here,’ she heard him call out, not sure whether he realised how reassuring that was to her, ‘it’s not far now.’

A few more steps around a muddy bend Hermione looked up and saw what appeared to be the top of the hill. Severus was waiting for her there, perhaps thirty yards away where the forest had thinned out, silhouetted against the setting sun with his back to her. As she neared him he turned and held out a hand, which she took, and he pulled her firmly up the last few steps and onto the hilltop, issuing her a small almost-smile and gesturing at the view.

The hill was higher than Hermione had anticipated and looked out over a vast expanse of undulating forest, the trees of which danced in the wind. A skein of geese flew in formation miles below them in the bottom of a deep valley, landing on a lake that glittered in the remainder of the sunlight.

‘It’s magnificent,’ Hermione said, once she’d caught her breath, ‘I can see why you like it up here.’

‘Mm…’ Severus agreed, sitting on the ground crossed-legged, ‘though I haven’t found anywhere better for hiking than the Scottish highlands. That’s perhaps the one thing I miss about home.’

She smiled and plonked herself on the ground beside him, ‘I didn’t have you down as the rambling type.’
'Helps clear my head,' he said with a tiny shrug, ‘anyway, I mainly just wanted to show you what you’re missing, cooped up in the house.’

‘Hmm…’ she replied, not sure how to respond. She watched him in silence for a moment as he absentmindedly tore clumps of grass out of the ground, a crease between his thick eyebrows. ‘Severus, can I ask you something?’ she said softly after a little time had passed.

He sighed. ‘Yes.’

‘Why haven’t you sent me on my way?’

He stopped tugging at the grass and looked up at the panorama, ‘you didn’t seem to want to go,’ he replied quietly. ‘Though… you are a woman of many contradictions,’ he continued, in an amusingly enigmatic tone, ‘you tell me you need to keep your mind busy to stop yourself from dwelling, and then you sit around doing nothing for days on end.’

‘I… I was reading,’ she responded a little pathetically. Hermione alone knew why she was suddenly content with just herself for company again, why she had needed a little less of the Sleepless Dream potion each night before bed. For the moment, leaving the house on her own was still a little beyond her capabilities, but surely in time that would come too.

The reason was, that during those prolonged periods of uneventfulness, each day while she waited for Severus to return from work, her mind was completely consumed by him. She was not yet sure in what capacity he had situated himself in her consciousness, but undeniably, from the moment the door closed behind him each morning, until he stepped back through it again in the evening, Hermione thought of little else but Severus Snape.

Part of it was that there were still a million questions she’d like to ask, and she would put up with him for a little longer if it meant satisfying her need to know the answers; part of it was that she was enamoured by, and perhaps a little envious of, his charmingly mundane little life in Bolstrad; and part of it was, that with the perspective time afforded, she rather thought his character was far more amiable than it had been when she was younger. She had found she enjoyed his company; he interested her.

But she wasn’t going to tell him that.

She looked up to find him watching her thoughtfully, a small smile ghosting his thin lips. For one
horrid moment she wondered whether he had read her mind; she was not familiar with the way Legilimens felt, if indeed it felt of anything at all, but she did not sense that he had used it on her.

‘Hmm…’ he said, obviously dissatisfied by the answer she had given him. ‘You are lucky to have found books so sufficiently engrossing as to allow you to forget the horrors of war and your more recent misfortune.’

And following that he lay back on the grass and rested his eyes while Hermione took in the last of the view before the sun set behind the mountains and they were plunged into an inky darkness. In time, the evening air grew too cold to be comfortable and they made their way back down the hill, Hermione ensuring she stayed much closer to Severus than she had on the way up.

When they arrived back to the house it was to find an unfamiliar tawny owl perched on the window ledge outside the front. It squawked tiredly as Severus pulled the letter from its talon before flying off again into the night.

‘Oh,’ Severus said, ‘for you.’

He handed the letter over to Hermione. Her name alone was written on the envelope in a messy scrawl by someone who appeared to have pressed a little too hard with their quill, sending little squirts of ink flying across the parchment.

It was from Ron, and he was furious.
Long after Severus had gone to bed, Hermione sat with the unopened letter resting on her lap, staring at the angry scrawl of her name, unsure that she really wanted to know what it said inside. She wondered how she would feel if Ron was writing, as she suspected he was, to end their relationship; liberated, potentially, she thought, or perhaps losing him would make her realise that she had truly loved him. She wouldn’t blame him, couldn’t blame him, if this was the nature of the letter. A part of her considered that perhaps this was what she had subconsciously been trying to do all along; push him away until he finally gave up. Make him do it so she wouldn’t have to. She ran a finger across the seal of the envelope and, endeavouring to procrastinate no longer, peeled it back and withdrew the parchment from within. It was decidedly short.

Dear Hermione,

I put off writing for a few weeks in the hope that you would be back by now, but still, you haven’t come. I haven’t mentioned anything in my previous letters because I didn’t want you to think I wasn’t being supportive. I’ve tried so hard to be supportive. But I’m worried about you now. Has something happened that I should know about? Please write, even it’s just to let me know that you’re OK.

I love and miss you so much. Come home soon.

Ron.

She felt warm tears spill down her cheeks as she realised now that her name on the envelope had not been written in anger, but rather in frantic concern. She suddenly found herself yearning to be with Ron for the first time in many years, but something had definitely changed. She did not long for his tender kisses that told her everything was going to be alright, nor did she find comfort, the way she had done all those months spent hunting for Horcruxes, in the thought of being wrapped in his lanky arms.

She merely wanted to be with him, along with Harry and Ginny, George and Neville, and Luna; maybe in The Three Broomsticks or at The Burrow, with familiar foods and bottles of Butterbeer, laughing at something ridiculous that was only funny to them, and listening to some nondescript Quidditch match commentary on Mr. Weasley’s modified radio.

But then she frowned and mentally cursed herself. Had that not been precisely the type of mundanity she had fled England to escape? In a clichéd sense she had left not to find Snape, but to find herself. She had no idea what she wanted from life, apart from this vague notion of a sense of purpose, and
she realised now that she was no closer to achieving that in Bolstrad than she had been in England. She felt suddenly far from home and very lonely.

She folded the parchment back into the envelope and placed it under her pillow, then lay staring at the ceiling for the next few hours until she succumbed to sleep.

~oOo~

As far as Severus could tell Saturday night’s correspondence had undone all the good work their walk into the mountains had achieved. He thought he had recognised the untidy scrawl on the envelope to be that of the youngest Weasley boy. Severus had an eye for detail and an impressive memory, and having read many a useless potions essay in that very hand had apparently had quite an impact on him. He sensed it would be impolite to enquire as to the contents of the letter, but he could tell by Hermione’s solemnity over the next few days that it had not bore good news.

‘And what are your plans for today?’ he asked, the same question he had asked every day since she had returned from the hospital, and to which, everyday, he received the same reply. When he had invited her to stay he had not thought it would be for this long. He didn’t entirely mind. It was nice to have someone to tell about his day when he returned from work, and he found she made for interesting company at mealtimes, but still, he had not meant for this to be a permanent arrangement and yet she was still almost three weeks later.

‘Nothing,’ she replied glumly.

That was, in fact, not her usual response and so he was right about the letter, he thought. Whatever it said, it had upset her. ‘Nothing?’ he questioned, with a customary arching of his eyebrow.

‘Yep.’

He sighed. He was in no mood for an argument. He wanted to scream at her to pull herself together, get a grip, but obviously that wasn’t what she needed to hear. He merely shrugged and made to stand when she suddenly spoke again.

‘What?’ she spat. ‘Go on. You looked as though you wanted to say something.’

‘No. I don’t know what else to say to you,’ he replied, impressed with himself for managing to keep
his tone quite calm.

‘If you’re fed up of me just… just spit it out!’

‘Would you go if I did? Because it’s been weeks and you’ve made no effort to leave of your own accord!’ he snapped, his voice becoming raised. He moved over to a drawer in the kitchen reserved for odds and ends and yanking it open pulled out a folded piece of parchment. ‘Here,’ he said, thrusting it into Hermione’s hand.

‘Subtle,’ she said, her tone heavy with sarcasm as she unfolded the train timetable he’d handed her. ‘Oh look, the next train heading west is on Thursday. I shall make sure I’m on it, and in the meantime, I’ll be sure to stay out of your way!’ she hissed, throwing the timetable down on the kitchen table and marching out of the room and heading upstairs.

‘Ha! How many times have you said that before?’ he called after her, wincing slightly as she slammed shut the bathroom door.

‘Fine!’ she screamed back, ‘I’ll be gone by the time you get home!’

He felt a tightening in his chest at this, but quickly disregarded it, suspecting that when he returned this evening, she would be right where he had left her.

~oOo~

Hermione knew she wasn’t fooling anyone. Even if she had intended to stay true to her word, she rather thought it might spite Snape more if she stayed put. So instead of packing her things ready to leave she merely conducted her usual morning routine, completing each task with a little extra vigour in an attempt to channel some of her anger positively. By mid-afternoon she had cleaned the house from top to bottom, save Severus’ bedroom, slamming cupboard doors and shoving furniture around in frustration as she went.

Shortly before Severus was due back from work there was a knock at the door. This was unexpected and most certainly not a part of Hermione’s routine. Marking her place in the book she was now sat reading, she peaked around the closed curtains and saw a plump, kindly looking woman, somewhat reminiscent of Molly Weasley, stood before the house. She did not look like a witch catcher. But then neither had the little boy, Hermione reprimanded her own trusting nature. Suddenly the woman looked up and caught sight of Hermione staring at her through the window.
'Ah… hello, ‘Ermione,’ she said, with a thick Romanian accent, ‘I am a friend of Severus.’

‘He isn’t here,’ Hermione called warily through the glass.

‘Yes, I know. He works with my husband. My name is Stela.’

‘Oh,’ Hermione said, realisation dawning on her, ‘you sent me the flowers when I was in hospital?’ she asked, remembering the tulips Severus had brought with him on the first day he had visited. Stela nodded enthusiastically and, still with a slightly distrusting frown, Hermione went to the door and opened it a fraction.

‘I mean no harm,’ Stela said, holding up her hands to show they were empty of potential weaponry, ‘Severus mentioned that you were staying with him and… and about your current situation, about your being a little worried to leave the house,’ she added, her voice low.

‘Well he had no right,’ Hermione said, a little abruptly. She was angry at Severus but he wasn’t here for her to take it out on, so unfortunately the kindly Stela would have to take the brunt of her mood.

Stela looked a little startled at her tone for a moment but then her expression softened into something more akin to sympathy. ‘No, I don’t blame you. But… I want to tell you about something that may be of interest to you. Can I come in?’

Hermione considered the old lady’s trustworthy smile before conceding, opening the door wide, and standing aside to let her past. After polite offerings and acceptances of tea and biscuits, they sat down together in the living room.

‘As I said, Severus has told me just a little of your circumstances,’ Stela explained, ‘and whilst he is uncommonly attuned to the anxieties of others, I fear perhaps he is not accustomed, nor best equipped, for supporting them through them.’

Hermione huffed something indistinctive in agreement.

‘Yes. But he has asked me to tell you about a group we have, here in the town.’
'What kind of group?'

'We call ourselves The Watch. We are a type of… I don’t know if this word is right… vigilante group. We are protecting the townsfolk from the witch hunters, patrolling and whatnot, and campaigning, mainly. Severus thought you might be interested, that it might build your confidence a little to know there are people looking out for you, but also he said that you might be of some use to us. He said you are familiar with fighting inequalities.'

Hermione felt her temper flaring again. This was an attempt by Severus to make a complete fool of her, she thought. He knew very well how her last crusade against inequality had turned out. It had ended with her storming out of the Ministry one day and setting off across Europe looking for him. Perhaps that’s what he thought would happen with this, only in reverse - it would be the last push she needed to clear off for good. And she was just mulling over how best to scupper his plan when the front door creaked open on its rusted hinges and the man himself appeared.

His gaze fell on Hermione and a small, knowing smirk spread across his lips as though he had won a secret bet with himself. She glared back at him with all the ill will she could muster.

'Err… Severus. I was just telling ‘Ermione about The Watch,’ Stela said, looking cautiously from Hermione to Severus and obviously picking up on the tension between them.

'I’ll leave you to it,’ he said, striding across the room in a rather dramatic flourish and situating himself in his armchair. He picked up one of the potions journals and opened it up at a random page, then sat pretending to read it, his eyes fixed on a single spot.

'As I was saying,’ Stela continued. She seemed to be used to Severus’ moods and merely ignored him. ‘We have meetings, it would get you out of the house.’

'I don’t want to be a part of any violence,’ Hermione said, dragging her attentions away from Severus.

'Condeiului este mai puternic decât bagheta!’ Stela replied somewhat enigmatically.

'What does that mean?’
'The quill is mightier than the wand,’ the old woman translated, ‘we make pamphlets and have columns in a few publications that go out to other wizarding communities. It is just grassroots stuff really, I understand if it is all a bit small scale for you. It is not quite Ministry level.’

‘No,’ Hermione replied thoughtfully, her interest has certainly piqued at the prospect of contributing to articles - she certainly thought she had quite a lot to say on the subject, and perhaps there would be a therapeutic element to it for her.

‘Well, our next meeting is on Wednesday, at our house, above my husbands little perfume shop. I would like it if you would consider coming.’

‘Oh, I hope to be leaving soon,’ Hermione replied, issuing Severus a quick glance. He was still reading the same page of the journal, a falsely amiable expression on his face. ‘But… yes, I think I would like to come on Wednesday. I’d be happy to help if I can.’

‘And likewise,’ Stela said with a genuinely warm smile, ‘now, I will leave you to enjoy your evening. I am sure Severus can show you to the perfumers if you do not know where it is.’

‘Oh, I’m sure I can manage on my own,’ she replied. And for the first time, in all the times she had mentioned leaving the house alone, she meant it.

‘Good, good!’ Stela said, heading for door, adding ‘night to you both,’ before stepping out into the chilled dusk.

‘Well, you should be happy,’ Hermione said, turning to Severus as she closed the door behind Stela, ‘I’ll attend their meeting, “build my confidence,” as Stela put it, and then I’ll be out of your hair for good.’

‘That is not why I asked her to tell you about The Watch,’ he mumbled, not looking up from the journal.

But Hermione didn’t think she had quite caught what he had said and decided she couldn’t be bothered to ask him to repeat it. She no longer cared what he had to say.

~oOo~
The next day Severus did not return from work at his usual time. They had barely spoken a word to one another the previous night or that morning and Hermione suspected his delaying was something to do with that. She turned off the heat from under the stew she was making when he was half an hour late; she re-heated herself a bowl when he was an hour late; she had a second when he was two hours late. Wondering vaguely where he might be, but reminding herself it was really none of her business, she took up her position on the settee and opened her book. She was asleep when, some hours later, there was a loud thud outside the front door, and the next moment a black figure came bowling through it, landing in a heap at the bottom of the stairs.

‘Severus?’ she gasped, jumping up off her makeshift bed and trying to make out what was going on in the gloom. She picked up his wand, which had been thrown across the floor when he’d fallen, and uttered a quick lumos to literally throw some light on the situation.

‘Ugh,’ he groaned, shielding his eyes from the sudden glare.

‘Are you drunk?’ she asked worriedly, though mild bemusement was also detectable in her tone. With the exception of those few times she had seen him ranting and raving, Hermione could not think of an instance when she had seen Severus Snape not utterly in control of himself. He looked quite pathetic laid there on the floor. ‘Come on,’ she said, holding out a hand to him, ‘let’s get you on the settee and I’ll make you a coffee.’

‘Mmm,’ was all he said by way of a reply, but he reached out for her hand and between them they managed to get him upright again. She navigated him over to the settee and deposited him there while she went to make the coffee, lighting a few candles as she went. From the kitchen she watched him sat slumped on the settee, dishevelled and a little sad looking.

‘Here,’ she said a few moments later, handing him a mug of steaming, extra strong coffee. ‘Are you alright?’

He watched her through hazy, hooded eyes for a moment while he took his first sips of the drink, then he averted his gaze and hung his head. ‘Today,’ he mumbled, ‘is Hallowe’en.’

‘Is getting blind drunk a Hallowe’en custom in Romania?’ she asked jokingly, but he didn’t seem to be in the mood. In fact, he looked up at her a little stricken, and she couldn’t be sure in the dim light but there seemed to be unspilt tears in his eyes.

‘It’s numbing,’ he said, slurring his words so that his speech was almost unintelligible, ‘I can’t help
thinking about it… always worse on Hallowe’en. The anniversary… I close my eyes,’ and he did this as he spoke, ‘and I see him going to the house… Potter… and then… Lily… dead. Her eyes staring… they were green…’ he trailed off. The words had seemed wrenched from him as if against his will and his face contorted with anguish not only at the memory, but as though he felt he had divulged too much and was bitterly regretting it.

‘Then don’t,’ Hermione spoke softly, reaching out and gripping his hand. She felt foolish for having not considered what today might mean for him.

‘What?’

‘If that’s what you see when you close your eyes, then open them. Look at me.’

He obeyed her command and their gazes met for a fleeting moment before he broke away and stared back down at her hand enveloping his own. She felt his fingers twitch but he did not pull away.

‘It’s all my fault,’ he said mournfully, ‘everything. Everything that happened in the war and all the suffering that people have had to endure since.’

‘But you also did so much good,’ she said earnestly, ‘you were instrumental to Harry’s success.’

‘I’m the reason his parents are dead,’ he spat, full of self-loathing.

‘And you’re the reason he’s still alive!’

‘Humph…’ he grumbled, finishing his coffee.

‘And as for everyone else, I told you, they’re doing fine.’

He did look at her now, ‘fine like you, you mean?’

‘Well…’
He groaned, looking away once more, and when he spoke again he sounded a little frantic, ‘I hoped you might start to feel better and that… that maybe I could help you, because I understand… but it’s been weeks and… I can’t… I destroy things, I can’t heal them… that is why you must go, despite how I…” He closed his mouth abruptly, alcohol apparently made him more loquacious than he liked, and practically jumped to his feet, but Hermione was faster and blocked him from leaving.

‘Ssh,’ she soothed, and hesitantly she reached up to wrap comforting arms around his shoulders. He stood stiffly, unmov ing, his arms rigid by his side, but he gave no indication that he wanted her to abate.

After a long moment, however, she did, reluctantly, pull away. She placed her hands on his shoulders again and their eyes met, ‘you have helped me more than you know,’ she whispered, and then their heads dipped mutually and their lips softly grazed. It was not exactly a kiss but in that instant, Hermione felt she understood Severus better than anyone ever had, as though he was passing to her his deepest and darkest secrets.
It was Severus who had broken the kiss. He had pulled away abruptly and stumbled back, almost tripping on the corner of the coffee table. ‘Shit,’ he’d mumbled, looking at her slightly panicked, ‘sorry!’

She had shaken her head. ‘I think that was mutual,’ she’d whispered, staring at him in an almost trance-like state.

His hands had been drawn up to his head and he’d grasped clumps of his hair despairingly. ‘Oh, Merlin!’ His head had been swimming, the whole scene had been a blur.

‘Go to bed,’ she’d urged, taking a step towards him. Maybe she’d reached out to him, he couldn’t quite remember, but he had stiffened nonetheless, and shifted further away from her until his back was up against the wall. ‘Severus…’ she’d beseeched, her eyes wide and sad, ‘it’s fine. I think we both need to sleep…’

She must have convinced him because he lay in his bed now, and judging by the pale white light that filtered through the window shutters and the pounding in his temple, it was the morning after. The events of the previous evening had played over and over relentlessly in his mind, disturbing his dreams as they were disturbing his every waking thought.

Severus was a man who knew what he was about. He defined himself by the series of unfortunate events that constituted his life. His father punching his mother was his earliest memory; Severus had been perhaps three or four years old. Then there had been the beatings he had suffered himself. As a boy he had dreamed of Hogwarts, had a naively idealistic notion of the school as some sort of haven, only to be bullied mercilessly once he got there. He had quickly discovered the belonging he found amongst the Death Eaters to be artificial. Then hearing the prophecy; the meeting on the hilltop; the promise he’d made. He had taught for ten years amid suspicion and distrust from his colleagues; surrounded by people and yet more alone than he had ever been. Potter had arrived at the school and it was true, he had her eyes. Six more years of being forced to look into them, perpetually reminded of his betrayal. And then he had been made a murderer, spent a year torturing the very students he had swore to protect, and, when neither of his masters had any further purpose for him, he had been disposed of. Then Lily, of course, was an underlying whisper through all of that.

He had lived a life of uncertainty and so had sought to control whatever aspects he could. He was fully aware that his appearance was not attractive, but to some extent he encouraged this, it kept people at bay, made them less inclined to want to associate with him. His dress, especially whilst teaching, had been designed to a similar end, as had his personality. He had not been particularly rude as a child and adolescent; granted, he had not been particularly pleasant either, surly even, but as an adult a scowl or cruel remark had stopped anyone from wanting to get too close. After years of
affecting this persona it had become learned behaviour, despite his best efforts to counter it since fleeing England.

He had had more control over his own life since coming to Bolstrad, certainly, and it was, as he had told Hermione repeatedly, preferable to his life before, but he had never felt like he deserved it and so had not utilised it to its full potential. He continued to live a solitary life, that way no one could hurt him and he could hurt no one.

Now Hermione had come along and ruined everything. He liked having her around, he had admitted that much to himself some weeks ago. But it was more than that and he knew it. He supposed he fancied her a bit. Though that didn’t explain what had happened last night. He’d fancied plenty of women in his time and managed to refrain from kissing them…

He was roused from his thoughts by the distinctive scent of frying bacon wafting up the stairs and suddenly realised how a fried breakfast was precisely what he needed to facilitate his recovery from this hangover. He stood slowly and made his way slightly unsteadily downstairs. He could see Hermione through the kitchen door, her curls wild from the heat of the oven top and her cheeks flushed from her exertions. He pretended to himself that he didn’t enjoy seeing her that way, ignored the desire that burned inside him to go over and kiss her again, and instead entered the room a little sheepishly.

‘Ah,’ she said cheerily upon seeing him, ‘and how are you feeling this morning?’

He groaned and sat down at the table, resting his head in his hands. ‘A little nauseous and a lot embarrassed,’ he murmured in reply.

‘Well, there’s no need for the latter,’ she assured him with a broad smile, ‘nor the former, for that matter. Here,’ and with that she handed him a small bottle of hangover cure and a steaming mug of coffee.

‘Thanks,’ he said, downing the potion in one large mouthful, ‘and again, I am so sorry about last night.’

‘And again, there is nothing to apologise for. I was equally to blame.’

‘It wouldn’t have happened if I wasn’t so drunk.’
She laughed a knowing little laugh. ‘It’s fine.’

‘Mmm…’ he said contemplatively, ‘you know, “it’s fine” is something we both say quite often, particularly when it clearly is not fine.’

‘That’s an interesting observation. Perhaps in the interest of clarity we ought to refrain from uttering such vague statements in future.’

‘Let’s make that a rule from here on in,’ he suggested, allowing himself to smile but only because she wasn’t looking at him. She was serving the breakfast onto plates and soon enough he had a mountainous serving of greasy meats in front of him. ‘This stuff, the bacon and whatnot, we didn’t have it in,’ he said, picking up his knife and fork and tucking in ravenously.

‘No. I went out and bought it. All by myself,’ she said in a mock-childlike tone and with a small but proud grin.

‘Oh,’ was all he could manage to say.

‘Well, don’t sound too happy for me, will you?’ she said.

‘No, it’s great. I… I suppose it’ll be a new wand and a train ticket next then?’

‘I think so, yes. After that talk with Stela and… everything else, I think I’m ready. To go get a wand at least. The train station is right at the bottom of town so… I don’t know, but we’ll see. It’s still progress.’

He nodded. ‘Would you like me to come with you?’

‘Now, that would rather defeat the object wouldn’t it? But thanks for offering.’

This was it then. He was surplus to requirement once again. He acknowledged that it was hypocritical of him to begrudge her this development in her recovery, after all, he had positively encouraged her getting out of the house since day one; but popping out to pick up supplies would inevitably lead to her finally getting her new wand, and getting her new wand would prevail her to
feel up to leaving for good. It was an inevitable progression of events and the mere thought of it made his heart ache.

He wanted to be harsh with her, to push her away. Usually when he began feeling even slightly amicable with someone his defence mechanism dictated that he default to being ill-mannered, and typically that made him feel better, but today he didn’t want to push her away. If she was leaving for good he wanted, perhaps somewhat selfishly, to enjoy the time he had left with her.

‘Be sure to get some new clothes, won’t you?’ he said, in as jovial a tone as he could muster, ‘you’ve been wearing those jeans for six weeks straight!’ he added, though in truth he had enjoyed her borrowing his clothes, sometimes when she gave them back to him they still carried the scent of her perfume.

‘Hey!’ she laughed, ‘I’ve scourgyfied them everyday!’

‘Mmm…’ he said dubiously, ‘I’ll believe you.’

‘I have!’ she protested, slapping him playfully on the arm, ‘but I’ll have a look.’

Undoubtedly, the kiss remained something of an elephant in the room for the duration of breakfast, but by talking about the weather and other innocuous subjects, they managed to navigate their way through it without too much awkwardness. Hermione, he observed, certainly had a new air about her today. There was a little bounce in her step, a little glint in her eye, and something excited and anticipatory about her tone when she spoke. She certainly seemed more unfazed than him by the event of the previous evening, though he suspected that might be to do with the fact it had perhaps not meant as much to her as it had to him. Anyway, whatever it was that had gotten in to her saw her float out of the door, humming no less, an hour later on her way to the wand makers.

He realised this was the first time he had been alone in a long time, which only served to reinforce for him how much he had grown to enjoy company. Once he’d dressed he saw to making himself useful, completing all the household tasks Hermione usually did, only in half the time as he had the benefit of magic. Indeed, it was just as he was using a tidying charm to neaten up her bedding, that the folded piece of parchment drifted to the floor. He knelt to retrieve it and was just about to disregard it on top of her pillow when the inky scrawl caught his attention. It was the letter from Weasley.

He sat on the edge of the settee, the letter balanced loosely on the tips of his fingers, tracing the lines of the untidy penmanship on the envelope with a thumb. He knew he shouldn’t read it but he also knew he was going to. He maintained a pretence of reluctance for a good few minutes, stealing quick
glances in the direction of the front door, lest Hermione return at that precise moment, and on a
number of occasions making to return the letter to its home under the pillow, only to withdraw it
again to sit staring at it a little longer. Eventually he pealed back the envelope and withdrew the note.

~oOo~

Citing his dislike of socialising, Severus excused himself from attending Hermione’s first meeting
with The Watch on Wednesday of that week. She graciously refused his offer to accompany her for
the walk and forced herself to spend the afternoon perusing the market before making her way
through Bolstrad’s winding alleyways to Fiers Florian’s Fine Fragrances, feeling all the more
confident to do so in the knowledge that she had her new wand tucked securely in her pocket.

Upon arrival she knocked tentatively on the door, wondering whether she was doing the right thing,
and was ushered inside a moment later by an enthusiastic Stela. ‘We are so glad you came,’ she
explained as she led Hermione through the shop, into the back room and up a staircase to the living
quarters. ‘Everyone is very much looking forward to having a Ministry official fighting for our
cause.’

Hermione wanted to interrupt to inform Stela that she was far from a Ministry official anymore and
tell her all about the years of failed attempts at getting equality for the house elves, but ultimately
couldn’t find it in her heart to disappoint the woman. Anyway, there was little opportunity for such
honesty once Stela had opened the living room door to reveal The Watch. A dozen or so eager and
inquiring faces turned in unison to look at Hermione.

Stela said something in Romanian which appeared to be an introduction of Hermione to the group
and one by one they came forward and spoke to the newcomer in varying degrees of English,
shaking her hand and offering her kindly words of thanks for her coming tonight.

‘Ah,’ exclaimed Stela as a small, grey-haired man with a pair of spectacles balanced on the end of his
nose neared the front of the queue, ‘this is my husband, Fiers.’ He looked considerably older than
Stela but had a similarly warm smile.

‘Pleasure to meet you, Miss Granger,’ he said, holding out a wrinkled hand for Hermione to shake,
‘Severus has told me a lot about you. All good, don’t worry!’ he added.

Feeling a little overwhelmed, Hermione merely faked a small laugh in response.
‘And this is our son, Nicu,’ Stela continued, as Fiers sidled out of the way and a tall, dark haired man of about Severus’ age and dressed in a distinctively Muggle suit, came forwards. ‘Nicu is a squib,’ Stela whispered with mild embarrassment into Hermione’s ear.

‘Thank you, mother!’ Nicu said reprovingly before turning his attention to Hermione, ‘it is true, but it would be nice to not be consistently depersonalised by it!’

‘Oh, being a squib isn’t so bad where I’m from,’ Hermione replied.

‘Then perhaps I should move to England,’ he said, laughing and raising his voice so Stela, who had moved off to talk to her husband could hear. ‘No, I cannot complain really. My parents are more understanding than most. They did not abandon me, ensured I got a good Muggle education, that is almost unique amongst Romanian wizarding folk, and I’ve made myself useful to The Watch, so Bolstrad doesn’t shun me too badly, at least not for the most part.’

‘Oh, well that must be easier than most squibs have it from what I can gather.’

‘Don’t feel too badly for them, ‘Ermione. After all, they are the ones that tried to kidnap you, are they not?’ said Stela, rejoining their conversation.

‘Well yes, but…’ she was distracted from finishing her sentence by Nicu’s broad, approving grin.

‘I think you are just what The Watch needs, Miss Granger. Perhaps you can help me talk sense into these people! Come,’ he said, gesturing for her to take a seat at the dining table, around which The Watch were now gathered, pouring over a map of Romania marked with little red ink dots.

‘These are the location of attacks in the last year, a marked increase from last year and the Witch Hunters grow more audacious,’ Stela explained, ‘Bolstrad, because it is so remote, is usually a safe place. Your attack was very surprising, we are sorry we were not more prepared for it.’

‘Oh…’ was all Hermione could manage. There was an unsettling reassurance in knowing she was not alone and a certain guilt attached to that for feeling so.

‘The trouble is, at the beginning of September, shortly before you arrived here, the Muggle government began offering more money for magical folk to hand themselves over, which in turn provided more incentive for the Witch Hunters to capture and force the hand of unsuspecting wizards
and witches!’ Stela concluded.

‘We have increased all of our efforts,’ Fiers continued for his wife, ‘we have more patrols, we cut off the scant links we ever had with the squibs, ended all negotiations, we write in newspapers, magazines, publish our own pamphlets informing people of the dangers they pose. Here, look,’ he said, handing Hermione a small piece of folded parchment. She scanned it briefly and found the haphazard diagrams and simplistic wording endearing. They did nothing to rouse her spirits, make her want to fight the injustice of it all.

‘We ought to hex them into the middle of next year!’ a large, muscular wizard loudly interrupted, slamming his fist down onto the table. His exclamation was followed by similar uproars from various people, who all began to speak at once.

‘QUIET!’ Stela shouted, taking charge after several attempt to gain everyone’s attention through more civilised means. Immediately the din diminished and Stela was able to continue in her normal tone. ‘Ermione, can we ask what you think?’ she said, turning to Hermione with a mildly pleading look in her eyes.

‘I think… I think that whilst all this is very good,’ she replied encouragingly, gesturing to the pamphlets, ‘you’re perhaps targeting the wrong group. You have to look at this a little more systemically to really get to the route of the problem. Blaming the Witch Hunters, the squibs, might prove counterproductive purely because, well…’

‘Because you ostracise them just as the Muggles ostracise you,’ Nicu finished, looking at his parents pointedly. Hermione was glad he was there to vocalise this blatant hypocrisy for her. ‘I have been saying this all along, ‘Ermione,’ he said with a smile.

‘Then what do you propose?’ Stela asked, sticking her tongue out in response to Nicu.

‘So… you’re telling me the Witch Hunters are a bigger problem than the government, or at least, they present a more imminent problem?’

‘Yes.’

‘Right, then we need to cut them off at the source. You say you’ve tried negotiating with the Witch Hunters to no avail, but have you tried negotiating with the Muggle government? Tried getting them to see that their policies on magic are positively medieval?’
There were a few titters of laughter among the group and Hermione wondered what it was she and said that was so amusing.

‘We are just a little group,’ Fiers explained, ‘they would not listen to us.’

‘But have your tried?’ she asked, a little more persistently, feeling a little fire begin to kindle in her belly, which was something she had not experienced in a long while. There was so much to be done here, so much she could do to help.

‘No,’ Nicu replied on behalf of the group, ‘I can tell you they have not!’

“Never believe that a few caring people can't change the world. For, indeed, that's all who ever have,”’ Hermione said quite quietly, not sure where she remembered the quote from. Nicu laughed uproariously and stood in solidarity beside Hermione, who had not realised she had gotten to her feet at all. ‘Yes,’ she continued, feeling encouraged, ‘you should try and infiltrate Muggle media, perhaps… I mean, Nicu, you're perfectly placed to liaise between the Muggle and wizarding worlds—’

‘As I have always said, but these lot would never allow it!’

‘Quite… are there other watches, or similar, in other towns? Could we unite, have demonstrations? There’s nothing a government likes less than public humiliation at the hands of it’s own people! What is your own Ministry of Magic doing?’

A chorus of replied were forthcoming: ‘they are worn out,’ ‘they are just recycling tired old ideas,’ and ‘they have all but given up!’

‘Then we speak to them too, try to motivate them back into proaction…’ she paused thoughtfully for a moment, trying to catch her breath and feeling she had got rather ahead of herself, ‘but this is not to say we abandon all hope for the Witch Hunters. If your own society was more accepting of them, they would have little need to be so resentful…’ she paused for another moment to think of the bitter and twisted Argus Filch and then of the great Angus Buchanan who had done so much for squib-wizard relations, wondering whether she might be able to get ahold of copies of *My Life as a Squib* translated into Romanian. ‘Perhaps you could find jobs for them in our world,’ she continued, ‘so they could earn a living, or Nicu, you could help them fit in with the Muggles, whatever made them happy and…’
'Miss Granger?' Fiers politely interjected, ‘you are asking us to change some of the very fundamentals of our society.’

Hermione looked at the man, at them all in fact, with what she hoped was sympathy that strayed far from being patronising. ‘Yes,’ she replied simply, ‘yes, I am!’

‘I think it’s brilliant,’ Nicu said amidst disgruntled sounding Romanian murmurings amongst the others. Hermione couldn’t understand, but could detect that they were aimed at her in a not very pleasant way.

‘Este absurd!’ Mrs Deleanu exclaimed loudly after one of the others had translated what Hermione had been saying for her, ‘absurd!’

‘Mrs Deleanu’ Stela spoke up, placing a gentle, placating hand on the woman’s forearm before addressing them all, ‘we have tried everything we could think of ourselves, and we invited ‘Ermione here today to give us new ideas. She has only done precisely that! Do not be unkind.’

And, as they worked through some of the finer details of the plan, the rest of the meeting continued in much the same vain, though gradually Hermione felt she was able to persuade even some of her most ardent objectors that her proposed tactics would be beneficial.

‘I only wish you were going to be around to help us,’ said Nicu, as he showed Hermione out of the shop much later that evening.

In all the excitement, Hermione had quite forgotten that she was due to leave. ‘Oh, well… perhaps you could write, if you need any advice?’ she offered.

‘I think you will be hearing from us very shortly,’ he said with another laugh.

‘You’ll all do a brilliant job,’ she reassured him, ‘good night.’

‘Thank you and good bye,’ he said, and with that he waved her off into the darkness.
Hermione had returned to the house last night a little giddy from the success of the meeting, excited to tell Severus all about it, however, when she had arrived it had been to find Severus already in bed despite it being still quite early. Then, the following morning she awoke to find Bolstrad coated in a thin layer of crisp, sparkling snow. It was almost as though winter had descended overnight; the trees stood liberated of their leaves; an icy wind shrilled through the lanes, and the sky over the mountains appeared foreboding and restless. But undoubtedly there was something beautiful about it and Hermione felt a little depressed at the thought of the one-way train ticket, bought during her outing yesterday, that she had tucked in her purse. From the window she made her way back to settee, her handbag rested on the floor beside it and she plucked out her purse to check, for what must have been the hundredth time, that the ticket was still there.

One way. Standard Class.

She stared at it forlornly for a long moment before she heard the creaking of floorboards above her head and stuffed it quickly back into the confines of her bag. She turned to find Severus halted halfway down the stairs, and judging by his unhappy expression he had witnessed everything.

He descended the remaining steps and stood before Hermione. ‘What time do you leave?’ he asked.

‘A little after three,’ she replied meekly, avoiding his gaze, which was fixed on her heavily and felt almost penetrating.

He nodded, looking thoughtful, then said, ‘so you have time to go for a walk before you go?’

‘I suppose.’

Then they breakfasted in near silence, Hermione wishing she dare speak, if only to thank him for his hospitality if not address the palpable connection that she could no longer deny had developed between them. For Hermione the kiss had united what she had thought were a number of disparate feelings. These emotions she had longed to understand for the past few weeks had suddenly, and dramatically, come to make sense. She didn’t think it was love. She realised now, of course, she had never been in love, but it felt like enough. Enough to be willing to take a risk. But she didn’t say anything, and neither did he. That is, not until a few hours later when they sat beside a frozen lake.

‘Where would you like to go?’ he’d asked as they left Bolstrad behind them, both wrapped in
numerous woollen layers in an attempt to keep out the bite of wind.

‘Somewhere off the beaten track. I think that would suit my mood,’ she had replied somewhat mischievously.

He’d given her an odd look in response then nodded and taken off down a winding, bramble encroached path, leading through a forest. They walked for a long time, still in silence, Hermione breathing in every essence of Romania she could in an attempt to imprint in her mind so she might remember it when she was ninety-nine as clearly as if she were there again. Whatever happened, this time spent in Romania had changed her life.

And then they had emerged by a vast lake, the edges of which were frozen, and Severus finally stopped to let them rest. Looking between the view and the sultry wizard that accompanied her, Hermione knew what she had to do else she’d regret it forever. Whatever his response, she simply had to know.

‘Severus, can I ask you something?’

He sighed, ‘go on then.’

‘The other night, when we…’

‘Yes,’ he said quickly, acknowledging her in a way that meant neither of them had to vocalise the fact that they had kissed, as though that would somehow make it less real.

‘You said that, well, you said that you destroy things, and that’s why I should go-’

‘-Oh, Hermione…’ he began apologetically, but she interrupted him.

‘No… you said that’s why I should go despite… something. You said “despite” and then just sort of trailed off, like maybe you’d said too much. But, what were you going to say?’

‘Urm… I don’t remember exactly.’
‘Liar!’ she teased, ‘go on, what was it?’

‘No, I don’t remember exactly, but I imagine it might have been something along the lines of… despite… how I… how I feel… maybe. You should go, despite how I feel. Something like that.’

He was looking off into the distance but she tugged his sleeve to get his attention.

‘And how’s that?’ she asked, her voice barely more than a whisper. ‘How do you feel?’

He turned his head to look at her, their faces intimately close, and studied her for a long moment. She held his gaze determinedly and whether with the use of Legilimens or not, she hoped he could tell what she was thinking.

‘I’m not sure,’ he replied ‘but, I think I wouldn’t mind if you decided to stay.’ He spoke deliberately as though his words had been given a lot of consideration.

‘I think I might like that. I… I don’t know what’s happening here, if anything’ she said after a contemplative moment, ‘but… I think I’d like to explore it, what it is, further.’

‘Mmm…’ he replied, slightly noncommittally, but she sensed it was himself he did not trust, not her.

She merely smiled and dared herself to reach out for his hand, hoping it wouldn’t be a gesture too far. He hadn’t seemed to mind the other night. She intwined her fingers through his and he reciprocated momentarily before clenching his hand into a fist and pulling away from her. They were sat so close she felt his body go rigid at her side and he refused to meet her eyes any longer.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing,’ he said quickly, too quickly. He betrayed his lie. ‘It’s fine.’

‘I thought we weren’t going to say that to one another anymore? Obviously there’s something. What is it?’
He groaned and leant even further away from her. ‘Weasley,’ he murmured, as though the word tasted bitter in his mouth.

‘Ron? What’s he go to do with anything.’

Severus still wouldn’t look at her as he answered, ‘he loves you,’ he replied, ‘and I suspect you love him.’

She stared at the side of his head incredulously for a moment. ‘Don’t presume to know how I feel!’ she hissed, moving herself away from him now. ‘In fact, don’t presume to know anything about Ron and I at all!’ She felt foolish for having laid herself bare for him, only to have undermine her in this way.

He turned to her with an angry scowl she recognised all too well. ‘Why else would you be sleeping with his letter under your pillow? Why would he be writing to you declaring his love, and you be sleeping with it under your pillow?’ And then he closed his mouth tight shut as though trying to stop anything else escaping against his will.

She floundered for just the briefest of moments as she tried to make sense of what he had said, and then she felt an almighty rage surge through her chest. ‘How dare you read my mail!’

‘What?’ he said, badly feigning not having heard her.

‘I can’t believe this. Just when I was beginning to trust you, you do something like this!’ she practically yelled, jumping up and taking a few unsteady steps away from him.

‘It’s true then,’ he stated, as though he had uncovered some huge conspiracy.

She merely glared at him, refusing to dignify his childishness with a response. She felt sick with anger and her face contorted in her struggle to articulate herself sufficiently. When no amount of trying would allow her to vocalise her myriad thoughts, she turned on her heal and stormed away from him.

~oOo~
She had practically sprinted back to the house, worrying numerous times that in her haste she would forget the route and end up lost in the freezing wilderness. Throwing her few belongings, and the new clothes she had bought, into her handbag with the help of a shrinking charm, she had been in and out within a few minutes, and then down at the train station in a few more. The ticket was in her hand, becoming increasingly creased and worn as she intermittently balled her hands into fists to try and relieve some of her pent up frustration. Some time later, she couldn’t say how long had passed, the train rolled in and with a cursory glance around the station, perhaps hoping Severus was going to appear suddenly, like something from a film, and intervene to stop her departure, she made her way towards it.

‘No!’ a voice demanded, reaching out and grabbing her wrist to stop her boarding the carriage. She wondered for a second whether this was really happening or whether she was imagining the aforementioned scene too vividly. No, she could definitely feel that tightness of that hand around her wrist, indeed it was quite painful. She rounded on the owner quickly and he immediately relinquished his grasp. ‘Sorry,’ he said, sounding earnest. It was Severus, slightly out of breath and looking uncharacteristically panicked. ‘Just… please… don’t go.’

She shook her head sadly, ‘all we do is argue anyway.’

‘I… I suspect we just argue to try and make this easier for ourselves. But it doesn’t work, does it?’

‘Hmph,’ she muttered in begrudging agreement.

‘I shouldn’t have read that letter. I’m sorry, I… I just needed to know, to see if there was any point in… in maybe saying something of how I felt.’

‘And you concluded that there wasn’t?’

‘It seemed to me that you loved one another,’ he replied hesitantly, ‘but only you can tell me whether or not that conclusion is correct.’

She considered his words and it occurred to her that she had thought of herself as separated from Ron for a long time and had merely neglected to inform him. She had gone through the motions of maintaining their relationship simply because it was easier. But Severus was right, it was unfair to Ron to prolong this agony. He deserved better than that and that was not the kind of woman she was either. She was beginning to realise that what was right, was not always the same thing as what was easy. Indeed, had she not spent many hours the previous night trying to convince The Watch of the
truth in this? She lamented the loss of that vivacity her teenage self had had for persevering, no matter what, and endeavoured for here on in to get it back.

‘We do not love each other,’ she said definitively, before seeing fit to qualify her answer, ‘Ron may love me, but I do not love him… not more than a friend.’

Severus nodded, watching Hermione carefully. ‘Then, I think I too would be… interested in exploring this, but… I have to ask that you end things properly with Weasley before we take it any further… I’ve been the weak corner of a love triangle myself, I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.’

She looked up at Severus, begging the tears not to fall from her. Not yet at least. They could fall in a moment when she was either wrapped in his arms, joyous and safe, or when she was in her train compartment on the way back to England, sorrowful and rejected.

‘Tell me, do you truly want this?’ she asked.

The train’s horn sounded, startling them both, though their gazes never faltered. He inhaled deeply and contemplatively, his expression unreadable, and then whispered, ‘yes.’
Reciprocity

She gripped his arm all the way, as though fearful he might get away, as they walked up from the station to his house. His affirmation had barely escaped his lips before she had fallen into his arms back on the platform, crying her eyes out and assuring him it was because she was both relieved and happy. He had held her shoulders with one arm and had brushed the other hand through her wild curls; it had felt exactly as he had been imagining. Then, reluctantly, they had pulled apart, each with a shy, unsure smile on their lips.

‘Come on,’ he’d said, his voice croaky and holding out his arm to her. She’d taken it in that almost vice-like grip, though he wasn’t about to complain, and they’d headed home. He had wondered whether it might be too soon, too presumptive, to refer to it as their home. Probably, but he relished her closeness, the warmth that emanated from her, and the scent of her perfume. There seemed no need to speak, they understood each other regardless, and settled for casting furtive glances up and down at one another when they thought the other wasn’t looking. Indeed, he felt quite proud of himself for refraining from kissing her again because it was all he wanted to do. He had very much meant what he said about Weasley, however difficult it might be to refrain from anything more intimate than that aforementioned hug and this current arm clutching.

Eventually rounding the corner onto the street where the house stood, he had felt his elation deflate. Once again, perched above the window, was a post office owl, the letter clutched in its talons bearing the same handwriting as the last correspondence Hermione had received, though this time it looked, if possible, even more frenzied. It occurred to Severus that if every time he took Hermione for a walk in the hills they would return to a letter from Weasley, then they would simply have to desist in the activity.

‘Perfect timing,’ he grumbled as she relinquished her hold of him and took the letter from the bird.

Hermione smiled up at him meekly. ‘It is, really. I can reply to him tonight. The sooner I write, the sooner he will reply. The sooner he replies, the sooner we’re free to…’

He acknowledged her with a nod and a sigh and followed her into the house where she plucked a quill, ink bottle and spare bit of parchment from an old bureau pushed into the corner of the living room. Severus hesitated at the bottom of the stairs, not sure whether she would want him present for this or whether he ought to make himself scarce, then he recalled what she had said outside.

*The sooner he replies*… Did she mean to say that she wanted to wait until Weasley responded to her letter before she’d feel comfortable progressing things with him, Severus? He was not sure that was what he had meant when he’d asked for her to end things properly. Her own letter ending it with him would have sufficed as far as Severus was concerned.
'You mean to wait until Weasley replies to your letter before we... commence with anything?' he asked, trying and failing to keep the disappointment out of his tone as he finally followed her into the kitchen.

She was sat at the table with the quill hovering over the parchment as she considered how best to word her letter, but she paused now to look up at Severus. ‘Well... yes. I’ve never intended to be purposefully unkind to Ron. I still consider him a good friend.’

‘Mmm...’ Severus grumbled, sitting down opposite her.

‘What’s wrong? It was you who suggested I end it with him properly in the first place.’

‘You need to do whatever feels right,’ he said, wishing it wasn’t, but knowing it was true.

She nodded and set about starting the letter. He watched her write but did not look at what it was she was writing. He pretended to himself this was out of respect for her privacy, but in reality he knew it was because he didn’t want to read her heartfelt messages to Weasley. There was an undeniable prickle of jealousy in his heart, heightened by seeing Hermione’s emotions fluctuate between pleasant nostalgia, hurt, and sadness as she progressed through the epistle. Rather unreasonably he supposed he’d hoped this would not be difficult for her. I am starting a new life with Severus in Romania. I no longer love you. What else was there to say? Clearly plenty judging by the way her quill danced over the parchment for line after line. Eventually, unable to bare it any longer, he busied himself with making coffees, purely so he didn’t have to watch all that unfold in front of him.

~oOo~

A little later he cooked while she was out at the post office, and after they’d eaten they sat together on the settee, Severus with his arm stretched out along the back of it, around Hermione and yet not touching her, and Hermione huddled into a ball for warmth, again, close, but not touching. It was a terribly cold night and a fire roared under the hearth.

‘You know,’ he said, hating to break the peacefulness but unable to take the tension building inside him any longer, ‘he might never reply.’

‘What do you mean?’ she asked.
'Weasley. He might never reply to your letter, and where does that leave us? We just wait, hold off… forever?'

She nodded slowly and he watched her bottom lip begin to tremble, wanting to kiss it to make it stop. ‘I suppose… I suppose I’ve already cheated anyway,’ she said, tearing up, ‘emotionally if not physically.’

‘No-’

‘I have, and I hate myself for it.’

‘We can’t help how we feel.’

‘No, but we can help what we do about it!’

He removed his arm from the back of the settee and tucked his hands between his knees, his shoulders hunching. ‘Forget I said anything,’ he murmured, ‘we’ll wait… whatever you want.’

‘Severus…’ she said, and he felt her icy fingers touch his chin, turning his head so he had no choice but to look at her. ‘You were right, what you said this afternoon at the station. It isn’t fair on Ron. I owe him to tell him before we take this any further.’

Severus nodded solemnly in response. ‘I just… how long?’ he asked, somewhat defeated sounding.

‘A week. If I’ve heard nothing back by then, I think we can presume I’m not going to. Is that alright.’

*It isn’t great,* he thought, but said instead, ‘fine,’ a little grumpily.

Hermione laughed though, a small, sweet laugh. ‘I don’t think… I don’t think it would be too inappropriate for you to keep me warm though,’ she said, smiling at him hopefully and tentatively nestling herself against his torso. He looked down at her for a moment before placing a cautious arm
around her shoulders. For a time it felt a little awkward but, willing himself to relax, he eventually felt at peace and so began the longest week of his life.

~oOo~

No reply from Weasley was forthcoming in that first week and so, over the course of the following week, Hermione migrated gradually from the settee to Severus’ bedroom.

The first time, she had come to him in the early hours of the morning. The house groaned and creaked as a mountain storm raged outside, blasting the windows with sheets of hail and illuminating the rooms with sporadic flashes of lightening. She had knocked at the door almost silently. He lay for a moment before responding, wondering whether he had imagined it, then she knocked again a little louder.

‘Is everything alright?’ he’d asked concernedly as he opened the door, casting an unspoken *lumos*. She stood before him, huddled into herself, wearing one of his bobbly knitted jumpers and looking utterly adorable.

‘I’m *so* cold,’ she replied tiredly.

He’d reached out for her hand, tugged her gently into the room and they had lay down on the bed facing one another.

‘Here,’ he whispered, drawing her towards him in his arms. He had nestled his face into her hair and inhaled her scent.

‘Severus?’

‘Mmm?’

‘I forgot to ask you tonight… what’s one thing you’re grateful for today?’

This silly game had become something of a ritual for them over the past couple of months, and invariably Severus replied with something sarcastic or meaningless, but his reply tonight was to be a
‘The cold,’ he said, thanking Merlin that she had had an excuse to come to him, though secretly hoping it had been more than the cold that had brought her to his bed.

She laughed and he felt her wriggle a little in his arms until she had a good view looking up at him. Her face was barely discernible in the darkness and, landing only marginally off target, their lips met once more. This kiss was more firm and, in time, more exploratory than the last; she tasted minty from her toothpaste, her lips were plump and soft, and he regretted not having shaved today.

Severus would have had it go on forever, but a crash of thunder startled them and they pulled apart. He issued her a rare smile which she returned in kind before settling her head back onto his chest. He listened to her breathing steady and then knew she was asleep and allowed himself to drift off too.

~oOo~

Hermione awoke the next morning to find Severus laid on his side next to her, his head propped up on a bent elbow, watching her with a contemplative expression.

‘You lied to me,’ he said, his morning voice croaky.

‘About what?’ she asked, stretching her spine to dislodge the kinks and then turning onto her side to face him.

‘After you missed your first train you told me if I had lunch with you you would leave me alone “forever.” Yet, you are still here!’

She attempted to feign hurt but, unable to stop herself, smiled up at him. ‘Would you prefer if I left?’ she asked.

‘Hmm…’

But before he could reply with whatever witticism he was conjuring, she pressed her lips against his to silence them. ‘Think carefully about your answer,’ she said mischievously after breaking away.
'I suppose you can stay,’ he teased, ‘if you must!’

She responded by slapping him lightly on the arm and withdrawing from the covers, but he grabbed her wrist gently and she turned back to him.

‘Whether or not you intend to stay up here every night, perhaps I could clear a drawer for your things?’

‘Oh, that sounds very official!’

He pulled his hand away and sat up in the bed, looking a little abashed and suddenly nervous. She had never considered before that Severus Snape might be self-conscious. He had always been so assertive, so in control and self-assured, it had not seemed possible. Yet here he was, wringing his hands and paling furiously because he believed he had enacted some terrible faux pas and all because Hermione had tried to make a joke. She was beginning to learn that there were certain, quite specific, things that Severus found funny, and their relationship, or whatever it was, was clearly not one of them.

‘Sorry,’ she whispered, reaching out to him and taking his hand in hers reassuringly, ‘I was just kidding. That would be great, it’d certainly stop me cluttering up the living room with all my crap.’

‘No, I’m sorry,’ he conceded after a moment of silent contemplation as he rubbed his thumb up and down the back of her hand, ‘I’m not used to… reciprocity.’

‘We need to be able to have a laugh, Severus.’

‘Of course… it might just take me a little while to get used to having someone to… well, just someone, really. It might just take me a while to get used to having someone.’

He had spent the last week telling her of the varied and numerous rejections he had experienced in his life and she found herself watching him sadly for a moment before deciding that that was going to do neither of them any good. ‘Well you better get used to it quickly!’ she said instead, kissing him soundly one more time before jumping out of the bed, ‘let’s get breakfast. You’re going to be late for work if you don’t hurry.’
He’d followed her downstairs with a groan that clearly said he’d rather spend the day in bed with her than at the perfumers and, after they’d finished their breakfast and he’d left for the day, Hermione couldn’t deny that she was sorry to see him go. She endeavoured to busy herself throughout the day so as to trick time into passing more quickly.

Since buying her new clothes her belongings in the living room had begun to encroach beyond the settee and onto the floor and armchair, so she could see multiple benefits to her moving her things upstairs. Gathering them in arms she made her way unsteadily to the bedroom and dumped them on the bed. She had not taken much note of the bedroom while Severus had been in it, being far too preoccupied with him, but she saw now that in addition to the wire-framed bed there was a wardrobe, chest of drawers and, inconspicuously in the corner, a cauldron filled with a bubbling moss green liquid. She couldn’t remember if he’d specified specifically which drawer he didn’t mind her taking.

She decided on the bottom drawer in the chest, thinking it was unlikely Severus would keep any of his own more important items in there, but when she pulled it open it was to find it was filled with hundreds of small glass bottles. They were smaller than any potions phials she’d ever seen and she wondered whether they were for perfume. Whatever their original intent, however, those that were not empty were filled with more of the odd green potion that was brewing in the corner. He had told her he still brewed for his own stores, indeed, she’d seen his stash of hangover potions in the kitchen cupboard, but this drawer seemed reserved specifically for this potion, which Hermione did not recognise.

This was decidedly odd but Hermione determined not to ask Severus about for as long as she could restrain herself. They had been getting along so well over the past week or so since their decision to make a go of things had been made. With great effort on both their parts they had, at least until last night, gone no further than cuddling on the settee. They sat there each night after they’d eaten, discussing all manner of things and Hermione learning what a simultaneously interesting and sad life Severus had led. They had taken walks in the hills, trudging through the snow which had settled with a vengeance now December neared, and Severus had even taken her for drinks at The Moroi with Fiers and Stela on the Friday. The week had been wonderfully domestic. Hermione had cherished the normality of it all and didn’t want to spoil the memory by potentially causing an argument about invaded privacy.

~oOo~

Severus stood in the bathroom examining himself in front of the mirror, feeling insecure and a little embarrassed. He looked at his face in the mirror. He thought he looked old. He pressed two fingers to the wrinkles at either side of his eyes in an attempt to smooth them out, only for them to inevitably spring back into place once he let go. His hair was, for the most part, still black, but it was beginning to grey at the temples. He was tired looking, his skin only a shade less waxy than it had been when he spent day and night in the Hogwarts dungeons. His nose took precedence over the landscape, large and hooked and ugly, no two ways about it. His body was perhaps a little better. Years of lifting heavy cauldrons and stalking about the castle had kept his limbs muscular and lithe, though in recent years his belly had softened in a most undignified manner, only worsening since he’d had
Hermione cooking her delicious meals for him everyday. There were also the scars. He had not fared so badly as some, but Nagini’s bite had left ridged lines of puckered, silvery skin up his neck and along his collar bone which disgusted him to look at, and, of course, his Dark Mark, still visible as a pinkish stain on his left forearm. All in all he felt he looked positively average for a man of his age and, as such, could not fathom how someone like Hermione could find him attractive in the least.

Nonetheless, things had progressed at a steady rate over the past few nights. There had been kissing and cuddling abound but Severus, woefully inexperienced at relationships as he was, knew that tonight would mark a shift. He had taken her out for dinner earlier in the evening, understanding that this was something couples traditionally did. He had chosen the restaurant they had lunched together at all those weeks ago, feeling this would imply sentimentality, and, moreover, knowing the magically heated veranda was properly romantic. She had seemed to enjoy it and he had partaken of perhaps one glass of wine too many for courage.

Now he was dawdling in the bathroom while a beautiful witch waited for him in the next room. Taking one last glance at his uninspiring reflection, he turned and his made his way back to bed…

~oOo~

Hermione awoke before Severus the next morning and watched him sleep for a while. He lay on his stomach, one arm tucked under his pillow and the other reaching out slightly towards Hermione. Last night had been positively splendid as far as Hermione was concerned and she hoped that today they might decide what “whatever this was,” actually was. Then she turned and found her gaze drift over to the bottom drawer in the chest of drawers - she was also going to have to satisfy her curiosity with regards to those potions. They gave her a bad feeling and her bad feelings were seldom wrong. Sliding out from under the covers and bracing herself against the cold, she padded over to the drawer and withdrew some of the empty bottles.

Just as she had, perhaps slyly, hoped Severus was roused by the clinking of the glass. ’Severus, can I ask you something?’ she said.

‘That’s becoming something of a mantra,’ he snarked groggily, lifting his head up from the pillow and looking at her through bleary eyes. ‘Later. Come back to bed.’

‘Err… no,’ she said, her inquisitiveness getting the better of her, ‘what are these?’ she asked, with an air of someone getting something off their chest that had been bothering them for a long time. She stood and held the empty bottles out to him and he focused an intense glare on them. She could practically hear his mind whirring as he battled to think up a convincing lie, then he shook his head and turned so he was sitting up in the bed and could look at her properly. His hand wandered absentmindedly to his neck.
‘They’re anti-venoms, or a sort of synthetic reproduction. They contain nothing of the original venom,’ he spoke hesitantly after a long moment.

Hermione jaw went slack, ‘Nagini…?’ she asked, aghast. He nodded. ‘And what happens if you don’t take them?’

He failed to hold her gaze and this told her all she needed to know.

‘You’re telling me that all this time, when you’ve been helping me back to health, you’ve been ill yourself?’

‘I’m not ill.’

‘But you’re not well.’

He considered this with a slightly furrowed brow. ‘No… not exactly.’
The Potion

Whatever explanation Hermione had been expecting for the odd green potions, this wasn’t it. It had crossed her mind that they might be contraband, and for a little while she had harboured the rather more optimistic hope that they were something innovative he was working on, that perhaps he’d gotten back some of his past passion for potions.

Instead, the truth made her feel cold and light-headed. She gaped at his admission, not sure how to articulate herself in response, and when she finally did speak her voice was low and unsure. ‘Are… are you dying?’

He smiled and not for the first time his nonchalance in the face of adversity frustrated her, ‘we’re all dying,’ he replied with a small shrug.

She shook her head slowly and placed the phials back in the drawer before she dropped them. She didn’t trust her appendages; her arms and legs felt weak and, worried they might betray her and she’d fall, she shuffled forward to sit beside him on the edge of the bed. ‘You know what I mean. Are you dying?’ she repeated more emphatically.

With his left hand he traced the scars along his neck and collar, his long fingers rising and falling as they ran over the ridges and valleys of his damaged skin. He had the good grace to adopt a more sombre expression before he continued. ‘I think it is possible that if I didn’t take them when I need them then… I might die, yes.’

‘Oh my God, Severus,’ she muttered disbelievingly, leaning back against the pillows next to him as she tried to make sense of what this all meant. ‘I don’t know what to say.’

‘There’s isn’t anything to say.’

She reached out and pulled the hand that was still stroking his scars away from his neck before he made them sore, but once she’d taken it she felt like she didn’t really know what to do and sat with it limply in her lap. ‘Perhaps… just help me to understand a little better.’

He sighed and exhaled in reluctant acquiescence, then squeezed her hand in a gentle, reassuring way. ‘For a long while after I was bitten,’ he began, sounding very much as though he was telling her this against his better judgement, ‘I was fine. The anti-venom I’d been taking in anticipation of the attack must have built up a better tolerance than I’d thought it would. The bleeding was a bigger concern
but when I eventually managed to stem that I… well, I thought by some miracle I was alright.’

‘Then what happened?’

‘I started with the odd twinge in my neck, then I’d wake up in the night and my blood would feel like fire coursing through my veins, then I’d black out and wake up a while later with only a hazy recollection of what had happened.’

‘Oh, Severus…’ she murmured, tightening her grip on his hand now. She hated to think of him alone and suffering.

‘Mmm… then, about a year later, I was in Italy working at vineyard, picking grapes, and I fell ill, passed out one day. I hadn’t been right for a while now I look back, but at the time I didn’t think much of it. I woke up in a Muggle hospital and you can imagine how baffled they were. They determined I had been poisoned. I suppose they tested my blood or something, and they knew it was from a snake bite, so they’d given me anti-venom, but they couldn’t work out how I’d survived. I’d guess it was because of the tolerance I’d built up though. It was weaker than before but still fighting the effects of Nagini’s bite. Anyway, I discharged myself and fled through Austria, just in case the story of the man surviving a strange snake attack made the news and word got out. I knew something like that would cause suspicion if it reached wizarding England and I couldn’t take that chance, not when I’d come so far.’

‘Once I reached Vienna I took stock of things. I knew the situation was quite serious by then, that I still wasn’t right and needed to act quickly, so I set about developing the closest thing to an anti-venom as I could. It took a while, many weeks, and for the first time then, I thought I would die. Not even in the immediate aftermath of Nagini’s attack did I honestly think I would die, maybe that was the effects of the adrenaline, I don’t know, but in Vienna I was in such excruciating pain towards the end I would have happily died!’

‘Severus!’ she exclaimed, hating to hear him talk like that, but her voice was quiet.

‘I would, I can’t describe it. I just wanted to be put out of my misery, and then… well, after Merlin knows how many failed attempts, the potion was ready, and it wasn’t perfect, but it worked and it’s kept me alive for the last four or so years. When I start to feel the burning in my veins I know it’s time to take another potion. Some days I need more than others, that’s why I keep such a large stock, to be sure I don’t run out.’

‘Well,’ she said, wanting to lighten the mood before she succumbed to tears, though not entirely sure it was appropriate, ‘you do have an excellent propensity for survival… for which I am immensely
‘Yeah, like a cockroach,’ he mumbled glumly, staring at his fingers which were still entwined with Hermione’s.

‘Honestly Severus, enough of that!’ she reprimanded. Yesterday she would have given anything for him to open up to her like this, but now he had, it was an awful lot to take in, especially with emotions still running so high following last night’s developments in their relationship. Hermione had envisioned a morning spent in bed, wrapped in one another’s arms, not to discover that the man she greatly suspected she was growing to love, was potentially dying. But not only that, Severus had also divulged an awful lot about his state of mind, whether intentionally, or not, and what she’d learned about that was worrying in and of itself.

Hermione felt selfish and foolish for being so self-indulged over the past weeks that she had been oblivious to all this. Perhaps she had not thought Severus Snape capable of such emotions, and so had dismissed the signs of his suffering. She knew differently now.

‘I wish you’d never found those bottles and I wish I hadn’t had to tell you any of this…’ he groaned and withdrew his hand from hers, swinging his legs out of the bed so he didn’t have to face her.

‘You’d have had to tell me eventually.’

He let his head hang, curtains of dark hair falling in front of his face. After a long moment of tense silence he spoke again. ‘Is… is this going to change anything, you know, between us?’

‘Of course not,’ she assured him, and it was true, though her mind still raced.

‘Promise?’ he said, sounding uncharacteristically vulnerable.

‘Promise.’

He nodded slowly and then twisted slightly so she could see his profile. ‘Then there’s one last thing…’ he trailed off, breathing heavily, but, now almost frantic, she placed a hand on his shoulder to urge him on, ‘I… err… recently, maybe for the last six months or so, I’ve been needing to take the potions more regularly. The pain has been more intense and more frequent,’ he said. He paused momentarily but then spoke again before Hermione had chance to interrupt, ‘I mean, I’m fine, really,
I am, but… well, I just thought you ought to know…’ and with that he turned from her once more and let his head fall into his hands.

Hermione manoeuvred herself onto her knees and situated herself behind Severus, wrapping her arms slowly around his shoulders. She hoped that this would be a comfort to him to some extent, but more than anything she just wanted to be close to him.

‘We’ll figure something out,’ she whispered soothingly, her mouth pressed against his neck. She could feel his heart pounding in his chest and cherished it.

~oOo~

They had spent the rest of the day carefully avoiding discussing the subject any further, which gave Hermione the opportunity to absorb and process it. Despite herself she found that frequently she cast concerned glances in Severus’ direction, based on some ridiculous logic that, now she had knowledge of his illness, he might drop dead at any moment, never mind the fact that he had been suffering for months, nay years, while she had been blissfully unaware.

Severus’ services had not been required at the perfumers and so they had spent the morning moseying through Bolstrad’s secondhand bookshops and lunching in their now favourite café, before taking a walk through the snow blanketed hills. Severus had held her hand throughout, something he hadn’t really done before, and as a result Hermione had felt brave enough to broach the subject of their relationship status.

‘Severus..?’ she began as they trudged through three feet high snow.

‘Yes, you may ask me something,’ he interrupted with a small smirk.

‘I was just wondering what, I mean… whether we’d decided what this… us, I mean, is yet?’

‘Hmm…’ he pondered, ‘well… I can tell you what it is to me, but perhaps that will be different to what it is for you.’

