

Adventures in FanFiction

RECAPITULATION

by
Mundungus42

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Allegro ma non troppo



Hermione's mobile phone trilled out the Ode to Joy, and in her haste to answer it, she nearly smeared the charmed ink she was using on her final design.

"Hello, sweetheart!"

"Hi, Mum! We're here!" Hugo's voice was crackly from magical interference at the International Floo Depot, despite the phone's Dampening Charms.

"Wonderful! Are you going to Floo to the Hog's Head straight away, or are you having lunch in London first?"

"I thought we'd have lunch with Dad and take the train," said Hugo. "I want Vic to see the English countryside he's heard so much about."

Hermione glanced at the clock on the wall. "Are you sure you want to take the train? The Hogwarts Express doesn't run during the summer. You'll have to catch the 3:45, it won't arrive until after dark, and it's supposed to rain. And the food's awful, unless you can still survive on pumpkin pasties."

Hugo laughed. "We'll be fine, Mum. We'll grab sandwiches at M&S before we leave. I'll get you a packet of their extra-strong tea."

"All, right. I'll meet you at the station."

"See you then. I'll phone if the plan changes. Love you, Mum!"

"Love you, too."

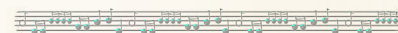
Hermione ended the call and sighed. On the one hand, she was glad of the extra time to finish the blueprints for her latest project. On the other hand, she was terribly impatient to meet the young man her son was bringing home. Hugo had always been like his father, who enjoyed having his good looks and charm appreciated by as many people as possible. However, halfway through his second year at university, his breezy, causal m-mails about his social life changed subtly. It wasn't until three months later that she had a name to put to the change: Victor Hall.

Vic's influence on Hugo was unmistakable. For starters, the two letters from the Dean of the Eastman School of Music displayed proudly in the kitchen were a testament to Hugo's improved marks. That alone made Hermione predisposed to think well of Vic, even if he turned out to be covered in tattoos and piercings. Hugo also took more weekend trips to New York City when he was with Vic, taking in every opera, concert, and play that had standby tickets available. And perhaps most significantly, Hugo's most recent m-mail indicated that he was making plans for the future, something that Hermione had privately suspected he would only begin doing after

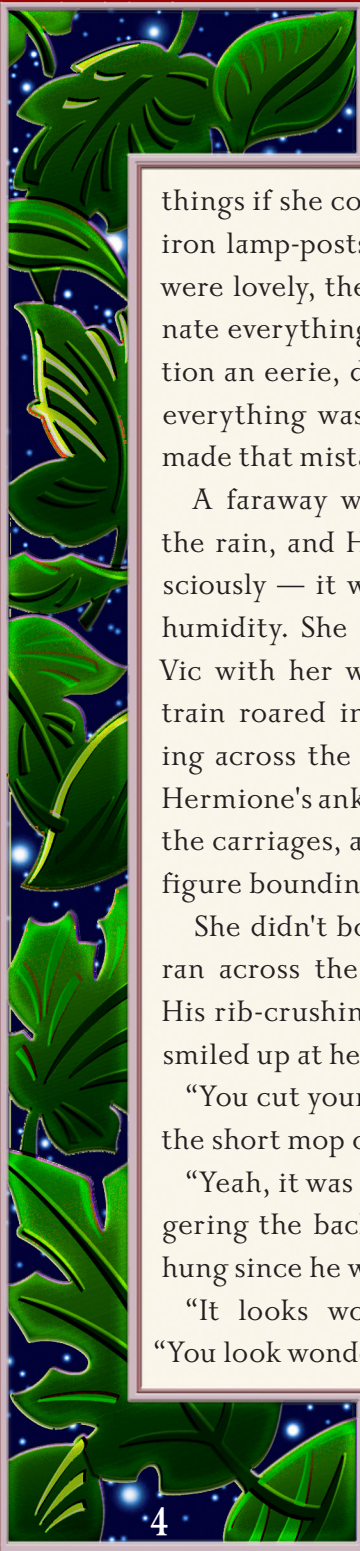
several months of living with her, post-undergraduate. And now Hugo was bringing Vic to see his home and meet his family. Their relationship bore all the hallmarks of being Rather Serious.

She glanced at the family photograph that hung over her drafting table, taken shortly before Ron's accident. Ron and Rosie took turns making faces at the camera while Hermione and Hugo smiled earnestly. They were so young and carefree. Hopefully, Hugo and Vic's path would be significantly smoother than her own had been. She caught a glance at herself reflected in the glass and made a face. There was a blotch of black on her cheek, and five pencils stuck out of the messy, greying bun on her head.

Yes, the extra time was welcome. She hoped Magical Mess Remover worked on charmed ink.



It was pouring rain by the time the train's headlight appeared on the horizon, and Hermione was especially glad her refurbishment of Hogsmeade Station had included Weather-Repelling Charms on the platform. Though it had been one of her first projects after finishing her architecture degree, she still held great affection for its cheerful red station, with its large fanlight windows that, in better weather, afforded views of Hogsmeade to the south and the forest to the north, with the towers of Hogwarts visible over the trees. Not that she wouldn't change some



things if she could do it all again. While the wrought iron lamp-posts that ran the length of the platform were lovely, they were spaced too far apart to illuminate everything properly, and at night it gave the station an eerie, dilapidated look, despite the fact that everything was in perfect trim. Hermione had not made that mistake a second time.

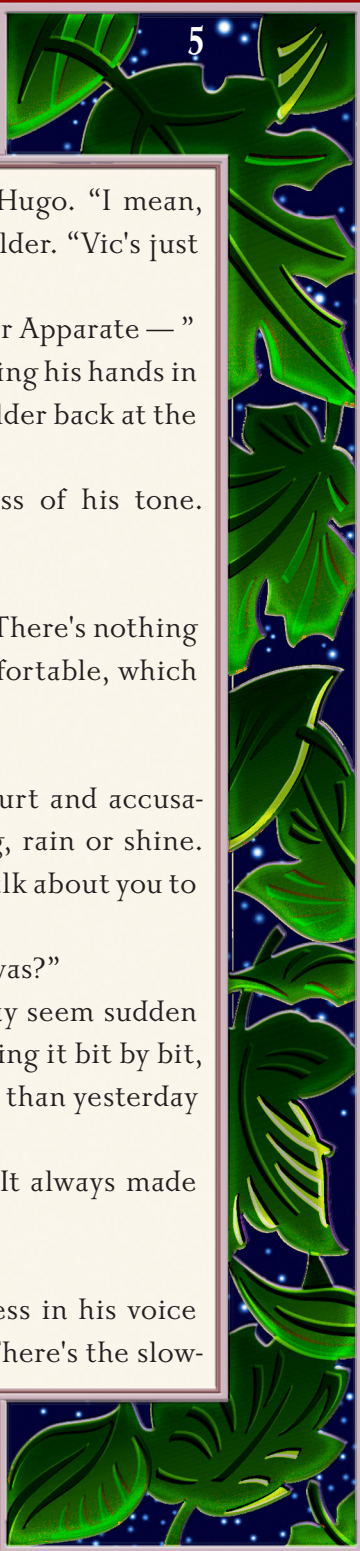
A faraway whistle pierced the rushing sound of the rain, and Hermione smoothed her hair self-consciously — it was frizzier than usual, thanks to the humidity. She supposed she would have to impress Vic with her warm hospitality instead. At last the train roared into the station, sending steam dancing across the empty platform and swirling around Hermione's ankles. Passengers began to trickle out of the carriages, and Hermione spotted a familiar lanky figure bounding down the stairs.

She didn't bother to blink back her tears as Hugo ran across the platform and embraced her tightly. His rib-crushing hug was the same as Ron's, and she smiled up at her son.

"You cut your hair," she said, reaching up to finger the short mop of curls on top of her son's head.

"Yeah, it was too hot when it was long," he said, fingering the back of his neck where his ponytail had hung since he was fourteen.

"It looks wonderful," said Hermione, grinning. "You look wonderful. It's so good to see you!"



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"You look exactly the same," said Hugo. "I mean, wonderful." He glanced over his shoulder. "Vic's just getting the luggage."

"I brought the car, but if you'd rather Apparate —"

"No, the car's fine," said Hugo, shoving his hands in his pockets. He glanced over his shoulder back at the train. "We saw Dad."

Her smile faded at the seriousness of his tone. "How was he?"

"Much worse."

"He's been getting worse for years. There's nothing to be done other than make him comfortable, which he is, as far as we can tell."

"How often do you go to see him?"

Hermione's heart swelled at the hurt and accusation in the question. "Every morning, rain or shine. Rosie comes a few times a week. We talk about you to him all the time."

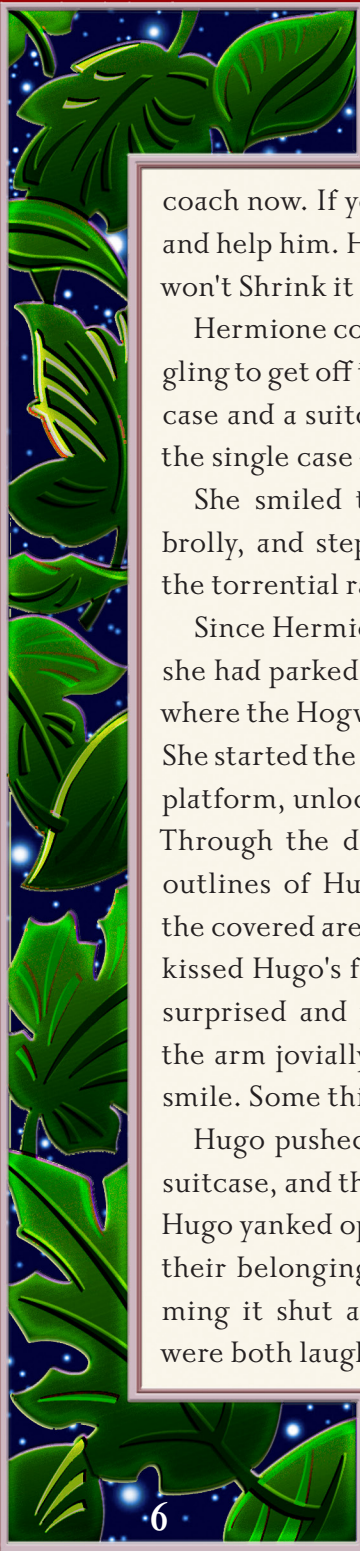
"Why didn't you tell me how bad it was?"

Hermione sighed. "The decline may seem sudden to you, darling, but we've been watching it bit by bit, so he really doesn't seem much worse than yesterday or the day before to us."

"I sang for him, but it didn't help. It always made him happy before."

"I'm so sorry, darling."

"Yeah, me too. Oh!" The moroseness in his voice switched to exasperated fondness. "There's the slow-



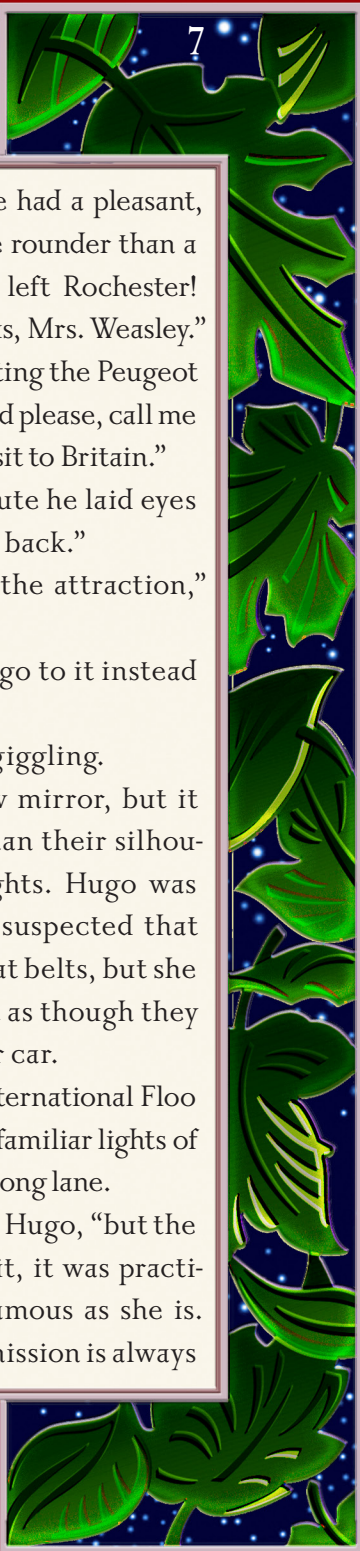
coach now. If you want to drive the car round, I'll go and help him. He's such a snob about his cello that he won't Shrink it or Apparate with it."

Hermione could see a dark-haired young man struggling to get off the train with a large black instrument case and a suitcase on wheels. They had only packed the single case — things *were* Rather Serious!

She smiled to herself, opened her still-dripping broom, and stepped out from the dry platform into the torrential rain.

Since Hermione owned the only car in Hogsmeade, she had parked the old Peugeot near the roundabout where the Hogwarts carriages picked up the students. She started the engine and drove up to the edge of the platform, unlocked the doors and unlocked the boot. Through the driving rain she could see the blurry outlines of Hugo and Vic approaching the edge of the covered area. To her surprise, Vic leaned over and kissed Hugo's forehead, a tender gesture that clearly surprised and pleased her son. He punched Vic in the arm jovially in response, which made Hermione smile. Some things would never change.

Hugo pushed down the extendable handle on the suitcase, and they both fairly leapt from the platform. Hugo yanked open the boot, and they both deposited their belongings as quickly as possible before slamming it shut and darting into the back seat. They were both laughing.



“Look at it come down!” said Vic. He had a pleasant, warm sort of voice, and his vowels were rounder than a typical American's. “It's like we never left Rochester! Thank you very much for coming to get us, Mrs. Weasley.”

“It's my pleasure,” said Hermione, putting the Peugeot into gear and driving towards home. “And please, call me Hermione. Hugo says this is your first visit to Britain.”

“Yup. My dad's English, but the minute he laid eyes on California, he knew he couldn't go back.”

“No snow, no rain; I can't imagine the attraction,” said Hermione.

“It does snow in the mountains. We go to it instead of the other way around.”

“Hubris, if you ask me,” said Hugo, giggling.

Hermione glanced in the rear view mirror, but it was too dark to see anything other than their silhouettes against the glow of the tail lights. Hugo was sitting very close to Victor, and she suspected that neither of them were wearing their seat belts, but she couldn't bring herself to nag. It wasn't as though they were in danger of being hit by another car.

They chatted about the increase in international Floo security and last term's classes until the familiar lights of McCoy House appeared, at the end of a long lane.

“You can't see much in the rain,” said Hugo, “but the house is amazing. When Mum found it, it was practically a ruin, and now it's almost as famous as she is. The Ministry's Arts and Culture Commission is always

after her to give tours of the house and grounds."

"The villagers aren't much impressed," said Hermione.

"They wouldn't be," said Hugo. "It's all a bit too Laird-of-the-Manor for your average Scot's aesthetic. Anyway, you'll see it in the morning, Vic. Mum, what's Rosie up to these days?"

"The usual. Dark wizard hunter by day, doting mum by night. She and Teddy are coming for dinner on Sunday night along with the others."

"Teddy's the Metamorphmagus, right?" asked Victor.

"Yeah," said Hugo. "Rosie married him straight from Hogwarts."

"Lucky Rosie," whispered Vic, with a wicked inflection that made Hugo snigger.

The fine gravel crunched under Hermione's tyres as she parked the car in front of the side door, which was protected from the rain.

"Harry and Ginny are coming, too," said Hermione, unlocking the door and turning on the lights. "James can't make it, I'm afraid. He's working an apprenticeship in Belgrade and can't get away, but Lily and Al will be there. Al's bringing Wendy Parkinson."

Hugo pulled the suitcase out of the boot. "I thought she dumped him."

"She did. For the third time, by my count. But they're on this week, so she's coming, unless she dumps him again before Sunday."

"She's awful," said Hugo approvingly. "I think you'll

like her, Vic. Sense of humour like a shiv. I think half the reason she keeps coming back to Al is so she has the opportunity to make fun of us all. Quite good-looking, though. No wonder Al's smitten."

Vic carried his cello in front of him like a shield to fit through the narrow door. "Are these the famous relatives who are coming?"

Hugo set the suitcase down next to the door. "I don't have any other kind," he said, making a face.

Hermione drew her wand and Summoned three glasses. "Now, I know you've had a long journey, would you like a —"

She cut off abruptly as Vic turned to face her.

The glasses fell to the floor and shattered loudly.

"Mum!" exclaimed Hugo. "Are you all right?"

Hermione couldn't answer immediately. She was staring at Vic, her mind unable to wrap itself around what she was seeing.

The young man who was standing in her kitchen with a look of bewildered concern on his face was a younger version of Severus Snape. His hair was cut short and stylishly, but the sallow skin, hooked nose, narrow lips, and piercing eyes were identical.

Hugo took her hand and led her to the kitchen table while Vic wordlessly drew his wand, repaired the broken glasses, and filled one with water. Grateful for a few moments to calm her whirling thoughts, Hermione drank deeply.

In order for Snape to have a son Hugo's age, the boy would have to have been born years after Snape had died in front of her eyes. Hermione looked more closely at Vic and felt her eyes fill with tears. Vic even had the same hands.

"I'm so sorry," she managed to choke out, pulling a handkerchief from her pocket. "I'd say I don't know what came over me, but..." she gestured feebly at Vic.

"I don't understand, Mum," said Hugo.

Hermione looked sharply at her son. "Don't tell me you haven't noticed the resemblance."

"What, Vic and someone I know?"

Hermione's astonishment faded to exasperation. "Did you never read HOGWARTS, A HISTORY?" she asked.

"How could I with you and Rosie hogging it all the time?" said Hugo, his jaw jutting out stubbornly. "For once could you not tell me off for not reading more and just tell me why you look like you've seen a ghost?"

"Severus Snape," said Hermione, meeting Vic's eyes. "You look exactly like Severus Snape."

Hugo stared at his mother for a moment and turned to stare at Vic. A moment later he burst out laughing. "You're mad! He doesn't look anything like the old bat!"

"Who's Severus Snape?" asked Vic.

Hermione shot a quelling look at her son before answering Vic. "A former Hogwarts teacher and Headmaster who was critical to Voldemort's defeat in the war. He was a spy, and one of the bravest men

any of us ever knew. Hugo's uncle Harry named his son Albus Severus in his honour."

"I still say you're mental," said Hugo. "Here, I'll show you a picture."

He ran down the hall towards his room, and Vic cleared his throat awkwardly. "I take it he's dead."

Hermione swallowed. "Yes. He was murdered almost thirty years ago. I — that is, we saw it happen. Hugo's dad and uncle Harry and I. He had no living relatives. That's why I was so surprised..." she trailed off with a feeble gesture at Vic. "You look so like him." She blinked and attempted to recover herself. "I'm so sorry to have spoiled your welcome. I wasn't expecting this."

He gave her a wry smile. "Neither was I."

Hugo came clomping back into the room with a shoebox. "This is my Chocolate Frog card collection — they don't have them in America, but they're sort of like baseball cards for famous wizards and witches. This is Severus Snape's."

Vic took the card and frowned. "I can sort of see it in the nose," he said doubtfully.

Hermione glanced at the card that Vic held out to her and tutted disapprovingly. "That's a caricature," she said, rising and crossing to the bookshelf that held her cookbooks and current reading. "There's a better likeness in *THE BOY WHO LIVED, THE MAN WHO DIED*." She flicked to the introduction to Severus Snape's chapter. "This was drawn by one of my classmates

while Hogwarts was under Death Eater control. It's one of the few renderings I've seen that give you an idea of what he was going through."

Vic was quiet as he looked at the picture, and Hermione could see his eyes scanning the paragraphs about Severus Snape's life. The kettle whistled, and Hermione automatically rose to make the tea. Her hands were shaking, but she didn't feel as though she might faint anymore.

Hugo sat down next to Vic and put his freckled hand over Vic's pale one. "Are you okay?"

"I guess," said Vic. "I don't really have much of a frame of reference."

"You said your dad was from England but never talked about it," said Hugo.

"Yeah."

"D'you reckon this is why?"

Hermione Levitated two cups of tea over to the table and set about rinsing the teapot as unobtrusively as possible.

Vic stared at the cup that settled in front of him for a moment, and then his face hardened. "No. There has to be some other explanation." His voice was cold and carried the ghost of Potions classes long past.

"Is it so unbelievable that your father might be a great wizard?" asked Hermione.

"Yes. My father is most definitely not a wizard," said Vic.