‘Are you willing to risk it and tell me what it is to you?’
He stopped walking and turned to face her, maintaining his grip on her hand. He inhaled deeply as he prepared to make his declaration. 'If I’m honest, I could probably go my whole life without verbalising this, but I’ve made that mistake before…’ he paused, a sad look haunting his eyes, and she suspected he was thinking of Lily, ‘but I promised myself, when I got my second chance, that I wasn’t going to make the same mistake again. And especially after this morning I think I need to say it out loud. I want you to know, for sure, and I don’t want to repeat my mistakes.’

‘Yeah,’ she whispered, the anticipation almost painful.

‘I… I rather think I’ve fallen in love you,’ he then said, concluding by closing his mouth tight shut and looking down at her with an anxious, anticipatory expression, as though he thought she might laugh at him, or worse, turn and leave.

Instead she nodded slowly as she made sense of this, and then a smile crept across her lips. ‘I was hoping you would say that,’ she said, ‘and I want you to know… I love you too.’

She saw his whole body relax in relief and he leaned down to draw her into a firm kiss, which she reciprocated gladly. Kissing him had become a regular occurrence, but it was no less luxurious for it. He had told her last night, before they had slept together, about his fears of disappointing her in many varied ways, and she had assured him that she did not think that was possible. Now, as their tongues curled around one another, she could taste the coffee he’d drunk over lunch and his stubble scratched her chin, but in that moment she felt as though, so long as they were together, they could achieve anything.

‘Today has been… emotionally turbulent,’ he said, when he finally pulled away.

‘I dare say you haven’t shown so much emotion in years!’ she joked.

‘In a lifetime,’ he replied, looking a little pleased with himself and placing another kiss on her forehead as he tugged her into his arms.

And, as he held her, she knew now what she must do: she was going to find a cure for his ailment. She would research, she would experiment, she would do whatever it took.

~oOo~
The moment he left for work the next day, Hermione made her way to the library. It was small, poorly stocked, and everything, obviously, was in Romanian, but with the help of the librarian she found their scant selection of potions books. *Vindecător* meant healing, the librarian said, and so she set about hunting through each book to find those with a section thus titled.

There were three, in the end, which looked sufficiently advanced to be helpful. Thick, dusty tomes, filled with intricate diagrams and complex instruction. At least they might be helpful once she’d worked out how to translate them. She was a little concerned she might have to learn Romanian in its entirety before she would be able to make proper sense of them, and then an idea struck her.

Hermione had continued to attend meetings with The Watch regularly since that first time, and under her guidance they had begun to develop a more durable strategy for tackling The Witch Hunters, for which the residents of Bolstrad were growing increasingly grateful. Indeed, every time she left the meetings, Nicu would see her out and would unfailingly say: ‘if there is ever anything I can do to return the favour, ‘Ermione, just let me know.’

Perhaps she would call in that favour and ask him to help her translate these books.
Severus was sat in his armchair, staring absently at the letter that had arrived addressed to her, when Hermione came bustling through the front door, her arms laden with books, and Nicu in tow. Severus had jumped up to help her the moment he saw her struggling, but the sight of Nicu had thrown him off slightly and he’d hesitated by the settee, watching as Nicu fetched more bags of books from outside and deposited them on the coffee table.

‘Oh, hi,’ Hermione said, noticing Severus with a look of mild surprise and making her way over to kiss him on the cheek, ‘I thought you’d still be at work.’

‘The shop was quiet,’ he mumbled. ‘Fiers sent me home.’

‘Oh, never mind. You’ve met Nicu before, haven’t you?’ she asked, gesturing over to their guest.

‘Briefly,’ Severus replied, his slightly petulant tone inadvertently betraying his latent jealousy. He had met Nicu once or twice before and thought the man seemed pleasant enough, but that wasn’t to say he liked the idea of him sniffing, as he saw it, around Hermione. Severus was the jealous sort and he had made his peace with that.

Hermione was looking at him a little oddly but seemed, thankfully, to decide to overlook his tone. ‘We’ve been into wizarding Bucharest. Nicu’s been helping me find and translate some books,’ she explained.

Despite his best efforts to remain civil, Severus felt his expression sour, partially at the thought of them enjoying a day together in Bucharest, which he quickly shunted from his mind, and partially because of these damn books. ‘What kind of books?’ he enquired, peering down at the mountainous pile of tomes on his coffee table, unable to make much sense of them other than to deduce that they appeared to be mainly potions and herbology related.

Hermione had been acting strangely furtive for the best part of two weeks now and Severus was wondering whether he ought to be concerned. On numerous occasions he had awoken in the night to find himself alone, only to venture downstairs to see Hermione pouring over books by dim candlelight. He acknowledged there was nothing particularly unusual about Hermione Granger pouring over books, however, it had not escaped Severus’ notice that the books were all in Romanian and, unless she had acquired an extensive grasp of the language in a stunningly short space of time, he was at a loss as to how she was understanding them. It crossed his mind that he should probably just ask her, but there was something about her secretiveness that suggested she did not want him knowing, and so initially he had determined to wait until she saw fit to tell him.
For his own peace of mind, he had concluded that it was research for The Watch and had dismissed it from his thoughts. Perhaps she simply did not think he would be interested. He had enjoyed seeing her so passionate about something again, and indeed, she would return from each meeting and regale him with tales of attacks they’d intercepted or the next phase of their plan, but Severus couldn’t pretend to be overly interested in what she had to say. It was the way whole face lit her, how her eyes glinted with excitement, and the eagerness of her tone as she spoke that fascinated him. It had also given her something of a social life, which pleased him inasmuch as he did not think it was something he could offer her. Drinks at The Moroi with Fiers every now and again was about Severus’ limit in this regard. But Hermione had taken to lunching with various members of The Watch, and he would not begrudge her that. And now it occurred to him, perhaps irrationally, but time would tell on that count, that Nicu might be taking advantage of said luncheons to try and woo her.

‘They’re just for something I’m researching,’ Hermione replied, issuing Severus a pointed look that suggested it would not be in his best interests to probe too deeply at the current time.

He merely scowled, at no one in particular, as an altogether more disturbing thought infiltrated his mind. Perhaps this studying wasn’t related to The Watch at all but rather was in response to his revelation regarding his sickness. Since that morning when he had poured his soul out to her, there had been pleasantly scant mention of it. He had wondered whether he would ever have told her if she hadn’t found those phials in his bottom drawer. He had also considered whether subconsciously he had wanted her to find the potions so that he would have to tell her; this would certainly account for his uncharacteristic vagueness when he gave her free range of the bedroom to make room for her belongings. It was true he had felt unburdened once he’d shared his secret with her, but whether he would have told if he was given a choice, he did not know and he did not know what these books might have to do with it, but now the notion had struck him, he was determined to find out.

‘…Severus?’ Hermione was saying, looking up at him quizzically.

‘Uh… what?’ he said, realising he had been absorbed by his pondering.

‘Nicu was saying goodbye.’

‘Oh, right. Bye,’ he grumbled, a little offhandedly. He couldn’t shake his dour mood, brought on earlier by the receipt of that aforementioned letter, and reaffirmed by both the presence of Nicu, which was wholly unfair to the man, and his new belief that, whatever it was Hermione was up to, was something to do with his being ill.

‘Goodbye,’ Nicu said, evidently sensing the atmosphere and wanting to leave as much as Severus
wanted him to, ‘I will see you on Wednesday, ‘Ermione.’ And with that he was gone.

‘Severus,’ Hermione admonished once the door had closed behind him, ‘that was a bit–’

‘-Sorry.’

‘Are you alright?’ she asked, sitting down on the settee and pulling off her boots to massage her feet.

With a sigh he sat down beside her and indicated she should lay down and put her feet in his lap so he could rub them himself. ‘What’re the books for?’ he asked.

‘Oh… I was hoping I could clear them away before you got in from work to be honest… I didn’t want to say anything until I’d found a solution… if there is one!’

‘A solution to what?’ he said, with a horrible feeling that he knew exactly where this was going.

She studied him for a moment then withdrew her feet as she tucked her knees under her chin and shuffled closer to him, brushing stray strands of hair out from his eyes. ‘I meant what I said,’ she replied following a pregnant pause, ‘when I said we’ll figure something out. I’m going to find something that, if it can’t heal you entirely, will at least improve efficacy of your potion.’

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose between the forefinger and the thumb of his left hand debating with himself how best to address this. If this was indeed what she was in search of, it needed to end before she discovered the answer. ‘With respect,’ he spoke carefully, ‘I am a potions master, do you not think I would have considered all the possibilities?’

‘Well… I would, but…’

‘I am fully aware of the potential ingredients out there that might increase the potency of those damn potions,’ he snapped, his frustrations finally getting the better of him. ‘But I would prefer if we could just go on as before,’ he continued, trying desperately to even his tone but ending up sounding pleading. ‘I’m fine. You’ve seen that. If you’d not found the potions you’d be none the wiser, so there’s really no need for all this!’
'There isn’t if you tell me what it is,’ she replied, stroking his cheek soothingly and not for the first time he was grateful of her patience with him.

He considered this for a moment and then thought better of it. ‘It doesn’t matter what it is,’ he said, ‘it isn’t available in Romania and it’s rare even in its native country.’

‘Oh, come on Severus! There must be a-’

‘-Look, I don’t want to argue about this and I certainly don’t want it to define our relationship,’ he said softly but with an air of finality.

She looked disappointed but reluctant to press the matter. ’Fine. But I’m going to keep looking. If nothing else it gives me something to do,’ she said.

He looked at her now and turned in his seat so he had better access to her lips. ‘I can think of something better we could be doing instead,’ he said with a smirk.

‘You won’t distract me!’

‘Oh yeah?’ he said, pulling her into a firm kiss and running his fingers through her hair. This was a most luxurious experience and he didn’t think he could ever tire of it.

‘Humph… perhaps you can,’ she grumbled, pulling away after a prolonged moment, ‘for now at least!’ she added, grinning as she took his hand and led him upstairs.

~oOo~

Feeling considerably more cheerful than he had done earlier in the day, Severus followed Hermione back downstairs an hour or so later. They had worked up quite an appetite and had decided on pizza, something easy and unhealthy, for tea.

‘When did this arrive?’ she asked, seeing the letter discarded on the coffee table as they made their way through the living room to the kitchen.
‘Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. It was waiting for you when I returned home from work,’ he replied.

‘It’s not from Ron,’ she stated, looking intently at the way her name was written on the envelope. ‘Harry, I think.’

‘What an honour,’ Severus replied scathingly, though when he saw the look on her face he regretted it. Her eyes looked a little tearful and she began chewing her bottom lip, a sure sign of distress. She dropped into the armchair with the letter held limply in her hands. ‘I can leave you to read it in private if you prefer,’ he offered.

‘No,’ she said, ‘it’s fine,’ and inhaling deeply she tore open the letter and began to read.

He watched her expression carefully, trying to determine her reaction, but her face was now fairly impassive. The time she was taking over it suggested she had read it through a good few times, and when she was finally done with it she handed it to Severus.

‘You want me to read it?’

She merely nodded in reply and he turned his gaze to Potter’s letter:

_Dear Hermione,_

_Firstly, how are you? Whatever’s happened, whatever your plans are, all I ask is that you stay in touch and let us know that you’re alright._

_Ron showed me the letter you sent him. I don’t know if you intended for him to do that, but I’m glad he did. He couldn’t bring himself to write. We’ve had to stop him twice from storming the Ministry and demanding Snape’s immediate extradition. We have to remind him that we don’t actually don’t know where you are but that’s such a scary thought! You out there, Merlin knows where, with him!_

_I want to believe that you’re too intelligent for Snape to have some kind of hold over you, you’ve always been so strong-willed and focused it doesn’t seem likely, but you can’t deny how weird, not to mention concerning, this is. We all know what frame of mind you were in when you quit your job and went looking for him, it’s hard to believe you when you say that it’s him that’s made you happy_
again. What can he offer you that your friends and family can’t?

I think we’re all feeling a little confused and betrayed but Ron more so than any of us. He’d hate me for telling you this, but I think you need to know: Ron had bought an engagement ring when you wrote to him last and told him you’d be back in a month. I hadn’t seen him so happy since before you left, and then you never came and then he received your letter. And as if your not coming back is bad enough, you tell us you’re staying to be with Snape? Whatever he did in the war, it doesn’t make the way he did before and the way he treat us in school OK! He was a piece of work, Hermione, you don’t need to me to remind you of that, I’m sure!

For what it’s worth I think you’re making a terrible mistake, but it’s your mistake to make and I will respect that. If there is ever anything that you need, please do hesitate to contact me!

Love always, Harry.

Severus took a moment to digest what he’d read. All things considered he didn’t think it was too critical an assessment of his characters. He had fully anticipated that Potter and Weasley would blame him for keeping Hermione from them, and that was fine so long as that was not how she felt. ‘You told them everything,’ he said quietly once his myriad emotions had settled in the pit of his stomach as something resembling mild unease, and he felt he could trust his voice not to quiver.

‘I don’t think I intended to initially, but once I started writing, it felt like the right thing to do…’ then she paused and her expression change to concern, ‘Oh, I’m so sorry!’

‘Whatever for?’

‘Did you not want people knowing about us..?’

He reached out and squeezed her knee, then observed her with an elevated eyebrow. ‘Why would I not want people knowing that the most wonderful witch I ever knew is in love with me?’ he said. Hermione flushed profusely and though there was still a trace of sadness in her eyes, she now wore a small but genuine smile. She looked at a loss as to how to respond, however, which certainly Severus could appreciate as he was not usually in the habit of such demonstrative affection, in fact, he didn’t think he’d told her he loved her again since that first time out on the snowy walk. ‘I’d rather thought,’ he continued, ‘that you might be a bit embarrassed of me. I thought you must have given some other excuse for your not returning!’
‘Certainly not!’ she exclaimed, moving over, dropping herself into Severus’ lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and resting her head on his shoulder.

‘Baffling,’ he commented, only half-joking, and she slapped gently in admonishment. He liked that she didn’t like him thinking lowly of himself.

‘I think the lack of response had been bothering me more than I realised,’ she said after a moment of silence, ‘I just wanted to know where I stand with them. I feel much… freer for knowing, even though I do feel awful for poor Ron! Maybe I should have gone back and told him in person…’

‘Well, it’s too late now. Are you sure you’re alright?’

‘I will be,’ she replied, ‘Harry was right, what he said about me being strong-willed and focused. I know what I want Severus, and it’s you!’

He shook his head with mild incredulity. ‘My question would be much the same as Potter’s,’ he began, once he’d built up the courage to ask, ‘what it is you think I can offer you that your friends and family can’t?’

‘Are you fishing, Severus?’ she asked with a smirk.

‘Maybe!’

She pulled back and looked him in the eyes. ‘I meant what I said when I told them you make me happy! I hope you believe me!’

‘I’m beginning to realise you don’t say anything you don’t mean,’ he responded.

‘Mmm… and you’d do well to remember that next time I threaten to hex you for leaving your clothes all over the bedroom floor!’

He laughed, pulling her back down into a firm embrace, and they remained like that, save for a break in which they ate their pizzas, for much of the rest of the night. Severus had a maddening habit of distrusting anything anyone said to him that was remotely complimentary, so whilst he was eager to
believe Hermione when she said she loved him and that he made her happy, he would likely never be able to believe her wholeheartedly. But, he reminded himself, she was there, right now, curled in his arms and no one could take that away from him.

~oOo~

‘I wish you’d leave this be!’ he groaned, taking off his travel robes and depositing them on the robe stand by the door. He was returning from work, a few days after the letter had arrived, to find her, once again, with her head stuck in one the books she’d picked up in Bucharest.

‘No,’ she replied simply and defiantly.

‘I was hoping you’d get bored, leave it alone!’

‘When have you ever known me give up in the pursuit of knowledge? If, as you say, there’s some way I can ensure you get longer, that we get longer, then I’m going to find out what it is!’

‘But it’s pointless. It doesn’t grow in Romania…’ Realising what he’d accidentally divulged he clenched his mouth shut.

Her head snapped up to look at him. ’So it’s a plant?’

‘What?’

‘You said it grows…’

‘No…’ Internally, he groaned with frustration at himself. She had this effect on him, where his inhibitions were lowered, he was put off guard, and it made him inclined to speak without thinking. It simply wasn’t like him, all those years as a spy had made him uncommonly careful with things like that, and in such a short time, Hermione had swept in and diminished his barriers of defence.

‘Severus…’ she implored, scrambling to her feet and clutching at his sleeves so he couldn’t evade her; she must have sensed, quite rightly, that he was preparing to flee. ‘If there isn’t anything I can do to get it, then it won’t hurt to tell me, will it? I can think of better books I’d like to be reading than
He considered this and deciding he would quite like not to have to share her attention with the books any longer, thought it might be acceptable to tell her, so long as there were conditions.

‘Fine,’ he practically spat, though his frustrations were not directed at her, ‘but if I tell you, you have to promise that that will be the end of it. That you won’t be angry and that you won’t go hunting for it?’

‘I promise. At this point I think I’d just like to know for my own peace of mind,’ she sighed.

‘You should know, I’m telling this in the spirit of honesty but it is very much against my better judgement.’

‘Severus!’ she implored.

He groaned. ‘Very well… it’s… ugh… Snowdonia hawkweed’ he said shortly.

‘Snow… Severus!’ she exclaimed, letting his arms drop and taking a step back as she glared up at him with wide, disbelieving eyes.

‘I’m not going back,’ he said hastily, ‘not for the sake of a weed when I am perfectly fine here!’

‘You’re telling me,’ she said, a little breathlessly, ‘that you refuse to return to Britain when the one plant that might make all this go away, is indigenous to it? You’re telling me that you’re so stubborn… so bloody pig-headed, that even if it might save your life, you won’t return?’

‘That’s precisely what I’m telling you, yes,’ he replied conversationally, and that was the crux of the matter. Snowdonia hawkweed was incredibly rare, one couldn’t simply arrive in Wales and begin foraging for it. ‘You promised you wouldn’t be angry.’

‘That was before I knew how selfish you were being,’ she said, ‘what… what about me?’
‘What about you?’

‘Severus… I love you. I… I know it’s only early days yet, but, you know, I wouldn’t go into a relationship if I didn’t think it had the potential to go somewhere, and now you’re telling me that we might not get that long together, even though there’s this obtainable solution, just because you refuse to return to Britain?’

He didn’t want to be the cause of her upset but this was not an issue he was willing to compromise on and he told her as much.

‘I just can’t believe you’d be so… so inconsiderate of my feelings when we’ve come this far. Don’t you want us to be together for a very long time?’

‘Forever,’ he replied, ‘however long that will be. It could be a very long time.’

‘Really? You think?’ she said, though her tone was mocking, ‘I’ve been watching you, ever since you told me about it… I notice when you’re writhing about in your sleep, grinding your teeth and sweating profusely; when you disappear to take one of your potions; I see how exhausted you are the next day as though you didn’t sleep at all… It’s been mere weeks, Severus, but I’ve noticed how it’s becoming more and more frequent, so don’t tell me you’re fine and that we might have a long time when it clearly isn’t true!’

She strode past him with that and shrugged on a thick woollen robe from the stand.

‘Hermione…’ he said, reaching out to try and stop her from leaving, but she evaded him with a twist of her body.

‘No, Severus!’

‘You’re coming back?’ he asked, feeling thoroughly panicked.

She looked up at him and her hazel eyes were filled with unspilt tears of anguish which he cursed himself for causing. ‘I just need a little time on my own,’ she replied after a moment, and with that, she was gone.
Returning to the house late in the evening, Hermione knocked on the door tentatively as though having forgotten she lived there. She had strayed far further into the mountains than she had ever gone with Severus, paying little attention to where she was going and soon finding herself lost and panicked in the dark. For the first time in many weeks the threat of the Witch Hunters caused her genuine fright and every rustling of the undergrowth or snapping of a branch she had been sure was them, come to exact their revenge for her having gotten away from them before. In her terror it had been a good half hour of aimless wandering before she remembered her own Four-Point spell and had cast an almost silent point me which had guided her back to the house.

Following the knock Severus opened the door quickly, as though he had been waiting just behind it all that time. She saw his entire body relax with relief as he realised it was, indeed, her. ‘Thank Merlin,’ he said, sounding a trifle angry, and then he reached out and pulled her into his arms. He clutched her tightly, almost painfully, and in a rather frantic fashion, but she stayed there willingly, finally feeling safe as she listened to his heart pounding in his chest.

A moment later he released her as curtly as he had grabbed her, his hands on her upper arms as he held her at a distance, apparently looking her over for signs of injury. ‘You’re freezing! Where’ve you been?’ he demanded.

‘I just went for a walk in the hills,’ she said, shivering again now she no longer benefited from the warmth of being close to him.

‘You’ve been gone for hours! I’ve been worried sick!’ he spat, and though Hermione acknowledged his anger was a byproduct of concern, she found his hypocrisy irritating.

‘Well, now you know how I feel about you!’ she snapped, pushing his arms off of her and striding past him. She threw some kindling onto the fire under the hearth so it roared back to life and then stood in front of it holding her hands out to the warmth. As much as she just wanted for him to hold her, she wasn’t about to let the issue of the Snowdonia Hawkweed be swept under the carpet without a fight. He meant too much to her for that.

‘Hermione…’ he began, turning to face her but not moving from by the door. ‘I can’t go back… I thought you understood.’

She sighed and let her arms fall loosely to her sides. ‘I thought I understood too, but that was before all this about the Snowdonia Hawkweed. I don’t understand why your anonymity is more important than…’ she wanted to say ‘me’, ask him why his anonymity was more important than her, but she
felt that would sound egotistical and presumptuous, so settled instead on saying, ‘I don’t understand why your anonymity is more important than your life.’

He glared at her, the flickering flames of the fire causing vague shadows to dance about his face, and he looked angrier than she had seen him since her school days. ‘I’m a traitor and I am a murderer,’ he spat, his tone filled with self-loathing, and she flinched as he spoke, ‘my life is worthless.’

‘Don’t… don’t say that,’ she said feebly. ‘It’s more complicated than that and you know it.’

‘Not in my head it isn’t. Just as I have to live with seeing Lily’s cold, dead face in my dreams, so too do I have to see that fucking sparkle disappear from Dumbledore’s eyes as he fell from the tower; so too do I see the look on Charity Burbage’s face as she pleaded for me to help before he killed her; and the fear in students’ eyes when the Carrows were torturing them and they thought I might help… That’s a heavy burden to bare for a long life, Hermione. So my choice is to return to England, potentially to be incarcerated in Azkaban, being tortured by these visions for a very long time, or I can stay here and live a life which… may be shorter, and therefore is less time enduring these visions, but will be so much richer.’

She frowned at him. ‘You sound as though you have been thinking about this for a very long time.’

‘Of course I have. I don’t want to die, it’s not like that… I could have let it end when Nagini bit me if that’s what I wanted. I just… well, I’m going for quality rather than quantity, if that makes sense. But… I’m not sure I can achieve that now if you’re not in it.’

She sighed. ‘I am… emotionally exhausted,’ she replied, dropping into the armchair heavily, ‘why should invest in something that I know is only going to cause me more heartache?’

He looked deflated but his response came flowing from him almost immediately. ‘You are the single best thing that has ever happened to me,’ he said in an urgent tone. ‘For now, the potions I have are… sufficient, so long as I take them regularly,’ he continued, perching beside her on the arm of the chair, his hands tucked between his knees as he often did when he was feeling vulnerable, ‘we may have months, more likely we’ll have years, but… however long we have, I promise I will spend every day making it worth your while.’

She considered this for an long moment and wasn’t even sure what her reply was going to be herself until she started to talk, ‘if our time is precious then… I don’t want to spend it arguing.’
'Me neither.'

Sighing again she reached up and pulled one of his hands out from between his knees, entwining her own stubby digits around his slender counterparts and squeezing tightly.

‘Does that mean you’re staying?’ he asked and his tone was childlike and reminded her of his need for constant reassurance. He had been abandoned too many times to believe, no matter how many times she insisted, that she wouldn’t leave him too.

She nodded. ‘It means from now on, we’re in this together,’ she said, and indeed she was willing to let this issue drop, but she had also been struck by something of a plan.

~oOo~

Following the heightened emotions of the Snowdonia Hawkweed debacle, the weeks before Christmas rolled by uneventfully as Hermione and Severus settled back into something of a routine. Severus’ services at the perfumers were required more frequently to help cope with the demand of Christmas shoppers, whilst Hermione kept herself busy with business for The Watch. With the exception of Wednesdays, when Hermione attended her meetings, they kept their evenings and weekends free to spend together, either reading by the fire or taking walks into the snowcapped mountains, and on one occasion Severus begrudgingly helped Hermione decorate a Christmas tree she’d bought.

Severus couldn’t remember the last time he had bought anyone a Christmas present, in fact, he couldn’t remember the last time he had properly celebrated Christmas at all, and he had thought long and hard about what would be a suitable gift for Hermione. She didn’t strike him as the kind of woman who would be interested in expensive jewellery or trinkets, something for which he was especially thankful as he was by no means rich. They had had a brief discussion about money some weeks ago. Hermione was determined to pay towards rent and other household essentials out of her savings, and though Severus might have preferred if she didn’t have to dip into these, he was endlessly grateful as his meagre wage would certainly have struggled to maintain the both of them.

As it was he had decided that thoughtful yet practical gifts would be most appropriate, but come Christmas morning he found his stomach tied in knots of nervousness, wondering, as she sat crossed legged on the floor, pulling out presents from under the tree, whether he ought to have bought her something a little more special.

‘Err… save that one for last,’ he suggested as she picked up the smallest gift, ‘open that one first instead.’
'Alright…' she said, picking up the gift he’d pointed to. She peeled back the wrapping to reveal a mahogany box decorated with an ornate floral design. ‘Oh, it’s beautiful,’ she said, and then frowned as she struggled to open it.

‘It’s a Romanian puzzle box,’ he explained, ‘let me show you.’ He took the box from Hermione and showed her how a panel slid out from the side to reveal a key, and another slid down at the front to reveal a lock, which, once turned, opened the box to reveal a small space for keeping treasures. ‘I thought maybe you could use it as a memory box or something… you’ve collected things from your travels haven’t you?’ He’d seen the hodgepodge of momentos she’d accumulated over the past two years and remembered her story of being trying to pick up a Carpathian crystal ball as a momento of Bolstrad before the Witch Hunters interrupted her. He’d considered getting her one of those but didn’t know if it would stir up unpleasant memories, or, for that matter, whether he wanted the indignity of being seen buying a crystal ball. He didn’t quite share Hermione’s opinion of Divination, not after having heard Trelawney’s prophecy first hand all those years ago, but he did consider it a subsidiary brand of magic.

‘Yes,’ she replied, beaming as she took the box back from him, ‘it’ll be perfect for them! Thank you.’

He nodded satisfactorily and felt himself relax at her genuine pleasure at the gift. Perhaps he had gauged this right after all. After that they alternated, him opening a present from her next, and then she opening another from him. She’d bought him exotic coffees, a new satchel as his old one was growing rather threadbare, a years subscription to his favourite potions journal, and a bottle of Ogden’s Finest. It was his favourite tipple but was lamentably unavailable in Romania and he’d never dare order any from England for himself lest he get caught. Then he’d bought her her own knitted jumper in a mustard colour (‘so you can stop borrowing mine all the time,’ he’d said, though secretly hoping she still would), an instant camera, and a perfume he’d composed himself, specifically from scents he knew she enjoyed.

‘With the exception of this lovely jumper,’ she said, pulling said jumper over her head to try it for size after they’d finished opening everything, ‘I can’t help but notice that all your gifts are in some way associated with memories. The memory box is self-explanatory, as is the camera, really, and I’ve always experienced strong fragrant flashbacks and this perfume,’ - she spritzed a bit into the air and sniffed - ‘reminds me all at once of walks in the hills, drinks at The Moroi, Bolstrad’s cobbled streets, and the market and… and you! So every time I wear it, it’ll make me think of all those things, wherever I am.’

He nodded. ‘Good,’ he said, thinking this was exactly what he’d desired. ‘I just thought, considering everything, if we don’t have long then I at least want you to remember it!’
She looked up from the perfume bottle, looking unfathomably sad, then her expression changed and momentarily she seemed as though she was in two minds about something. Then she said, ‘no… there’ll be no sadness today. It’s Christmas day and we’re going to have a nice time!’

Severus gave a small smile and nodded once in agreement. He had promised to make sure that her staying with him would be worth her while, and Severus Snape kept his promises.

~oOo~

Though Severus had been typically reluctant at the prospect of having to socialise, the couple had accepted an invitation to have Christmas dinner with Fiers and Stela in their little flat above the perfumers. Severus had protested and procrastinated to the point where they were almost going to be late, taking an inordinate amount of time to shave, complaining that the smart clothes Hermione had asked him to wear didn’t fit properly, and then being apparently unable to find his wand, which turned up on the nightstand where he always left it. Growing increasingly used to this type of behaviour from her partner, Hermione had been patient until the point where if they hadn’t left immediately they would have undoubtedly missed Stela’s Christmas gammon, and with that she had dragged Severus out of the house while he was still doing up his shoelaces.

Hermione rapped her knuckles on the door and a moment later Nicu opened it to greet them, kissing Hermione on both cheeks, in response to which she felt Severus tense at her side, and shaking Severus’ hand. They were led upstairs to the flat which was filled with the delicious aroma of the roasting gammon and boiled vegetables, and once they had wished Fiers and Stela a ‘Merry Christmas,’ or ‘Crăciun Fericit’ in their case, they were shown into the living room and offered drinks by Nicu.

‘I believe we have you to thank for sending ‘Ermione in the direction of The Watch,’ Nicu told Severus as he handed him a beer, ‘I can’t tell you what an asset she has become. She has revolutionised it!’

Severus scowled. ‘Of course she has,’ he replied, placing a possessive arm around Hermione shoulders as they sat side-by-side on the settee. Hermione wasn’t sure he even realised he did this when Nicu was around, but she was sure Nicu had noticed.

‘And to think, Severus’ she began in an attempt to diffuse the tension between the two men, ‘you only wanted me to go in the first place so you could get rid of me!’

Severus turned to her, ‘that’s not true,’ he admitted, ‘quite the opposite, in fact. I was hoping you’d like it so much you might stay. If I couldn’t get you to stay for me, then maybe you’d stay for The
‘What?’ she exclaimed disbelievingly, ‘you tried to trick me?’

‘Tried and failed,’ he pointed out, ‘if I remember rightly, in the end, it was me you stayed for!’ he added, casting a slightly smug sideways glance at Nicu.

‘Whatever your reason for staying, ‘Ermione, I am just glad you did!’ Nicu said.

‘Everyone is,’ Stela agreed, bumbling into the room with a tray of sarmale for them all to try, ‘ground pork in cabbage leaves,’ she explained in response to Severus’ dubious expression. ‘Nicu and I have almost finished translating your letter into Romanian,’ she then continued, turning her attention back to Hermione.

‘Letter?’ Severus mumbled through a mouthful of food, looking up suddenly and appraising Hermione with a quizzical expression.

‘Yeah, I’m sure I told you about it. It’s an open letter to the Muggle government. Nicu has a friend who writes for a political magazine and is sympathetic to our cause, he’s going to make sure it gets in the next edition.’

‘So… it’s anonymous?’ Severus asked, making a sour expression as he continued to chew his sarmale.

‘Well…’ Hermione began, but she could sense something in Severus’ tone that suggested he had a preferred answer to this question, though she was not sure what it was.

‘It will be from ‘Ermione, on behalf of The Watch,’ Nicu answered for her in the end, ‘she is like our leader now,’ he added, grinning at Hermione.

‘Oh,’ said Severus. He glared up at Nicu and Hermione could tell by the muscle twitching in his jaw that he was biting back something caustic he wanted to say. ‘These are delicious,’ he said instead. It was evidently untruthful and his tone falsely jovial as he popped another sarmale into his mouth. For a long moment the four of them merely glanced at one another in bewildered silence, no one, perhaps with the exception of Severus, quite sure what had just happened. Needless to say, they were all exceedingly grateful when Fiers entered and announced that dinner was ready.
The rest of the day was pleasant enough, with Severus making an especial effort to get on with everyone following the incident before dinner. He really could be quite good company when he wanted to be, that is, when his jokes weren’t masquerading insults and he decided the topic of conversation was worthy of his attention. Not wanting to spoil the mood, Hermione decided that she would wait until another day to find out what it was that had upset him about the letter.

~oOo~

Returning to the house in the early evening, having partaken of far too much of Fiers and Stela’s glorious feast, Hermione and Severus settled on the settee for an evening of Gobstones and hot cocoa. Under Severus’ patient tuition, Hermione’s Gobstone skills had certainly improved, though she had some way to go before she’d be able to beat him without him letting her.

‘Bleugh,’ she exclaimed, scourgifying the rank smelling gunk from her clothes after losing the third round. ‘I think that’s enough of that for tonight!’

Severus was sat back in his seat watching her over the top of his mug with a bemused expression, ‘don’t be a sore loser,’ he chuckled, ‘it doesn’t suit you.’

‘Sore loser indeed! I don’t remember you being particularly gracious yourself when you lost ten minutes ago,’ she said smilingly.

‘Humph,’ he murmured, sipping his cocoa to hide his smirk. Every now and again he would let her win and feign disappointed just so he could see her excited smile and hear her tinkling laugh. Lost in the memory of his innocuous deceptions, it was a moment before he realised he had fallen under Hermione’s scrutinising gaze.

‘I have another gift for you,’ she said cautiously, as he looked up at her questioningly, ‘I wasn’t sure whether or not to give it to you… I don’t want to spoil what’s been such a lovely day.’

‘Oh…’ he remarked, not sure what to say. What kind of gift was likely to ruin Christmas? he wondered.

‘Wait here,’ she said, and with a deep, steadying sigh jumped up and disappeared upstairs, returning a moment later with a large package in her hands which she handed hesitantly to Severus. ‘OK, open it,’ she urged, ‘but be careful!’
Severus nodded and peeled back the brown paper then, for a long moment, he simply sat, staring at the gift half-opened in his lap, determinedly schooling his features so she wouldn’t read any of the intense concoction of various emotions vying for pre-eminence in his mind.

‘It’s—’

‘I know,’ he interrupted, though his tone was gentle, if not a little shaky. He seemed to be requesting a little longer to process the significance of the gift in silence, and Hermione was prepared to give him all the time he needed. She placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder and waited, then, when he did feel ready to continue, he was barely articulate, ‘where did you… how did you..?’ he stuttered, and she suppressed a smile at his uncharacteristic lack of composure.

‘Neville Longbottom,’ she replied. ‘He’s apprenticed to Professor Sprout now. I wrote and asked if there was any chance he might be able to get hold of some.’

Severus nodded mutely and, discarding the rest of the packaging onto the floor, ran a long finger up the spindly stem of the plant, and a gently thumb over the bright yellow flower that sat at the top.

‘Snowdonia Hawkweed,’ he murmured, not daring to his eyes off the plant incase it was all some horrible illusion, then, ‘I… I don’t know what to say…’ he continued after a moment.

‘You’re not angry?’ she asked, nibbling on her bottom lip and looking at him concernedly. Severus, however, was not entirely sure how he felt. Snowdonia Hawkweed had plagued his every waking moment, gnawing at the back of his mind, for the best part of the last four years. His lowest moments, when he was wracked with pain of the venom burning through his veins, had been the only time since leaving his homeland that he had ever given serious consideration to returning, and when his dreams were not filled with the horrors of war, they were haunted by the unobtainable Snowdonia Hawkweed. And now it was suddenly tangible, within his grasp, and the culmination of everything that stirred in him after all this time was overwhelming.

‘No. Not angry,’ he managed to say, then reluctantly he reached forwards and relinquished the flower from his grasp and onto the coffee table. He realised his fingers ached from subconsciously clutching at the terracotta plant pot so hard. ‘Thank you,’ he said, finally tearing his eyes away from the gift and looking up at Hermione.

Her eyes were filled with tears but she was smiling. ‘Do you think it will work?’ she asked with eager hope as she took a step forwards towards him, wringing her hands anxiously.
He nodded, slowly and contemplatively, ‘I’ve thoroughly researched its healing properties,’ he replied, ‘I mean, it was only re-discovered last year, they thought it was extinct, so everything I’ve read is a little dated but I… I think it should, yes…’ and with that the rest of his sentence was muffled by Hermione’s hair as she flung herself at him, wrapping her arms tightly around his shoulders.

‘You do think your life is worth living then?’ she asked, pulling away so she could study him closely.

‘I wouldn’t go that far but… well, I suppose you’re worth living for,’ he replied, running a hand through her hair and pulling her in to a sound kiss.

~oOo~

‘Do I need ask what it is you’re grateful for today?’ she asked as they lay in bed later that night, Severus on his back and Hermione with her head resting on his chest, her fingers gently stroking the smattering of black hair there. The room was dim but slightly illuminated by the small fire burning beneath a cauldron of the bubbling green potion in the corner.

‘I’m grateful for Neville Longbottom,’ he replied, ‘and what a terrifying thought that is!’
Herbology had never been Severus’ forte. He had bungled through his NEWT purely because it was useful for Potions, and indeed, he had a sound understanding of how plants might be used as ingredients, but actually keeping them alive was another matter entirely. Thus, a multitude of relevant literature had been purchased and perused through; various gardening tools now adorned the shelves of the makeshift lab in the master bedroom, and the terracotta plant pot containing the hallowed Snowdonia Hawkweed stood centre stage, protected, most of the time, by a glass cloche, lest so much as a dust particle should settle on its petals.

‘It might grow better in the window box,’ Hermione had suggested, coming into the bedroom one evening to find Severus pipetting a plant growth potion into the soil. Indeed, he had become rather preoccupied with its welfare, running upstairs each day the moment he returned from work, even before he had greeted Hermione, to check it hadn’t mysteriously died in his absence. ‘It’s fine!’ she would call after him with an exasperated sigh and he could practically hear her rolling her eyes. His primary concern was that the frost would get to it though, so it was not until around mid-March, when the snow began to melt and the early signs of Spring evidenced themselves across the mountains, that Severus relaxed his guard and the Snowdonia Hawkweed was placed outside, where it did indeed thrive.

There was no doubt as to the improved efficacy of the potion. From having to take three, sometimes four, potions a day to counter the effects of the venom, mere weeks after Christmas, once he’d perfected the ratios, Severus was having to only taking one, and sometimes this was only as a precaution. He felt vitalised and spirited in a way he could not remember having felt before, as though for the past five years he had been submerged underwater, his vision blurred and his hearing muffled, but had suddenly surfaced into a more real and vivid world.

Though he also suspected this was not entirely the work of the potion. Since Christmas his relationship with Hermione seemed to have taken on a new dynamic. He’d never laid himself quite so bare for anyone before, never dared to let himself get too close. Not after Lily at least. In his experience it only resulted in one getting hurt, and he’d had a lifetime of hurt. He wasn’t even sure what was different about Hermione. He had not invited her into his life, she had blustered in with the first winter winds, but now he found himself utterly enamoured. He often found himself sat watching her, especially when she wasn’t doing anything in particular, with a small, inadvertent smile on his face that made her instantly, adorably suspicious.

‘You’re doing it again!’ she’d reprimand him, catching him in the act, and he’d laugh and look away quickly to hide his blushing cheeks.

He couldn’t articulate what it was that made him look at her like that, no matter how often she demanded an explanation, but he imagined it might have to do with his unrelenting astonishment that she was there at all. The thought of his life without her now made him feel slightly panicked. In fact,
though he balked mentally at the cliché, he rather felt as though she had saved his life. Not just in the literal sense, in that she had acquired the Snowdonia Hawkweed for him, but in other primitive, more fundamental ways.

Until Hermione his life had been a series of catastrophic nightmares and atrocities, but when she arrived she had brought with her a sense of serenity, as though she was what had been missing all along. She gave him an appreciation for the simpler things; taught him that there were people he could trust, and that sometimes it was alright to laugh at himself. And he wasn’t sure how, if at all, he could ever repay her for all that, which, if he dwelled on the thought too long, had the potential to send him spiralling back into bouts of guilt, inadequacy, and self-loathing; a vicious cycle that threatened to jeopardise it all.

‘You deserve so much better,’ he told her on an almost daily basis.

‘You can be terribly hard work sometimes, Severus, you know that?’

‘Yeah… I don’t know why you bother!’

‘Me either!’ she’d snap.

‘Then maybe you should go.’

‘Humph! Maybe I will!’ and with that she’d disappear upstairs and the last thing he’d hear would be the bedroom door slamming shut.

But she never did go, though he would never allow himself to become complacent. She was there every morning when he awoke, and every evening when he went to sleep. A constant. Her hair clogged the plug hole in the bathroom; she had an annoying habit of folding over the pages of books to mark her place, and she’d even had the audacity to try an get him to diet. But he found he did not mind. For his part, he was messy, stereotypically prone to leaving the toilet seat up, and full of excuses as to why it wasn’t his turn to wash the pots after dinner. They would read together, walk together, play Gobstones together, and talk together late into the night. Sometimes they would talk about home, and the war, but it made both of them sad and they would often regret it.

Whilst vocalising his feelings for Hermione remained problematic, demonstrating them physically was not. Initially this had taken even him by surprise; there had been women before, at sporadic intervals, with whom he had had physical relationships; they had all been meaningless. But
Hermione and he made love just as they fought: often and passionately, always making sure they went to sleep on good terms, usually able to coax one another out of a mood by playing their game of asking what one was most grateful for that day. Severus was never short of an answer, but nor did he ever say what he truly wanted to say; that the one thing he was most grateful for everyday, was her.

That was why he found it so difficult to relent where the issue of her writing to the Muggle government was concerned. A few days after Christmas, when the euphoria of having the Snowdonia Hawkweed had worn off somewhat, he had realised that she was building up to ask him something. She often seemed to be assessing him for the best time to ask him things and would start with her usual ‘Severus can I ask you something?’ to which he would invariably reply with ‘yes.’

‘What was your problem when Stela and Nicu mentioned the letter I’ve written to the Muggle government?’

‘Oh… that,’ he murmured. Hermione was sat on the bed watching him, her legs swinging slightly off the edge, and he stirred his potion thoughtfully a few more times before he went on. ‘I… I’m just not sure attaching your actual name to the cause is entirely wise,’ he said, looking up at her, finally. She frowned back at him but said nothing, which he took to mean that she expected him to elaborate. ‘The Witch Hunters that tried to snatch you, they’ll not be best pleased that you got away and… and I just worry that if they see your name in a magazine under an article about cutting off their main source of income, and they somehow trace it back to you then… I don’t know, maybe they’ll want to… seek their revenge, or something…’ He felt uneasy saying it, like it was some sort of betrayal of his unwavering admiration of her and everything she did, so he was anticipating an argument and remained behind his cauldron as though it was some sort of shield.

Hermione studied him for a moment, then nodded slowly. ‘And if it was anonymous?’

He thought about it. ‘Then that might be different,’ he replied.

And that had been the end of the matter for many week until an uncommonly rainy day in June when the subject was brought up again. They had spent the day lazing about the house, reading and eating and having sex, and currently they lay on the settee, Severus with his arms wrapped around her from the back, dosing lightly as they listened to the rain hammer against the window.

‘I’ve been thinking,’ she said suddenly, turning in his arms so they were facing one another.

‘Oh dear,’ he smirked, receiving a playful slap on the arm in return. ‘I can tell by your tone this isn’t something I’m going to like.’
‘Hmm… perhaps not, but hear me out. I was thinking that I might try and get some work.’

‘Oh, well… that sounds OK so far. If you’re feeling up to it.’

Hermione had continued to steadily get her life back on track following the attack the previous September, however, there were still moments when she preferred if Severus was out with her after dark, and still times when, if she forgot to take a Dreamless Sleep potion, she would awaken in the night, dripping in cold sweat and screaming for them, the Witch Hunters, to stop. ‘I’m not sure it’s a case of feeling up to it, to be honest,’ she replied, ‘although I think I’m doing much better… my savings are drying up and it’s only fair I continue to contribute to the rent and utilities…’ she trailed off, her Gryffindor bravery apparently escaping her.

‘The suspense is killing me,’ Severus mocked.

She chewed her bottom lip and frowned up at him, ‘I thought I might write.’

‘Write?’ he questioned.

‘You remember Nicu’s friend, with the magazine? He liked the letter a lot and it caused quite a stir amongst some politicians, apparently…’ Severus felt himself stiffen, and probably Hermione’s having paused was a response to that, but after a moment she continued cautiously, ‘well… he’s asked if I’d like to have a regular column. He’d pay me but, well… they’d want my name on it, you see… to make it more, authoritative, I suppose.’

Severus inhaled a sharp intake of breath and withdrew from her, moving to the far end of the settee, slumping down in the seat and running a frustrated hand through his hair.

‘Severus…’

He held up his free hand to silence her, needing a moment to process what she’d said and not trusting himself to maintain a civil tone quite yet. He clenched his jaw and felt the muscles there twitch.

‘It’s a really great opportunity,’ she reasoned, her own voice calm, steady, but a little imploring.
‘We’ve talked about this,’ he rasped through gritted teeth.

‘It could really help The Watch’s cause.’

‘The Watch is not worth losing you over.’

‘Well, Nicu thinks that-’

‘I don’t give a shit what Nicu thinks!’ he spat, standing abruptly and striding over to the opposite side of the room. He needed distance from her to think more clearly. He didn’t want to argue with her; he didn’t understand why she couldn’t see that this was so foolish an idea. He knew that at least in part he was being selfish; he already felt he was holding her back just by her being here with him, and now he was actively restricting her from pursuing her passion, but he was adamant about this.

‘I thought you’d be more supportive,’ she said a little angrily, as though she’d read his mind and was wanting to strike him where it would hurt the most.

‘And I suppose Nicu is supportive?’ he hissed, feeling his cheeks flush at his own childishness. She’d made him feel suddenly defensive and incoherent, which manifest itself, unfortunately, as immaturity. He hated his inherent jealousy that perpetually made him doubt Hermione’s loyalty to him, but deep down he knew she wouldn’t cheat, he’d seen what a wreck she’d been at the prospect of cheating on Weasley with him, and therefore he knew that his question had been uttered merely with the exclusive intent of hurting her feelings.

‘As a matter of fact, he is!’ she said, losing her composure now and raising her voice. She seldom lost her equanimity like this when they argued. Severus would stomp about, clattering and banging inanimate objects around, screaming and shouting, and Hermione would sit there, retorting with levelled responses that completing outweighed Severus’ belligerence. So, Severus knew that she was really upset now and once again he found he hated himself for causing her such anguish.

‘I… I’m just concerned for you,’ he said solemnly, hanging his head so his hair fell in front of his face and obscured his expression. ‘I can’t…’ he began, but stopped himself before the end of that utterance escaped him. He had been about to say that he couldn’t lose Hermione as he had lost Lily, then he’d realised that he hadn’t thought about Lily once since committing himself to Hermione at the train platform all those months ago, and he felt instantly consumed by guilt. He wondered why his mind had chose this moment to torment him with yet more emotions, and it crossed his mind that the ache in his chest might be him having a heart attack. He felt himself becoming overwhelmed and
with a great effort brought his thoughts back to the present. He would worry about Lily later. ‘If you must write, can they not remain anonymous?’ he asked weakly, hoping to compromise, but still not able to look at her.

‘It just wouldn’t be the same,’ she replied, apparently sensing something in Severus’ tone that made her relent a little in her admonishment. ‘Severus, this stuff with The Watch was all your idea, remember?’ she added.

He shrugged. ‘It was just supposed to be you and the townspeople though, I didn’t know you were going to turn it into a national organisation!’ He dared a glance in her direction and saw that she looked simply sad now. ‘I should have known better!’

‘I thought you’d be pleased,’ she said, her voice sounded as though she was ready to cry, but her eyes remained defiant. ‘That’s why I’ve been doing all this, partly at least. I thought it’s what you’d envisioned for me and because I wanted it, you wanted it for me. I thought you understood that it’s what I need - to be out there, doing what I’m passionate about… purposeful again!’ She stopped talking abruptly and let her arms drop to her sides, almost defeated.

Severus rubbed his eyes and moved back to perch beside her on the settee, though he still remained some distance away, not sure she would want him any closer. He felt ashamed of himself, but his gut feeling that she was risking her safety remained unwavering. ‘I…’ he paused and sighed, biting the proverbial bullet, ‘I love you so much, Hermione, and I am so proud of you, of how far you’ve come since last September and everything you’ve done with The Watch. But that’s precisely why I can’t condone this. I cannot lose you.’

She looked over at him with a furrowed brow, but there was also a small smile on her lips that he suspected was because he’d told her he loved her. He didn’t do it often. Nowhere near often enough, anyway. ‘Firstly,’ she began, ‘I love you too. Secondly, this conversation sounds uncannily like the conversations we were having after I found out you were ill, except in reverse.’

‘Err… precisely,’ he agreed, ‘and you managed to convince me that I was wrong to place so little value on my life so now it’s my turn and I’m begging you to do the same!’

‘Oh, Severus! It isn’t the same situation at all! There won’t be any danger. Nicu says…’ and she paused pointedly, as if daring him to complain about Nicu again, but when he didn’t, she continued, ‘he says that he’ll be with me, whenever we have to go into Muggle Bucharest, I mean, partly he’ll need to be there to translate, my Romanian still isn’t up to scratch but… and when I’m in Bolstrad, there aren’t many times when I’m not with you, are there?’
He considered this but remained thoroughly unconvinced. ‘I could never forgive myself if something were to happen to you and I wasn’t there to stop it.’

‘That won’t happen,’ she said, ‘I promise. Don’t start with your “old habits” routine again,’ she added, managing another strained smile.

‘Come here,’ he said, sounding terribly pleading as he held out his arm to her. She shuffled along the settee and tucked herself under it, her head resting just below his chin. ‘Whatever you do, you’ll be brilliant, just…’ he paused to plant a kiss on the top of her head, ‘be safe!’

And so, still very much against his will, Hermione began writing for the magazine, and eventually a number of other publications. Predictably, she was fantastic at her work and, over the course of the next few months her name became synonymous with The Watch’s cause. It wasn’t fame precisely, not like she had endured back home, but she enjoyed a certain level of popularity within political and charitable circles. She was invited talks and galas and important meetings, and refusing to ever appear neglectful of supporting her again, Severus could often be coaxed into attending by her side.

Whilst she inevitably made enemies amongst those who opposed her ideas, the way she spoke at these events was gradually changing the minds of those who mattered most; her passion was infectious. And so too did Severus slowly become accustomed to the idea, not least because, there was absolutely no doubt that it was working. By August, a number of Witch Hunters had come down from the mountains to surrender themselves and had, following some initial reluctance from the citizens of Bolstrad, been accepted into the community, whilst in the capital one of the main political parties now had the issue at the forefront of their agenda - and it was all Hermione’s doing.

Severus did feel his mood dip again, as it always did, in the run up to Hallowe’en, the anniversary of their first awkward, drunken kiss. As per tradition he drowned his sorrows in The Moroi all night, but there was no scene when he returned; indeed, no mention at all, this time, of what it was that haunted him. Severus could not, no matter how hard he tried, reconcile himself with the fact that it was OK not to spend every moment of his life dwelling on what could have been where Lily was concerned, but having Hermione had certainly gone some way towards helping. Anyway, the morning after Hermione had pushed a hangover cure across the table to him at breakfast and they had gone about their regular business.

Letters continued arrived by owl post for her. Severus became adept at predicting who they were from by the handwriting on the envelope, but he knew it only interested him because he was checking they weren’t from Weasley. Not that he ever said as much. But they arrived from her parents, and Potter, Longbottom more occasionally, and sometimes the Lovegood girl. He knew she missed England and her friends there, she told him as much, but when their first anniversary, and Christmas and new year were pleasant affairs and the months afterwards rolled by, Severus gradually began to feel that maybe, just maybe, she meant it when she said she wasn’t going anywhere.
Then, it was almost two years to the day since Hermione first came to Romania that, practically skipping back to their tiny house, excited to tell Severus that the Muggle government were finally contemplating passing a bill to re-instate an effective Statute of Secrecy and devolve power of the wizarding world entirely to Ministry of Magic, she opened the door to find him prostrate on the living room floor, a broken bottle of his green potion spilling out onto the rug just out of his arm’s reach…
Under her calm exterior, Hermione was absolutely furious. Furious at Severus because she had thought they were beyond keeping secrets from one another; especially about something so serious as this, and, moreover, furious at herself for not realising something was amiss. All she could think was that if he’d just told her, there might have been something she could do.

She stabbed the trowel into the soil unrelentingly, slicing through the withered roots of the Snowdonia Hawkweed, tipping it out of the window box and watching it fall onto the ground below with a dull thud; the clumps of earth exploding across the small courtyard that constituted their back garden. It was oddly satisfying. The plant had been taunting her for days, glaring up at her every morning when she pulled back the shutters. It was amazing how conscious she was of it now and yet she had been so unaware of it over the past months as it slowly withered away right before her eyes. Granted, she had been busy with work, but not so preoccupied that she would miss something so obvious, so crucial, as this. Surely not? But even if she had, she reasoned, it didn’t explain why Severus hadn’t told her. He was too proud and too stubborn, she determined, and this time it had potentially killed him.

After brushing the soil off her fingers and closing the window she checked her watch and discerned it was almost visiting time at the hospital. She had been going every day, just as he had visited her, except he was still sleeping almost two weeks after she’d found him. The moment she’d walked through the door that day her eyes had been drawn to him, lying there, and she’d stood petrified for Merlin knows how long before her limbs would do as she asked them and allowed her to move over to him.

Crouching over him she had been sure he was dead, and checking for a pulse seemed to confirm this, but then she’d seen the spittle on his lips shift as he inhaled a shallow, rasping breath. In a panic she’d rushed upstairs and grabbed another of his potions out of the bottom drawer in their bedroom. Returning to him, she had rolled him onto his back, his head resting on her knees, and poured the green liquid down his throat. He had gagged and she had coaxed him until the phial was empty. She had held him tightly around the shoulders, whispering soothingly in his ear, unsure whether it was helping or whether there was anything else she ought be doing. His head lolled and his eyes rolled back but, in time, he emerged from his stupor, enough to sit up at least, before he vomited down his front. She fetched him water to drink and cleaned him with a scourgify, then stood aside until he’d caught his breath.

‘W-what happened?’ she asked, crouching beside him again. She placed a hand on his shoulder but he recoiled as if in pain so she pulled it away again quickly.

He looked up at her through wide, bewildered eyes. ‘I… I need… hospital,’ he croaked, each word
seemingly a great struggle for him.

She felt her heart start pounding in her chest again. She didn’t know where the wizard hospital was. ‘I’ll fetch Stela,’ she said, ‘just… you wait here. Rest.’

He closed his eyes tight and shook his head. ‘Muggle… hospital,’ he rasped. ‘Tell them… snake,’ he managed, before slumping to one side apparently unconscious again. But Hermione finally understood, he needed a dose of proper anti-venom and with that she Apparated them to the only hospital she could think of; the one where she had been treat after her attack two years ago.

That was where he had been for the past two weeks; being treat, inevitably, as some sort of medical marvel. She had stayed with him for the first two days, but had been forced to return home on the third to wash and get new clothes. She also needed to pick up some things for Severus and inform Fiers that he wasn’t going to be in work. She’d taken a long shower, her body aching from sleeping in the plastic armchair beside Severus’ bed at the hospital, before moving into the bedroom to get changed. That was when she had seen it. The brown and shrivelled Snowdonia Hawkweed in the window box. She could tell by its condition that this hadn’t just happened those days they’d been in the hospital; it had been like this for a long while.

She’d spent a few days trying to bring it back to life, practically drowning it in growth potions but knowing that her efforts would be useless, and had eventually given up and decided to take out her frustration on it by digging it up with all the ferocity she could muster and watching it plummet onto the stone ground outside.

Now, she pulled closed the window shutters, grabbed the bag of supplies that she’d put together for Severus, pyjamas, shaving equipment, and one his potions from the bottom drawer, then Apparated to the hospital.

‘No change, I’m afraid,’ the nurse told her as found her way to the ward. Hermione smiled politely, she had expected nothing less.

Severus slept in a darkened room, the window open and a fan spinning to try and keep it cool. His temperature was high, too high, and beads of sweat formed on his brow which Hermione wiped away with a paper towel. He looked somehow younger and more peaceful, the crease between his eyebrows and his normally persistent scowl finally relaxed. But he also looked paler than usual, with dark rings around his sunken eyes, his hair greasy and lank like it had done back in her school days. She brushed it off his face with gentle fingers as she set about telling him of her day.

She had never done very much, she had cancelled all her engagements regarding The Watch
immediately, but the doctor had told her Severus could hear her, and so she made her day sound exciting and wonderful in the hope it might rouse him. Then, when she had exhausted this exercise, she would read to him, holding the book in one hand and Severus’ clammy palm in the other.

He had been given anti-venom as soon as it could be procured, and it had succeeded in stabilising his condition. The doctors also mentioned Severus’ unusual tolerance to the venom, but obviously Hermione said nothing of the potion. For the moment he was being kept alive by a plethora of drugs and drips, few of which Hermione had any idea what they were doing, and each day, despite the ‘nil-by-mouth’ sign above the bed and not knowing whether or not it was the right thing to be doing at all, Hermione would slip Severus one of his potions. Sometimes his eyelids might flicker for a moment after this and she would wait with bated breath to see if he awoke, but as yet, he had not.

They told her they could not say if he would wake up at all, and that even if he did, they did not know what the long lasting effects might be.

~oOo~

Hermione wrote to Neville and asked if there was any chance he could send more Snowdonia Hawkweed.

He replied to say that what he had sent before had been the last of his stores.
The Shrieking Shack

He lay for a moment; conscious but his eyes closed. The room was cool, draughty, yet he felt internally hot, his skin and the ground beneath him damp with sweat. Or perhaps it was blood, he thought, there was bound to be blood. He thought he could smell it; metallic and clinical. There was no pain though, he was surprised to observe, save the throbbing in his head. His limbs felt leaden, immovable, and he could hear his own heartbeat, forcing his poisoned blood through his veins. He needed to move on, get out of there. If someone came back and found him he was done for, either they’d finish him off, or he’d be looking at an eternity in Azkaban, and at this moment he did not know which would be preferable.

In fact, all he knew for sure was that he was not dead.

He lifted his left arm to his neck, the right arm seemed weighted down, broken maybe, he wondered, and expected to feel the gaping punctures left by Nagini’s fangs, but found instead only coarse welts. That was decidedly odd and considering, for just the briefest of moments, how easy it would be to drift beyond the veil, leave the living world behind, he tentatively opened his eyes. It took them a moment to adjust in the darkness but it became quickly apparent that he was not, as he had suspected, in the Shrieking Shack. He inhaled sharply, feeling his heart pound so vigorously in his chest it seemed like it might burst through his rib cage. Why did his mind insist on playing these cruel tricks?

He began to writhe as panic and confusion consumed him and then, seemingly from far away, he heard his name being called.

‘Severus..?’

The weight on his right arm lifted and a bright, electric light flickered on. Severus shifted up the bed, staring wide-eyed around what, it was now clear, was a hospital room.

‘Severus,’ the soft voice spoke again, ‘it’s OK. Stay calm.’

He felt a warm hand on his forearm and, as the speaker moved closer, he smelled something familiar, like home-baked cakes and hazelnut. It had an almost tranquilising effect; he felt his heart begin to calm and his body, which was now pressed against the headboard, begin to relax. A figure, presumably the owner of the voice, sat beside him on the bed and slowly came into focus. It took him just a moment longer to work out why she, of all people, would be there. She’d been there when the snake attacked, looked on while he divulged his memories to Potter, and then she had left him for dead. There was no explanation for why she would be at his bedside.
‘What…’ he croaked, but his voice died before the sound passed his lips, just as his memories came flooding back in one overwhelming rush, so forceful he felt winded.

‘Ssh… it’s OK. Don’t worry,’ she said, and it was decidedly comforting, but of course it would be: *You love her. She loves you.*

He reached out and grabbed her hand, just to check she was real and this was not another nightmare where she would be snatched from him into the darkness again. She was wearing a mustard coloured jumper, the one he’d bought her for Christmas the other year, it was bobbly now from over washing.

‘You’re real,’ he stated, feeling the last tensions within his body diminish.

‘Yes,’ she said, weakly and then more definitively, ‘yes,’ and she was laughing despite the tears streaming down her cheeks.

He reached an aching arm out to her, to beckon her closer, and gently she leant forwards and pressed her soft, warm lips to his. It was a brief kiss but it was all he needed to assure him. *Kiss of life*, he thought.

‘I’m going to fetch the nurse,’ she whispered, pushing stray tendrils of hair out of his eyes. He nodded once in response, feeling instantly bereaved the moment she left his side.

~oOo~

It was late October before Severus was allowed home from the hospital. In part, his rehabilitation was hindered by his own stubbornness, which returned with renewed vigour shortly after his awakening, and in part, due to the doctors’ insistence on carrying out numerous experiments on the poison levels within his blood in an attempt to fathom just how it was he had survived. They remained none the wiser upon Severus’ discharge day, still ignorant of the potion Hermione had continued to sneak into the hospital for him everyday, and declared it a complete mystery. Hermione had been marginally successful during this period at coaxing him to take his Muggle medication too, at getting him out of bed to walk around, and to eat the less than appealing hospital food, whilst Severus, for his part, had sat on his bed, arms folded defensively across his chest, complaining about anything and everything to anyone who would listen - usually Hermione. But Hermione was happy to listen, in fact, she practically encouraged him. While he had been unconscious she had thought she may never hear him moan again, and so now she was happy to let him do so to his heart’s content.
Undoubtedly, however, it was of great relief to both of them, and quite possibly the hospital staff, when Severus was allowed home. As they travelled back to Bolstrad by train, Severus still weakened by the effects of the poison and prone to bouts of nausea that made him question how he’d fare with Apparation, there seemed to be little to say. They huddled together in the corner of the compartment, watching the blur of the landscape’s autumnal hues pass by, content in their mutual sense of utter relief.

‘What would you like to do?’ Hermione asked gently as they stepped into the house a few hours later, ‘I could cook, if you’re hungry, or the latest edition of your potions journal arrived yesterday… or we could play Gobstones, perhaps?’

‘I’m glad you’re here,’ he said, smiling down at her, ‘I’m glad I’m not alone. But I think I just need to sleep.’

‘Whatever you want,’ she replied, issuing him a small smile in return, knowing he would not know the depth of that statement. She had made a silent promise, to herself, and to him, that there would never come a time again when she was so preoccupied with her own endeavours, so self-consumed, that she would forget he might be suffering alone.

Taking his hand she lead him upstairs. She sat on the window ledge as he stripped down to his boxers, too lethargic to change into pyjamas, and slipped beneath the bedsheets. He’d lost weight in hospital, his ribs were showing and his limbs looked stringy and sinewy. ‘Right,’ she said, a moment later, having realised he was watching her stare, ‘if there’s anything you need, call me, OK?’

He shook his head. ‘Stay with me?’ he whispered, laying in the centre of the bed, holding out his hand and gesturing her towards him. She went to him slowly and crawled in the bed beside him, resting her head on his chest as he wrapped an arm around her back. Oh, how she’d missed this.

Soon after, she felt the sting of tears in her eyes again, and not having the energy to hold them she sobbed unrestrainedly, weeks of suppressed tension pouring from her. Severus pressed her close and let her cry until there were no tears left.

‘Why are you crying?’ he asked, in a hushed tone as she wiped her cheeks on the back of her hand.

‘Oh, God. I’m so sorry, Severus.’
‘What for?’

‘For being so bloody self-absorbed these past few months. I should have made myself more available to you. You should have been able to tell me!’ she said, angry at herself.

She felt him shrug his shoulders slightly. ‘It was going to die whether you knew about it or not, and you seemed to be enjoying yourself so much with your work… I didn’t want to spoil that.’

‘You are far more important to me than work!’ she replied determinedly. He said nothing and fell silent for a long time. Eventually, she looked up to see he was staring out of the window and she followed his gaze to the flower box. ‘I dug it out,’ she told him, unable to keep the derision from her voice at the mention of Snowdonia Hawkweed, ‘and Neville said… there’s no more.’

Severus sighed. ‘I’ll be alright, you know?’ he said, though he didn’t sound particularly convincing.

‘I know,’ she responded anyway, and with that she jumped up, closed the window shutters so the flower box was no longer in sight and the room was plunged into darkness. Then, both emotionally exhausted, they drifted to sleep wrapped in one another’s arms.
A Change of Circumstances

The week following Severus’ discharge from hospital was calm and pleasant, spent together in their favourite ways; reading, walking, and playing Gobstones, as Severus rebuilt his strength. But it wasn’t to last. Hermione could sense a change in him; a certain apathy, melancholy, and restlessness that suggested discontentment. He was warm towards her, practically craved intimacy with her, and yet seemed simultaneously disconnected and tentative. She always expected a decline in his mood in the run up to Hallowe’en; she had grown accustomed to his bouts of woe at this time of year and nothing ever quite prepared her the vitriol she found him capable of on October 31st, but this year he seemed absolutely dedicated to causing her hurt.

He was thoroughly miserable from the moment he awoke. He picked at the breakfast she made him; complained his coffee was cold; and then proceeded to spend the morning moping around the house in his pyjamas, making nasty comments about every little thing that displeased him, whether it be inanimate objects, his work, his illness, or Hermione herself.

‘I think I’m going to go into work if you’re being like this,’ Hermione told him towards late morning, ‘you seem to be feeling a lot more yourself!’

She had, not begrudgingly, left a number of projects for The Watch on hiatus whilst Severus had been in hospital, and she hadn’t anticipated on returning quite so soon, but she also wasn’t about to spend her time being Severus’ figurative punching bag.

‘You do whatever you want,’ he said coolly, not looking up from his potions journal, ‘you usually do!’

‘And what’s that supposed to mean?’ she snapped, rounding on him and mentally cursing herself for taking his bait.

‘You can be incredibly selfish sometimes, Hermione, you know that?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘This time last week I was on my deathbed, for all we know I could be on my deathbed again next week, but if the bloody Watch is more important then you get yourself off!’
She considered a number of absurd and mean spirited accusations that clamoured at the forefront of her mind, fighting to be voiced. Had she not explicitly told him that he meant more to her than work, had she not demonstrated it by being at his bedside all those weeks? But she wasn’t about to sink to his level and so settled instead on say, ‘I’m going,’ in as mild a tone as she could manage. Then, with that, she stalked over to the robe stand by the doorway and pulling a thick travelling robe around her shoulders.