"Severus Snape convinced the world's most power-

ful Legilimens that he was a faithful follower," said Hermione. "Surely hiding magic from one's family would be a simpler deception."

"Why would he do that?" asked Hugo. "It's dangerous to suppress your magic."

"I don't know," admitted Hermione, bringing a plate of Honeyduke's chocolate biscuits over to the table. "We'd have to ask him."

"If he is actually this man, which I doubt," said Vic, closing the book and pushing it across the table towards her.

He did, however, accept a biscuit, which comforted Hermione with the thought that perhaps she hadn't completely ruined his visit after all.

"You'll probably want to go home straight away and talk to your dad," said Hugo sadly.

Vic sat in silence for a moment. "I don't think I will, actually. I've been looking forward to this trip for ages, and I have no idea what I'd even say to him. Besides, I can't practice at Dad's because the neighbours complain, and I need to have these pieces down cold if want to get into a decent ensemble."

Clearly, Hugo saw this for the transparent excuse to stay that it was, and he flung an affectionate arm around Vic's narrow shoulders. "Thank you."

Vic rested his head gently against Hugo's. "Your family might think you made me up if I left."

To Hermione's surprise, Hugo threw back his head

and started laughing.

"It wasn't that funny," said Vic, amused in spite of himself.

"Oh, Merlin!" said Hugo, looking at his mother. "Can you imagine Uncle Harry's face when he sees Vic?"

Hermione nearly spat out the sip of tea she'd just taken. "I'll Floo him tomorrow," she said when she'd recovered.

"No, don't," said Vic, a wicked grin lighting his features. "I think it'll be a valuable learning experience."

"Yeah," said Hugo, squeezing his shoulder. "You'll learn why even He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was scared of Uncle Harry."

Hermione shook her head, laughing. Despite the bizarre situation, it filled her heart to see the boys' easy familiarity and affectionate teasing. Rosie was five when she told everybody she was going to marry Teddy, but Hugo in love — she'd never been able to picture it. Now that the two boys were in front of her, she was surprised by her own lack of imagination.

Vic drank the last of his tea and carried his cup and saucer over to the sink. "If it's all right with you, I think I'll go to bed now."

"Of course," said Hermione. "You've had a long and eventful day."

"Understatement of the year," said Hugo, yawning.

"You really should take this," said Hermione, holding THE BOY WHO LIVED, THE MAN WHO DIED out to

Vic. "Just in case. Think of it as research in preparation for meeting the family."

"Mum, a book isn't going to make everything all better," said Hugo with more than a touch of impatience in his voice.

"No," said Vic mildly, taking the proffered volume. "But it certainly can't hurt."



Hermione was surprised how easy it was to work with a pair of music students in the house, even though both boys were practicing standard repertoire and orchestral excerpts, which was both loud and repetitive. Hugo boomed out the opening of the TUBA MIRUM from Mozart's Requiem in his room, while Vic ran the same passage of Elgar repeatedly in the garden. Then again, she supposed it was appropriate, given that she was herself engaged in a repetitive task: she was re-doing the master suite in the Hogarth's manor house again. She would have been far more annoyed about this if they hadn't agreed to a fee that even she felt was exorbitant for any and all changes to the final design. Thus, every time Antigone Hogarth changed her mind about which walls should have windows, Hermione mentally converted the work into classes at Eastman. This project alone could sustain Hugo through a Ph.D., if he so chose.

After owling the revised plans to the Hogarths, Hermione paused on her way to the kitchen to watch

Vic play. He was on the bench under the arbour, and he'd moved on to a piece that Hermione didn't know. It was clearly a piece he knew by heart, since his music lay on the ground in front of him. It was a pleasure watching Vic's nimble fingers run up and down the fingerboard in time with his bow. His face was tense with concentration, and to Hermione's surprise, the music on the ground in front of him began to move.

As Vic played, a sheet of parchment fluttered, as though in a breeze, until it lifted up into the air, bobbing in time with the music. A second sheet followed, and before long there were dozens of sheets of music bouncing around the garden, at first in seeming randomness, and then their movements began to take shape. They were *dancing* some long-forgotten steps, forming rows and bowing gracefully to their opposite numbers, circling, weaving in and out of one another. The dance wasn't perfect, though. Sometimes the pages deviated from their lines, and there was one moment where Hermione could have sworn a piece of paper acted as though its nonexistent foot had been stepped on. But it was one of the most charming things Hermione had ever seen magic accomplish.

As the piece accelerated in tempo and grew more complex, the dance became more frenzied and wild, and sweat was beading on Vic's forehead. And as suddenly as the graceful opening had turned frenetic, the quick notes smoothed into longer notes. When



Vic pulled his bow from the strings on the last note, the music fell gracelessly to the ground.

Panting, Vic looked up and saw Hermione standing at the window. He gave her a nod and wiped his brow on his forearm. She Summoned a glass of water for him and floated it over to him.

"Thanks."

"What was that?"

"Gabielli's Ricercar number seven. It's what happens when a virtuoso cellist and Charms master gets bored with the repertoire for solo cello."

"You mean the magic is written into the music?"

Vic nodded. "It's a pretty challenging piece. I'm working it up for my senior recital."

Hermione's confusion must have shown on her face, because Vic pulled a score from the pile next to him and held one of the sheets of parchment next to it. "See, here's a side-by-side comparison of magical and nonmagical editions. Those squiggles and spirals in the magical edition are casting marks. At these moments, you have to sort of imbue the notes with magic, sort of like in the 'determination' step of Apparating. If you do that and play the right notes, the music dances."

"I've never seen anything like it."

His lips curled into a look of disapproval. "That's not surprising. Britain is infamous for its persecution of music magic even now. Magical composition died

out here during the early Romantic era because the style was to bring about a certain feeling in the audience, and it was classified as Dark Magic. That's why so few wizards and witches here learn music and the strong musical tradition here is almost entirely non-magical. I'll bet if your parents been magical, Hugo would never have chosen to study music."

Hermione's national pride was slightly stung, but Vic was right. Choral singing and reading music had been a part, however, small, of her early Muggle education, but music was conspicuously absent from the Hogwarts curriculum.

"Of course, we have the opposite problem in the US," continued Vic. "Music's being squeezed out of public schools by a mania for standardised testing, but it's flourishing in the magical communities, thanks largely to the immigrant communities."

"I confess, I was surprised to hear Hugo talk about teaching here when he graduates," said Hermione.

"Once people are exposed to it, I suspect they'll come around," said Vic, "especially when they realise what one can do with music. The Gabrielli is one of the more challenging solo pieces I've played, frivolous as it is. But in terms of magical power, just imagine what a magical symphony can accomplish!"

"Or a magical choir," said Hugo, who had appeared in the door to the garden. "I'm done for now," he said buzzing his lips noisily and joining Vic on the bench.

“My chops are completely shot.”

“That’s what you get for not touching your trombone all semester,” said Vic.

“If you had to be passingly familiar with every instrument in addition to taking independent study in voice, you wouldn’t touch your cello for a semester, either,” said Hugo.

“I don’t need to learn any other instruments. I already play the best one,” said Vic, stretching his arms over his head.

“Isn’t he an awful snob, Mum?” asked Hugo, grinning.

“Terrible,” agreed Hermione. Already it was becoming easier to look past Vic’s familiar features and appreciate the charming young man for who he was.

Vic tapped his bow on the ground, which made his music leap to attention. “I’ve still got to beat Debussy into submission before lunch,” he said. “Then Shostakovich 5, Haffner, and Beethoven 5 for the rest of the week. If I’m playing when your uncle and aunt get here, do you think they’ll be less likely to hex me?”

“Not if you’re playing Shostakovich,” said Hugo.

“Philistine,” said Vic, flicking his bow at Hugo.

Laughing, Hugo led Hermione into the kitchen. “Want some coffee, Mum? Vic forgot to give it to you last night, for obvious reasons, but he brought a couple of pounds of his dad’s coffee as a present.”

Hermione blinked in surprise as her image of Severus Snape collided with Hugo’s words. “His dad’s coffee?”

“Yeah, he roasts all the coffee and blends all the tea at his shop. We figured bringing tea to England would be like carrying coals to Newcastle, but Vic’s dad always sends him coffee at school, and it’s much better than Starbucks.”

“If it’s no trouble and you’re making some, yes, I’d love a cup.”

Hugo shot her a grin and rushed off to his room. He returned a few moments later with a small bag of fragrant beans. Hermione was about to apologise for not having a coffee maker when Hugo produced a *cafetière*, which he set on the counter. While he set the kettle to boiling over an enchanted flame, he sent a dark brown line of beans dancing through the air until they gathered in a cloud over his head. With a flick of his wand, the beans shattered into tiny pieces, and he sent them whizzing into the *cafetière*. An arc of steaming water followed from the spout of the kettle.

“How do you have your coffee?” asked Hugo.

“I’ll have it black, thanks.”

“I don’t suppose you have any cream?”

“Sorry, love. Just milk.”

Hugo shrugged. “The coffee’s strong enough, I doubt milk would make much of an impression on it.”

“As long as you don’t start drinking cream in tea, we won’t have to revoke your British citizenship,” said Hermione.

While Hugo bustled through the kitchen fetching

cups and saucers, Hermione smiled at her son's new-found culinary skill. She suspected she knew who to thank for that.

Moments later, Hugo set a steaming cup of coffee in front of her. She had to admit that it smelled absolutely delicious, with little of the dry bitterness she associated with a dark roast, and her first sip confirmed that it was a superlative cup of coffee.

She made an appreciative humming sound as the rich flavour spread over her tongue. She took the bag of beans that Hugo had opened, hoping to find some information about the shop, but it was blank, save for part of the word "coffee" that had been stencilled on the original bag. Hermione thought it was quite clever to fashion packaging from the bag the beans had been bought in.

Hermione nearly jumped when Vic appeared in her peripheral vision.

"You are evil," said Vic to Hugo. "Did you really think I could keep practising with the smell of liquid ambrosia in the air?"

"You need a proper break," said Hugo, pouring him a cup. "Your callouses are going to peel off if you keep this up, and then it'll be annoying to play for a week."

"I have to get back in shape," said Hugo, stretching his long fingers.

"You have all summer," said Hugo. "Five hours of practice on the first day is just going to make you

regret it. Plus, we're both Floo-lagged. There's finite mental benefit."

"It's calming," said Vic as Hugo placed a cup of coffee in front of him.

Hermione felt a stab of empathy for Vic, who clearly was not as settled as he seemed, and took that as her cue to leave. "I'll just finish this in my office. Thank you for the coffee."

"You're welcome," said the boys in unison.

To distract herself from brooding over Vic's possible origins, Hermione opened her pending projects folder and added some more protective charms to her preliminary design for a children's Quidditch pitch in Luton. Hermione sat, fondly remembering Hugo's first disastrous time on a broom. Her design included velocity-activated Cushioning Charms to save some other family the ordeal they'd been through. She and Ron hadn't spoken for days after that stunt, and it was only Rose's patient tutelage that got Hugo on a broom again, with far more successful results. With Rose determined to fix things, it was as impossible for them not to reconcile as it was for Hugo to remain earthbound.

Memories of her fights with Ron always brought with them a shadow of guilt that Hermione brushed away as if it had been a fly. The situation was what it was, and things would be what they were even if they'd never quarrelled. Hugo was lucky to have a whole cadre of foster fathers to look after him after

Ron's accident, but she wondered if being largely raised by a single parent had been one of the things that brought Hugo and Vic together.

She couldn't help but consider what sort of woman Vic's mother had been. She had it from Hugo that Vic had been raised by his father. Assuming Severus Snape and Vic's father were the same man, and Vic's resemblance and mannerisms were too similar to Snape's for them not to be, she had to have had the patience of a saint. Had she been a witch, or had Snape hidden his magic to spare her, as well? Had she died? Or had she finally had enough of his sharp tongue and left?

These questions were far harder to dismiss, and Hermione found herself filled with the burning desire for answers. On the surface of it, it was a prudent thing to do before presenting Vic to the rest of the family. Beneath that, she was vaguely aware of something else, but this she attributed to having a distraction from doing the same kind of work day in and day out. As pleasant as she found her work, she needed something else to occupy her mind, and this was a challenge worthy of her.

A sweet cello melody that Hermione recognised as Debussy floated in from the open window, and Hermione felt resolve settle into her stomach. There was no point in pressing Vic for details or concerning him further. She had enough information to locate the man who had raised him. Now all she had to do was find him.

She found Hugo casting a Cleaning Charm on the coffee things.

"I'm just going to drive into town," said Hermione. "Do you want me to buy some cream?"

"Sure, Mum," said Hugo. "I have a ton of reading for pedagogy, so I'd better get started on that before Vic starts in on the Shostakovich."

There was a disdainful screech of bow on strings from the garden, and Hugo grinned at having successfully taken the mickey.

The last vestiges of the previous night's rain sparkled in the early afternoon sunshine, and Hermione took a deep breath of the clean air. The Peugeot smelled slightly musty from their trip in the rain, and she wound down the windows. She tapped her wand on the MPS, and it crackled to life.

Destination?

"Ministry of Magic, London," said Hermione.

Go north point five kilometers.

"Yes, I know how to get out of my own drive," said Hermione.

Fine. Get yourself to London. See if I care.

"I'll get us to the edge of the village, and then you can drive. All right?"

The MPS didn't answer, which Hermione took to be a good thing. She had considered coughing up the Galleons for a friendlier personality overlay, but now that her children were grown up and out of the house,

she found she'd got used to the daily resistance.

The road was muddy, but nothing too awful, and Hermione took care not to avoid splashing passersby with puddles. She knew everyone in the village, of course, and they knew her, and they exchanged nods as Hermione pootled past. When she reached the edge of town, the MPS crackled to life.

I don't suppose you've got your seat belt on.

"I have."

Good.

Hermione was glad she'd finished her coffee while driving through the village, because the Peugeot leapt forward and rocketed down the country road.

Nice day, isn't it?

"It is," said Hermione absently, pulling out her phone and searching the Ethernet for coffee and tea shops in Solana Beach, California.

That boy seems nice enough.

"Mmm," said Hermione.

Shame about his nose, though.

"There's nothing wrong with his nose."

That enormous hooter? Hard to believe his neck can support the weight of it.

Hermione knew from long experience the futility of arguing with the MPS "Listen, I've got some things to do, so just let me know when we're about five minutes away."

Spoilsport. Can we talk about your son's hair, then?

"Be my guest, but don't expect much of a response."

Clearly, the MPS didn't need much encouragement. Fortunately, Hermione was adept at tuning out the MPS when she wasn't using it for directions. The countryside zipped by, and within minutes they were whizzing invisibly through the outskirts of London. She waved at the Knight Bus as it passed them, and the driver gave her a merry honk.

The MPS was too busy listing the reasons that curly hair didn't look good in a short cut to let Hermione know they were nearing their destination, but she had made the trip enough times to know when they'd arrived.

Shall I wait here for you?

"I may be a while."

What am I supposed to do, twiddle the windscreen wipers?

"Go and park yourself."

Well, I never!

Hermione grinned as the Peugeot drove off in what could only be described as a huffy manner. She stepped into the phone box on the corner and a few minutes later found herself in the lift down to the Department of Magical Transportation. The squat little witch in the reception window smiled at her.

"What can I do for you, Mrs. Weasley?"

"I need to Floo to America."

"Very good. What's your date of departure?"

"Today."

The witch blinked in surprise.

"I only need to go for an hour or two," said Hermione hastily.

She blinked in surprise. "I'm going to have to call my manager."

"Of course."

Three managers later, Hermione was standing in front of the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic.

Percy Weasley had changed little in physical appearance over the years, and he looked at Hermione with the same long-suffering expression that he wore when dealing with his mother. "Do I even want to know?"

Hermione shrugged. "There isn't much to tell. At least, not yet."

"And this hasn't anything to do with the American boy Hugo brought home?"

Hermione glanced innocently at a spot above Percy's head. "Vic's lovely."

"But?"

Hermione sighed. "You really don't want to know."

Percy gave her the don't-muck-it-up glare before signing the form that lay on his desk. "You have a day."

"I won't need that much time."

"No telling how much time you'll need."

"True," said Hermione. "Thank you, Percy. If I'm wrong, I promise to tell you everything over a cup of tea."

"And if you're right?"

"We're going to need something a lot stronger than tea."

Andante



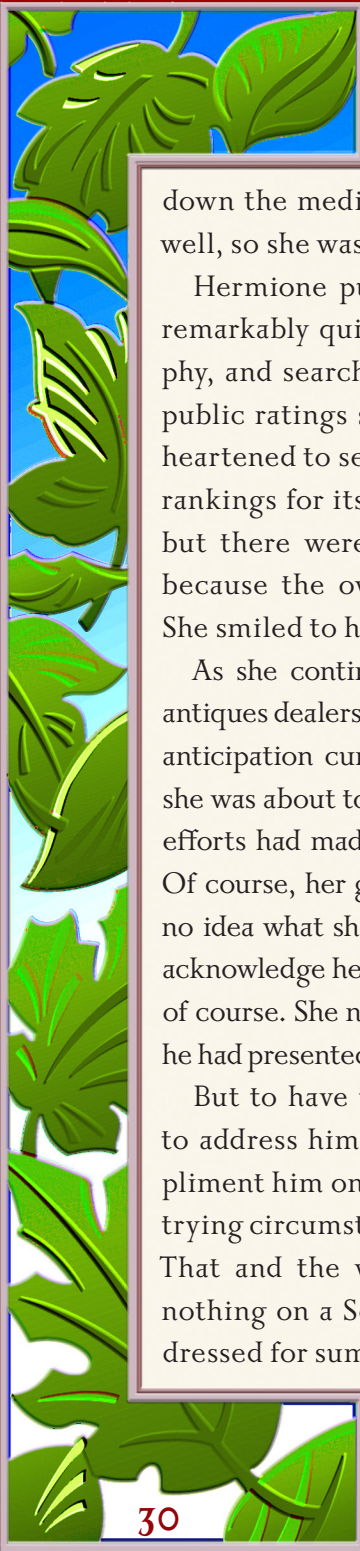
It took nearly half an hour to get through security at the International Floo Terminal in Los Angeles, but fortunately Percy's signature on her form worked its magic, and she soon found herself whuffing into existence in the Beach Palm Motel along the Pacific Coast Highway.

"Checking in?" asked the heavily tattooed witch behind the desk.

"No, just passing through," said Hermione, smiling at the sign that said the hotel accepted all magical currency, nonmagical currency, and coin. "Can you tell me where I can get a good cup of coffee around here?"

"Sure, Mitch's place. It's near Fletcher Cove, a few blocks north of here at Lomas Santa Fe."

Hermione thanked the woman and went outside. She had got quite used to Hugo sending postcards and letters to Solana Beach, California, and the name conjured up images of tropical sun, palm trees, and turquoise ocean. However, the reality was quite different. The sky was overcast, for one, and a fine mist hung in the air. She could practically feel her hair frizzing. The historic Pacific Coast Highway was a sleepy four lane road with a row of eucalyptus trees



down the median. At least there were palm trees as well, so she was probably in the right place.

Hermione pulled out her phone, which adjusted remarkably quickly to her sudden change in geography, and searched for Mitch's. The link led her to a public ratings site of some sort, and Hermione was heartened to see that the place had consistently high rankings for its offerings, location, and atmosphere, but there were also a number of one-star reviews because the owner was notoriously sharp-tongued. She smiled to herself. This had to be it.

As she continued walking north, past yoga studios, antiques dealers, and boutiques, Hermione began to feel anticipation curling in her stomach. In all probability, she was about to come face to face with the man whose efforts had made it possible to win against Voldemort. Of course, her giddiness had an anxious edge. She had no idea what she would say to him or even if he would acknowledge her. She didn't need his acknowledgement, of course. She never had. Solving the difficult problems he had presented had always been its own reward.

But to have the opportunity to acknowledge *him*, to address him as an equal, and most of all, to compliment him on the job he'd done raising a son under trying circumstances, that made her pick up the pace. That and the weather wasn't that pleasant. It had nothing on a Scottish spring of course, but she was dressed for summer.

At last, her phone guided her to turn left towards a park, and there it was, across the street from a pizza place. The building was designed to look like an English cottage, with thick tiles and enormous roses that put Hermione's to shame. Yet given the eclectic design of the town, it looked as though it belonged there. There was a raised deck with tables and chairs, though they were empty, likely due to the early hour and unpleasant weather. Hermione opened the door and was immediately enveloped in warmth and the fragrance of coffee. She couldn't help herself stopping just inside the door, closing her eyes, and inhaling deeply.