‘Yeah, you run along to Nicu. You must have missed him this past week while you were stuck in here with me!’

She turned to find him stood directly behind her, and facing one another in the narrow space between the bottom of the stairs and the front door they were forced close together; Severus loomed over her, practically snarling and despite her best efforts to remain steadfast, she felt herself recoil from him.

‘That is incredibly unfair!’ she protested, he voice weak and shaky.

‘But you’re not denying it?’

‘Of course I am! We’ve talked about this before. Nicu and I just work together… I’m not going to justify my friends to you!’

‘Just… fuck off then!’ he grunted, though he looked immediately as though he regretted speaking to her like that and began to backtrack as she opened the door to leave, ‘no, wait…’

But whatever he had been about to say was lost as the door slammed closed in his face. After that, she wasn’t sure she cared what he had to say. As she strode down the street Hermione realised that their argument had been about absolutely nothing at all, that Severus had not even know what it was about - she knew he didn’t think there was anything going on with her and Nicu - and yet she was left with the most formidable sense of sorrow. All this came back to Lily, and Hermione now realised she was trying to live up to the memory a dead woman, and wasn’t even coming close.

Under the circumstances, that simply wouldn’t do…

~oOo~

Severus stumbled into the house later that night having partaken in perhaps one too many glasses of
Firewhisky at The Moroi. This had been his unfortunate method of coping after his argument with Hermione. On top of the overwhelming sense of guilt that gnawed at his gut every Hallowe’en, the argument had been enough to almost tip him over the edge. He hadn’t meant to upset her like that, he certainly hadn’t meant to speak to her like that. As a couple they argued frequently, because they were so passionate, they told one another, but that did not stop Severus’ head, every time, from becoming filled with unnecessary and unfair doubts about her loyalty to him. On this occasion he had followed Hermione out of the house shortly after she had left to drown his sorrows in anticipation for her having left by the time he returned.

The house was dark and she was in neither the living room nor the kitchen. Severus got himself a glass of water to try and sober himself a little before he headed upstairs. She was not in the bathroom and she was not in the bedroom… no, there she was, sat on the window ledge, silhouetted in the moonlight. He stood in the doorway, not sure whether he was welcome, swaying slightly despite his best efforts to not.

‘You’re drunk,’ she stated, without even looking up at him.

‘Why are you crying?’ he mumbled. ‘Because of earlier?’

‘Yes and no.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘You were vile to me.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You’re always “sorry”,’ she spat. She turned to face him finally, wiping his tear stained cheeks on her sleeve. ‘I don’t think I can cope… no, I mean, I shouldn’t have to put up with your moods, Severus… I can’t do it anymore.’

‘I’ll try harder,’ he said, trying but failing to keep the pleading tone out of his voice. He shuffled further into the room, lingering by the bed, a few feet away from Hermione still. She stood up to face him, looking concerned and ringing her hands. Hermione was rarely unsure of herself these days and to see her looking so distinctly lacking in confidence was disconcerting for him.
'I think I’m probably going to have to go back to England,’ she replied, matter of fact though in little more than a whisper.

‘No, Hermione… just give me one more chance!’ he begged. A part of him hated what she reduced him to; grovelling and pathetic. But the thought of her going was making him feel genuinely panicked, he had no doubt that she wouldn’t see her threat through after this morning, and he was overcome by a desire to keep her here by whatever means necessary short of locking her in the cellar. ‘I behaved appallingly. It’s my own shit to deal with and every year I take it out on you.’

She fell silent for a long moment, seemingly weighing something up in her mind. ‘There’s not just me to think about anymore,’ she continued eventually and, despite his drunken state, Severus understood her inference immediately; he did not miss her fingers drifting fleetingly to her stomach. He slumped down on the bed, staring at her blankly. She took a step towards him. ‘We were never exactly careful,’ she said.

Words failed him and his sat silently. Then, swallowing a swell of nausea in his abdomen, he managed to ask, ‘how long?’ in a croaky voice.

‘Maybe six weeks or so.’

He nodded, ‘and how long have you known?’

‘Not long,’ she assured him, ‘I found out just before you woke up… then there just didn’t seem a good time to tell you and, well… I didn’t know how.’

His gaze dropped to the floor. ‘And I don’t know how to respond.’

‘Severus I… I understand if… if…’

‘If I want nothing to do with it?’ he hissed.

‘This was never exactly part of the plan,’ she whispered, her voice cracking as she fought back a fresh bout of tears.
He laughed, a breathy, incredulous sort of laugh, ‘you were never part of my plan,’ he said, looking up at her finally and managing a small smile, ‘and yet here you are.’ Then his face fell into a strained but contemplative expression, ‘although, this is going to change things rather.’

He felt the bed sag slightly as she sat down beside him, ‘you can be as involved as you like.’

‘Are you leaving me?’ he asked simply.

‘Not willingly,’ she replied, her voice still small.

‘Then…’ he hesitated for just the briefest of moments, ‘I think I would like to try.’

He was still watching the floor but she took his chin in her fingers and directed his head so he had no choice but to look directly at her. ‘You mustn’t do this out of some misplaced sense of duty. I won’t have you beholden to something merely because you feel obliged. Remember how important your freedom is to you.’

‘This is different.’

‘“I think I would like to try” is not particularly affirmative, Severus.’

‘I just meant… I don’t really know how to be…’ He wanted to say ‘how to be a father’ but the word ‘father’ made it all too real and apparently he wasn’t quite ready for that yet. ‘I don’t really know how to do it,’ he decided to say instead, rather lamely.

‘Well, that makes two of us,’ she said with evident relief.

‘Shit,’ he muttered, rubbing his temples. Their conversation had given him a false sense of sobriety, but now the intensity of it was making head began to spin again.

‘Shit indeed!’ she responded with a sigh of her own.

‘I don’t deserve you,’ he said. He only really ever said things like this when he was drunk and hoped
in this instance at least that his inebriation would not undermine the truth of the statement.

‘I wish you didn’t believe that,’ she whispered placing her arm around his shoulders tentatively and he immediately felt safer and more secure, as though he could accomplish anything, even being a father.

‘I really am sorry about this morning,’ he repeated.

‘I’m sure you are, and I’m sorry too, but I don’t want to talk about this morning ever again,’ then she paused and withdrew her arm and let it fall limply in her lap beside the other one, ‘what are we going to do now?’

‘We’ll be fine,’ he said, taking her hand in his and giving it a warm, reassuring squeeze. ‘We always are, together.’

‘It just couldn’t have happened a more inconvenient time!’ she half-sobbed.

He looked up at her slightly confused, wishing they could have this conversation in the morning. He didn’t trust what he was saying so he didn’t know how he could expect Hermione to. ‘What do you mean?’ he enquired.

‘Just… you, Severus… you’re ill, and I have so much on at work, and… we barely have enough money for the two of us, and there’s no room here, and-’

‘Shh,’ he soothed, though he felt as though he needed soothing himself. Actually, he felt suddenly bereaved. Bolstrad had been his haven for seven years now, and it had served him well. He had never known what it meant to feel at home until he had settled in Bolstrad, enjoyed his work, established something of a network of friends, and found, in Hermione, a partner to share all that with. But she was right, as always. They were happy together in Bolstrad because they enjoyed the simpler things in life, those long walks into the mountains, reading by the fire, a couple of pints in The Moroi, and the simplicity of one another’s company on cold nights. But their joint income was barely enough to support the both of them, never mind the additional cost of a baby. The rent was dead money, and the prospect of finding better paid work in Bolstrad was small.

But rather than burden Hermione with all that, though he suspected she already knew, he merely replied with, ‘I would like my child to attend Hogwarts, I think,’ and it wasn’t a lie.
‘You would move back to England?’ she asked, her eyes widening and her grip on his hand tightening.

‘I don’t see as we have much choice.’

‘Perhaps not,’ returning to a more forlorn state, ‘I’m so, so sorry!’

‘No, don’t be, it’s fine.’

She gave him a look which he had come to recognise as a reminder that they had promised not to tell each other it was fine when it clearly wasn’t. He issued her a small smile by way of apology.

‘I think we could be happy there too, though, you know?’ she said, ‘I could ask my parents if we can stay with them until we find work and a place of our own…’

He shook his head, utterly unconvinced. He was a proud man and he would look after his own family. ‘I have a house,’ he said somewhat reluctantly, as though the words were something he did not want to admit.

‘You do?’

‘It’s a dump, in a cesspit of a town. My mother left me with it.’

‘Sounds perfect!’ she grinned, her sarcastic optimism lighting up her face, and he couldn’t help but laugh. She had a way of making even the most grim circumstances seem positive.

‘I was so worried about telling you but it seems have underestimated you once again, Severus Snape!’

‘Mmm… you have an unfortunate habit of doing that,’ he said, drawing her into him and placing a gentle kiss on the top of her head before pulling away from her and closing his eyes for a moment. ‘You know, going back would have… other implications for me.’
'You mean a trial?'

‘Mmm.’

‘I already told you, Harry said—’

‘—Just,’ he paused to steady his tone, ‘don’t get your hopes up on that score. We’d be taking a risk, is all I’m saying.’

She looked up at him, unfathomably sad, and sighed deeply. ‘Then I don’t know,’ she said, simply, perfectly echoing how he too felt. Her hand had fallen absently onto her abdomen and he allowed his gaze to drift there too; it didn't seem possible that a child, *his* child, *their* child, lay there.

‘For now, let’s sleep,’ he suggested, frowning inadvertently at his own internal confusion, ‘I am quite drunk,’ he added.

‘And we can talk about more pertinent matters in the morning?’

He nodded and, stumbling about the room for five minutes, managed to strip down to his boxers. Hermione, already in her pyjamas, simply slipped under the duvet and watched him struggle with a bemused smirk.

~oOo~

A short while later Severus lay asleep on his stomach, one arm under his pillow and the other draped protectively, possessively over Hermione. She had asked, as was their custom, what it was he was grateful for today. He looked at her with what she hoped was sincerity and had replied that he was grateful for the baby.

He was asleep before she whispered into the darkness: ‘I hope you will feel the same in the cold light of day.’
Hermione awoke before Severus the next morning and, unfurling herself from his grasp, stole downstairs to gather her thoughts. They had kept her awake most of the night and still made little sense. It was a bright, fresh morning, the kind that inspired optimism, or would have done if Hermione had been able to shake the overwhelming sense of apprehension that had settled upon her yesterday morning and had, as yet, failed to shift. If she found herself distracted for long enough she might be able to disregard the persistent fluttering in her abdomen, but the moment something brought her out of her daydream, it would return with renewed vigour.

She made a pot of tea, absently, the Muggle way, then sat nursing it at the kitchen table, staring out of the window for so long that it had gone cold by the time she remembered it. Severus’ reaction to her pregnancy had not been at all as she had expected; it was ideal, suspiciously so. She had given up on the prospect of returning to England with him long ago, he had been immovable on the subject and she had gradually made her peace with that, happy with their life together in Bolstrad. Yet, last night, had he not suggested himself that they should return?

And he had definitely said he would like to try to be a father. For Hermione having children had always been a matter for someday, not today, and she and never discussed it with Severus. She wondered now whether this was a subconscious reaction to the assumption that he wouldn’t want them.

Today, now that Severus would be sober, an arduous conversation was going to take place, and so she set about preparing a sizeable cooked breakfast, hoping that the smell would lure him from their room.

Sure enough, not long after, she heard the creak of the stairs as he came lumbering laboriously down them in an inevitably hungover state. He looked dishevelled and ashen, but this was practically ritual for them after three first of Novembers together. Hermione had determined that she could not help him where his sorrow over Lily was concerned, and so she limited her role to pushing him a hangover cure across the kitchen table as he situated himself unceremoniously into a seat there. He grunted his thanks and she said nothing until she was sure it had begun to take effect.

‘Here you go,’ she muttered, placing a plate heaving with food in front of him, and watching him carefully as she took her seat. They ate in silence. Hermione wondered whether he might bring up the subject first; but he was being particularly withdrawn this morning, his eye boring into his breakfast as he forked in ravenous mouthfuls. He sighed as he finished, sitting back in his chair as he drained his coffee cup.

‘Better?’ she asked, hoping to gauge his mood.
‘Mmm,’ he replied, and then made to stand but Hermione, refusing to let this conversation go unspoken, began talking before he quite made it to his feet.

‘Do you want children?’ she asked, ‘if you had a choice, would you have chosen this?’ and he stopped in the middle of standing, his palms pressed against the tabletop, and slowly lowered himself back into the seat.

He rubbed his temples for a long moment before he replied, ‘I suppose I… I never dared hope that I might have them,’ he said, almost fearfully, as though he expected her to laugh at him.

She smiled encouragingly instead. ‘I have to say, I never got the impression you particularly liked children,’ she said, trying not to sound accusatory. Her years with Severus had attuned her to the fine balance required to navigate sensitive topics with him.

‘Hmm,’ he mumbled thoughtfully, ‘I can understand why, but don’t go on what you saw at Hogwarts. I was so stressed, I didn’t like anything much.’

‘And your own child?’

‘Would be different,’ he replied quickly.

‘How so?’ she asked, she needed him to spell it out. She didn’t particularly like herself for it, but she needed him to prove that he was doing this because he wanted to and not because she was in some way forcing him. ‘You do whatever you want… you usually do… you can be incredibly selfish sometimes… you know that?’ No, she swept the thoughts from her mind, only just realising what an impression they’d had on her. She had thought she was doing what would be best, for them. But it wasn’t her that had made him say those things, not really. It was Lily. Everything always came back to Lily it seemed.

He met her gaze for the first time all morning, ‘they’ll be intelligent, and thoughtful, funny in a way that isn’t ever offensive, they’ll have good friends and, well… they’ll be like you.’

She couldn’t help but smile. ‘And if they’re not?’
‘It won’t matter, because they’ll be ours.’

All those hours Hermione had spent by Severus’ bedside she had imagined what their child might be like. All she could see when she closed her eyes was a lanky, raven haired boy whose knees were always scraped and whose brow was always furrowed. He was shy, though quietly determined, and free of the burdens both his parents carried.

‘What about you?’ Severus said after a moment, stirring her from her thoughts.

‘Sorry?’

‘Children?’

‘Oh… I thought maybe one day. I didn’t think… so soon.’

He nodded slowly then rested his chin in his hand, frowning just like the little boy Hermione’s mind had conjured. ‘You’re young. Your career was just getting started, I appreciate the timing isn’t ideal.’

‘Maybe not, but then I think… there’d always have been something to stop us wouldn’t there? Some reason why now wasn’t a good time…’ she replied, then quickly added, ‘I mean, if we had been to plan this in the future…’ She felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment. Even after all this time together, it felt presumptuous to think of a future with him. She always felt as thought this could be snatched away from her at a moment’s notice, just as so many things had been lost to her before, and that by vocalising such ambitions she might curse them. She looked up at him, and he was watching two robins dance around in the air outside the kitchen window. He looked exhausted and older, somehow, in the stark white winter light. She often forgot there was twenty-years between them. The war had given her little choice but to grow up fast, whilst his love for Lily seemed to have stunted his emotional development, perhaps accounting for juvenile moods he was so prone to; moods that she’d have to be the one to soothe him out of. ‘Severus… are you sure you’re alright?’ she asked, once more withdrawing from her musings and this time to see that Severus’ cheeks were flushed and his eyes seemed glassy, like he might be about to cry. She hadn’t ever seen him cry.

He smiled weakly; a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. ‘Yes. I was just thinking how much I stand to miss out on… I’m living on borrowed time. It feels different now than it did before.’

‘No-’
‘-I am. After my recent… issues, and without the Snowdonia Hawkweed…’

‘No,’ she repeated defiantly, sounding like a child herself.

He frowned, began chewing the inside of his mouth, and returned to staring out of the window as he replied, ‘if anything should happen to me, then I would want you to have your family and friends nearby, not be stuck out here in the arse-end of Romania.’

‘You said yourself, you could live for a very long time on the potions you’re making, even without the Snowdonia Hawkweed.’

He shook his head. ‘I’ve been having to take them much more frequently recently.’

‘But…’ she felt a surge of overwhelming emotion rip through her chest and her sentence escaped her merely as a sob. He jerked his head away from the window to look at her but made no move to comfort her as tears, both angry and sad, spilled down her cheeks. She took a few steadying breaths, clasping her hands together so tightly in her lap that her knuckles turned white. ‘If… if you… oh, Merlin… I can’t even bring myself to say it…’ she groaned.

‘You mean, if I don’t have long,’ he finished for her and she nodded in agreement, swallowing hard.

‘If… if that’s the case, why do you want to spend the time you do have in a country you hate so much, enduring trials, and publicity, and maybe even… Azkaban?’

He ran a hand through his hair and then shrugged noncommittally. ‘I don’t know, I just suppose… I haven’t done much good in my life, but… I have the chance to do this right at least,’ he replied, gesturing towards her stomach to infer her was talking about the baby. ‘We won’t be rich in England,’ he continued, ‘not by any means, but… I have some savings in Gringotts and once the trial or whatever is sorted, I could get a better job than the perfumers, make sure you’re settled in the house and everything before… anything happens.’

‘But at least… I’m sure we could make this work in Bolstrad, no?’

Severus was shaking his head in disagreement before she’d even finished her sentence. ‘I thought you’d be happy to go back?’
Hermione had ached for England ever since she had decided to stay in Romania. While the Carpathians undoubtedly had their own, distinct beauty, it was incomparable to the familiarity of the rolling English countryside; whilst Stela, Fiers, Nicu and other members of The Watch were fine people to spend one’s time with, there are no friends like the friends you meet at school; she missed her parents, she missed Yorkshire tea, and she missed people she could reminisce about the old days with. But that was not to say the sacrifice had not been worth her while. As she had admitted to herself long ago now, she had left England to find an inner peace, and Severus, in his own way, had helped her do that.

‘I just want you to be happy,’ she said.

A strange look washed over his face, a look of mild puzzlement that he often wore when she said something kind to him, a look that suggested he couldn’t quite believe her because he was so unaccustomed to, or felt so undeserving of, anyone paying him such dues. It had taken Hermione a long time to get him to accept compliments and loving gestures without stiff rebuttals. It had been a constant reminder that he felt he had never been valued, never wanted, nor loved, and it broke her heart. But today, a testament to her efforts, albeit reluctantly he accepted her words and issued her a grateful smile. ‘Wherever we are, so long as you’re there, I will be happy,’ he said, his cheeks flushing slightly as he cast furtive glances at her, clearly trying to judge her reaction. Whilst sometimes his reticence to display emotions made Hermione want to scream, his awkwardness when he did try was endlessly endearing.

‘This is all so unfair,’ she bemoaned, feeling petulant but justified with it. ‘This should be a happy occasion and yet I just feel overwhelmingly sad.’

‘Don’t,’ he implored, a keen look in his eyes, ‘I promised myself, when I didn’t die on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, that I wasn’t going to dwell on might have beens or could be’s…’ he paused in response to her mildly incredulous expression. What about Lily? her mind screamed, and he seemed to hear it, ‘… except one night a year,’ he qualified with a subtly wry grin. ‘So, I reckon we have a choice, we can sit at the kitchen table, mourning our time together before it’s even over, or we can go out there and make the most of it. It’s entirely up to you.’

She stood and moved over to him, stopping just short of his knees, blocking his view of the window so he’d be forced to look at her. ‘I choose the latter,’ she said. Her stomach was at his eye-level and his gaze fell on it for a second time. She reached down and, taking his hands, placed his palms flat against it.

‘You mustn’t forgive me for the way I spoke to you yesterday,’ he said, looking up at her earnestly, ‘no one should ever speak to you like that, least of all me. I... remind myself of my father, when I get like that, and I refuse to be like him... especially now,’ he continued, rubbing his fingers gently over
the fabric of her blouse. He had not divulged much about his parents and Hermione, knowing what she knew from his memories, had never pressed him on the subject. ‘I’ll do better… I’ll be better,’ he added, seemingly speaking more to himself than Hermione.

‘You really mean it, don’t you?’ she asked.

‘What?’

‘I thought you were just saying it last night, because you were drunk, and because you were sorry for what you’d said in the morning. But you really want this baby, don’t you?’

‘Have I not said?’ and he broke into the first proper smile all morning.

‘Not explicitly.’

He slid his arms from her stomach to around her waist as he stood up. ‘I want this baby,’ he responded, then placed a firm kiss on her lips as though that sealed the deal.

~oOo~

‘That I won’t be forgotten,’ he replied to the usual question as he climbed into bed beside Hermione that night.

‘What do you mean?’ she asked, nestling in beside him and relishing his warmth on this cold winter’s night.

‘I worry about being forgotten sometimes.’

‘But that’s silly, Severus. Your name is in history books!’

He shook his head thoughtfully. ‘I don’t want to be remembered like that, I…’ he paused, and she thought he might be at risk of clamping up, fearing he’d divulged too much, but then he inhaled deeply and continued, ‘I want people to remember how I am now. I want the people who really
‘I’ll remember you,’ she promised in a small, sad voice, ‘and if… if you don’t get the chance, I’ll make sure our child really knows you, and your grandchildren, and great-grandchildren forever more. You will not be forgotten, Severus Snape!’
Tapping her chilled fingers against the window sill, Hermione watched the dark figure struggle up the hill towards the house. The sky had been an ominous shade of steely grey for the past three days and had finally erupted with snow yesterday afternoon, blanketing Bolstrad overnight. The phrase pathetic fallacy floated into her mind as she contemplated the prospect of spending time holed up in the house with Severus. Such were the perils of living in the mountains. He had ventured out some three hours earlier to gather supplies lest such an event should occur, and Hermione had relished the peace. Since their conversations over the kitchen table some two months ago, Severus’ enthusiasm for either their child or their moving back to England had waned without explanation and they had lived in a state of constant tension. They had not bickered or fought, but neither had they basked in the excitement of prospective parenthood as Hermione had dared to believe they might.

~oOo~

It had all started with her first trip to the healer’s.

‘Is something the matter?’ Hermione had enquired, registering the concern on the medi-witch’s face. Severus, for his part, had seemed mesmerised trying to make sense of the swirling, grainy projection that hovered beside the bed, but as Hermione spoke he too turned his attention to the medi-witch, who was now chewing her bottom lip with a creased brow.

‘Nothing is the matter,’ she replied after a contemplative moment, ‘there is a slight anomaly on the scan, that is all. I will fetch the healer to see,’ and with a reassuring smile she stood and left the room.

‘What do you think that means?’ Severus asked as the door closed again, ‘anomaly?’

‘I don’t know,’ Hermione replied in a small voice. ‘Do you think something’s wrong?’

‘She said not.’

Their agony was prolonged for a little over five minutes, though it felt considerably longer, and then the medi-witch returned with a healer in tow. The healer introduced herself and the two medics spoke amongst themselves in Romanian, pointing intermittently at the projection.

‘Ah,’ the medi-witch said a moment later, slightly startling Severus and Hermione who had retreated
into a private bubble of concern. ‘It is as I suspected and nothing to fear,’ she said, before turning to address Hermione personally, ‘it is twins.’

Hermione had felt Severus’ grip on her hand go slack as he stared up at the projection with wide, worried eyes, and whilst his posture remained the same she practically felt him withdraw from her emotionally. In fact, he didn’t speak again, save the odd grumble, until they were back outside, Hermione clutching a moving image of her scan loosely in her hands.

‘Twins,’ he said, slightly incredulously, ‘that’s going to be expensive.’

She looked up at him frowningly. ‘Is that all you have to say?’

And he had shrugged in response.

*Perhaps everything will be alright once he’s got his head around it*, Hermione tried to convince herself, not sure whether she had quite got her head around it herself yet. Her mother was a twin, and her great aunts were too, so, she supposed, twins did run in the family, but she had never once considered that she might have twins. That seemed naïve now and when she had told Severus this he had acted for a time as though she had somehow tricked him and had sat brooding until even he realised how ridiculous this was. But still, he did not emerge from the odd stupor this news had induced, instead burying himself in work at the perfumers.

‘Train tickets across continents are expensive,’ he said, ‘baby stuff costs a fortune.’

~oOo~

He had maintained this mantra in its various forms for the last two months, and indeed, the moment he walked through the door in early January, bringing in with him a flurry of snow, the first words to escape his mouth were regarding the cost of bread and milk. Hermione felt herself, quite against her will, roll her eyes and sigh heavily, which Severus saw. He issued her his customary scowl as he marched past her into the kitchen. Choosing to rise above it she merely shook her head and situated herself at the bureau, rifling through the various letters she had started and abandoned whilst he had been out. She had been intending to reply to her parents for quite some time but hadn’t, as yet, been able to find the words.

~oOo~
A week or so after her first scan Severus had returned from a particularly long shift at the shop to find her crying over a letter from her mother. Hermione had written to her parents to tell them the news of the babies, sure their response would be precisely the encouragement she and Severus needed, only to be left disappointed:

Dear Hermione,

Your dad and I are both well, thank you for asking. You’ll have to forgive my taking my time to reply to your last letter. I have to say your news came as something of a surprise and, if I’m completely honest darling, I didn’t want to say anything I might regret. We’ve both had time to cool off and get our heads around it now though.

I know you’re a very capable young woman, you always have been, but it’s a mother’s right, as you will learn, to fret over their children and I can’t help but be worried for you. I just hope you haven’t underestimated how this is going to change your life. It isn’t that we aren’t thrilled at the prospect of being grandparents, and twice over to boot, just that we regret the circumstances in which this is happening.

Have you thought about work? Or money? You might just have convinced us that your relationship with Severus is what you want, but that doesn’t make the fact that you’re having children with a man twice your age, never mind that he’s your ex-teacher. I know he seems to treat you well, and you’ve said he’s sticking by you, but you’ve also said before he isn’t well, and your friend Ron, he told us about Severus’ past, Hermione. We didn’t want to believe him without you confirming it for us, and we thought you’d tell us when you were ready, but you’ve never said anything, which has just makes us worry all the more if it is true that he’s a fugitive. I’m sure you don’t need me to spell out the implications of that for you. You’ve always been so intelligent, this just doesn’t seem like you at all, and a part of us can’t help but think there is so much potential being wasted here.

I truly hope you won’t be too hurt by this, we just feel it is necessary to be honest with you because we love you so, so much! Please let us know when you will be coming home, and if there’s any way we can help you, or Severus, for that matter.

Lots of love, Mum and Dad.

Severus had reached out and taken the letter from her wordlessly. She watched, her vision blurred by tears, as he read it over a number of times.

‘So they agree with me,’ he said after a moment, slumping beside her on the settee and throwing the letter derisively onto the coffee table.
‘What do you mean?’ she sobbed.

‘They agree that I’m holding you back. That a baby… babies are going to stop you achieving all the things you could have achieved.’

‘Well, I don’t agree with that,’ she said weakly.

He exhaled through his nose, issuing her a wonky grimace. ‘Then more fool you,’ he grumbled, turning to her and stroking her abdomen. Occasionally, tentatively, he would do this - place his hand against her burgeoning stomach and look at her with an unspoken fondness, a small smile upon his lips. But then a moment later a shadow would pass over his features and, mumbling indistinctly under his breath, he would turn away from her and busy himself with something inconsequential.

Yes, everything will be alright once we’re back in England, she tried to convince herself.

~oOo~

Back at the bureau in January, Hermione dipped her quill in the ink but stopped short of pressing it against the parchment. She turned to Severus who had re-emerged from the kitchen and thrown himself into his armchair with a book, his legs crossed at the ankles and his feet resting on the coffee table.

‘When can I tell my parents we’ll be back in England?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know,’ he sighed, letting his hands and the book fall to his lap. ‘Next month, maybe.’

‘Before Christmas you said it would be January.’

‘Things change.’

‘What things?’
‘Things.’

‘Oh, for Merlin’s sake,’ Hermione finally snapped, ‘going back was your idea and you’ve done nothing towards arranging it.’

‘Look, just because it was my idea, doesn’t mean it was an easy one. Bolstrad is my home. It isn’t the same for you,’ he responded flippantly.

‘Oh, you think so?’ she hissed, then she stood suddenly and promptly began rummaging in the cupboard underneath the bureau, eventually withdrawing the Romanian puzzle box he had bought her all those Christmases ago, and placing it with a wooden thud on the coffee table. Severus watched in silence as she deftly, with practiced motions, slid back the panels to reveal the key, pushed it into the lock and pulled open the lid. She considered the contents for a moment. She had placed a similar charm on the box to that she had placed on her purple beaded bag, and it was filled with an impossible number of trinkets and treasures. Reaching in she pulled out a small brown object. ‘An acorn,’ she said, looking at it a little sadly, ‘from the first time you took me for a walk in the mountains,’ then she placed it on the table and reached back into the box, ‘pressed flowers from the bunch you picked for me in the woods here; photographs of us in The Moroi, in the mountains, in the park, at events in Bucharest; the bloody napkin from the first time we went to lunch; Christmas cards from Fiers and Stela; pamphlets I wrote for The Watch; the babies’ scan picture—’

‘Alright!’ he interrupted, pleading with her to stop, ‘alright!’

‘Tickets from when you took me the theatre,’ she continued, ignoring him completely, ‘the Carpathian crystal ball you finally swallowed your pride to buy me; the diary I used to keep of my journey searching for you, full of how desperate I was find you; letters from my friends and family that I haven’t seen for almost four and a half years because of you; the cork from the champagne we had on our one year anniversary—’

‘I get it!’ he cried urgently, sitting forward in the chair and clutching handfuls of his hair. ‘Shut up.’

Hermione pushed the puzzle box away from her with one frustrated gesture, ‘just don’t tell me Bolstrad doesn’t mean as much to me as it does you when I’ve spent the last two years putting down roots, making it my home… making memories, just like you wanted!’

‘I said I get it.’
'I didn’t ask for this to happen anymore than you did!’

‘I know.’

‘Then why are you punishing me?’

‘I…’ he paused, running a hand through his hair, ‘I suppose,’ he continued in stilted utterances, ‘to make it easier… I don’t know.’

‘What on Earth… just, stop talking in riddles, Severus. I’m sick and tired of this, you need to start making sense. Now.’ Hermione felt as though they’d had this same conversation Merlin knows how many times before.

He pinched his nose.

~oOo~

On Christmas day they had told Fiers, Stela and Nicu and had received their first genuine congratulations. Severus had smiled what appeared to be a true smile as Fiers handed him a beer and shook his hand.

‘I can tell you, Severus, there is nothing more rewarding than bringing up children,’ Fiers said with a fond glance in Nicu’s direction. Then a little more quietly, so only Severus and Hermione would hear, he added, ‘I will tell you a secret of which I am not proud. Before we realised Nicu was a squib I had very traditional beliefs about… their type, and for a time I even had those beliefs about Nicu. I do not like myself for it, but I was ready to abandon him in the mountains and there was little Stela could have done to stop me. Then one day, Nicu was playing in the street with some other children, magical children, and the first thing I noticed was that none of them cared that he was a squib, and when some older children came along and they started to make fun of one of Nicu’s friends. There was some accidental magic because the children were getting worried and scared and the more magic there was the more worried and scared they became.’

‘But Nicu, he stepped up to these bullies and he spoke to them. To this day I do not know what he said but they backed down and went on their way. When I asked Nicu about it he said to me, “Papa, words are stronger than any magic,” and in that moment I realised this child’s potential, squib or no,’ he paused and looked at Nicu a little sadly now. ‘Yes, children can make you see the world in a whole new way; teach you things about yourself you would never have known if you didn’t have
them; give you a fathomless capacity to love you never knew you were capable of.’ He finished speaking with a sigh and patted Severus on the arm, a fatherly sort of gesture in itself, and then moved away from their little gathering before either of them had the opportunity to respond.

Severus watched after the old man as he made his way over to a gramophone on the other side of the room and adjusted it so a record of Christmas songs began to play softly in the background. ‘That was a strange thing to choose to tell us after all these years,’ he said quietly.

Hermione nodded in agreement and it was only much later that she suspected what the ulterior motive behind Fiers having divulged such a tale might be. Hermione withstanding, Fiers knew Severus better than anyone; Fiers would know the anxieties Severus was likely experiencing at the prospect of becoming a father, perhaps he would even anticipate anxieties Severus was yet to think of. Perhaps in Fiers’ mind telling Severus of the myriad ways Nicu had improved his life, was aimed at assuaging these anxieties and Hermione was thankful to him.

But whatever Fiers’ intentions, all he seemed to achieve was heightening Severus’ awareness of these unspoken fears that festered and fermented in his gut, causing him to withdraw even further from her.

*Everything will be alright once the babies are here,* she had thought to herself, not sure who it was she was trying to convince anymore.

~oOo~

‘I should probably be more concerned about the trial, Azkaban, or the fact that I’m ill, but I’m not,’ he was saying, back in the present, ‘I’m concerned because our children aren’t even born yet and I’m already a letting them down.’

‘Severus…’

‘Well firstly, actually, I’ve failed you because everything you worked so hard for is going to go out of the window now, when I swore to stand by you and support you.’

‘We’ve talked about this already…’

‘And then the babies… We have no money, so I can’t provide for them practically.’
‘-What about what Fiers said?’ Hermione asked.

‘What Fiers said… well that scares me more than anything. There’s been plenty of things in my life have made me see the world in a whole new way, and it’s seldom been good; I’m certain that anything else there is for me to discover about myself won’t be good either, and as for a “capacity to love I never knew I was capable of”… I’m too selfish. I had the audacity to call you selfish at Hallowe’en, but the way I’ve been behaving, distancing myself from you… that’s been for my own benefit, and my own benefit alone.’

‘What will it take to convince you that you are worthy?’ Hermione asked him earnestly. She moved from the floor, wobbling slightly as she was still becoming accustomed to her bump, and perched on the arm of the chair beside Severus.

He looked a little startled at her dismissal of his admission. ‘I will never be worthy… but you need to know, the way I feel about the baby… babies hasn’t changed… I’m just terrified.’

‘And the way you feel about me?’ she asked, raising an eyebrow in perfect imitation of him.

With a fluid motion he whipped his wand out of his back pocket. A wisp of silvery-white emerged from the end of it as he whispered a spell under his breath. Indistinct shapes rose in the air like smoke, coming together in the centre of the room, atop the coffee table, taking the clear form of a ghost-like otter. It bounded around the table, chasing its tail, then scratched behind its ear with a hind leg before dropping to the ground and disappearing as though it had plunged into the depths of a deep lake.

‘You… your Patronus changed?’ Hermione stammered, staring at the floorboards where the otter had disappeared.

He shrugged in concurrence, ‘and it’s a dog - a male… I mean… it’s compatible, unlike my other one, the doe’ he added, seeming suddenly self-conscious as he slipped his wand away again and withdrew back into the armchair. ‘I trust you know what makes them change?’

‘True, unchangeable love,’ she murmured, looking up at him.

‘Yeah, well… you asked how I feel about you.’
‘Sometimes, Severus, what you say and the way you act don’t match up.’

‘Tell your parents the beginning of March,’ he said suddenly, grasping her hand and meeting her eye, ‘my actions and my words will match up this time, I promise.’
He fingered the two train tickets in his pocket, taking his time in his walk up the hill as he contemplated how there would be little opportunity to enjoy this view in future. The snow had long since been washed away by heavy winter rains, but even in the impenetrable gloom, Bolstrad was beautiful to him and he was going to miss it. Not the sentimental type, and loathed to attach himself, at least after Lily, to anywhere, anything or anyone, Bolstrad had had an effect on him and he’d made an exception. Bolstrad and Hermione, he corrected himself.

He recalled when he had first come here, still reeling from his sickness in Italy and practically penniless. Weatherworn and weary he had stumbled into The Moroi and experienced the first bit of good luck in his life, or so it felt. Quite by chance, Fiers had been there. He was drowning his own sorrows as his perfumers had been targeted by disgruntled locals who abhorred his squib-sympathising ways; the windows, and countless bottles of perfume smashed to pieces. Severus had offered, in exchange for a roof over his head, to act as a sort of security guard, and Fiers had agreed. Gradually an acquaintanceship of sorts had developed and Severus had been promoted to working in the shop, which in turn had given him the financial freedom to rent his own house. Bolstrad had offered him what Hogwarts had failed to all those years ago; all those attributes aforementioned which he held so dear.

And he had spent his last night in Bolstrad much as he had spent his first, getting drunk in the pub with Fiers, though this time Stela and Hermione had been there too, watching on amusedly from behind glasses of pumpkin juice. They didn’t talk of this being their last time together, there was more a sense that they were doing this for old time’s sake. They had been cheerful to start with, and then had become nostalgic, Hermione had cried a little and blamed it on her hormones.

As he pushed open the front door of the house, he wondered whether he might ever have the opportunity to return here.

‘Hi,’ he said as he entered the living room to find Hermione packing the last of her clothes into her trunk. The furniture was all still in place, they would be leaving it here, but the room still felt distinctly un-homely, or perhaps as though they had never lived there or it was someone else’s house and they were merely calling in to visit.

‘Hi,’ she replied softly, smiling up at him. Ever since he had relayed his fears of what their futures held to her, she had spoken to him in this tone, as though she thought she might startle him if she so much as raised her voice above a whisper. For his part he was trying to be more patient, less self-consumed, but he was master of hiding his feelings when he wanted to, and there was no doubt that he was still absolutely terrified, terrified to his very bones. His head was filled with everything that might go wrong, and he didn’t dare let himself believe that things might go right.
'Stela has sent a hamper for the journey,’ he told Hermione as he placed the basket of food on the coffee table. ‘Sandwiches, and scones, and stuff.’

‘That was kind of her. I’m really going to miss them,’ she replied.

‘Yeah,’ he said.

‘Here, can you help me up, please?’

He grinned and closed the space between them, heaving Hermione to her feet by her outstretched hand. She was huge, but pregnancy suited her. Her cheeks were filled out and a little ruddy, and she’d developed curves in, at least as far as Severus was concerned, all the right places.

‘I think we’re all packed,’ she said, gesturing towards the two trunks that lay open but filled to the brim on the living room floor. There was remarkably little show for his life in Bolstrad, he thought, now it had been packed away into his trunk, but then he looked up at Hermione, her old mustard jumper stretched over her stomach, and realised that everything there was to show for his life was stood right there. ‘I, err… didn’t know what you would want to do with your potions?’ she muttered, disturbing Severus’ reverie.

He scowled. Those bloody potions. ‘I’ll put some in my satchel and the rest can be packed away,’ he said.

‘Right… you ready then?’ she asked, looking as though she was worried what his response might be.

He swallowed hard and nodded slowly. ‘Ready,’ he affirmed.

And hand in hand, dragging their trunks behind them, they left their little house and made their way, headed for the train station, back through the winding streets of Bolstrad for the final time.

~oOo~

As the train pulled out of the station, craning his neck until it ached, Severus watched Bolstrad
disappear from sight, feeling an almost overwhelming sense of loss as it did so. The rain lashed
to the carriage window as they sped through the Carpathians. The mountains rose up on either
side of the tracks, their tops lost in a thick grey fog. Rather than symbolising protection from the
outside world, as they once had, they now seemed to loom over them, making Severus feel oddly
claustrophobic. In places, where the sun broke through the clouds, a dappled white light was cast
across the foothills, but otherwise they travelled West through an endless twilight.

‘Severus?’ Hermione asked, snuggling into him, her head rest on his shoulder as the rocking motion
of the carriage began to lull her to sleep.

‘Mmm?’

‘What will happen, when we get back?’

He groaned slightly and shifted away from her but she had a firm hold of his arm. ‘I’ve already told
you,’ he grumbled.

‘Tell me again… please.’

She had told him before that it made her feel safe when he said it out loud; the unknown was what
worried people like Hermione, people that were so used to knowing all the answers.

So, with a resigned sigh he reiterated their plan. ‘I’ll take you to the house,’ he said quietly, ‘and get
you settled in. It’ll take a bit of work to make it liveable. Then I’ll use a glamour charm and go to
Gringotts as soon as I can, so you have a bit of money,’ he continued, ‘but that’ll alert suspicion, I
think, my account hasn’t been used for so long… I don’t know what the goblins will make of it at
all…’

‘Then what?’ she murmured.

‘And then I’ll make sure you have what you need for the babies… and then, I suppose… I’ll hand
myself in.’

Hermione opened her eyes and looked up at him, ‘having to have a trial suggests that they could find
you guilty. It’s a scary thought.’
'Mmm,’ he said, looking out of the window at the passing scenery overly intensely, refusing to meet her gaze as he didn’t trust his facial expression not to betray his fear. He felt too emotionally exhausted today to maintain a schooled expression.

‘Harry will still give a testimony in your defence,’ she said, starting to sound panicky, ‘I’m sure of it. I’ll write to him as soon as we get back! His name still carries a bit of weight, obviously—’

‘-No,’ Severus interrupted, ‘I’m not going to Potter for help!’

‘Severus… that’s ridiculous if it could mean the difference between you going to Azkaban or not.’

It still concerned Severus that accepting help from Potter would be taking him right back to where he started; indebted once again, and he told Hermione as much, though even as he said it he knew it was a half-hearted protestation. If he stood any chance of staying out of Azkaban then he needed Potter’s help, loathed as he might be to accept it.

‘I’ve told you before, just because someone does something for you doesn’t mean they expect something in return,’ she replied. ‘I don’t think now is the time for pride.’

He rested his head against the back of the seat and closed his eyes, he could feel a headache coming on. ‘You’re right, of course,’ he acquiesced with a sigh after a prolonged moment.

‘Mmm… I know,’ she said with a small, satisfied smile, ‘but I mean, what would I tell the children? “Sorry your father is serving a life sentence, but he was too stubborn to ask your Uncle Harry for help.”’

Severus turned to her quickly, ‘Uncle Harry?’ he said, absolutely aghast.

‘I knew that would get your attention,’ she said, but she grinned back at him and he knew she was only teasing.

‘Ugh… that’s not funny.’
'It is a little bit… I do intend for my friends to be a part of their lives though, you know that, don’t you?'

‘Do they have to be a part of my life?’

‘You might like to make an effort, especially if Harry is going to help.’

‘You said I wouldn’t owe him anything…’

‘You wouldn’t be doing it for him, you’d be doing it for me.’

He reasoned that he did owe her something, nay, everything, but shook his head in mock annoyance anyway. ‘And as well as always being right,’ he laughed, ‘you have an uncanny ability of always getting your own way!’

‘I know that too!’

He turned to look at her properly now, swimming, for what seemed an eternity, in hazel eyes. He reached out and gently stroked one of her wild curls, pulling it straight and smiling as it sprung back into place. He had been doing this with increasing frequency over the past few days as their departure loomed ever closer; it was to remind him why he was doing this, doing what he had always said he would never do.

‘What?’ she asked, a quizzical smile creeping across her lips.

‘Nothing… I…’ he stammered.

‘Go on.’

‘I… just haven’t seen you like this for a long time,’ he replied. ‘It’s nice to see you genuinely happy.’

‘Mmm…’ she murmured, tucking herself back under his arm, and he squeezed her protectively. ‘But it’s no fun if it’s at the expense of your happiness,’ she said, watching out of the window herself.
'It isn’t,’ he assured her, and it wasn’t an untruth. He was tired, and he was still terrified, but he knew if he let himself he could be happy too, and it was her that had done it to him. ‘I love you,’ he whispered, but when he turned to her he saw she had fallen fast asleep.

~oOo~

For just over a week they journeyed across Europe, spending most of their time huddled inseparably in one train carriage or another, watching the scenery outside alter as they passed from country to country. Hermione slept a lot, nestled beside Severus, his arm draped over her, and he looked out of the window, his head pressed against the cool glass. Hungary, Austria, Germany, France, and then, in the first days of March they stepped foot on British soil.

For Severus it felt disconcertingly uncanny; at once familiar and foreign, but Hermione had stood stock still for a moment, looking at her feet which she shuffled slightly in the mud below them. She held her hands palms upwards to the rain and and inhaled deeply through her nose, relishing the scent of the damp air as a subtle, clandestine smile spread across her lips.

‘Home,’ she whispered, and as Severus watched her it was as though an almighty weight had been lifted from her shoulders, until, at least, she opened her eyes and looked up at him and he realised in that moment that he was her final burden. He nodded and took her hand, they had one more train to catch before to the Midlands, Cokeworth and his childhood home in Spinner’s End.
Eileen and Tobias

Severus could feel the dwindling residue of protective wards cast long ago as he stepped through the threshold of his childhood home in Spinner’s End onto a mound of unopened post. Hermione followed him in out of the cold; the rain had abated as night had drawn in, but a frost had begun to set on the ground shortly before their train had arrived into the nearby station, blanketing the ground in a crisp, glittering layer that crunched under foot. Within the house there was a distinctive odour of damp in the stale air. Hermione reached out and flicked an electric light switch but nothing happened.

‘Sorry,’ Severus said, looking at her apologetically as they moved into the living room, ‘I’ll go to Gringotts first thing tomorrow and…’ he trailed off, frowning at the threadbare carpet and faded sofa.

‘We’ll make it a home, Severus,’ she said, issuing him a small smile and squeezing his hand briefly. He was grateful for her show of optimism however misplaced he felt it was. ‘I think it’s colder in here than it is outside, though’ she added, taking her wand from her cloak pocket and casting incendio into the grate below the hearth. Orange flames burst to life and the room was filled with a warm light that immediately enhanced its appeal. ‘Better,’ she said, unfastening her travelling cloak and laying it over the dusty sofa so she could sit there without getting her clothes dirty. She sighed contentedly and the flames danced in her eyes.

Severus watched her for a moment, an odd, guilty feeling twisting his abdomen. ‘I’ll see what state the bedrooms are in,’ he suggested quietly, making to leave.

‘Wait, Severus. Sit down and rest for a bit.’ She looked up at him imploringly and patted the unoccupied space on the sofa beside her. After a slight hesitation he slumped into the seat, feeling travel weary and old. She hadn’t taken her eyes off him. ‘What’s wrong?’ she asked.

He exhaled a loud sigh, ‘I don’t want to be here!’ he said at length.

‘Oh,’ she whispered, and he did not miss the flash of panic in her eyes.

‘I just mean… here, in this house. Nothing else,’ he clarified. ‘This isn’t a happy home.’

‘Maybe not,’ she said after a moment’s consideration, ‘well, not yet. But it can be.’ He looked at her unconvinced but nodded in agreement anyway.
‘It’s not like we have much choice anyway, is it?’

‘We’ll make it nice!’

He snorted derisively, ‘it’s going to cost a fortune!’ he said. His tone was angry but his anger was not directed at Hermione, and he hoped she knew it.

She shifted her position so she could look at him more clearly and pulled his folded arms apart so she could snuggle into his chest. He knew he was being petulant but he couldn’t shake the feeling of failure and frustration that had descended on him the moment he stepped into the building. It was the same feeling that used to descend on him when he returned home from terms away at Hogwarts as a boy.

‘We’ll have a proper look tomorrow, when we have light, to see what’s salvageable. The cleaning won’t take long. Then we can decorate,’ she said, and the way she said it made him almost believe her.

He nodded and draped an arm around her once again, his fingers resting delicately on the mound of her stomach. The bedrooms forgotten, they fell to sleep like that until morning.

~oOo~

When Hermione woke she was laid on the sofa, a fusty, moth eaten blanket placed over her. She sat up and stretched her aching limbs. After a quick surveillance of the ground floor of the house, and calling Severus’ name upstairs, Hermione determined that she was alone. ‘I don’t want to be here!’ she remembered him saying last night, and now he was gone. No. She shook the thought from her mind. Had he not also said he would go to Gringotts this morning?

Annoyed at herself she padded down the corridor to the kitchen. There was an old fridge, which she knew would be empty but opened anyway, only to be met by the stench of stale milk. She found a chipped glass in one of the cupboards and endeavoured to rinse it and fill it with water, but when she turned on the faucet it emitted a light brown sludge instead.

With a sigh she went to her trunk, which Severus had stored on top of his in the living room, and where she knew she’d stashed the scones Stela had baked before they left Bolstrad. Realising she was starving she guzzled one down, and then took her time with a second, wishing she had something to wash it down with. She contemplated a trip to the corner shop, but realise she had no
Muggle money on her. Instead, with a resigned sigh, she mustered the energy to venture upstairs to see if she couldn’t start making the bedroom inhabitable. In the stark, white daylight, the house looked to be in a considerably worse state of disrepair than it had in the shadows and half light of the previous night.

The upstairs landing was a small rectangle with three doors coming off of it. Immediately to the left at the top of the stairs, Hermione discovered the bathroom, which was in a similar condition as the kitchen. The two bedrooms were adjacent to one another, a master bedroom on the front overlooking Spinner’s End, and a smaller bedroom on the back, presumably looking down on the dank patch of grass that constituted the garden. It was, she thought, seeking to be positive, a little larger than their home in Bolstrad.

She supposed she ought to deal with the master bedroom first as they would be needing it more imminently; she didn’t fancy the idea of another night on the sofa, but the second bedroom had a strange allure. It had been Severus’ bedroom when he was a child, and soon it would Severus’ children’s bedroom. The door squeaked as it yielded to her gentle push.

It was sparsely furnished with a single, metal framed bed pushed up against the window at the far end, a wardrobe, and a desk. There was little by way of decoration save a cork board mounted above the desk where a teenaged Severus had pinned a fabric Slytherin crest, some Quidditch tickets from a match in 1973, and a photograph of himself in his school uniform surrounded by a group of other Slytherins, one of whom she suspected might be Regulus Black. She recognised his grey eyes and they reminded her of Sirius, anyway.

In comparison with the rest of the house this room looked to be in quite fair condition, it was only when Hermione opened the wardrobe door and was greeted by an avalanche of boxes and bin liners that she realised there was more work to do than she’d initially thought.

Some of the bags were filled with Severus, and what she suspected were his parent’s, old clothes. She dumped them all in a pile she had mentally labelled “charity shop,” though she’d run it by him first. She also found some old books, some were Muggle children’s books with nice, colourful illustrations that she wanted to keep for the babies, and others were old potions books, more advanced than anything they studied at NEWTs level, so she she assumed they were from Severus’ apprenticeship. She thought they might be worth keeping as well.

Other boxes and bags were filled with cassette tapes, ornaments wrapped in old newspaper, cheap jewellery, Muggle housekeeping magazines, and finally, in the very bottom, a box filled with hundreds of photographs. Most were loose in the box but there were three thick albums. Hermione leafed through a few of the individual photos first. There were a couple of black and white ones which showed a man and a woman, the latter of which Severus strongly resembled, walking arm in arm along a pier at the seaside; another showed just the woman, smiling at the camera; a third showed them stood together on their wedding day, the woman already heavily pregnant with,
presumably, Severus. Hermione glanced through a few more of the photographs but they were all of Severus’ parents and other people she did not recognise and she wanted to see photos of a little Severus.

She reached for a green, leather-bound album and opened the front cover where a note had been written: “To Sev, Dad found some old films and had them developed. Some of these are so embarrassing, but they’re funny, and anyway, I thought you might like them. Happy Birthday! Love, Lily x”.

‘What are you doing?’ a voice suddenly asked from the doorway. Severus stood there looking a little windswept, his cheeks pink from the cold.

‘Oh, Severus, you made me jump,’ Hermione laughed, smiling up at him. ‘How did you get on at the bank?’ she asked.

‘Those are private,’ he said, ignoring her question and snatching the photo album out of her hand. He closed it with quick snap and threw it back into the box.

‘I was just looking through what we could throw out and I stumbled upon them’ she said, standing and frowning at this sudden change in temperament from him. He had been sullen for days, but now he seemed thoroughly enraged, an emotion not even she was particularly accustomed to from him anymore.

‘Yeah, you can start with them,’ he snapped, gesturing sharply at the box of photographs, ‘burn them for all I care!’

‘Severus, I -’

‘I’m going to clean the kitchen,’ he interrupted her, ‘it’s a right shithole.’ And with that he turned and left her stood there alone, utterly confused, once again, as to what she had done to upset him.

~oOo~

She came downstairs a few hours later to find Severus scourgifying the countertops in the kitchen. A slight whirring suggested he had fixed the fridge and the floor tiles were gleaming.
'Our bedroom doesn’t look half bad,’ she said softly, not sure whether time would have assuaged his mood or not. She had abandoned the spare room after Severus’ outburst and spent the remainder of the morning cleaning the front bedroom. ’Just needs a lick of paint. You’ve done a good job in here, too.’

He turned to look at her, his expression indeterminable. ‘Are you hungry?’ he asked. Hermione inferred from his tone that he would rather not talk about what had happened upstairs. She would let it lie for now but she wasn’t sure she wouldn’t be able to not ask him about it later.

She smiled weakly, ‘starving. I’m a bottomless pit these days,’ she said, resting a hand on her stomach.

‘I’ve sorted out the electricity,’ he stated, nodding in the direction of the glowing bulb above Hermione’s head, ‘we have gas,’ he demonstrated the hob, ‘and I’ve sorted out water payments,’ he turned the faucet and Hermione was thankful to see it run clear.

‘See,’ she said cheerfully, moving further into the room and sitting down at the tiny kitchen table, ‘things are coming together nicely already.’

‘Mmm,’ he said, still sounding unconvinced. ‘is soup, OK?’

‘Lovely.’

She watched him open two tins of tomato soup with a rusty Muggle tin opener and listened to him bemoan the loss of grocers that sold fresh vegetables in Bolstrad. Hermione suggested that the garden might be big enough for a small greenhouse, but Severus had dismissed the idea, apparently determined to be negative about everything to do with the house. As they sat to eat he had poured himself a copious measure of Firewhisky, and Hermione barely managed to refrain from mentioning that it was rather early in the day for that kind of thing. They had slurped their soup mostly in silence.

Eventually, when she couldn’t take it any longer, Hermione spoke. ‘Are you going to be like this forever from now on?’ she asked, conversationally.

‘Like what?’ he said. She could tell by his grisly tone how the Firewhisky was already effecting him.
'Moody and miserable. Drinking in the middle of the day. Is this because of those bloody photo albums? I didn’t know what was in those boxes when I started looking, I thought there might some pictures of you, when you were younger and… it made me wonder what our little one might look like. That’s all!’

He glared at her, his brow furrowed and his lips pressed together tightly. ‘Are you quite finished?’

She shrugged slightly to show that she had and looked away from him.

‘You see that dent in the wall?’ he asked suddenly, gesturing towards a hole in the plaster about five feet from the ground near the kitchen door.

‘Mmm…’

‘My dad did that. Rammed my mum’s head into it one time. Over there,’ he said, pointing to purplish stain on the wall, ‘he threw a bottle of wine at her, it smashed in her face and then hit the wall. My earliest memory is of her unconscious on the living room floor covered in blood. He’d knocked her senseless then gone off to the pub. I must have been about three or four and I didn’t know what to do so I just stood over her dabbing her cuts with kitchen roll-’

‘-Oh, Severus-’

‘-He’d lock me in the cellar for hours, ’til I pissed myself or he couldn’t stand the sound of my crying anymore; he isolated my mum from everyone she knew, her friends, her family; he drank all the money he earned and forbid magic for any purpose. She was so busy trying to appease him she didn’t have the time or energy to bother with me. The only thing she ever stood up to him over was my going to Hogwarts, and I suppose it benefitted him cos’ I was out of the way most of the year then-’

‘-And she’ll have know you were safe there!’ Hermione pointed out.

‘Mmm… I suppose. I hadn’t thought of that.’

‘What happened to them?’ she asked, ‘your parents?’
‘My dad died when I was seventeen. An accident at the mill. Tragic,’ he replied bitterly, ‘tragic because I wouldn’t have minded finishing him off myself.’

‘Sev—’

But he pulled a face that quite distinctly told her to shut up before continuing himself. ‘My mum got a load of compensation which she spent on putting me through my apprenticeship. She was never quite right again after what he’d put her through. She’s in a home now, for the elderly, down on the south coast. They sea air is supposed to be good for them they assured me,’ he smiled sadly.

‘Your mum is alive?’

‘Yeah.’

‘But you said she left you the house. I assumed…’

‘I said she left me with it, not left it to me,’ he replied, chuckling slightly. ‘Last I heard she was alive and well and still enjoying games of Gobstones.’

‘I… oh! Would you want to go and see her?’

‘Urm… I don’t know, it’s been a long time. She might not want to see me.’

‘Why not?’

‘I haven’t had much to do with her since I was about twenty-one, when I started teaching at Hogwarts. She got wind of what I’d been up to with the Death Eaters and she wasn’t impressed. Said I was more like my dad than she’d realised.’

‘Well, maybe in the spirit of fresh starts we could go and see her together. Show her how you’ve changed.’

He nodded despite looking thoroughly unconvinced. Hermione knew he didn’t believe he’d changed
himself, so how was he going to prove to anyone else that he had. ‘Maybe,’ he replied at length. ‘Look, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you all this stuff before. I’ve never really talked about it to anyone, well, not since Lily anyway… I don’t think I quite realised how being back here would feel.’

‘How does it feel?’

‘It feels like… like he could walk through that door any minute and I’d be powerless to stop him doing whatever he wanted.’

‘But that won’t happen, Severus. Look at me,’ and with her fingers on his chin she guided his face so their eyes met, ‘all these horrible memories, we can replace them. Whatever looking at that living room brings back to you, well, soon enough, that’ll be where your own children take their first steps, where they laugh, where we all play together; the cellar can be where you brew your potions. We can’t change what has happened, but can change what is going to happen.’

‘Very philosophical,’ he grumbled, raising a skeptical eyebrow at her. ‘You’re always having to put me back together. I can’t see where the fun is in that for you.’

‘I think it’s about time you had someone to put you back together, rather than you having to sort everyone else out. Let me worry about you, if I want. Let me fuss.’

‘It should be the other way around. You’re pregnant.’

She shook her head. ‘You sorted me out when we were in Romania. I was all over the place when I turned up. Now it’s my turn. Let me. Please.’

His skepticism didn’t wane but he acquiesced with a curt nod of his head. ‘I’m acutely aware that time is of the essence here. From here on in, we start making happy memories,’ he said with renewed determination.

‘Agreed.’

~oOo~
'You’re not like him, you know?’ Hermione told Severus later that evening as they lay in bed. They lay apart, both on their backs, staring at the dark ceiling. Hermione rubbing her hands over her stomach to try and calm the twins who were turning somersaults in there.

‘I’m not so sure,’ he replied. ‘I’m awful to you sometimes, I know I am. I remind myself of him very much.’

‘I can be awful to you too,’ she whispered, glad when he didn’t respond to deny it. ‘But you can also be kind, and funny, and generous and loving, and all the other good things too.’

‘Less often.’

‘You are capable of all those things…’ she paused to yawn, turning, with some effort, onto her side. ‘You do exhaust me though Severus. You give nothing away for months, years at a time, and then you lay it on me all at once. Every time I think I know you better than anyone, there’s something else.’

‘Sorry. I think that’s everything now,’ he said, and she could practically hear his smile.

‘And don’t you feel better for having told me?’

‘No,’ he said, and she admonished him with a slight tap on the arm, knowing that he was lying.

‘Tell me,’ she said, wanting to lighten the mood, ‘what are you grateful for today?’

He reached out in the darkness and took her hand. ‘I’m grateful to be sleeping in a proper bed for the first time in over a week,’ he replied. ‘You?’

‘Mmm… I’m grateful you felt you could tell me those things today when it’s obviously difficult for you,’ she replied, all the while remembering what he’d said about being able to talk to Lily about them first and, despite her embarrassment at her own petulance and jealousy, not sure how that made her feel.
Harry's Promise

The cafe had been chosen specifically so that Hermione and Harry may talk without either interruption or people eavesdropping. A quaint faux-Victorian Muggle tearoom in a Derbyshire village, with frilled doilies on the tables and mismatched crockery, provided the perfect sanctuary. It was a miserable day, which suited Hermione’s mood, as she was greeted by a slightly taller, more muscular, hairier Harry than she remembered.

‘Bloody Hell, Hermione,’ were the first words to escaped his mouth as his eyes fell on her stomach.

‘It’s great to see you again too,’ she muttered, sitting down at the table Harry had reserved for them and folding her arms over her front in an unsuccessful attempt to draw attention away from her pregnancy.

‘Sorry,’ Harry said quickly, sitting opposite, ‘you never said you were pregnant, although I did wonder why you said you’d be coming by train and not Apparating. I suppose… it… it’s Snape’s?’

‘They,’ she corrected, unable to fully meet his gaze, ‘twins. And yes, they’re Severus’, of course they are!’

‘Of course. Sorry… ugh, this hasn’t got off to a very good start already, has it? Shall we try again?’

She smiled at that. ‘Yes, alright. Hi, Harry, long time no see. How are you?’ she said, sounding as though she was reading from a foreign language translation book.

‘I’m very well thank you, and yourself?’

‘I’m great,’ she said, then added ‘really!’ in response to Harry’s unconvinced frown.

‘Well you certainly look well,’ he said, relaxing his features.

‘I look like a hippogriff.’
'In spite of that… ouch!' he exclaimed, smiling broadly as she swatted him playfully on the arm. ‘When are you due?’

‘Mid-June.’

‘Oh, they’ll be the year below our James at school then.’

Hermione sighed, feeling suddenly overwhelmingly sad. ‘Oh, Harry. I’m so sorry I missed your wedding, and, oh my God, your first child. I feel awful!’

‘Hey! I can’t say I wouldn’t have preferred it if you were around, but what’s done is done. Now you’re back there’ll be plenty more stuff for you to be a part of! Here…’ he took his wallet from the back pocket of his trousers and withdrew a photograph of Ginny holding a baby, beaming up at the camera. ‘James Sirius Potter,’ Harry explained proudly.

‘He’s gorgeous Harry. He looks just like you… and Ginny, she looks so happy.’

‘Yeah, she’s a natural mum.’

‘Maybe she can give me some tips then because I haven’t got a clue! I’ve read all the books -’

‘- of course you have!’ Harry interjected, still grinning mischievously.

‘But,’ she continued, ignoring the interruption, but feeling her spirits rise no end at his light mood, ‘I get the impression it’s not really something you can learn from a book!’

‘I’d say not,’ Harry said, placing the photograph back in the wallet, ‘and twins! You’d be better asking Molly about that!’

‘Molly…’ Hermione whispered. One of the hardest parts of ending her relationship with Ron had undoubtedly been forgoing her relationship with the rest of his family. Molly had been like a second mother to her throughout her adolescence but Hermione had not felt it appropriate to continue contact with Molly when she had broken her youngest son’s heart. She had half expected one of Molly’s shrill howlers in the post in the weeks after she had finally broken it off with Ron. ‘How is she? How
‘They’re doing well. Molly and Arthur love being grandparents. Bill and Fleur, George and Angelica - you remember Angelica Johnson from school? - Percy and his wife Audrey, they all have kids now too.’

‘Are they… mad at me?’ Hermione asked, feeling childlike.

Harry laughed though. ‘Confused by you more than anything. That’s all anyone is. Confused and perhaps a little worried.’

‘Oh,’ was all Hermione could manage and she was thankful when the waitress interrupted them to take their order. Hermione hadn’t even looked at the menu so just ordered cream tea, assuming that such an establishment would serve them. ‘And Ron?’ she ventured tentatively.

‘Ah,’ said Harry, with the air of someone who was unloading a heavy burden, ‘he’s doing OK… ish. It hasn’t been easy for him though, if I’m honest. He sacked off the Auror stuff when you… ended it with him, and he’s been helping George out with the business. I think it suits him better and he enjoys it more than he ever did being an Auror.’

‘I hope he’s happy,’ Hermione said earnestly. ‘Has he… found anyone else?’

Harry nodded noncommittally, ‘he’s always got some girlfriend or another, but it never gets serious. I think… well, to be honest, I probably shouldn’t say this, but I think if you said you wanted him back he’d accept in a flash.’

‘Oh,’ Hermione concluded in a small voice, not sure what an appropriate response to that would be.

‘Yeah… like I said though,’ Harry continued, obviously as keen as her to change the subject, ‘people are more interested in you. What’ve you been doing for the last five years?’

Hermione smiled weakly and, as their food arrived, began to regale Harry with tales of her time on the continent. He nodded and made affirmative noises in all the right places as she described her travels, but it was only when she mentioned her first encounter with Severus in Bolstrad that he showed any genuine interest; sitting up straighter and beginning to ask questions, and it was only when she’d concluded, telling him about their reasons for returning to England, that she noticed his
expression.

‘What?’ she asked, rather sharply.

‘Well, it’s just… look, to be honest, and we need to talk about it at some point, Hermione, so we may as well get it over and done with… all this doesn’t really seem like you,’ he said, nodding in the direction of her baby bump. ‘It was weird enough when you disappeared with barely a goodbye. You were always the smart one, and before you left you were doing well in work, they were going to promote you even though the bylaw wasn’t passed, you had friends… you had Ron, your parents were back… and now you’re just… I dunno… shacked up with Snape, a fugitive to all intents and purposes I might add, and he’s got you lumbered with his kids…’

‘Lumbered?’

‘Yeah, sorry, that was a bit harsh, you know what I mean though?’

‘Actually, do you know what, Harry?’

‘What?’

‘You sound just like him. Severus, that is. He’s said practically the exact same thing to me God knows how many times. He feels like he’s holding me back, restricting my opportunities, not good enough for me.’

‘Maybe he has a point,’ Harry mumbled.

‘No he hasn’t!’ Hermione hissed, her voice raising slightly which caused a number of other customers to cast cursory, disapproving glances in their direction. She continued at a more civilised volume, ‘we went through such a shitty time those last few years of the war and then for a few years afterwards. We’d had such a significant purpose all through our teenage years and then suddenly… I don’t know, I was just drifting aimlessly…’

‘Hermione, if you’re trying to find a purpose that compares to what we were trying to achieve with defeating Voldemort, then you’re always going to come up short.’
‘I don’t necessarily mean *defeating* Voldemort. That was the endgame, yes, but my role in all that was a lot smaller. A lot smaller but still *purposeful!* And I thought after the war, going back to school to get my NEWTs, getting a job at the Ministry where I might really make a difference, and even marrying Ron, I thought that would be my new purpose. But it wasn’t working for me… the business with the bylaw was just the straw that broke the camel’s back… I’d not been happy for a while.’

‘But Snape gives you purpose?’ Harry, looking completely bewildered by the concept.

‘Initially searching for him did, yes, and now…’ she hesitated and considered Severus’ dark moods, one of which still persisted, his ill temper, and his penchant for social isolation. Then she thought about his caustic wit, his intelligence, his loving protectiveness, and the way they seemed to understand the intricacies of one another’s psyches like no one she had ever met before. ‘And now, he is my whole world. My very reason for living,’ she said with an air of finality, looking up at Harry as if daring him to dispute it with her.

He stared at her incredulously for a long, silent moment then shook his head as if to wipe all his thoughts from it and said, ‘I just want you to be happy, Hermione. It would be hypocritical of me to be angry about this, I mean, that’s what we fought that bloody war for, isn’t it? So that people could live their lives the way they chose to live them? So, if you mean it when you say Snape makes you happy—’

‘—which I do!’

Harry nodded, ‘then… and, I mean I can’t really understand it yet, but… I’ll try.’

Hermione nodded, not trusting her voice to remain steady if she spoke. She felt her eyes sting with unspilled tears as Harry reached across the table and took her hand in his. For him to try was all she had wanted.

‘I… I’d like if we could be friends again,’ she whispered, hopefully.

‘Don’t be daft! We never stopped being friends!’ he assured her.

‘And Ron, Ginny? The others?’
‘I can’t speak for them, but I’ll have a word.’

‘Thank you,’ she sniffed, wiping her cheeks with her napkin and taking a deep breath to steady her nerves. ‘I’m being silly.’

‘Hormones I suspect,’ Harry said with a dramatic roll of his eyes, ‘Ginny was the same.’

Hermione smiled weakly. It felt rude to ask a favour of Harry after that, and she didn’t want him to think that that was the only reason she had wanted to see him, but she had to ask.

‘Harry?’ she ventured.

‘Yeah?’

‘I… I have a favour to ask. I feel really cheeky, it’s about Severus, but…’

‘About his exoneration?’

‘Yes, I… I hate to ask but…’

Harry gave a small shrug and chewed his bottom lip contemplatively. ‘I can’t stop a trial, Hermione, and, you know… the… climate is different now than it was just after the war. People are going to be as sympathetic as they might have been back then.’

‘I understand, anything you can do… I can’t tell you how grateful we’d be. I know… we don’t deserve it.’

‘I’d say if there’s one thing the two of you deserve it’s a bit of happiness. No, this is something I have wanted to do for Snape ever since we found out the truth, so… I’m just repaying him like I always said I would, but… look, I’ll have to tell them he’s back in the country. Now I know for sure, you know?’

Hermione felt her heart sink but couldn’t pretend she hadn’t been expecting it. Both she and Severus
had known this was a possibility if she came to ask Harry’s help, but Severus had determined it was worth the risk and certainly couldn’t make matters any worse. ‘Can you not give us a bit more time?’ she asked.

Harry shook his head apologetically. ‘My head’ll be for the chopping block if they found out I knew and didn’t say anything. As an Auror, I’m bound by oath.’

‘Oh, of course. I wouldn’t want to compromise your position Harry, it’s just, well, with the babies coming and me not being able to work at this point, I’m sort of relying on Severus financially and—’

‘I can help you with money, if you need it.’

‘No, I mean… we’re fine,’ she lied, ‘and anyway, it’s not just that. Obviously I could do without Severus being in Azkaban,’ she said, pointing to her stomach.

‘I could maybe levy for house arrest or something?’ he said, but there was something in his tone that suggested he didn’t think the chances were high.

‘Do you think they’d go for that?’ she asked, unhappy but knowing it was the best option out of bad bunch.

‘One can but try.’

‘Thank you,’ she said breathily. ‘I don’t want to cause any, well, anymore trouble.’

‘I made a promise that I’d help Snape with this way before you and he…’ he paused and frowned, clearly unable to describe what it was he felt Hermione and Severus were doing.

‘That’s all it would be,’ Hermione assured him, ‘he doesn’t want the Order or anything, in fact, he hates that I’m asking you for even this much, but if you wouldn’t mind helping us with this Harry… just so we, well, our kids really, can live normal lives here.’

‘Fine,’ Harry said, though it didn’t sound as though it was fine at all. ‘I’ll leave it ’til Monday and then I’ll have to report it. They won’t send me as I’m personally involved, I guess, but they’ll send
Aurors. They’ll want to bring him in for questioning.’

‘To be forewarned is to be forearmed,’ Hermione with a brief smile, ‘not that he plans to put up a fight or anything,’ she added quickly. ‘We knew this would happen, if we came back. You used to be quite optimistic that he’d get off though, Harry. What do you think now?’

Harry sighed and rocked his head from side to side, as though weighing up his thoughts on the matter. ‘It doesn’t look good that he went away for so long. It looks like he was trying to run from something, you know? But there is evidence… To be honest, a part of me was hoping that Snape might have come with you today.’

‘So you could arrest him?’ she asked, aghast.

‘No, no!’ he replied, ‘I have something for him. Maybe next time?’

‘Maybe. Like I said though, he’s not overly interested in Orders of Merlins and money.’ *Though God knows we could use the money,* she wanted to say, but was quite sure Severus would not appreciate her broadcasting their financial situation to Harry Potter of all people.

‘It’s not that,’ Harry replied, ‘I still have his memories.’
Half an hour later, Hermione pondered Harry’s departing words as her train slipped out of the station. Though she had never seen them herself, Hermione had heard Harry recount the contents of those memories numerous times, specifically in front of the Wizengamot in late ’98 when he was trying to convince them not to put out an international search warrant for Severus’ arrest. Hermione knew how they detailed Severus’ lifelong love for Lily and the way he had dedicated his every waking moment in the years after she died attempting to repay the debt of his betrayal. Undoubtedly, there was a subtle, irrational jealousy that gnawed at Hermione’s abdomen at the thought of how absolutely intrinsic Lily was to Severus’ very being, but the absurdity of this was not lost on her, and her fundamental desire was to see Severus make his peace with her death.

However, a solution to the problem did not present itself before the scenery changed from the fresh, green, sheep-filled Derbyshire hills, to the perpetual, industrial grey of Cokeworth. Rather unexpectedly, Severus was waiting for her on the platform when the train pulled back into the station, wrapped up against the elements in his customary head to toe black.

‘You didn’t have to come and meet me,’ she said, after navigating the crowds to where he sat on a metal bench.

He stood as she approached and leant in to kiss her cheek, an unusual move for Severus Snape and she acknowledged it for what it was: an apology, an acknowledgement of the bitter mood he had been unable to shake since they returned to his home town two weeks ago. He had been pleasant enough with Hermione for the most part, but she could tell it was a forced sort of amiability that was gradually exhausting him. With Severus’ being ill she always felt a sense of time being against them, but this feeling had grown more acute at the prospect him going to prison, and seeing him stood in front of her now, looking in equal parts stoic and yet a little sorry for himself, her heart ached to know that they had until just Monday.

‘I wanted to,’ he muttered. ‘Are you alright?’ he asked, pulling away from the embrace and studying her face.

‘I’m fine,’ she nodded, ‘it was fine.’

‘No tantrums?’

‘Just a mild one. Nothing I couldn’t handle.’
‘I don’t doubt that… home?’

‘Yes, please.’

With the wet, slippy pavements and Hermione’s walk being more of a waddle these days, their progress through the streets was slow, but Hermione, the thought of Severus’ memories withstanding, felt utter relief. Now that it was over she realised how much the prospect of seeing Harry again had been bothering her, but it could have gone a lot worse, she supposed. She was also relieved that Severus’ mood really did seem to have lifted. Indeed, as they’d left the train station he’d even taken her hand and walked with her like that for a good ten minutes before their fingers had frozen and it was of mutual interest for him to cease so they could bury their hands in their pockets. But he was patient with her, slowing his pace to stay by her side and holding her arm when they attempted to navigate a particularly lethal stretch of cobbles.

‘I missed you today,’ he said, bestowing her with a rare smile.

‘And I’ve missed you for days,’ she’d replied in reference to the aforementioned mood and looking at him pointedly to ensure he understood her reference.

He nodded acceptingly. ‘Sorry… I know, I’m shit… but, I have things in better perspective now.’

‘Good,’ she smiled back warmly, then she sighed with resignation, knowing they were both avoiding talking about the one thing they needed to talk about the most, and looped her arm through his so they were walking very close together. She held on for dear life. ‘I asked him,’ she said sadly, ‘they’ll be coming on Monday.’

Severus nodded and gazed off towards the still distant factory chimneys. ‘I was hoping we might have longer but it’ll be fine,’ he muttered, and she was unnerved by how unconvinced he sounded. ‘I am innocent,’ he said to no one in particular, even perhaps as though he was reminding himself of the truth of that statement.

‘Harry said they’ll question you and then he’s going to try and get them put you under house arrest, rather than Azkaban, until the trial. He’ll be a witness for your defence.’

‘That’s… unduly kind of him,’ Severus replied, without even the tiniest hint of sarcasm. They walked along in silence for a few moments, Hermione stealing glances up at him every now and again to try and gauge his true feelings. ‘Look though,’ he said eventually, ‘if we only have until
Monday I don’t want to spend the rest of the weekend dwelling on it, ruining my last days of freedom—

‘-Don’t say that Severus!’

‘We knew this was going to happen, Hermione,’ he said reasonably. ‘I’ve been off with you these last couple of weeks, through no fault of your own. I was in a mood cos’ of Potter and stuff, at least… the thought of asking him for help… but I know that was stupid. I’m grateful that you went to see him and… even more so that he is willing to help, after everything. But I won’t spoil the rest of the weekend because of it. Actually, to start us off, I have a surprise for you,’ he said, ‘back at the house. By way of an apology.’

‘Ooh… what is it?’ she enquired, determined to feign the joviality he had requested, feeling it was the least she could do considering what was about to befall him.

‘Well, if I told you it wouldn’t be a surprise now would it? I think you’ll like it though,’ he said, smiling secretly.

‘I’m intrigued,’ she responded, nudging him affectionately with her shoulder.

~oOo~

They arrived back in Spinner’s End a few moments later. With the exception of a few ragamuffin children playing in the street, it was typically deserted.

‘Right, close your eyes,’ Severus said, letting Hermione in through the front door and placing one hand over her eyes and the other on her shoulder to guide her. ‘Follow me… step up,’ he instructed, coaxing her to the foot of the stairs, then gradually up them and, once they reached the landing, into the spare bedroom. ‘Ta da,’ he said, with mock excitement, and pulled his hands away.

The room had been cleared of all the old clothes and books and things that Hermione had abandoned the day after they had first arrived. The bed was gone too, and in its place two iron cribs made with fresh white linen. A nursing chair, currently occupied by a gathering of old teddies, sat by the window beside a wooden chest of drawers, on top of which stood a nightlight and the books Hermione had put aside to save for the babies. The walls had had a coat of white paint, and three small watercolour paintings of scenes from *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* hung along one wall.
Tears prickling her eyes, Hermione turned to Severus, who had remained loitering by the doorway, merely watching her with a slightly uncertain expression, and beamed. ‘This is amazing,’ she said, struggling to get the words out for laughing with joy, ‘it looks absolutely lovely!’

He shrugged. ‘I used magic,’ he said nonchalantly, picking determinedly at a loose flake of paint on the door frame.

‘Well, obviously,’ she laughed, for it had all been put together far too quickly for him to have done it the Muggle way, not that the image of him struggling to follow instructions for building the cots wasn’t amusing, ‘but that doesn’t make it any less special or me any less grateful! This has been driving me crazy for weeks!’

‘Oh, really? You should have said something…’ he said, cocking an eyebrow and coming into the room. It wasn’t untrue that she might have borderline nagged him to sort through the room if he wasn’t willing to let her do it. He had remained reticent about her entering it ever since he’d snapped at her over the photographs.

She slapped him lightly on the arm and exhaled a long, satisfied breath. ‘I love it, and I love you,’ she said earnestly, rubbing his arm, ‘thank you for this!’ and she meant it perhaps more than he would ever know. It warmed her heart whenever he acknowledged the imminent birth of their children without mentioning expense in the same breath.

~oOo~

Severus had also cooked tea, another rare treat. A nice, filling lasagne that warmed them through as the evening chill set in. The ancient plumbing creaked and groaned as the boiler, even accompanied by the fire, struggled to generate enough heat for the whole house, so they spent the evening huddled together on the sofa in a way reminiscent of their early days together in Bolstrad, when the euphoria of being in a new relationship had outweighed any difficulties they faced. Severus even placed a gentle hand on her stomach, and intertwining her fingers through his she would guide his hand to where the babies kicked and somersaulted within.

‘There was something else Harry said,’ Hermione found the courage to say after a long while, loathed to break the silence. She looked up at Severus from where her head lay rested on his chest. ‘He… he has the memories your memories.’

‘Oh.’
'You know, the ones you gave him when you… died.'

'Yeah.'

'I think he wanted to give them to you in person.'

Gently he pushed Hermione off of him and sat up with his elbows resting on his knees and his palms pressed together. ‘I think… just being back in Cokeworth… I’ve been thinking about Lily a lot lately,’ he said, looking contemplative.

‘Oh… I see,’ Hermione replied, hoping she didn’t sound a crestfallen as she felt. ‘I thought you might have been, I suppose, after you snapped at me about those photos.’

Severus twisted slightly to look at her properly. ‘What photos?’

‘Erm… the day after we got here I was trying to sort out the spare room and I was looking at an old photo album she’d made you as a birthday present and-’

‘-Those were photos of Lily?’

‘Well… yeah?’

‘Hang on a minute,’ he said, standing quickly and dashing out of the living room. She heard his feet patter up the staircase and the noise of something heavy being moved around in the bedroom above. A moment later, he reappeared with the green, leather-bound album clutched in his hands. ‘I didn’t realise there were pictures of Lily, I just presumed they were pictures of my parents and stuff. I didn’t want you looking through those,’ he explained, sitting down beside Hermione again and opening the album to the front page. He ran his long, boney finger across her writing, whispering the words she’d written to him some thirty or so years before: ‘Happy Birthday, love Lily… I remember this now, Lily got it me for my fifteenth birthday. We weren’t talking long after that.’

‘What was she like?’ Hermione asked, as Severus turned the page again to reveal six photographs of a pale, skinny, raven-haired boy at various ages holding out his hand in an attempt to prevent his photograph from being taken.
A soft, enigmatic smile spread across Severus’ lips. Hermione didn’t think she had ever seen him look nostalgic before. On those few times they had looked to the past together it had been painful for them both, but clearly, though perhaps buried deep, he had memories of Lily that remained unmarred. He inhaled thoughtfully before replying, ‘she was smart, witty, always saw the good in people, like me and her wretched sister. She was creative and imaginative. When my parents were being particularly shit she’d invent these games, where we were other people in another time, or another place. It was pure, perfect escapism. She was kind, and she was honest, and she always had a bloody camera in her hand!’

‘She sounds lovely. You know… I think Harry might like to hear these things about her.’

‘I doubt he’d want to hear them from me.’

‘There isn’t really anyone else.’

He looked up from the album momentarily and stared into the dancing flames. ‘I suppose not,’ he said a little sadly. ‘Almost everyone I went to school with is dead aren’t they. That’s a… strange thought…’

‘I’m sorry.’

He shrugged and looked back down at the album, flicking through the pages slowly and drinking in each image of emerald-eyed, flame-haired Gryffindor. ‘They took me on holiday with them to Scotland one summer,’ he said, pointing to a photograph of himself with Lily, both about twelve years old, as they paddled in loch. ‘We camped. I’d never been camping before… hey, maybe when the babies are old enough that’s something we could do?’

‘I’d like that,’ Hermione replied, feeling a little bubble of joy in her abdomen.

‘Her family represented something I didn’t know existed in real life,’ he said, turning the page again to a photograph of a jolly looking man showing a boy Severus how to use a fishing rod. ‘It was the kind of life I wanted to give her,’ he said, then biting his lip as though regretting he said that, he looked at Hermione apologetically.

‘We’ve never really talked about Lily, have we. Not properly.’
'There’s nothing to say.'

‘Then you should see your face when you’re looking at those pictures of her,’ Hermione said, issuing him a small smile.

‘She was my first true friend, that’s all.’

‘I don’t expect you to stop loving her, Severus, she was obviously very special to you.’

He looked suddenly stricken. ‘Hermione…’ he said, and leaned across to take her hand. ‘You must know, I love you in a completely different way.’

‘I don’t know what that means,’ she said, feeling an overwhelming plethora of emotions simultaneously.

‘Just… you’re not second best, or anything. I love Lily all wrong. Destructively… obsessively, selfishly, unhealthily and it took me loving you… and having you love me,’ he added, somewhat tentatively, ‘for me to realise that! I will always love Lily, Hermione. How could I not? She was the first person to ever show me any compassion and I destroyed it…’ he trailed off and, releasing Hermione’s hands, slumped back on the settee, ‘I destroy everything, eventually.’

‘Don’t say that.’

‘Well, it’s true.’

‘Clearly it isn’t,’ she rebuked him, gesturing towards herself and including the twins in that too.

‘My head’s a mess,’ he spoke after a moment. ‘The last few months have been… a lot. The babies, leaving Bolstrad, Cokeworth… what’s going to happen on Monday… I certainly wasn’t prepared for a conversation about Lily. My head’s mashed. I would have told you about her years ago if I’d known you wanted to know… though, knowing you, I should have known you would want to know!’

‘I’m sorry.’
‘Stop apologising,’ he demanded, though not unkindly. ‘Here,’ he said, pulling a photograph of himself out of the photo album and handing it to Hermione. He looked to be about ten years old in it, a skinny little dot of a child, wearing denim shorts and a grey t-shirt that looked faded and shabby even in the sepia image - not at all dissimilar to the little boy she imagined when she thought of their son. ‘You said you wanted to see photographs of my when I was younger. I hope for his sake, if we have a boy, he looks nothing like me though!’

‘I think you were cute,’ she said, smiling down at the photo.

‘Hey?’ he murmured to get her attention again, and she looked up to find him watching her carefully. ‘I have been clear on the subject of my loving you, haven’t I?’ he asked.

‘What? Yes!’ she replied definitively.

‘Good. Cos’ I do.’

‘I know.’
For the Murder of Albus Dumbledore

On Monday morning they sat rigidly, side-by-side, close but not touching, on the settee on the living room. The curtains were drawn, the drum of heavy rain against the window sounding from beyond them. It was too cold but neither of them had thought to light the fire. They merely sat, waiting for the inevitable, both wishing they had had just a little longer.

Sunday had passed in a haze, time slipping away before either of them had realised it. They had taken a morning stroll along the canal, and through the park where Severus explained he had first built up the courage to speak to Lily. He asked whether Hermione would bring the twins there to play once they were old enough and she promised she would and that he would be by her side when she did. They had lunch, sex, tea, and then before they knew it, it was late and they were in bed, though sleep remained elusive. The impending arrest was never mentioned, though it loomed like a Dementor over all they did.

Bringing the pair suddenly out of their reverie, there was a sharp knock at the door just after the clock struck nine. ‘Severus Snape?’ a male voice called.

Severus looked over his shoulder in the direction of the din and then his eyes fell on Hermione; he fumbled for her hand, gripping it far too tight once he found it.

‘Everything’s going to be alright,’ she assured him, her voice shaking despite herself.

He nodded and pulled her to a standing position, turning to face her with an intense gaze. ‘I’ll be fine,’ he said in a low voice, ‘I… I lo-’

Another, harder wrap of knuckles on wood. ‘Severus Snape, we know you’re in there,’ the man said.

‘We have a warrant to search these premises, Mr. Snape,’ a female voice then spoke.

‘Look at me,’ Severus whispered, and Hermione did as he bid. ‘You need to know how much I love you-’

‘Mr. Snape!’ the voice outside sounded again, ‘we really must insist that you open this door.’
Hermione reached up and placed a hand on Severus’ cheek, ‘I know,’ she said, and it took all her strength to prevent her voice from cracking. ‘Go.’

He nodded and pressed his lips against her forehead, his hand falling on her stomach, momentarily but affectionately. Then he withdrew and disappeared into the hallway. Hermione stayed where she stood in the living room, hearing the front door click open.

‘Severus Snape?’ the man’s voice asked, clearer now it wasn’t muffled by the door.

‘Yes.’

‘You are under arrest for the murder of Albus Dumbledore as well as conspiring with He Who Must Not Be Named to overthrow the Ministry of Magic. We need you to come with us.’

And then, with a crack, the three of them were gone.

~oOo~

Late that night, when once again sleep did not come to Hermione, she sat on the settee watching the dying embers of the fire, when suddenly the Floo burst alight with green flames and a dark figure emerged.

‘Severus!’ she gasped, jumping up as quickly as her burgeoning baby bump would allow and reaching out to him. But when the commotion had died down she realised it was not Severus at all. ‘Harry, what are you doing here? Where’s Severus?’ she asked, looking around Harry as though Severus might have been able to sneak into the tiny living room behind him without her noticing.

‘Hermione, I’m so sorry! They… they wouldn’t agree to house arrest.’

Her heart sunk and her mind raced, ‘then… Harry… where is he?’

Harry looked at her gravely, ‘Azkaban,’ he replied.
'Oh my God,' she gasped, suddenly finding breathing very difficult. Images of Sirius Black, gaunt and manic, with that haunted look in his eyes, a look that never quite left him, assaulted her mind.

'Hermione,' Harry implored, placing two hands on her upper arms as though afraid she might crumple, 'it isn’t like it used to be. He’ll be OK.'

She nodded mutely and felt Harry’s strong hands guiding her to the settee. ‘There must be something we can do.’

‘I’m working on it, I promise you.’

‘How long?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘When can I see him?’

‘I… there’s to be no visitors.’

Hermione let out an involuntary whelp and covered her face with her hands.

‘Hermione… I saw him just before they transported him. He asked me to pass a message on. He said it’d make sense to you.’

‘Yes?’

‘He said he needs his potion?’

Hermione looked up at her old friend, he eyes puffy and cheeks tear-stained. ‘Oh my God,’ she whispered, ‘he’s going to die.’
‘Hermione…’ Harry pleaded, sounding as though he thought she was being rather melodramatic, which only served to infuriate her.

‘You don’t understand,’ she spat, struggling to bring her emotions under control, ‘he’s talking about an anti-venom… Nagini’s bite… it poisoned him and it’s slowly killing him. Even the anti-venom is only life-prolonging, not a cure.’

‘Merlin! If it’s medicinal they’ll let him have it in Azkaban though.’

Hermione nodded. ‘Except, I don’t know how to make it,’ she whispered. All those years of watching him brew it, even helping him slice or grind the ingredients every now and again. She had been enraptured by watching him work, his swift, smooth motions, so much so that she had not paid any attention to what it was he was actually doing. ‘I… I,’ she stammered, getting to her feet and then sitting back down again. She felt herself begin to panic and it was not an emotion she was accustomed to.

‘Does he have any already brewed?’ Harry asked.

‘He… yes, he will do.’

‘Wanna fetch them me?’

Hermione nodded and stood again, shuffling out of the room and upstairs to the bedroom like an Inferi. Severus kept his already brewed potions in the bottom of his bedside cabinet and Hermione gathered as many of them as she could carry in her arms and brought them back downstairs to Harry.

‘Keep this one,’ he said, passing her a random bottle, ‘see if you can’t deconstruct it and work out how it’s made. I’ll try and convince them let me speak Snape and ask him how he does it but he’s in solitary so it’s likely only his solicitor they’ll let in to see him.’

‘Oh, solicitors… are they good, Harry?’

‘The best.’
‘The best the Ministry can supply. I wish we had the money to pay someone.’

‘All that’s sorted, Hermione. I’ll pay for the solicitor. I told you, I would help any way I could.’

‘Oh, no… Harry… I can’t let you do that. They’re so expensive!’

‘I want to.’

Hermione sighed sadly. ‘Thank you,’ she murmured, earnest though embarrassed. Severus would hate the prospect of Harry funding his defence but the phrase beggars cannot be choosers came to mind. ‘This is all such a mess and it’s all my fault!’

‘Don’t be daft,’ Harry said, apparently contemplating whether or not it would be appropriate to place his arm around her shoulder and deciding instead to squeeze her forearm.

‘If I hadn’t made him come back…’

‘Or if he’d have come back all those years ago, like you wanted him to. He could have had his name cleared in a flash and then gone anywhere he wanted a free man. But anyway, it sounded to me like you didn’t have much choice.’

‘What?’

‘They asked Snape about why he came back when he was questioned. I was listening in.’

‘Oh. I think he would have preferred to manage in Romania to be honest.’

‘That isn’t what he said at all, ‘Mione. And he was under oath.’

She looked at him quizzically.
Harry shrugged slightly. ‘He said he was tired of living always terrified someone was going to turn up from the Ministry and arrest him, and he didn’t want you, or the kids, having to live with that fear as well,’ he explained, ‘he said he was getting the family he never thought he’d have and certainly didn’t deserve, and he wanted you to be settled and happy, and that that wouldn’t have been possible in Romania,’ and then he paused and looked at Hermione as though he couldn’t quite believe what he was about to say, ‘Snape… he loves you very much.’

‘And I him.’

Harry merely nodded.

‘What happens now?’ she asked.

‘Err… there’ll be a preliminary hearing, the solicitors will start building their case tomorrow. There’ll definitely be a trial. We’ll have a fight on our hands.’

Hermione felt a warm swell in chest at Harry’s use of the plural pronoun. She enjoyed that idea that she was not alone in this and that if, as he said, they did have a fight on their hands, she was glad it was Harry by her side. ‘And what can we do in the meantime?’ she asked.

‘You just keep yourself well and try to figure out how he makes that anti-venom,’ Harry replied, glancing at his watch and making to stand. ‘I have to get home.’

‘Of course… thank you again, Harry. We’ll find a way to repay you-’

‘-No,’ he interrupted, ‘no. After this, that’s it,’ he laughed, ‘we’re all quits!’
‘I don’t like seeing you like this,’ Hermione’s father said, piling tin-foil takeaway containers on top of one another before dropping them in the bin. Her mother filled the sink with warm, sudsy water to make a start on the dirty plates her daughter had allowed to accumulate over the past few days. ‘You can’t go letting yourself fall apart, darling. It won’t do Severus any good and it certainly won’t do the babies any good.’

Her parents had first knocked on the door two days after Severus’ arrest and they had visited almost every day since. Although Hermione had written to give them her new address, apparently Harry had maintained regular contact with them and had informed them of what had happened. It was an immense comfort to have them there after so long apart. She had thought she wanted to wallow alone in self-pity for a bit, but she had soon found that she was enjoying being mothered. To not have to think, or do, anything for oneself was not unpleasant if just for a short while, and her mind was so consumed with thoughts of Severus that this reprieve was not unwelcome.

‘I’m not falling apart,’ Hermione protested, though admittedly still in her pyjamas and dressing gown though it was well past lunch, ‘I’m just having a bit of a mope.’ She sat at the kitchen table, skim-reading a *Daily Prophet* article supposedly detailing a number of salacious revelations relating to Severus’ arrest. Over the past two weeks, not a day had gone by when his photograph (or an old one, at least, retrieved from the archives from when he’d been made headmaster at the school) had not adorned the front page, and each edition proposed fresh speculation. Some was so ludicrous that it bordered on hilarious, such as that Severus had confessed to a string of vampiric homicides across the continent before settling in Transylvania with his coven, whilst others, such as that he had somehow manipulated or spelled Hermione into thinking she loved him, were both upsetting and unsettling, especially as so few column inches were dedicated to the contradictory facts of the matter. There was little mention of the sacrifices Severus had made for the sake of the wizarding world, nor Harry’s renewed fight to reveal such truths.

‘Do you need these?’ her father was asking now, flicking through a pile of unopened post.

‘Anything from *The Prophet* you can chuck,’ she replied, waving her hand absently in his direction. Most of the letters were emblazoned with *The Daily Prophet’s* stamp and undoubtedly contained requests for comment which Hermione was stubbornly declining to respond to; and until they had the mind to publish something advantageous to Severus’ cause, she would continue to do so.

‘OK… well there’s a couple from British Gas, and these don’t have an address so I imagine they’ve come by one of your owls,’ Mr. Granger explained, placing what remained of the pile on the table in front of Hermione.

Hermione picked them up and shuffled through them. Those from the utility companies were clearly
bills which she would deal with later, there were a couple addressed to Severus, and then one in particular which caught her attention. Hermione’s name was written in a familiar script on the envelope, and when she opened it the sight of the Hogwarts crest at the top of the paper made her heart beat a little faster.

Dear Hermione,

I must start with an apology. I should have written long ago and I cannot explain why I did not other than that I was embarrassed and ashamed by the way I have behaved. However, I have been keeping abreast, as best I can, of your’s and Severus’ situation and would like to offer my service, such as it is, to helping Severus as he once helped all of us.

Would you like to come and visit me at the school? I would certainly like to be re-acquainted with you but understand if you don’t think it would be appropriate. There have been changes since you were last here, some of which I think you might like to see. Please respond via the school owl in your own time.

Best wishes,

Minerva McGonagall.

‘What is it?’ Hermione’s mother asked, sitting down at the table and sliding a cup of steaming tea across it to her daughter.

‘An invitation from my old Head of House. She wants me to go see her at the school.’

‘Will you go?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘It’d get you out of the house.’

~oOo~
The invitation remained unanswered, tucked behind the clock on the mantelpiece, for two weeks. Occasionally Hermione would pull it out and read it again, thinking that she had decided upon her reply, but would then change her mind and hastily reposition it. It certainly wasn’t seeing Minerva that put her off going. Revisiting Hogwarts, regardless of how brief the trip might be, might have one of two effects. It might evoke so many memories that she’d be overwhelmed; good memories, as well as bad, she was sure, but she already felt filled to the brim. Or it might bring her a sense of closure. McGonagall’s letter suggested that the school had been returned to its former glory, the physical damage repaired, at least, but it would take more than restoration charms to rid the castle of the ghosts of war.

It had been late at night, when once again sleep eluded her, that Hermione had taken out a quill and written her response and the following weekend she had found herself stood at winged-boar flanked gates of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Minerva McGonagall awaited her. The old witch was divested of her robes and dressed in a tartan knee-length skirt and purple blouse; a level of casualness Hermione had never seen in her before. She still wore her hair in a bun, but it was a notch looser than it had been when she was teaching. She looked older than when Hermione had seen her last, but, like many of those she remembered from the old days, there was a particular glint in her eye that she had not carried through the war.

‘My goodness,’ she said, pulling Hermione into a grandmotherly embrace, ‘it’s so good to see you again. How are you?’

There was that question again. That is what everyone wanted to know. It’s what Harry asked each time he stepped through the floo, what her parents asked when they visited, and what both Stela and Nicu had enquired when they wrote. ‘I’m fine,’ Hermione replied, her stock reply that she was sure everyone saw through, though she smiled at her old professor for good measure.

‘And Severus, how is he?’

‘They tell me he’s alright, but… well, they won’t let me see him, or write to him… so I don’t really know,’ she murmured, unable to keep the resentment from her tone.

Minerva was shaking her head in disbelief. ‘I can’t believe how they’re treating him. After everything he did for this country! I mean… I feel terrible about the way I treat him,’ she said, watching Hermione’s facial response carefully. ‘I’d do anything to go back… to help them… things might have turned out very differently if they’d have just told someone, anyone, else.’

‘I know,’ Hermione said simply. Having spent the last three weeks going over and over the ‘what ifs’ and ‘could have beens’ in her mind, she knew how futile an exercise it was to dwell on them.
‘Come on,’ Minerva said, gesturing towards the castle with a nod of her head, ‘I’ve asked the elves to prepare us some lunch. I think it’s warm enough for us to eat outside, don’t you?’

It was almost May and Spring was proving uncharacteristically warm for the Scottish Highlands. The sun hung, a golden globe, just above the North Tower, silhouetting the parapets against the crystal blue sky, casting long shadows over the tidy lawns, and dancing off the Great Lake like spilled glitter. Far away, by the edge of the forest, Hermione could see Hagrid’s vegetable patch in full bloom, a sleeping, aged Fang guarding his crops, and further away still, tiny specs darting around above the distant Quidditch pitch; students practicing before the upcoming house cup final. The school had acquired a tranquility which Hermione did not recall from her time as a student. She supposed it must have been there in the early days, but if it was, the memory was lost to her.

She remembered what Harry had told her about Severus after The Final Battle, about how the truth had made him realise just how much he had had in common with his bitter, twisted Potions Master. ‘The abandoned boys’ he had called them, including Voldemort in that sad trio, who had all found their home at Hogwarts. Hogwarts had meant something different to Hermione. She was grateful to have come from a happy home, but if it had seemed like this to Severus when he first arrived after the horrors of Spinner’s End, then she was happy for him, that at least for a time he had known what it was like to have that.

In fact, it was only as they meandered further up the gravel path towards the Entrance Hall that the signs that things had not always been this way became apparent. In places the stonework was a slightly lighter shade of grey, giving the effect of a patchwork quilt and betrayed the fact that repairs had had to be made. When Hermione had returned to the school to sit her NEWTs only the most rudimental repairs had been completed on the infrastructure of the castle to make it habitable for those students returning after the summer. There had been places where if one leant against a wall, or trod with heavy feet on a particular patch of floor, it would have crumbled away to bits, and still, Hermione saw, in less traversed areas of the castle, the repairs had thus far been neglected. A bridge, for instance, between the Charms corridor and the stairwell to the dungeons, maintained evident fire damage, the buttresses which flanked The Great Hall remained battered and broken, and the smashed windows of Greenhouse One had not been replaced, the plants within having long ago crept out and begun spreading their tendrils up the sides of the castle wall to which the greenhouse was attached; nature reclaiming its land.

‘Less urgent repairs have had to take a back seat for the moment,’ Minerva explained, watching Hermione trace her finger along a fissure that ran from the head, down along the torso of a gargoyle by the main doors. ‘We’re getting there, but many have felt it more important to deal with the school’s social issues.’

‘Social issues?’ Hermione asked, returning her attention to her companion as they made their way inside the castle.
‘Breaking down stereotypes has been more difficult than rebuilding walls,’ the older witch explained, leading Hermione along a corridor and up a seemingly eternal spiral staircase that were for teachers only. ‘In the first few years after the war you would think that to be sorted into Slytherin was akin to having already pledged your allegiance to Voldemort’s old ideologies the moment you walk through the front doors. I mean, there had been an element of that for as long as anyone living can remember, as you know, but the war seemed to magnify the issue when really that wasn’t what Slytherin had been about in the beginning at all.’

‘So what did you do?’

‘Well… we taught them about Severus, about how he was a Slytherin and he’d done so much good. Some of the others too, poor Regulus Black, and then Peter Pettigrew and everything he did as a Gryffindor; Cedric Diggory and how intelligent and brave he was in the Triwizard Tournament, and he was a Hufflepuff… and how intelligent you were, undoubtedly suited to Ravenclaw, and yet one of the bravest Gryffindors there ever was! We teach them that things aren’t so black and white as perhaps we once thought.’

‘And did it work?’ Hermione asked, slightly embarrassed by Minerva’s appraisal of her, thinking about how she didn’t feel particularly intelligent when she couldn’t figure out how to help Severus; couldn’t even figure out how to replicate his anti-venom.

‘It’s starting to. Some of the younger students, especially those with Muggle parentage, have never known any different, and their indifference to what house they’re in is beginning to wear off on the others.’

‘Oh,’ Hermione said thoughtfully. ‘I think that would please Severus.’

‘I hope so,’ Minerva replied as they reached the top of the steps and emerged onto the third floor corridor, just down the way from the headmistress’ office. Minerva muttered something under her breath as they approached the entrance and the moving staircase transported the two women upwards. The office was little changed since Dumbledore had occupied it, though there were subtle tartan touches here and there that were distinctly McGonagall. The previous headmasters’ and headmistress’ portraits were either empty or their occupants dosed in their frame. Notably, the portrait of Dumbledore, which hung, pride of place above the desk, was empty. Minerva led Hermione through a door at the back of the office and onto a private balcony, high above where the students now mingled below like little black ants, enjoying the sun on their lunch break.

‘Do you miss it?’ Minerva asked as they took their seats at the table. ‘Hogwarts, I mean.’
'I do,’ Hermione admitted. ‘Though, I think perhaps I would have preferred to attend now, from what you’ve said. I’m glad it will be different for the twins.’

‘Oh! Goodness, I haven’t even congratulated you have I!’ the old woman cried apologetically.

‘That’s alright, not many people have,’ Hermione replied glumly, picking at the sandwiches that had been put out for them.

‘Oh no, I think it’s wonderful,’ McGonagall said, and from her tone Hermione could not imagine that she wasn’t earnest. ‘You and Severus… yes, I can see what the appeal is there for you both.’

Hermione frowned. ‘You can?’

‘Oh, of course. You were both always so… I don’t know how to describe it really… determined, dedicated, passionate, though you clearly channelled it differently,’ she said, then, ‘stubborn,’ she added with a wry smile on her thin lips. ‘An equal match in intellect,’ she continued, as though ticking items off on a list, ‘and I imagine Severus can be quite sultry, whilst you are quite adept at cajoling him out of it… yes, quite compatible.’

Hermione must have looked at Minerva a little dumbfounded for the latter’s expression suddenly changed to one of consternation. ‘What is it?’ she asked, sounding rather worried.

‘I…’ Hermione stammered, ‘nothing, just… thank you…’

‘Whatever for?’

‘Just that… well, no one has ever said anything like that about Severus and I before.’

McGonagall studied Hermione contemplatively, a glint of sadness in her eyes. ‘It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks,’ she said after a long moment in which Hermione got the distinct impression the old woman was talking from experience.
'Quite right,’ she replied, though desperately wanting to ask what it was had made McGonagall look that way as she’d spoken.

But instead, they fell into a moment of companionable silence, Hermione sampling a scone with raspberry jam and Minerva sipping her tea. ‘Horace is retiring at the end of the year,’ the older woman said conversationally, ‘for good this time, he says.’

‘Oh.’

‘Mmm… I think one of the old Holyhead Harpies players has invited him to her Dordoigne villa for the summer and he rather fancies he won’t return.’

‘That’ll be nice for him.’

‘Yes, though it will leave me in need of a new Potions Master.’

‘I’m sure you’ll find someone.’

‘Actually, I thought, I mean, obviously Severus would be my preference if… when all this horrid business with the trial is settled.’

Hermione considered this. She tried to imagine the Severus she knew now back in his billowing teaching robes and couldn’t quite see it. She also thought Severus would hate the idea, but Minerva was wearing a hopeful expression that she couldn’t quite bring herself to extinguish. Hermione even suspected that she might be lying. Severus had been the harshest, most unfair teacher Hermione had ever encountered, so it was highly unlikely that he would be Minerva’s first choice to fulfil the role. No, this was a peace offering and Hermione appreciated the sentiment.

‘I’lI certainly ask him,’ she replied, ‘though I don’t know how long the trial will drag on. The preliminary hearing is set for early June, and we’re hoping he’ll be able to come home until the trial begins, but when that could be, I just don’t know… it could be months and months.’

‘I can wait, I’ll get temporary cover if I have to. At the very least I’d like to give him first refusal. Anyway, I can’t pretend that one of the reasons I asked you here wasn’t to find out everything one of my best students has been up to since they left. Tell me about Romania?’
And Hermione did. It was a pleasant, reminiscent conversation. Minerva had a good sense for when Hermione was straying into realms of detail that upset her, and carefully directed her questioning away from it when this happened. But Hermione told her all about Bolstrad, the political climate between magical folk and Muggles in Romania, The Watch, and all they had done to try and put it right.

‘One of my biggest regrets about leaving Romania is leaving that work unfinished,’ she concluded. The sun was just beginning to set beyond the Highland hills, drowning the castle in warm, golden glow. ‘But it’s so good to be back, I mean… obviously despite what’s happening with Severus. It is undoubtedly good to be home.’

‘But a home much changed from that which you left.’

‘For the better, it seems,’ Hermione replied, ‘although…’

Minerva looked at Hermione knowingly. ‘There’s something, isn’t there, a feeling that hangs over everything. A sort of sadness that it’s hard to shake?’

‘Yes!’ Hermione exclaimed, feeling such relief that someone had been able to put into words what she was feeling.

‘I feel it too. I think everyone does. But we go on.’

‘It would be an injustice to those who had died if we did not.’

‘Precisely. And to go on is not to forget. We have a memorial garden here at the school. It isn’t much, but perhaps you would like to see it?’

And Hermione thought that she very much would.
The Memorial Garden

The memorial garden was set within what had been a seldom traversed courtyard during Hermione’s school days. It was surrounded by ivy-covered stone columns, which created cool spots where the shadows fell. One narrow stone path circled the whole area, cutting through the wilderness of flowers that grew about the place, whilst another led inwards from where Hermione and Minerva stood towards a great stone plinth in the centre; the names of those who had made the ultimate sacrifice etched into its sides.

‘Do you mind if I stay for a while?’ Hermione asked, inhaling the perfume of multifarious flowers. It was utterly peaceful here and Hermione felt herself relax properly for the first time in what seemed an age.

‘Of course not. Stay as long as you like.’

‘Thank you. I can see myself out if you have things to do.’

‘If you’re sure, I’ll give you some time alone, but… please stay in touch, alright? I want to visit the babies when they’re born, and if there’s anything I can do to help, you just let me know!’

‘I will do. And thank you so much Professor! Today has been… good for me.’

Minerva nodded and smiled kindly, patting Hermione’s shoulder in a gesture of solidarity, before turning and stepping out of the garden. Hermione watched her leave, listening to the fading sound of her heals clicking on the paving slabs as she disappeared back into the school. She took a moment to absorb the garden as a whole before beginning to follow the path around the edge of the courtyard, her right hand outstretched slightly to skim gently over the tops of the shrubbery. She walked slowly, almost aimlessly, building the courage to direct her attentions to the plinth. The prospect of seeing the names of those who had died carved into stone made it all too real; brought home a sense of finality she had been able to avoid whilst in Bolstrad. But she could prolong it no longer and with heavy heart she turned towards it.

‘Remus Lupin, Nymphadora Lupin, Frederick Weasley, Alastor Moody, Albus Dumbledore…’ she whispered their names aloud as she ran her fingers lightly over the engravings.

After a moment she sighed sadly and turned away, walking back along the stone path to a bench where she sat down and closed her eyes, listening to the birds chirruping; the buzz of bees, and the
slight breeze that whistled through the stone columns. The babies were doing somersaults, and she stroked her hand over her swollen abdomen in an attempt to soothe them. She was suddenly acutely aware of these signs of life, juxtaposed as they were against the indomitable atmosphere of death that clung to the memorial. She felt at peace for the first time in a long time; her worries dissipating as she basked in the warmth of the early Spring sun, thinking that this is precisely why those who’s names adorned the plinth had died; so that those who survived could live.

‘Hi,’ a quiet, familiar voice suddenly sounded from across the courtyard, stirring Hermione from her thoughts. Her eyes flickered open and once they’d readjusted to the light she saw that it was Neville, a basket of wild flowers in his arms.

‘Neville!’ she exclaimed, standing as quickly as her baby bump would allow and taking a few steps forward. Without taking his eyes off her, Neville placed the basket on the ground and filled the space between them, wrapping Hermione tightly in his arms without a second thought, refusing to relinquish her for a good long time.

‘How are you?’ he murmured over her shoulder.

‘I’ve been better,’ she replied, smiling though he wouldn’t see it. She realised it was the first time she hadn’t simply replied with ‘I’m fine,’ her customary response these days to the myriad people repeating that same question to her.

She felt him loosen his hold and pull away to look her over. ‘You look well,’ he said, ‘Minerva told me you were back, but I didn’t realise you were pregnant. Congratulations!‘

‘Thanks!’ she replied, and she realised also that Neville was the second person that day to have properly congratulated her. She allowed herself to feel a little flurry of guiltless excitement in response. She was excited about the babies, of course, but it was difficult to think of their imminent arrival without being reminded that their father was currently rotting in Azkaban.

‘Do you like the garden?’ Neville asked, looking around with a sorrowful yet proud expression.

‘Oh, it’s beautiful,’ she said.

He nodded. ‘Not many people come here anymore. The seventh years that have just left were the last students that would remember The Final Battle, and they were too young when it happened to remember it properly. Sometimes some of the other staff come, but mainly it’s just me these days. I
like to keep the flowers tidy for them,’ he explained, gesturing towards the plinth.

‘That’s thoughtful of you,’ she said, ‘I should have come a long time ago. It’s been helpful.’

Neville nodded knowingly and Hermione wondered whether he too suffered the nightmares and persistent guilt.

‘Let me just plant these flowers then maybe we could go for a walk?’

She nodded and situated herself back on the bench, watching Neville trowel clumps of dirt out of the ground and plant the flowers he had picked. He worked quickly and deftly, his years of tutelage under Professor Sprout clearly having honed his skills, and before long he was righting himself and making his way over to where Hermione sat.

‘So,’ Neville said as they wandered around the outskirts of the castle, headed towards the greenhouses. He looked askance at Hermione, smirking in a way that made Hermione suspect she knew what was coming. ‘Snape, eh?’

‘Yeah,’ she said, unable to help smiling. ‘Snape.’

‘You realise that’s madness, don’t you?’ he said, and though he probably meant it, his tone was jovial. This was banter, unlike the sly remarks she had previously endured from people.

‘Love that is not madness is not love.’

‘Quite.’

‘Are you seeing anyone?’ Hermione asked. This felt like a normal conversation any twenty-five year old might have with their friend. It was so pleasant, so normal, she could almost have forgotten everything else that was going on.

Neville nodded, a small smile creeping onto his lips. He looked a little bit pleased with himself, but endearingly so. ‘Yeah, I am actually,’ he said, ‘you remember Hannah Abbott?’
‘Course. That’s great, Neville!’ she replied genuinely.

‘Actually, I’ve asked her to marry me,’ he said, blushing slightly.

‘Well, congratulations! That’s wonderful!’

‘Thanks. Err… we’re having a get together at the weekend to celebrate, I’d love if you could come?’

‘Oh, I’d love to,’ she said, beaming over at Neville. For a fleeting moment she thought how nice it would be for everyone to be together again, and then she remembered. ‘Is Harry and everyone going?’

‘Yeah. Harry, Ginny, Ron, Luna. All the old crowd… oh…’ he stopped as he seemed to have noticed Hermione’s sudden change in expression.

‘I’m sorry, Neville… I’m just not sure it’s a great idea if, well, if Ron is going to be there. I haven’t seen him since I got back and I don’t want there to be any tension or anything, you know? Not on your engagement party!’

Neville nodded understandingly. ‘Well if you change your mind, it’s at The Leaky Cauldron. Eight o’clock. Hannah works there and they’re putting on a spread. It should be a good night.’

‘I’ll think about it,’ she said, smiling gratefully and full of regret that it wasn’t as simple as just saying yes. They were nearing the greenhouses now, giving Hermione inspiration to change the subject. ‘How’s your apprenticeship going?’ she asked as they entered Greenhouse Two.

Neville walked ahead towards some shelves where equipment was stored for classes and deposited the basket and trowel in their rightful places. ‘Pamona’s been amazing,’ he replied, ‘I can’t have been the easiest apprentice, but she’s been really patient with me. She’s already let me take a few classes this year, to get me used to teaching, and…’ he trailed off, apparently only just realising that Hermione was no longer walking beside him, despite her having stopped ten paces back to stare at something he couldn’t see behind a monstrous snarfalump.

Hermione looked up the moment he fell quiet. ‘Neville,’ she questioned urgently, ‘what is that?’
He moved towards her and followed her gaze to where it fell on a single thin stem emerging from a dry patch of soil, a bright, sun-like plant sitting atop it. Reaching up towards the sky that way it looked simultaneously stalwart and yet vulnerable.

‘Urm… Hieracium Snowdoniense,’ he said, ‘oh, right… yeah, Snowdonia Hawkweed, like I sent you that time.’

‘I thought you said you didn’t have any more?’

‘We didn’t for years, it’s very rare. It only grows in very particular conditions and to be honest I haven’t quite worked out what they are-’

‘-Can I have it?’ she interrupted.

‘I don’t know… Pamona-’

‘-Neville, you don’t understand…’ she paused, considering whether Severus would appreciate her telling Neville he was ill. *Fuck it*, she thought. ‘This stuff… Severus needs it. He’s ill, well, no… he’s dying, and this stuff, it makes him well.’

Neville stared at her wide-eyed but grimacing slightly. ‘Oh, Merlin! You should have said in your letters, this probably grew not too long after I wrote to you telling you we didn’t have any, around Christmas time,’ he said, ‘but I didn’t realise it was so urgent,’ and as he was talking he had dropped to his knees with the trowel back in his hand, slowly and carefully beginning to dig the Snowdonia Hawkweed out of the dirt.
Was it coincidence that she had arranged to meet with Archibald Featherstonehaugh at a small tea shop just off Diagon Alley precisely two hours before Neville and Hannah’s engagement party would be happening just up the road? Absolutely not. But she would pretend that it was if anyone asked. ‘Oh, I was meeting someone here earlier so I thought I’d pop in before I head home,’ she would tell them. They need never know that Mr. Featherstonehaugh had offered to come to Spinner’s End and that Hermione had suggested Diagon Alley might be more appropriate.

Featherstonehaugh was Severus’ solicitor. He looked to be in his nineties; shrivelled, grey, and like he needed a good going over with a duster. But he was also the best solicitor Galleons could buy.

‘How is he?’ she enquired urgently the moment he sat down opposite her.

‘A little unwell,’ Featherstonehaugh replied without preamble, ‘having to ration his potion is taking its toll,’ he concluded, looking at Hermione pointedly.

Since acquiring the Snowdonia Hawkweed from Neville, she had worked tirelessly to recreate the anti-venom. Every spare moment was taken up with leafing through Severus’ personal potions journals, trying to decipher his minute, scrawling handwriting. She had mixed what seemed like hundreds of batches but none had had the same odour, texture, or colouring as Severus’ originals, and numerous times Hermione had sent bottles of the putrid liquid flying across the basement in frustration.

‘Progress is slow,’ she admitted, ‘but there have been developments. Here, I brought these.’ She handed over a crate of seven small bottles of potion, each in varying shades of green. The whole thing felt very experimental, and she did not like the idea of Severus being the guinea pig, but there was nothing else for it. She had given Featherstonehaugh the last bottle of Severus’ own making at their last meeting, save the one she was using for guidance. If these did not work then the outlook was unknown, but unlikely to be favourable for Severus. ‘I’ve numbered them,’ she explained, ‘and if you could perhaps relay to me which one he finds most effective, I will brew that regularly. Beyond this though, I am out of ideas,’ she said regrettably. Hermione did not admit defeat lightly, but she had considered all her options and these seven potions were the result.

‘He’s been using more than this in a week,’ Featherstonehaugh commented, eyeing the potions skeptically.

‘Well, I hope that these will be stronger than the ones he’s used to,’ Hermione explained, feeling a little defensive. She hoped that the presence of the Snowdonia Hawkweed would compensate for
any other weaknesses the potions might have. ‘But if you could arrange for him to write down the instructions I would be able to provide more, much more quickly.’

‘As I’ve said, there’s to be no direct or formal communication between inmates and… loved-ones. You’re neither a blood relative, nor his wife. There’s nothing I can do.’

‘I’m the mother of his children.’

‘That doesn’t count for very much these days I’m afraid,’ Featherstonehaugh said somewhat haughtily. Hermione felt thoroughly judged, so if that had been his intention it was effective. She had decided she did not like Featherstonehaugh, but she was in no doubt as to his legal prowess, so she would endure him. As he accepted the potions she determined to change the subject to the actual purpose of their meeting before she lost her temper.

‘So what’s going on?’ she implored.

Featherstonehaugh shuffled the pieces of parchment he’d taken from his briefcase and lay them out on the table in front of him, smoothing them flat with the palm of his hand. In her current mood this only served to irritate Hermione, who began to suspect his procrastinating was a personal affront to her. ‘You may recall,’ the old man began at length, ‘the law against conspiring to bring about Pureblood rule that was rushed through prior to the Death Eater trials of ’98?’

‘Yes.’

‘They argued otherwise but essentially it was merely a way of ensuring that they could prosecute anyone who had been a follower of He Who Must Not Be Named. It did not matter how large a roll they had played, whether they had killed or tortured anyone, if there was even the smallest piece of evidence that they upheld his ideals, then they were bound for Azkaban. Many of Mr. Snape’s old acquaintances were charged with it, for example.’

‘I remember.’

‘So it’s rather clever on their part then, don’t you think, that they haven’t charged Mr. Snape with this offence?’

Hermione contemplated this with a furrowed brow. ‘No,’ she replied after a long moment, ‘it seems
to me that charging him with conspiring to bring about Pureblood rule would have been a surefire way of ensuring he stayed in Azkaban for the rest of his life.’

Featherstonehaugh smiled in a way which suggested he was a party to a joke Hermione was being left out of, serving to irritate her no end. ‘No, it is very clever indeed,’ he said, somewhat enigmatically, ‘by charging Mr. Snape with the murder of Albus Dumbledore and declining to charge him with conspiring to bring about Pureblood rule they are admitting that they recognise that everything Mr. Snape did both before and after the murder was for the benefit of the light, but the murder itself was not.’

‘Oh,’ Hermione murmured, feeling confused and not a little naïve. ‘I don’t really understand,’ she admitted.

Featherstonehaugh rolled his eyes impatiently but began to explain when he caught Hermione’s own expression of annoyance. ‘They see that there are too many witnesses to the good he did in the war as a whole. Ex-students, teachers, even ex-Death Eaters that are willing to give evidence under oath that Mr. Snape’s behaviour might not be as it seemed during those years.’

‘Ex-Death Eaters?’

‘Mmm… I’ve been talking with a…’ he paused to rifle through his papers, ‘ah, D. Malfoy.’

‘Oh, Merlin.’

‘You know him?’

‘Mmm,’ she replied noncommittally.

‘He seems rather eager to help. As does your friend Mr. Potter, of course.’

‘Well that at least seems positive.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Featherstonehaugh agreed, ‘or it would be if they were charging Mr. Snape with conspiring to bring about Pureblood rule. This is why it’s so clever that they are only charging him
with the murder of Albus Dumbledore, because the only true witness to that, is Albus Dumbledore himself, and of course he is in no position to give evidence.’

‘Those seem like dirty tricks,’ Hermione managed to reply, her voice breaking just slightly.

‘Rather. I think they feel Mr. Snape has made a fool of them, having escaped them for so long, and it’s that which they don’t like more than anything. That which they are really punishing him for.’

Hermione considered this at length. This was perhaps her third meeting with Featherstonehaugh since Harry had hired him, and gradually, as time passed, she had come to realise that the euphoria which had defined Britain’s wizarding world in the first few years after the war, the euphoria in which she had anticipated Severus would find sympathy, had clearly waned considerably. She also felt fraudulent, to some extent, having promised Severus that he would have allies and support, that a trial would essentially be a formality, his vindication a certainty. Now she didn’t feel so sure.

‘But,’ she said, suddenly remembering something with a warm sense of relief, ‘there’s Severus’ memories. They show Professor Dumbledore requesting him to do it. The Wizengamot can be shown the memories and they will see for themselves.’

Featherstonehaugh shook his head. ‘I only wish it were that simple,’ he said, tidying his papers as though readying himself to leave. ‘Memories are not admissible in court I am afraid. They can be easily tampered with.’

‘But you can tell when they’ve been tampered with,’ Hermione protested. ‘The scenes cut and change.’

‘Not when the editing is done by a particularly powerful wizard,’ Featherstonehaugh explained, ‘and there is no doubt Mr. Snape is a powerful wizard.’

Hermione glared at him in disbelief. ‘Let me get this straight,’ she said, ‘the one piece of evidence you might have used to prove Severus’ innocence is effectively useless?’

‘I’m afraid so,’ Featherstonehaugh admitted.

‘What motive do they imagine Severus would have for killing Professor Dumbledore if it wasn’t for the greater good of the war?’ Hermione asked, feeling as though she were helplessly clutching at
‘They’ll probably argue that there was some personal gain. I can’t imagine the specifics,’ Featherstonehaugh said dismissively, ‘perhaps to gain power and glory for himself somehow. He did become headmaster of Hogwarts after Dumbledore’s death, that will have been accompanied by considerably increased power, not to mention pay. But really, I don’t know and it doesn’t matter. All that matters is convincing the Wizengamot otherwise, and I fully intend to do that.’

‘You spoke earlier about the original Death Eater trials, Mr. Featherstonehaugh. Remind me, did any of them get off based on character witnesses alone?’

‘I… well, no, they did not! But that is not to say Severus cannot. He has done it before, when he was hauled in front of the Wizengamot for being a Death Eater in his early twenties, he got off based solely on Dumbledore’s word.’

‘Yes, but that was Dumbledore’s word, and as you have pointed out he isn’t going to be able to provide his word again. I hardly think whatever Draco Malfoy has to say will have quite the same effect.’

‘I am in the early stages of building this case, Ms. Granger. Your patience is appreciated, these things take time!

‘Yeah, well you let me know when you’ve done that!’ Hermione snapped, finally losing her patience. ‘Severus doesn’t have time!’

Hermione merely huffed.

‘The preliminary hearing will be held first week in June, as you know,’ Featherstonehaugh said after giving Hermione a moment calm down and clearly eager to change the subject. He watched Hermione a little worriedly. ‘I can’t foresee us having to meet again before then. I will write to inform you which potion Mr. Snape prefers and you can send any future batches directly to my office.’

‘Right,’ Hermione replied, thinking that suited her perfectly. The less she had to see of Featherstonehaugh the better.
'If that is all then I will bid you good day, Ms. Granger,’ he said, beginning to pack away his papers and pull on his battered travelling cloak.

‘Bye,’ she murmured, barely audibly just before Featherstonehaugh Apparated out of the cafe.

He left Hermione feeling a little dazed. She remained at the cafe, recuperating, for a little while longer, at least until she could no longer stand the palpable disdain of the young witch and wizard who wanted to close up for the night, and then made her way out into Diagon Alley. It was a blustery evening but otherwise pleasant; the sky was a deep blue in the East, littered with tiny stars, and a haze of oranges and pinks in the West, where the sun was in the last throes of setting. She had never been here at this time of day before. Without the hustle and bustle of witches and wizards rushing about the place there was an almost eerie silence where the footsteps of the last few shoppers echoed along the cobbles.

She had been talking with Featherstonehaugh for longer than she had anticipated, certainly longer than she had wanted to, and checking the clock above Gringotts, she saw that Neville and Hannah’s party had begun some fifteen or so minutes ago. Not sure she would know whether she was actually going to go inside until she saw the building, with a heavy heart, Hermione turned towards The Leaky Cauldron and slowly made her way in that direction.

~oOo~

She wasn’t sure how long she’d been stood watching the door to The Leaky Cauldron, but her feet were beginning to ache and as the result of the increasingly warm days, she could feel that her ankles were particularly swollen this evening. Every now and again, through the sashed windows, she would see Neville or Luna or a red head, undoubtedly belonging to a Weasley, bob passed, and the muffled sound of old Weird Sisters songs could be heard out on the cobbled street it was so loud. The party had begun forty-five minutes ago by this point but Hermione was yet to build up to courage to go inside.

A fierce debate raged within her. It was perhaps a little arrogant to believe that her presence would unsettle the gathering; presumptuous to believe that they would have missed her as she had missed them; and a certainty that they would not be welcoming her back with open arms. She had caused them nothing but undue hurt and distress. She had been selfish and they deserved better. She didn’t want to ruin anyone’s night, and all she could imagine would happen if she stepped through that door was a frosty reception and an evening of awkward small talk. She didn’t want to put herself through it, and she certainly didn’t want to put them through it. She had put them through enough.

‘Hermione?’ a meek voice sounded from behind her. She turned quickly, slightly startled, and found Harry stood a few paces away, Ginny by his side. It was the latter who had spoken, but she stood silent now; wide-eyed and her mouth opening and closing intermittently as she tried to form her next
sentence. ‘Oh,’ she managed eventually, her tone slightly despairing. In the next moment she had disentangled herself from where Harry had his arm around her shoulders and then, closing the gap between herself and Hermione in three swift steps and after pausing for just a beat, she had gathered her old friend into a warm embrace.

‘I’m sorry,’ Ginny stammered, releasing a slightly stunned Hermione from her grasp, ‘when Neville told me you might be coming I wasn’t sure how I was going to react when I saw you. Not until it happened.’ She moved her hands to either side of Hermione’s head, gently angling her face so she was forced to meet her gaze, and beamed. ‘But I’ve just missed you so, so much! All I feel is relief… well, relief and happiness!’

Slightly overwhelmed Hermione nodded silently as she composed herself. ‘I’ve missed you too. All of you,’ she replied after a moment, feeling that the remark did not do justice to the depth of the joy she felt. Ginny appeared equally overwhelmed and soon had Hermione back in her arms as though she were some sort of buoyancy aid.

‘Err… what were you doing out here?’ Harry asked tentatively, as though testing whether this was a safe moment to interrupt the reunion. Ginny and Hermione released one another in time for Hermione to notice something seemed to have briefly caught Harry’s attention in the pub behind her, and when she turned to look she saw the back of a red head receding from the window within.

‘I was just… leaving, actually,’ Hermione replied, casting a sad glance back at the pub. ‘I’m not sure I’m in the mood for a party.’

‘Don’t be silly!’ Ginny cried.

‘Leave her, Ginny. If you don’t want to come, Hermione, you don’t have to,’ Harry said. He took Ginny’s hand and Hermione saw him squeeze it briefly but tightly; a silent warning for her to desist in her protestations.

‘Oh, alright,’ she said, frowning confusedly. ‘I think everyone would like to see you though.’

‘I’m not so sure,’ Hermione said, issuing her old friends a small, sad smile. She was fairly certain the red head in the pub window had belonged to Ron and that Harry’s silent pleading with Ginny had been for his benefit. It also didn’t feel right. Thoughts of Severus sat in his cell didn’t exactly put Hermione in a celebratory mood.
Both Harry and Ginny looked at her sympathetically, seemingly having understood her inference.

‘Well, perhaps we could catch up-’

‘-Harry! Ginny!’ a new voice interjected. Hermione spun around to see Neville hanging out of the doorway to the pub. His cheeks were a little ruddy with Fire Whiskey induced merriment. ‘And Hermione!’ he added upon seeing there, ‘you came!’

‘Actually-’ she tried to explain, but it was to no avail.

‘-The party’s in here! George is about to set off indoor fireworks!’

Hermione would have found Neville’s round, happy face difficult to deny anyway, but before she knew it Ginny had hold of her forearm and was dragging her towards the pub anyway. ‘Look, Neville wants you here and it’s his party. If you’re trying to avoid anybody,’ Ginny said quietly, ‘you’re doing it for the wrong reasons.’ And with that they were inside The Leaky Cauldron.

Tom the innkeeper had reserved a private function room for the party and it was filled with well over forty guests. Many of them Hermione didn’t recognise and surmised they were members of Neville or Hannah’s families, but there were many more familiar faces also, all of which turned to look in her direction the moment they entered the room. In unison they fell silent for the briefest of moments. It was Harry they were concerned with though. Hermione had almost forgotten the way his mere presence could command this kind of reaction from people as gradually the gathering ceased their gawping and the volume of the din ascended once again.

‘I’ll see you in a bit,’ Harry said slightly dismissively as he strode passed Hermione and Ginny and off towards the back of the room. Hermione didn’t have the opportunity to see where he went before Neville, Hannah, Luna, Seamus and Dean had all gathered around her for hugs, kisses and other such enthusiastic salutations. At the same moment a loud banging erupted from across the room and George’s indoor fireworks burst to light; pink and red sparks exploded into the air, zipped around the room and then burst into heart shapes above Neville and Hannah’s heads. The gathering ‘oo’d’ and ‘aah’d’, Hermione among them, and Neville pulled Hannah into a kiss. Everyone clapped and there was a loud ‘swit swoo’ from George.

‘Brilliant,’ Hermione said, genuinely awed.

‘Mm,’ Seamus agreed though he actually sounded thoroughly disinterested. The group around her
had all turned their attentions back to Hermione and were smiling pleasantly and expectantly. ‘So,’ Seamus continued, ‘where’ve you been?’

‘Yeah,’ Dean interjected before Hermione had chance to reply, ‘is it true what *The Prophet* has been saying? About you and Professor Snape?’

‘I don’t believe he’s a vampire, Hermione. Not for one moment,’ Luna added.

The questions came thick and fast and Hermione attempted to answer them as best she could, finding that, as she had been wholly anticipating them, she did not mind too much, however, when Neville interrupted to silence them ten minutes later she was undeniably relieved.

‘Alright, alright’ Neville said, ‘enough with the inquisition. Hermione’s here to have fun like the rest of us. Wine?’ he asked, offering Hermione a glass of ruby liquid.

‘Err…’ she replied, grinning and gesturing to her stomach, ‘best not.’

‘Oh, Merlin,’ Neville laughed, ‘sorry!’

‘Honestly, Neville. I think you might have had too much of that yourself!’ Hannah teasingly admonished her fiancé, who responded by wrapping his arms around her shoulders. ‘Get off you!’ she exclaimed in faux-struggle. ‘Hey, there’s Butterbeer and pumpkin juice, Hermione. Just ask Tom at the bar,’ she managed to suggest before Neville had dragged her off to talk to some old witch Hermione presumed was his grandmother. Hermione paused for a moment, watching after them with a small smile. She knew Severus would have hated the party had he been able to attend, probably he would have refused to attend, but she thought, briefly, how nice it would be to have him there.

The last few weeks seemed a blur in which she had been numb to her pain, but suddenly, she missed Severus achingly. She imagined it was a result of seeing Neville and Hannah like that, and Harry and Ginny earlier. Normal couples doing normal things. Having fun together. Laughing. Hermione had almost forgotten that this was how it should be.

‘Let’s get drinks,’ Ginny suggested quietly, watching Hermione carefully. Hermione nodded and followed her old friend to the bar where she ordered a Butterbeer. They found a couple of spare chairs at the end of a table occupied by some of Hannah’s family and Hermione, tired of being asked questions, enquired about Ginny’s life instead. She was shown more photographs of baby James, and another of Ginny and Harry on their wedding day which Ginny kept in an enchanted locket
around her neck; Ginny lamented about having to give up playing Quidditch for the Holyhead Harpies due to an injury last season and told Hermione of her plans to get into sports journalism so she could keep a foot in. In many ways it was as though they had never been apart, but in others it was as though Hermione had lived a hundred lives since she had last seen her friend.

Throughout the evening more old acquaintances came over to where Hermione sat to catch up and reminisce about their school days. There seemed to be a tacit consent amongst the group that the subject of the war was taboo, and the conversations remained light-hearted. Though not without the occasional twinge of guilt when thoughts of Severus sat staring at the same four dank stone walls of Azkaban infiltrated her mind, Hermione laughed; allowed herself, if just for tonight, to enjoy herself for a little while.