When she opened her eyes, she was being regarded with amusement by a middle-aged woman with long, greying blond hair and at least five piercings in each ear.

"Namaste!" chirped the blonde, whose nametag proclaimed her to be Miranda.

"Good morning," said Hermione, not sure what else to say.

"All mornings are good, even when the weather's gnarly."

"It's fairly dreadful," agreed Hermione. "But perfect weather for coffee."

"And an even better time of day for caffeine," said Miranda, grinning. "What's your pleasure, sister-goddess?"

By habit, Hermione preferred tea to coffee, but the odour of roasted beans was heavenly. "What do you recommend?"

"What makes you happy?"

Hermione thought for a moment. "A friend brought

me a pound of Mitch's coffee, and I liked it black very much. Is there another way to have it that isn't too sweet?"

"How about a café Cubano? It's a shot of our epic espresso made with demerara sugar, which cooks it while it's being brewed. And it's majorly copacetic with the toffee scones."

From Miranda's tone of voice, Hermione gathered that "majorly copacetic" was a good thing. "Perfect. I'll have one of each," said Hermione, handing over her Gringott's Express card that was spelled to look to Muggles like whatever credit card the establishment accepted.

Miranda glanced at the card. "I haven't seen one of those in a dragon's age."

Hermione blinked, surprised. "Are you a witch?"

"Sure. Mitch serves all in his own way," she said, slipping a large scone from the display case into a paper bag and handing it to Hermione. "Don't worry, we're shiny with the International Statute of Secrecy. We just have a huge magical population, and everybody seems to get along just fine most of the time. It'll just be a few minutes on the coffee," she glanced at the card. "Hermione. Nice! Are your folks Shakespeare nuts, too?"

"My mum and dad met in a production of *Winter's Tale*."

"Are they thespians?"

"No, they're dentists. But they still act in the Christmas Panto every year."

"So you're a sport?" she asked over the sound of the coffee grinder.

"A sport?"

"You know, a magical babe in a nonmagical family?"

"Yes. We call ourselves Muggleborns at home."

"In this land of political correctness, we find the word Muggle to be pejorative and heavy, just to give you a head's up."

Hermione smiled. "I'll bear it in mind."

"Don't feel bad if you slip. The owner still uses the word just to annoy people. It's part of his natural charm and perversity."

Hermione laughed. If Mitch wasn't really Severus Snape, she was going to eat her wand. "Being perverse and whinging are practically our national pastimes."

"Mitch could have been the captain of England's national whinging team," she said, placing a heaping scoop of fragrant coffee into the espresso machine. "Not unlike his tea blends, he's an acquired taste. Do you want your Cubano for here or to go?"

Hermione wondered for a moment if Miranda was Vic's mother before dismissing the idea as unlikely. "I'll have it here."

The bell over the door rang merrily as a pair of teenaged girls appeared in the doorway, both wearing bikini tops visible beneath their outer shirts. Miranda pointed at them in turn.

"Skinny latte and a caramel macchiato?"

"You're a mind reader, Randa," said one of the girls, pulling a purse from her beach bag and putting the

exact change on the counter.

"Hermione, your Cubañño's up."

The coffee had crashing waves drawn in light brown atop a layer of fluffy foam, and its fragrance was divine. The scone in the bag was generously studded with shiny brown bits of toffee and Hermione was surprised to find her mouth watering. She hadn't had lunch before setting off on this wild Snape chase.

She took her coffee and scone to a seat in the window and watched people trickle into the shop, a mix of surfers, women with babies in slings, and professionals on their way to work. One man in a turban was clearly a wizard — she could see his wand sticking out of the top of his drawstring trousers. Before long, nearly every seat was taken. Hermione watched for any sign of Severus Snape. Would he look the same? Would he pretend not to know her? Would he be angry? It was anybody's guess, and she didn't think it was only the sweet, strong coffee coursing through her system that made her warm with excitement and anticipation.

A foursome of men carrying surfboards was making their way up from the park, which Hermione assumed went down to the beach. They were long, tanned, and smoothly muscled, and they had all pulled their wetsuits from their arms and left them folded down over their waists. She tried not to think about their ages as they approached the shop, and she deliberately looked at the flyer on the table for open mic night at the bar down the

street instead of being obvious about watching them rest their boards against the edge of the deck.

The bell rang, and Hermione noticed that Miranda was discreetly tucking a wand into her back pocket and that the girls' coffee orders were sitting on the bar. Miranda set a teapot filled with steaming water next to them.

"How do the wave walkers find today's swells?" asked Miranda.

"Frigid," said one, whose wet hair hung off his head in long, golden ribbons. "Double Americano, Randa." Hermione glanced surreptitiously at him through her eyelashes. He couldn't have been more than twenty-five. Definitely too young to ogle.

"Right. Grande espresso for Ryan, black coffee for Logan. What about you, Mitch?"

Hermione's head shot upward at the mention of his name.

"The Assam blend, I think," said a voice that made Hermione shiver with recognition. "And for pity's sake, don't put milk in it this time."

Fortunately or unfortunately, the speaker was on the far side of Ryan, who was more than uncommonly tall, so she couldn't verify his identity. Though really that voice was all that was needed.

"I've been instructed by the owner of this establishment to always serve Assam with milk," said Miranda, who sounded puzzled rather than put out.

"True, but this is an Assam blend, blended, in this

case, with Darjeeling, which is never drunk with milk."

"I surrender the pot to you, O He Who Signs My Paychecks," said Miranda, dumping two spoons' worth of the blend into the vessel and holding it out in front of her. "You can add or not add whatever you like."

"That would be acceptable." The speaker stepped up to the counter to take the pot, and Hermione had to remind herself to breathe.

Though Hermione had told herself that she was ready to see him again, the sight of his hawklike profile made her feel lightheaded. Mentally shaking herself, she catalogued the differences in his appearance. The pale skin of his face had darkened and roughened with exposure to the elements, the hair was longer and shot through with silver, and the body — well, she'd never seen him out of teaching robes, but she'd bet her last Knut that he hadn't been built like *that* when she had seen him last, with smooth brown arms, and shoulders swelling gently with lean muscle. Only the undersides of his forearms were noticeably pale, otherwise she'd never have guessed that this coffee-roasting ocean dweller could ever have been the old bat of the dungeons.

She was still marvelling over the differences when she heard Miranda say, "How's the Cubano, Hermione?"

"Delicious, thanks," Hermione heard her own voice say from somewhere far away, and she watched from the same place outside herself as the object of her scrutiny snapped his head towards her and stared,

face as impassive as granite.

"She's a daughter of Circe from your motherland," said Miranda, unnecessarily, handing Ryan his coffee.

"I'm on a short holiday," said Hermione.

"I see," said Mitch. His face was still damnably still. She felt as though she was waiting for the storm to break. "How do you find California?"

"It's not as sunny as I thought it'd be."

"June is invariably foggy, and it sometimes stretches into July," said Mitch. "It's not until August that the sun comes out for the summer."

She was getting impatient for him to say something — anything — to acknowledge her. "Won't you join me?" Hermione asked, gesturing to her table. "I'm sure we can find better things to talk about than the weather."

Snape glanced over his shoulder at his friends, and the blonde waved him off. "See you after work?"

He nodded and brought the teapot over to Hermione's table. He settled into the chair with the air of a condemned man, which made Hermione bite back a smile.

"I suppose I should be grateful that you came sans whichever Weasley you deigned to wed," he said.

Hermione bit back a sharp retort but held her tongue. He didn't know. There was no way he could know. "You needn't worry about Ronald. He won't be visiting anybody," she said tightly.

"Oh?" Snape sat back in his chair, his languor belying his sharp words. "Did that lummoX survive it all

only to get himself killed in peacetime?"

"He was injured in the line of duty twelve years ago. He's been in the Janus Thickey Ward at St. Mungo's ever since," said Hermione.

Clearly Snape wasn't prepared for this, and his face went still once more. He didn't offer his apologies, but he made a show of pouring himself a cup of tea before speaking.

"How does Victor find Britain?"

"Full of people who stare."

He acknowledged this with a nod. "What have you told him?"

"I've told him he resembles Severus Snape and gave him one of the better books written about the war so he has some sort of context for people's reactions when they decide to venture out more."

He made a derisive noise with his lips. "A book. How predictable. And now you've come to satisfy your curiosity."

"I want to know what you expect me to tell people," said Hermione, crossing her arms. "The resemblance is too strong for anybody who knew Severus Snape not to remark upon it, and he's only going to look more like you as he gets older."

"Victor is an adult. He's capable of deciding what to tell people."

"He's still under the impression that he's a sport," said Hermione, feeling her temper flare for Vic but not will-

ing to let Snape know he'd succeeded in angering her.

"The boy isn't a fool. At least, I don't believe he is."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"When he realises that his father is a wanted criminal in England, surely he'll make decisions appropriate to the fact."

Hermione felt a warm wave of satisfaction that he wasn't bothering to deny that he was Severus Snape. "But you're not a wanted criminal."

"And how long do you think it would take for that to change if it were known that I survived? That I had brought up a child who resembled me in every way but those traits that matter? That I've managed to scrape out a not entirely unpleasant existence on the other side of the world? Do you suppose they'd give me a medal?"

"That you were working for Dumbledore to avenge Lily's death is common knowledge," said Hermione. "And Harry made the front page of all the papers when he named his younger son for you."

She was satisfied to see Snape's eyes widen, though he was master of himself enough not to choke on his tea.

"Yes, little Albus Severus Potter," she said with relish. "My godson, you know."

To her surprise, Snape smiled, though it was a decidedly scornful one. "It's good to know that Potter hasn't changed in his most prosaic essentials."

"Do you think he'll have a prosaic reaction to meeting Vic?"

Snape took a sip of tea. "What did you do?"
"I dropped three glasses. Don't change the subject."
"You answered your own question. If you didn't respond with anger, surely Potter won't, not after naming one of his precious brood after me."

"But — "

"You're making a mountain out of a molehill, Granger," he said, interrupting her.

"Weasley," she shot back. A thousand words of protest were on the tip of her tongue warring for the right to escape first. Was he being deliberately obtuse?

He made a dismissive gesture. "Clearly Victor doesn't want to know anything at this point, most likely because he'd like to form his own conclusions. It's not a strategy I should rely on, but he's always had his own way of doing things."

Hermione blinked, annoyed by the change of subject, but it was clear that Snape wasn't going to tell her anything of substance about himself or Vic. "Children are like that," said Hermione, by way of acknowledging his desire for privacy. "Mine may look like a perfect mix of me and Ron, but they've never been little carbon copies of either of us."

Snape gave her a long, measuring look and sipped his tea. She took another sip of her drink and a bit of scone, waiting for him to break the silence.

At last he spoke. "I would appreciate your keeping my whereabouts secret for as long as you can."



"Isn't that particular djinn out of the bottle already?"

"You're the first person to come in search of Severus Snape in over twenty years."

"How long do you think that will last?" she asked. "The boys are planning to teach music magic in Britain after they graduate."

"They'll have to convince the Wizengamot that music magic isn't Dark, and that could take years if it happens at all. There's still plenty of time for Victor to make alternate plans, should he see the need to do so."

"With due respect," said Hermione, her tone clearly indicating how much respect the thought his opinion about the Wizengamot was due, "things are very different now. Society is much more open to hybrid forms of magic and far less likely to use binary descriptors like Light and Dark Magic to describe things."

"But you don't deny that the particular brand of magic that our offspring have chosen for their life's work is currently outlawed in England."

"It is, for now," said Hermione, grudgingly.

"And you also acknowledge that his physical appearance is likely to be an impediment to receiving fair treatment from the powers that be, not to mention the reaction of the average wizard on the street."

"I wonder that you allowed your son to go to abroad at all if you have such dire predictions for his prospects in Britain."

"Victor is of age. There's nothing I can do to stop him."

"Would you, if you could?"

"That boy is dearer to me than I am to myself," he said, his voice like iron. "I would do anything within my power to keep him from being unfairly branded as a Dark wizard, especially when his magic is beauty incarnate."

Hermione was momentarily taken aback by the vehemence of Snape's protectiveness, but she recognised the impulse all too well. "Would you come to England?" she asked. "Harry and I would support you, as would the rest of the former Order."

"I fail to see how reminding the world of my crimes would aid Victor in any way. The boy must learn for himself how to deal gracefully with suspicion and fear. Merlin knows I haven't much to teach him on that front."

"Your secrets are safe with me, at least for as long as Vic wishes to keep them."

"Thank you," he said.

They sipped their beverages in silence for a few minutes.

"Your son plays cello beautifully," said Hermione. "He was practising in the garden when I left."

"He's accustomed to playing outside."

"The noise bothers you?"

"The only person it bothers owns the flat next to mine. I imagine your son had a similar problem growing up. He is a brass player, is he not?"

"He sings more than he plays, but yes, trombone is his primary instrument. When he was first learning

he used to follow his sister around with it and make the most disgusting sounds he could. But if we sent him to his room, he would play 'Yellow Submarine' repeatedly until we let him out again."

"Victor broke the neck of his first cello by standing on it in an attempt to reach a box of doughnuts," said Snape. "I didn't know what made him cry harder, breaking the cello or finding out that the box was empty. His magic tutor taught him to repair it the next day, but he was disconsolate that evening."

Hermione nearly asked why he hadn't simply repaired the cello with magic and recalled Vic's insistence that his father was a Muggle. Perhaps it was experiences like having to repair his own cello that had convinced him.

She glanced over her shoulder to make sure Miranda and the turbaned wizard weren't listening. "I've no idea how you've lived as a Muggle all these years," she said quietly.

"I was raised as a Muggle. Besides, emigrating as a wizard would have been impossible. It was far easier to forge a Muggle identity than a magical one."

"Doesn't eschewing magic have all sorts of dire effects on your health?"

He gave her another measuring look, and Hermione had the distinct impressions that she'd strayed into territory that he didn't wish to talk about.

"It can, but the magical and Muggle communities

are far less segregated here."

"And, of course, once Vic came along, yours was designated as a magical dwelling."

He gave her a sharp look. "Of course," he said after a moment's pause.

"And you hired a magical barista. Clever to hide in plain sight."

He shrugged. "I thought it wise to have a contingency plan in case Victor goes through with his dunderheaded notion to move to Britain. Those plans may yet fall through, of course. Potter's reaction to the resemblance may frighten him into remaining in America."

Hermione smirked. "Harry's far more likely to offer to adopt him than hex him."

"I suspect Victor would handle being hexed with greater equanimity than an unwanted offer of adoption. Or worse, having one of the Potter spawn named after him."

Hermione laughed, and Snape made a move to rise.

"Would you like anything else?" he asked, gesturing at her empty cup.

Hermione had to work very hard not to let her eyes travel obviously up and down his lithe torso, the lower half of which was still encased in neoprene.

"I should go," she said. "The Potters, other Weasleys, and Lupins are coming for dinner on Sunday. I had rather hoped that you might be convinced to join us, but I suppose that's out of the question."

"Entirely."

"Well, it was good to see you," said Hermione. "And I'm glad you're doing well. You will let me know if you change your mind about coming back, won't you?"

"I daresay you will be one of the first to know," said Snape drily, as he swept off towards the counter, the arms of his wetsuit flapping as his teaching robes had once billowed.



Dinner that evening was a quiet affair, enhanced by fresh produce from a farmer's market in Solana Beach that Hermione had found before Flooing home.

They chatted amiably about the BBC Proms, whose concerts Hugo and Vic had already categorised by how long they were willing to wait for tickets, and about Hermione's latest commissions, which led to several penetrating questions from Vic about how to navigate the Ministry of Magic's reclassification processes.

While Hugo washed, Vic dried, and Hermione put things away, they chatted about the advantage, or lack thereof, of having a terminal degree in a society that lacks institutions of higher learning. Hermione, whose training was through a commuter program in Rotterdam, was quick to assure him that a master's degree wasn't needed in order to teach in Britain.

Vic nodded. "Actually, I have an unrelated question for you."

"Of course. Anything you like."

"You know about science, right?"

"A little. What branch?"

Vic's eyes were on the dish he was washing. "Genetics."

"I took some natural science courses as electives. What do you need to know?"

"If I wanted to find out if I'm actually related to Severus Snape, how would I go about doing it?"

"You don't need science for that," said Hugo. "There are loads of spells, right Mum?"

"True," said Hermione, "but we'd need a sample from each of them in order for one to work."

"How about a piece of hair?" asked Vic.

"Don't be thick," said Hugo. "Where are we supposed to get Snape's hair?"

"I found one of Dad's hairs in a book I borrowed the last time I was home."

Hermione blinked in confusion. This wasn't merely a test to see if Vic was Snape's son. This was also a test to see if the man who had brought Vic up was truly his father. "I suppose we could test it first as a control," said Hermione, hoping Hugo would either ignore or acknowledge the implications.

Vic understood her subtle prevarication for what it was and nodded. "I'll just get it."

"Mind if I have a drink, Mum?" asked Hugo, gesturing at the drinks cabinet.

"Of course not, love."

Hugo made himself a whisky and soda, which had been Ron's favourite drink after a long day, and Vic

came back in with a copy of *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*, which he opened.

He gently pulled a dark strand of hair from between the pages and laid it on the white tablecloth. He met Hermione's eyes, reached up to his own head and plucked one of his own hairs and laid it next to the first.

Hermione raised her wand and said, "*Phoreso*." Over the pieces of hair, a series of luminous horizontal bars appeared, whirring like the wheels of a slot machine until they began to slow.

"Odd," murmured Hermione.

"What is it?" asked Hugo.

Hermione held up a shushing finger. The bars continued to slow until finally they locked with one another.

Hermione stared at the result, frowning. "Vic, was your hair ever long?"

"Yeah, I cut it last year, why?"

"Because this isn't your father's hair. You've got an old piece of your hair here."

Vic's intense inquisitiveness faded into dismay. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. The expression patterns are identical. And notice the colour? These are both from the same wizard."

"Oh," he said. A deep flush stained his cheeks.

Hermione felt a rush of fondness for the poised young man who suddenly looked so lost. "I can teach you the spell," she offered. "That way you can try it the next time you go home."

"I wouldn't want my dad to see me doing it," said Vic. "I try not to do magic when he's around. I don't think he likes it."

Hermione bit her tongue against the explanation she so desperately wanted to give him, but the story wasn't hers to tell, and she didn't know most of it.

"I thought your dad only had one mood: sarcastic," said Hugo. How does disapproval differ from that?"

"Disapproval is louder."

"What's louder, disapproval or Shostakovich?"

"Disapproval, but the neighbours don't complain about that for some reason."

"Great, so take me with you the next time you go home. While you're practicing, I'll start yelling and shrieking so they'll leave you in peace. Oh, Vic! That's it! I know how we can find out if your dad is Severus Snape or not."

"Ask him?" asked Hermione.

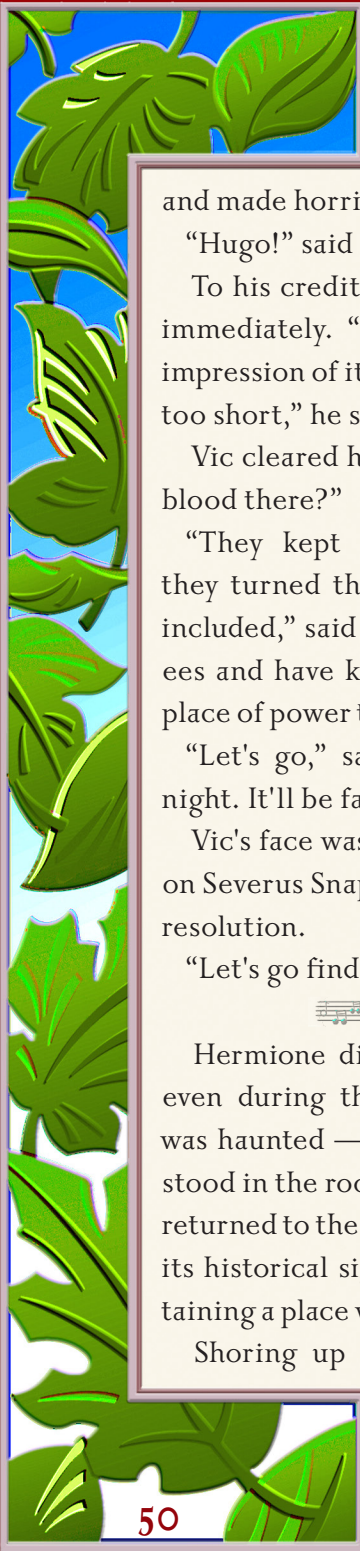
Hugo ignored her. "Are you up for an adventure, Vic?"

"What, tonight?"