~oOo~

It was late, and Hermione was just beginning to wonder whether it might be acceptable for her to bid her goodbyes now, when she felt the unmistakeable sense of being watched. She was laughing at something Luna had just said when a figure skulking in the shadows at the far side of the room caught her attention. There was no doubt that it was Ron. Intermittently, Hermione had cast cursive glances around the room throughout the night and not seen him. She thought he might have left after he’d seen her outside, actually, but was glad to see that he hadn’t. She hoped he had managed to enjoy the party in spite of her. *And why shouldn't he?* she thought.

Whatever Ron was thinking, like an automaton, Hermione found herself standing and making her way over to where he stood.

‘Hi,’ she said tentatively.

‘Hi,’ he murmured in response, refusing to meet her eye.

‘How are you?’ she asked.

‘I’m good. *Really* good actually!’ he said with evidently false cheer. ‘You?’

‘I’m fine.

‘Glad to hear it,’ he said. Then he hesitated, his eyes wandering to her stomach but never her face.
An odd look crossed his face but in the next instant he appeared to be merely searching for something to say. ‘Err… when are due?’ he asked awkwardly, clearly not caring less.

‘June.’

‘That’s…’ but he trailed, finally turning to look at her but, the moment their eyes met, he looked away again with a disdainful scowl. ‘Sorry, I can’t do this,’ he said, and strode away out of the pub. Hermione watched after him for an indeterminable amount of time and then, deciding that this was a conversation that needed to happen, and that the sooner it did so the better, she followed him outside.

~oOo~

He leant back against the wall of the pub, his hands dug deep in his pockets, his ears still burning red with anger, and his face contorted with something akin to agony. Hermione approached cautiously.

‘Ron, I-’

‘-It doesn’t seem fair,’ he spat, sounding slightly out of breath, ‘that you can just waltz back in here after all this time, after everything you’ve done to me, and everyone welcomes you with open arms as though nothing has happened.’

‘No, it doesn’t. You’re right and I’m sorry.’

He shook his head, refusing to look at her. ‘Just when I’m starting to get my head around it, just starting to get my life back on track, you have to go and turn up again.’

‘It just happened. I-’

‘-And with Snape, for Merlin’s sake!’ he exclaimed, sounding thoroughly disgusted, ‘salt in the wounds, that is!’

‘I know you and Harry hate him, but-’
‘I don’t hate him,’ Ron said, his tone venomous. ‘It’s worse than that. I envy him and that makes me sick. He has everything I ever wanted.’

‘He’s locked in Azkaban, Ron!’ she breathed incredulously.

‘But he’ll get out, and you know what I mean anyway. You, and a family. That’s all I ever wanted with you and I… I just don’t understand what he can offer you that I can’t!’

Hermione gave this some thought and concluded that she wasn’t sure either but that there definitely was something Severus could offer her that Ron had never been able to. She thought back to what McGonagall had said, about both her and Severus being determined, passionate and stubborn, and wondered whether that was it but couldn’t be sure. It was just a feeling she had, but she wasn’t sure Ron would understand that. She wasn’t even sure she understood it herself and certainly couldn’t have articulated it. Not that it mattered, in the end. She didn’t need to explain herself because Ron began to speak again. It was clear he had wanted to get these things off his chest for a long time and Hermione felt she owed it to him to let him have his say.

‘And then I look like the bitter and twisted one. Everyone telling me to shut up and get over you. That I should be happy that you’re happy!’

‘I treat you really badly,’ Hermione admitted. ‘I was going through a tough time, and I know that’s no excuse really, but it’s the best I can offer.’

‘Why couldn’t you talk to me about it?’ he asked, sounding suddenly deflated rather than defensive.

‘I don’t have answers for your questions,’ she replied honestly.

‘Then this conversation is pointless.’

Hermione perched on the edge of a empty beer keg, feeling suddenly very tired. She winced at a sharp pain that shot through her abdomen as she did this and rubbed her stomach with the palm of her hand to try and soothe it. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said quietly after the twinge had passed, ‘we were so young when we got together.’

‘-no younger than Harry and Ginny-’
‘-and it happened under such intense circumstances. I can’t help but think we were just caught up in the moment.’

‘-don’t speak for *me.*’

‘That *I* was just caught up in the mom-*’ She paused again in response to an intense cramp in her stomach but as it passed fleetingly once again, she continued. ‘When the dust settled I didn’t feel the same way about you. I admit I should have been more honest with you from the start, but when I left to find Severus it wasn’t to go looking for *this.* It just happened.’

Ron breathed heavily through his nose for a long moment, his nostrils flaring angrily with each exhalation.

‘I would like for us to be friends again,’ Hermione tried when no response was forthcoming from him. ‘I’ve missed you.’

She watched as he closed his eyes and the muscles in his jaw twitched wildly. ‘I’d like for that too,’ he said, after an agonising pause. ‘I’m just not sure I can.’

‘I understand that, but will you at least think about it?’ she implored.

‘I suppose I’ll have to seeing as everyone else seems so willing to forgive and forget,’ Ron grumbled, sounding utterly noncommittal.

‘Thank you,’ she said, though she still felt uneasy.

‘I’m going back in,’ he said, straightening up quickly and striding across the courtyard to the door. ‘I’m going to try and enjoy the rest of the party.’

Hermione nodded, understanding his inference that he would prefer if she would leave so he could do this. ‘I’m not feeling very well anyway,’ she said honestly, heaving herself off the keg. Ron half-shrugged and she followed him inside.
‘I’m not promising anything,’ Ron said as they stood in the cramped hallway between the private room where the party was being held and the door to the main part of the pub with the exit into Muggle London.

Hermione issued him a small, grateful smile. It was all she could manage, emotionally drained as she was. Ron, apparently, couldn’t even manage that, and he turned and disappeared back into the party without paying another moment’s heed. Hermione stared blankly at the closed door for just a minute longer and then turned to make her way back out onto the street.
One of Each

They arrived two days after the party. In the early hours of the morning as a summer storm raged outside. One of each. Hermione had protested that it was too soon, that they were too small, but her mother had reminded her baby’s worked to their own schedule.

The brown-haired, hazel-eyed girl came first, wailing into the humid air as the midwives held her against the heat-blushed skin of Hermione’s cheeks. The raven-haired, onyx-eyed boy came half an hour later; whimpering and dazed. He was taken away so they could check his airways. It was momentary but felt an age to Hermione as she tried to make out what was going on through the crowd of doctors and nurses who gathered around the tiny perspex cot, prodding and poking at her tiny son.

Then he was returned to her, wrapped, like his sister, in a crisp white blanket, a knitted hat on his tiny head. They were both so small it was hard to believe they were living, breathing humans. Even as they lay, each in the crook of one of Hermione’s arms making little baby grunts and gurgles. She looked between them incredulously, marvelling at every last detail of their features. Later, as they had dozed in the cot beside her bed, Hermione had allowed herself to cry; cry out her fears and anxiety and cry because Severus was not with her to share in this. Then she straightened herself out and promised herself that this would be the last time.

~oOo~

‘She’s definitely an Erin,’ Hermione explained to her mother a week later after she had finally been allowed out of the hospital with the babies. She cradled her daughter, Erin, in her arms. ‘Erin Georgia.’

Her mother paused, her cup of tea halfway to her mouth. ‘Oh, Hermione. You don’t have to do that!’

‘I want to. I couldn’t have done it without you and I think naming her after you is a fitting thanks!’

‘Well I’m honoured,’ Georgia said, finally regaining her fine-motor skills and bringing her tea to her mouth to sip. ‘And this little fella?’ she asked afterwards, stroking the top of the boy’s head as his grandfather held him on the settee next to her.

‘He’s a little more tricky,’ Hermione admitted.
‘Don’t tell me you’ve called him Bertram?’ Hermione’s father asked. ‘He’ll get a hard time at school if you have. I always did!’

‘No,’ Hermione chuckled, ‘I’d like to honour Severus but I’m not sure how he’d feel about that. Perhaps “Severus” as a middle name wouldn’t be unacceptable.’

‘And you have no ideas for a first name?’

‘I like Jack, Noah, Isaac… I wish Severus was here to help, but I’ll have to register them before the preliminary hearing so he won’t get chance.’

‘One of them will start to sound right,’ Georgia said encouragingly. ‘We tried all kinds of things before we settled on Hermione.’

‘You were very almost a Halcyone,’ Bertram commented, issuing his wife an eye roll. ‘Before I requested your mother look a little further through at least the “H” section of the name book.’

Hermione laughed. She had been doing more of that over the last few days. An odd sense of calm had arrived along with the babies. Halcyon days, Hermione thought, wondering at the coincidence of that having been brought up. It was a kind of peacefulness that Hermione did not feel guilty about because it did not undermine her longing to have Severus home with her. Each night as she put the babies down to sleep she sat in the nursing chair between their cots and told them stories of their father’s bravery until their eyes were too heavy to keep open.

‘You’ll see him soon,’ she always whispered in conclusion, more to herself than the babies, she sometimes thought.

Her days were filled with nappies, bottles, and soothing their cries. She found the uncertainty of parenthood unsettling, being so used to being able to read a book and understand something almost immediately, and reaching the end of each day with them both content always felt like a little victory.

But Hermione’s work was not finished once the twins were asleep, for her evenings were spent brewing the anti-venom. Featherstonehaugh had written four days after their meeting in Diagon Alley to announce that batch seven had been the most successful of those she had given Severus to try and so now her spare time, or what little of it there was, was taken with brewing as much of this as she could manage.
‘Present,’ Neville said when he arrived with Harry, Ginny, and baby James just over two weeks after the twins were born. He handed over a crate with six individual Snowdonia Hawkweed plants in it, each covered by a glass cloche. ‘I’ve got a bit of a nursery going at the school from the cuttings I took originally,’ he explained, ‘these ought to keep you going for a while, and then I’ll bring more.’

‘Thanks, Neville,’ she said, relieved as she had used the last of what she had in the potions she had just sent to Featherstonehaugh.

‘We brought some of James’ old clothes as well,’ Harry added, dumping a large sack on the kitchen table.

‘Thanks. That’s great,’ Hermione replied, thankful of the money that would save.

This was not her friends’ first visit. Since the twins had been born they had visited alone or, like this, in small groups. Luna had been too, and on one occasion even George had tagged along with Ginny.

‘How are you?’ Ginny asked presently, James perched on her hip, as Hermione made tea for her guests, ‘you look tired, are they keeping you up at night?’

‘No more than is to be expected,’ Hermione replied, smiling weakly. In truth she felt utterly exhausted; when one baby awoke for feeding it was inevitable that their cries would wake the other, but it was the kind of exhaustion one experienced after having done a good day’s work and so Hermione didn’t mind it entirely.

‘Not long until the hearing,’ Harry stated, accepting his cup from Hermione, ‘two weeks isn’t it? How you feelings about that?’

Hermione sighed. ‘I’m not too worried about the hearing. I just hope they’ll let him come home.’

‘And the trial?’

‘I… I’m trying to stay positive, but from what Featherstonehaugh has said, things aren’t looking great.’
‘Mmm…’ Harry murmured, taking large gulps of his drink to avoid having to comment on that further.

‘Would you like us to come with you on the day,’ Neville asked, ‘for moral support?’

‘Yeah,’ Ginny agreed, ‘mum can have James and we can meet you here beforehand.’

‘I…’ Hermione paused, feeling overwhelmed with gratitude. Ron had been right, it was utterly unfair that they could treat her as though nothing had happened. She at least knew she did not deserve it. ‘Thank you, for the offer, but…’ She paused, wondering how Severus might feel to look up from the witness stand to see her in the gallery surrounded by her old friends. ‘Perhaps not everyone… it might be… strange for Severus,’ she explained, trying to fob them off in a way which wouldn’t offend them. She remembered what Severus had said about not minding if her friends were part of the twins’ lives but not wanting them a part of his. She had been relatively certain this had been said at least partly in jest, but with Severus one could never be sure, and she didn’t want to cause him any additional anguish by creating an audience of ex-students to observe his misery at the hearing. Perhaps he’d think they had gone along in the hope of seeing him that way.

‘We’re here to support him too,’ Neville reminded her.

‘I know, and I appreciate it. Severus does too, I’m sure, but… it might a bit overwhelming for him. I think he’d prefer it to just be a quiet affair.’

‘Tell him good luck with that!’ Ginny said, ‘I was talking to Ernie MacMillan the other day, he’s the current affairs editor for The Prophet, and he says they’re sending every spare reporter and photographer they can to the hearing and they’re camping out the night before because they reckon some of the foreign press will be there too and they want the best spots outside The Department of Magical Law Enforcement.’

‘Oh no,’ Hermione replied in a strained tone as she began to feel less confident about the hearing as well now.

‘What if just I came?’ Harry offered. ‘Sna… Severus,’ he corrected himself, ‘already knows I’m helping you out so it won’t be such a shock perhaps?’

Hermione considered this and it sat a little more easily with her. ’Yeah, alright,’ she acquiesced, a little apprehensively but not unappreciatively.
'I’ll meet you here on the morning, early, and then we’ll Floo to the Ministry. We’ll go directly to the Auror office so that we can avoid any crowds.'

‘Yes,’ Hermione replied a little more affirmatively, ‘thank you.’

~oOo~

Ginny was not mistaken about the level of interest in Severus’ hearing. Sat in Harry’s small, messy cubicle on the Auror Headquarters, the noise of the baying crowd could be heard even through the thick oak door that separated Harry and Hermione from them.

‘They’re like animals that haven’t eaten for weeks,’ Harry said. He moved over to the door and peered through the keyhole at what was happening in the large hallway outside. ‘It’s not all journalists. There’s members of the public too, a lot seem to be on Severus’ side.’

‘A lot but not all,’ Hermione replied glumly.

‘Mm… I’ve not seen anything like this since the original Death Eater trials.’

‘I wish people wouldn’t keep comparing them,’ Hermione said as she sat in Harry’s desk chair, swivelling it from side-to-side in her restlessness. ‘Severus wasn’t a Death Eater… at least not this time around.’

‘Of course,’ Harry said, turning back to her. ‘I’ve spoke with the Chief Warlock, you know. I asked them about house arrest again.’

‘And what did they say?’

But before Harry had chance to reply there was an increase in the volume of the crowd through the door. Harry dashed back to the lock and peered through. ‘I think he’s here,’ he said, looking back at Hermione worriedly. She was on her feet now, struck by a powerful, though improbable, prospect. Without little further consideration she had brushed passed Harry and disappeared through the heavy door.
She pushed her way through the crowd, elbowing photographers and reporters out of the way as she went, Harry on her heels, calling out for her to wait up. Somewhere over the din the voice of a patrol officer called for people to move out of the way and the gathering parted to create a pathway, which eventually Hermione emerged onto the edge of it. Severus was being paraded down the clearing, his hands bound behind his back by a charm, and two patrol officers clutching his arms to guide him.

‘Severus!’ she called out as he neared. He didn’t hear so she called again, more loudly this time, and when he still didn’t hear she was left with little choice but to step out into the middle of the pathway and block their way.

The trio ground to halt, the guards tightening their grip on their captive. ‘Hermione…’ Severus responded, his voice hoarse from disuse and his eyes wide.

‘Step back!’ the guard demanded, attempting to brush her aside.

‘No, wait!’ Harry suddenly said, appearing out of nowhere and standing shoulder to shoulder with Hermione. ‘Give them a minute,’ he implored, and the guards must have recognised who it was they were talking to because, after a brief glance at one another, they relented. There were also murmurs from a few members of the crowd stood close enough to realise what was happening, but the noise of everyone else, oblivious to the intervention from The Boy Who Lived, was cacophonous.

‘You have a son and a daughter,’ she shouted to be heard over the noise. ‘One of each. I just needed you to know that before… before whatever happens next!’

A small smile spread across his lips but it didn’t quite reach his eyes and looked almost pained. A hundred camera flashes illuminated the scene. ‘And you’re all alright?’ he asked.

Hermione nodded, choking back anguished tears. ‘I’m so proud of you,’ she told him, ‘and I love you.’

‘Come on!’ the guards ordered, growing impatient. They pushed Severus forwards with a jolt.

‘Hermione I…’ Severus said, groaning slightly as he struggled against the guard’s grip. ‘I love you all so much… tell the babies that, yeah?’
‘You’ll be able to tell them yourself tonight!’ she told him, her voice raised and uncaring that the surrounding journalists would undoubtedly have been able to record the conversation verbatim.

Severus was having to twist to see her now, so far down the pathway had the guards pushed him, but she saw him nod his head once in a final act of defiance, and then he gone into the courtroom.
Inside the courtroom was similarly crammed with all manner of witches and wizards as the hall outside, though this gathering fell silent when the double doors at the back of the room swung open and Severus was brought through to the witness stand. Harry led Hermione, holding her loosely by the wrist, to some empty seats towards the back of the gallery. Hermione didn’t recognise anyone sat around her, and thought how cruel it was of people, strangers, to make this into such a spectacle; something to entertain them in their otherwise mundane lives; something they could go home and gossip about with their friends and family.

*But it isn’t some salacious fiction, Hermione thought bitterly, it’s our lives.* And as she sat, squashed between Harry and plump wizard who sweated in the heat, she silently cursed every single one of them before focusing her attention on what the Chief Warlock, who had risen to speak, was saying.

‘The purpose of this hearing is to determine how the defendant, Mr. Snape, wishes to plea to the charge of the murder of Professor Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore on the thirtieth of June, 1997, and any appropriate action which needs to be taken as a result of said plea. Will the defendant please rise.’

Severus got his feet, struggling just a little. In the exhilaration of the meeting outside, Hermione had not quite realised the toll Azkaban had clearly had on him. He was thin as a rail, his eyes sunken, the light behind them dwindling; his hair had grown long and shabby, and his skin was layered in grime. Usually so well put together and a stickler for cleanliness, it was most unsettling to see what he had been reduced to.

‘Please state your full name and date of birth,’ the Chief Warlock requested.


‘Mr. Snape, as aforementioned, you have been charged with the murder of Albus Dumbledore in June of 1997. How do you plea? Guilty or not guilty.’

Severus hung his head slightly so his hair curtained his face. Hermione watched him intently as he deliberated with himself. At length he said, ‘not guilty,’ in a small but determined voice. A ripple of indistinct murmurs travelled through the gallery, sounding in equal measure disappointed and relieved. Hermione was amongst the latter as she released the breath she had not realised she was holding. Harry squeezed her hand and issued her a small smile which she returned weakly, the gravity of the task in hand; of arguing that Severus was not guilty of *murder* when he had undoubtedly *killed* Dumbledore, suddenly dawning on her.
‘Silence in the courtroom!’ the Chief Warlock ordered, rapping his gavel down thrice onto the sound block in front of him. ‘Silence!’ and with that the whispers and titters in the gallery began to subside. The Chief Warlock gave them a disdainful look before continuing. ‘Very well, Mr. Snape, your plea of “not guilty” has been noted and as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot I declare today that a trial will be held at the earliest opportunity to provide the chance for you to prove the truth of it. A date for said trial will be set in due course. As per precedence I order that you remain—’

The Chief Warlock was interrupted by a loud cough in the gallery. Hermione, along with every other head in the room, turned to Harry who was sat with his hand covering his mouth but not a hint of an apology in his eyes. Instead he was glaring pointedly at the Chief Warlock, clearly trying to make him remember the conversation they had recently had. For a long moment the Chief Warlock merely stared back and then looked away, apparently relenting, albeit reluctantly.

‘Until the trial,’ he began again, addressing the entire courtroom once more, ‘I order that Mr. Snape be put under house arrest… though his wand will remain in our custody! Court dismissed,’ he concluded briskly, casting Harry one final look of disapproval before turning and sweeping out of the room, his plum-coloured robes billowing behind him, to more sounds of jumbled dismay and agreement from the crowd.

‘I have a feeling I may just have used the very last dregs of my “influence,”’ Harry said, grinning widely as he made to stand. ‘Well, come on then!’ he said, tugging at Hermione’s arm to stir her into action. Currently she was sat staring at where the Chief Warlock had been stood, not quite sure she believed what she had been hearing. ‘Hermione, come on!’ Harry urged once more, ‘let’s go get him!’

~oOo~

They left the courtroom ahead of the crowds, practically running through back-corridors and stairways that only the staff would have known about. Harry leading the way, Hermione followed in an elated daze, finding herself slightly out of breath with exhilaration when they halted in front of a door marked “defendant’s waiting room.” Harry knocked sharply on it and it was pulled open a moment later by the Chief Warlock himself.

‘Potter,’ he bemoaned, looking reluctant to allow them to enter. Harry took a step forwards; it could have almost been threatening if he hadn’t worn such an amiable expression, forced as it was. Begrudgingly the Chief Warlock open the door and allowed them in.

‘As he is no longer your prisoner,’ Harry said to the Azkaban guards, espying Severus as soon as they entered, his arms still behind his back, ‘you have no right to keep his hands bound.’
The guards looked between Harry and the Chief Warlock, who nodded curtly in acquiesce. The first guard, indistinct as they were, withdrew his wand and cancelled the charm that held Severus’ hands behind his back.

‘We’re just finalising the paperwork. Mr. Snape has agreed to the conditions of his release, he just needs to sign the contract,’ the Chief Warlock explained, holding out a quill to Severus who paused in rubbing his sore wrists to take it. ‘On the line here,’ the Chief Warlock instructed, jabbing at the parchment impatiently with a stubby forefinger. Once Severus had signed it, the contract was magically duplicated and one handed over to him. ‘You have one hour to get back to your house, after that, you don’t leave it,’ the Chief Warlock reiterated forcefully one last time. ‘I bid you all a good day,’ he then added, heading for the door. Once he reached it, hand outstretched to the doorknob he turned back to Harry. ‘When you have a moment, Potter, a word in my office if you will,’ and with that he was gone, the guards shuffling reluctantly after him.

‘Oh dear, I think I might be in bother,’ Harry said, running a hand through his hair. ‘I…’ He paused as Hermione took a few steps towards Severus and then faltered; her vision blurring with unspilled tears and an uncertain expression on her face. Severus took a few steps towards her also, reaching out to place a hand on her shoulder before apparently thinking better of it and dropping his arm back to his side. ‘I… I’ll leave you to it,’ Harry said, his brow furrowed at the scene before him. Both Hermione and Severus turned to look at him and Hermione considered how strange it must be for him to see his old friend and ex-Potions Master like this. ‘I’ll call by the house in a few days,’ he suggested, ‘see how you’re getting on.’

‘Thanks Harry,’ Hermione managed to say without her voice cracking.

‘My pleasure,’ he assured her, and then turned to the door when Severus spoke, stopping him in his tracks.

‘Potter,’ he said, and though his tone wasn’t particularly kindly it was not his customary tone for addressing Harry; neither reminiscent of the menace he had used as a teacher, nor the sultry loathing he had maintained in the years since. ‘I… would like to thank you as well. For everything,’ he continued, each word seemingly a struggle for him. He gave Harry a long, serious look until the younger wizard slowly nodded his acceptance.

‘You’ll be OK?’ Harry asked Hermione.

She glanced up at Severus, whose expression was stoney, and then back at Harry. ‘I’ll be fine. See you soon.’ Harry nodded again and turned to leave the room.
Hermione and Severus watched the door close behind him and then turned to one another again. Severus took another tentative step towards her and reached out a hand to stroke her curls with the backs of his fingers. He closed his eyes as he did this, as though remembering something from long ago that had stirred overwhelming emotions. Hermione reached up and took his hand in hers, gently holding it to her lips and kissing it softly.

‘Take me home,’ he whispered, holding her gaze for a long moment. She nodded silently and, still clutching his hand, led him out of the Ministry. The crowd outside The Department of Magical Law Enforcement was, if possible, thicker than it had been on their way in and though initially those gathered appeared to have forgotten their purpose for being there, the moment Severus and Hermione stepped out of the court and into the hall they were reminded; clambering and jostling one another to get their exclusives. It took fifteen minutes of repeated insistence that they had “no comment” before the pair made their way to the Atrium, out into Muggle London, and to a safe Apparition point where they disappeared with a crack.

‘We have twenty minutes before you have to be in the house,’ Hermione said once they’d landed by the canal in Cokeworth. For all it’s industrialisation, Cokeworth had certain charm in the golden light of the setting summer sun. ‘I thought you might enjoy the walk back.’

Severus nodded that he would and silently they made their way to Spinner’s End.

~oOo~

He followed her through the door of the house a little hesitantly, though he had never been so glad to see this place in all his life. It was warm and familiar and Hermione’s decorating had made it almost homely, not that there was much opportunity to enjoy it at the moment, for no sooner had they hung their travelling cloaks on the rack than Mr. and Mrs. Granger had joined them in the narrow hallway, each issuing Severus a dubious appraisal, their eyes flitting from the top of his greasy head to the bottom of his scuffed shoes.

Hermione glanced between Severus and her parents. ‘Mum, dad,’ she said, a little nervously, ‘this is Severus.’

They continued to stare at him, apparently mesmerised, for just a fraction of a moment longer and then Mr. Granger seemed to come to his senses and stepped forward with his hand outstretched. Severus shook it tentatively.
‘Severus,’ Mr. Granger said, ‘it’s a pleasure to finally meet you. Hermione’s told us a lot about you!’

Severus looked at Hermione completely aghast, dreading to think how her description of him would have seemed to her parents. *My old Potions professor… twenty years older than me… fugitive… got me up the duff… he’s in prison at the moment…* Their young, intelligent daughter lumbered with an absolutely waster like him. He also imagined what he might say if his own daughter brought home a man of similar standing in a few years. He didn’t think he would be shaking his hand, that’s for sure. But Hermione was smiling innocently at him, apparently amused by his discomfort.

‘I wish we were meeting under better circumstances,’ Mrs. Granger then said, also shaking Severus’ hand.

‘Me too,’ he agreed, though he was struggling to muster much enthusiasm. If he was honest he wanted them to leave. He wanted to be alone with Hermione for a little while.

‘It must have been dreadful for you, locked up in that place when you’ve done nothing wrong,’ Mrs. Granger was saying, but her husband was quick to shush her.

‘Let’s leave them be now, Georgia. I’m sure the man doesn’t need an inquisition at this hour,’ he said.

‘Oh, yes, sorry!’ she apologised, as though she had quite forgotten herself and as though this was a common occurrence. ‘The babies are asleep. They’ve been good as gold!’ she continued, turning her attentions back to Hermione and handing her a baby monitor. Severus glanced nervously up to the top of the stairs. There was the other reason he wanted the Grangers to leave. The babies, *his babies*, were asleep up there, incomprehensible as that sounded.

‘Thanks for watching them,’ Hermione said, kissing each of her parents on the cheeks and giving them a small hug as they put on their coats ready to leave.

‘Any time, Mione!’ her dad replied, ‘I mean it! If you need anything, you call us, alright?’

‘Yes dad,’ Hermione responded with a small sigh.

‘You too Severus,’ Georgia added. It was a kind gesture, the sort of thing he’d seen happen to other people, and he was not sure of the correct response so he settled for smiling weakly, hoping they
would mistake his rudeness for lethargy. Then suddenly she lay her hand on his forearm, 'I think you should know, Severus, that Hermione has told us nothing but wonderful things about you. None of this trial business is ideal, I can’t pretend this is what I would have chosen for my daughter and I think we have a lot to talk about, but I want to thank you for making her happy these past few years,’ she said, meeting his gaze with an earnest expression, ‘and of course, thank you for our grandchildren,’ she added, beaming at him. Hermione had the same smile.

‘You… you’re welcome,’ he said, wishing he had the wherewithal to act a little more graciously, but he was exhausted and overwhelmed and was sure he had just heard one of the babies stir on the monitor, which had unsettled something in his abdomen again.

‘Bye you two!’ Hermione said suddenly. She sounded cheerful still but there was a persistent edge to her tone.

‘Yes, come on,’ Mr. Granger said, directing his wife out of the front door. ‘We’ll see you later.’

~oOo~

Bolting the door locked behind her parents, Hermione finally turned to Severus. She looked him up and down and then lunged at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. He stumbled slightly as he caught her, but held her firm.

‘Why are you crying?’ he asked, frowning down at her as she relinquished her hold of him.

‘They’re happy tears,’ she assured him as he wiped them away with a coarse thumb. Then she sighed and took his hand. ‘Welcome home, Severus! I can’t believe you’re really here,’ she added, pulling him down into a sound kiss. Her lips felt momentarily uncanny, but they were soon in rhythm with one another again, and the familiarity of her feel and taste settled his nerves. But then she broke away all too soon and looked up at him with her big, hopeful eyes. ‘Are you ready to meet your children?’ she asked, taking his hand and giving it a firm squeeze.

‘Urm…’ he glanced at the top of the stairs skeptically.

‘I’m sure they’d like to meet you,’ she offered, tugging his hand gently in the direction of the stairs. He relented with just a little hesitancy and traipsed up after her.
The children’s bedroom was illuminated by the warm glow of a nightlight. With it’s occupants now settled in it had a cosier, more homely feel than when Severus had first decorated it.

‘This is Erin,’ Hermione whispered, leaning over crib and stroking their daughter’s soft curls. ‘Erin Georgia Snape.’

Severus placed his hands on the side of the crib and stared down at the tiny figure sleeping within. She was Hermione all over, from her little button nose to her rosy cheeks, and Severus felt his heart swell.

‘Are you OK?’ Hermione asked, looking up at him with a concerned frown.

Severus realised he had forgotten to breathe for a little while and inhaled deeply. ‘Yes, I… Erin… she’s…’ he trailed off, he didn’t think he had the vocabulary to do the child justice.

‘Yes?’

He looked at Hermione who was smiling now, apparently amused, once again, by his flustered state. ‘Perfect,’ he answered finally, in little more than a whisper.

‘Yes, she is,’ Hermione agreed, ‘and your son is equally so,’ she continued, moving over to the other cot. Severus took a few steps in the same direction, suffering a slight ache in his heart as he tore his gaze away from Erin. ‘Isaac Severus Snape,’ Hermione announced, gesturing towards the black haired boy, ‘and he looks just like you,’ she added, placing her hand over Severus’. Isaac was slightly smaller than his sister, undoubtedly had his father’s complexion, and a mass of fine black hair topped his little head. It was perhaps too early to say whether he had inherited the Prince nose, though Severus certainly hoped not.

‘Isaac Severus Snape,’ Severus said, turning to Hermione slightly aghast, ‘poor little bugger!’

‘I thought it was nice!’ she replied defensively but still with a small smile.

Severus smiled back and looked between the two sleeping babies. ‘I’m so sorry I’ve not been here,’ he said in a whisper.
‘You haven’t been able to be here,’ she corrected him, taking a step closer and running her hands up his arms to rest on his slumped shoulders. ‘Everyone’s been really great though, they’re all rallied round. My parents, Minerva, Neville, Harry, the Weasleys even-’

‘Weasleys? Even Ronald?’ Severus interrupted, his gaze snapping up from the floor.

‘Not so much, but we’ve… talked. Maybe there’s a chance we can be friends,’ she said, looking off into the middle-distance solemnly.

Severus sighed, too tired to care about Ron Weasley for the moment. ‘Let’s go to bed,’ he suggested.

‘Oh… after having the babies I’m not really ready for… that yet,’ she said, chewing her bottom lip.

Severus smiled tiredly. ‘I need to sleep,’ he said softly, ‘and I’d prefer if you were with me while I did it.’

Her blushed cheeks were just evident in the dim light and with a small smile she took his hand and led him to their room where they changed and fell into bed.

‘I’m grateful that you’re home,’ Hermione whispered as they lay in the darkness. ‘What are you grateful for?’

He wondered tonight whether he ought to say the answer that he always truly wanted to say. *Her,* that he was grateful for *her.* But something prevented him. Perhaps the tenuousness of it all. The thought that it might not last; might be taken from him in the very next moment. As though voicing it might curse it. So he settled on something safer. ‘Same,’ he said tiredly, and with that they fell asleep together, Hermione clinging to Severus practically for dear life.

~oOo~

He was alone when he woke the next morning, a thin strip of early summer sun spilling across the bed through the gap in the curtains. It took him a moment to remember where he was, and why he hadn’t awoken to the sight of grey stone walls. He stretched his long limbs, savouring the luxury of the cotton sheets and smiling as the smell of a cooked breakfast wafted through the house to greet him. Ignoring the protestations of his aching body, he swung his legs out of the bed and, pulling on an old sweater, which hung a little looser on his thin frame, made his way downstairs. As he passed
the living room door a Moses basket caught his attention and he ambled cautiously over to it to see the twins sleeping peacefully, side-by-side within.

‘Morning,’ Hermione whispered, coming up behind him and wrapping her arms around his waist.

‘When do I get to see them awake?’ he asked, nodding his head in the direction of the babies as he placed his hands over where Hermione’s met on his stomach.

‘You just missed them this morning, I’m afraid. But they never sleep for too long, let me tell you! You might just have time for some breakfast. It’s ready.’

Severus nodded and reluctantly tore his gaze away from the twins before following Hermione into the kitchen. She’d prepared quite a feast, a magnificent full English, the likes of which Severus could only dream of whilst forcing down his gruel in Azkaban.

‘Are you trying to fatten me up?’ he said, his mouth already full of bacon.

‘Quite frankly, yes,’ she replied with a small chuckle, ‘you’re all skin and bones after being in that place!’

‘Well, I’m not complaining,’ he replied, ‘this is delicious!’

‘Good,’ she said, and then proceeded to eat her own breakfast whilst never tearing her eyes away from Severus.

‘Can you stop staring?’ he asked, after a moment, his eyebrow raised, lips twitching into a smirk.

‘I just can’t believe you’re here!’ she said, shaking her head incredulously for emphasis.

‘Mmm,’ he murmured, choosing to smile rather than say what was actually on his mind; that his being here might be short lived, and instead they fell into a companionable silence until they were disturbed by a rapping on the window. A large Eagle Owl was tapping its talon impatiently against the glass, evidently important correspondence tied to its leg, which Severus got up presently and retrieved.
'For you,’ he said, handing the letter to Hermione with one hand and shooing the bird away with the other. He watched her read the letter through a good three times, her expression growing ever more consternated as she did so, and when he couldn’t bear it any longer he spoke again. ‘What is it?’ he asked, frowning across their now abandoned breakfast at her.

‘They… they want me to give evidence at the trial,’ she said, chewing her bottom lip as she looked up at him finally.

‘Oh, well surely that’s a good thing?’ he replied, ‘you can tell them how wonderful I am.’

‘For the prosecution,’ she clarified. Severus stopped what he was doing, his spoonful of baked beans hovering half way between his plate and his mouth. ‘They’re going to ask me what you were like… before, aren’t they?’

He nodded slowly, ‘I imagine so, yes,’ he said, ‘and you just need to tell them the truth.’

‘But…’

‘You tell them the truth, Hermione,’ he emphasised imploringly. ‘You tell them precisely what a complete bastard I was.’

She opened her mouth to protest again but Severus silenced her with a stern look. ‘Just when I was thinking things were starting to look up,’ she said miserably, pushing her unfinished plate of food away from her.

Me too, Severus wanted to say, but stopped himself. He remained acutely aware that he was on borrowed time and had determined not to waste it being maudlin. He was saved by a stirring in the next room, the soft whimper of one of the twins. ‘Finally,’ he said, not allowing his nerves to better his enthusiasm. ‘I want to hold them,’ he told her and the sight of her smile as he said it was almost enough to make him believe that everything was going to be alright.
In the weeks after the preliminary hearing their lives settled into a kind of normality. The mundanity and monotony of it all was, at least as far as Severus was concerned, a beautiful and serene thing. He did not find himself to be a natural father, much as he had anticipated, and, though not to such an extent that he would appear neglectful, he left much of the babies’ care to Hermione. She fed them, changed them, and bathed them, and he watched on mesmerised, handing her nappies and wipes every now and again. Though it left Severus with a profound sense of inadequacy, Hermione, apparently content to allow him to move at his own pace, did not seem dissatisfied with this arrangement. He did find he was rather adept at settling the twins, sometimes more-so than Hermione, and he enjoyed the weight of them resting against his chest as he did so, their hearts beating in tandem. It reminded him of the absolute vitality of life; for the first time all the pain and suffering he had endured until this moment seemed utterly worth while.

‘And you deserve it,’ Hermione had said when he tried to articulate this to her.

Hermione’s friends visited, of course. Severus shared awkward nods of acknowledgement with Potter and the myriad Weasleys who passed through his front door. He certainly didn’t mind them coming but tried to busy himself out of the way while they were there, though a lengthy conversation with Longbottom regarding the preservation of Snowdonia Hawkweed had been most useful. Severus had found that his house arrest did not exclude the garden, and so Longbottom, a little nervously, had instructed him for an entire afternoon on how to tend and maintain his own nursery there. It clearly made Hermione happy to have them around and to see her more spirited in their company was enough for Severus. From the garden, the cellar, the bedroom, or wherever else he had chosen to hole himself away, he would hear these friends referred to as the babies’ aunts and uncles and after long deliberation with himself decided that he could not possibly mind. To have that many people doting on them could be no bad thing.

He experienced a similar sensation when Hermione’s parents visited as well. Seeing them fussing and cooing over their grandchildren would, in a past life, have made him nauseous, but now filled him with a warm peacefulness; and he discovered the true source of these feelings one Saturday afternoon when the Grangers were invited over for a barbecue.

‘We fished out these old photographs of when Hermione was a baby,’ Georgia said, handing them over to Severus as they sat around on cheap plastic furniture in the garden, ‘Erin is the spitting image of her.’ Severus looked between the photograph and his daughter and saw that it was true. They shared the same round face, almond-shaped eyes, and those distinctive brown curls.

‘Those are so embarrassing,’ Hermione complained, stretching her arm out to snatch them from Severus, but he held them just out of her reach.
'No they’re not,’ he said calmly, ‘you were very cute. I particularly like this one,’ he added, holding out a picture of a chubby Hermione, perhaps a few months older than the twins, having a bath in the kitchen sink. Present Hermione blushed furiously in response and folded her arms in mock annoyance.

‘So Isaac must look like you then, Severus,’ Bertram said, holding his grandson in front of his face, squinting at him studiously. ‘He certainly doesn’t seem to have much Granger in him.’

‘Mmm,’ Severus grunted, a little less enthusiastic now. A life-long battle with his gangly limbs, sallow skin, and greasy hair made him just a little anxious at the thought of Isaac having inherited them.

‘Do you have any photographs from when you were a baby?’ Georgia asked.

‘Yes, he does!’ Hermione said gleefully, jumping to her feet, apparently relishing the opportunity for revenge. She passed Severus with a satisfied smirk before faltering by the back door and turning to him. ‘You don’t mind, do you?’ she asked, clearly remembering his offhand reaction when he had caught her looking through the photographs all those months ago. All that seemed so insignificant now, as though the past had finally learned to stay where it belonged.

He shook his head and she disappeared into the house, returning again a moment later with three battered photographs. ‘Aw, just look at him,’ Hermione cooed, handing the photographs to her mother. ‘Exactly like Isaac, you both have that little crease between your eyebrows.’

‘Oh, you don’t have those wonderful moving photographs,’ Bertram commented, looking at the picture over his wife’s shoulder.

‘Err… no,’ Severus said, ‘my father didn’t… approve of them.’

‘Is this him?’ Bertram asked, pointing to a miserable looking man begrudgingly holding an equally miserable looking baby Severus in one of the photographs.

‘Mmm,’ Severus grumbled affirmatively.

‘And who’s this?’ Georgia asked, pointing to the woman in the photograph. ‘Your mum?’
‘Yeah.’

‘Oh!’ Hermione suddenly exclaimed, ‘your mum. I’ve been so busy with everything I never even thought… won’t she want to know she’s a grandmother?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps not,’ he replied a little sadly, taking the photographs from Georgia. When he was a child his mother had always seemed very old to him, perhaps it was the way she carried herself as a result of her abuse, he wondered, but in the picture she looked awfully young, practically a child herself as she cradled her newborn son in her arms. A ghostly smile played across her lips as she looked down at the baby, but there was a depth to the subtlety of her expression which suggested wonderment and hope.

‘She looks so proud of you there,’ Hermione observed, smiling softly down at him as he ran his thumb over the photograph.

‘She was. That’s the trouble,’ he murmured. ‘I let her down very badly.’

‘Oh, our children do all kinds of things that let us down, Severus,’ Georgia said, sympathetically, pausing in the middle of fussing Erin, ‘but it doesn’t mean we think any less of them.’

‘Oh yes, you’ll learn that soon enough,’ Bertram added, issuing his daughter a mildly disapproving look. Hermione looked a little put-out at this but Severus couldn’t imagine that anything she had ever done quite compared to becoming a Death Eater. ‘The letters we used to get from your school about you, Hermione… but of course, I’m sure you’ll know all about those, Severus?’

‘I imagine I probably wrote one or two of them,’ he replied, grinning at Hermione and glad of the excuse to steer the subject away from his mother. “Consummate rule breaker,” that was my favourite phrase.’

‘Well, our Hermione did always like to be the best at whatever she did,’ Georgia said, causing everyone but Hermione, who sat with a mildly disgruntled expression as she attempted not to laugh herself.

‘Yes, you’re all very funny,’ she said after a moment, giving in at last and laughing along with them.
‘Today was nice,’ Severus said later as he and Hermione sat down in the living room, the twins asleep, at least for the moment, in their cots upstairs. ‘Do you think your parents like me?’ he then asked. Hermione frowned momentarily, it wasn't like Severus to question, or even care, what others thought of him. ‘It’s important to me that they do,’ he said, apparently reading her expression.

‘I think they do, yes,’ she assured him, ‘they’re certainly coming around to the idea of us being together.’

‘Oh… so when your dad said that you’d done things that had let them down, he wasn’t referring to… us?’ It was a thought that had only occurred to Severus after the event, but had been niggling at him ever since.

‘Definitely not,’ she replied, quite forcefully.

‘Good. I wouldn’t want to cause any difficulties between you,’ he said, shuffling uncomfortably on the settee beside her.

‘Has this got to do with your mum?’ she asked, intuitive as ever.

‘Maybe,’ he shrugged. ‘It got me thinking anyway, what you said about her wanting to know about the kids. Seeing your parents with them, having them over for barbecues, even your friends visiting, things like that, it’s… well, it’s nice.’

‘And do you think your mum might like to be a part of that?’

‘I don’t know, I - she - we, never had then when I was young, but when I looked at that photograph today, how hopeful she looked in it, I wondered whether that’s how she expected things to be. Like I said before, he made it so she didn’t have any friends and her parents died when she was still at school. I can’t help but think she must have been very disappointed with her lot,’ he said bitterly.

‘With your father maybe, but I’m sure not you.’
‘By the end she didn’t think us so very different.’

‘Then perhaps it’s time to prove her wrong,’ Hermione said, in that optimistic way she had.

‘How would you feel if Isaac or Erin became Death Eaters?’ Severus asked glumly.

Hermione sighed, a little defeated sounding, in response.

‘Sorry. I don’t mean to upset you,’ Severus continued, turning to face her a little more and reaching out to brush his hand through her hair again. He had done this a lot at the start of their relationship and had found himself doing it again now he was free from Azkaban; it had become a sort of comfort to him, settling his rattled nerves. ‘But that’s what it equates to; Isaac or Erin running off to become Death Eaters is unthinkable to me, so it must have been equally so for my mother when I did it. I don’t think I realised it until today, not properly anyway, but I was all she had, and then… and then I went and did… that.’

‘She didn’t buy into that ideology? I think I kind of assumed that’s where you got it from…’ Hermione said apologetically.

‘Merlin no! I read about it in books and I hated my father so I simply… made it fit. Then when I went to school and I was surrounded by it, it got augmented. I can’t pretend that the notion of being part of a group, where I might have real influence, didn’t seem appealing to a kid who’d never really had any friends, and before I knew it I was in way, way too deep. But my mother, I think she was sort of fascinated by Muggles, I think. She did marry one after all and she’d never hear a bad word against them. I suppose she had more sense to see the difference between one shitty Muggle and Muggles in general.’

‘And how did Lily fit into all that?’

‘She didn’t. She was an… anomaly. But once she started going out with Potter, I couldn’t see the point in resisting any longer. I had nothing left to resist for.’

‘Not your mother?’

‘By my mid-teens I felt pretty bitter towards her. Don’t get me wrong, she was my mother and I loved her, but I was angry at her, for staying with my father I suppose.’
'It’s not always so simple as just packing a bag and leaving.’

‘I know that now, but it seemed that simple back then. And I suppose I was angry at myself, for not being able to help her. I thought by joining up to the Death Eaters I might be able to get rid of him once and for all for her, but then he died in that accident at the mill and I felt I’d been robbed of my chance.’

‘Severus…’

‘I know, I know. All this… it’s not how I feel now, as a forty-five year old, but it’s how I felt when I was fifteen.’

‘Alright. What happened next?’

He shrugged tiredly, ‘like I said, she used the compensation money to put me through my Potions apprenticeship. I repaid her by taking The Mark and she effectively disowned me.’

Hermione studied him at length as he closed his eyes and tried to calm his agitation. She only spoke once he opened his eyes again and looked over at her expectantly; needing her to respond with something that might make him feel better. ‘I’ll ask you a similar question to the one you asked me now,’ she said. ‘If Isaac or Erin became a Death Eater, how would you feel? Would you care any less about them?’

‘No!’ he replied insistently.

‘Then might we assume your mother feels the same about you?’

‘I don’t know,’ he responded, hanging his head. ‘It’s been twenty-five years.’

‘The passage of time may have worked to your advantage. Look at the way Harry and even Neville are with you now… look at the way I am with you now. Ten years ago I’m sure you wouldn’t have expected that possible. And you’ve already told me you feel differently about your mother now than you did back then, so what’s to say her opinions of you haven’t changed? Time affords us perspective.’
He contemplated this for a long moment, remembering the unfiltered disgust his mother had exhibited towards him the last time they had seen one another. She had caught sight of the Dark Mark as the too-short sleeves of an old jumper had ridden up as he washed his hands in the kitchen sink for dinner one evening. Severus had seen her that angry with his father before, but never with him. He had left Spinner’s End that evening, bound for Malfoy Manor, pulling his old Hogwarts trunk containing all his worldly possessions along behind him. Within the year, the Potters would be dead.

His mother had sent him one letter in the years since, telling him that she was moving to Devon, a residential home for witches, and that Spinner’s End was his to do with as he pleased. He had been teaching at Hogwarts for a little over five years at the time and had considered replying to tell her as much; to tell her that he had made something of his life. He had sat in his office, the quill hovering above the parchment where he had written “Dear Mother,” when it dawned on him that perhaps he had not made that much of his life after all, that he was here because of Dumbledore’s generosity alone, not his own merit. At this he had dismissed the idea in an instant, screwing the letter up and throwing it into the fire.

He had kept Eileen’s letter though. It had probably been lost at some point after he had fled The Final Battle, but he had kept it all those years, reading over it every now and again. It had been short and to the point, formal almost, but signed “love always,” which, now he remembered that, made him realise Hermione might be right.

‘I suppose a letter wouldn’t hurt,’ he said, still sounding unsure as he rubbed a hand through his hair, ‘though I don’t know where I’d start.’

‘I can help you with the wording if you like.’

He nodded in agreement and watched as Hermione fetched some spare parchment and a quill from the drawer in the hallway.
Invitations and Declinations

Severus sat crossed-legged on the living room floor with the twins before him. It was a warm day in mid-July and the windows that looked out onto the street were open in an attempt to circulate the heavy, humid air. Severus had discovered that if he dangled a rattle above Erin’s head she might try and reach for it. It was a simple game but had occupied father and daughter for a good ten minutes already. Isaac had not quite mastered the technique yet, but he lay watching them intently, satisfied with sucking his hand.

With so much time on his hands Severus had dedicated himself to observing the minutia of the twins’ development. His house arrest afforded him few opportunities, but having the time to dedicate to Erin and Isaac was a silver lining he had not had to look far to find. Isaac was undoubtedly the more placid of the two; he was seldom the first to cry when they awoke hungry in the night, and whilst Erin would squeal for attention in the daytime, Isaac was content to wait his turn. As demonstrated by the rattle game, Erin was a little quicker to pick up new tricks, but Isaac was usually not far behind. Severus marvelled at the differences between them, in constant wonderment at how he could have had a role in the creation of things so pure and perfect.

He would perhaps deny it if anyone asked, but undoubtedly a part of this ardent observation was to monitor for signs of magic. He was fuelled by curiosity, more than anything, perhaps buying into, far more than he should, old myths about the most powerful witches and wizards displaying their magic at a younger age. He knew ultimately that it did not matter whether they had magical abilities or not, though it would likely be easier on them if they did; how frustrating it must be to have knowledge of this magical world and yet not have access to it. The notion made him think of Petunia Evans’ bitterness, which in turn made him feel slightly nauseous.

‘Harry is having a birthday party on the thirty-first,’ Hermione said as she entered the living room, disturbing Severus from his musings as she scrutinised what looked to be an invitation. ‘It’s addressed to both of us,’ she added amiably.

‘Great. I’ll have my dress robes pressed immediately,’ Severus snarked, withdrawing the rattle from Erin’s sight as he sat back against the settee. The baby gurgled disapprovingly whilst Hermione gave him a look which quite clearly said “there’s no need to be like that.” ‘He’s only put my name on there because he knows I can’t go,’ Severus continued to protest.

‘You should learn to recognise olive branches when they’re offered to you, Severus,’ she said, somewhat distractedly as she read the invitation over again. He huffed in response and turned his attention back to Erin, who was now whimpering frantically in her pursuit of the rattle. Severus held it out to her again, grinning as she kicked her legs and flailed her arms in an attempt to grab it.

Hermione watched the scene from across the room, chewing her lip contemplatively. ‘I’ll tell Harry I
can’t go,’ she said at length, though her solemnity revealed her true desire.

‘What? Why?’ Severus asked, pulling back from Erin once again and looking critically over at Hermione.

‘It doesn’t seem right, me attending parties when you’re stuck here. I wouldn’t be able to enjoy myself properly anyway.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ Severus said reprovingly, ‘last I looked it was just me under house arrest. You should go; see your friends… have fun!’ he concluded pointedly, with a tone that implied his insistency on the matter. There had be far too little fun of late, he thought, and Erin clearly agreed; aggrieved as she was to no longer have access to the rattle, she was now beginning to sob.

‘Oh, I don’t know… It’s an all day thing… I’m not sure I like being away from the babies for that long…’ Hermione mused.

‘I think I can manage them on my own for one day,’ Severus assured her, mentally trying to remember the front of a nappy from the back. ‘We’ll be fine, won’t we?’ he said, addressing Erin who was still agitated.

‘You sure?’ Hermione asked, a little skeptically.

‘Yes! Tell him you’ll be there.’

She hesitated for one more brief moment. ‘Alright,’ she said eventually, brightening somewhat. She shuffled the invitation from Potter to the bottom of the pile of mail she was holding and opened the next few letters, which were apparently bills or junk as they were not worth comment, before suddenly exclaiming, ‘ooh, and Neville and Hannah have set a date for the wedding. The twenty-third of August. Your name’s on that too. You don’t think the trial will be over by then, do you?’

‘Featherstonehaugh says September at the earliest,’ Severus replied, then, ‘what a shame,’ he added wryly.

Hermione cast him another disapproving look but didn’t admonish him. ‘One for you,’ she said, handing him an envelope of thick, good quality parchment. Severus placed the rattle on the coffee table and took the letter from Hermione, ignoring Erin’s renewed protestations. He cast his gaze over
his own name on the front, not recognising the handwriting, and then pulled back the green wax seal on the opening. The letter within was written on the same expensive parchment:

Dear Severus,

I hope this letter finds you and your family well.

It was a great surprise to receive your letter after so many years of silence. I did not know whether you were dead or alive. I have to confess that I do not subscribe to The Daily Prophet and when I do have the misfortune to catch wind of their articles, I habitually dismiss them as mere rumour. As such, though I had surmised that you would be involved in that ghastly business up at the school a few years back, I am in equal measure surprised and relieved when you tell me your role was in opposition to Voldemort.

I am similarly surprised to learn that you are a father - and to twins, no less! There was a time I would have relished the prospect of grandchildren, though I admit I never expected it. I could speak at some length on the topic of parenthood but why should you listen to me? The only piece of advice I can offer is to suggest that anything you do be the antithesis of what your father and I did, though I am sure you have worked at least this much out for yourself.

As for your offer for me to come and meet them, I am afraid I think I must decline. Although I know I am not particularly old by the standards of magical folk, I feel much, much older in my person and, having finally found a sedate and peaceful life here in Devon, I do not wish to unsettle myself again. I cannot say for sure whether a part of my reasoning is not an inability to forgive you for the heartache you caused. Much time has passed and the memories have certainly numbed, but still, for reasons which are not yet clear to me, I find myself resistant to reacquainting myself with you.

I apologise if this is neither the response you desired nor anticipated. I would, perhaps, not be averse to further correspondence.

Love always,

Your mother, Eileen.

Severus read it through twice, once hurriedly and a second time more carefully. For all his hesitancy in writing to his mother he had become convinced that her response would be a positive one, and the realisation that she wasn’t interested left him feeling slightly winded.
‘Severus?’ Hermione said, and he looked up to find her watching him worriedly. ‘What is it? It’s not to do with the trial is it?’

Severus shook his head and heaved a resigned sigh as he handed the letter to Hermione wordlessly, watching her expression fluctuate between concern and anger and back again as she read through it. After a long moment, in which the only disturbance was Erin’s now persistent whinge, Hermione looked up at him and said, ‘oh, I’m so sorry, Severus. Are you OK?’

He shrugged in response, taking the letter back from her to read it though one last time, as though perhaps the sentiments expressed within it might have changed. ‘She shouldn’t sign “love always” if she doesn’t mean it,’ he said, to his own ears sounding rather pathetic though Erin was practically screaming now, forcing her parents to speak in raised voices. Hermione placed the other letters, still in a pile, on the coffee table as she slid onto the floor beside Severus. She reached out a hand to stroke Erin’s curls comfortingly, though the child didn't quieten much.

‘She says she wouldn’t mind you writing to her again. Perhaps if you maintain contact she might come round to the idea eventually.’

Another shrug. Severus felt a little foolish for getting his hopes up. It was uncharacteristic of him to have done so and he had quickly been put in his place. ‘I’m not sure I want to after that,’ he said, throwing the letter onto the pile with the rest on the coffee table as though it disgusted him. ‘I told you she-’

He was interrupted by a particularly piercing cry from Erin and subsequently, a sudden commotion as the drapes in the window fluttered wildly, the letters were strewn across the coffee table, and the rattle Severus had placed beside them rolled off the edge and onto the floor where it landed just within Erin’s reach. She ceased her crying immediately as her little fingers found it. There was a moment of silence.

‘Do you think that was magic?’ Severus exclaimed, betraying his enthusiasm for the subject as he looked between Erin, the rattle, and Hermione with an expression of mild incredulity.

Hermione frowned uncertainly and Severus followed her gaze over to the window where the drapes now shifted with a little less gusto. ‘Err… sorry darling,’ she replied, sounding genuinely apologetic, ‘I think it might just have been a breeze.’ She stood presently and moved over to close the windows, turning back to Severus smilingly. ‘So, no signs of magic from either of them yet then? I’ve seen you checking.’

‘Err, no,’ Severus admitted, tilting his head to the side as a look of slight consternation flitted across
his features. He studied the babies, ‘the books said they might show signs at any time from birth.’

‘You’re not worried are you?’ she asked, kneeling back down next to him.

‘No… at least… not yet…’ he trailed off thoughtfully. Thus far he had found that whatever the twins did, at whatever pace they did it, he experienced a thrill, and so as far as he was concerned they could take as long as they liked to display magic. ‘I just don’t want to miss it when they do,’ he said, a bitterness in his tone that reminded them both of that which they endeavoured, every day, to forget; that his time with them might be short-lived.

Hermione sighed and shuffled closer to Severus, resting her head on his shoulder and wrapping her arms around him. ‘You sure you’re alright?’ she asked. ‘About your mum?’

‘Mmm… I will be,’ he replied, wholly aware of how unsure of that he sounded.

Hermione smiled sympathetically and leaned across to kiss him on the cheek. ‘I’m going to go RSVP to Harry and Neville then, but let me know if you need anything, OK?’ She stood and gathered the strewn pile of letters and invitations off the coffee table, turning back to Severus once she reached the door to be sure she elicited a response from him.

He nodded at her with what he hoped was a reassuring expression, then, as she left he picked the rattle up from where it had fallen, dangling it over Isaac this time, and laughing to himself as the boy took no interest.
Hathersage Hall

Hermione knew she was being dishonest and underhanded, and it didn’t sit well with her. There was no joy in deceiving Severus. Her plan had kept her up half the night, knotting her stomach with guilt. For long periods she would convince herself that she was doing the right thing, then in the next moment she would talk herself out of it, and then again, when morning came, she had awoken with a new resolve; she could not simply do nothing. Severus had not been himself since he received that letter. On the surface, to the untrained eye, it might appear that all was well, but Hermione could sense the inner tumult that had plagued him since that day. She had caught him, on more than one occasion, re-reading the same lines, a rueful expression marring his features.

After breakfast she sat at the dresser in their bedroom window, attempting to flatten her hair with a Muggle serum.

‘Aren’t you going to be late?’ Severus queried, entering the room almost silently, sitting on the edge of the bed and catching her eye through the reflection in the mirror.

‘Erm… I’m sure Harry won’t mind,’ she replied distractedly, rummaging through her disorganised jewellery box for a pair of earrings that matched her outfit. She fished out some silver hoops and put them in, then stood to examine herself fully in the mirror. Her face and stomach were still rounded from pregnancy, leaving her looking frumpy and older than her twenty-five years in her pale blue summer dress; her hair, despite her best efforts, was wild in the humidity; and no amount of make-up would disguise the dark circles around her eyes. You’ll do, she thought to herself, turning to see Severus was watching her with an odd expression. ‘What?’ she asked, curiously.

‘Nothing,’ he said, shaking his head with a small smile, then, ‘you look lovely,’ he said, rather shyly.

Hermione felt herself blush and tried to ignore the renewed twinges of guilt. ‘Thanks,’ she breathed, a little self-consciously, avoiding his gaze. She heard the creak of the bed springs as he stood and moved closer to her.

‘There aren’t many opportunities for getting dressed up these days,’ he stated, placing his hands on her shoulders, ‘if you exclude court, that is…’ he added with a grimace. She met his eye and gave him a small smile that withered into a frown as she remembered her plan. ‘Hey, you’re not worrying about the babies are you?’ he asked, apparently in response to her furrowed brow, ‘we’ll be fine.’

She wasn’t worried about the babies; Severus doubted himself far more than she doubted him, but it was as good an excuse as any to explain her odd mood without revealing the lie. ‘You’ll call my mum if there are any issues, yes? You remember how to use the mobile phone?’
‘It won’t be necessary but, yes, I do. Anyway, I can always Floo call you at Potter’s if all else fails—’

‘-No,’ she exclaimed suddenly, causing Severus to step back in surprise. He issued her a quizzical look. ‘Sorry,’ she said, trying to laugh it off, ‘I just mean… how would that work with your house arrest, if half of you was here and half of you was at Harry’s house?’

She saw Severus’ whole countenance relax as he considered this. ‘Hmm…’ he murmured, ‘the phone it is then,’ he said, as though the prospect of using the Muggle contraption disturbed him.

‘I should get going,’ Hermione said, gently peeling herself away from Severus and moving out of the bedroom. She paused at the entrance to the babies’ room and seeing them sleeping soundly within decided against going in to kiss them goodbye for fear she’d wake them. ‘I’m going to Apparate. I’ll go down to the alley to do it. It’ll wake them if I go from here,’ she told Severus as they continued downstairs together.

‘Alright,’ he said, ‘hey?’

‘What?’

‘Have fun,’ he said, and it was an order. She smiled and nodded in reply, accepting his light kiss on her lips. ‘You know when you’ll be back?’

‘Not sure. Not late though.’

‘No rush.’

~oOo~

A warm, salty breeze unsettled the loose fabric of Hermione’s dress as she made her way along the beach. It was desolate, save the odd dog walker, a young couple making sand-castles with their toddler in the distance, some teenagers splashing one another in the shallow surf. Enclosed by steep cliffs and no ice-cream van or arcade in sight, it wasn’t the type of place families flocked to, school holidays or not. Hermione was glad of it, not least because there were fewer people to have their attentions drawn to the smartly dressed young woman who had appeared out of nowhere by the rock
pools. She smiled amiably at an old man with a Dachshund Hound and promptly cast a mild *obliviate* over him before trudging her way across the sand and then up the steep path that had been carved into the cliff face, emerging, out of breath and a little clammy, onto the coastal road at the top. A sign read: “Welcome to Hathersage - please drive carefully.”

Hermione had studied the area intensely on the map, though now she was here it looked rather different. It was an unassuming, distinctly Muggle sort of place, which was probably precisely why it had been chosen. The village consisted of a smattering of cottages, a pub, a shop, and a pig farm. It had the air of a place which had once been self-sufficient but whose residents had more recently succumbed to the allure of the large supermarkets and posh restaurants of the nearest town; abandoning the village to whatever fate should befall it.

Hermione enjoyed the tranquility as she meandered through the village centre and out onto the country lane beyond. According to her prior calculations it was about a half-a-mile walk from here to Hathersage Hall; a walk she had planned precisely to give her time to change her mind, turn around, and go home if she should so choose. As it was, she managed to maintain her conviction all the way to the wrought-iron gates she recognised from the letter heading. She pulled said letter from her shoulder bag and teased the thick parchment out of the envelope. At the top-centre there was a small but intricate embossing of a Victorian mansion stood beyond a large set of gates, and around the image were the words “Hathersage Hall Residential Home for Elderly Witches” written in a fine, italicised script. Hermione looked between the image and the view before her, noting that, with the exception of a few decades degradation evident in the latter, they were indeed the same place. With a heavy sigh and a cursory glance around her, she re-bagged the letter and set off up the gravel track that wound towards the real Hathersage Hall.

It was built of grey stone beyond an expanse of manicured lawn. Flower beds of Summer Lilac and Honeysuckle surrounded a small, koi-filled pond. Hermione approached the great oak doors that appeared to be the entrance; they had been left ajar, presumably as a result of the intense heat, and so Hermione took that as an invitation to enter. It was silent inside and her sandals echoed on the parquet flooring as she made her way towards the reception desk. No one was there but there was a bell to ring in such an event, which Hermione did. While she waited she wandered over to glass doors of a conservatory. There were half a dozen elderly women inside, lounging on wicker furniture, reading, or playing chess. Hermione wondered whether they had all be driven here by similar pasts to Eileen, whether Hathersage Hall was a similar sort of sanctuary for them.

‘Hello. Can I help you?’ a voice sounded from behind Hermione, startling her slightly. She turned to find a middle-aged witch dressed in beige robes had arrived at the reception desk.

‘Err… I’m here to see Eileen,’ Hermione stammered.

‘Eileen?’
‘Snape,’ Hermione replied, then in response to the woman’s confused expression amended this to, ‘Prince?’

‘Oh… are you sure?’

‘Yes,’ Hermione said, not sure at all.

‘It’s just, in twenty years I don’t think Eileen has ever had a single visitor. Is she expecting you?’

‘No… is that a problem?’

‘I shouldn’t think so,’ the witch said, smiling pleasantly but giving Hermione an odd look, ‘although it might if you’re interrupting her game of Gobstones. Come. Most of our residents are in the orchard, it’s shadier.’ She gestured for Hermione to follow her and led her through the conservatory, out onto a stone veranda, then across the lawn to where the grass began to grow a little more wildly. Amidst this apple trees grew, and beneath them was more wicker furniture; divans and high-backed chairs. Hermione was led over to where a couple of grey-haired witches were playing what appeared to be a rather intense game of Gobstones, then the staff-witch raised her hand to stop Hermione from going any further. She waited until the woman with her back to them had finished her turn before speaking. ‘Eileen?’ she said, in a gentle tone, ‘you have a visitor.’

The elderly woman turned to face them, issuing them both a sharp look of puzzlement. She was a small, boney woman with the same high cheekbones as her son; her darkness a stark contrast on such a summery day. ‘Hello Eileen,’ Hermione said, wishing she’d prepared a little better for this moment, ‘I’m Hermione, Severus’ partner.’

Eileen narrowed her eyes and looked Hermione up and down. ‘Indeed,’ she said simply, after a long moment.

The staff-witch looked between them, then asked tentatively, ‘you’ll be alright, Eileen?’

‘I should think so,’ the older witch replied. The staff-witch smiled, looking unsure, bowed her head slightly and departed. ‘I’ll come find you for a re-match in a little while, Ethelburga. I shouldn’t think this will take too long,’ Eileen told her Gobstones opponent, who nodded and followed the staff-witch. Eileen scrutinised Hermione for a moment longer before gesturing for her to take the seat Ethelburga had vacated. ‘This is unexpected,’ she said, by way of a greeting.
‘Yes, I’m sure. Sev—’

‘-You’re not at all what I imagined.’

‘Oh. No?’

‘No. I imagined you’d be a little more... well, you look like a nice, sensible young woman, which makes me wonder how you fell in with someone like my son.’

There was not particularly any malice in Eileen’s tone but Hermione thought her assessment terribly unfair. ‘I think... perhaps the Severus I know is much changed from the Severus you remember,’ she suggested.

Eileen looked doubtful.

Anyone else might have given in at this moment, not willing to deal with such ingrained ornery, but the similarities between the woman before her and Severus were too apparent, and Hermione knew exactly how to deal with this kind of temperament. ‘Would you like a game?’ she asked, pointing to the Gobstones board.

‘You know how?’ Eileen asked, studying Hermione skeptically.

‘Of course. Severus taught me,’ she replied simply, ‘and I understand you taught him. He tells me you’re very good.’

Clearly mildly surprised Eileen expressed a ghost of a smile at that and handed Hermione a small sack of gobstones, tossing one of her own onto the board to start the game. Hermione followed suit, her gobstones landing way off the mark, which seemed to amuse Eileen. They played on like that in something akin to companionable silence for a good few minutes until the older witch had succinctly trounced Hermione.

‘Yes,’ Hermione said, feigning disgruntlement at the outcome, ‘Severus always beats me as well.’
'We used to play all the time when he was a boy. It was our little secret,’ Eileen replied wistfully, and then looked as though she wished she hadn’t, as though she had divulged too much. She turned her attention back to the Gobstones board, busying herself with clearing it away and refusing to meet Hermione gaze again as she said, ‘I am presuming you did not come here to play Gobstones. So, why are you here?’

Hermione took a sharp intake of breath. ‘I came to ask you to reconsider coming to visit us. I know it would mean a lot to Severus.’

‘Then why isn’t he here himself?’ Eileen asked, sitting back in the divan and pressing her hands together in her lap.

‘He… you really haven’t read *The Prophet*?’ Hermione asked. ‘It’s been on the front page practically every day for months.’

‘Severus has?’

Hermione nodded. ‘Severus is currently under house arrest. He has been accused of murdering Albus Dumbledore. But,’ she said quickly, before Eileen had chance to interject, ‘you must know that he *did not* do it…’ And, as the sun swept across the sky, casting ever lengthening shadows around Hathersage Hall, Hermione explained everything to Eileen. About Severus betraying Voldemort, his role as a spy, Nagini’s bite, his being a war hero, how they’d met in Romania, the twins, how the Ministry was now trying to make him out to be a callous murderer when it couldn’t be further from the truth, and everything else in between. ‘So, you see,’ she said, winding down to her conclusion, ‘Severus wants to make things right with you now, in case he doesn’t get another opportunity.’

Eileen seemed to consider this for a moment and then said, in a cold whisper, ‘do you know what he said to me the last time I saw him?’

Hermione shook her head.

‘He told me he hated me; that his joining the Death Eaters was my fault, and that anyone he might injure or kill as a result was because of me, that I should feel responsible for it because I had driven him to do it. So then every time I read in *The Prophet* about a Muggle and Muggleborn death I had to wonder; was that Severus, am I to blame… You will forgive me if your story does not inspire me to forget the evil he did too quickly.’
Hermione felt a sudden chill and felt goosebumps rise on her arms. It was easy for her to forget how venomous Severus was once capable of being when she saw him, on a daily basis, enacting such domesticated things as settling their babies, cooking their tea, or reading in the garden. ‘W-we say and do things when we are angry, and when we are young, that we don’t necessarily mean,’ she responded, rather feebly.

Eileen near snorted. ‘You did not see his expression, nor did you hear his tone. He meant what he said,’ she spat. ‘It was in that moment I knew I had lost him… twenty-one years of trying to protect him from his father when the real danger had always lurked… elsewhere…’ The older witch was clearly becoming agitated, her dark eyes unfathomably sad.

‘I’m sorry,’ Hermione said. It had certainly not been her intention to upset Eileen. She found herself, without much aforethought, moving to sit beside the woman on the divan, her hand resting comfortingly on Eileen’s stiff digits. She felt the older witch flinch but when she did not pull away Hermione felt it was safe to continue. ‘Severus has been punished enough for the things he did in the first war, and the things he has done after, for that matter. I know - he knows - he made mistakes but can’t you see he’s trying to put them right?’

Eileen did pull away now, practically turning her back to Hermione and clutching her hands together in her lap so tightly her knuckles turned white. ‘He broke my heart,’ she said amidst a sob; a ghastly sound that caused those around them to look over concernedly. ‘He was my boy. The one good thing in my life and he left me. By taking The Mark he betrayed everything we had.’ She brought a now shaking hand to her face and covered her mouth to stifle the sound of more crying, her frantic gaze cast across the fields towards the ocean.

Hermione gave her a moment to compose herself and then continued in a gentle voice. ‘I think Severus feels much the same,’ she began, watching the back of Eileen’s head where the older witch was still refusing to turn and face her, ‘he was bitter, angry, ultimately foolish, and he regrets the things he said and did, but that isn’t who he is now. Perhaps if you would just meet with him and hear what he has to say?’

Eileen appeared to contemplate this, her expression twisting like gnarled bark. ‘I don’t think so,’ she responded at length.

‘And your grandchildren?’ Hermione asked, ‘You’re not interested in meeting them?’ She withdrew her purse from her bag and a photograph of the twins laid side-by-side in their Moses basket from that. ‘Here,’ she said, handing it to Eileen who studied it fleetingly before abruptly handing it back. ‘Severus thought you might like to meet them, that you might like to come to Cokeworth and… well, be a part of the family.’

‘Cokeworth?’ Eileen questioned, now observing Hermione with a raised eyebrow.
'Yes,’ Hermione said, ‘we’re living at Spinner’s End for now. But we’ve decorated–’

’-You cannot whitewash over the things that happened in that house,’ Eileen spat.

’I know,’ Hermione protested, ‘I didn’t mean–’

’I though Severus would have sold the dump. I don’t know how he can stomach it there.’

’He barely could, in the beginning… but he’s making the best of it… the twins, they’ve made it a more… hopeful place.’

Eileen looked a little stricken. ‘Babies don’t fix things,’ she said, as though this was something she had regrettably learned from experience.

’You’re twisting what I’m saying,’ Hermione said, now the one who was withdrawing as Eileen became increasingly aggressive the more fraught her nerves became. ‘P-perhaps I should go,’ she suggested, making to stand.

’It’s an illusion,’ Eileen said suddenly, stopping Hermione in her tracks, ‘this notion you have of “family.”’

’No…’

’Severus was two years old the first time Tobias caught him doing accidental magic and locked him in the coal shed; six when he withdrew him from the local school because he was worried someone would uncover our secret; seven the first time he stood between his father and I as we fought; nine when he made me a birthday gift of perfume from petals and Tobias thought it was a potion and smashed the bottle before Severus had had chance to give it to me; fifteen when he punched his drunkard father to protect me from another beating…’

’Severus has never hurt us,’ Hermione said willing her voice not to quiver. ‘He is not his father.’
‘For your sake, and the children’s, I hope you are right,’ Eileen responded, wringing her hands, ‘but you don’t experience the things Severus experienced and get to live a normal life. I can tell you that because I have tried and failed myself.’

Wrought with a myriad of emotions, Hermione didn’t feel efficiently equipped to respond effectively to Eileen’s diatribe; what she did feel was a sudden and fierce protectiveness of everything she held most dear. She stood, feeling her eyes burn with furious, unspilt tears and met Eileen’s icy glare. ‘I think perhaps it is not Severus you are angry with, but rather yourself,’ she said, and then, before the lonely figure of the old witch was able to respond, Hermione had Apparated away.

~oOo~

Hermione felt emotionally exhausted as she stepped through the door at Spinner’s End moments later. She found Severus in the living room, reading by last dregs of daylight that filtered through the gossamer-like drapes.

‘Hey,’ she greeted him, feeling instantly less rattled.

‘Evening,’ he replied, glancing up just briefly from the book he was reading.

‘How were the kids?’

‘Fine. They’re sleeping.’

‘And how are you?’

‘I’m fine,’ he said, then paused, perhaps somewhat expectantly, before asking, ‘how did you enjoy the party?’ in a manner which suggested his amiability was slightly forced.

Hermione dropped onto the settee beside him, kicking off her sandals and pulling out her earrings. ‘Oh…’ she replied, avoiding his gaze while she concocted yet another lie. ‘It was good fun.’

He looked up at her again and nodded once. ‘Ahuh,’ he murmured, then, ‘I am glad,’ he said, squeezing her shoulder before returning his attention to his book once more. Hermione watched him
for a moment, wondering whether he was going to speak again; this reticence was uncharacteristic, but when he said nothing she picked up today’s *Daily Prophet* from the coffee table, more for something to do with her hands than something to actually read, and they sat together practically in silence until bed.
On the Nature of Prisons

Prisons take many forms. There are those built of stone, great fortresses bound by ancient and forgotten charms, guarded by creatures too terrible to mention; smaller sites of confinement that ensconce and entomb, where we might be free to leave but have no choice but to remain; and then there are those made of less tangible substances, memories and thoughts which threaten to overwhelm and destroy us from within. Severus had endured them all at some point or another throughout his life, but currently it was the latter tormenting him most fiercely.

He pulled the nursing chair across the babies’ room and sat with his face pressed up against the bars of the cot. His arms, stretched through the gaps between said bars, lay limply on either side of the twins, who were down for their afternoon nap. Erin slept soundly, having exhausted herself in the morning learning to role from her tummy to her back, but Isaac was awake, wriggling and twitching, and occasionally emitting a soft moan. They had grown chubby in recent weeks, their features more distinctive, their skills ever more pronounced. They were immeasurably wonderful and Severus should never have allowed himself to grow so attached.

There had been something intoxicating about them from the moment he had first laid eyes on them; an allure he could never have anticipated and knew he could never have resisted, and whilst at first it had been liberating, this wonderment, it had gradually grown increasingly burdensome the nearer the trial had drawn. As though the prospect of leaving Hermione was not anguish enough, Severus could not help but think that had he never known the twins, not been so foolish as to bond with them, then the thought of spending the rest of his days in Azkaban may just have been bearable. Knowing that Erin and Isaac would be growing up in the outside world without him had induced an almost painful sorrow.

And then there was this secret Hermione was keeping from him. It had been a week since Potter’s party and still she had not confessed to where she had been that day and, though he hated himself for it, he could not shake the notion that she had been with Weasley.

It was Ginevra that had burst out of the fireplace, exposing Hermione’s deception. ‘I came to tell her that if she’s avoiding the party because of Ron then she needn’t worry because he hasn’t turned up either,’ she’d said in all innocence. At first Severus had been concerned, but the more he contemplated the coincidence of it being both Hermione and Ronald that were missing, that had soon turned to anger.

Thus, he found himself imprisoned in this way, in a vicious cycle of his own despairing thoughts. The feeling had a disturbing familiarity, reminiscent of the years he had dedicated to mourning Lily, only it did not harbour the sense of decay that his feelings for Lily had acquired over the years, it was fresh and it was tender.
But he had promised himself, had he not, that these months would not be spent maudlin, and a
discontented moan from Isaac reminded him of this in the next moment. He stood and leant over the
crib, scooping the boy into his arm and then sitting stiffly in the nursing chair again, looking down at
those big, black, uncanny eyes. His son. The concept still baffled him and he shook his head
disbelievingly.

‘You have that look again,’ Hermione’s voice sounded from behind him and he got the impression
she’d been watching him silently for a while.

‘What look?’ Severus grunted.

‘That sort of… pained look,’ she said, edging further into the room and perching on the arm of the
nursing chair. She stroked a few stray hairs behind Severus’ ear and glancing up he saw that she
looked concerned rather than accusatory and so he shrugged in an attempt to convey that he was
fine. ‘Sickle for your thoughts, then?’ she prompted.

‘I don’t know how long I’m going to have with them, do I?’ he said, in barely more than a whisper,
as he looked back down at Isaac. ‘I’m just making the most of it.’

‘I don’t want to hear talk like that!’ she said, a touch reprovingly. ‘We said we were thinking
positive.’

‘Well, we need to be realistic,’ he snapped, his voice becoming slightly raised which startled Isaac.
The baby began to squirm and whimper in Severus’ arms. ‘Shit. I didn’t do anything,’ he insisted,
losing his nerve and immediately holding Isaac out for Hermione to take.

She sighed and squeezed Severus’ shoulder reassuringly, ‘he’s probably just hungry,’ she said as she
took the baby. She nestled him into the crook of her arm and Severus stood so she could use the
nursing chair. She pulled up her top and Severus watched in infinite awe as the child latched to her
breast. ‘They’re starting to prefer the baby food,’ she stated, a little sadly.

‘Mush.’

‘Mmm… Featherstonehaugh is here, actually,’ she said, ‘that’s what I came to tell you. I can come
join you once Isaac’s dropped off, if you like?’
Severus shook his head. He preferred to see Featherstonehaugh alone, he did not need Hermione knowing quite how dire the situation really was. She could think positive as much as she liked, but it was growing increasingly difficult for Severus to do so. ‘No, I’ll deal with him,’ he replied, ‘hopefully we won’t be long.’

He did not miss the slight look of hurt in her eyes despite her evident efforts to conceal it. ‘Alright,’ she conceded with a false smile.

He nodded once and moved to leave the room, faltering slightly in the doorway and turning back to watch her place Isaac back in the cot beside his sister, and his heart ached.

~oOo~

This was Severus’ habit, locking himself away in the dining room when Featherstonehaugh came for his weekly visits. Hermione tried to be understanding but could not pretend that it didn’t hurt a little not be invited in. She also suspected Severus was shielding her somewhat from the truth, he was always particularly evasive after these meetings, always had potions to brew, the Snowdonia Hawkweed to attend to, or wanted to spend time with the babies, as though these tasks were utterly incompatible with letting her know how things had gone. So she was left in the living room, listening their muffled voices in the next room, whatever they were saying indistinct but serious sounding.

Erin and Isaac had awoken from their nap a little while after Featherstonehaugh had arrived, and so she’d taken them for a walk along the canal to pass a little time. It had been a glorious summer and she slightly resented having spent most of it in the confines of Spinner’s End. Of course it wouldn’t have been right to leave Severus alone there for too long, or too often, but it would have been nice, for all of them, to have been able to enjoy their first English summer after so many missed. There was always next year, she thought optimistically.

In the next moment the voices of the two men grew clearer as the dining room door opened and they both emerged, disturbing Hermione’s train of thought. ‘Hope for the best, prepare for the worst,’ she heard Featherstonehaugh saying in an unsuitably cheery voice, ‘that’s my philosophy.’

‘Great,’ Severus drawled, and Hermione could imagine the raised eyebrow that would have gone with it. She listened to their footsteps along the hallway and then the unclear farewells now that Featherstonehaugh had stepped out of the house. The door closed a little loudly behind the lawyer, followed by a frustrated groan from Severus. Moving into the hallway herself Hermione found him with his palms and forehead rested against the panes of glass in the door. ‘I hate that man,’ he said, apparently sensing Hermione’s presence behind him, ‘sending him to represent me is Potter’s idea of a sick joke.’
‘He’s good at his job,’ Hermione said, rubbing soothing circles on Severus’ back.

‘Let’s hope so,’ he sighed, turning to issue her a weak smile.

~oOo~

Later that evening, with the twins asleep upstairs again, Severus and Hermione sat in the dining room, eating their tea in ominous silence. Featherstonehaugh’s weekly visits had a habit of creating this terse atmosphere, with Hermione eager to question Severus on what had passed in their meeting, and Severus reluctant to divulge little more than was absolutely necessary to quieten her.

‘Severus, can I ask you something?’ Hermione said, pushing her broccoli around her plate with her fork and reminding Severus for all the world of a younger, less self-assured Hermione back in Bolstrad. He nodded affirmatively. ‘Has Featherstonehaugh explained to you why you couldn’t write to me when you were in Azkaban before?’

‘Mm,’ he replied, feeling his jaw clench as he immediately sensed where this might be going.

‘So,’ Hermione continued contemplatively, ‘you know that if… if we were, say, married then we would be able to write to one another if… if things don’t go so well at the trial?’

He studied her across the dining room table, chewing his own food with purpose as he considered a response. ‘Yes, I know that,’ he replied neutrally.

‘Oh,’ Hermione said, in a tone balanced somewhere between implying that this was information she found very interesting indeed, and dejection at Severus’ evident lack of enthusiasm for the subject.

Severus swallowed his over-chewed vegetables with great effort, his mouth suddenly feeling very dry, and took some large gulps of his beer. Hermione placed her knife and fork together on her plate with a sharp clank, placed her elbows on the table and her chin on the backs of her hands. They watched each other in silence for a long moment before Severus couldn’t take the tension anymore and looked away.

He carefully considered what to say next, hoping beyond hope he had misunderstood her inference. ‘You’re asking me to marry you?’ he said, a little deflated sounding.
‘I…’ she stammered. Frowning, she sat a little straighter, her hands falling limply into her lap, then in the next moment she’d pushed her chair back, picked up her plate and stood to leave. ‘Just… never mind,’ she said, her voice a pitch higher than usual, and with that she strode out of the room. Severus gave her a moment, listening as filled the sink with water and clattered about with the dirty pans in the kitchen, then, with a sigh, he followed her.

‘Please, just forget I said anything,’ she spoke the moment he entered the kitchen. She turned off the tap and leant against the countertop with both hands as though catching her breath.

‘What’s brought this on?’ he asked, resting against the doorway and folding his arms across his chest.

‘Nothing,’ she said, beginning to scour the dirty pots furiously. ‘Forget it. Please,’ she beseeched.

Severus took a few steps towards her and placed a hand around her upper arm. ‘Leave that for a moment,’ he said. ‘We’ve been together almost three years, we’ve lived together, had children together, and you’ve never once mentioned getting married. Why now?’

She looked at him clearly stung, her eyes red-rimmed. ‘Because there’s always a chance things won’t go your way in court, and… and I can’t bear the thought of never hearing from you again. Knowing I’ll never see you again is bad enough.’

Severus sighed and slid his hand from her arm to her shoulder, manoeuvring her gently so she was facing him. Her gaze fell to the floor but looking at the top of her head rather than her mournful eyes made this easier for Severus if nothing else. ‘What happened to being optimistic?’ he asked, ‘just this afternoon you said you didn’t want to hear talk like that.’

‘“Hope for the best, prepare for the worst,”’ she murmured in a decent imitation of Featherstonehaugh. She looked up at Severus, biting her lip. ‘I wasn’t listening in,’ she said apologetically, ‘I heard him as you were showing him out.’

‘Well, I wish you hadn’t,’ Severus replied with a shrug. ‘Look,’ he continued after a long moment of collecting his thoughts, ‘it’s not that I wouldn’t want to marry you, I just… I don’t think my potential incarceration is a reason to do so.’

Hermione frowned. ‘No, but loving one another, and wanting to spend the rest of our lives together
is a reason.’

‘But there are other reasons too,’ he replied quietly.

‘Other reasons people get married?’

‘Other reasons why I think we should not get married.’

She backed away from him, a shaking hand covering her mouth. ‘I see,’ she said. ‘And what about the twins?’

‘Well, I can still write to them. They’re blood relatives,’ he said, knowing how clumsy it sounded even as he was saying it, and Hermione’s crestfallen expression broke his heart a little.

‘So it’s just me then?’ she asked shakily.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes tight shut as he spoke. ‘It would be selfish, on my part,’ he said at length. ‘If I do end up in prison, I wouldn’t want you… tied to me. I wouldn’t expect you to… wait around.’

He saw her expression soften; though she continued to look concerned, it was in a wholly different way. Severus read perhaps a hint of pity in it, which sent a conspicuous prickle of anger through his body. Hermione, none the wiser, took a step towards him and placed a hand on his cheek. ‘Shouldn’t that be my decision to make?’

Severus reached up and placed his own hand over hers. ‘No,’ he replied, sure in his answer. ‘I know what it’s like to long after someone who isn’t coming back. You should get on with your life.’

Hermione sighed in a way which suggested she didn’t agree but didn’t want to argue about it, and untangling her hand from his she wrapped her arms around his back. ‘Why can’t you be honest with me about these things?’ she said sadly. ‘Like back in Bolstrad, when you were getting sick again, you didn’t say anything. If you talk to me, I might be able to help.’

Severus felt himself stiffen in her arms, that strange anger striking him again with a vengeance.
‘Alright,’ he snapped, moving swiftly away from her. He didn’t have the energy to control his
emotions. ‘Let’s talk about honesty. Urm… good news about Mrs. Potter isn’t it?’ he asked, satisfied
with the level of danger in his tone.

‘What?’ Hermione asked, clearly genuinely baffled by the change of subject which made Severus
feel a little smug.

With a smirk, he breathed a small, dark chuckle. ‘That she’s pregnant, you must be very excited for
your friend, no?’

‘I…’

‘Unless, of course, you didn’t know that she was pregnant. But how could that be when you were at
the party where she and her husband announced it?’

‘Severus, I…’

Hermione looked at him as though she had been struck by something that had knocked the wind out
of her and grabbed the countertop again for support; her expression a little frantic. But now Severus
had started he found that he couldn’t stop. He wanted to shout and rage as he hadn’t in years,
accumulated frustrations, long laid to bed, suddenly clamouring for air.

‘You wanted to talk about honesty, Hermione. So you won’t mind telling me where you went
instead of Potter’s party?’

‘How do you..?’

‘Ginevra stopped by while you were out that day. I think initially she came to drag you to the party
but when I told her you weren’t here she said to tell you she was pregnant. They were going to
announce it at the party and she didn’t want you finding out from someone else and thinking she
hadn’t told you on purpose, or some crap like that.’

A shadow passed across Hermione’s face. ‘Why didn’t you say something sooner if you’ve known
all this time?’
'I wanted to see if you’d tell me yourself and you haven’t. So, I’m asking you now. If you weren’t at Potters’, where were you?'

Hermione stumbled a little as she moved to sit in one of the kitchen chairs. She held her head in her hands for a moment and rocked back forth despairingly. ‘Severus, I… I’m afraid I’ve done something very stupid,’ Hermione blurted at him after a long period of silence.

‘Were you with him?’ Severus found himself responding before he could help himself. Though he didn’t particularly want to hurt Hermione, he knew in the act of asking this question it was now inevitable. Her indubitable loyalty was one of her most endearing qualities and for him to once again doubt her even he knew was unfair.

‘Who?’ Hermione asked, finally looking up at him. Severus met her eyes and contemplated, for the first time in their relationship, using Legilimens on her to determine the truth, but the prospect of invading her in this way was repugnant to him, so he looked away before he had the chance.

‘Weasley!’ he spat instead.

He saw Hermione’s cheeks redden with inevitable fury. ‘How could you even think that?’ she replied, her own tone disgusted enough to make Severus feel miniature.

‘It’s the only explanation I can come up with. Neither of you were at the party.’

‘Well, you’re wrong.’

Severus threw himself into the seat opposite Hermione. ‘Go on then.’

She shook her head and inhaled a stabilising breath. ‘I… I went to see your mother.’

Severus stared at her incredulously. ‘What? Why?’

‘To try and get her to come and see you, of course!’
Severus swallowed the expletives that threatened to erupt from his mouth. ‘Why must you always interfere in things that are none of your concern?’ he groaned instead.

Hermione looked a little disappointed, like someone who had tried their best and still come up short. ‘I… you… you seemed really unhappy when she said she wouldn’t come and I just thought… maybe if I spoke with her, told her how things had changed…’ Her sentence faded out as she caught Severus’ glare, then opening her mouth to continue she failed to emit any sound.

‘Obviously,’ Severus said through gritted teeth, ‘you know you shouldn’t have done it, otherwise you would have told me.’

Hermione nodded slightly, but it didn’t exactly look as though she was in agreement with him. A heavy silence fell as she shifted uncomfortably in her seat and Severus, slumping back in his chair, seethed. The air felt thick and hot and Severus found himself taking deep breaths when a sudden wail from upstairs disturbed their silent battle as they both glanced upwards to the babies’ room.

‘Saved by the bell,’ Severus murmured as Hermione made to stand.

‘I just thought,’ she replied, her tone gentle as she held back tears, ‘that if I could convince her to come see you, it might make you happy, and if she didn’t, then you need never know and no one was hurt.’ She cast him a lingering look with that, before jogging upstairs to deal with whichever of the twins was the source of the crying.

~oOo~

Hermione remained upstairs far longer than it took to feed and settle two babies. Severus cleared the kitchen and, with a double shot of firewhisky in his hand, made his way to living room.

Though a little embarrassed by his outburst earlier, he felt justified in his anger. It wasn’t just that he felt Hermione had, once again, interfered in things that were none of her concern, it was, he supposed, that if his mother was going to come, he wanted it to be because of him, not because Hermione had spent an afternoon cajoling her.

Indeed there were multiple other sources of this anger, assaulting him like unrelenting after tremors of a larger earthquake. Not least his aforementioned confinement within the walls of Spinner’s End, but suddenly the injustice of his situation was beginning to feel startlingly apparent. After everything he’d done in the war, the system had thoroughly done him over. Everyone kept telling him so and
perhaps he was finally starting to believe it, as self-pitying as that might sound. And he was also angry at himself for allowing this to happen. He stood to lose so much now and knew he should have stuck to the principle that had kept him safe in all the years after Lily: *never* let anyone in.

But regardless of the cause, this anger refused to abate and perhaps sensing that, when she did finally come back downstairs, Hermione peered around the doorway rather tentatively. It was unfortunate for her that she was there to bear the brunt of his mood.

‘What did she say?’ Severus asked without looking up at her. ‘When you told her about “how things had changed?”’

‘She… well, she isn’t here, is she?’

Severus merely nodded and without another word Hermione slipped back out of the room. He heard her pad back up the stairs. He felt tired, and old, and more than anything, more than ever, trapped. He closed his eyes and imagined walking in the Carpathian Mountains, Hermione’s hand pressed in his; easier and simpler times. But it was a fantasy, he did not dare allow himself to believe, not even for a moment, that he might experience this again.

~oOo~

‘Severus, we never go to sleep on an argument,’ Hermione said, reaching out and placing a hand on his shoulder.

She lay in bed, much later that night, as he sat on the edge. He shrugged her off of him as he pulled on his pyjama top before standing and picking up the pillows from his side of the bed. Her hand hovered in the air a moment before she allowed it to fall onto the mattress.

‘Tonight we do,’ he murmured under his breath.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked, pushing herself up so she was sitting on her knees.

‘I’ll sleep on the settee,’ he said, taking blankets out of the wardrobe now.
'Severus, please. There’s no need for that… hey, what is it you’re grateful for today?’ she asked, and there was something pleading in her voice that only served to irk Severus further. It would appear he was not quite ready to forgive her.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ he replied, ‘perhaps that I haven’t left the house in three months; that my solicitor thinks I’m probably going to end up in Azkaban; that I’m likely going to miss out on seeing my kids grow up, or maybe I’m grateful that my girlfriend is a liar! There’s too much to pick from today.’ He strode towards the door, halting only as Hermione spoke again.

‘You’ve lied to me plenty too,’ she said, her voice low.

‘I’ve never lied to you,’ he huffed, ‘I’ve just… omitted details.’

‘That amounts to the same thing and you know it,’ she said, throwing herself back down onto the bed and turning away from him. She reached for her wand on the bedside table and cast a quick *nox*, plunging the room into darkness. For a moment Severus watched her silhouette in the synthetic orange hues of the streetlamp beyond the curtains, then turned and stomped downstairs.
Hermione wasn’t sure whether or not she had slept at all when the first light of dawn pushed through the curtains. Between the babies, who had fussed alternatively throughout the night, and her own harrowing thoughts, it had been difficult to drift into any kind of restfulness.

She had spent many a night before this wracked with an enduring guilt over deceiving Severus to visit Eileen. It was not a decision she had taken lightly and her anguish was assuaged only by the solid fact that she had acted at least in the hope of bringing him some happiness. Of course, she could appreciate his anger. When he had told her about his parents, he had trusted her with something almost sacred and for a man who had had little cause to trust people in his life, that was no small feat. Then Hermione had gone and betrayed that trust in the most fundamental of ways.

Now, lying on her back in bed, her hand outstretched in the empty space where Severus ought to be, she contemplated her next move. An apology was in order, undoubtedly, but her contrition was limited. She had concluded that she felt somewhat disappointed in Severus; disappointed that he could not see she had only been trying to do the right thing with that little resources she had, and disappointed, once again, in his unwillingness to share his anxieties with her. This was an issue that had almost killed him once and had, on numerous other occasions, caused issues in their relationship, so it baffled her that, when their time together now was potentially so precious, he would jeopardise it with this same secretiveness.

With a frustrated sigh she swung her legs out of the bed, dressed quickly, and went to gather the twins. They were getting too big for her to be able to easily carry them at the same time, but with some logistical manoeuvring she managed to get them down to the kitchen and into their high chairs. She had paused halfway along the hallway, at the closed door to the living room, wondering whether she ought ask Severus if he might like coffee, before thinking better of it and leaving him be.

Tiredly, she mashed fruit for the babies and spoon fed it to them between bites of her own dry toast. This morning Isaac had acquired a habit of stubbornly refusing to open his mouth, no matter how much pretending the spoon was a Chaser, destined to score a winning goal, occurred, while Erin was far more interested in the feel of the food in her hands than the taste of it.

‘Fine,’ Hermione murmured after a good half hour of this, ‘have it your way,’ she conceded, clearing away the pots and scourgifying everything within a two metre radius of where Erin had been sat. With another sigh she heaved the babies back into her arms and carried them upstairs, placing them on blanket on the floor of their room for changing. She fished out two outfits from the top drawer of their dresser. Most of their clothes were hand-me-downs from James and so each morning they were dressed in baby grows every-so-slightly too big for them, and ever so slightly faded from hot washes, but the babies were usually fairly compliant in the process. Not this morning though. The moment Erin had her old nappy removed, the screaming began and, after witnessing the additional affection his sister received as a result of this, Isaac was quick to follow suit.
‘You sound as though you could use some help,’ a gruff voice spoke from behind her. Severus looked like she felt, and she wondered whether he had carried on drinking when he’d gone back downstairs last night. When she didn’t say anything to rebuke him, he knelt beside her on the floor and began wrangling a squirming Isaac into his baby grow. ‘What’s gotten into you?’ he asked the child, who squealed in frustration in response, flailing his tiny, balled-up fists.

‘Babies can sense a bad atmosphere,’ Hermione said, lifting Erin into her arms as she stood. ‘Bring him down when you’ve got him dressed, will you? It’s not doing any of us any good holed up in here. I’m going to take them to my mum and dad’s.’

‘Whoa,’ Severus exclaimed, getting to his feet abruptly and blocking her exit from the room, ‘what do you mean? For how long?’

‘For as long it takes,’ she replied, ‘for me to come back and make this right between us.’

She saw his body relax, but his expression remained stoney. ‘You’re coming back?’ he implored, a flash of worry passing behind his eyes to match the tremulousness of his tone. It was in these rare moments, when he inadvertently exposed his insecurities, that Hermione was reminded of his lack of self-confidence. He could as imperious and cantankerous as he liked, Hermione knew it was a façade designed to protect his soft underbelly.

‘Yes,’ she insisted.

He paused for a moment longer, watching her closely, then stood aside to let her pass. She felt his eyes on her as she left the room but she didn’t look back, knowing it would break her resolve if she did.

At the bottom of the stairs, with practiced movements, she bundled Erin into the double-pram; it was easier to Apparate with the babies if they were strapped to something inanimate, and Severus followed her downstairs not long afterwards and did similarly with Isaac. He looked down the children for a prolonged moment and then cast a tentative look at Hermione.

‘I’ll be half an hour,’ she assured him, checking she had all the twins’ things in their changing bag, ‘an hour max.’ He looked as though he might have been about to say something acerbic, probably regarding her new found proficiency for lying, but she disappeared with a crack before he had chance.
She was back well within the hour, but Severus’ restlessness was palpable from the moment she reappeared in the living room. He was dressed, shaved, and had perhaps taken a hangover cure, but there was skittishness about him which suggested he still wasn’t feeling quite himself.

‘Look, I’m sorry,’ he said, before she’d even had chance to catch her breath. There was an odd pleading to his tone that made Hermione’s stomach knot.

She frowned at him as she took a seat on edge of the settee. ‘What are you sorry for?’ she asked.

‘I…’ he began, but the utterance hung unfinished in the air as he surveyed her with a quizzical expression.

‘You’re apologising because you think if you don’t, I’ll leave,’ she stated.

‘And that’s not a reason to a apologise?’ he asked, as though trying to work out a particularly difficult riddle.

‘No,’ she replied calmly, ‘especially when you don’t have anything to apologise for. You have every right to be angry with me, so I don’t want you not saying things that you might want to say just because you’re worried I’ll leave. I’m rather afraid you’re stuck with me now, so you needn’t be concerned on that score.’

‘Right,’ he murmured, still sounding unconvinced as he finally lowered himself onto the settee opposite. ‘But, just because you’re not going to leave, doesn’t mean I want to argue with you.’

‘Then let’s try for a civilised discussion. I’ll start,’ she said, looking across at him and ensuring their eyes met. ‘I’m sorry, for lying to you about going to the party.’

‘And I want to accept your apology,’ he said, contemplating her with a regretful look in his eyes, ‘but… it’s the same every time: why must you always interfere in things?’
Her last “interference” had saved his life, she thought, trying to ignore the stung feeling his question evoked. After all, she had invited him to say whatever he desired, had she not?

“I’m only ever trying to help,” she replied quietly.

“I’m not one of your causes,” he grumbled, avoiding her eye.

“No,” she said softly, “you’re more important… you know, I made a promise, when you were in hospital before; I’d been so wrapped up in stuff with The Watch that I’d started taking you for granted, so I promised that I’d never let myself forget just how important you are again and, I thought, if you’d let me, I’d spend the rest of my life trying to get you to realise how important you are as well.”

Severus interrupted her with a derisive scoff which she chose to ignore.

“I saw how upset you were when your mother declined your invite,” she continued, “and going to see her just seemed like something - the only thing - I might be able to do to help… because… because you’re so important to me…” She paused of her own volition at that, chewing her lip as she realised she was at risk of becoming incoherent.

“You didn’t have to lie about it,” he responded grumpily.

“Would you have consented to my going?”

Severus grimaced, which really told Hermione all she needed to know: he would never have approved of it. “I wish I’d never told you about my parents,” he said at length, slumping a little in his seat and drawing his arms around himself almost protectively. “Never let anyone in,” he said bitterly, though it was almost as though he was reminding himself of this, rather than telling it to Hermione.

“It isn’t a weakness, Severus. Is there something I’ve done that makes you feel you can’t tell me things?”

“No,” he said sharply, looking up at her again to add emphasis to this denial. “It’s nothing personal. I tell you more than I’ve ever told anyone, really.”
With a sigh, Hermione slid from the settee and sat on her knees at Severus’ feet, taking his hands in hers. She half expected him to shrug her off as he had done last night, and was quietly relieved when he squeezed her hand back, even if he still couldn’t look at her properly. ‘I have to confess I thought I was getting rather good at reading between the lines of what little you do give away, but clearly I’ve taken a huge misstep on this occasion.’

‘Not “huge,”’ Severus muttered, which did not exactly relinquish her of blame.

‘But a misstep nonetheless,’ she said. ‘And another thing I may have misunderstood, while we’re on the topic… I did think you were coping alright with the trial and everything. I take it from your… outburst last night that that is not the case?’

‘It’s just all starting to feel very real all of a sudden. Being here with you and the babies, it’s been easy to pretend that the trial wasn’t happening, but Featherstonehaugh told me yesterday; they’ve set a date; the sixteenth to the twentieth of September. It might run over but he doesn’t think it will.’

‘Oh,’ Hermione said, withdrawing from him to sit crossed-legged. ‘That’s over my birthday,’ she added lamely. She stared down at the carpet. She’d been doing a rather stelar job herself of pretending the trial was a cruel figment of her imagination, her insistence that they maintain an optimistic outlook regularly convincing her that there was truly nothing to worry about.

She was disturbed by Severus shifting and soon he was sat on the floor before her. ‘This is why - and I know you don’t want to hear it… I’m a bit tired of saying it, to be honest - but if these are to be our last few weeks together then I don’t want to spend them fighting.’

‘Me either,’ she agreed, ‘but letting all our tensions and anxieties eat away at us unspoken isn’t making our time together any richer either. If we have an issue, we should talk it through.’

He closed his eyes as he considered his response. ‘That seems… manageable,’ he said at length, ‘but we can’t have this discussion today and you expect me to be like some open book tomorrow. I can only promise that I’ll work on it.’

She met his gaze. ‘That’s all I ask,’ she said, smiling warmly.

He did not return the gesture, and as she leant forwards to embrace him he placed his hands on her shoulders to stop her. ‘And all I ask of you in return,’ he said, ‘is that you don’t lie to me again.’
She nodded slowly. ‘Of course,’ she replied, with little hesitation.

‘Hmm,’ he murmured, looking her over. He reached up a hand and ran his fingers through her hair and she closed her eyes at his touch, turning her head until her cheek rested in his palm. ‘Come here,’ he then urged, pulling her gently by the arm until she was sat between his legs, her head rested against his chest, and they stayed like that for a long time, feeling all the uncomfortableness of the last twelve hours dissipate.

‘I should go fetch the babies,’ she said eventually, peeling herself away from him reluctantly. She made to stand but he held her wrist to prevent it.

‘Any decent grandparents wouldn’t mind looking after their grandchildren a little longer than two hours,’ he said, wrapping his arms around her shoulders as he spoke. She twisted slightly to see his face and saw a curious glint in his eye, a look she hadn’t seen in a long time.

‘But what,’ she said, with faux innocence, ‘would be the point in that when their parents are decidedly… unoccupied?’

He smirked, sliding one hand up her the back of her t-shirt. ‘If you’re at a loose end,’ he said, suggestively, ‘I can always think of something we could be doing.’

Hermione smiled and drew him into a firm kiss and it was quite a while longer before she returned to her parents’ place to pick up the children.
The Puppet Master's Portrait

She wore the same outfit she had worn the day she went to Hathersage Hall. It was really the only decent dress she owned and, she reasoned grimly, it wasn’t as though any of her friends had actually seen her in it the first time. Anyway, coupling it with slightly more make-up and a few more pieces of jewellery had made it more than wedding appropriate. Lifting the hem in one hand she made her way downstairs, finding Severus in the living room entertaining the twins by reading one of his potions journals aloud to them as they sat on their play mat. He looked up as she entered and she gave a half shrug; a gesture clearly intimating “what do you think?”

“You look very nice,” he said, though he didn’t sound too passionate about. ‘I trust you are going where you say you’re going this time?’ he added.

Since their argument at the beginning of the month things had settled back into something resembling a sense of calm. There had been no mention, until this moment, of Hermione’s visit to Eileen, and Severus was making a marked effort to be more open with Hermione.

‘Severus…’ she murmured, undeniably disgruntled that he should choose now to bring this up.

He screwed his eyes shut momentarily and shook his head. ‘Sorry. That was unfair.’

‘No it wasn’t,’ she said, moving towards him and placing a kiss on the top of his head. ‘I’ll bring you back a wedding favour to prove it.’

‘Your word is proof enough,’ he said, still sounding somewhat apologetic.

Hermione smiled at him then swooped to kiss each of the babies too. ‘I’ll see you all later,’ she said softly.

‘Bye,’ he grumbled, then after a beat, ‘Hermione?’

‘Yeah?’

‘You really do look lovely,’ he said, his cheeks turning a pale hue of pink.
Hermione’s grin widened. ‘Thank you,’ she replied.

~oOo~

It being the summer holidays, Neville and Hannah had managed to persuade McGonagall to allow them the use of the school grounds for the wedding. It was unprecedented, by all accounts, but she had relented at their excuse of saving money for Hannah’s healer training, a matter which McGonagall intended to take full advantage of once the younger witch had qualified by having her replace Madam Pomfrey, who had deigned to remain in situ only as long as it took for a suitable replacement to be found.

So, it was on this premise that a marquee had been erected on the shore of the great lake, just where the slope of grass that rose towards the castle petered out to flat.

Hermione Apparated to Hogsmeade at approximately the same time as a number of other guests were beginning to arrive, moving in their droves up the path to the castle, Harry and Ginny amongst them. She waved to grab their attention, glad that she wasn’t going to have to go into the wedding alone.

‘Look at you,’ she said, by way of greeting to Ginny, gesturing at the slight convex of her pregnant stomach which was just visible beneath the chiffon of her peach dress. Hermione couldn’t help but be slightly envious of how well Ginny pulled off childbearing. Hermione felt that when carrying the twins she’d become rather frumpy, with thick ankles and ruddy cheeks, and that she was still recovering from these symptoms some five months later, whilst Ginny had that glow people always talked about. ‘Severus told me the news,’ Hermione continued a little sheepishly, ‘sorry I’ve been so… aloof. We’ve had a lot on.’

‘Course,’ Ginny replied with an sympathetic smile, ‘how are you all?’

‘Oh, fine,’ Hermione said, deciding it wasn’t exactly a lie. They were fine, they just wished to be a little better than fine. ‘You?’

‘I’ll be better when the morning sickness passes,’ Ginny chuckled, though the laughter didn’t quite reach her eyes.

‘She was like this the first time too,’ Harry commented, observing Ginny a little helplessly.
Hermione smiled knowingly, patting Ginny on the arm in a show of comradeship; she had suffered similarly herself. ‘Pregnancy suits you anyway,’ she said softly, and Ginny smiled as though she needed to hear a compliment.

‘Come on,’ Harry urged a moment later, guiding both women on either side of himself, with his arms around their shoulders. ‘I want to wish Neville luck before the ceremony, he was terribly nervous at the stag do last night.’

They followed the crowds through the school gates and across the grass to the marquee. More chairs than Hermione had ever seen at a wedding were facing the alter, on either side of a pale blue carpeted aisle. Hermione thought it nice, how a boy who had had so much difficulty making friends at school had so many people to invite his wedding. Many such people had already arrived and either taken their seats or were milling about admiring the extravagant cerulean and white flower decoration that only a true Herbologist like Neville could have been responsible for.

‘Harry!’ a voice called from near the alter. It was Neville, dressed in a set of fine blue robes. ‘I’ve saved you all some seats,’ he added, waving them towards near the front of the marquee. They moved through the crowds and filed into the row, three from the front, that Neville had indicated. Luna was already seated there, almost lost in the plumes of the hot pink fabric of her dress.

‘Looking good Neville,’ Harry said, shaking his friend’s hand.

‘I’ve got nervous sweats,’ Neville replied, dabbing his brow with a handkerchief.

‘Oh, you’ll do great, Neville!’ Hermione assured him.

‘I do hope so. My Uncle Algie has a ten Galleon bet on me flubbing the vows and- oh…’ he paused, glanced at Hermione, then said ‘hey, Ron,’ as the aforementioned made his way down the aisle from behind them.

Ron looked fleetingly between Hermione and the last remaining seat beside her. ‘You will do great, Neville,’ he agreed, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed with an air of furious resignation before sitting down stiffly. ‘Hannah’s a lucky woman!’

‘Here here!’ Harry said jovially. It was a clear attempt at diffusing the tension but its success was limited and Hermione felt as though she was absorbing Ron’s agitation by osmosis.
‘I’m the lucky one,’ Neville grinned. ‘Merlin… I think it’s time!’ he looked off towards the entrance where Susan Bones had appeared in a bridesmaid dress to announce the bride’s arrival.

‘Break a leg… not literally of course!’ Ron said with a half-smile. Hermione could tell he was overcompensating for the awkwardness but Neville laughed anyway and with one last, steadying inhalation, made his way to the alter.

~oOo~

It was an elegant ceremony. Hannah looked magnificent in a long, silk gown, and Neville, his cheeks almost cerise throughout, remembered his vows verbatim. The Leaky Cauldron were responsible for catering and had provided quite a feast, including a bar which magically replenished itself every hour to increasingly raucous applause from the wedding guests. There was much merriment and banter, friends reuniting, telling stories of the good old days, and many a toast to Neville and Hannah’s futures. Towards dusk a band set up on a little stage towards one side of the marquee and the tables were vanished to make room for a dance floor. Hermione danced with Harry, Dean and Seamus, and even Hagrid for a little while, before seeking some cool, fresh air beneath a lantern-filled oak tree beside the lake. An arrangement of large cushions and bean bags had been placed haphazardly around a huge picnic blanket, and Hermione sunk into one of them with a sigh.

It was much quieter here, with just the odd couple having migrated to the water’s edge for a private moment together as the setting sun spilled almost violent orange hues across the sky. It had been a long time since Hermione had enjoyed such unadulterated fun, perhaps not since Romania; it felt good to be amongst her friends, laughing and joking, all her cares momentarily forgotten, but it had only taken someone mentioning Severus, albeit innocently, for her to have been assaulted by pangs of guilt. Severus would undoubtedly think her silly for allowing that to happen, but nonetheless retreating to the lakeside to catch her breath and dwell for just a moment on reality, was precisely what she needed.

‘There’s a lot of good memories here, isn’t there?’ a voice from behind cut through her thoughts. She sat up and found Ron stood a few feet away, looking sheepish and flushed in the half-light of sunset. Why did he have to keep sneaking up on her like that? ‘For you,’ he said, offering her one of the glasses of wine he was holding, ‘elf-made, you used to like it,’ he continued with a shrug.

‘Thanks,’ she said, accepting it, ‘and yes, there are some good memories here. Very special ones, in fact.’ She gestured for Ron to sit on the bean bag beside her, not sure if he would accept, and relieved when he did. They looked out over the water in silence for a moment, the only disturbance the thrum of the band and chatter of voices from within the marquee.
‘I’ve been doing a lot of thinking,’ Ron said at length, and she could tell by the slight slur of words that he had gotten himself quite tipsy in anticipation of this conversation. ‘I said I would.’

‘Oh…’ Hermione replied, recalling their last conversation outside the pub at Neville and Hannah’s engagement party, in which she’d asked if he would at least consider being her friend again.

‘And if you’re still amenable… I would like for us to be friends again,’ Ron continued uneasily, looking anywhere but at Hermione. He took three more large gulps of the wine before he dared look at her for her response.

She smiled, ultimately unable to help herself. ‘Thank you,’ she whispered, feeling as though she had just placed a particularly bothersome jigsaw piece.

Ron shook his head. ‘Don’t be under any illusion that I’m doing this for you. This is the only thing I’ve haven’t tried to make myself feel better about this whole mess. I tried chasing you, I tried leaving you be… the only thing I haven’t tried is trying to get back to how things were… before. Us being friends.’

Hermione nodded. ‘Well, I reckon I owe you that.’

Ron sighed and placed his wine glass on the ground and then shifted on the seat so he was looking at Hermione more directly. He was perhaps sat a little too close for her comfort but there was an urgency about his demeanour that prevented her from asking him to back off. ‘Hermione, look at me,’ he said, his tone sad, rather than demanding, which caught her attention, ‘I am ready to let this lie, but only if you can promise me a couple of things?’

She observed him with concern, not used to this seriousness he’d suddenly acquired. ‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘Do you promise me that you’re happy?’ he said, then she saw his entire body stiffen as if bracing himself for the response.

‘Yes,’ she replied definitively, ‘I can promise you that.’

Ron winced slightly, as though he had been hoping for a different answer. ‘In that case, can you promise me that if that ever changes… if you’re ever not happy with Sna- your current situation, that
you’ll tell us… not necessarily *me*, but… someone?’

Hermione shifted to increase the physical distance between them, needing the extra space to think. ‘That is easy to promise you too,’ she said, contemplatively, ‘in part because you are my friends, and in part because there is no doubt in my mind that I will ever be *unhappy* in my… *current situation*.’

Ron’s eyes flickered over Hermione’s face as if he were scrutinising her for even the smallest sign she were lying, but he was left disappointed, and with a resigned sigh, almost a huff, sat back in the seat and nursed his wine glass between his long, knobbly fingers. He looked young, Hermione pondered, younger than Harry and she did, with his pink, freckled cheeks and shock of red hair. He had always maintained a certain childishness that had both attracted and repelled her in equal measure. He could be silly with abandon, brightening even the darkest of times with his humour, but then he was avoidant of responsibility, and immature when the situation warranted more dignity. He was so fundamentally different to Severus that she wondered how she could at any time have imagined there could be a future between her and Ron. He simply wasn’t her type. It felt so much more natural to be just friends, and there was no doubt that he was a good friend.

‘We were a good little team, weren’t we? Harry, you, and me?’ she said, without really thinking and blaming her sudden bout of nostalgia for the outburst.

Ron grinned. ‘Yeah, we were,’ he agreed, sitting up. ‘The stuff we used to get away with at this place!’ he added, gesturing towards the school.

‘If I ever found out the twins were up to even half that stuff I’d be so mad!’

‘Yeah, Harry’s just the same with James,’ Ron chuckled. ‘My mum could always teach you how to make howlers, she’s had enough practice.’

‘Yeah…’ Hermione said, though slowly her smile faded. ‘How are they? Your mum and your dad? Ginny never really says.’

Ron shifted uncomfortably, glancing out over the inky lake again. ‘You know,’ he replied noncommittally, ‘they have good days and bad days. Though more good days of late… same as us all, I suppose.’

‘Yeah,’ Hermione agreed solemnly, ‘and Harry, he seems to be doing much better now, which is good to see after how much he struggled right after the war.’
'Yeah, he is,' Ron said, nodding, ‘not that I’ve been much use to him.’

‘More use than I’ve been half the world away, I’m sure,’ she replied.

‘He seeks Dumbledore’s counsel more than he does mine.’

‘Dumbledore?’

‘Yeah, well, his portrait. McGonagall’s told him he can visit whenever he likes. I reckon he comes about once a month or so. I don’t know what they talk about. I mean, really what could a portrait be saying to him that his living, breathing friends can’t. But whatever, so long as he’s hap-’

‘-Oh my God!’ Hermione suddenly exclaimed, a clamouring sense of dawning overcoming her. ‘Ron, you’re a genius!’

Ron looked at her a little startled and then said, ‘I have no doubt that you’re right, but… what have I said?’

Hermione shook her head and ignored him, her thoughts suddenly racing. Indeed, what could a portrait be saying that living, breathing people could not?

‘Hermione?’ he asked, sounding a little concerned now.

‘I’m sorry,’ she murmured, ‘look, if you meant what you said tonight, about us being friends again, then I’ll see you soon, alright? But right now, I have to find Professor McGonagall…’

~oOo~

Hermione found McGonagall being spun around the dance floor by a slightly overenthusiastic Hagrid and managed to catch the old witch’s eye. She watched her say something to the half-giant that made him smile and blush a little, and then she wove towards Hermione through the crowds looking somewhat relieved by the interruption.
'Is something the matter, dear?' she asked, taking in Hermione’s antsy demeanour with a furrowed brow.

'I don’t know,' Hermione replied, ‘maybe… this isn’t really the place… let’s get some fresh air.’

‘Very well,’ McGonagall complied with evident confusion, following Hermione out of the marquee. Hermione saw Ron was still sat by the lake, but thankfully he didn’t turn to see her exiting the marquee again.

The night had turned cool, a soft breeze blowing down from the hillside, bringing with it the earthy scent of highland heather.

‘We appear to be heading to the castle,’ McGonagall’s Scottish burr rang out once they were out of earshot of the other wedding guests. ‘I trust at some point you’re going to tell me why?’

Hermione stopped to catch her breath and straighten out her thoughts. It would do no good to get her hopes only for them to be dashed again. ‘The headmasters’ portraits in your office; how does their magic work?’

‘Well, I… I can’t say as I know too much about it… Hermione, did you bring me away from a perfectly good party to discuss something you could have read in *Hogwarts, A History*?’

Hermione jaw dropped. ‘Of course! *Hogwarts, A History*! Where is my brain,’ she admonished herself. Having once been able to recite this, one of her favourite books, by heart, she felt a little sense of betrayal at not thinking of it in her time of need. ‘We need to go to the library,’ she added with a sense of urgency. McGonagall cast a slightly longing glance back down at the marquee and then acquiesced with a nod of her head and lead Hermione inside the castle.

Hermione had never been in the castle when it was so empty before and listening to the desolate echoes of their footsteps along the long corridors made her feel small and insignificant almost. The walls hummed with an eery sentience, as though settled into a kind of hibernation while the students were away and disgruntled to be disturbed by the two witches.

McGonagall led Hermione, once again, through various back corridors until they reached the library, where, pushing open the door, Hermione was greeted by the comforting scent of old books. This had been her haven during her schools days and still evoked a certain tranquility that settled her currently
rattled nerves. She rushed to the history section, running her index finger along the spines of the alphabetised tomes until she reached ‘B’ for Bagshot; a tingling chill ran over down her back causing the hairs to stand on her neck as she recalled the last time she had seen the author. But shaking such thoughts from her mind she pulled the book from the shelf, placed it on a nearby table and began flicking through the well-thumbed pages.

‘Here…’ she murmured, locating the section she was looking for. She skim read the description of when and why portraits of headmasters and headmistresses were placed in the office then began reading aloud once she found the section that interested her most. ‘Subjects of said paintings will typically sit for their portraits a some point prior to death; they will then be enchanted by the artist before being concealed somewhere no one but the subject will have access to it. The subject alone is able to impress upon it their characteristics whether they be memories, mannerisms, or witticisms. They are encouraged to visit their portrait regularly for this purpose. The realism with which a portrait might, after its subject’s death, imitate their behaviour is dependent upon the power and skill of that subject…’ she paused, her heart pounding against her sternum. ‘Professor? You would agree that Albus Dumbledore was a very powerful and skilled wizard, would you not?’

McGonagall lifted her perplexed expression from the book to Hermione. ‘I would,’ she affirmed, with a single nod of her head.

‘Then it stands to reason that his portrait would be a fairly decent imitation of the real thing?’

‘One would presume so, yes, from what you’ve just read,’ the older witch retorted with an edge of impatience in her tone, then ‘Miss Granger, I really must insist that you tell me what in Merlin’s name is going on!’ she said sharply, apparently no longer in the mood the humour her ex-student. Hermione wondered whether it was the mention of Dumbledore, who McGonagall had undoubtedly been fond of, that evoked this.

Hermione nodded slowly, perhaps a little apologetically. ‘Archibald Featherstonehaugh, you know him?’ she said, forcing herself to speak slowly despite her agitation now to get up to McGonagall’s office.

‘The solicitor?’

‘Yes, he’s representing Severus in the trial.’

‘Oh, that’s good. He’s very reputable.’
Hermione scoffed. ‘If what I’m thinking is right he’s overlooked something vital to the case; the very thing that might guarantee Severus his freedom.’

McGonagall’s interest appeared to peak. ‘Go on,’ she urged.

‘Featherstonehaugh told me that the Wizengamot won’t accept memories as evidence in trials, because they can be so easily tampered with. He also told me that the reason they’ve only charged Severus with Dumbledore’s murder, and not conspiring to bring about Pure Blood rule, like all the other old Death Eaters, is because they know the only proof that Severus didn’t murder Dumbledore out of cold blood is in memories, and Severus’ memories at that; there isn’t an independent source who could give an actual statement that would prove Dumbledore asked him to do it.’

‘Whereas there are a great many of us could attest to the good Severus did during the war,’ McGonagall said to show she was managing to follow Hermione’s frantic train of thought.

‘Precisely. But if the portraits of the headmasters work how Hogwarts, A History says they work, then… well, don’t you think its a possibility that there is someone who could give that statement?’

McGonagall took a step back from Hermione as she pondered this. ‘Merlin,’ she whispered after a long moment. ‘You mean…?’

‘I mean that… surely it isn’t beyond the realms of possibility that Dumbledore could do it himself?’

McGonagall’s wrinkled brow creased. She leant over the book again as if she wanted to double check the facts. ‘We just have to hope that Albus had the foresight to inform his portrait of his plan with Severus.’

‘Yes.’

McGonagall inhaled a deep breath and before Hermione could let out another word the old woman had grabbed her by the wrist and was dragging her through the school towards her office, surprisingly sprightly for a woman of her years. They ascended the spiral staircase and burst into the darkened room above, where McGonagall hastily cast a small *incendio* to illuminate the lanterns around the walls. Dumbledore’s portrait hung ominously above McGonagall’s desk in the flickering orange light, its subject sleeping with his head rested against the back of the armchair in which he was sat.
‘Albus?’ McGonagall said in an urgent whisper and then, when he did not stir, ‘Dumbledore!’ she said, a little louder, tapping her knuckles impatiently against the oak frame. Dumbledore awoke with a snort, sitting up suddenly in the chair and blinking confusedly between the two witches.

‘Minerva?’ he said, with an element of alarm, ‘and… Miss Granger?’ he added, sounding a little uncertain.

‘Hello headmaster,’ Hermione whispered, edging towards the desk and feeling a little overwhelmed now she was faced with him. ‘I’m hoping you might be able to help me with something.’

Dumbledore rested his elbows on the arms of the chair and pressed his fingertips together just below his bearded chin. ‘Go ahead,’ he urged.

‘I was wondering whether… well, I suppose… firstly, I was wondering whether you visited your portrait regularly before you… passed away? To pass on your… wisdom?’ she stammered, her mind working more quickly than her mouth.

‘Oh, yes,’ the picture replied, ‘it was absolutely imperative that I did.’

‘Yeah,’ Hermione said breathlessly, ‘so then… you told the portrait about your plan with Severus? To have him kill you?’

Dumbledore nodded as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. ‘Certainly. Had I not, my portrait would never have trusted Severus and we would never have been able to accomplish what we set out to do.’

Hermione’s legs suddenly felt as though they couldn’t hold her weight and she fell back into one of the overstuffed armchairs. It had been re-upholstered in Black Watch tartan since Dumbledore’s day, but still did little to cushion Hermione’s fall.

‘Miss Granger?’ McGonagall said, standing beside her with a boney hand on her shoulder. ‘What should we do?’

The truth was, Hermione didn’t know. ‘Professor Dumbledore?’ she said, hearing her voice behind to quiver. ‘Do you know that Severus is facing trial for your murder?’
‘Yes. Professor McGonagall has informed me of this.’

‘I don’t know quite what the legalities are yet, Professor, but if it is allowed by wizarding law then your testimony could, at the very least, support Severus’ case, and maybe even get him off altogether. Do you know whether portraits can give evidence in court?’

The old wizard chuckled. ‘That is a quirk of wizarding trivia my human counterpart did not see fit to concede to me. I can only assume he did not think it necessary.’

‘That is something Featherstonehaugh might be able to confirm,’ McGonagall said, apparently sensing Hermione’s rising panic, ‘I’m sure he is knowledgeable on the case law.’

‘Right… yes,’ Hermione said, mentally reminding herself not to get ahead of herself. She turned back to the portrait, noting how uncannily the artist had captured the sparkle in Dumbledore’s eyes. ‘Professor,’ she addressed him, ‘would you be willing to give evidence in court if it is allowed?’

Dumbledore looked at her very seriously then, a look she had seldom seen him use when alive; a simultaneously safe and dangerous look which she was unsure whether or not to trust.

‘Not even the portraits of the greatest witches and wizards in history can quite hold the full range of emotions and notions that their counterparts did,’ he began, his hands falling into his lap. ‘My own counterpart was keen to pass on facts, things that had been said, things that had been done. All important things, undoubtedly, but he shared little of how he felt throughout this, and the spells which bind us portraits cannot compensate for that entirely.’

‘So, I have sat for nearly ten long years, dwelling on my counterpart’s behaviours with little knowledge of what motivated them other than a burning desire to see Voldemort vanquished, and this has allowed me to see things a little clearer. I have, for example, concluded that I was a selfish and manipulative man. I was a puppet master and any weaker witch or wizard my puppet. I did not act for Harry, but myself, and Severus… well, he had paid off his debt to me long before I asked him to kill me. I used him and I abused his trust to my own end and for that, well, I rather think giving evidence in his defence is the least I can do.’
‘I can’t let you out of my sight,’ Severus said, smirking and stroking a stray curl back behind Hermione’s ear. They lay facing one another, side-by-side in bed at some indecent hour of the morning. It felt an age since Hermione had returned, flustered and practically incoherent as she attempted to explain to him about Dumbledore’s portrait. She had stayed at the wedding as long as manners dictated she ought, but had managed to slip away at just past midnight, giddy with anticipation to deliver the news of this last glimmer of hope.

‘And what’s *that* supposed to mean?’ she demanded, poking him gently in the arm.

‘Nothing,’ he said, with a nonchalant shrug, ‘other than that you have a terrible knack for attracting trouble whenever you’re left to your own devices.’

‘What can I say? I court drama… I have to, going out with you!’

‘Mmm,’ Severus murmured with a satisfied sigh, turning onto his back and pulling Hermione with him so her head rested on his chest. They were silent for a long while, Severus inhaling her intoxicating scent as they rested their eyes.

Severus was a rational man, in fact, he prided himself on being so, but in the moment of Hermione’s revelation every last semblance of this had eroded, reducing him to a grinning, ecstatic fool. Previously, Hermione’s optimism had failed to transpose onto him, but the novelty of this new idea, the mere prospect of someone being on his side, had stirred within him a renewed sense of hope. It was the first time he had truly felt like there might be a real chance of acquittal, and the only reasonable thing to do seemed to be rushing upstairs to bed together, and so this is where they found themselves, exhausted from sex but too excited to sleep, just before dawn.

‘Though we shouldn’t get our hopes until we know for sure,’ Hermione continued, as if reading his mind. She ran her fingertips over his smattering of black chest hairs before resting her hand over his heart.

‘I’ll write to Featherstonehaugh first thing in the morning.’

Hermione reached over him to check his wristwatch which had been discarded on the bedside table. ‘It already *is* first thing in the morning,’ she chuckled, ‘it’s gone five.’
‘Well, time flies when you’re having fun!’ he said, a slightly mischievous expression crossing his features as he reached down with his free hand to pull the bed sheets over their naked bodies. Hermione laughed again, a tinkling, giggly sort of laugh, and Severus pondered what a pleasing sound that was.

‘Oh,’ she then said, interrupting herself, ‘although, you do realise that we have stayed up on the very same night the twins have chosen to sleep through for the first time…’

Severus’ eyes snapped open. ‘Oh, Merlin… that is a cruel irony.’

‘Mmm,’ Hermione agreed, propping herself up on one elbow and slowly running her free hand down Severus’ torso, pausing just where the bedsheets crossed his hips. ‘We may as well make the most of it though,’ she continued with a teasing smile, ‘seems a waste not to.’

Severus’ smirked, nodding slowly. ‘Just give me a moment…’

~oOo~

Severus had a forkful of baked beans halfway to his mouth when a frantic knock came at the front door. He shared a puzzled look with Hermione over the kitchen table and then, leaving his breakfast to go cold regrettably, went to answer it.

‘What’s all this about portraits?’ Featherstonehaugh demanded the moment Severus opened the door. The old man appeared flustered, his wisps of white hair askew atop his balding head, his glassing slid the end of his crooked nose, and looking utterly out of place in a set of purple robes against the eternal grey of Spinner’s End.

‘That was quick,’ Severus grumbled, standing aside so Featherstonehaugh could enter the house.

‘I Apparated here as soon as I read your letter,’ the solicitor said, bustling down the hallway as he waved in front of him the scrap of parchment Severus had used to write him a hasty note earlier that morning. As they reached the kitchen Featherstonehaugh greeted Hermione and the twins, who were sat in their highchairs eyeing the little old man suspiciously, with a curt nod, before dumping his heavy leather briefcase unceremoniously on the table between their uneaten breakfasts. Hermione sighed and rolled her eyes but Severus managed to silence what was inevitably going to be a rebuke of Featherstonehaugh’s behaviour with a brief but severe glare. Featherstonehaugh looked between them, apparently sensing the fleeting moment of tension. ‘Portrait?’ he then said, somewhat
impatiently as though without time for their domestic triflings.

‘Yes,’ Severus said, ‘here’s the thing…’ And with that he proceeded to explain, with some help from Hermione, about Dumbledore’s portrait, simply hung there at the school, willing and able to give evidence in Severus’ defence if only the law would allow.

‘So… do you think it would be allowed?’ Hermione asked as Severus concluded the tale.

Featherstonehaugh looked a little stricken and began pacing around the small kitchen, the twins held mesmerised by his movements. ‘I can’t say as I’ve ever heard of such a thing,’ he responded at length, coming to a halt near the oven and stroking his chin thoughtfully with a thumb and forefinger. ‘I wasn’t even aware that these particular portraits existed until you just said. I was primarily educated at Ilvermorny, you see, before my parents moved us back to England. I attended Hogwarts for my final year, and I can’t say I ever had the privilege of visiting the headmasters’ office in that time. But, of course, that isn’t to say it hasn’t happened… we’d need examples from case law, is all. If there’s a precedent for this kind of thing then the Wizengamot would find it extremely difficult to deny us the option of using Dumbledore’s portrait.’

Severus felt his heart begin to pound a little faster, but was determined not to let anything remotely resembling optimism fog his senses.

‘Where do we start looking?’ Hermione asked, standing suddenly as though willing to leave right at that very moment.

‘I’ll track down the artist, for a start,’ Featherstonehaugh replied, ‘to use as an expert witness; to expound on the legitimacy of the magical processes used in developing portraits which accurately resemble their subjects, and you,’ he continued, pointing a wrinkled finger at Hermione, ‘might help by visiting The National Archives at The British Library of Wizardry and Witchcraft. The law section contains Merlin knows how many books on case law. We’d just need one example.’

‘I can go today,’ Hermione said eagerly, looking at Severus with a hopeful expression. He responded with a weak smile, wishing he could share in her enthusiasm but knowing how many hundreds, if not thousands, of thick case law books, written in minuscule type, lined the shelves of the law section of The British Library of Wizardry and Witchcraft.

‘Good,’ Featherstonehaugh spoke again, ‘the fundamental problem with this latest plan is, of course, that we only have three weeks to execute it.’
'We’ll do whatever it takes, won’t we Severus?’ Hermione said, as if attempting to cajole him.

‘Mmm,’ he grumbled in modest agreement.

‘Very well,’ Featherstonehaugh said, ‘then I will be off. Keep me posted of any developments.’

Severus and Hermione bid him farewell and the solicitor made to leave, before halting in the kitchen doorway and turning back to them with a little exclamation of, ‘oh!’ He flicked open the latches on his briefcase and withdrew a thick envelope from within. ‘Here are the documents you requested. You both need to sign - anytime before the sentencing - and return them to me for finalising.’ He handed the envelope to Severus, who took it somewhat hesitantly before casually slipping it under his arm, in the hope that this act might prevent Hermione from thinking it was important and thereby feeling too inquisitive about it.

‘Err… thanks,’ Severus said, feeling Hermione’s quizzical expression on him.

~oOo~

‘What’s that?’ Hermione asked, once Featherstonehaugh had bid them goodbye for the second time.

‘A conversation for another time,’ Severus replied, slipping the envelope onto a high shelf in one of the kitchen cabinets.

There was something foreboding about his reservations to divulge the envelope’s contents but indeed, The British Library of Wizardry and Witchcraft undoubtedly seemed like a more of a priority in this moment. Hermione nodded in a concessionary way. ‘I’ll go and get dressed then,’ she said, then hurried upstairs and quickly completed her morning ablutions before dressing in a set of teal robes and making her way back downstairs.

Severus had moved the twins into the garden and was laid on his back in the grass with Isaac climbing on his chest and Erin crawling up his legs. Despite spending almost all day, every day cooped up in the house together, it felt, of late, as though they had not really spent any time together at all. But Hermione smiled at the scene before her, trying to commit it to memory, as she did with almost everything Severus did these days; if things didn’t go to plan at the trial, she would be able to tell the children: ‘your dad would play with you in the garden. He’d lay in the grass and you’d clamber all over him. All I’d hear was the three of you laughing together.’
‘I’m going, Severus,’ she said, standing in the back doorway, loathed to disturb their play.