"Yes. We need to get into the Shrieking Shack when nobody else is around," said Hugo. "Mum'll let us in. Won't you, Mum?"

"I thought we needed a strand of hair in order to make it work," said Vic.

"It doesn't have to be hair," said Hugo. "Snape died there. He got bit by a very huge, very hungry, very angry magical snake, and he bled all over the place." He stared off into space, clapped his hand to his neck,



and made horrible choking noises.

"Hugo!" said Hermione, more than a bit horrified.

To his credit, Hugo seemed to realise his mistake immediately. "Dad used to do this really fantastic impression of it on nights when my bedtime story was too short," he said, by way of apology.

Vic cleared his throat. "So there's still some of his blood there?"

"They kept the room exactly as it was when they turned the house into a historical site, blood included," said Hermione. "I'm on the board of trustees and have keys to all the protective spells. It's a place of power that we don't want anybody to exploit."

"Let's go," said Hugo. "I've never been there at night. It'll be fantastically creepy."

Vic's face was stony, but having seen a similar look on Severus Snape's face recently, she recognised it as resolution.

"Let's go find some answers," he said.



Hermione disliked going to the Shrieking Shack, even during the day. She didn't believe the place was haunted — she knew better. But every time she stood in the room where Snape had died, a part of her returned to the awful night. However, she understood its historical significance and also the risks of maintaining a place where blood had been willingly spilled.

Shoring up the building had certainly been an

architectural challenge, but far greater were the magical protections. Before Harry had named his son for him, a sizeable percentage of the population had never accepted that Snape had been working for Dumbledore, and vandalism, arson, and sabotage had been attempted numerous times. Thankfully, Hermione was at least as devious as the would-be criminals, and mug shots of people with "VANDAL" written on their foreheads in purple pustules had become less frequent in the crime section of the PROPHECY as word of the building's protections spread.

Still, Hermione's heart was beating quickly as they reached the edge of McCoy House's anti-Apparition zone. Hugo and Vic's presence at her side was reassuring, and the young men were blessedly unaware of her unease.

"There's only a small Apparition window at the Shack, so I'll have to side-along you both," she said.

The boys nodded, and she took their hands, pictured the square section in the corner of the garden in her mind's eye, and whisked them off.

Vic looked a bit peaky when they popped into existence outside the dilapidated building, but no worse for wear.

"Stay here," she said when they had recovered. "I need to turn off the Alarums."

"What was that?" asked Vic after she had released the keystone charm.

"It's based on Goblin magic," said Hermione. "At

least I think it is. None of them would collaborate with any witch, and certainly not with me."

"It felt sort of like music magic," said Vic, "only without sound, if that makes any sense."

"Can I move yet, Mum? My nose itches."

"All the perimeter security spells have been temporarily suspended," said Hermione. "Let's go."

She led them through the garden that she'd filled with plants that were either poisonous, stinging, or potions ingredients as much to honour the man who had died there as to encourage people to stay on the path. The door opened for them with a protracted creak, and they stepped into the shack.

The rotten timbers had been frozen in place, never to shift or squeal again, and they glowed subtly, which during the day gave it a comfortable, warm feeling. But at night, with no sunlight illuminating the windows or coming in between the exterior boards, the orangey-yellow light looked like nothing as much as dying embers that made the edges of their shadows fade into nothingness.

The hidden door that led to the tunnel was ajar behind the crates that had once shielded her and Ron and Harry from Voldemort's sight, and she ignored the bronze plaque that proclaimed the door's significance to stare at the dark patch on the wooden floor, cordoned off to prevent people stepping on it.

"That's it?" asked Vic softly.

Hermione nodded. "The protective charms are tied to his blood," she said. "Nobody can lift it except me or Harry, and once we're gone, they'll be permanent."

Hugo was silent. "This is really weird."

Hermione laughed. "It is," she said. "Are you sure you want to do it this way, Vic?"

"Yes. For Hugo, at the very least."

Hugo frowned. "Me?"

"Yours is the country with cultural baggage attached to this face," he said, tapping his nose sardonically with his finger. "If this is a coincidence, I want you to know it was as well as me."

He included Hermione in his "you," and she felt a twinge of guilt for pressing Vic on the issue last night. However, she knew she'd been right to do so, and the boy ought to have whatever proof he sought.

She dispelled the protections with a murmur.

"Do you want me to use the Phoreso Charm?" she asked.

"No, I'd like to try something else," said Vic. "Hugo, can you help? I want to use the Puccini."

Hermione could tell Hugo was about to ask what to do, when Vic took his hands and whispered something into their palms. Hugo's hands began to glow with soft blue light. He closed his hands into fists, and when he opened them again, he began to play the air in front of him like a piano.

Hermione knew Hugo could play reasonably well, despite having to be forced to practise as a child, but

this was the first time she'd see him create sounds made of magic, and where his fingers descended, bright spots of magic radiated out from his fingertips like ripples on the surface of a pond, and the air was filled with a gentle swell of strings.

Not an arpeggio had gone by before Hermione realized that she *knew* this song, though she didn't know the name of the opera it was from. It hardly mattered. Even Celestina Warbeck forewent her usual torch songs to sing the piece, popular for its charming melody and relatively short duration. But before Hermione could recall the name, Vic opened his mouth and began to sing.

O mio babbino caro, mi piace é bello, bello!

[Oh dear father, he pleases me, he's handsome!]

It was as if she'd never heard the piece before. Vic's warm voice floated effortlessly into his falsetto on the climax of the phrase, and goosepimples rippled up Hermione's arms.

Vo andare in Porta Rossa a comperar l'anello.

[I will go to Porta Rossa to buy a ring.]

The Italian words became clear in her mind, a child's entreaty to a father, and she grasped the longing, and the need for approval and validation.

Si, si, ci voglio andare! E se l'amassi indarno, andrei sul Ponte Vecchio, ma per buttarmi in Arno!

[Yes, I will go there! And if my love is in vain, I will go to the Ponte Vecchio and throw myself into the Arno!]

To Hermione's surprise, the dark spot on the floor began to shimmer, at first in red, then in green, and finally the same blue that danced at Hugo's fingertips. A tendril of blue light rose from the floor and began to wind itself around Vic.

Mi struggo e mi tormento! O Dio, vorrei morir!

[I struggle and I am tormented. Oh God, I would rather die!]

The light surrounded him, illuminating him. Hermione was too wonderstruck to move. Vic's face was in her mind's eye along with Severus's, and the two were singing the final words in unison, begging for pity and acceptance.

Babbo, pieta, pieta! Babbo pieta, pieta!

[Have pity, father! Have pity!]

Hugo's fingers struck the final notes slowly, as if trying to encourage the magic to linger, but the light was already fading, as though it were being absorbed into Vic until the room had darkened and the dull glow was visible once more.

Hermione let out a breath she hadn't realised she was holding, and the three of them stood, watching the light fade, breathing hard. This had been magic-making as she'd never seen it before, and she wasn't entirely sure she understood it. Severus was right: his son's magic was pure beauty.

Hugo cleared his throat. "All right, Vic? All right, Mum?"

Hermione smiled at her son. "Yes, darling. Thank you." It was then that she noticed how pale Vic was. She

made a move towards him, but Hugo was faster and wrapped his arms around Vic just as he collapsed.

They laid him on the floor of the shack, and Hugo smoothed his hair back from his face. Hermione cast a gentle *Rennervate*, and Vic's eyes fluttered open.

"Can you move at all?" asked Hugo.

Vic shifted slightly on the floor. "Sort of. Help me up."

Hugo took Vic's arm and pulled him into an upright position over his shoulder.

"You can side-along Apparate from here," said Hermione, who was absently repositioning the cordons surrounding the bloodstained part of the floor. "I'll be along as soon as I've reactivated the protective spells and anti-Apparition barrier. There's Magic Replenisher in my medicine cabinet."

"We'll be all right," said Hugo.

"Not drained," murmured Vic. "Confused."

"You never make any sense after you let the spell have its way with you instead of controlling it properly," said Hugo, adjusting Vic to a more comfortable position.

"I didn't cede control," said Vic in a singsong voice. "Did it perfect. Perfectly."

"Yes, and it sounded very pretty," said Hugo, shifting him to a more stable position.

"Don't patronise," said Vic, his consonants suddenly sharper. "It worked. It just doesn't make sense."

"Is Snape not your dad then?" asked Hugo. "His magic and yours looked pretty similar. Hold on."



Vic braced against Hugo. "He's not my dad. He's *me*."

Hermione looked up from her work sharply just as Hugo turned, and he and Vic disappeared with a crack.

Her jaw fell open as she grasped the implications of Vic's statement, which neatly explained the strong resemblance, Severus's refusal to return to Britain, and even the results of her Phoresis Charm.

Somehow and for reasons unknown, Severus Snape had created a perfect genetic and magical copy of himself and raised him as a son.

Adagio



It was nearly three quarters of an hour before Hermione had replaced all the protective spells and raised the anti-Apparition barrier. She retreated to the unprotected square in the corner of the garden and Apparated home. The door to the boys' room was closed, but she could hear their indistinct voices as she walked down the landing to her bedroom. She knew better than to interrupt, so she busied herself flossing and cleaning her teeth, but her mind was still racing.

How had Snape done it? Cloning? Magical duplication? The fact that Vic was so much younger than Snape stymied her. She couldn't guess what method

Severus had used, given that every one she could think of was illegal to use on humans. More importantly, *why* had he done it?

She dismissed hubris and simple curiosity almost immediately. Such motives were too self-indulgent for someone who had sacrificed most of his adult life fighting a tyrant. Difficulty finding a mate was also summarily dismissed as frivolous, though Hermione couldn't help giggling imagining Professor Snape on a date in his high-necked teaching robes. The wetsuit had been a marked improvement. She replayed their earlier conversation in her mind and tried to recall what she had said that provoked him into silence, which she now understood to be his attempt to suss out how much she knew about Vic's origins.

The first was easy to identify, in retrospect. She'd made some flippant remark about children not being carbon copies of their parents, which had definitely put him on his guard. But it was her offhand observation that Vic's arrival — she supposed she couldn't call it a "birth," not unless he'd hired a surrogate — had been excellent cover for Severus's own magic use.

Hermione sat down on her bed and kicked off her shoes. It was decidedly less than flattering to think that he might have cloned himself in order to gain *carte blanche* to do magic. Then again, his silence might have indicated that he was outraged by such a suggestion. That interpretation made more sense,

especially given his protectiveness of Vic.

That boy is dearer to me than I am to myself.

Hermione wondered if he was capable of anticipating Vic's reaction to discovering his origins. They may have shared the same genes, but Vic was a wholly different person who had been raised in very different circumstances from Severus.

She glanced at the clock and realised that it was late afternoon in California. He would need to be warned. She rose from the bed, opened her handbag, and quickly found the card from Mitch's Speciality Coffee and Tea and typed the number into her phone.

There was no answer. Hermione scowled. She strongly suspected that Severus was ignoring her call. Well, that wouldn't do.

She drew her wand and cast her Patronus.

"He knows," she told the silvery otter. "I — well, I don't know what to tell you other than that. I don't know how much longer he'll be here, but I wanted you to know."

The otter looked at her quizzically, as if asking for the rest of the message, and she shook her head. "Deliver the message to Severus Snape. He's here on the southwest coast of America. Try to deliver it in private if there are other magical people around."

The mischievous misdirection was to her Patronus's taste, and she executed a back flip in the air before whizzing off in a westerly direction. Hermione had no idea how long an overseas Patronus message would

take to be delivered, but she could at least attempt to sleep now that she'd given Severus a head start on what was likely to be a fairly spectacular argument with his son. Parents had to stick together.

She was settling into bed when her fireplace flared to life. She jerked into wakefulness wondering how on earth Severus had gained access to her unlisted Floo. However, her stomach tightened into a cold knot when she saw Healer Johnson, the head of the Janus Thick Ward at St. Mungo's.

"Mrs. Weasley, you'll want to come with me."

Hermione's hand flew to her heart. "Is he —"

"No," said Healer Johnson. "But you should hurry."

"Thank you. I'll just tell the boys and come straight through."

The medic's face disappeared, and Hermione walked down the hall, surrounded by a strange sense of surreality. That this could be happening and the house was as warm and comforting as it always had been. There was silence from the far side of Hugo's bedroom door, and no tell-tale light shone from beneath it. She knocked gently on the door.

There was no response.

She rapped harder. "Hugo, wake up" she said softly. "Healer Johnson's called us to St. Mungo's."

There was a loud thump, and Hugo opened the door wrapped sloppily in his sheet.

"Is dad —?"

"Not yet," said Hermione, swallowing. "But she wouldn't call us in the middle of the night it weren't serious."

"I'll get dressed," said Hugo, lighting the room with a wave of his arm. "Just a minute."

"Come to my room, we'll use my fire after I call Rosie, Harry, and Ginny," said Hermione. She glanced at the room. "Where's Vic?"

Hugo frowned. "He's in Rosie's old room. It's all right. He doesn't need to be there."



Not for the first time, Hermione marvelled at how young her husband looked, despite the white strands that peppered his orange hair and the gauntness that gave his features an alien delicacy. Of course, he hadn't had a care in the world for twelve years. Still, she wouldn't have traded any of her hard-won wrinkles for anything. Ron would never have those badges of honour.

"I'll take him out of stasis," said Healer Johnson, drawing her wand and casting a nonverbal *Rennervate*.

Ron rolled over on his back and his eyes opened, though his gaze was unseeing as ever. However, in the new position, his breathing was laboured.

"Is it an infection?"

"No. The atrophy has spread to the part of the brain that controls involuntary muscle systems. I'm so sorry. There's nothing we can do."

Hermione swallowed. "Does it hurt him?"

"I don't think so. He's not showing any signs of stress."

Hermione took his hand and began stroking it. For years after the accident, his hand would tighten around hers. Even though the Healers explained that it was only a reflex, it comforted her. But no matter how hard she wished it, the hand she held remained limp.

As the minutes passed, Rose and Teddy arrived, as did Molly and Arthur, Harry and Ginny, Percy, still in his pyjamas, George and Katie, Charlie and Luna, and even Bill and Fleur, who had been on holiday in the Maldives. Hermione nodded her greeting but didn't let go of Ron's hand.

St. Mungo's had erected partitions for their privacy, and Hermione caught snippets of murmured conversations around her, though her own focus was on her husband's thin chest feebly rising and falling beneath his hospital robes.

Molly sat across from Hermione and took Ron's other hand. Hermione had long since ceased bearing her mother-in-law any animosity for wanting her youngest son to live out his life in St. Mungo's. He wasn't suffering, and it clearly gave her comfort to see him. Hermione had grieved for the loss of her husband many years ago, and she hoped that wherever he was, the passing of his mortal coil would bring him peace. But now, as the shell that had once been her husband struggled for breath, she could see the lines deepen in Molly's face, and Arthur placed his hands on her shoulders.

Hermione belatedly realised that Hugo's hand was

on her shoulder, and she looked up at him. His face was ashen but resolute, and he whispered that he would like to do something, with her permission. She nodded dumbly, and he extended his hand to Rose.

Hugo took a deep breath and began to sing.

When you walk through a storm, keep your head up high, and don't be afraid of the dark.

Hermione closed her eyes against the upwelling of emotion the familiar tune elicited. She hadn't heard the words since her last Chudley Cannons match, over a dozen years ago.

At the end of the storm is a golden sky and the sweet silver song of a lark.

Hermione opened her eyes as Rose's voice joined Hugo's, and then Ginny and Luna began to sing, followed by Harry and Katie, and all the other Weasleys, even Fleur. In her mind's eye, Hermione saw Ron at age eleven, fairly bouncing with excitement and telling her about the one Cannons match he'd seen in which the team took home a victory. It wasn't until much later that she'd realised that the reason Molly and Arthur had raised a brood of Cannons supporters was because no other team offered season tickets whose cost was lower the more home matches you attended and provided free Portkeys to away games.

Walk on through the wind, walk on through the rain, though your dreams be tossed and blown.

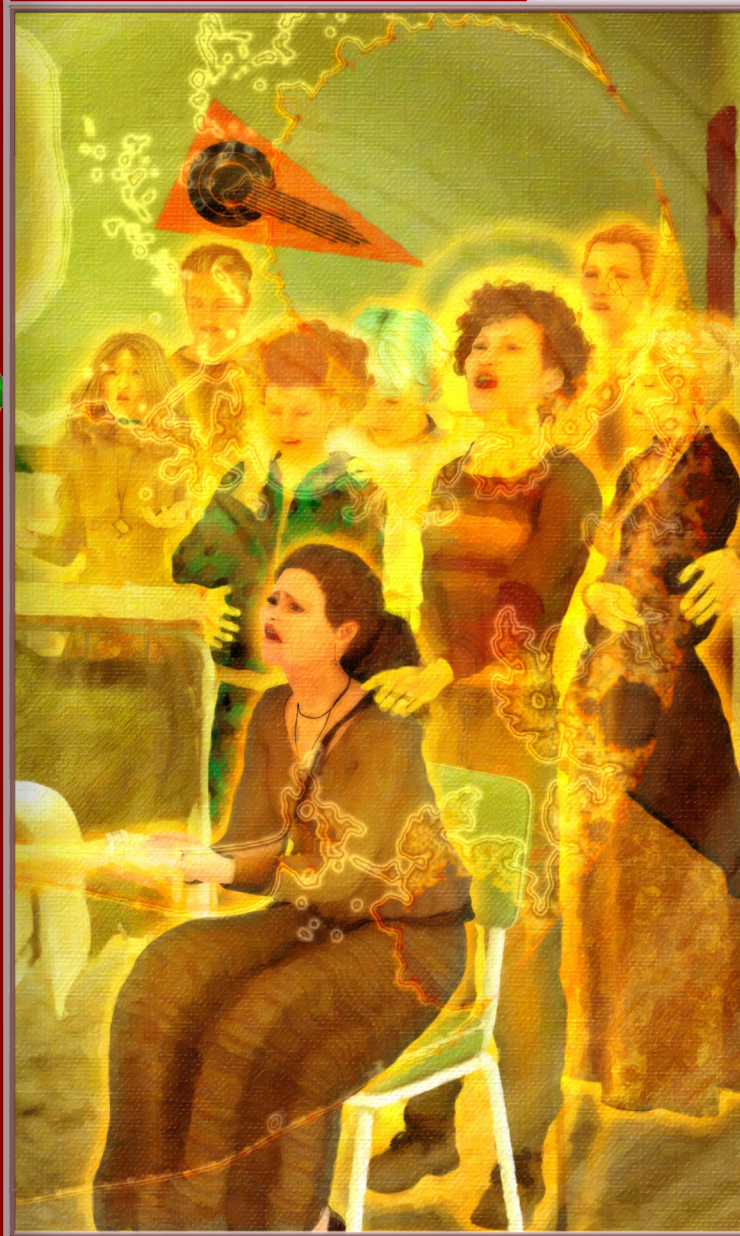
Hermione was back on the Cannon's home pitch

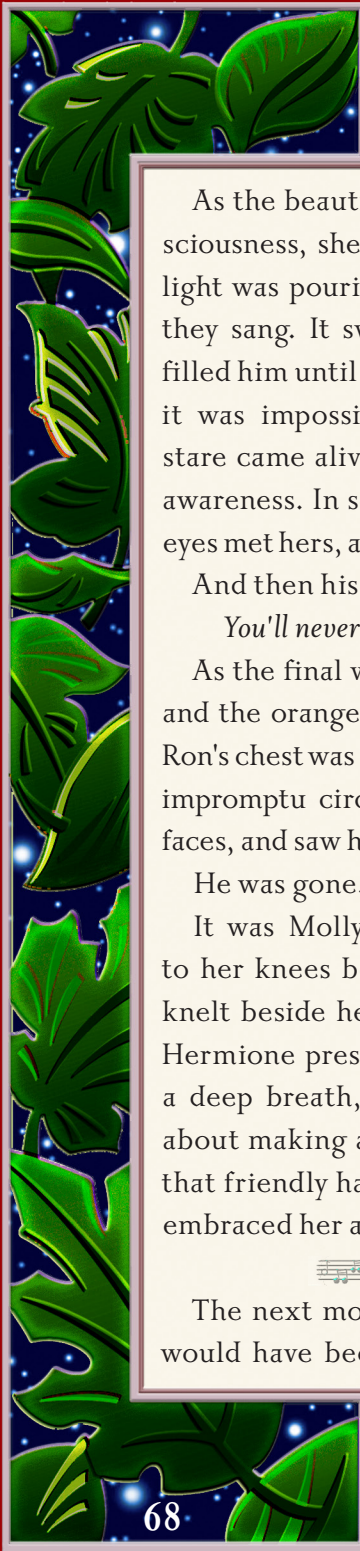
with Ron and the children, their arms thrown over their neighbours' shoulders, singing the song that one of the Muggle-born players had brought with him from Liverpool Football Club. Ballycastle supporters had attempted to use their superior numbers to steal the song for their own club, but the Chudley supporters, from years of heartbreaking losses, had far stronger lungs for bellowing. Hermione felt their shared triumph surge through her as she revisited that day in the rain out-singing Ballycastle on their home pitch, even as the Cannons lost 438 to 67.

Hermione smiled at the memory, even as her tears ran freely, and to her astonishment, she saw that light was pouring out of Hugo and bathing his father's body in a warm, orange glow. She squeezed the hand that still gripped her shoulder and sang in a choked voice.

Walk on, walk on with hope in your heart and you'll never walk alone.

As she sang, she felt that she was filling the words with her memories of Ron, as though she were casting a Patronus. Their first kiss. The first time they made love. The day she asked him to marry her. Their wedding night. His first successful case as an Auror. Her first commission. The way he spun her around joyfully when she told him she was expecting Rose. His face the first time he beheld his daughter and his son. The vague, first-thing-in-the-morning kisses and the grateful embraces at the end of a long day.





As the beautiful memories swirled around her consciousness, she became gradually aware that orange light was pouring out of her and all of the others as they sang. It swirled gently around Ron's body and filled him until his skin glowed. And though she knew it was impossible, Hermione fancied Ron's vacant stare came alive for a moment of understanding and awareness. In some version of the present reality, his eyes met hers, and his lips formed the words, *Thank you*.

And then his eyes closed.

You'll never walk alone.

As the final words echoed through the closed ward and the orange light faded, Hermione could see that Ron's chest was no longer rising. She looked around the impromptu circle of joined hands and tear-streaked faces, and saw her own realisation dawn on all of them.

He was gone.

It was Molly who broke the circle first and fell to her knees beside Ron's body with a wail. Arthur knelt beside her, tears dripping from his long nose. Hermione pressed her lips to Ron's limp hand, took a deep breath, and rose to find the Healer to see about making arrangements. She was vaguely aware that friendly hands rubbed her back and loving arms embraced her as she passed.



The next morning, Hermione woke at ten, which would have been a positively decadent lie-in if she

hadn't been at St. Mungo's until the wee small hours of the morning. She lay there, letting wakefulness take hold, and had to admit that despite everything that had occurred during that seemingly endless night, she felt well enough. She put on her dressing robe, splashed some water on her face, and went out to the kitchen to make tea. She would have to ask Hugo or Vic to teach her how to best make the coffee.

It was then that she realised the house was silent — no trombone booming from the back of the house or cello singing from the garden.

She took her tea and padded down the hallway to Rose's room, where Vic had spent the night, and found the door open, and though the bed had been slept in there was no sign of Vic. She smiled knowingly and for an instant envied Hugo having someone to turn to physically. She began to dismiss the thought instantly out of habit, but stopped herself.

The children were grown, she earned enough money to provide for her needs and wants, and now, after a decade of living as a virtual widow, she was finally free to do as she wished. It wouldn't do to go out and take up with an international Quidditch team, but the thought that she could made her smile. She glanced in the mirror and regretfully smoothed her grizzled curls. Ron had always entreated her to keep her hair long, and she had, despite knowing that he would never run his hands over it again. But it was

always so hot in the summer and unruly in humidity.

Newly resolved, Hermione tossed a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace. "Salvatore's Salon, Diagon Alley!"

An hour later, Hermione returned home to find Hugo seated at the table playing glumly with a bowl of porridge. He didn't look up until after Hermione had kissed his cheek.

"Mum! Your hair!" he exclaimed.

"Sal took a bit more off than usual," she said, relishing the shocked look on her son's face as he took in her now chin-length curls. "Do you like it?"

"It's —" he swallowed. "You look really different."

"But good," she said, having learnt long ago that the best way to get compliments from Weasley men was to prompt them.

"Yeah," said Hugo, shaking his head as if to clear water from his ears. "So, I thought I'd go to the Ministry today and make some preliminary inquiries about teaching music magic."

Hermione smiled. "I'm proud of you for thinking about this so far ahead of time."

Hugo shrugged. "Yeah, well, now that I'm going to be doing it alone, there's nobody to delegate to."

Hermione blinked in surprised. "What about Vic?"
"Vic's left."

Hermione was too surprised to say anything.

"It's very simple," he said tightly. "Vic got what he wanted, and now he's gone."

"Darling," said Hermione, at a loss to say anything else. She brought over the teapot and refilled his cup.

Hugo's ears were turning red. "All this time he's been using me to get here, and like some great plonker I gave him everything he wanted, even access to Snape's blood. The signs were everywhere. I just didn't understand what they meant until tonight."

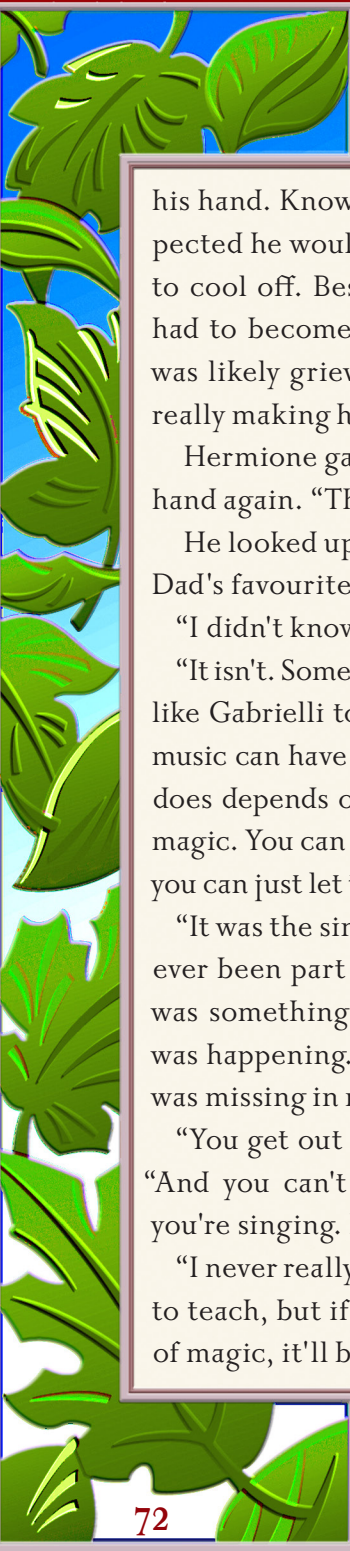
"He just left?" asked Hermione. "No explanation?"

"He admitted that he knew who Snape was before he came here. He knew exactly who all of you were and knows more about the war than I do. He planned everything that happened at the Shrieking Shack — he was the one who suggested I learn the accompaniment to that aria for my keyboard skills class, and that was months ago! All he had to do was ask a few leading questions, and we practically did everything for him. He played us like a bunch of really thick cellos."

Hermione as having a difficult time reconciling the warm affection shared between Vic and her son and the Machiavellian motives Hugo had apparently assigned him. "But surely —"

"No, Mum," said Hugo, eyes on his cup of tea and face stormy. "Vic came here solely to prove that Severus Snape is his father. You said Snape was the ultimate spy. I reckon he's a chip off the old block."

Hermione was torn between wanting to embrace Hugo tightly and arguing that he should give Vic another chance to explain. She settled for squeezing



his hand. Knowing Hugo's temper as she did, she suspected he would listen to reason when he'd had time to cool off. Besides, Hugo hadn't had as long as she had to become resigned to Ron's condition, and he was likely grieving. Best to remind him of what was really making him upset.

Hermione gave him a small smile and squeezed his hand again. "Thank you for what you did last night."

He looked up at her, surprised, but pleased. "It was Dad's favourite."

"I didn't know it was a magical song."

"It isn't. Some music is written by magical composers like Gabrielli to make specific things happen. But all music can have magic put into it, and what the magic does depends on the song and the person adding the magic. You can go in with a design, the way Vic did, or you can just let things happen, which is what I did."

"It was the single most powerful piece of magic I've ever been part of," said Hermione seriously. "And it was something I didn't even know I needed until it was happening. It was as if the magic could see what was missing in me and filled it up."

"You get out of it what you put into it," said Hugo. "And you can't lie about what you're feeling when you're singing. Not when there's magic involved."

"I never really understood what it was that you want to teach, but if you can teach other people that kind of magic, it'll be an undeniably positive force."

Hugo's ears went red again, but this time she knew it was from pleasure. "That's what I like about it," he said. "You don't just wave your wand and know what'll happen."

Hermione winced slightly. "Well, we'd best not tell the Wizengamot that when the time comes. The old guard are dying out, thankfully, but there are still enough of them who are suspicious of anything that doesn't fit into neat little classifications. Now, if you like, I can give you the names of some people in the Ministry. The Wizengamot Administrative Office is on the second level — you'll want to take the lift from the atrium. The receptionist is brilliant, so ask her first who you should talk to, but if she doesn't know where to start, I'd suggest you talk with Ernie Macmillan. He's a walking encyclopaedia of legal precedents, and if he can't suggest a starting place, I don't know who can."

"Thanks," said Hugo. "I'll go after breakfast. Or lunch. Or whatever this is."

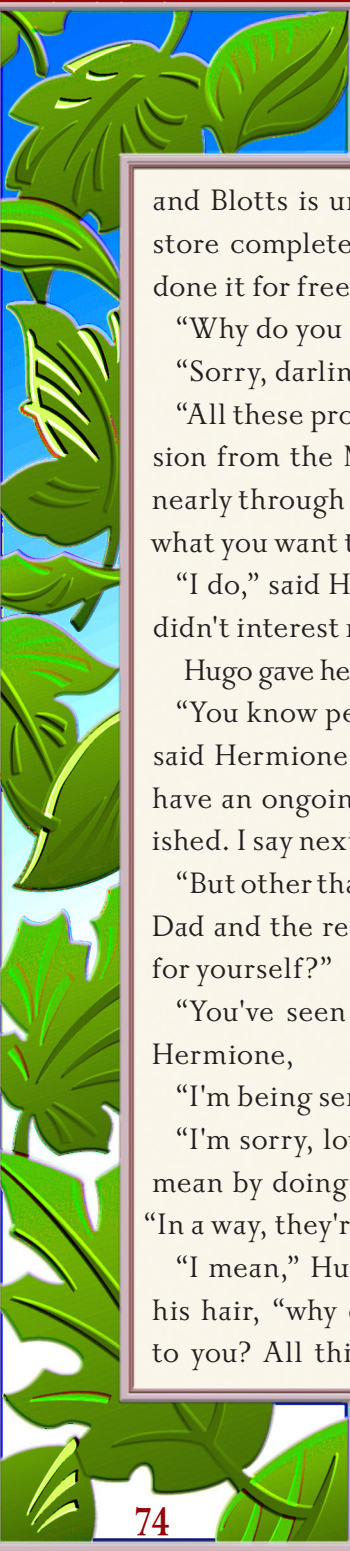
"You'll have to Apparate or go to the Hog's Head," said Hermione. "They disconnected our Floo from the Ministry network last year."

"But Dad was still alive last year!" said Hugo.

"I gave them permission to do it," said Hermione gently. "The fewer people that have access to our home, the better."

Hugo's jaw was still set at a mutinous angle, and Hermione busied herself with pouring herself a cup of tea.

"I have a new project," she said brightly. "Flourish



and Blotts is under new management and wants the store completely redone. I didn't tell them I'd have done it for free."

"Why do you do stuff like that?" asked Hugo.

"Sorry, darling, I don't know what you mean."

"All these projects for other people. You have a pension from the Ministry, Rosie's on her own, and I'm nearly through school. Why don't you retire and build what you want to?"

"I do," said Hermione. "I wouldn't do the work if it didn't interest me at least a little bit."

Hugo gave her a knowing look. "The Hoggarths' place?"

"You know perfectly well why I took that contract," said Hermione primly. "And your Uncle Harry and I have an ongoing bet to see when it's going to be finished. I say next year, and he says two years from now."

"But other than the house, which was at least half for Dad and the rest of us, what have you ever designed for yourself?"

"You've seen the master suite, haven't you?" said Hermione,

"I'm being serious, Mum," said Hugo, frowning.

"I'm sorry, love, but I don't know exactly what you mean by doing a project for myself," said Hermione. "In a way, they're all for me."

"I mean," Hugo paused, running his hand through his hair, "why don't you do something that matters to you? All this stuff, it's playgrounds, or practical

things, or making buildings look prettier, but none of it's really important. Do you want future generations to look back at us and say, boy, they had some well-designed childrens' Quidditch pitches?"

Hermione had a feeling she knew what was driving this line of questioning. "I'll tell you what," she said. "I'll think about it, and you think about it. If one of us comes up with something important that I think I can do reasonably well, I'll do everything I can to make it happen. Does that sound fair?"

Hugo gave her a suspicious look, as if he expected her to be teasing, but when he was convinced that she was in earnest, he stuck out his hand for her to shake, which she did.

"It's a deal." He emptied his cup of tea and wiped his mouth on the back of his forearm. "I'm off to the Ministry, then."

"Do you want the Peugeot?"

"Naw, it's a nice day. I'll walk into town and Floo from there. I probably won't be back until late. I'm getting together with Al for dinner."

"I'll see you tomorrow then," said Hermione. "Have a wonderful time."

"Are you going to be all right by yourself?"

She gave him a sad smile. "I've been by myself for years now, darling. I'm fine."

He kissed her cheek. "Your hair does look nice."

She waved her hand playfully at him as he left. It

wouldn't do for him to hear the lump in her throat.

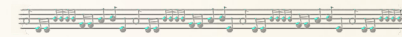
When the house was silent and still once more, Hermione took her tea over to the drafting table and stared at the clean expanse, willing it to go away. As excited as she was about the Flourish and Blotts job, the last thing she felt like doing was work. In an attempt to fall back into her old routine, she returned to the kitchen and cleaned the tea things by hand, letting the mindless activity occupy her physically, wondering what else she ought to do. The house was clean. All the arrangements for Ron's memorial service had been delegated to Molly, all the forms were signed, all the appropriate petitions made, and all the announcements sent to the proper publications. Her Owl Office box would likely be loaded with condolences, and the second-to-last thing she wanted to do was read and respond to them. She needed to get out of the house.

And therein lay the crux — there was nowhere in Wizarding Britain where she could go. After she finished drying Hugo's mug for the third time, she hung it on its hook, and in doing so, she noticed that the edge of Percy's parchment was sticking out the top of her handbag.

She had twenty-four hours in America, courtesy of the highest levels of the Ministry of Magic, and she'd only used two.

Without stopping to think, Hermione grabbed her handbag and the two most recent issues of *MAGICAL ARCHITECTURE* from the pile by the door and set off

towards the Three Broomsticks.

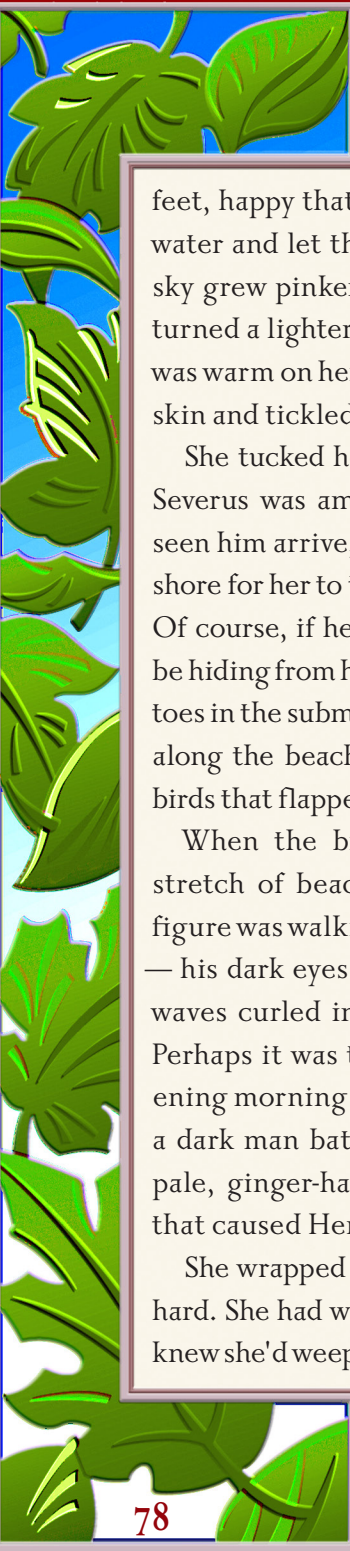


The sun was just beginning to rise in Solana Beach, and Mitch's wasn't going to be open for another half hour, so Hermione walked down to the beach. It was marginally warmer than it had been the day before, so she kicked off her sandals, hitched up her robes, and dabbled her toes in the surf, which was bracingly cold. Waves crashed noisily offshore and bubbled shoreward until fading into foam at her feet. It was quite loud, but it was a comfortable cacophony, and one in which her own insignificance was a comfort.

The sky, thankfully free from clouds and fog, had lightened to a pale yellow, and several black figures with surf boards were walking into the water. An elderly jogger trotted past, and as the sky grew lighter, more figures walked meditatively into the surf, threw their boards on the restless surface of the water, and paddled out towards the breaks.

Already surfers could be seen floating on their boards out among the breaks, catching rides on the faces of small waves as they crashed over upon themselves. It was a peaceful thing to watch, even as the riders fell into the sea or leapt from their boards as the wave's energy fizzled beneath them.

Hermione grew tired of holding her skirts above the waves and surreptitiously shortened the hem of her robes to just above the knee. She waded out several



feet, happy that her feet had become used to the cold water and let the fading waves caress her ankles. The sky grew pinker, and it seemed to her that the waves turned a lighter blue as the sun rose, and the sunshine was warm on her back even as the sea breeze cooled her skin and tickled her nose with her newly-shorn curls.

She tucked her hair behind her ear and wondered if Severus was among the morning's surfers. She hadn't seen him arrive, but those in the water were too far off-shore for her to tell if he had been one of the early risers. Of course, if he'd spotted her, she suspected he would be hiding from her in the coffee shop. She idly flexed her toes in the submerged sand and continued to walk north along the beach, much to the consternation of shore birds that flapped noisily away at her approach.

When the birds had landed on a less-populated stretch of beach, Hermione noticed that a familiar figure was walking out into the surf. He hadn't seen her — his dark eyes were focused on the water where the waves curled in translucent arches upon themselves. Perhaps it was the enormity of the sea, or the brightening morning sky, or even the contrast of imagining a dark man bathed in golden sunshine rather than a pale, ginger-haired one beneath institutional lights that caused Hermione's eyes to fill with tears.

She wrapped her arms around herself and swallowed hard. She had wept for Ron many times before, and she knew she'd weep again, but this time she wept for herself.

She didn't sob. There was too much beauty surrounding her to succumb to that indulgence. But her eyes continued to leak, and the astringent wind blew her tears out of the corners of her eyes, and when she turned her head to watch the surfers once more, the air seemed to vibrate against her ears as if murmuring to her.

Wait. There was music on the wind. There, someone up the beach had set up what looked like a portable radio next to his board and was doing yoga. Hermione smiled when she recognised the band as one that had always epitomised this part of America for her. Still, it wasn't one of their infectious pop hits about surfing and cars. It was a ballad, with harpsichord, winds, and strings. She was having a difficult time placing the tune, which was familiar to her but filled with odd chromatics and surprising leaps up the scale. But when the singer settled into the refrain, the lyrics burst from Hermione's memory seemingly of their own accord.

God only knows what I'd be without you.

Hermione's throat was too tight to sing, but the words were there now, and her lips moved along with them.