‘Alright,’ he said, lifting his head and looking at her a little sadly. ‘Don’t forget to bring some back so I can look through them tonight, yeah?’

‘Yeah. I’ll see you later,’ she said, smiling at him, and each of the twins, before turning back into the house. She grabbed a handful of Floo powder from the pot on the mantelpiece and stepped inside the fireplace. ‘The Leaky Cauldron,’ she pronounced, with especial attention to her annunciation, and after a few, stomach-churning moments, found herself at the entrance to Diagon Alley.

She was vaguely familiar with The British Library of Wizardry and Witchcraft, a labyrinthine building tucked behind Gringotts, from her days working at the Department of Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, but nothing could quite have prepared her for the sheer volume of books, with their Latin titles and strange reference codes, in the law section. She glanced skeptically along the shelves and then, with an internal shrug of resignation, pulled a few at random from the bottom row. She situated herself at a table by a window, in the hope that the light would help her stay awake, and began reading.

It was a onerous task, with each tome taking an inordinate amount of time to sift through, and none of them apparently useful. There were chapters on stolen portraits, asides about defaced and destroyed portraits, even a paragraph about a portrait sitting on a jury in New Zealand, but nothing about them giving evidence. On more than one occasion it had seemed futile, but the thought of having to describe to the twins the way Severus had been with them, rather than having them able to make memories of that themselves, spurred her on, and it was almost dark outside when the librarian approached her.

‘The library closing in ten minutes,’ she informed Hermione, ‘if you want to check any books out please take them to desk.’

‘Thank you,’ Hermione smiled, gathering as many books as she could into her arms and the bags she’d brought and shifting them with great effort over to the check-out desk.

‘You can only borrow a maximum of ten books at a time from the library,’ the librarian said sternly, reminding Hermione of Madam Pince, which made her wonder whether such stellar customer service was an element of librarianship training.

‘Oh… are there any special circumstances where you can take out more?’
‘I’m afraid not,’ came the sharp reply.

‘Alright…’ Hermione said, eyeing the pile of books she’d brought to the desk ponderously. She had no idea whether one might be more relevant than another. ‘I suppose I’ll just take these ten then,’ she said, picking the ones she hadn’t yet had chance to look through. The librarian nodded and stamped each of the books in turn and, with that, Hermione hurried out of the library, back to the atrium, through the Floo, and into the living room back home.

~oOo~

Hermione found Severus asleep at the dining room table, his cheek stuck to the page of the book he’d been reading when he’d succumbed to his tiredness.

‘Morning,’ she whispered, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder to wake him. This had become their routine since Featherstonehaugh had first sent Hermione to The British Library of Wizardry and Witchcraft three days ago. Hermione would spend her days at the library, then bring home ten books for Severus to scour through of an evening, and it was beginning to take its tole. Severus looked exhausted, with dark rings around his eyes, a few day’s worth of stubble marring his jaw, and his hair lank and greasy as it framed his face. ‘Have you been up all night again?’ she asked.

‘Hmm,’ he groaned, blinking in the bright white light of dawn, ‘it was four-thirty when I last looked at the clock. I must have fallen asleep just after that.’

‘Ah,’ Hermione replied, dropping into the seat beside him with a tired sigh. ‘And any luck?’

‘Nothing,’ he said, snapping the book shut frustratedly and rubbing his eyes. ‘I looked through them all and again, there’s nothing.’

‘Well, these are just a tiny proportion of the books in the law section. I’ll go back today and bring home some more home with me tonight… and maybe I can get my parents to have the twins so you can get some proper sleep?’

‘No. I’m fine,’ he said, stifling a yawn perfectly timed to reveal his lie.

‘If you’re sure,’ Hermione replied doubtfully, and Severus nodded affirmatively. ‘Perhaps a strong coffee then?’ she suggested.
He followed her into the kitchen where she did indeed make strong coffees and slices of toast for the both of them, which they ate mostly in silence, before Hermione went to get ready for the library again.

‘This arrived while you were upstairs,’ Severus said, once Hermione had returned. ‘A letter from Featherstonehaugh saying he’s found the artist and he’s willing to provide his expertise. He’s also spoke to the portrait and he says his evidence is very damning.’

‘That sounds promising.’

‘It does, but… it also reminds me,’ Severus said, moving over to the opposite side of the kitchen and pulling down the envelope that Featherstonehaugh had deposited with him the other morning. ‘These are documents to get everything signed over into your name. You’ll get control of my money, or what’s left of it, and the house, so you can sell it and move if you want.’

‘Oh,’ was all Hermione managed to respond with. She looked at the sheets of parchment Severus had withdrawn from the envelope, flicking through them, looking at the words but not really reading them. Her fingers felt a little numb as she shoved them back in the envelope. ‘Well, I can sign those when I get back later then.’

‘They’re important, Hermione.’

‘I know,’ she agreed, ‘remind me when I get back, yeah?’ Severus nodded and they kissed fleetingly before Hermione made her way to the Floo.

She found herself, half an hour later, once again in a corner of The British Library of Wizardry and Witchcraft, craning over a thick tome enticingly entitled Wizengamot Records VIII, which was yielding as many results as the seven volumes that had come before it, that is to say, none. She pulled it closed with a dull thud, which echoed around the otherwise empty room and signed resignedly, only now realising it was well past lunchtime and she was absolutely ravenous. Trusting that no one would steal her seat she gathered her belongings and left the book on the table, then made her way out into Diagon Alley, the sunlight burning her eyes, which had grown more accustomed to the dimness of the library.

The street was bustling with people. It was the last week before the new school term and so families had flocked to the shops to purchase supplies, but the crowds made the heat almost unbearable and gave Hermione an appetite which only a trip to Florean Fortescue’s (newly re-opened by his
grandson) would satisfy, despite really needing something more substantial than an ice cream sundae to see her through the day. She meandered along the cobbles, ducking out of the way of excitable children and frustrated adults, until she reached the parlour, where she promptly ordered herself something extremely chocolatey before sinking into a seat at one of the few spare tables.

‘Hermione!’ a voice said a few moments later, just as she was attempting to spoon the last of the chocolate sauce from the bottom of the sundae glass. She looked up to find Harry and Ginny, who carried a squirming James, peering down at her. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Comfort eating,’ she replied, with an air of someone who had been caught in the act.

‘Everything alright?’ Harry asked.

‘Yes and no,’ Hermione answered, before launching, for what seemed like the thousandth time, into the tale of Dumbledore’s portrait giving evidence at the trial. ‘So every day I come the library, look through the case law books and then take ten home - the library will only let you take out ten at a time - and Severus spends all night doing the same thing, all, thus far, to no avail.’

Harry frowned thoughtfully. ‘So… if Ginny and I were to come to the library with you, we could take out thirty books?’

‘Yes, I suppose,’ Hermione said with a small shrug, ‘but we wouldn’t be able to get through thirty books in one evening so I’m not sure it would speed up the process.’

‘Maybe not the two you alone,’ Ginny added, ‘but what if we all pitched in?’

‘Oh…’ Hermione muttered, cringing slightly at her friends’ display of generosity when, once again, she had given so little to them in return. ‘I couldn’t ask you to do that.’

‘You didn’t ask,’ Harry said, ‘we offered. Anyway-’

‘-Ooh!’ came a sudden, high-pitched interruption. ‘What luck! I’m out for an afternoon stroll in Diagon Alley and what should I see? This little reunion between the Boy Who Lived and the Girl Who Left.’
For Merlin’s sake!’ Harry cursed, ‘Skeeter!’

The journalist looked to have gone a little to seed in the intervening years since the war, the grey roots of her hair showing beneath the bleach blonde and distinctive crow’s feet creeping out from the corners of her eyes. She promptly, though without asking, pulled a spare chair from another table and squeezed herself between Hermione and Ginny.

‘Did I just hear you discussing plans to rescue poor Snape from his fate in Azkaban?’ Skeeter said, ignoring Harry pointedly.

‘No,’ Hermione, Harry and Ginny replied in unison, followed by a definitive ‘no, no, no,’ from James.

‘I’ll take that as a “yes,”’ Skeeter grinned, ruffling James’ hair, much to Ginny’s chagrin, as she pulled a pad of parchment and a quill from her vile crocodile-leather bag. ‘So let me get this straight… you’re planning to have a portrait of Dumbledore give evidence at Snape’s trial?’ she said, with a little laugh to emphasise how ludicrous she clearly found the concept.

Hermione felt a heat rise in her cheeks and before she quite knew what she was doing she was on her feet. ‘Just get lost!’ she barked, flexing her fist around her wand. Rita Skeeter was the last person she had any patience for today. ‘Do I need to remind you again of Ministry policy on Animagi?’

‘Ah… I have a bit of news myself on that score,’ Skeeter said, he voice so calm it made Hermione angry. She reached back into her bag, withdrew an equally hideous purse and from this a card which read: Rita Skeeter - registered animagus. Form - beetle, with a little image of the Ministry crest. ‘There isn’t as much need for sneaking about in peacetime,’ she said, as though she regretted this, ‘so you see, I really rather think I can write whatever I like, and a story about how poor, pathetic Professor Snape has been reduced to relying on pieces of art to defend his already pitifully weak case is precisely what I think my readers will be interested in! They have been rather deprived of gossip since the original Death Eater Trials!’

‘Don’t use Severus to get back at me for what I did to you all those years ago,’ Hermione said, hating the pleading tone her voice had inadvertently adopted, ‘… please…’

‘From Informant to Inmate! I can see the headline now!’ Skeeter cackled with a dreamy expression.

‘You need to leave now,’ Harry said suddenly, standing shoulder to shoulder with Hermione in a
way that made her feel slightly nostalgic it was so reminiscent of the comradeship of their school days.

‘Yes, I had,’ Skeeter agreed with a wry smirk, packing her belongings back into her bag, ‘I have an article to write, after all! But good luck to you,’ she continued, sounding anything but meaningful, ‘from what I can gather, you’re going to need it.’ And with one last, satisfied smirk, she stood and left them alone.

Harry had placed a hand on Hermione’s forearm to prevent her from doing something she might regret. ‘I really hate that woman,’ Hermione said, after taking a few calming breaths.

‘I know, but she isn’t worth your time and effort,’ Ginny reasoned, standing also. ‘Save that for Severus. Come on, let’s go.’

~oOo~

‘Severus?’ Hermione called, stepping into the house at Spinner’s End, her arms laden with books and Harry, Ginny, and a sleeping James, rested on his mother’s shoulder, trailing behind her. Severus emerged from the living room, looking as though he might just have woken up again. He gave the trio before him a severe, questioning look. ‘Harry and Ginny had the idea of all three of us taking out books. They’re going to stay and help us look through them,’ Hermione explained.

Severus’ expression didn’t soften. ‘Right,’ he replied simply, taking the bag of books Ginny held out for him. Hermione felt his eyes follow them as they moved passed him into the dining room. He joined them a moment later, situating himself, with a huff, at the opposite end of the table from where the others had all sat.

They each pulled a book from their respective piles and began, with little preamble, to look through them. As James slept on, and the afternoon wore on, the odd quadripartite read on. There were occasional tea breaks, and Hermione and Severus took it in turns to see to the twins, who were intermittently napping and hungry, but for the most part they all sat in silent solidarity, ever aware that time was against them.

‘Oh dear,’ Ginny said towards tea time as James finally awoke and began to grizzle. ‘We probably best be off, but I could take James to my mum and dad’s tomorrow, and we could meet you at the library at opening time?’
'If you’re sure,’ Hermione said, feeling a little of her stress dissipate at the thought of the help. It made the task feel just a little more manageable.

‘We are,’ Harry said, as though he was bored of repeating himself. ‘See you tomorrow.’

Hermione nodded. ‘Yeah, see you tomorrow then,’ she said, walking their guests out. ‘Do you fancy a takeaway?’ she called back to Severus as she closed the front door behind them. ‘I can’t be bothered to cook.’ In truth, her eyes ached from squinting at tiny print all day and all she wanted was to curl up on the settee with a glass of wine and some greasy food.

Severus emerged from the dining room, still stoney faced. ‘Fine,’ he replied somewhat curtly.

‘Everything alright?’

‘Fine… I mean… yeah, I’m just tired. Curry?’

‘Lovely.’

She followed Severus into the kitchen where he brought the menu for the local Indian takeaway down from one of the cupboards, the envelope from Featherstonehaugh along with it. ‘Will you sign this while we wait for it to be delivered?’ he asked, placing it on the kitchen countertop.

Hermione looked at the papers and took a deep intake of breath. ‘Later,’ she then assured him, picking up the menu. ‘Want to share a peshwari naan?’

‘Yeah, and get pilau rice…’

The food was delivered and they are too much of it, sharing a bottle of wine between them as well. Such simple pleasures would once have been amongst Hermione’s favourite times spent with Severus, but now there was always a sense that this might be the last time, and it drained the joy from the moment like a dementor.

‘Can you sign these now?’ Severus asked as they moved from the kitchen to the living room. Hermione sunk onto the settee and Severus dropped the aforementioned envelope in Hermione’s lap,
remaining stood by her knees.

‘Aw,’ she groaned, snuggling further against the back of the settee. ‘My eyes are too tired to read anything else tonight. Remind me in the morning.’

‘You’re not usually one for procrastination,’ Severus replied, sitting beside her finally but adopting a much more rigid posture. ‘Why won’t you sign them?’

Hermione sighed and swilled the contents of her wine glass for a long, thoughtful moment before she replied. ‘I really am just exhausted… and sick and tired of law jargon for that matter. If I’m signing something I want to read through it properly first.’

Severus watched her for a moment, looking as if he might be about to push her on the matter before thinking better of it and instead reclining beside her with his head rested close.

~oOo~

The next morning, and the morning following that, Hermione met Harry and Ginny at the entrance to the library as planned. They maintained their ritual of returning to Spinner’s End with their mountains of books and spending their days pouring over them. On the third morning, Hermione arrived at the library as usual only to find a small crowd waiting for her.

‘I’ve been on a recruitment drive,’ Harry informed her, gesturing to a rather sleepy looking George and Neville. They greeted her with a smile and nod and then the group proceeded into the library, the librarian who had checked their books in and out every day looking disdainful at the prospect of having to check out fifty books today.

‘Don’t you lot have jobs?’ Severus enquired rather gruffly as the five of them marched back into the house at just after half-past nine.

‘Not one more important than doing this,’ Harry replied with a wide grin.

‘That’s a rather concerning attitude from an Auror, Potter,’ Severus snipped as they spread themselves around the house in whichever room they happened to find a vacant seat. ‘Ah,’ Severus said, holding Hermione back by the wrist as she tried to pass him. ‘A word, if you will?’
‘Mm? ’

Severus cleared his throat and held up a copy of The Daily Prophet. Hermione hadn’t realised he’d been holding: ‘… whilst poor, sorry Snape rots away under house arrest, pinning his hopes on the futile dream of a piece of art getting him off the hook, his much younger partner was recently seen enjoying the sun and an ice cream with friends in Diagon Alley. When reached out to for comment on the situation, Hermione Granger professed that ‘there is little point us all moping around. It’s looking like Snape is going to Azkaban, so I may as well start getting on with my life’’

‘Oh, Severus… I absolutely never said those things… Skeeter accosted us in Diagon Alley the other day and you know what she’s like… she’s made all that up.’

‘I don’t doubt that, but she’s made us look like idiots.’

‘Well… not as idiotic as she’ll look when you’re let off,’ Hermione replied, smiling hopefully up at him. Severus looked unsure, if not a little angry, and in the next moment had crumpled the newspaper into a ball and was holding it tightly between his hands. ‘I’m sorry, Severus.’

‘I’m not angry at you, I’m angry at… the situation!’

Hermione took his hand and rubbed her thumb in soothing circles over the back of it. ‘Then let’s prove Skeeter wrong,’ she said, ‘we’ve got to be close to an answer.’

Severus nodded solemnly. ‘Yeah,’ he said, sounding unconvinced as he issued a Hermione a wonky smile that she assumed was supposed to be reassuring but instead just reminded her how he wasn’t coping as well he made out. ‘Let’s get to it… if there’s anywhere left to sit…’

~oOo~

The house at Spinner’s End was not particularly suited to simultaneous visits from numerous people, and if Severus was disgruntled by the seating arrangements on the third day, then he had more reason to be so on the fourth. Hermione had arrived at the library to find that Luna and Hannah had now also joined the group, and when they had withdrawn their books and returned to the house they were greeted by Hermione’s parents, who had popped by to see how they were doing and, learning of their plan with the portrait, were refusing to leave without in some capacity helping. So they spread about the house and garden, swapping seats when one became uncomfortable after so long in the
same position. It was laborious and seemingly unending work. Every so often someone might call out, thinking they had found something, only to be forced to apologise in the next moment because they’d misread or misinterpreted it. But, they read on uncomplainingly, all unswervingly devoted to the cause, and for that, Hermione would be eternally grateful, even if this was yet another favour she could never hope of repaying.

The twins proved something of a distraction, and whenever they stirred someone was always eager to take a break from their reading to settle them. ‘My turn, I think,’ Neville offered, as fresh cries rang out from upstairs on the afternoon of the sixth day. He marked the page he was on and got to his feet. ‘I don’t understand half of what I’m reading anyway. I think my skills might be better utilised elsewhere.’

‘No,’ Severus exclaimed suddenly, apparently overhearing the conversation in the living room all the way from the kitchen and meeting Neville halfway down the hall. Hermione arrived at Severus’ shoulder to witness a sort of stand-off between the two men. ‘I’ll do it.’

‘Nah, you’re alright, I don’t mind.’

‘I don’t care whether you mind,’ Severus said tersely, ‘they’re my kids, I’ll sort them out.’

‘Alright…’ Neville acquiesced somewhat tremulously, reduced almost to his first year Gryffindor self, as Severus brushed passed him and stomped upstairs.

‘Sorry Neville,’ Hermione apologised with a sympathetic smile, ‘he’s under a lot of stress.’

Neville shrugged, still looking hurt, and with his hands dug in his pockets wandered back into the living room. Hermione waited a moment longer, to give Severus time to calm down, and then followed him. She found him sat in the nursing chair, his head held in his hands and the twins still sobbing in their cots. He looked up as she entered, rubbing his face with his hands a little despairingly. ‘I can’t take it anymore,’ he said. ‘I just wanted to spend my last weeks of freedom with you and the twins. Not with this… this book club you’ve set up!’

‘Severus,’ Hermione implored, crouching on her knees before him and holding his hands in her own so he couldn’t pull on his hair. ‘They just want to help.’

‘I’ve always managed on my own before,’ he murmured, sounding utterly defeated, ‘I can manage on my own now.’
'But you don’t have to, is my point. Let us share the burden,’ she implored in return.

‘This is useless.’

‘Severus, listen to me!’ Hermione said, feeling herself becoming annoyed despite her best efforts to remain calm. ‘How can we stop now when it could be in very next book we look in?’

‘I’ve gone beyond caring,’ he said, his tone fraught. ‘I want those people gone.’

‘Severus, not so long ago, back in Bolstrad, after The Witch Hunters attacked me, you refused to give give up on me when I had very nearly given up on myself. You were patient when I was petulant, encouraging when I was apprehensive, and loving when I felt absolutely worthless. You gave me a new life and… and I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t do the same for you; if you got sent to Azkaban and I hadn’t done absolutely everything in my power to try and prevent it. “Those people” are just trying to help, and we cannot cover enough books between just the two of us!’

Severus lifted his gaze from the floor and let it drift towards Erin, who was sat with her tear-stained face pressed against the bars of her cot, her pudgy little hands held out for someone to pick her up.

‘The trial starts in four days,’ he said hoarsely, ‘if we haven’t found anything by then, we call it a day? It’s ruining what ought to have been time I spent with you and the kids.’

Hermione bobbed her head from side-to-side noncommittally. ‘I’ll ask the others to leave, and I’ll make time for you, of course, but I can’t promise you that I’ll stop looking myself, in the evenings or something.’

Severus opened his mouth to argue but was interrupted by a sharp knock at the front door downstairs. He frowned momentarily and then stood quickly, suddenly alert, like a dog hearing something humans couldn’t.

‘I’ll get it,’ he grumbled, though there was a certain franticness about him now as he moved passed Hermione and sped down the stairs again. She watched him go reluctantly, wishing one of their guests would have got the door so they could finish their conversation, but as she pulled the twins from theirs cots and followed Severus back downstairs, she was ultimately pleased it was him that had answered it.
‘I believe it is customary to great visitors to one’s home with a “hello,”’ a vaguely familiar voice sounded from beyond the threshold of the house. The owner of said voice was blocked from Hermione’s view as she came she down the stairs, but just as she reached Severus’ side they spoke again: ‘I brought you up better than that.’

At Hathersage Hall there had been something almost intimidating about Eileen, a certain darkness that suggested she had the potential to be dangerously unpredictable, not dissimilar to the aura Severus maintained at Hogwarts. But just as this perception of Severus had dissipated once Hermione met him in a different context, indeed here in Spinner’s End, for all her brash introduction, Eileen appeared jittery with nerves, as though the slightest harsh word might send her jumping from her skin.

‘I…’ Severus murmured, unusually at a loss for words. ‘I didn’t think you were interested,’ he managed eventually.

‘Hmm… well, after your… partner visited me,’ Eileen said, casting a somewhat disdainful look in Hermione’s direction, ‘I did a lot of thinking… and I also took to reading The Daily Prophet, to try and keep abreast of your trial. I read Rita Skeeter’s article, about what you were trying to do, with the portrait or what have you, and I…’ she paused and glanced down the street as though checking no one had followed her. ‘Here,’ she continued, thrusting a hessian bag weighted with thick books at Severus, ‘I thought these might help.’

Severus took the bag from her and peered inside frowningly. ‘We’re looking for examples in law books,’ he said, and his tone made Hermione step a little closer to see that the bag was filled with what appeared to be History of Art books.

‘Yes,’ Eileen said, sounding a little unsure of herself all of sudden, ‘and I thought that might be precisely where you were going wrong.’
Severus lent his back against the cool, whitewashed brick of the old coal shed. An eerie stillness had descended over the house, inciting in him a strange claustrophobia which made him realise he did not like being alone in the place for too long. Spinner’s End was haunted; infiltrated by spectres of the past, uncanny returns of repressed memories. Having Hermione and the children there made it bearable, but without them the hallways echoed. The creak of the floorboard on the fourth step from the top; the groan of the plumbing when the hot tap was used; the way the wind whistled through the disused attic; there was even something about this coal shed, a vague recollection of being locked inside, but it was difficult to determine whether that had really happened, or whether his mind had conjured it as part of some cruel trick. It all reminded him, intermittently, and sometimes with long periods of respite, of a childhood he had long sought to forget. Hermione had not been wrong when she suggested that things would get easier in time, that new memories could be made to replace the old, but not enough time had yet elapsed. And then his mother had returned, bringing everything he had worked to confine to the past, shrieking back to the present with a vengeance.

He had come outside seeking fresh air, inhaling slowly and deeply to try and calm his frazzled nerves. In the end it had seemed too easy, his mother turning up with those books. Anything that wasn’t a struggle made Severus suspicious. She had looked much as he remembered her; stern featured but always with a subtle softness, perhaps reserved only for him, in her eyes. She seemed skittish, casting nervous glances around the hallway as they’d ushered her inside. Severus assumed the place had the same effect on her as it had on him.

‘I hadn’t realised everyone would be here,’ she’d said, her gaze settling on Harry for a prolonged moment as she entered the living room. ‘I don’t know… this might be a silly idea.’

Severus had remained scowling in the hallway, so it was Hermione who replied. ‘We’re grateful of any help we can get.’

There were about two dozen art history books in Eileen’s hessian bag, which were distributed between the group, before in unison, they returned to their task. Severus read the preface to a batted edition of Renaissance Riddles before finding himself distracted. He cast his gaze over his overcrowded living room, watching peoples’ heads shifting silently from side-to-side as they scanned the pages before them. They weren’t doing this for him, he recognised, but for Hermione. He stood to benefit, of course, and so he was appreciative, but this was friends doing a good turn for another friend. He wondered what it must be like to have friends like that. Lily might have done this for him once, but Lucius, would he have ever? It was unlikely, he thought, and it was just as he was pondering this that his mother caught his eye. Neville had vacated a seat on the settee for her and she looked uncomfortable, sandwiched between Luna and Hermione’s father. She issued Severus a fleeting smile but he couldn’t bring himself to return it. There was an uncanny quality about seeing her here, in this house, again, and he didn’t like it. He looked away quickly, returning his attention back to Renaissance Riddles, staring at chapter one unseeingly.
He was unsure how much time had passed when someone moving in the corner of his eye caught his attention. It wasn’t a sudden movement or even particularly animated, but it was different to the monotonous head bobbing of everyone reading.

‘I think… yes, I think I’ve found something… listen to this…’ It was Ginny, sitting up and bringing the book she was reading closer to her face. Her voice shook a little as she continued, everyone now looking in her direction. ‘Edgar De’ath’s ability to capture the emotion of his subjects was renowned throughout Europe. Indeed, during the Baroque period he pioneered many of the techniques for transposing peoples’ thoughts and feelings onto their oil-painted counterparts that we still use today. Perhaps most significantly, his depiction of Quentin Quinton hung at Windsor Castle, which served as advisor to King George III; that of Professor Stanley Ridley which taught medical magic to prospective healers at St. Mungo’s for over a century until his methods became outdated; and his portrait of a young maid he met whilst travelling in Yorkshire, which once sat on the jury at a local murder trial.’’

Ginny stopped reading at that and looked at Severus, who stared back dumbstruck. ‘Read that again,’ he croaked.

She nodded, cast a fleeting look at Hermione, who had moved to the edge of her seat, and then obliged. ‘…There’s even a picture,’ she concluded, holding the book out to Severus. He took it from her with visibly shaking hands, staring down at the black and white copy of De’ath’s The Maid, which showed a plump, tidily-dressed young woman smiling nervously.

Severus read the caption below. ‘She died halfway through the trial,’ he murmured, ‘so rather than delaying the sentencing they used her portrait. It was in 1777… up in Skipton…’ he trailed off, worried his voice would shake like his hands if he continued. He looked to Hermione, hoping she would know what he was thinking without him having to articulate it verbally.

‘So, we just need the case law book that relates to this case,’ she said, her voice small.

Severus merely nodded.

‘It won’t matter that this wasn’t in front of this Winzengamot thing you keep talking about?’ Hermione’s mother asked.

‘I shouldn’t think so,’ Hermione replied, ‘the local courts abide by the same principles, they’re like satellite Wizengamots. They still exist today in places remote from London, but with developments to
the floo network and brooms they’ve grown less common. I don’t know too much about it, just what I’ve read in these books… sorry, Merlin… I’m rambling.’ She stood up and then quickly sat back down again, wringing her hands in her lap.

‘We’ll go back to the library,’ Harry said suddenly, standing from where he was sat on the floor. ‘If we leave now we might make it just before they close. Now we know the year, we can focus our search.’

Hermione had nodded mutely, squeezing Severus’ shoulder reassuringly as she moved passed him towards the floo. ‘We’ll be back as soon as we can,’ she said, smiling warmly, ‘this could be it!’ He’d nodded, still not trusting his voice to be steady, as they’d stepped into the green flames and disappeared. Mr and Mrs Granger had then offered to take the twins, and though he was still reluctant to have them out of his sight, Severus didn’t feel he would be much used to them in his current state. Ginny had then suggested that the others ought to go too, and they’d bid Severus polite goodbyes before leaving him alone with Eileen.

She didn’t move from her position on the opposite settee, looking at Severus with an expression he couldn’t read. When nobody had spoken for so long it became almost painful, Severus not really knowing what to say, Eileen said: ‘there was something your partner—’

‘-Hermione. Her name is Hermione!’

‘Yes, of course. I mean no disrespect… there was something Hermione said when she visited me,’ Eileen continued, a little hesistant sounding now, ‘she suggested that it might not be you that I was angry with, but rather myself, and having given it some thought I am inclined to believe she was right.’

‘She’s always right,’ Severus said, not sure what else he should say.

Eileen smiled at that. ‘She makes you happy?’

‘Very.’

‘Then I’m glad you found this.’

Severus nodded curtly in acknowledgement. He wanted to say a thousand things all at once and yet,
simultaneously, say nothing at all. ‘And you?’ he asked tentatively.

‘What?’

‘Are you happy?’

‘I am… at peace,’ she replied, looking suddenly sad. She stood and wandered to the mantlepiece, picking up a photograph of Severus, Hermione and the twins that stood there. ‘I was rather uncharitable about you when Hermione visited. Unfairly so. I played my own part in what happened.’

‘Nothing my father did was your fault. Nor mine, for that matter.’

Eileen heaved a dry chuckle. ‘I should have taken you and left as soon as you were born. Before even.’

‘You had no money and nowhere to go,’ Severus said, feeling a weight settle on his chest and his head began to ache. ‘I am sorry that I ever blamed you.’

‘And I am sorry that I put you through all that…’ she paused, watching him carefully. ‘I… I would like for us to try and rebuild what we had.’ She smiled weakly and knelt by the bay window, withdrawing her wand and pointing it at the floorboards. ‘Alohamora,’ she muttered, reaching down and prising back a now loose plank of wood. She reached beneath and, after a moment of struggling to reach something, pulled out a dusty box which Severus instantly recalled from his childhood. ‘Our little secret,’ his mother said with a smirk, ‘do you remember how we used to play Gobstones while you father was out?’

‘Yes,’ Severus said. ‘I’d forgotten that was hidden there though.’

‘Perhaps one day we’ll play again?’ she asked, avoiding his gaze and busying herself with replacing the floorboard. Severus suspected there was more to this enquiry than merely a desire to play Gobstones with him. She was suggesting that she wanted to be a part of his life again and he didn’t quite understand his feelings on the matter.

‘I’m tired,’ he said, after another silence that went on too long.
'Oh,' Eileen replied, looking a little crestfallen, ‘of course… it’s been quite a day.-’

‘I’m not saying no,’ Severus said quickly, ‘I’m just saying… I have a lot happening at the moment, but… once the trial is over I’ll have more energy to expend on this and… and you deserve that.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, barely audibly and a little disbelievingly. Severus wondered whether she was about to cry, but sincerely hoped she was not. ‘I’m going to go then. May I?’ she asked, pointing to the floo powder which they kept in a little porcelain container on the mantlepiece.

Severus shrugged and Eileen had one foot in the floo when she turned back to face him. ‘Severus?’

‘Mm?’

‘I wish you all the best for the trial. If they can’t see you’re innocent they’re complete dunderheads!’

Severus tried to smile. ‘Thank you,’ he said, ‘and for bringing the books too.’

‘You are of course, welcome. Now good bye.’ And with that she disappeared in a flash of green light.

This was when Severus had found himself alone, and he realised it was the first time he had been completely alone in a long time. He slumped onto the settee, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger before moving his hand up to rub through his hair. Checking his watch revealed that Hermione had only left half an hour ago, and there was no telling how long she would be, so he decided it would do no harm to rest his eyes. He felt as though he could have slept for hours but he was having no such luck this afternoon. He opened his eyes again almost against his own will, realising, once they had readjusted to the bright sunshine, that the Gobstones box had been left on the coffee table. It made his heart hurt. His mother had taught him to play with that board, taught him that trick of flicking his wrist when he released the gobstone. This had been his favourite thing to do as a child, even into his teen years, and the fact that his father knew nothing of it made it all the more special. However, with this, came a certain sense of melancholy; it was also a reminder that he had been robbed of a great many more memories like this, and, as much as he tried to prevent it, a burning resentment rose within him at this notion. Indeed, Spinner’s End was riddled with these reminders of his childhood, the walls and floors quite literally holding onto secrets of the past, and Severus felt his breath hitch in his throat as he thought of this. He got to his feet and picked up the box then slid it onto a high bookshelf where it wouldn’t catch his eye and made his way out to the garden for some fresh air…
This was where Hermione located him, hidden behind the coal shed, an hour or so later. ‘Severus?’ a quizzical voice sounded from behind him. He stood up straight and peered around the side of the shed. Hermione stood in the back doorway, a faded green leather book clutched in her hands. Their eyes met across the small yard. ‘We found it,’ she said.
What the Death Eaters Saw

Hermione had stopped in the doorway of their bedroom to observe Severus sat on the edge of the bed, fastening the last of many buttons down his front. He had on the same bottle-green robes he’d been wearing when Hermione had first seen him in The Moroi. That was almost three years to the day ago, though in some ways it seemed much longer, and in others like it was only yesterday.

‘What?’ Severus enquired, arching an eyebrow at catching her staring.

‘I was just thinking,’ she replied, ‘how you wore those - your best robes - when you finally agreed to meet with me in Bolstrad.’

‘Mmm,’ he returned, getting to his feet and checking himself over in the mirror. ‘I wouldn’t flatter yourself thinking it was for your benefit, I just wanted you to think I was doing alright for myself.’

‘Oh, charming!’ she said with a smile, taking a few steps towards him and wrapping her arms around his middle from behind, her head rested against his shoulder blade. She felt him stiffen slightly, for just a brief moment, and then relax into her hold.

‘Thank Merlin you didn’t fall for it,’ he whispered. Gently, he prised her fingers apart where they met over his abdomen and turned to face her. Hermione felt a burning desire to be close to him, and refused to remove her arms, which slid to his thin waist. He studied her for a moment, his dark eyes flicking over her features meticulously. ‘You’re alright,’ he said, his voice strange. It had not been a question but rather like he felt as though if he said it aloud it would make it more true.

‘I’m alright,’ she replied, and she saw a ghostly smile pass across his lips. She didn’t need to ask how he was, she could tell by how tightly his hands gripped her shoulders, and the way the muscle twitched in his jaw that he was struggling. ‘Are you ready?’ she asked instead.

He inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. ‘As I’ll ever be,’ he replied.

~oOo~

It was hot and stuffy inside the court house, and if Hermione had considered it busy at the pre-trial hearing, that was nothing compared with the scene that had greeted them today. The moment they had stepped out of the floo and into the atrium they’d been met by a barrage of flashing camera
lights. She’d felt Severus tense at her side, but in the next moment he had taken her hand and was pulling her through the crowd towards the courtroom with apparent determination. That was how it would appear in the papers tomorrow at any rate; Hermione alone could sense his hesitancy. Indeed, her own legs felt leaden, and she wanted nothing more than to turn with him and flee. It crossed her mind that they might pick up the twins, Apparate to Bolstrad, live out their lives in that crooked little house at the top of the hill, and no one would need know the truth. It would be as though all this horridness with the trial were merely some bad dream. But then they’d arrived at the small ante-chamber, slightly out of breath from the briskness of Severus’ pace, and seeing Featherstonehaugh stood soberly, in his starched black robes and horsehair wig, had made the reality of the situation irrefutable.

‘Ah,’ the solicitor said, picking up a few sheets of parchment, ‘you’re here. Any last instructions?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Severus said a little hoarsely before turning to face Hermione. ‘You should go and find a seat,’ he said, giving her the distinct impression that actually there was something he’d like to say Featherstonehaugh, he just didn’t want her to hear it.

‘Alright,’ she reluctantly acquiesced, ‘then I will see you tonight,’ she told him, reaching up on her tiptoes to kiss him.

‘You will,’ he replied, looking at her a little longingly as he stroked a stray curl behind her ear, ‘now go on.’

She issued him a weak smile, nodded once, and left the room in something of a flurry lest she burst into tears. Tears would do no one any good, so she ignored the burning sensation behind her eyelids and strode down the corridor towards the courtroom entrance determinedly. She could hear the thrum of voices from within before she had even opened the door, and paused for a moment with her palms pressed against the oak. She didn’t know what she was waiting for, or attempting to delay, and she knew that whatever it was, her attempts would be futile, yet she couldn’t bring herself to go inside. Perhaps she’d spent so long trying to be optimistic for Severus’ sake that she’d actually convinced herself that a ‘not guilty’ verdict was inevitable, and being here had reminded her that it was actually anything but.

‘Ermione?’ a familiar voice sounded from behind her, though it was surely impossible, ‘you did not tell us you were friends with ‘arry Potter!’

‘She did not tell us a lot of things,’ said another voice, a little reprovingly.

Hermione turned to see the most unexpected gathering of people: Fiers and Stela, the ones who had
spoken, were there, looking slightly bewildered, Harry was beside them, and, loitering in the shadows at the back, was Draco Malfoy of all people.

‘I thought you might have come down here,’ Harry said, confused and a little uncomfortable looking, ‘these two said they knew you?’

Hermione looked between them all with wide, glassy eyes. ‘Yeah,’ she said breathlessly after a moment, ‘they do,’ and with that she lurched forwards and fell into Stela’s welcoming arms.

‘W-we should never have left Bolstrad,’ she stammered frantically, feeling sudden, overwhelming guilt, which she suspected had been building for some time, buried beneath a multitude of other emotions. ‘If I hadn’t made him come home none of this would have happened. H-he warned me and I didn’t listen…’ There were still no tears but wild sobs ricocheted through her chest as she clutched to Stela’s shoulders.

‘Now, now,’ Stela comforted her with a pat on the back, ‘it would have been but a half life you lived if you were not being true to yourselves.’

‘Mmm,’ Hermione murmured into Stela’s shoulder, clinging to her old friend for dear life. She was not entirely convinced, right now, in the shadow of the trial, any life in Bolstrad seemed preferable to what was waiting beyond those oak doors.

‘We wrote to Severus before we came,’ the old woman then said.

‘He never mentioned.’

‘Probably because he told us not to come,’ Fiers replied, coming up beside Hermione and patting her arm in a fatherly way, ‘but the day is yet to come when I will take orders from my assistant, so we are here whether he likes it or not!’

That made Hermione smile and a moment later she pulled back from Stela, stood up, and straightened out her robes. ‘I’ve… well, we’ve missed you so much,’ she continued, ‘I’m sorry we didn’t tell you.’

‘It is understandable why you did not,’ Fiers said.
‘How did you find out?’ she asked.

Fiers chuckled. ‘That’s all down to you, dear,’ he said with a smile. ‘You remember, even as recently as when you were in Romania, how the newspapers were manipulated so only positive things were written about magic and those who used it. It was to encourage that sense of solidarity amongst wizarding communities in the face of the oppression they experienced at the hands of the Muggles. It is, of course, precisely why Severus was able to live such an anonymous existence in Romania in the first place. But that is all a thing of the past now.’

‘We did not hear stories of Voldemort or anyone who would use Dark magic,’ Stela then said, taking over the story telling from her husband. ‘But now, there is going to be a treaty, Hermione, between the Muggle government and our own. They have agreed to stop paying out for people to give up their magical status—’

‘Yes,’ Fiers interjected, apparently unable to contain himself, ‘and there is no need for press injunctions in such a climate, so they have been telling us what happened in Britain after your war. How Harry Potter triumphed and… and about how Voldemort’s followers were rounded up; Severus, “The Last Death Eater,” now amongst them.’

Stela nodded eagerly, a broad grin spreading across her kind, wrinkled face. ‘That is why Nicu is not here. He wanted to be, but he must stay in Budapest to oversee the new treaty being signed. He continues your work!’

Hermione smiled shyly. It felt wrong to be happy considering what was about to happen, but she couldn’t help but be pleased, if not a little overwhelmed, that her years of work on The Watch’s cause had come to fruition in such a remarkable way. ‘That’s fantastic,’ she croaked, unsure how to verbalise exactly what it was she felt.

‘Better than fantastic. But it is something to be celebrated after all this nastiness is over,’ Stela said, apparently reading Hermione’s uncomfortableness.

‘We should get going,’ Harry offered, checking his watch.

‘Right,’ said Hermione, nodding as she mentally pulled herself together. ‘Oh,’ she then exclaimed, suddenly remembering that Draco was still there. He had managed to make himself surprisingly inconspicuous for a Malfoy. ‘What… what did you want?’ she asked, sounding rude but not meaning to.
'Urm...' he murmured, slinking forwards out of the darkness. He was taller than Harry, but skinnier, certainly a less imposing figure in a darkened corridor such as this. ‘I shouldn’t really be here but I wanted to... well, forewarn you, I suppose...’ He paused, looking uncomfortable, but his audience must have seemed impatient because, with a little stutter, he began again after just a moment: ‘My father and his old friends, you see, they’re planning on turning this trial to their advantage. “Throw Snape under the Knight Bus,” were my father’s words.’

‘And what’s the supposed to mean?’ asked Harry, suddenly at Hermione’s side so the four of them, Fiers and Stela included, faced Draco in unity.

The latter bowed his head slightly and refused to meet their gaze. It was a mannerism she recognised; Severus did the same thing, whenever he was in some way reminded of his association with Voldemort, and there was something disconcerting about witnessing the self-consciousness of these once confident men, however misplaced that confidence might have been.

‘It won’t be difficult for them to overemphasise Severus’ role in the war to make their own seem lesser,’ Draco explained. ‘They’ll make out he tricked them, manipulated them, took advantage of them...’

‘That’s ridiculous!’ Harry cried before Hermione had the chance, ‘everyone knows the part your father played in the war, and as soon as this trial gets under way, they’ll all know exactly what part Snape played; that of spy for Dumbledore!’

‘And I hope you’re right! I’m on your side, believe it or not, but Severus did get close Voldemort, whatever his intentions for doing so might have been,’ said Draco, looking over his shoulder down the corridor as though checking they weren’t being overheard. ‘You were there at my father’s trial. You saw him give information on the other Death Eaters to make himself look better, and Severus is like the jewel in the crown. Just don’t underestimate what my father will do to regain even a fraction of the social standing he had before the war!’

‘We wouldn’t put any level of underhanded scheming past your father!’ Harry spat.

‘Good, then my job here is done,’ Draco retaliated. ‘I just wanted to be sure of that, and I’ve told Severus’ solicitor what he can expect as well. I won’t forget the things Severus did for me during the war, you know.’

‘Right,’ Hermione said, wanting to put a stop to Draco and Harry’s argument before it had really
begun. She didn’t have the energy to deal with Draco at the moment. ‘Then… thank you, I suppose,’ she concluded somewhat dismissively.

Draco sighed resignedly, nodded once, and then brushed passed the four of them into the courtroom.

‘I still can’t trust him,’ Harry said, once the door had closed again.

‘It seems hypocritical to forgive Severus and not Draco for getting caught up in something when they young and impressionable, though,’ Hermione reasoned.

‘Mmm,’ Harry shrugged, ‘anyway, we really ought to get ourselves seated. Come on.’

Evidently reading Hermione’s reluctance to go through the oak doors earlier, Harry didn’t give her a moment longer to think about it before tugging her gently by the wrist into the muggy, overcrowded court. The din of voices fell silent at the sight of Harry Potter and Hermione Granger striding between the rows of seating, but in the next moment people had returned to their conversations and Hermione felt happily anonymous once more. Ginny was saving seats for them just beside the stand where Severus would be brought out to, and a quick glance around the nearby pews revealed a number of other people had also turned out for support. Minerva was there beside Eileen; Neville, Hannah, and Luna; George, Arthur and Molly Weasley, sat on either side of a grim looking Ron; and a few rows back was Draco sat surrounded by various vaguely familiar old Slytherin students. Hermione just hoped Severus recognised this for what it was; people on his side.

~oOo~

Whether or not Severus even saw the people who had gathered to support him, Hermione could not tell. From the moment he was brought into the dock he avoided so much as a glance in their direction. He kept his head down, his gaze steadfastly fixed on something the middle-distance above the Wizengamot’s heads. He had stood, when asked by the Chief Warlock to do so, and spoken to confirm his name, and then had sat in his chair again, shoulders slightly slumped. The Chief Warlock had reiterated Severus’ charge and explained to the court that opening statements from both the defence and prosecution would be followed by the presentation of evidence. He had then pointed a boney finger at Featherstonehaugh to intimate that he should go first.

‘Ladies and gentlemen of the Wizengamot,’ Featherstonehaugh began. Surprisingly, considering his small and crooked stature, there was something formidable about him as he addressed the room. ‘My client does not deny killing Albus Dumbledore. But as we will show you over the course of this trial he had no choice but to kill one of his closest friends and allies, and one can only imagine what a torturous and painful act that must have been for a man to whom loyalty is no triviality. So why did
he do it? My argument on that score; he did it for the sake of us all. It was an act of war, an act of war which was instrumental in Harry Potter living long enough to dispose of Voldemort once and for all. My client is a man who has dedicated almost his entire adult life to the protection of Harry Potter to this end. Indeed, you will hear many a fantastical tale over the next few days with regards to my client’s own involvement with Voldemort and his followers, but I will take this opportunity to remind you that these fables come from the mouths of individuals already convicted, or at the very least, reluctantly pardoned by yourselves, of conspiring to bring about Pureblood rule and other related crimes. My point being, they are hardly trustworthy sources. I urge you to consider the facts of this case, and the facts are that Mr. Snape is no murderer.’

As Featherstonehaugh concluded and took his seat a tall, hawk-like woman across the room, who Hermione presumed to be the prosecution lawyer, got to her feet. She spoke in a scratchy, tinny voice that carried about the room with astounding clarity: ‘ladies and gentlemen of the Wizengamot, before you, looking a little older, and perhaps a little tireder than you remember him, is Severus Snape. In 1997 this man was responsible for the murder of one of the greatest wizards of our time; Albus Dumbledore. He pointed his wand at an unarmed wizard and cast the worst of the unforgivable curses. We will show you throughout the course of this trial, how Snape has lied and manipulated for his own benefit. As Mr. Featherstonehaugh has just said, I have no doubt that loyalty has always been of utmost important to his client, but I would argue that his loyalty has always been placed with Voldemort. Without further ado, I would like to call the first witness to the stand; Lucius Malfoy.’

A door creaked open at the back of the silent courtroom and Lucius Malfoy was ushered in by a court warden. Hermione wasn’t sure what she was expecting, or perhaps hoping for, but he looked much the same as he had before the final battle. Perhaps there was a little grey at his temples, but otherwise he strode down the centre of the courtroom and took his seat with a characteristic arrogance and smugness that only Lucius Malfoy could have been capable of affecting.

‘Mr. Malfoy,’ the hawk lady said, ‘you understand when you are in this court that you are under oath to tell nothing but the truth?’

‘I do,’ he confirmed with a small smirk. Hermione saw Severus’ body twitch a little and for the first time he lifted his head so to glare directly in Lucius’ direction.

‘I believe it would be of benefit to this court for us to start at the beginning,’ the woman continued, ‘tell us, if you will, how you and Mr. Snape first met?’

‘We met at school, Hogwarts. I was a sixth year, Slytherin, and he was sorted into my house. He… caught my attention, I suppose.’

‘In what sense?’
‘For an eleven year old, he was particularly skilled at Dark magic, which was an… interest of mine at that time,’ Lucius said, as though he had rehearsed every word very carefully. ‘I reckon he could have taught me a thing or two,’ he then added, with a hollow laugh. ‘I’d seen him cast the odd hex in the corridors, but most students will do that from time to time, and then towards Christmas of his first year, I caught him out of bed after curfew - I was a prefect, you see - duelling with some other kids in his year. He knew curses I’d never heard of, in fact, it turned out later he’d invented them himself. I think it was safe to say I was… impressed.’

‘So you became friends?’

‘I wouldn’t say “friends,” there was a considerable age gap, but certainly acquaintances. He was badly bullied, so I suppose, getting me and some of the other older boys on side had a protective factor for him. He would seek me out. He had a lot of questions, but once I left Hogwarts we lost touch for a few years.’

‘And then what happened?’

‘I received a letter from him. Quite out of the blue. Oh, it must have been three or so years later. Snape would have been about fifteen when he wrote it.’

‘Indeed. I would like to draw the court’s attention to exhibit A,’ the woman’s shrill voice rang out. A screen dropped down against one of the walls and there was a clicking and whirring noise from somewhere at the back of the room as a projector switched on. Magnified against the screen was an apparent copy if this missive for all to see, and though the lettering was a little larger, a little clumsier, more childlike, it was undoubtedly written in Severus’ unmistakable spiky scrawl. ‘For anyone at the back who can’t quite see, I shall read exhibit A aloud: “Dear Mr. Malfoy, You said I should contact you when I came to a decision. I’m sorry it has taken me this long but I know what I want now. I don’t think I should write it out in case this letter is intercepted, but I hope you will know what I mean. Next weekend is a Hogsmeade weekend. Can you meet me? Yours faithfully, S. Snape.” And did you know what Mr. Snape was making reference to, Mr. Malfoy?’

‘Yes. A conversation we had before I left school, or rather, a number of conversations we had had. He would ask me about becoming a Death Eater.’

‘And you said you could help him?’

‘No, no,’ Lucius replied, waving his arms in front himself theatrically. ‘Certainly not. I just said it
was a big decision, he should think about it, and once he’d decided, he should contact me and we could… discuss it.’

‘And did you meet Mr. Snape in Hogsmeade that weekend?’

‘I did.’

‘And what did you discuss?’

Lucius hesitated, apparently choosing his words carefully. It was the first time he had faltered throughout the entire inquisition. ‘He asked me the same question again. He wanted to know what he needed to do to become one. He asked if I could take him to a meeting.’

‘So what you’re saying, Mr. Malfoy, is that from the age of at least… what, eleven, Mr. Snape was actively seeking to become a Death Eater?’

‘Objection!’ cried Featherstonehaugh, suddenly jumping back to his feet, ‘irrelevant!’

‘Overruled,’ said the Chief Warlock with a dismissive wave of his hand, ‘I think it is pertinent we have an understanding of any ideologies the defendant might have invested in if we are to understand whether or not he committed the crime in question. Continue, Mr. Malfoy.’

‘Right… then, yes, I would say he was actively seeking becoming a Death Eater, I mean, there were other things too…’

And so, for over an hour Lucius Malfoy regaled the court with stories of Severus’ corrupt and corrupting teenage years. Stories of how his letters had become incessant, obsessive almost, all expressing his fervent desire to join Voldemort’s ranks; how he, poor Lucius, had felt overwhelmed, threatened even, as he had attempted to temper Severus’ enthusiasm for the subject; how Severus had practically begged Lucius to take him to gatherings the moment he was of age, and how he had set about impressing the Dark Lord with demonstrations of his own Dark spells and potions from the very first of these. Lucius’ role, according to Lucius, had been that of mere bystander, harassed, possibly spelled, into facilitating Severus’ initiation. And the more Lucius spoke the more restlessness Hermione could sense from the crowds. They were like dogs who had been told to leave their food; staring, slobbering, single-minded, and Lucius was their master, they hung to his every word.
‘How is Severus to have a fair trial when there are so many pre-conceptions?’ Fiers whispered into Hermione’s ear, leaning forward from the row of seats behind.

‘I don’t think fairness has factored into this at all,’ Hermione muttered through gritted teeth, ‘not facts for that matter,’ she added, feeling completely justified in her sentiments as Lucius completed his tirade with:

‘It’s quite possible I wouldn’t have become a Death Eater myself if it hadn’t been for Snape haranguing me about it day and night…’ he said, sounding very sorry for himself, ‘threatening me to find things out for him… I didn’t take The Mark so long before him, and certainly not long after I’d received his letter…’ His grey eyes flicked about the room apparently assessing how his audience had taken this last part; Hermione shook her head with derision and disbelief and hoped she wasn’t the only one. She wished Severus would look at her, look at all of them, so he might not feel quite so alone, so he would know that they hadn’t believed a word, but he refused to remove his gaze from Lucius.

‘Mr. Malfoy,’ the prosecution lawyer said at last, thankfully silencing Malfoy, who she seemed to sense was falling apart. ‘You have relayed to this court, in great depth I may add, your knowledge of the extent of the defendant’s involvement with the Death Eaters, which was evidently substantial. I have no more questions for the moment. Thank you.’ The prosecution lawyer sat down abruptly, glancing at Severus as if checking for some sign that she had chinked his armour. For his part, Severus remained with his gaze still fixed on Lucius, his expression perhaps vaguely disappointed.

With the hawk-lady having sat down it was Featherstonehaugh’s turn to ask his questions. ‘Mr. Malfoy,’ he said sternly, getting to his feet and again and pacing in front of where Lucius sat. ‘A point that seems to have been overlooked thus far, that perhaps you can clarify for me, is why Severus would ever have considered you some sort of authority on Death Eaters in the first place?’

‘I…’

‘I mean, you tell us that you were in some way beguiled, manipulated even, by this child, five years younger than you and for most of the period of time we are talking about, under age, but, if that is the case, which I am certainly not suggesting it was, why did he choose you, who apparently knew so little about what he wanted to know? Or perhaps why, if, again, you knew so little about the topic in question, did you even suggested in the first place that my client should contact you about it?’

Lucius said nothing, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly like a fish.

‘It’s no matter, Mr. Malfoy, if you’re struggling with that,’ Featherstonehaugh continued, ‘I think
'Objection!' the hawk-lady interjected, ‘argumentative!'

‘Upheld,’ grumbled the Chief Warlock, ‘this is Mr. Snape’s trial, Featherstonehaugh, not Mr. Malfoy’s.’

Featherstonehaugh shrugged. ‘Then perhaps you would care to be more vocal with my next line questioning, Mr. Malfoy, lest we should think you have become bewitched once more?’ he said, addressing Lucius again. ‘In 1996, your son, Draco Malfoy, was given a rather special task by your Master, was he not?’

Lucius paled visibly and took a sip of the water from the glass in front of him, clearing his throat. Hermione suspected he wasn’t used to being spoken to like this and relished the slight thrill she experienced at seeing him so uncomfortable looking. ‘He was,’ Lucius croaked.

‘Can you explain what that was?’

‘To… to kill Albus Dumbledore.’

There were a few gasps from the crowd which Featherstonehaugh seemed to enjoy having caused. ‘And shortly after this honour was bestowed on your son, his mother, your wife, visited my client at his home and asked him to help your son; asked him protect your son, even complete the task he had been assigned should he fail? She will tell us herself in the coming days how she had him partake in an unbreakable vow to this end?’

Lucius’ brow creased. ‘I…’ he began before trailing off. He scanned the crowds of people searchingly until he found Draco. From where Hermione sat, Draco’s face was obscured by a number of other heads, however, she sensed that he must have reacted affirmatively in some way to Featherstonehaugh’s question because the crowd suddenly erupted with such disdain that the Chief Warlock had to intervene to silence them. ‘I… not to my knowledge,’ Lucius called over the din. ‘Not that I know of!’

Featherstonehaugh heaved a dry chuckle. He was clearly enjoying himself, even if he was the only one. “‘Not to your knowledge,’” he repeated. ‘Could you tell the court where you were at this time?’
'Azkaban,' Lucius replied at length, murmuring it rather as though he didn’t want people reminding of the fact.

'So it is quite possible that this event took place without your being privy to it? That perhaps your wife and son would not have wanted you to know this?'

Lucius grimaced and looked at the prosecution lawyer for support, though none was forthcoming. Indeed, she now looked rather like a hawk that had flown through a particularly bad storm, so flustered had she become. ‘I… suppose that is possible,’ Lucius said at length as though each word were being torn from him unwillingly, ‘though I think it very unlikely.’

'Fortunately,' Featherstonehaugh scoffed, ‘what you “think” is of no concern to this court, we deal in facts here, and perhaps when we hear from your son and your wife over the coming days we will finally get hear some! This is pointless, no further questions.’

Lucius stepped down from the stand slowly, looking as though he didn’t quite understand what had just happened. But Featherstonehaugh being finished with cross-examining Lucius only meant it was the turn of his old cronies to step in, and clearly Draco had not been mistaken about any of their intentions. One by one, eerily familiar faces that still had an ability to send chills down Hermione’s spine took the stand to deride Severus.

‘Oh, yeah,’ Crabbe, who had been let out of Azkaban for the occasion, had told them, ‘Snape told The Dark Lord all kinds of stuff. All Dumbledore’s secrets… there was the time when the Order were moving Potter and Snape told us where they would… very accurate information it was too… there was a battle and a number of deaths… Snape was casting curses and jinxes just like the rest of us.’

‘Indeed,’ the prosecution lawyer mused with a self-satisfied smirk, ‘that seems a rather strange thing for someone who purports that they were trying to save Harry Potter’s life to do. No further questions.’

‘… made him very popular with The Dark Lord all that masterminding did too!’ Selwyn contributed, ‘his right hand man, and I reckon he’d have done anything to maintain that position, murdering Dumbledore included! I don’t think The Dark Lord could have been half as successful if it wasn’t for Snape.’

‘It’s no use my pretending I was some kind of angel,’ Avery said, giggling madly, ‘but even I was
shocked by some of the stuff Snape used to get up to. Right from when we were at school… handed out hexes like they were Bertie Bott’s, didn’t have a good word to say about Dumbledore even then; reckoned he favoured the filthy Mud—’

‘Now, now,’ the hawk-lady said, interrupting Avery, who seemed to have succumbed to a touch of insanity, just in time. ‘None of you have painted a pretty picture this afternoon,’ she added, as Avery was ushered out of the courtroom. ‘I don’t think there is any point in continuing, my point is made, I feel.’

Featherstonehaugh had questioned all these others just as he had Lucius, reducing most of them to gibbering wrecks, but it was difficult to say whether the Wizengamot could overlook the pre-conceptions Fiers had spoken of. It would be naïve to believe that this trial was going to be based solely on the evidence given within it and not the twenty years of lies and aspersion Severus had had to endure prior to it. She’d tried to read the Wizengamot’s facial expressions, but it was a futile endeavour; their features were stoney, unbearably unreadable.

So Hermione left the court room at the end of the day feeling exhausted and deflated, and when she met Severus back in the ante-chamber it was to find him looking much the same. He issued her a tight, closed-mouthed smile, and there didn’t seem to be anything to say. Fiers and Stela fussed him and Severus was polite, not that he wasn’t really pleased to see them, Hermione just suspected he wished it had been under better circumstances.

‘I still cannot believe I spent three years with a war hero working in my shop for five Aur an hour!’ Fiers said, shaking his head at Severus like a disappointed parent.

‘That’s the equivalent of about two Galleons, ten Sickles an hour,’ Hermione explained to Harry, who seemed to find the concept of Severus working as an assistant in a perfumer’s mildly amusing anyway, regardless of how little he’d earned doing it.

‘Leave the boy alone!’ Stela reprimanded her husband. ‘He needs his rest now. He has a busy week of this!’

‘Mmm, we *should* be getting home,’ Hermione agreed, stepping beside Severus and looping her arm through his. Selfishly, perhaps, she needed him to herself for a little while.

‘We’ll be back tomorrow,’ said Harry.
‘And the day after, and the day after!’ Fiers added. ‘Until the end.’

‘Thank you,’ said Severus, though it sounded a little strained. He was too used to having to go through these things alone, Hermione thought.

~oOo~

They returned home that evening to an empty house. Hermione’s parents were taking care of the twins and had agreed to have them overnight until Hermione and Severus settled into the routine of attending court. It was still light outside but Severus drew the living room curtains the moment they stepped through the Floo, then threw himself onto the settee, screwed up his face and pinched the bridge of his nose. Hermione didn’t say anything, didn’t know what to say, but squeezed him on the shoulder as she moved passed him to go make some tea and open a bottle of wine.

‘I’m sorry you had to hear all that today,’ Severus said after taking several considerable gulps of the wine Hermione had handed him a few moments later.

Hermione sighed. ‘I can’t pretend I enjoyed it,’ she said, ‘but Lucius is a liar, I’m sure the Wizengamot know he’s not to be trusted.’

‘He’s not a liar,’ Severus said, as though he rather regretted the fact, ‘he’s an embellisher, perhaps, and a surmiser, but nothing he said was a lie.’

‘Oh…’ Hermione replied. Being reminded of Severus’ history still left a sour taste in her mouth. ‘Well, it doesn’t matter what he is, it’s our turn tomorrow. Harry and me, Minerva… and then Featherstonehaugh can call his witnesses, can’t he? Draco and Dumbledore’s portrait… even Narcissa. Things will start to look a lot better from tomorrow.’

‘Things couldn’t look much worse,’ Severus mumbled, defeatedly.

Hermione shifted closer to him on the settee and placed an arm around his shoulders. ‘But what’s one thing you’re grateful for?’ she asked. ‘In all of this, what’s one thing?’

Severus turned to look at her so their faces were mere inches apart. She noticed his eyes were red-rimmed, and he wore he a strange, panicked expression. He opened his mouth to speak before quickly closing it again.
‘Well?’ she prompted when he remained silence for just a little too long.

‘It was nice of Stela and Fiers to come all this way,’ he said, rather lamely. He looked away as he spoke, as though looking at Hermione caused him some sort of pain. ‘What about you?’

‘Your bravery,’ she replied immediately, having been pondering this all day. ‘I had long thought your loyalty was your greatest quality but now I see that it’s your bravery.’

Severus huffed incredulously. ‘There’s a fine line between bravery and stupidity,’ he returned, draining his glass.
Hermione wiped her damp palms on her robes and then clenched her hands together once more in her lap. Her new perspective of the court room unnerved her; an intense claustrophobia descended as a hundred heads turned in her direction, expectant and impatient as they awaited her response to the prosecution’s question.

‘Perhaps you did not hear me, Miss Granger?’ the hawk-lady sneered, her voice startling Hermione, ‘did you believe Mr. Snape innocent of the crime of which he is accused when you went searching for him?’

She had already been forced to answer questions about Severus’ behaviour towards her and other students when she was at school; about his unfairness and favouritism of the Slytherins; what she recalled of his work for The Order, his actions in the Final Battle, and every answer she had given had felt like she was twisting a knife into his back. There was no amiable way of describing how torturous his lessons had been, and no way to tell them about his vitriolic outbursts and seething hatred of Harry that put Severus in a good light. Hermione felt incoherent and foolish; no matter how she attempted to spin her telling of the story, the prosecution would trick and trap her into betraying him.

Now there was another letter being projected onto a screen; exhibit seventeen or whatever number they were up to, Hermione had lost count. It was a letter she had written to Ron perhaps three months after she left in search of Severus. In it she told Ron she loved him, described her desire for a little time away, and reiterated the doubts she had about Severus’ innocence, and Harry’s naivety. Doubts that she had expressed to Ron, and only Ron, countless times before.

‘Miss Granger,’ a man’s voice suddenly cut across the silence. Hermione looked up to see the Chief Warlock had gotten to his feet. ‘I must insist on an answer,’ he said, in a tone which suggested his patience was running thin. ‘And I must remind you that you are under oath. Did you, or did you not, think the defendant was guilty of murdering Albus Dumbledore when you set out to find him?’

She inhaled sharply. ‘I… I wanted to believe it,’ she said in a panicked whisper, ‘that he was innocent, I mean, but…’ She frowned, daring to cast a quick look at Severus. Earlier he had been avoiding her gaze as he had yesterday, but now he glared at her with such ferocity she felt bruised by it. ‘But… I had some… doubts, I suppose, yes.’

‘Even after everything your good friend Harry Potter had told you, and everyone else for that matter, about Mr. Snape’s memories?’
‘I… I’d always defended Severus to Harry whenever he doubted his loyalty; if Dumbledore trusted him, then we all ought to, but… I suppose, perhaps… I don’t know, it just seemed to me that… that there must have been another way, that Severus killing Dumbledore was… unnecessary, but-‘ She had wanted to go on, tell them how she had changed her mind, how she now knew it was the only way and had no doubt that Severus had acted on Dumbledore’s order, but the prosecution lawyer had apparently finished with her; chewed her up and spat her back out.

‘-so when you set out across Europe, as far as you were concerned,’ the woman interjected, ‘you were hunting down a murderer?’

‘Hunting? No… I… Harry felt very strongly about Severus returning. I was just trying to help a friend, and I thought if Severus stood trial then, then it would be their decision as to whether or not he was guilty. It didn’t matter what I thought!’

‘So it was a sort of extradition… expedition you were on?’

‘I certainly never thought of it like that,’ Hermione replied, willing herself to remain civil but feeling her voice raise. ‘I went looking for him primarily because it gave me an excuse to get away. I didn’t give much consideration to the intricacies of Severus returning, not beyond Harry wanting him to; I don’t even know that I ever expected I would really find him. I mean, even after I did find him, we didn’t return for over two years.’

‘So you played the long game. Lured Mr. Snape into a false sense of security and then convinced him to return to England with you,’ the prosecution said, peering at Hermione over the top of her thick-rimmed spectacles in a condescending manner. ‘But that is by-the-by, really. The fact of the matter is you set out to bring home someone who you believed to be a criminal. The fact that you harboured him for two years can perhaps be overlooked in this instance. We ought to be thanking you for your good work Miss Granger,’ she said with a wry, self-satisfied smile. Hermione noted that she was not being given the opportunity to refute this claim, and the moment she opened her mouth to speak the prosecution said instead, ‘no further questions.’

Feeling momentarily stunned, Hermione tried again to speak but was silenced by Featherstonehaugh hurriedly making his way across the courtroom towards her, issuing her a keen look which suggested she ought to be quiet before she made matters, if possible, even worse.

‘What my learned colleague has conveniently omitted from her questioning,’ Featherstonehaugh said quickly, ‘is that Miss Granger and Mr. Snape have been romantically involved now for three years. Did you enter into a relationship with this man believing he was a murderer, Miss Granger?’ he asked, pointing his finger at Severus, who flinched as though he had been struck by it.
‘Absolutely not,’ Hermione replied, watching Severus carefully. She needed him to believe her.

‘Did you have children with a man you believed to be cold blooded killer?’

‘No!’ she implored. ‘The memories might not have been enough to convince me but Severus has convinced me.’

‘And you would say you know Mr. Snape quite well?’

Hermione looked at Severus once more. He looked wounded, timid almost.

‘Yes,’ Hermione replied decisively, ‘better than anyone.’

Featherstonehaugh nodded. ‘Yes. And what kind of a man would you say he is then?’

Hermione swallowed. ‘Loyal,’ she began, keen to do this justice now she had been given the opportunity, ‘supportive, protective, steadfast, brave, a good father, and… and more capable of loving than anyone I have ever known!’

‘A glowing reference,’ Featherstonehaugh said, ‘so to conclude, you no longer think him guilty of the crime of which he is accused today?’

‘Definitely, absolutely, not!’

‘So your opinion of him changed? Instead you now find him to be a rather respectable man and husband?’

‘I do.’

‘Very good. Now may I remind my learned friend,’ Featherstonehaugh continued looking back at the hawk-lady, ‘that attempting to change peoples’ opinions of other people is the very nature of our work as lawyers, so we cannot pretend that it is beyond the realms of possibility that Miss Granger’s opinion of Mr. Snape may have changed as a result of time or a new perspective. That will be all,
Miss Granger. No further questions.