If you should ever leave me,

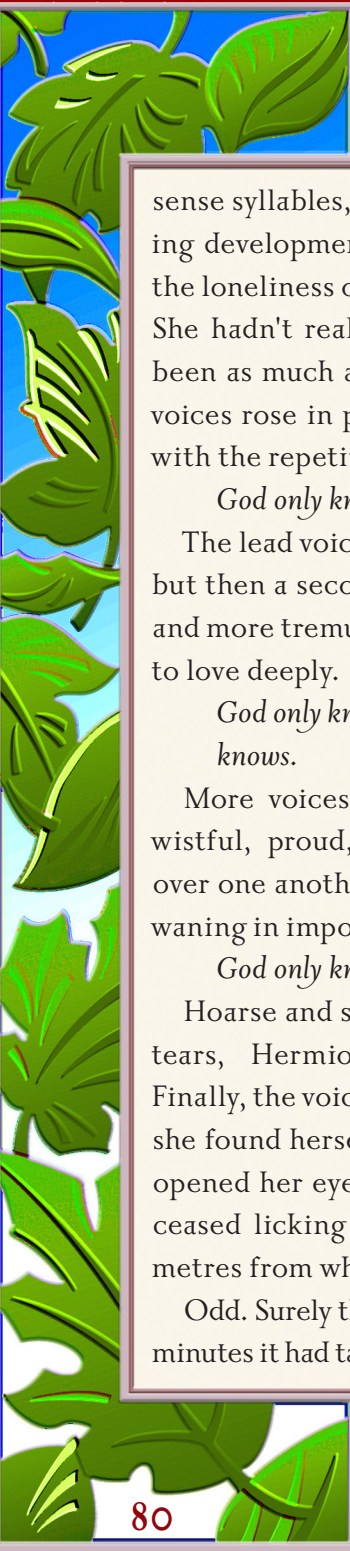
Though life would still go on, believe me.

The world could show nothing to me,

So what good would living do me?

God only knows what I'd be without you.

As the voices in the song went from words to non-



sense syllables, and the melody faded into an ever-rising development, Hermione closed her eyes and let the loneliness of the past twelve years flow out of her. She hadn't realised that being a virtual widow had been as much a part of her as her magic, and as the voices rose in pitch and volume, she mouthed along with the repetition of the verse and into the refrain.

God only knows what I'd be without you.

The lead voice was filled with quiet contemplation, but then a second voice piped up, sounding younger and more tremulous, as if fearful about what it meant to love deeply.

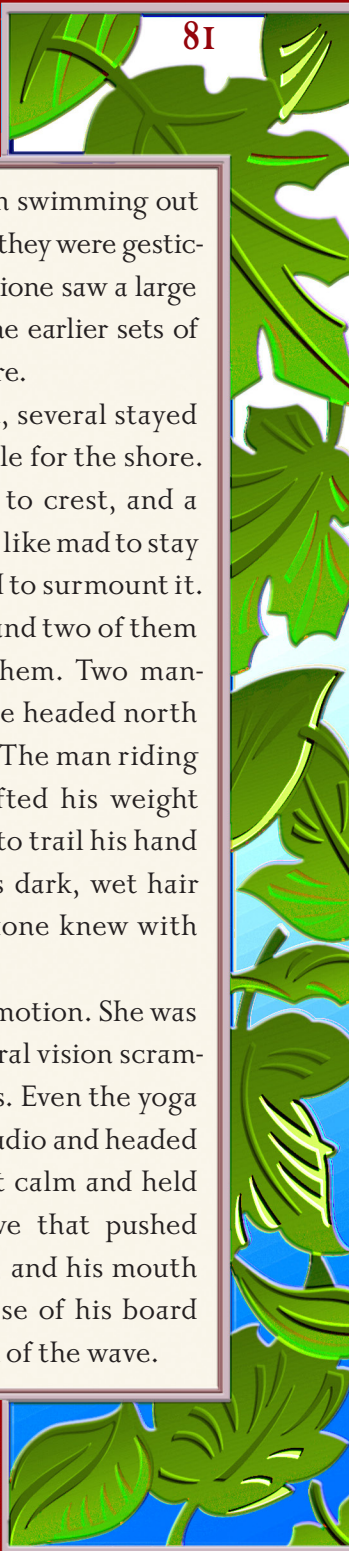
God only knows what I'd be without you. God only knows.

More voices joined the first, sounding in turns wistful, proud, affectionate, resentful, all layered over one another, the words and phrases waxing and waning in importance.

God only knows what I'd be without you.

Hoarse and stuffy as she was from the unexpected tears, Hermione found herself croaking along. Finally, the voices and instruments began to fade, and she found herself aware of an unnatural silence. She opened her eyes, and to her surprise, the waves had ceased licking her feet and had withdrawn several metres from where she was standing.

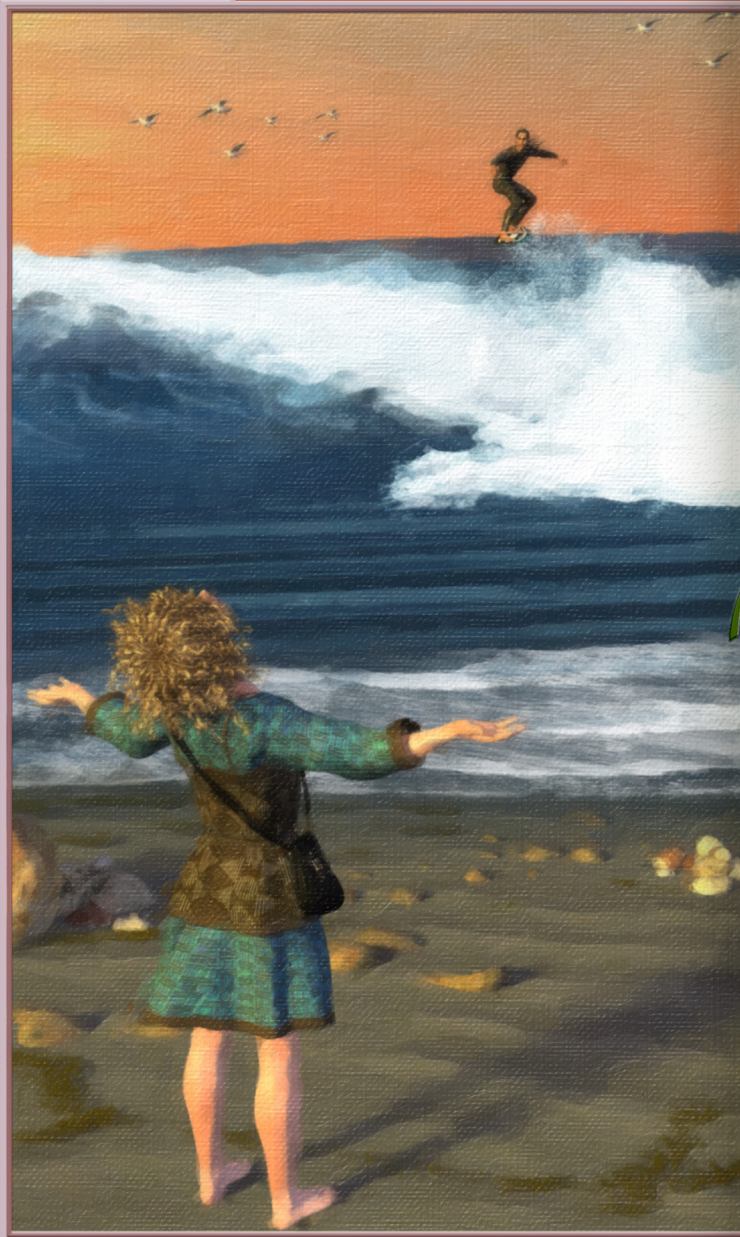
Odd. Surely the tide hadn't retreated so far in the few minutes it had taken to listen to the end of the song. She



glanced out to the surfers and saw them swimming out to sea as the surf zone shifted. And then they were gesticulating wildly at the horizon, and Hermione saw a large rise of water at least twice as high as the earlier sets of waves, heading majestically towards shore.

Most of the surfers swam to meet it, several stayed where they were, and one made a paddle for the shore. As the wave neared, she saw it begin to crest, and a dozen surfers were in front it, paddling like mad to stay on its face, but only a handful managed to surmount it. They slid down the slope of the water, and two of them went flying as the wave broke over them. Two managed to creep to their feet, but the one headed north was heading into another break point. The man riding the wave southward towards her shifted his weight from foot to foot and finally crouched to trail his hand in the tube of water next to him. His dark, wet hair streamed out behind him, and Hermione knew with sudden certainty that it was Severus.

The scene seemed to unfold in slow motion. She was vaguely aware of people in her peripheral vision scrambling for the steps that led up the cliffs. Even the yoga practitioner had seized his board and radio and headed towards higher ground. Hermione felt calm and held her arms out towards the large wave that pushed Severus inexorably closer. He saw her, and his mouth dropped open in surprise, and the nose of his board flipped up, depositing him on the back of the wave.



The wall of water knocked her feet out from under her, and she fell headfirst into it. Her body was tumbled, and though every nerve screamed from the sudden immersion in frigid water, the sudden quiet was soothing, and she relaxed her body, knowing that she would float upwards. But no sooner had she let go of herself than the wave retreated and deposited her face-down on the sand, where she lay, spitting out the salty water.

A brown hand extended into her field of vision, and she looked up to find Severus looking down at her with a sardonic look on his face.

"You might simply have called the shop," he said.

She took his hand in both of hers and allowed him to hoist her to her feet. "You didn't answer when I called yesterday."

"I was busy, Granger," he said. "You called at the height of evening rush."

She didn't bother to correct his use of her maiden name. "I trust you received the message?"

He sighed and picked up his board. "I ought to have known the witch with the aquatic Patronus was the one to sing up that wave. Come on."

Her first thought was that he'd ignored the important part of her question. Her second was to deny calling the wave, on the basis of her lack of overall musicianship and singing voice, but her teeth had begun chattering loudly. Her protest would have to wait.

She followed him up the stairs to the park, where

numerous piles of belongings lay on the grass near other surfers who were stretching and pulling on their wet suits. He stopped by a battered black surfboard bag, laid his board next to it to dry, and produced a blue and white striped beach towel, which he handed to her. She pulled it snugly around her shoulders and cast a surreptitious Drying Charm on her clothes. After casting a second charm on the towel, she handed it back to Severus.

"Thank you," she said.

He scrubbed his hair with the warm, dry towel. "And to you," he said. "Now, what was so Gods-all important that you had to conspire with the sea to bring me here? Not the little lovers' quarrel, I trust? Victor should cease sulking in a day or so and realise he's been an utter dolt, and once he's set his mind to making someone forgive him, the boy is nothing if not persistent."

Hermione smiled at Severus's assessment of his son but sobered quickly. "I'm not sure when Vic left last night, but Hugo and I were called to St. Mungo's. Ron passed away last night. It was expected — he'd been in decline for the past year, it was painless, it was peaceful, and Hugo was like an angel singing him to his rest."

Severus's face was uncomprehending. "You came halfway around the world to tell me this?"

"I had to get away," said Hermione simply. She was surprised at how calm she was when the same thoughts an hour ago had made her feel cornered and desperate.

"I still have almost a full day left on the International Portkey I used yesterday, and I knew this would be a place where I wouldn't have to deal with people looking to share their own loss with me. I've had twelve years to come to terms with losing Ron, and I'm tired of being in mourning. I simply want to, well, be without having to be something for someone else."

"Well, in that case, I shall reserve my sympathies until such a time as you are ready to receive them," said Severus. "In the interim, I should be delighted to treat you to the beverage of your choice at Mitch's establishment. The owner owes me a favour or two."

Hermione's eyes sparkled. Perhaps the Vic was a chip off the old block in more ways than one. "Anything warm would be lovely."

As they walked up the pavement towards Mitch's, they passed the yoga practitioner whose choice of music had brought about such a powerful response in Hermione. He was pulling on his wetsuit in preparation to hit the waves, and Hermione was about to thank him when the words died in her throat. What she had taken for a radio was actually a stained cardboard box containing recyclable objects that had obviously been picked up along the beach.

Rondo



he sun was low in the sky when Hermione made it back to Hogsmeade, and the first thing she did was stop by the apothecary for some aloe. It had been many years since she'd spent substantial time in the sun, and her shoulders and face were already turning red, and the salve Severus had given her was wearing off. Still, she wouldn't have swapped the hours spent with Severus for the world. What's more, she still had twelve hours left on the Portkey, and thinking about what they might do with those twelve hours did marvellous things to her insides.

Merlin, but it had been a long time since she'd felt this way. Knowing how potentially shocking her windblown appearance might be to someone who expected her to look like a grieving widow, Hermione took the back way to the edge of the village and made her way towards McCoy House.

The Peugeot was parked next to the side door, and Hermione felt a twinge of guilt. She hoped Hugo hadn't been home for long. She knew that he hadn't had as much time to reconcile himself to Ron's deterioration as she and Rose had, and even though she suspected the row with Vic would blow over, he was nursing that

loss as well. However, Hugo had always preferred to work through things on his own, for better or for worse, so perhaps it was for the best that he had a bit of space.

Hermione went in through the side door and found her son lying face-down on the sofa with piles of forms spread out on the coffee table and floor. Unless she'd got it wrong, the poor boy would require tea immediately.

"Successful trip to the Ministry, I take it?" asked Hermione,

"Ungh," said Hugo, feebly raising his head.

"That good?"

"Did you have to do this every time you wanted to get approval to use new magic on a project?"

"It used to be worse," said Hermione heating the water with a tap of her wand and dropping several teabags in. "New construction, particularly with previously untested charms used to require approval by the full Wizengamot. However, after my first few projects, they got so tired of spending entire sessions approving the same magic that people have been using on existing construction, they finally changed how charm reclassifications were done. Now there's a much smaller board for approvals, and there are actually some competent people on it."

"But a first year curriculum in magical composition alone comprises dozens of charms," said Hugo. "It's going to take years to get these re-classified."

Hermione Levitated the teapot and two cups over

to the coffee table. "Well, if I know the Ministry like I know the Ministry, when the backlog reaches the higher ups, things change. When that happens, you'll probably have the opportunity to argue for blanket reclassification of music magic, and if you have enough approved reclassifications beforehand, it'll be a strong mark in your favour."

"Ta," said Hugo, taking a cup gratefully. "I reckon it's a good thing I'm starting now."

"I'm proud of you, sweetheart," said Hermione, wincing slightly as her sunburned shoulders brushed the armchair's wool upholstery. "It's no easy thing you're doing."

Hugo shrugged. "It's what I love. And if even one other screwed-up kid bound for Hogwarts finds themselves in music the way I did, it'll be worth it."

Hermione glanced at the forms. Whomever Hugo had found at the Ministry had done an impeccably thorough job.

"What's in the bottle?" asked Hugo, gesturing to the apothecary vessel on the counter.

"Essence of aloe," said Hermione. "I spent a bit too much time in the sun this afternoon."

"Gardening?"

Hermione paused, unsure of how much truth Hugo was entitled to. "I was wandering. I didn't really want to talk to anybody today."

Hugo nodded. "I don't blame you. Everyone at the

Ministry was very nice, but I must have been stopped ten times by people offering condolences before I even reached the lift. Huh, this is different tea."

"Yes, it's an Assam-Darjeeling blend. Do you like it?"

"It's a bit weird, but it tastes all right, I suppose."

Hermione made a mental note to save Severus's blend for when Rose came over and to serve Hugo the usual Earl Grey. She gestured to the piles of forms. "I can start filling out the addresses and general petition type ones," she said. "I'll need you to fill in the specific spell details, though."

Hugo gave her a pathetically grateful look. "Thank you, Mum. You're the best."

"It's the least I can do," she said. "Your father did the same thing for me when I was first starting out."

"I can't believe you let him. His handwriting was awful."

Hermione began to giggle. "It was. Someone named Herbert G. Wessel of Hogsmouth received half of our petition responses by accident. I did them myself afterwards."

They chatted companionably as they filled out forms and drank tea, and before long Hermione realised that her shoulders were burning and her stomach was growling.

"I'm going to go and have a wash, and then what would you say to dinner at the Hog's Head?"

"I thought you wanted to get away from everyone earlier."

"Yes, but we're going to have to appear in public sooner or later, and so much the better to toast your father's memory in a place that he loved and spent a lot of time."

"Let's invite Rosie and Uncle Harry," said Hugo. "They'd want to be there."

"Excellent idea. Ron would have loved being remembered there." She gave Hugo a cheeky grin. "Maybe we could ask them to put up a plaque commemorating all the holes he put in the wall by the darts boards."

"Or we could buy everyone a round and start the dirty version of 'Weasley is Our King,'" said Hugo. "I still haven't heard all the verses, and he was my dad."

Hermione giggled. "Your dad and I collected them. Over seventy, all told. I have a feeling we'll be hearing new ones tonight."

Hugo grinned. "If not, we can always write them ourselves."



The next morning, Hermione was up at her usual time, though she doubted she'd see much of Hugo before noon, especially if he failed to notice the bottle of Hangover Cure she'd left on his dressing table. After some beans and toast, she brewed herself a pot of Severus's tea and placed it on the desk next to her drafting table. Yesterday had been the first day in many years that she hadn't done any work, and even though nobody would appear at her table and tut over her absence, the Flourish and Blotts job was a high priority.

After sticking a large scroll of parchment to the table, she opened the file, which contained a magical scan of the building, complete with blueprints, diagrams of existing charms and their loci, a map of current inventory, and a vague handwritten note from the new owner that essentially told her to do whatever she liked. Thankfully, cataloguing standards rarely changed, so the shelves could be Shrunk as-is for ease of unloading and to avoid confusing the customers.

Hermione waved her wand to transfer the bones of her project to the parchment, and as she did the suite of spells she'd placed on the table began generating a list of materials and a to-do list for the physical job, which started with a reminder to undo each of the security and structural charms before starting demolition.

Now, for the façade. The store fronts of Diagon Alley were a mishmash of styles, some horribly clashing, all from different eras. The old Flourish and Blotts had been grand in Elizabethan days, with its beautiful wood panelling both inside and out, but the wood had faded outside and darkened inside, which made things look quite shabby. It wouldn't do to introduce a completely new architectural style. The shop was too famous for that.

As much as Hermione loved mullioned windows in principle, they made window displays problematic, and if the store wished to entice more casual shoppers to enter, they would have to go. She Vanished

them from the plan with a wave of her wand and enlarged the window spaces, though she retained the shape of the original windows and surrounded them with a thin strip of brass. The undersized gas lamp that never fully illuminated the doorway at night was summarily vanished and replaced by a pair of larger brass lamps flanking the door, whose hardware she would be replacing. The ancient sign would be replaced with a nearly identical one, only slightly larger, with embossed brass letters.

She spent some time doing an estimate for the cost of having an outwardly curving display window and consulted her library of catalogues to see if the original roof tiles were still made, until she nodded in satisfaction. She waved her wand, and from her design parchment of notes and sketches, a piece of concept art materialised in the air in front of her. She added a few textural details, Summoned a smaller piece of parchment from her desk, and laid the design on its surface. The colours glowed briefly before settling on the new surface.

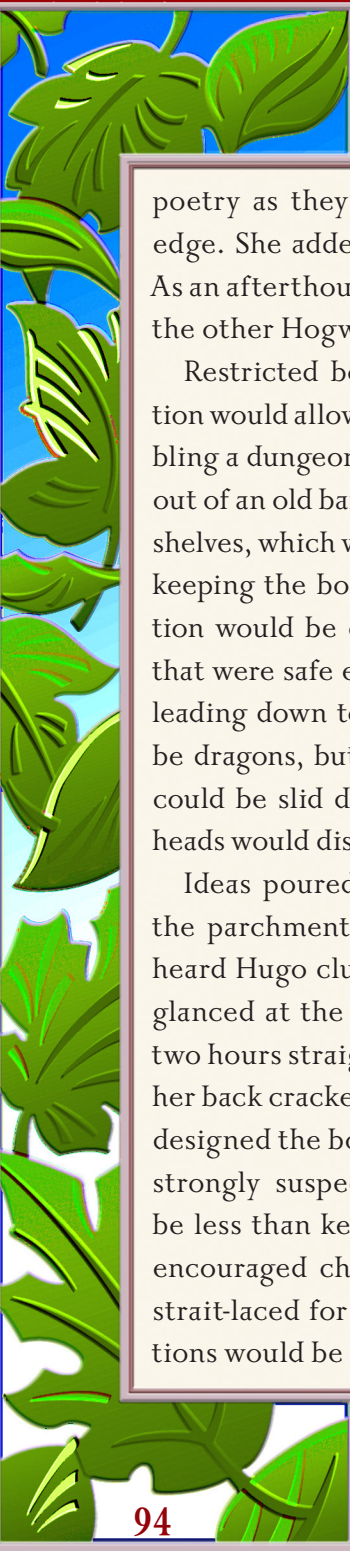
Hermione whistled for the post owl that the Hogsmeade office had grudgingly assigned to McCoy House, rolled up the concept sketch, and gave the owl a bit of dried meat that she reserved for special deliveries. When the design was winging its way to the new owner, Hermione poured herself another cup of tea, affixed a new sheet of parchment to her drafting

table, and stretched her shoulders. Redesigning the interior of the store was going to be fun.