Hermione had almost breathed an audible sigh of relief as Featherstonehaugh scurried back to his seat, but then the hawk-lady was on her feet again, striding back over to the stand and watching Hermione with a determined expression.

‘Miss Granger, I notice neither “honest” nor “kind” were not amongst your list of adjectives for describing Mr. Snape. Indeed, you have already spent a good portion of this morning’s session using words like “vile” and “bitter” to describe him. At this point I’m not sure which you expect us to believe,’ she said.

‘People change.’

‘Ever heard the phrase a Death Eater never changes his Mark?’ the prosecution sneered.

‘That’s rubbish. There are plenty of Death Eaters who deferred to our side in the end,’ Hermione argued.

‘But did they really defer, Miss Granger, or did they affect deferring to their own end. I posit that Mr. Snape is amongst those in the latter category and I beseech the Winzengamot to acknowledge that the facts seem to point to this,’ she paused, apparently giving the courtroom a moment to digest this. ‘Mr. Snape has continually and repeatedly acted to his own end,’ she added, and then concluded with a smug, ‘that is all,’ and returned to her seat.

Hermione wanted to scream or cry, or both, but before she knew it her feet were carrying her absently down the steps from the stand and across the centre of the court. When she looked again at Severus his gaze had returned to the floor and she felt like she had utterly failed him. A court warden gestured for her to return to her seat but she strode past him bound for the exit, unable to bare another moment of it. It was cowardly to leave Severus like that, when he didn’t have a choice about sitting there and listening to his character being derided so, but she could feel herself crumbling and that would do him no good either.

She pushed through the same oak doors that she had hesitated to enter the day before and moved briskly along the corridors, the only sound the tap-tapping of her shoes on parquet flooring. She turned corners and strode down long corridors without much thought for where she was headed until she found a relatively clandestine alcove and ducked into it. She instantly collapsed onto the windowsill of a low, translucent, diamond-grille window, her head pressed against the cool glass, and tried to relax her body, which she realised now ached she had been holding it so tensely during her interrogation. Slowly, she felt it begin to uncoil, but the anger and frustration she felt both with
the prosecution, and herself, took much longer to subside.

She wasn’t sure how much time had passed when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

‘Here you are,’ a familiar voice spoke. She turned to find Ron kneeling beside her. ‘I’ve been looking for you everywhere.’

‘If I’d have sat in there in any longer I’d have ended up saying something I regretted!’ she groaned, resting her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands despairingly. ‘Even more than I already have.’

‘Mm,’ Ron murmured, sitting down beside her. ‘That’s why I came to find you, actually. I wanted to make sure you didn’t think I’d done that on purpose.’

Hermione withdrew her head from her hands and looked at Ron quizzically. ‘What do you mean?’ she asked.

Ron winced as though he regretted saying anything. ‘Oh… just that… I thought you - or at least Snape - might think that I’d handed over those letters on purpose…’

Hermione felt the anger that had begun to cool revolt like lava in her abdomen again. ‘Well, I didn’t think that, but now you’ve said it I do!’ she snapped. ‘I thought you were here to support us, but you’ve come just to make sure Severus gets sent down, haven’t you? What? Do you think if Severus is sentenced to life in Azkaban I’ll come back to you?’

‘You’re being hysterical, Hermione!’ Ron protested.

‘Don’t “hysterical” me!’ she responded. The argument was oddly nostalgic; Ron accusing of her of hysteria when she considered herself merely passionate. ‘How do they even have those letters if you haven’t done this on purpose?’

‘Merlin! I wish I’d never said anything now. I thought that’s why you’d run out of the court,’ he replied, running a hand through his hair. ‘I did give them the letters, but I gave them to them three years ago. You’d just written to me telling me you were staying abroad. I was pissed off, furious in fact! I brought them in to work, when I was still working with the Aurors, in the hope I could convince them that such a change in heart meant that Snape had tricked you, spelled you, was
holding you against your will, convince them of anything, really, that would mean they’d go looking for you… bring you back…”

‘And what did they make of them?’

‘They didn’t believe a word I said. Thought I was acting like any other spurned ex. They just gave them a cursory look to see if there were any indicators of where you were hiding out; I told them you were too clever to have left any obvious trail, and then they must have kept copies in Severus’ file. I had as much idea as you that they were going to resurface today,’ he concluded, almost pleading with her to believe him.

‘Oh…’

‘I’m sorry that they did resurface but I need you to know I didn’t do this to cause trouble. I don’t want to jeopardise our friendship again when it’s already as tenuous as it is.’

Hermione sighed sadly, finding her anger with Ron to be misplaced. It was the situation she was angry with really. ‘Our friendship isn’t tenuous,’ she assured him, ‘after what we’ve been through together I don’t think it ever could be. That stuff’s unbreakable. Harry, you and me, I don’t think anyone else could properly understand it. Things are different now, but I need you two as much as ever.’

Ron smiled weakly. ‘That means a lot.’

‘It means more to me that you would still want anything to do with me after what I’ve put you through,’ Hermione said, hanging her head somewhat ashamedly.

‘We can’t keep having this conversation every time we see one another,’ Ron said, shaking his head. ‘Today we move on. I’m on your side.’

‘And I yours.’

Ron placed his hand over Hermione’s. It felt simultaneously wrong and yet comforting, and neither feeling particularly weighed out the other so she went with it, until there were more footsteps and suddenly Harry was rounding the corner too. He took a few steps passed the alcove before realising he’d seen them in it and retracing himself.
‘They’ve broken for lunch,’ he said, looking between his two old friends, ‘Hermione, Snape would like to see you in the ante-chamber.’

‘Right,’ she muttered, a feeling of anticipatory dread overcoming her. She turned back to Ron, ‘thank you,’ she said, earnestly. He shrugged nonchalantly in response as she left him and Harry stood in the alcove.

~oOo~

She entered the ante-chamber to find Severus alone, picking at a ham salad sandwich. He looked up tiredly as she entered but wouldn’t, or couldn’t, hold her gaze.

‘Severus, I…’ she trailed off as he waved a dismissive hand to silence her.

‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ he said.

‘I think we have to. Let me explain…’

He shook his head. ‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ he repeated, a little more definitively.

‘Then, just… I’m sorry if I’ve disappointed you,’ she said, needing to say something.

‘Your adamancy that I would need Potter’s influence to get off makes more sense now,’ he said. ‘I suppose I had always presumed that you thought I was innocent, but if you need The Winzegamot’s confirmation then…’

‘I don’t,’ she protested, ‘that woman didn’t ask me when I realised I was wrong. They didn’t get to hear how the moment I saw you in The Moroi I knew you couldn’t have done it for any sort of personal gain.’ She paused, anticipating that he would ask her to elaborate, but he merely took a bite of his sandwich and gulp of his drink. With a sigh she moved towards the table and sat down facing him. ‘You emanated self-loathing,’ she said, ‘vulnerability; and then there was the way you were with me; a tenderness, a gentility that I just knew someone who had murdered would not have been capable of. I just knew, and from that moment any notion I had that you weren’t innocent was gone.’
He studied her for a moment, his sandwich temporarily forgotten. ‘That’s terribly naïve of you,’ he said, ‘uncharacteristically so, to “just know.”’

‘Are you saying you don’t believe me?’ she asked. Severus shrugged but didn’t say anything. ‘This is what they want,’ Hermione continued, reaching out across the table for his hand, ‘us arguing.’

‘I told you I didn’t want to talk about it.’

‘And I don’t want it to fester. I don’t want you believing that I think that of you.’

‘I don’t,’ he conceded at length, washing the last of his sandwich down the pumpkin juice he’d been provided with, ‘you’re too… *Gryffindor* to stand up like this for *something* you don’t believe was the *right* thing.’

‘Oh…’ she said, frowning, ‘I’m not sure how I should take that.’

‘As a compliment. Look, what I definitely *don’t* believe is that you would have stood by me all this time if you didn’t, at least now, believe that I’m innocent. It wasn’t nice to hear that you didn’t always believe I was innocent but… it was clever of you, much cleverer than “just knowing,” not to simply take it at face value. That’s a quality I admire in people.’

‘Skepticism?’ Hermione asked with a raised eyebrow.

‘Pragmatism. Anyway, you’re right, they *are* just doing this to try and get everyone on the defence side arguing. Let’s not give them the satisfaction, eh?’ he concluded, squeezing her hand briefly in return.

‘OK,’ Hermione replied tentatively. Though she was grateful for it, his forgiveness didn’t make her feel any better about the situation, she still felt as though she had done untold damage to his case.

She watched him eat in silence for a little while, and then, when she couldn’t contain herself any longer, felt a duty to Ron to explain to Severus what he had told her about how the letters came to be in the prosecution’s possession.
‘Whatever,’ Severus grunted. ‘Please can we talk about something else?’

‘Sorry, course. I missed Minerva’s testimony. How was it?’ Hermione asked.

Severus shrugged again. ‘She tried her best but, like you, she didn’t have a lot to work with.’

‘It will all seem better after tomorrow,’ she reassured him, though she was speaking as much to herself as she was him.

‘I want you back in there this afternoon,’ Severus then said solemnly, ‘…it’s comforting to know you’re nearby.’

‘Of course,’ she replied instantly, ‘I’m sorry I walked out.’

Another shrug. It was becoming clear that shrugs were a substitute more pertinent things Severus would rather be saying, but Hermione didn’t get the opportunity to extract what these might be before Featherstonehaugh had bumbled into the room, pointedly ignored Hermione in apparent protestation at her performance on the stand earlier, and informed Severus that the Wizengamot had returned from their break and he was required back in court.

~oOo~

The afternoon session wore on much as the morning had; lengthy and tedious in the stifling courtroom.

It was Harry’s turn to be made a fool of, much as Hermione had. He was ridiculed for attempting to ‘ride on the coat tails of his childhood glory,’ and ‘pretending he still maintained any kind of sway of the Wizengamot of today.’

He was asked about Severus’ memories, though, which he described in great detail: how he’d seen Severus and Lily grow up together, seen Severus’ love for her, and that one word, “always,” that haunted Hermione. Severus listened to it with closed eyes and a vaguely serene expression which suggested that it both pained and contented him to be reliving those moments. They helped Hermione understand Severus a little better though, why he behaved the way he did every
Hallowe’en; he’d never had any closure on Lily’s death.

And then the hawk-lady had struck the inevitable blow, arguing that memories were untrustworthy, could be easily tampered with, and Severus’ eyes had shot open as though he couldn’t he believe she had the audacity to suggest that those things he’d experienced, felt, believed had not been real either. But Harry had done his best, and whatever the outcome, Hermione would be eternally grateful to him for his efforts. He stepped down from the stand issuing her a tight-lipped smile, which she returned as best she could.

The next day Draco, similarly, put up a good fight, insistent that Severus had helped him when The Dark Lord had given him that fateful task during his sixth year, but there was no getting away from the apparent closeness Draco had witnessed between the same Dark Lord and Severus during meetings, no ignoring how intrinsic Severus had appeared to be to Voldemort’s plan. Then Narcissa had followed Draco, her tale of Severus taking the Unbreakable Vow perhaps doing more good for Severus’ case than everyone else’s testimonies together.

And this was followed by Dumbledore, the ‘pièce de résistance,’ as Featherstonehaugh described him. A portrait propped up where the other witnesses had sat before looked undoubtedly ridiculous. There were a few titters of laughter from the gallery as the silk cloth that protected it was removed. Even Severus’ grimace shifted fleetingly to a smirk, before settling back as the reality of being faced with his old master dawned on him.

But ridiculous as the portrait might look, it was adept in its duty. It would have been uncharacteristically careless of Dumbledore not to dedicate time and energy to his portrait, and it was evident in the intricacy with which it was able to relay Severus’ role as spy - supporting Harry’s recollection of Severus’ memories, everything that Draco and Narcissa had said, and ruining everything the old Death Eaters had told of - that perhaps Dumbledore had even been preparing for such an event as this. He even withstood the prosecution’s cross-examination better than any of the living witnesses had. Indeed, it was the first time Hermione had seen the hawk-lady flustered and it was, in fact, a rather satisfying feeling.

And so the giving of evidence part of the hearing came to a somewhat satisfactory end, and feeling utterly exhausted, both mentally and physically, Hermione and Severus withdrew to Spinner’s End and fell into bed.

‘Go on then,’ Severus said drowsily after they’d switched off the lights. ‘What’s something you’re grateful for today?’

‘That Featherstonehaugh has finally been able to give the prosecution a taste of their own medicine,’ Hermione answered decisively. ‘You?’
As their eyes adjusted to the darkness she saw that he was looking at her, chewing his bottom lip contemplatively. Then he rolled into his back. ‘That this is almost over,’ he said, lacking any kind of lustre.

‘Yeah,’ Hermione agreed, ‘although, a part of me wishes it would go on forever it means more time together,’ she whispered, frowning at his profile.

~oOo~

The following morning Hermione awoke to husky wishes of ‘happy birthday’ in her ear. Severus kissed her lobe and then trailed a line of soft, whispering pecks down her neck before pausing at her collar bone and returning his attention to her lips. His stubble tickled her chin as he placed one final, deeper kiss there, and she savoured the sensation before he pulled away. ‘I have something for you,’ he said, reaching into the drawers at his side of the bed and pulling out a small square box wrapped in gold paper.

‘Oh, thank you,’ she replied, drawing herself up into a sitting position with her back rested against the headboard. Severus lay on his side, his head rested on one hand and the other lay over Hermione’s thigh where he drew gentle circles with his thumb. ‘I didn’t expect anything when you’ve had so much else going on.’

‘Just open it,’ he said, dismissive of her concerns.

Hermione pulled apart the bow and peeled back the gold paper to reveal a black, leather box. She glanced at Severus curiously and opened the box to find a pair of what appeared to be diamond earrings.

‘Carpathian Crystal,’ Severus said, acknowledging Hermione’s perplexed expression.

‘Oh my God, Severus,’ Hermione said, picking one out between her thumb and forefinger to examine more closely. ‘They’re beautiful. How did you..?’

‘That’s the original reason I contacted Fiers and Stela. I wanted them to owl them over, not bring them themselves. You like them then? I was worried they might be a bit… fancy.’
'I have been known to be fancy from time to time, you know! I love them!'

‘Hmm…’ he murmured, clearly unconvinced, ‘then why do you look so… consternated about them?’

Hermione smiled the smile of someone who had been caught out trying to conceal something. ‘I suppose it’s just… well, they must have cost a fortune,’ she said, frowning. ‘We’re not really in a position to be buying Carpathian Crystal jewellery now, are we?’

Severus chuckled. ‘Don’t worry, you- we won’t starve,’ he said. ‘In fact, I’ll make you a slap up breakfast to prove it. Full works?’

‘Alright,’ she practically giggled, glad to pretend for just a little longer that this was a birthday like any other. She watched as he pulled on a t-shirt and shabby pair of faded black jeans and hurried, pausing momentarily at the door of the twins’ room, down the stairs.

Hermione got herself and the twins out of bed and followed Severus downstairs a few minutes later to the smell of sizzling bacon. They sat, just the four of them, eating and laughing until they were disturbed by a brief knock at the front door followed by Hermione’s parents shouting their greetings down the hallway.

‘In here!’ Hermione called back.

‘Morning,’ Severus grunted as they came into the room.

‘Good morning,’ they replied in chorus, then, ‘happy birthday darling!’ Georgia said, approaching Hermione with open arms. They hugged one another tightly and then Georgia withdrew. ‘Hard to believe you’re twenty-six! It goes so fast. Be sure to appreciate that with these two…’ she said, trailing off as though another thought was consuming her as she stroked the babies’ heads. Perhaps she had realised that Severus might not have the opportunity to appreciate the twins growing up, which was precisely the thought that had struck Hermione, but then, seemingly everything anyone said reminded Hermione of that these days.

‘Here you go ‘Mione,’ Bertram added, handing Hermione a pale blue envelope and kissing her on the top of the head.
‘Thank you,’ she replied, opening it to find a birthday card and a cheque for a substantial amount inside. ‘Oh… gosh! Thank you!’ she said. Severus peered over her shoulder but looked more uncomfortable than grateful.

‘You’re welcome,’ Georgia said, smiling in a way which reminded Hermione that her parents questioned her life choices.

‘Just the closing statement today, then?’ Bertram asked, filling the empty seat beside Severus.

‘Yes. We could be back just after lunchtime,’ Hermione replied, standing and putting the dirty pots in the sink.

‘It’s no matter,’ Georgia shrugged, ‘we’re going to go to the park, aren’t we darlings?’ she added, fussing the babies again, at which Isaac brought his breakfast back up all down his front.

‘Merlin!’ Severus groaned, rushing to get a cloth.

‘We’ll sort it,’ Georgia interjected, grabbing the cloth from Severus’ hand.

‘No!’ he snapped, snatching it back. ‘I’ll do it.’

Georgia acquiesced with a glance at Hermione, who shook her head apologetically in the hope that her mother would leave it at that.

‘I think he’s clean,’ Hermione said after watching Severus wipe Isaac’s front for far longer than was necessary.

Severus sighed and stood straight. ‘Sorry,’ he murmured to Georgia, looking suitably embarrassed.

Georgia smiled weakly and waved her hand dismissively. ‘You’re under a lot of stress,’ she said, as though that made his behaviour acceptable. ‘Now, you two go get ready. We’ve got everything under hand here.’
Hermione led Severus upstairs and they dressed in silence with the exception of Severus’ occasional deep sighs, frustrated groans, and slamming of wardrobe doors.

‘I’m sensing something is the matter beyond it being the last proper day of the trial?’ she said eventually.

Severus sighed again. ‘Why’d they have to give you so much money?’ he asked, sounding petulant.

‘Err… because I’m their daughter, because it’s my birthday, because they’re nice people doing a nice thing, or maybe because, my God, we could use it?’ she replied.

‘I can look after you,’ he mumbled.

‘No one’s saying you can’t, Severus - not that I need looking after, of course. My parents are just helping us out, that’s all.’

‘Fine,’ he grumbled, like a teenager. ‘But… well, if you’ll accept money from them, you’ll accept it from me,’ he said, reaching into the top drawer of his bedside cabinet and pulling out the papers for signing over the house and giving Hermione access to his Gringotts account from within.

‘Severus, do you really think there’s any need?’

‘-Yes. Whether you need it or not, I want to look after you. Sign them and then I’ll know you and the kids at least have the house and the money, well, what’s left the money,’ he laughed grimly. ‘It would make me feel a lot better.’

‘Fine,’ she said, in perfect imitation of his earlier “fine.” He simply scowled in response and handed the parchment over to her. Hermione read through them briefly, trusting that Severus wouldn’t have her signing anything dicey, and scribbled her name on the line at the bottom. Severus then took the form and did the same. ‘It just seems like we’re admitting defeat by signing those,’ she added once he’d finished.

‘Thank you,’ he said at last, sounding genuinely relieved and ignoring her comment. ‘Come on now, let’s go.’
'Hang on.' And with that she picked out her new earrings and slid them into her lobes. They looked too dressy for what she was wearing, even though they were of a subtle size, but they also made Hermione feel attached to something solid, close to Bolstrad, where she’d felt secure, eventually, and close to Severus who had made her feel that way.

~oOo~

As Hermione had predicted Featherstonehaugh and the hawk-lady’s closing statements had not taken too long. The prosecution had denigrated Severus’ character succinctly, whilst Featherstonehaugh, for his part, had done all he could to undo this, reminding the Winzengamot of his client’s heroism and sacrifice. But ultimately Hermione could not shake the feeling of uncertainty that washed over her as the Wizengamot filed out of the courtroom to the deliberation chamber.

‘Now we just wait,’ Featherstonehaugh informed them unhelpfully as they sat in the ante-chamber half an hour later. ‘I think we managed to undo some of the damage done the other day at any rate,’ he added, casting a dark look in Hermione’s direction.

‘I thought I’d feel relieved that it was over,’ Severus said, clutching Hermione’s hand under the table, which wasn’t like him at all. ‘But I mostly feel sick.’

Hermione smiled softly at him. ‘Then let’s get you home.’

Severus squinted at her, glanced at his watch, looked as though he was about to say one thing and then said instead, ‘yes, come on,’ and led her out to the Atrium and through one of the fireplaces. They re-appeared in Spinner’s End a few moments later to a confusing chorus of ‘Happy Birthday’ yelled by a dozen or so people crammed into their tiny living room. Hermione froze, still stood in the hearth, looking bewilderedly between her unexpected guests and Severus.

‘Surprise,’ he murmured in her ear, not sounding too enthusiastic about it.

‘I…’ Hermione stammered, ‘wow! I don’t know what to say,’ she added, and never a truer phrase had been spoken. She was completely taken aback; against the backdrop of the trial, birthday celebrations felt completely out of sorts.

‘We thought it might be nice to have a little surprise party for you, darling,’ Georgia said, stepping forward from the gathering with a grumpy looking Isaac in her arms. He reached out for Hermione who took him as a distraction as much as anything else.
'Wow,’ she repeated. ‘It certainly is a surprise.’

‘There’s food and drink and music and presents,’ Harry said, standing beside Georgia.

Hermione feigned a smile and looked back at Severus whose expression remained neutral.
‘Sounds… fun,’ he said silkily, the corner of his mouth twitching.

‘Yes, it does,’ Hermione said, sounding, if not feeling, a little more convinced.

She squeezed Severus’ hand in a subtle show of solidarity and began making her way around the guests, chatting, receiving gifts and hugs, cooing over baby James and new baby Potter’s scan photograph, and having everyone coo over the twins. Harry manned a barbecue in the back garden and nibbles were laid out in the kitchen. It would have been quite pleasant if it wasn’t for the awful sense of foreboding which relentlessly overshadowed it.

‘Did you organise this then?’ Hermione asked, managing to get Severus alone by the buffet table over an hour later.

He shook his head. ‘The Potters, in conjunction with your mother. I’m not sure I actually even agreed to it,’ he said, shoving a sausage roll on his mouth and glancing around at their guests a little skeptically.

‘Then let’s ask everyone to leave,’ Hermione pleaded, ‘it doesn’t feel right having them here when tonight could be…’

‘Our last night,’ Severus finished for her. ‘Not saying it aloud isn’t going to make any less true, but anyway, no. The world hasn’t stopped spinning just because of the trial. If nothing else I think they just want to take your mind off things.’

‘Mmm,’ she murmured thoughtfully. If the intention of the party had been to take Hermione’s mind off things, it had failed miserably in its task, for the only topic of conversation amongst the guests was indeed the trial. Harry, Neville and Fiers had sat out in the garden, dissecting all the evidence themselves; Luna had tried to engage Stela and Eileen in conversation about discrepancies between Lucius and Dumbledore’s version of events; and everyone else had done nothing but try and convince Hermione that everything was going to be alright, reminding her, each time they said it, of the distinct possibility that it everything might be far from alright. ‘And you’re OK?’ Hermione asked
‘I’ll be better once Fiers and Stela let up on the babies,’ he replied, looking through the kitchen window to where their old friends were monopolising the babies on the grass outside. ‘I want a turn.’

Hermione chuckled. ‘Has your mother been formally introduced?’

‘Err…’

‘You ought to,’ Hermione advised, stroking his arm. ‘She seems to be coming around to the idea of them.’

‘You’ll let her see them, won’t you, if I’m not around?’ he asked, frowning.

‘Of course!’ Hermione exclaimed. ‘If that’s what she wants.’

‘I’ll go find out,’ he said, kissing the top of Hermione’s head, pinching one last sausage roll from the table and heading outside into the garden in search of his babies. Hermione watched as he crouched on the grass and immediately they both went to him for hugs.

‘He is surprisingly good with them,’ Harry suddenly said, standing beside Hermione as though he’d been waiting for Severus to leave before making himself known. ‘How are you faring?’

‘Not great,’ Hermione replied, adding, with a small smile, ‘but so long as Severus doesn’t know that.’

‘Of course he knows that,’ Harry stated. ‘You might be able to hide it from the rest of us, but not him.’

Hermione sighed with closed eyes. ‘I don’t know how I’m going to cope.’

Harry made a tutting sound. ‘You’ll cope because you always do, and if you’re struggling… well, look around you! Everyone here would help you out in a heartbeat, regardless of whether Sna-
Severus goes to Azkaban or not.’

‘Of course,’ she said, ‘I know everyone means well, and of course that will be useful practically, but Severus and I… I don’t know… we understand one another, that’s the only way I can describe it, and no one is going to be able to replace that.’

Harry didn’t reply for a moment and then, a little sheepishly, asked. ‘Not even Ron?’

‘Ron?’

‘I feel like I interrupted a… moment of some description, outside of the courtroom the other day,’ he explained.

‘Definitely not!’ Hermione replied, aghast, ‘at least not in the way you’re implying. Ron doesn’t think that, does he?’

‘He hasn’t said that he does,’ Harry said, now grazing at the buffet table himself. ‘But I know if you said the word, he’d be… open to the idea.’

‘I’ve been quite explicit that I’d like for us to be friends, just friends,’ she said, thinking back to see if there was a time she might have given Ron the wrong impression. She’d held his hand for a moment in that little alcove, but that was all, and she’d do the same with Harry, or any of her friends, it didn’t mean anything.

‘And that’s fine,’ Harry shrugged, ‘but if things don’t go in Severus’ favour tomorrow, just be careful with Ron. He’s always going to wonder what could have been and I have to look out the both of you.’

‘I can’t be worrying about Ron, not tonight,’ Hermione said, shaking her head and turning her attention back to the scene in the garden.

‘Hermione?’ came a sudden call from outside. ‘Hermione?’ It was Georgia, who a moment later was stepping into the kitchen. ‘Come outside, let’s get some photographs of you, Severus and the babies,’ she said, waving the camera Severus had bought for Hermione on their first Christmas together around before her. ‘Does this have the magic, moving film in it?’
‘Yes,’ Hermione replied with a smile, ‘come on, Harry. Let’s get some group shots too.’

They followed Georgia outside where Hermione was promptly directed to stand beside Severus in front of the flowerbed, which consisted solely of his booming crop of Snowdonia Hawkweed. Severus sidled up beside her with Erin in his arms and Eileen, who appeared to have cheered Isaac up somewhat, handed him to Hermione. Severus placed his spare arm firmly around Hermione’s shoulders as she slid hers around his waist.

‘Say cheese,’ Georgia urged, standing a few paces away and holding the camera up to her face.

Hermione looked up at Severus who raised a customary eyebrow and issued the camera with something more akin to a smirk than a smile, which caused Hermione to giggle, Erin to wriggle, and Isaac to cry at precisely the moment Georgia pressed the shutter button.

~oOo~

‘That was nice of everyone really, I suppose,’ Hermione said, coming back into the living room where Severus was sat, looking a little frazzled, on the settee. He nursed a glass of red wine in his hands and Hermione suspected he might have had perhaps one too many.

‘Mmm…’ he grumbled in agreement, swilling the contents of the glass. ‘That’s all I wanted, for you to be surrounded by your friends and family if things don’t go well tomorrow.’

‘I know,’ Hermione replied sadly. It seemed futile to rebuke him with her usual “you’re going to be found innocent” mantra. ‘We’ll be fine, but that doesn’t mean we won’t miss you, won’t think about you all the time, or that I won’t make sure your children know the truth!’

‘I should think not,’ he replied with a smirk, ‘actually… now we’re alone,’ he said, ‘there’s something else I’d like to give you.’

‘You already gave me something,’ she replied with a hint of suspicion. ‘The earrings were more than enough.’

‘This is not really for your birthday,’ he explained as he stood, discarding his wine on the coffee
table, ‘not this birthday anyway. Wait here.’ And with that he had dashed out of the room and up the stairs. There was a creaking of floorboards above Hermione’s head and the sound of something heavy been slid across the bare wood before Severus returned a moment later carrying a shoebox, which, after just a slight hesitation, he passed to Hermione.

Looking up at him a little bewildered she slowly removed the lid. Inside was crammed full of sealed envelopes, each with her name written on them in Severus’ spiky scrawl. She glanced up at him bemused and questioning.

He sighed and sat down beside her again, leaning against the back of the settee but looking far from relaxed. ‘Seeing as I won’t be able to write to you should things not go as planned tomorrow, I’ve written you these letters instead, one for every birthday, Christmas, and anniversary of our getting together. They’re all dated and you have to promise me you won’t open them until the date it says on the letter.’

Hermione looked down at the box with an overwhelming sadness. Suddenly the reality of the possibility that after tomorrow she would never see him again felt too keen. She realised that for all they had spoken about it, planned for it, over the last few months, she had avoided considering what it would actually mean; fundamentally, never seeing one another again. At a loss for words, she looked back to Severus, wanting to thank him but not sure she could convey the depth of gratitude she was feeling, only to find that he was crying. He was sat perfectly still, one hand over his eyes but tears streaming visibly down his cheeks, but the moment he felt Hermione watching him he could hold his composure no more. He began to tremble, tear at his hair, and groan as if in pain, as wild sobs gripped his body.

Hermione had never seen him cry before and for a fleeting moment she wasn’t sure how to react, how he would want her to react. She placed a tentative hand on his shoulder but as another sob wracked his body she instinctively drew him close to her, stroking one hand through his hair, so he could tear at it no longer, and gripping him tightly with the other. She didn’t speak but merely held him, hushing him soothingly for time to time, until he had exhausted himself.

He lay with his head rested against her chest for a moment breathing long, steadying breaths, then righted himself in his seat at length and hid his face behind his hands once more. ‘Fuck,’ he managed at length, ‘sorry.’

‘You don’t have anything to apologise for,’ Hermione assured him.

‘It’s the thought of leaving you, the twins too… it’s killing me. It hurts,’ he said meekly, pointing to his chest as if to say that is where his pain was manifest. ‘I shouldn’t have let myself get so… complacent in my happiness.’
‘Yes you should,’ Hermione replied, placing a kiss at his temple, ‘you deserve happiness.’

‘Well, even if it was just for a little while, I’m glad I got to experience it,’ he said, sniffing loudly and rubbing his eyes one last time.

‘Severus…’ Hermione sighed, feeling her own eyes well up. He’d had such a tragic life and now it seemed likely it might have such a tragic ending.

‘No more crying,’ he ordered, however, thankfully stopping her before she had even started.

‘Bed?’

‘No. I don’t want to sleep. I don’t want to miss a moment of being with you. Let’s just… talk.’

She smiled. ‘Like we used to, back in Bolstrad when we’d stay up all night debating an article from one of your potions journals or something to do with The Watch?’

‘Yeah, or when we used to plan for the future…’

‘You want to do that?’ she asked with frown. A part of her was hopeful that he did, but another part knew it would be indeterminately painful for both of them.

Severus chuckled quietly. ‘Just tell me of your plans,’ he said, ‘regardless of what happens tomorrow.’

And so she did. She told him of her half-formed plans to work in The Ministry again, “nothing fancy, just something. Maybe part time,” she told him how she’d like to take the twins back to Bolstrad, perhaps once a year, and they shared their predictions on what houses Erin and Isaac would be sorted into once they went to Hogwarts. In her mind, when she imagined these things, Severus was always there beside her, but he remained a shadowy, allusive figure. She trusted it was the uncertainty of the whole thing that caused this, but it unnerved her, terrified her even, that she was unable to conjure more vivid images of him, like he was somehow fading before he was even gone.
'You’ll be fantastic whatever you do. All of you,’ Severus said tiredly just as the sun was beginning to rise. They sat cross legged, facing one another on the living room floor, a plate of cold vol-au-vents from the party between them. The night had gone too quickly.

Hermione smiled back at him. ‘I love you,’ she said, reaching out to stroke his stubbly chin. He brought his hand up to hers and then pressed his lips against it, his dark eyes never leaving her hazel ones.

‘I think I just heard the twins,’ he said after a long moment, he looked torn between wanting to remain alone with Hermione and seeing the babies upstairs. Hermione took his hand and pulled him to his feet, leading him upstairs to the twins’ room. They were both awake, chubby faces pressed against the bars of their cots. Severus leaned over to pick Isaac up, holding him out in front of himself for a moment, checking him over with a slight frown, before pulling him against his chest. Hermione pulled Erin into her arms likewise. ‘I never would have thought I could have had a part in creating anything as beautiful as these two,’ Severus said looking between them both. He reached out with his spare hand to stroke a thumb over one of Erin’s curls.

‘I would have,’ Hermione whispered, smiling at him sadly as her heart swelled to see him stood there holding his son. ‘It’s still early. Let’s have breakfast together, before my parents get here.’

Severus had nodded and followed her back downstairs where they’d sat together at the kitchen table, feeding the twins, eating their own toast, and talking about anything other than the latest edition of The Daily Prophet, which showed a photograph of Severus looking drawn and weary on the steps of the courthouse below a headline that cried: “The Last Day of The Last Death Eater!” With breakfast all finished Hermione had showered and dressed slowly, allowing Severus time alone with the children. As she did her hair she heard him talking them in the next room, so quietly that she suspected he didn’t mean for her to hear, and in many respects she rather wished she hadn’t on account of how it made her heart ache. He told them how much he loved them, would miss them, was proud of them; how he didn’t mind what they did, what they became, so long as they were happy.

Her parents had arrived shortly afterwards. Severus had kissed each of the babies on the forehead as they sat, non-the-wiser, in their grandparents arms, before striding away from them and refusing to look back.

‘No more pretending now,’ Severus said as he and Hermione stood together in the fireplace, his fingers clutching at her upper arms so tightly it was almost painful, though it was a welcome pain, it felt rich against her numbness. ‘I love you,’ he added, simply but earnestly.
‘I love you too,’ she replied, matching his sincerity.

Between stepping out of the green flames into the Atrium at the Ministry and seeing Severus stood in the dock for the final time was something of a blur, and Hermione only really came to her senses when the Chief Warlock, in his starched, plum-coloured robes, got to his feet and cleared his throat.

‘We have listened and seen much evidence in this case over the past week. The Winzengamot has discussed and debated this evidence late into the night and have come to a conclusion regarding it.’ He peeled back the opening of an envelope, reminding Hermione of those old Muggle talent shows she’d used to watch with her mum on a Saturday evening when she was younger, and reminding her also that for almost everyone in the courtroom what was written on the parchment inside was equally as entertaining. ‘We find the defendant…’ the Chief Warlock read, before pausing at length, undoubtedly for dramatic effect, or merely to prolong Severus’ pain. ‘…Not guilty of the murder of Albus Dumbledore.’

~oOo~

A/N: Phew! Obviously that was going to be the outcome! One more chapter and an epilogue to go. I could be a while getting them up, but they’re on the way I promise!
The End, The Beginning

Hermione felt like she was under water. The courtroom had erupted into a cacophony of roaring cheers and boos, and though she was vaguely aware that the former were louder than the latter she couldn’t make sense of it. Everyone had suddenly risen to their feet, though Hermione remained seated, not trusting her legs to hold her weight.

‘W-what did he say?’ she stammered, reaching out with a trembling hand to get Harry’s attention.

‘Hermione! Didn’t you hear!’ he cried over the din, hoisting her to her feet and wrapping his arms around her. ‘Not guilty, they said!’

‘Not guilty,’ she repeated, ‘not guilty...’

Harry smiled at her. ‘He’s free,’ he clarified.

Hermione felt a rush of blood to her head and, suddenly feeling more present, her first thought was of Severus. Over the sea of people who now milled about the courtroom, sharing animated conversation, however they felt about the verdict, she saw Severus still on the stand. He was on his feet but bent double, his arms outstretched before him as he gripped the sides of the stand; even at this distance Hermione could make out that his knuckles were white he was holding so tight, and that the breaths he was taking were shallow and panicked.

‘Go on then,’ Harry said, urging her forward. She realised she was just staring dumbly at Severus when she should be going to him, taking him in her arms and letting him know that finally, everything really was going to be alright.

She squeezed Harry’s shoulders where her hands still lay following their hug and issued him a relieved and grateful smile. ‘Thank you,’ she said simply, knowing there was no way she could ever repay him, and began making her way through the crowd. A few people who clearly recognised her congratulated her as she passed, but her focus was now solely on Severus, who still maintained his hunched position on the stand.

‘Severus,’ she whispered as she neared him, placing a gentle hand on his upper arm.
He jumped as though she’d shocked him and turned to face her. ‘You… you’re always right,’ he said, a little breathlessly after taking a moment to compose himself.

Hermione smiled. ‘Perhaps you should listen to me more often then,’ she said, moving closer to him and wrapping her arms around his waist. He stiffened and glanced around the room as he was wont to do during public displays of affection, but there was no way Hermione was relenting, not today, and before long he had settled into her arms, stroking a stray curl behind her ear as she rested her head against his chest, listening the thump, thump of his heart as the beat slowed to normal.

‘There are things still left to discuss,’ Featherstonehaugh’s voice cut through the moment. Hermione peeled herself away from her embrace with Severus reluctantly and they both peered down at the little old man. He had a glint of pride in his eyes, though Hermione imagined that this was more in response to his own efforts as Severus’ lawyer rather than anything either of them had done.

Severus sighed tiredly, rubbing his eyes with the hand that didn’t still clutch at Hermione.

‘We just need to get through the next hour or so and then we’re free,’ Hermione said in response. ‘Forever.’

‘I’m reluctant to imagine a forever,’ Severus replied, looking suddenly downcast again, ‘if this trial has taught me anything its that I shouldn’t be taking forevers for granted.’

Hermione shook her head. ‘Then for now, at least, let’s just take each day as it comes.’

~oOo~

A short while later Hermione sat in the ante-chamber surrounded by her friends. As she watched Severus, Harry, and Featherstonehaugh converse across the room it gradually dawned on her that this was real. Severus was going to be coming home with her, the twins would be waiting for them there, and they would be able to get on with their lives. She imagined their future and now, and when she thought of all those things she had described to Severus last night - her job at Ministry, trips to Romania, waving the twins off on their first trip to Hogwarts - Severus was there was beside her, opaque, solid, and unwavering again.

‘You must promise that you will come and visit us at the first opportunity,’ Stela said, filling Hermione’s glass from a decanter of wine that had appeared from goodness knows where, and which kept refilling itself each time the last dregs were poured into someone’s glass.
‘We’d love that,’ Hermione replied.

‘And you must also promise to bring those babies with you,’ Fiers added. ‘In fact do not come if you are not going to bring those babies!’

Hermione laughed and Stela smacked her husband disapprovingly on the arm. Laughing felt less forced, Hermione noted. In fact, everything felt more natural. The guilt of daring to enjoy herself had lifted.

Looking back over at Severus she saw that he now appeared to be signing something for Featherstonehaugh and then the lawyer was packing his paperwork back into his briefcase one last time. The two men shook hands and then Featherstonehaugh was out of the door and gone from their lives. Harry was saying something to Severus before he too turned and left the little gathering. Severus watched the door close behind his old nemesis and then slunk back over to where Hermione and the others were sat.

‘All sorted?’ Hermione asked as he took the empty seat beside her.

‘Ahuh. Just needed to sign some bits off for Featherstonehaugh,’ he said. ‘I’ll miss him in a strange sort of way!’

‘Pff,’ Hermione hissed, ‘whilst I shall be eternally grateful to him, miss him I shall not!’

‘Wine, Severus,’ Fiers interjected, pouring Severus a glass before he’d actually consented to it. ‘We were just organising your first trip back Bolstrad!’ he added, with a wink.

And it was as simple as that. They floated back into normal conversation; a holiday, Christmas plans, the impending birth of the Potter’s second child, Neville being given the responsibility of a NEWT class after next term. It was simplicity, and it was perfect. Hermione half-expected Severus to ask how long it would be until they could leave, but he didn’t. He drank his wine and contributed to the conversation, all the while holding Hermione’s hand beneath the table, running small circles over her palm with his thumb.

A short while later the door opened again and Harry came through it, his arms laden with one heavy cardboard box and with another levitating just behind him. ‘I thought you might like to do the honours, Snape,’ he said, approaching their table and dumping both boxes in front of Hermione and
Severus with a thud. Their gaze rose quizzically from the boxes to Harry. ‘These are all the documents the Ministry has been keeping on you since, well, for a long time,’ he explained. ‘We’ll only destroy them now you’ve been found innocent so I thought, maybe you’d like to be the one to do the deed.’

Severus raised an eyebrow and ran a thumb over the top of the papers, stopping at random and plucking out an old arrest warrant, then an old *Prophet* cover showing him as headteacher, then some court documents. His wand had been shoved unceremoniously between a transcript of his most recent interview with the Aurors and a wad of parchments which appeared to be his OWL results. Why they had those on file, he had no idea. He pulled his wand out, which required some force considering how tightly packed in the papers were, and accidentally dislodged something small and glittering which fell onto the stone floor with a rather disconcerting smashing sound.

Both Hermione and Severus peered under the table to see a small glass bottle broken at their feet, and leaking from it a silvery liquid substance. Hermione felt Severus stiffen and knew immediately that those were his memories, his memories of Lily. She looked up at him but his gaze was fixed on the bottle and it was clear from his expression that he was debating wildly with himself about what he should do. Hermione shifted away from him slightly to give him a moment to think, and watched as he took his wand and pointed it at the bottle. He waited another long moment, his fingers twitcher on his wand handle, and then he straightened his arm and spoke.

‘*Scourge*—’ he began to say, but Hermione interrupted him.

‘-No!’ she said, withdrawing her own wand and pointing it at the broken bottle. ‘*Reparo,*’ she spoke instead. The shards of glass which littered the floor pulled themselves together and the liquid withdrew back inside it.

‘What are you doing?’ Severus asked as she bent down to scoop the bottle up off the floor. ‘I don’t need those.’

‘Just… let’s hold onto them. They can stay in the bottle if you prefer, but at least you’ll know they’re there. In case you change your mind.’

He seemed to think this over and then acceded with a single nod of his head, and so Hermione knew she had correctly read the reluctance in his expression earlier. Lily was always going to be a part of who Severus was, and Hermione loved who Severus was, so that was that. She pocketed the bottle and squeezed his hand.

‘I’m glad to have this back, at least,’ he said, holding his wand up. ‘It felt like I was missing a limb.’
‘I can imagine. Try it out on those boxes then,’ Hermione advised. Severus pointed his wand at the first box and muttered an *incendio* charm, reducing the box to ashes in a matter of minutes. Then he did the same with the second box.

‘That’s it then,’ he said, placing his wand back into his robe pocket and patting it as though checking it hadn’t gone anywhere. ‘That’s the end of all this nastiness.’

‘And the beginning of our next chapter,’ Hermione added.

‘I’ll drink to that,’ Harry suddenly said, raising his glass of wine. He’d spoken loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear, and suddenly they were all facing Hermione and Severus with their glasses extended into the air. ‘To new beginnings,’ Harry said.

‘New beginnings,’ the crowd retorted in unison, clinking their glasses together and taking a drink.

Amidst the noise Hermione turned back to Severus. ‘Whenever you’re ready to leave, just say the word.’

‘I will, but not yet,’ he said, glancing around the room as if looking for someone. Hermione followed his gaze to where Minerva sat chatting with Hannah and Luna. ‘Actually,’ he continued, ‘I should probably go round and have a word with everyone before we leave. Thank them for their support.’

‘I’m sure they’d appreciate that,’ Hermione said, watching Severus move across the room, speaking to no one, it turned out, until he reached Minerva. Hannah and Luna quickly came to join Hermione’s table leaving the old colleagues to talk alone.

~oOo~

In the weeks which followed Hermione and Severus’ lives began to settle into what, in time, would become their normal. There were perhaps more visitors than they would ordinarily expect, people popping by to check that they were alright, or ask if they needed anything, and whenever either of them left the house, whether it be a trip to the corner shop for a pint of milk or a stroll along the canal, reporters for all kinds of publications would appear out of nowhere asking for comment on the trial. Hermione suggested that Severus might do one interview, to satisfy their appetites, but he refused, knowing that they’d get bored eventually when another, more salacious story came to light. Hermione contented herself with cutting every positive article about Severus out of the newspapers.
and compiling them in a sort of scrapbook. Severus hated this too but Hermione thought it might help the twins make sense of everything when they were older.

They were a busy few weeks though. Everything that had been put on hold prior to and during the trial now needed tending to, and so decorating Spinner’s End, making it a proper home, spending time with family and friends without the burden of the trial hanging over them, and doting on the twins, were all prioritised.

A week after the trial a letter had arrived from the Ministry, sealed with the emblem of the Minister for Magic himself:

Dear Mr. Snape,

I am writing to thank you for your efforts in the recent, regrettable war. I would like to extend my appreciation for the part you played and acknowledge personally the risks you took.

I have known you for many years and am guilty of never seeing what an honest, loyal soldier you were in the fight against Voldemort. Along with those you fought alongside your name will now find its right place in the history books; your story will be told.

As with the others who took part in the war, whether that part was small or large, it will be honoured with financial reward, and in your case an Order of Merlin. Please contact my office directly so that this can be arranged for you as quickly as possible.

Yours sincerely,
Kingsley Shacklebolt
Minister for Magic.

‘You going to tell him where to stick it?’ Hermione asked, after Severus had told her what the letter said.

‘I would have, once,’ Severus said, ‘but I think, all things considered, I ought to accept it. I shall consider it compensation… the money at least. I don’t want the Order. That’s just ridiculous.’

‘Well I think it’s well earned,’ Hermione said, stretching up to place a congratulatory kiss on his
But eventually things began to settle down and they found time to enjoy themselves, which for Severus meant getting as far away from Cokeworth as was reasonably possible, whenever they could. This was how they found themselves enjoying a picnic on a hillock on an uncharacteristically warm day towards the end of October. The leaves of the trees were tinged with Autumnal oranges and the stream ran too cold for them to dip their feet in, but on the hillock a warm breeze blew and when the sun peered out from behind the clouds it could have been high summer.

Severus shielded his eyes as he woke from his nap. As his eyes adjusted to the light he listened to the giggle of the children not too far away, and Hermione’s gentle voice encouraging Erin to share her toy with Isaac. He enjoyed the earthiness of the scene. The trickle of the stream, twittering birdsong, and rustle of leaves as the wind blusted through their branches. He had not realised what a toll the monotony of months cooped up in Spinner’s End had had on him until today when he and Hermione had finally found the time get out into the Peak District. He’d felt an overwhelming desire for an open space, to be able to walk for miles without seeing civilisation, and to breathe fresh, unpolluted air. It had been Hermione who suggest they go hiking, just as they had used to do in Bolstrad, and she’d gone out and bought baby carrier backpacks with some of the money her parents had given her. Severus hadn’t even known such things existed, but having Erin on his back while he walked gave him a greater sense of peace.

They’d stopped on the hillock for lunch, ever intending to move on further through a nearby forest, but it had turned out to be such a tranquil spot that they had decided instead to spend the day there until dusk, before Apparating, begrudgingly, back home.

‘Hello sleepy head,’ Hermione said, disturbing Severus’ reverie as she made her way back to the picnic blanket.

‘I wasn’t sleeping,’ he protested.

‘Of course you weren’t,’ Hermione replied, sitting crossed-legged next to him as the twins crawled about on the blanket before them. ‘These two on the other hand will sleep very well tonight I should imagine.’

‘Finally some peace and quiet then.’

‘Oi!’
‘You know I don’t mean it,’ he said, draping an arm over her shoulder as they both looked fondly down at the babies. Erin was still refusing to share her teddy, much to Isaac’s chagrin. ‘Anyway, I should make the most of being able to spend my days with them like this.’ Hermione looked at him questioningly. ‘I spoke to Minerva after the trial. She told me about the job going to Hogwarts. Potions Master,’ he continued in response. ‘I said I’d take it.’

‘What?’ Hermione exclaimed. ‘But you hate teaching. Why would you put yourself through that again?’

‘Because I have responsibilities now,’ he said. ‘I’ve told you, I want to be able to provide for you all and currently my savings are dwindling. We can’t rely on handouts from your parents forever and Merlin, what I would give to see the twins in clothes that haven’t once belonged to Potter’s offspring!’

‘That’s all fair enough,’ Hermione said, ‘but… well, what would you do if you could do anything?’

‘Anything?’

‘Yeah, if you didn’t have to worry about all that stuff. What would you do then?’

‘Well…’ he pondered, ‘I suppose, potions is what I know, so something with that…’ He paused to consider this carefully. He had enjoyed potion making before he began teaching it, he thought. When you didn’t have the lives of thirty inept students to consider it could be quite a calming and reflective process and it would certainly be nice not to have a master, for once no one to answer to whether it be Lord Voldemort, Dumbledore or even the humble Fiers; in fact, something that didn’t involve anyone else at all. ‘Self-employed,’ he added, ‘yeah, I’d do freelance potions work. Maybe I’d specialise in anti-venoms. Then there’d be a research element to it too.’

‘That sounds perfect for you,’ Hermione said, looking at him with an odd expression; wild eyes and an almost-smile.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘Severus… if that’s what you want to do then you should do it!’

‘I can’t, for all the reasons I’ve just said,’ he protested.
‘We’d manage,’ she encouraged. ‘I’m getting about ready to go back to work. I’ve seen a couple of part-time jobs advertised in *The Prophet*. That way childcare wouldn’t be an issue. We’d make it work.’

‘Hmm… and I’ll have my “compensation” soon, I suppose, that’ll tide us over for a while.’

‘That might be better spent starting up your business. Getting some new equipment, marketing and whatnot.’

Severus sighed contemplatively. ‘We’ll never be rich.’

‘Perhaps not,’ she agreed, ‘but that isn’t to say we won’t be happy.’

~oOo~

They lay in bed later that night, Hermione’s head on Severus’ chest, as they rested their aching legs. A sliver of silvery moonlight spilled through a gap in the curtains, casting just enough light that, as he looked down at her, Severus could just make out Hermione’s expression. She looked expectant.

‘You,’ he said, before she had chance to speak.

‘What?’

‘That is what I am grateful for today. That is what I am grateful for everyday. You.’

He could not say why tonight had been the right night to finally say that, that which he had wanted to say for so long, but it was right, and so true. Indeed, all it had taken, in the end, to make him realise that before he had been living his life merely in half-light and shadows, was Hermione blustering into his life with the late summer, Bolstrad breeze. But what he might never believe was that, had he asked, Hermione would have said precisely the same thing about him.
Epilogue

Severus heard the din before he saw the source of it; a high-pitched scream followed by boyish laughter, a dull thud as a snowball exploded against the window.

A satisfied smile spread across his thin lips. They were home.

‘Mum!’ he heard his daughter complain, her voice muffled by the door, ‘would you tell him to stop?’

A grunt and another thud suggested that a second snowball had missed its target. ‘For God’s sake, Nate. Give over,’ he heard Hermione respond wearily, a scratching noise suggesting she was trying to find the key to the door. Severus moved from the living room to the hallway and opened the latch from the inside.

‘You’re not half drawing attention to yourselves with all this racket,’ he reprimanded as the door swung open to reveal Hermione and his three children. He eyed their trunks and owl cages pointedly and with a jerk of his head suggested they ought to hurry inside.

‘It’s him!’ Erin said, glaring at her youngest brother as she shook snow out of her hair. At thirteen Nathaniel enjoyed nothing more than annoying his big sister, and he was particularly skilled at it. Born four years after the twins, he had been no less of a surprise and no less of a joy to his parents. He rolled his eyes at his sister’s melodrama and approached his father for a hug, which was duly reciprocated. Severus took the boy’s face in his hands and tilted his head so he was forced to look at him. Like Erin, he was Hermione all over, from his freckled cheeks, to his wide brown eyes, to his mop of unmanageable brown curls.

‘For all our sakes, leave your sister alone,’ Severus chided. Nathaniel grinned but nodded in concession; Erin huffed slightly at her father’s side but was brought in for a hug of her own before she could swat her miscreant brother away. ‘Good term?’ Severus asked.

Erin shrugged. ‘Just six more months to go,’ she said, looking genuinely pleased for the first time since she had walked through the door.

‘Not that you’re counting,’ Severus replied with a frown, shifting his daughter to arm’s length, his hands on her shoulders, so he could her study her the way he had Nathaniel. Erin was as intelligent as her mother and as sharp-witted as her father, but channelled it in entirely different ways. She was more interested in Witch Weekly than her school books; boys than revising; and make-up and music
than spell practice, causing her parents no end of worry with her perfectly average academic record. Of all of them she was the one Severus struggled with the most, but there was something about her gregariousness, her confidence, and charisma that beguiled him.

‘I can practically smell the freedom,’ she said with a wry smile which Severus couldn’t help but return, and with that she had ducked out of his grasp and following Nathaniel up the stairs, dragging her trunk behind her.

Severus turned next to his eldest son next. Isaac reminded Severus so much of himself that it both enthralled and terrified him. He was around the same height as his father, though probably not finished with growing, and had the same dark features set against porcelain skin. Hermione always said he was precisely how she’d imagined a son of Severus Snape’s would be; her little scrap of a lad with perpetually scuffed knees.

‘And you?’ Severus asked, addressing the boy.

‘I’m fine,’ Isaac assured him.

‘Keeping your head down?’

‘Ahuh,’ the boy replied. A conscientious student, for the most part, but shy and self-conscious, Isaac was as subdued a teen as he had been a baby. His sister’s and brother’s outgoingness had often meant that he was overshadowed, but once one took the time to get to know him, he was every bit as charming. Isaac was their only Slytherin, their other two being in Gryffindor, and, as such, he could be every bit as sly and devious as one might expect of his house, but he was never cruel or harsh with it.

‘Good,’ Severus continued. ‘And have you heard anything from St. Mungo’s?’

‘Not yet, but that could be a good thing. Malfoy’s the only one who’s heard back and his application was declined.’

‘No news is good news then.’

‘Yeah, well… I’m still not going to hold my breath.’
‘You’d be surprised at the power of a little optimism,’ Hermione interjected as she hung up her travelling cloak. This had become something of a saying of hers ever since Severus’ trial; she was not the superstitious type save her faith in optimism. Isaac looked less than convinced, however, as he followed his siblings upstairs.

‘I swear they’re harder work now than they were when they were little,’ Hermione said with a sigh before placing a swift kiss on Severus’ cheek as she swept past him. Indeed, Severus had always imagined that his own children would be better behaved than the cretins he had attempted to educate at Hogwarts, but alas, it was not to be. They had proved to be every bit as mischievous and cheeky as any of them. ‘Anyone hungry?’ Hermione then asked, her voice raised slightly so it would travel to where the children had dispersed around the house.

A chorus of ‘starving,’ from up the stairs answered her call. Hermione sighed (filling three teenagers was a seemingly never ending task), and made her way to the kitchen with Severus at her heels. They had never moved from Spinner’s End. In the seventeen intervening years since they had had first arrived there they had done just as Hermione said they would and made it a happy home. When Nathaniel had come along they’d merely extended into the attic so Erin would have her own room and the boys, with only mild complaints, shared.

Hermione had returned to work in the same sub-division of the Department of Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures she had left over twenty years previously. She’d gone full time once Nathaniel started Hogwarts, and having been promoted to manager shortly afterwards she was now able to ensure ever increasing headway was made in their endeavour. Ministry guidance on fair treatment of house elves had been approved a decade ago, and was now common practice across Britain. Severus had worked from home, developing his anti-venoms, for which he sometimes received large orders from big organisations, like St. Mungo’s and Hogwarts, but mostly provided potions for individuals who, like him, had experienced some misfortune with a poisonous creature or plant. They were by no means rich, but they lived comfortably. Severus’ ailment continued to bother him, he could become tired easily, or occasionally feverish, but there was no doubt that his own anti-venom continued to work well, and the Snowdonia Hawkweed out in the garden continued to bloom.

‘You all finished with work for the holidays now?’ Hermione asked as she began to slice a loaf of bread for sandwiches.

‘Almost. I just have a few things need posting to St. Mungo’s,’ Severus replied, pulling various meats, cheeses and salad options from the fridge for her.

‘But it’ll be done today, won’t it? I really want to make sure we spend time together as a family this Christmas.’
‘I’ll send them off after lunch, but… you do know this isn’t our last Christmas as a family?’

‘I know. But things will still be different. They might have other places they want to go next year. Isaac will be off doing his Healer training at St. Mungo’s if all goes well, and Erin might want to spend next Christmas with Edgar.’

Severus raised a skeptical eyebrow. Edgar was the latest in a long line of Erin’s boyfriends and Severus would have bet a hundred Galleons that the whole thing would be over well before Christmas next year. ‘Maybe Edgar could come to us instead,’ he suggested, having been told on numerous prior occasions that he ought to be more supportive of Erin’s relationships. If it was down to Severus there would be no boyfriends at all, they had already caused far too much heartache as far as he was concerned, but while ever they made Erin happy he supposed he shouldn’t complain.

‘Maybe,’ Hermione replied, ‘but that doesn’t change the fact that this might be our last Christmas together as a family, just the five of us, and I want it to be special. Shout them down, will you?’

Severus moved into the hallway and called up to the children that lunch was ready. They came down the stairs like a herd of elephants, filed passed Severus, and rampaged into the kitchen where they took their seats and began munching on the sandwiches and crisps without any further ado.

‘You’ll notice Erin is no longer a vegetarian,’ Nathaniel pointed out, gesturing in Erin’s direction where she was currently biting into a ham sandwich.

‘Shut up, Nate!’ his sister hissed, then turning to her parents, ‘it was too hard with all that Hogwarts food in front of me every day.’

‘Well,’ said Hermione, ‘that makes Christmas dinner a little simpler!’

‘Precisely,’ Erin said, issuing Nathaniel a smug smile. ‘Anyway, the big news is that Aunt Ginny wrote to me last week. She says she’s already had a word with loads of writers about me shadowing them during my internship—’

She was interrupted by a derisive snort from Isaac.
‘What?’ she snapped, becoming exasperated.

‘You’re only doing this to meet your favourite celebrities!’ he scoffed.

Erin looked appalled at the very notion. ‘Why does no one take anything I do seriously?’

‘Err… maybe because you don’t take anything you do seriously!’ Isaac replied. ‘Vegetarianism, for instance-’

‘That’s enough! You’ve been back home five minutes and you’re already arguing!’ Severus interjected, sensing things were on the verge of getting out of hand. ‘Remind me again why you’re so insistent on having a family Christmas?’ he added, turning to Hermione. She merely scowled.

‘Well, I think that’s wholly unfair. I actually intend to take it very seriously!’ Erin continued defensively. ‘I want to be a proper journalist; I’m going to write proper stories. The facts. People will trust me. Imagine, dad, if after the war ended, or when your trial was on, there’d been someone who had bothered to find out the facts instead of just making stuff up to sell a story.’

Severus sighed. As capricious as she might sometimes be, her heart was usually in the right place. ‘I think what you’re doing is very respectable, if that’s what you’re planning,’ he said, coming to her defence.

‘Thank you,’ Erin replied, sticking her tongue out at Isaac, which somewhat diminished the maturity of her recent argument. Severus rolled his eyes.

Severus had never felt he was a natural father. As much as he was enamoured by the children, and they too adored him, which he could never quite get his head around, parenting was undoubtedly a struggle for him. He lacked patience, was, at times, prone to being too harsh, and found it difficult, as always, to display emotion. Hermione encouraged him and together they reckoned they’d done a half-decent job; the kids had turned out alright, and most importantly they were happy, which made everything their parents had gone through, even before any of them had been born, seem all the more worthwhile.

~oOo~

Later that evening the five of them were found in the living room; Isaac on the floor attempting to
untangle a string of fairy lights, Hermione and Erin sorting through a box of baubles, and Nathaniel and Severus erecting the fresh Christmas tree in the window.

‘Is it straight?’ Severus asked his youngest son as he knelt below the lowest branches to adjust the stand it was in.

Nathaniel moved to a distance and squinted at it. ‘It’ll do,’ he replied with a shrug, clearly bored of making sure the tree looked alright when he could have been putting decorations on it.

Severus extricated himself and looked over it to be sure it really would do. ‘Ready when you are then,’ he said to Isaac, who looked as though he wasn’t sure whether he was untangling the lights or making matters worse. Severus pointed his wand at them and they began to untangle themselves.

‘Well, why didn’t you say you could do that half an hour ago instead of standing there watching me struggle!’ Isaac complained lightheartedly, casting his father a faux-sour look.

‘A part of me was enjoying watching you struggle,’ Severus chuckled as he helped his son wrap the lights around the tree. ‘Problem solving skills will be useful once you’re at St. Mungo’s.’

‘If I’m at St. Mungo’s,’ Isaac corrected him.

‘Optimism!’ Hermione reminded him.

Once they had the lights on Severus and Hermione sat on the settee and let the children complete the rest of the decorations, giving instructions every now and again as where a bauble ought to be. Putting up the Christmas decorations while drinking steaming mugs of cocoa and nibbling ginger biscuits was a family tradition. They had a few family traditions throughout the year, but as the children grew older it was harder to maintain them; they were keener to do their own thing, so really Severus could see why Hermione was so eager to ensure they spent time together over the holidays.

‘Oh, Severus,’ Hermione said after a moment, ‘I found this while I was fishing the Christmas decorations out of storage,’ Hermione said, pointing to an ornately decorated wooden box on the coffee table. It was a little battered around the edges but Severus recognised it immediately as the Romanian puzzle box he had bought her all those years ago.

‘What is it?’ Isaac asked, picking up the box and trying and failing to open it.
‘Here,’ Severus said, taking it from his son and sliding away the secret panel to reveal the key. ‘I bought that for your mum on our very first Christmas together. Hard to believe that was nineteen years ago.’

‘Mmm,’ Hermione agreed. ‘I’ve kept little memories and things in it,’ she explained to the children, ‘maybe tonight we could all sit down and look through them?’

‘Yeah,’ Isaac and Nathaniel nodded, though Erin remained silent.

‘Erin?’ Hermione queried.

‘Well… it’s just… some of my friends are meeting up in Diagon Alley tonight. Just for a couple of drinks. I was hoping I could go to that,’ she replied.

‘Oh… and you can’t do that another night?’ Hermione asked, suddenly downcast.

‘But… today is Edgar’s birthday and I won’t be seeing him for a whole two weeks now…’

‘You’ve just spent the last three months with Edgar, can’t you spend your holidays with us? Severus?’ Hermione said, looking at him a little imploringly.

Severus issued Hermione an apologetic smile. ‘There was always going to come a time when they’d rather be out with their friends than stuck here with us,’ he reasoned.

Hermione sighed defeatedly. ‘Very well,’ she told her daughter. ‘Just don’t be hungover tomorrow.’

‘Thanks mum,’ Erin replied sincerely. ‘I should go get ready,’ she added, checking the clock on the mantlepiece.

‘Remember it’s the middle of December!’ Severus called after her as she skipped up the stairs. Erin was wont to wear short skirts and strappy tops regardless of bitter winds or threats of snow. As they heard Erin’s bedroom door shut and the low thump of music begin to emanate from up two flights of
stairs, Severus stretched an arm around Hermione’s shoulders. She looked up at him and managed a small smile despite her recent disappointment. ‘There’s still plenty of time for us to spend together,’ Severus assured her.

‘I know. I just hate the constant reminders that they’re growing up,’ she conceded.

‘Oh, well. You still have me,’ he said, a dark humour in his voice that made this sound mildly like a threat. It was Hermione’s turn to roll her eyes.

She had given up on the idea of a marriage proposal years ago. She would have quite liked to have been asked, she sometimes thought, but she didn’t mind really. She didn’t need a signed piece of parchment to know that Severus loved her. He proved it to her in little ways, the ways that mattered most. He listened attentively when she got passionate about work, even though she knew it was of no interest to him; he sensed she was upset sometimes even before she did, and would wrap his arms around her comfortingly or make her laugh until she forgot what it was that was bothering her; he still put up with her hair always clogging up the plug hole in the shower, and he was, at least most of the time, patient with her admittedly incessant questions.

And for her part, she put up with how cantankerous he could be, and his constant complaining, in fact, she considered herself more adept than ever at cajoling him out of those low moods he remained so prone to. She had made it life ambition to make him realise that he deserved the happiness he felt, and his smile when he looked at the children, the pride he took in his work, and ease with which he now said, each night, that she was what he was grateful for that day, told her that she had had some success with this:

‘You say that every night,’ she’d say, ‘you have to pick something different!’

And then he’d reply, ‘but every night it is the truth,’ and would refuse to budge on the topic.

They lived a simple life together and it was enough.

‘Done,’ Isaac announced, standing on one side of the tree while Nathaniel stood on the other. They both gestured at it rather theatrically, which really did cheer Hermione up.

‘Looks great boys,’ she said. ‘Hold that pose, let me take a photograph!’ The boys groaned but did as they were asked. They were used to having Hermione take their photographs, indeed, the house was filled with pictures of the family; family holidays to Romania, a few of Severus and Hermione
before the children were born, and then plenty of them all together, each of the children in their school uniforms, with their grandparents, and with the “cousins,” as Harry and Ginny’s children were now referred. Reminders, Hermione liked to consider them, of everything they had to be grateful for, everything that had almost not been.

As the flash went off Erin re-entered the living room with her hair and make-up done and wearing an elegant black dress which not even Severus could have found anything to complain about.

‘Oh, Erin, you look nice. Get in beside your brothers. And come on Severus!’ Hermione said, gesturing for them all to stand around the tree.

Severus was a little grudging but got up nonetheless. ‘Set the timer, Hermione, then you can be in it too,’ he suggested. If he had to suffer, then so did Hermione.

Hermione fiddled with a button on the back of the camera and jumped into shot beside Severus, who put an around both her and Nathaniel, who stood on his other side. They all beamed into the lens and waited for the clicker, which took so long their faces began to ache, but eventually flashed.

‘Right, I best be off. I’m going to go down the street and apparate,’ Erin announced. ‘I promise I won’t be back too late.’

‘You have your wand?’ Severus asked, perpetually concerned about his children’s safety.

‘I do. I’ll see you all later!’ Erin replied, giving each of her parents a quick hug on her way out of the door.

‘Can we have a look through this now?’ Nathaniel asked, holding up the Romanian puzzle box with a quizzical expression.

‘Oh,’ Hermione replied, as if just remembering. ‘Of course.’

And so the four of them squashed onto the one settee, Severus and Hermione on either end and their boys between them. The puzzle box was opened and the remainder of the evening was spent lost in the memories of many happy years.
A/N Thank you to every single one of you who has read, favourited, and reviewed. It has meant a lot. I am both pleased and a little sad that I’ve finished writing this but I do have plans for a sort of prequel/sequel/companion piece entitled The Romanian Puzzlebox. I hope to have the first chapter up around September time. Thank you to everyone again!

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