Hermione closed her eyes and saw Flourish and Blotts as it had been. She let her mind go, and images of the shop flashed in her mind's eye, mixing with her own affection for the place, the sorts of books they stocked, and her associations with the new owner, whom she'd met only once. The owner's clean, bright efficiency was undimmed by the smudges she'd picked up while exploring a cubby hole concealed by one of the shelves. Hermione imagined she would want to create welcoming warmth with the suggestion of secrets within.

There. The wood panelling remained, though in a brighter, redder shade, and new bookshelves trimmed with brass stretched all the way to the ceiling. There were projection charms that would allow patrons to see all the contents and index charms that could identify primary subjects, authors, and even obscure words. The shop would be outfitted with a dozen brass-railed rolling ladders that would come when called.

The details flowed out of her quill tip as she allowed herself to relive her first experiences with each section. Sunshine from a new skylight would fall on the student textbook section, and there would be quotations from *PARADISE LOST* carved along the shelf fronts. She smiled, thinking that generations of Magical children would be surrounded by Muggle



poetry as they embarked on their quest for knowledge. She added some serpentine detail and smiled. As an afterthought, she added textural suggestions of the other Hogwarts houses.


Restricted books would be in the cellar. Expectation would allow for nothing else. But instead of resembling a dungeon, there would be a reading table made out of an old barrel, and decoration on the front of the shelves, which would suggest wine racks in addition to keeping the books from escaping. The children's section would be outfitted with smaller rolling ladders that were safe enough to play with and a copper slide leading down to the main floor. The banisters would be dragons, but with no stoppers at the base so they could be slid down, though the intimidating dragon heads would discourage all but the bravest sliders.

Ideas poured out of her, and before she knew it, the parchment was full of notes and sketches. She heard Hugo clunking about in his bedroom, and she glanced at the clock. She'd been working for nearly two hours straight. She raised her arms and winced as her back cracked noisily. Though she had successfully designed the bookshop of her childhood dreams, she strongly suspected that the current owner would be less than keen to have anything in the store that encouraged children to play. She seemed a bit too strait-laced for that. She also wondered if the quotations would be allowed to remain. Probably not.

Hermione sighed regretfully at the interior she had created and suddenly understood what Hugo had meant by asking if she'd ever designed anything for herself. And she had to admit, he had a point. Clearly, every job had rules based on the intended function of the space. But to be freed from the strictures of an outside client, to be at the mercy of no taste but her own, now that was something worth considering.

She glanced at the room around her. She'd designed her office space. It was a clean, bright, wholly functional space whose occasional splashes of colour drew the eye and invited closer looks, but it had been designed for work, not for relaxation or enjoyment. Her cup of tea had got cold, and she cast a Warming Charm on it as she rose and approached the window to the garden. She'd planted it while pregnant with Rose, and the fragrance of her namesake flower mingled with the manicured grass in the centre of the garden, which had been used as a makeshift Quidditch pitch as the children had grown. Hermione took a sip of tea and walked into the living room.

Now, this room had been pure Ron. In fact, it still felt as though he might come bounding through the door from the garden at any moment and flop down on the comfortable leather sofa before turning on the antique wireless and listen to a Quidditch match the way he had when he was a boy. Her gaze fell upon the single reading chair in the corner where she habitu-



ally tucked herself, and she was struck by the oddness of having to hide from the ghosts of boisterous gatherings past, even now.

She walked down the hallway towards her bedroom, in whose design Ron had had a large hand, the bathrooms, one of which held a decadent bathtub that she never used, and doubled back towards the entry hall, which would have been the least-used space in the house, had there been room for the piano anywhere else.

Hermione was surprised to find Hugo sitting at the keyboard sorting through a pile of sheet music. He glanced over his shoulder at her approach.

"I didn't know you were up and about," said Hermione. "I've made some tea. Would you like some?"

"I'm fine, thanks," said Hugo, testing the damper pedal and running a quick arpeggio up the keys.

"I'll just let you practice, then," said Hermione.

"I'm not practicing anything, just mucking about," he said. "Do you still play?"

"Not for years."

"But you always played," said Hugo. "I thought you liked it."

"I do like it," said Hermione. "I just got busy with other things, that's all. And after you left for university, there was nobody left to accompany."

Hugo gave her a look. "You shouldn't let that stop you doing things you like," said Hugo, rolling the C-minor chord at the beginning of *Sonata Pathétique*, a

piece he used to play when he was feeling out of sorts.

"No," said Hermione softly. "But it just happens sometimes, whether you mean it to or not."

Hugo continued to play the moody opening, and paused just before the *allegro*. "Do you want to take the left hand?"

Hermione laughed. "I don't even know if I still can."

Hugo grinned and shifted to the right of the piano bench. "You can play it with your index fingers, if you like."

Hermione joined him at the piano and stretched her fingers. "Right."

"I'll take your tempo," said Hugo. "I can do it at any speed."

"Brave words," said Hermione, grinning. She lifted her wrist gently, as though allowing it to breathe, and brought her fingers down on the keys, rocking quickly back and forth between the octave Cs.

True to his word, Hugo caught her quick tempo immediately and began to play the percussive right hand part. Though it had been many years since she had played the piece, Hermione found her own right hand fingering its part against her thigh. She suspected Hugo of doing the same with his left hand. She missed the first set of chords, which made Hugo tut at her, and her tremolo was uneven, and they had to stop completely on account of giggles when they reached the cross-hand measures.

By the time they reached the end of the section,



Hermione's forearm was aching, and she'd resorted to banging out eighth notes instead of playing tremolo. This amused Hugo to no end, and he started playing all the fast quarter notes as triplets, which lasted less than four bars because Hermione couldn't hold her tempo steady for laughing. Hugo took over completely on the repeat, but he began to swing the rhythm and throw in occasional flat sevens, and soon Beethoven's moody classic sounded like lounge music.

"Do you remember hearing Alfred Brendel play this?" asked Hermione. "You must have been five or six, but you were rapt. At least until the slow movement when you curled up and fell asleep."

Hugo immediately switched to the slow movement. "Was that the time Dad won tickets to the United Harpies match?"

Hermione blushed, recalling the awful fight they'd had that ultimately ended with her and Hugo at the Royal Academy of Music and Ron and Rosie in Puddlemere. "That's right. I'm surprised you remember."

"I was terrified you'd make me go and watch Quidditch, and then I was terrified that you'd had a row because of me. But the concert was worth it."

"I haven't been to a concert in years," said Hermione wistfully. "I try to catch at least the Last Night every year on telly at least."

Hugo stopped playing and looked at her pityingly. "I was going to tell you at lunch, but you force me to

take drastic measures." He stood and pulled a pair of crumpled pieces of paper out of his pocket and handed them to Hermione.

She looked at them, and her eyes widened in surprise to see that he'd obtained passage for two via International Floo to California later that night. "What's in Los Angeles?" she asked, trying to keep her voice light.

"Only Mahler 8 at the Hollywood Bowl," said Hugo. "Dudamel's conducting, a dozen odd choirs, and we're going to go have our minds blown, not to mention our eardrums. Though it's going to be happening at a ridiculously late hour for us, so we'll need a nap."

Hermione glanced at her son and wondered if he hadn't had a different companion in mind when he'd purchased the tickets, but the idea of seeing such a grand piece of music live in a legendary venue under the baton of a great conductor was too tempting. "That sounds absolutely wonderful," she said, dropping a kiss on top of Hugo's head.

Hugo grinned. "Good. I'd have hated to bring Rosie. She'd clap in all the wrong places and fret over when she could go to the toilet."



Hermione's first feeling upon spotting Severus and Victor ahead of them in the stream of people was one of inevitability. Of course Vic would be here. It was a positive sign that Severus had agreed to accompany him, but she wondered if seeing the two of them

together wouldn't make Hugo stroppey. Fortunately, the two men continued up the asphalt paths that led to the top of the amphitheatre while Hugo, who had been too busy chatting about Mahler to notice them, led them directly to their seats, which were quite close to the front at a small plastic table.

"All right tickets, eh?" asked Hugo, grinning.

"Lovely," said Hermione, who was doing her best to surreptitiously locate the two men. After ordering fantastically overpriced champagne and a few minutes of chatting about the programme notes, she was convinced that Severus and Vic were far enough away not to have to worry about Hugo spotting them. The venue was enormous, and the sun had set behind the hills, making it even harder to see other members of the audience. The lights were bright in the falling dusk, and a traffic helicopter lazily circled the amphitheatre.

Suddenly, Hermione's phone gave a succession of short buzzes.

"Don't forget to turn that off," said Hugo, frowning.

Hermione began rifling through her handbag. "I thought I'd leave it on with an *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* ringtone. That'd be nice, wouldn't it?"

Hugo didn't dignify this with a spoken response. He merely sighed at the injustice of being saddled with a facetious parent and buried his nose in the programme.

Hermione pressed her thumb to the screen of her phone, and it flashed to life. She had to suppress a



giggle when she saw that it was a text from Severus.

THERE'S A PLEASANT VIEW UP HERE.

Hermione didn't bother concealing her grin. *IT WOULD BE A SHAME NOT TO WALK AROUND A BIT WHEN WE'VE COME ALL THIS WAY ALREADY.*

DON'T TAKE TOO LONG AFTER THE INTERMINABLE PIECE ENDS. SOME OF US MUST WORK TOMORROW.

SOME CUPID KILLS WITH ARROWS. SOME WITH TRAPS. DON'T FORGET TO TURN OFF YOUR PHONE.

V REMINDED ME TWICE ALREADY. THANKS.

Hermione snorted and turned off her phone.

"What's so funny?"

"Just a Healer joke from Uncle Harry," said Hermione, knowing that Harry's proclivity for tasteless jokes wouldn't arouse Hugo's interest.

Hugo made a face. "The nexus of the sublime and the profane." He brightened, suddenly. "Not a bad metaphor for Los Angeles, actually."

Hermione smiled at Hugo. "When did you get so worldly?"

"When American Floo gave us unlimited access for a flat fee last summer," said Hugo. "Did I ever tell you about going to New Orleans?"

Hermione gave him an arch look. "No, you didn't."

"Don't worry," said Hugo, grinning. "I won't."

Hermione tutted. "You're teasing."

"Maybe," said Hugo, clearly enjoying himself. "But I did hear Mahler 8 in Portland, and I've been wanting to

hear it with a different conductor ever since. It's kind of an odd piece. Brilliant and powerful, but odd. You'll see."

There was already an obscene number of musicians onstage: an enormous orchestra, an even bigger force of singers, and a third set of temporary steps was filling up with a children's chorus. The distinctive white arches of the bowl were lit with gold, and as the audience lights went down, the stage was flooded with dazzling white light. The audience began to applaud as the soloists walked to their seats in front of the orchestra. The conductor followed them, practically bouncing onstage, and waved his arm at the assembled musicians, who all rose to their feet in unison to accept the anticipatory applause.

The conductor gave the audience a broad smile and a short bow, mounted the podium, and raised his baton. When he lowered it, a loud chord sounded on the organ, which surprised Hermione. But she was even more surprised when the adult choirs burst forth into full-throated song. Hugo caught her eye and grinned. No waiting until the final movement for the choir, then.

The piece's nickname was the Symphony of a Thousand, but it might as well have been a million for the electric effect the music had on the audience. Vic's admiring words about what a symphony of wizards and witches could do sent a sympathetic shiver through Hermione as goosebumps rolled down her arms. All concerns and worries melted into the aural marvel in front of her,

and she let the music lead her through a meditation on redemption, love, and unspeakable beauty.



When the final triumphant notes rang through the amphitheatre, the audience burst into enthusiastic applause, which lasted through multiple sets of bows. Hugo whistled loudly for the brass and the choirs, and cries of *bravi tutti* erupted spontaneously around them. When the singers and orchestra finally began to leave the stage and the house lights came up, Hermione's hands were red and warm from clapping.

Hugo stood, stretching. "Can you believe Mahler wrote all of that in ten weeks?"

Hermione winced as she stood, her posterior protesting from having been pressed into hard plastic for an hour and a half. "Did Mahler sleep?"

"Not according to Mrs. Mahler," said Hugo, who made to follow the crowd out the way they had come.

"Wait," said Hermione. "I want to have a look around."

"There's not much to see in the dark, unless you fancy a walk uphill."

"I'm going to be stiff as a board tomorrow if I don't move the extremities a bit. A brisk uphill walk sounds lovely."

"There's a decent view of the Hollywood sign this way," said Hugo, ducking under the barrier between the tables and the bench seats.

Hermione followed him, trying to convince her legs to keep pace with Hugo's long strides.

They were over halfway up when Hugo spotted Vic and Severus, and he stopped short.

"What- oh," said Hermione. She waved at Vic, who awkwardly returned the gesture.

"What did you think of the piece?" she asked Vic, hoping to keep Hugo from lashing out immediately.

"Some of his tempi were a bit brisk, but I can't complain about the overall effect," said Vic.

"In other words, he cried like a baby," said Severus.

"Dad!"

"So did Hugo," said Hermione.

"Mum!"

"Since my son is clearly too mortified by his recent behaviour to bother introducing me, how do you do. You must be Hugo Weasley. I daresay you know who I am, but you may call me Mitch, if it would make things easier for you."

Severus held his hand out to Hugo, and Hugo shook it heartily, despite looking as though he'd swallowed his own tongue. "Nice to meet you at last, sir," he managed to choke out. "Thanks for all the coffee."

"It was partially self-interest," said Severus. "Hook them when they're young, as the saying goes. There's some truth to it. It never ceases to amaze me how far people will come for a familiar cup of coffee." He glanced at Hermione and gave her a crooked smile. "It's good to see you again, Hermione."

"And you," she said, not bothering to conceal her

blush or her grin.

Hugo still bore an amazing resemblance to a rabbit in headlights, and Hermione felt a bit sorry for him. Given who Hugo's own relatives were, she had seen similar terror on his schoolmates' faces when meeting her or Ron or Harry for the first time. For his part, Vic looked more than a bit suspicious glancing between his father and Hermione.

"Hugo, I know you and Vic have much to discuss," said Hermione. "Severus and I will be fine on our own. If you wouldn't mind, Severus?"

"Not at all," he said. "I happen know of an establishment in the vicinity where it's possible to procure frozen confections of an unusually complex nature."

"That sounds wonderful, thank you, Severus. With all your Floo travel last summer, I trust you can find your way home tonight, Hugo?"

"Um, yeah," said Hugo.

Severus offered Hermione his arm, and they continued their walk to the top of the amphitheatre.

Hermione could tell that Severus was listening for their sons' reactions as closely as she was.

"Did my dad just ask your mum out for ice cream?" asked Vic.

"Did my mum just say yes?" asked Hugo.

"I think, my dear, we've been had," said Vic in a sardonic voice.

Hermione glanced back to see the look on her son's

face and was gratified to see his expression was wry rather than outraged. "I blame your dad. Mum's not that sneaky."

"You really ought to read that book your mum gave me," said Vic. "I think you've underestimated her."

Hermione waved goodbye and utterly failed to conceal her grin.

Hugo returned her wave. "Perhaps I did."

When Hermione and Severus reached the top row of seats, they exited onto the lightly wooded hillside and sat down on a picnic table that overlooked the hills. Her hand was still on Severus's arm, and he cupped his other hand over hers. It was a perfect evening, and Hermione could just make out a few stars in the clear sky overhead, despite the bright lights of the bowl and the city around them.

She sighed. "It seems such a shame to spoil such a lovely evening with serious talk."

His thumb rubbed gentle circles over hers. "Unless I'm mistaken in my assumption that there will be other times like this, the potentially premature end of this one needn't be a catastrophic loss."

"I suppose."

"And, if your reluctance to spoil the mood with questions is due to imagining where else we might go and what else we might do this evening, I would like you to enter into any such thing knowing all that you wished to know about me, within reason."

"Define 'within reason.'"

"For any deeply personal or potentially embarrassing questions you ask, it seems only fair that I should be allowed to follow suit."

"That seems fair," she said, leaning her head on his shoulder.

He turned his face into the top of her head and inhaled deeply before pressing his lips to her curls. "Short hair suits you."

A pleasant shiver ran through her, and she lifted his hand and kissed the back of his knuckles. "Thank you. Everything about the life you've built here seems to suit you."

"Very nearly," he said, resting his cheek on her head. "But of late, I've found it to be lacking in some essentials."

She gently turned her head to avoid knocking his nose, looked into his eyes and swallowed hard at what she saw reflected in them.

"I believe I understand," said Hermione softly.

"I believe you do."

They both leaned in to close the distance between them, and their lips met with none of the hesitance of a first kiss. Severus's lips were warm and pliant, and when they parted, simultaneous puffs of breath signalled their shared surprise and pleasure in the simple act of kissing.

"Oh," breathed Hermione.

Severus leaned in for another kiss, which she gave him, along with all the tenderness that welled up in

her. Soon, her fingers were tangled in his hair and his palms were hot on the sides of her face, cradling her like something precious.

He withdrew gently, wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin atop her head. "This isn't entirely what I'd intended," he said softly. "You're right, there is much that we should do before any of this." His arms tightened, belying his words.

"This needn't be *quid pro quo*," she said. "You could simply tell me what you want me to know or ask me what you would."

She heard rather than saw his smirk. "That's hardly my habit."

"Well, this certainly isn't my habit," said Hermione, laughing and pressing her ear against his chest. "But it's like something in here is calling my name, and I answer because I know something in my corresponding quarter is calling yours."

He caressed her hair and followed it with a kiss on top of her crown. "A fanciful sentiment."

"...but not inaccurate" remained unsaid, but understood.

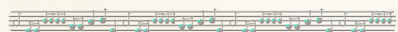
They held one another in silence for a few moments when Hermione pressed a kiss to his neck. "I'm of the firm belief that nearly all serious discussions are best had over ice cream."

Severus gave a facetious sigh. "If we must."

"We must. I don't want anyone to think I lured you up here on false pretences."

He pressed a quick kiss on her lips that startled a laugh out of her. "Take my hand," he said, eyes aglow. "I know a short cut."

Hermione put her hand into his, and the world whirled before her as they both disappeared with a pop.



They exploded into existence inside a public Apparition vestibule, presumably in a magical neighbourhood. Severus took her hand and led her into a narrow car park that was filled with the smell of the sea. The car park opened onto a four-lane thoroughfare, which was across the street from a distinctive, modern train station. She didn't need to look at the street sign to identify the Historic Highway IOI.

He opened the door to a brightly lit shop, whose sign featured a cartoon cat licking its lips and approached the queue, which moved so quickly that they were at the front before Hermione had finished reading through the menu board.

"Welcome to Gatto Gelato," said a young man behind the counter. "What can I get for you?"

Severus saw her look of blank confusion and cleared his throat. "If you wouldn't mind the liberty, I would be happy to order for us."

"Be my guest," she said gratefully.

"We'll have three single orders: falludah marshmallow, goat's cheese and roasted fig, and chocolate curry."

"Anything to drink?"

"Nothing for me."

"Tea, please," said Hermione.

"Hot," added Severus. "With caffeine."

While the young man prepared their order, Hermione gazed at the list of flavours in awe. She had been a fairly serious Potions student at Hogwarts, yet there were ingredients listed that she'd never heard of, and plenty that she would never have thought to put in ice cream.

When the ice cream arrived, Hermione followed Severus to a small table in the corner and she got a good look at the ice cream. The goat's cheese and chocolate curry looked all right, if a bit unusual colourwise, but the falludah marshmallow was the same colour of pink as the chalky medicine she'd had to take as a child when her stomach was upset. The white ripples even gave the suggestion of medicine that hadn't been shaken thoroughly. Fortunately, the rose scent wafting off it was delightful, and the first bite filled her mouth with such fragrant sweetness that she closed her eyes to hum her appreciation.

Severus smirked knowingly and slid the goat's cheese ice cream towards her. This bite was a perfect chewy sweetness balanced with tart goat's milk and the crunch of the fig seeds. The chocolate curry was a perfect match of spice, dense chocolate flavour, and smooth coolness, with a hint of coconut sweetness. It was a perfect trio of flavours, and Hermione smiled at her companion.

"I don't know that I can go back to Fortescue's after this."

Severus glanced at her and cast a surreptitious Muffliato Charm. "Fortunately, with the International Floo, one needn't settle."

Hermione felt a warm tingle deep in her stomach at the implication that she would be coming to California frequently. She gazed at him, knowing full well that what he had to tell her would be incredibly important and trying to ignore the voice in the back of her head that told her that none of it really mattered. It was a novel sensation. Normally the voice in her head was the sensible one that spoke up in time to keep a political discussion from turning heated or when George was spoiling to get his nieces and nephews in trouble. Still, her curiosity wasn't about to let her stop him from whatever information he wished to impart, no matter how much she wanted to know which flavour of ice cream tasted best on his lips.

"I'm glad to have a native guide," she said. "Out of curiosity, when was the last time you Side-Along Apparated anybody?"

"Not since coming to America," he admitted. "But I was with you. There was no danger of being caught. And this place is magic-friendly."

"I didn't mean to suggest you were being reckless," said Hermione. "I was simply wondering how you could have lived without the most basic magic for so long."

"It became habit," he said with a shrug. "Magical communities here aren't as isolated as they are in Britain,

so it was quite easy to walk into alley in magical neighbourhoods and Apparate several feet. When I started hiring witches and wizards at Mitch's, I was able to re-zone the business for mixed use, which meant that I could perform magic at work when nobody else was around. Surfing also helped because, as you learned, the waves contain ambient magic, and salt water washes away excess magic and replenishes drought." Severus cleared his throat. "And as you realised, when Victor was born, I was able to re-zone my home."

There was tension in Severus's voice when he spoke of his son. "Why?" she asked gently.

Severus took a bite of chocolate ice cream. "Because he exhibited signs of magic when he was eighteen months old."

Hermione gave him a look. "You're going to make me ask directly, aren't you?"

"Dubiously flattering as it is that you think I possess the skill of reading minds undetected, I really couldn't say what's going on in that curly little head of yours," he returned mildly.

A thousand questions were clamouring to be asked. She finally decided on one that would tell her more about Severus than Victor. "Why did you create him?" she asked.

"Why did you have children?" asked Severus.

Hermione gave him an impatient look, but she stuck to the rules of their previous discussion. She'd received answers already. It was Severus's turn. "I was

married to a man I loved, I had a good career, we were financially secure, and we were surrounded by family who would help watch them."

"So it was the done thing?" he asked scornfully.

"Partially. And it was partially for the selfish reason of wanting them. But mostly, I did it because I wanted to meet people who were part Ron and part me. I knew the world would be more interesting for it, and I knew it would be a challenge. And most of all, I knew that no matter who they were, we would love them, and we had so much to give."

Severus looked at her measuringly. "Our reasons were not dissimilar," he said at last.

Hermione gave him a wry smile. "You were married to a man you loved?"

He scowled, not bothering to dignify her joke with a verbal response. "It was an experiment of sorts."

"That's something of an understatement," said Hermione, taking a bite of the pink ice cream. "There isn't really precedent for this that I know of."

He looked at her seriously. "I thought Potter would have regaled you with the night of the Dark Lord's return."

She was suddenly very glad she had a hot cup of tea. "Bone of the father, flesh of the servant, blood of the enemy," she quoted softly. "Severus —"

"The spell the Dark Lord used that night came from an ancient grimoire of blood magic written by a wizard named Letholdus Sallow," he said.

Hermione frowned. "I've never heard of him."

"It's no wonder. Though Sallow made more concrete steps towards achieving immortality than any other wizard, he died a gruesome death at the hands of someone whose loved one was sacrificed on that quest — the parallels to the Dark Lord were copious, but Riddle was nothing if not devoid of irony. Suffice it to say, Sallow's grimoire was one of the few possessions I brought from England when I came here. It makes *Secrets of the Darkest Art* look like volume one of *The Standard Book of Spells*."

Hermione bit back a comment about all blood magic being Dark when she recalled what Hugo and Vic had said about music magic's dark classification.

Severus's lips thinned, as if anticipating her disapproval.

After a moment of thought, she shrugged. "As far as I can see, Vic is perfectly normal, if a bit enamoured of his own cleverness, but that's part of being a young man. I don't see how any magic that went into his creation could be considered dark."

He gave her a disbelieving look. "I daresay you'd be alone in that assessment."

"Why? Was the original plan to fatten him up and eat him?"

There was amused exasperation in his eyes. "The experiment wasn't only to see if I could make a new life, or gain companionship, or get my home re-zoned for magic use. It was also to see how different my own life could have been under the right circumstances."



After a moment's pause to marvel at his audacity and ambition, it all made perfect sense. "So what you're saying is that Vic came into this world through an act of love and perverse curiosity, the same as most children that are conceived in the usual way."

"When you put it that way, it sounds nearly run-of-the-mill," he said in tone of distaste. "I assure you, the magic was designed with none but the very worst intentions."

"Intentions that you do not seem to share."

Severus lowered his voice. "Sallow created the spell to make a younger, healthier version of himself that he could use as a vessel for his own soul, that he might live his youth again. The vessel's own soul, of course, was to be discarded."

Hermione's fingers tightened around her cup of tea. "Sweet Circe," she whispered.

"The fact that soul-sundering wasn't part of the spell makes it one of the more benign ones in the book."

"Do you still have the grimoire?"

"It's in a safe place."

Hermione frowned. "You know what could happen if the book were discovered in your possession."

"Of course I do," he said testily. "Unfortunately, it was created by a twisted genius bent on self-preservation by any means. One cannot simply throw it in the bin, and it's the only object I've ever seen that resists Fiendfyre."

Hermione's shiver had nothing to do with the ice cream. "What else have you tried?"

His lips turned up into a rueful smile. "Everything short of vitrification and burial at Yucca Mountain."

Hermione shook her head. This was an unholy mess. As long as the book existed, Severus could never return to England as himself, and the secret of Victor's origins would never be secure.

Some of her anguish must have shown on her face, because Severus looked rather uneasy. "To answer your question more fully, I created Victor several years after moving to California, but I had yet to establish regular means for purging my excess magic. My thinking may not have been wholly clear, even to myself."

"But you never regretted it," she said, thinking of the night of debauchery and high spirits that had led to Rose's conception.

"Not very often," he said, with a wry smile.

"The ice cream is melting," said Hermione, scooping up some of the liquid curry chocolate, her mind whirling. Everything had changed, yet nothing had.

He did the same for the goat cheese, and they finished their ice cream quickly.

"There's a Floo depot at the station across the street," he said, holding the door open for her.

His voice was even and friendly, but there was a hollowness to it that made her heart ache.

"You know what would be nice after that lovely ice cream?" she asked, placing her hand on his arm.

He raised an interrogative eyebrow at her.

"Something hot to drink," she said, rubbing her thumb along his forearm. "Do you know where we might find coffee at this time of night?"

He pulled her into the alley, and she rose up on her toes to kiss him.

"I think I know just the place," he murmured into her mouth.



Severus lived in a bizarre-looking block of flats that were completely covered in wooden shingles, but it was walking distance from his shop, and the waves crashing nearby led her to conclude that the view during the day would be breathtaking. She blinked when the lights came on, and smiled at the contrast of bright beachfront architecture and the Persian rugs and cognac leather furniture. There were books everywhere, of course, and she could tell he hadn't expected company from the fine layer of sand on the hardwood floor. It wasn't a large flat, but it was comfortable and undeniably masculine.

Severus frowned at the trail of sand, which led to the balcony where two surfboards rested against the railing, and he Banished it with a quick wave of his wand. He kissed her cheek and began bustling around the kitchen.

"Make yourself comfortable," he said, pouring a quantity of beans into a hand-crank coffee mill. "I daresay the books should keep you occupied for a minute or two."

Hermione huffed without annoyance and circled

the room while trailing her fingers over the spines. Victor's cello sat next to an old upright piano and a violin case. Sitting on the piano bench was a cardboard box containing Vic's textbooks from the previous year. She glanced at one on advanced note theory, which was well beyond her grasp, before settling on a book on beginning magicoustics, which she had enough physics to understand, and she particularly enjoyed the acoustic and magical analyses of the great performance halls of the world.

"Did you know that the Cleveland Orchestra plays in a place called Severance Hall, Severus?" she asked, once the coffee mill ceased grinding.

There was the gurgling hiss of an espresso machine from the kitchen and a grunt of disapproval. "I couldn't miss it. Victor listens to 'Performance Today' religiously on the radio, and it seems like half the concerts they air are recorded there. I flinch every time the host mentions the blasted place."

Hermione grinned. "If I ever wanted to tweak the nose of the Wizarding World, I'd combine its features with Snape Maltings, where they do the Aldeburgh Festival, and call it the Severance Snape Hall."

There was a loud snort from the kitchen. "It would be burned to the ground before its first concert."

"All of my controversial monuments come with highly creative roof-to-foundation protective hexes," said Hermione, giggling.

"I hardly think that would stop the most determined."

"You'd be surprised. Vic got to see what I did at the Shrieking Shack firsthand the night we —" she stopped suddenly and clapped her hands over her mouth.

A quiet clatter of porcelain was the only sign that he'd grasped any of the implications of her words.

"Merlin," she whispered, lowering her palms to her cheeks as her mind seized the disparate threads and began to weave them together with remarkable quickness. The complete answer was there in outline form. Only the details had to be filled in.

Fortunately, Severus seemed to realise what was happening in Hermione's head, and he brought two cups of espresso over to the coffee table, sat, and watched her put the pieces together.

Finally, the trance faded, and Hermione looked at Severus. "I'd like to see Sallow's book."

There was no questioning what she meant. "It's in a Muggle safe-deposit box," he said. "I suppose we could Apparate in now, but the security cameras all but guarantee we'd pay for it in paperwork and fines from the Bureau of Magical Affairs. I'll take you tomorrow, provided you can coherently explain whatever idea has made you light up like a Christmas tree."

"As you've probably gathered from my gaffe, the location of your supposed death is now a monument whose protection and preservation we take very seriously, not only because of your reputation but also because blood

willingly given is one of the most powerful forces we know," she gave a wry smile, "for good or for ill. Sallow knew that. He put it into his resurrection spell."

Severus shook his head. "If you had any idea of the broken souls and destroyed lives that went into protecting that grimoire. We'd need dozens of similar sacrifices to destroy the book."

Hermione gave him a triumphant grin. "I'm not suggesting we destroy it. I'm suggesting we make it unusable. If we can't defeat the protections, which, if it could be done, I presume you would have done so years ago, we can use your sacrifice in the Shrieking Shack to boost the preservation spells on the book."

He took a sip of espresso. "And why exactly would we want to do that?"

Hermione seized his other hand and squeezed it excitedly between hers. "You said you'd tried everything short of vitrifying it and burying it at Yucca Mountain. What if we expanded the radius of the book's protections and embedded it in magical concrete? The block of concrete would be protected, so nobody could break it open to access the book inside it."

"So we would bury a slab of magical concrete at Yucca mountain?" asked Severus.

"Or we could use the slab as part of the foundation for a magical building. Perhaps Britain's first magical concert hall, built walking distance from Hogwarts near McCoy house."

Severus's eyes narrowed in thought. "A neat solu-

tion," he said after a moment's pause.

Hermione grinned triumphantly and took a healthy sip of espresso. "It is, isn't it? You'll be free of the damn thing, and you'll never have to worry about anybody discovering Victor's origins, and if you wished, you'd be free to re-establish yourself in England, completely free of ties to the Dark Lord."

He shook his head, frowning. "Unless you're planning to build on the location of the shack, we have a not-insignificant logistical problem. Blood magic is location-specific. That's why the Dark Lord had to resurrect himself at his father's grave. It wasn't simply the proximity to the bones of his father; it was also a somewhat sacred resting place whose defilement added necessary power to the proceedings. Since the extra power from the sacrificed blood is necessary and the blood is tied to the shack, we must devise a way to transport the grimoire, while its protections are still malleable, to the foundation site. It would require an immensely complex series of charms and a dozen witches and wizards to create a spatial portal stable enough to move it from one location to another."

Hermione walked over to the music stand that stood in the corner and picked up the magical edition of the Gabrielli score. "Or a powerful wizard who shares your blood and can use music magic to move objects from place to place," she said, holding the score out to him.

His eyebrows rose in disbelief, and there was such

a look of naked hope on his face that she tossed the score aside and embraced him fiercely. He held her tightly, and she could feel his breaths hitching silently. She rubbed her hand in circles on his back, and he pressed his forehead into the junction of her neck and shoulder. His breathing evened, and he began stroking her back and pressing kisses against her neck.

"If this harebrained scheme works, Granger," he growled between kisses, "I'll owe you a life debt."

"It's only fair," gasped Hermione. He was nibbling on the spot that made her entire body quiver. "We've owed you a life debt for years."

He pulled away from her to study her face. "You have no obligation to me," he said softly.

"I believe we've already discussed what this is, and it's certainly not an obligation." She gave him a wicked smile. "It's a natural reaction to having seen you in a wetsuit."

He snorted. "Flatterer. Now, if you've quite finished turning my life upside-down, I can think of other more agreeable activities in which we might engage."

His words sent a delicious shiver through her. "If it would make you feel better, you're welcome to turn me upside down for reciprocity's sake." She hardly recognized the throaty voice as her own, and it had an electric effect on Severus. He pounced on her, fingers fumbling with her buttons and his trousers as he devoured her with his mouth, his tongue and firm lips dotting hot points of pleasure down her throat.

Hermione arched up to meet him, and he slid his hand behind her back and unfastened her brassiere with a deft tug. "I sincerely hope you won't feel the need to solve the rest of the world's problems before engaging in such activities in the future," he said, the wry admonishment in his voice undercut by raw desire.

She wiggled her shoulders to slide the straps off. "Of course I will," she said, playfully nibbling at his neck. "I'll never be able to focus on the job at hand, otherwise."

He gently fingered the skin over her collarbone. "Then I shall endeavour to be as distracting as possible."

She gasped as Severus's hot mouth pressed against her breast, and his tongue slid beneath the fabric of her brassiere to lave her nipple. She slid her hands up his arms and kneaded the muscles of his arms and shoulders, and he gently slid his hands beneath her brassiere and rubbed his thumbs across her nipples, which sent delicious ripples of pleasure through her.

Clothing was slowly discarded as he turned his focus to the parts of her body that remained covered, and Hermione greedily ran her hands over the newly exposed skin and muscle of his body. There was only the least bit of discolouration on his forearm where the Dark Mark had been, and on his neck was a pair of long-faded scars. Hermione brushed her fingers and lips over them in turn, and she heard him gasp.

"All right?" she asked, taking his hand and sucking his beautifully tapered index finger into her mouth

as she lay down on the sofa.

"Yes," he gasped, his dark eyes taking in the sight of her stretched out before him, and he adjusted himself beneath the waistband of his underpants. Hermione released his finger reluctantly and propped herself up on her elbow.

"Let me help you with those," she offered, sliding her fingers beneath the waistband of his pants and tugging them down over his hips.

He wriggled a bit to help, and his erection sprang free from its confines, as long and perfectly shaped as the rest of him. Hermione couldn't resist pressing a kiss to its rosy tip, and Severus hissed in pleasure.

Encouraged, she ran the blade of her tongue along the edge of his glans, savouring the salty musk of him.

She stopped when she felt his hands on the side of her face, gently raising her face to meet his gaze. "As much as I appreciate this, I must request a temporary cessation of this particular avenue of foreplay, because if you continue with this particular sort of stimulation, I fear I will be unable to participate fully in mutual congress."

Hermione smiled at his stilted language. "I sincerely hope you won't always feel the need to elucidate the terms so precisely before engaging in such activities."

He smiled. "Of course I will," he said with heavy irony. "I'd have to use Legilimency, otherwise."

Hermione grinned and lay down on the sofa. "Then I shall have to empty my mind of everything except how much I want to make love with you right now."

His eyes were locked on hers as he lowered himself on top of her. She raised her pelvis in welcome, and the blunt head of his penis brushed her entrance, making them both gasp.

He raised an interrogative eyebrow, and she gave him a wicked smirk before thrusting her hips upward, which moved him fractionally inside her.

"All right?" she asked breathlessly.

He made a guttural sound deep in his throat and slid into her. His arms were quivering in time with the bone-deep shiver that ran through her as he filled her, and she breathed in sharply as the sensation went from thoroughly pleasurable to absolutely perfect. When he was fully ensheathed in her, he adjusted himself between her legs so the base of his pelvis came in contact with the tender nub above her entrance.

It was her turn to growl in pleasure as he began to thrust, first slowly, building with agonising deliberateness to a faster rhythm, and each thrust made pleasure bloom deep within her. She found herself whispering to him: hissing his name, invoking various deities and historical figures, and even describing the way her body responded to him.

Her body felt whole in a way it hadn't for so many years. Her nerves were singing as they made love, and his body was a bowstring, becoming more and more tense as he thrust and withdrew, until finally he pulled partway out.

"I can't hold back much longer," he managed to gasp.

Hermione seized his buttocks, gave them an affectionate squeeze, and gently pulled his hips back into contact with hers. "You don't have to," she said, squeezing his cock gently inside. "Just a few more thrusts. Merlin, but this is bloody amazing."

Severus was breathing hard, and his thrusts became more erratic. "Not so bad yourself," he panted.

"That's it," she whispered, eyes opening wide as her body tightened in anticipation of his next thrust. "Oh, yes, Severus, please!"

He straightened his arms, and if Hermione's arousal hadn't already been cresting, the sight of Severus with his head thrown back in abandon, his powerful, perfect body poised to drive into hers, would have been enough to drive her over the edge.

She let out a cry as he descended into her, and she could barely breathe, so powerful was the pleasure that went crashing through her, throbbing with indescribable ecstasy. He was shouting, too, from the pleasure of riding out their shared climax from the moment it broke over them to lying, panting and shuddering, in its wake.

She raised her hand to his face and tucked the strands that had come loose from his band behind his ear, and he kissed her gently, and she ran her hands over his sweat-dampened skin, scratching her nails gently along his spine and shoulder blades. He

hummed his approval and adjusted his hips, which sent a gasping aftershock through them both.

There was no need for words, not when peace and contentment shone out of Severus's eyes, and Hermione knew that the love she felt for him shone out of hers. He made to withdraw, but couldn't resist pressing one more lingering kiss to her lips.

Unfortunately, the moment was somewhat spoiled by sound of a key in the lock. Severus sprang off of her with a curse and seized a plaid-printed throw to wrap around his hips.

"Victor!" he bellowed. "Stop where you are!"

Severus tossed her a second throw, this one crocheted maroon, and Hermione ducked behind the sofa.

From her partially hidden spot, she heard the door burst open and slam into the wall behind it. Unfortunately, like his father, it seemed that Victor had a saving people thing.

"Dad, are you — ?" he began in a panicked voice. And then he stopped short. "Are you — " he began again, surprise fading quickly to outrage.

"MUM?" shouted a second voice that Hermione recognised as her son's.

Cheeks burning, she wrapped the throw tightly around herself and stood up, telling herself firmly that she had nothing to be ashamed of.

"Hello, sweetheart," she said. "Would you mind giving us a minute, please?"



Vic buried his head in his hands. "I'm not seeing this. I am not seeing this."

Hugo's jaw was working up and down soundlessly as his face turned purple. Hermione braced for the coming explosion, but Severus drew himself up to his full height.

"Jarring as it may be for you to realise that your mother is an adult, with all that entails," he said in a soft, dangerous voice, "I would strongly suggest that the tirade that you are about to deliver, Mr. Weasley, be reconsidered, given that you are standing in my home. Victor, take him to the beach. Throw him in the water if you have to, and when you return, Mrs. Weasley and I wish to talk to you about a subject completely unrelated to what you may or may not have seen. This is all we will be discussing tonight. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, Dad," said Victor, seizing Hugo's hand and practically dragging him out of the room.

"But —" began Hugo, whose face had faded to a mottled red.

"See you later, Hermione," said Vic, pushing Hugo into the hall and closing the door quietly behind him.

Hermione could hear her son protesting loudly as he was steered down the steps and away from the house.

When the house was quiet again, Severus wordlessly handed Hermione a box of tissues, which she took gratefully. As she wiped up the dribbles that had run down her legs, she began to giggle.

Severus frowned. "What's so funny?"

"This," she said, gesturing with the damp tissue. "Us. Our sons. This is utterly ridiculous."

"We would have had to tell them eventually," said Severus, "unless I'm overestimating the importance of these events."

Hermione let her blanket fall and wrapped her arms around his waist before kissing him. "Not at all. Now, you don't happen to have a shower, do you?"

"First door on the left," he said, crossing to a built-in cupboard and pulling out a yellow bath towel.

"Thanks," she said, taking the towel and giving him an impish grin. "Care to join me?"

This time he did laugh, a rich, warm sound that bounced off the walls like sunbeams. "I wasn't expecting you to be incorrigible," he said, the corners of his mouth quirking upward. "I must admit, I approve wholeheartedly."

He swooped in for a kiss, which she returned enthusiastically. "I'd rather hoped you would," she said.

When Hugo and Vic returned from their walk, they found their parents sitting, fully clothed, next to one another on the sofa, holding hands. This they studiously ignored, but they accepted the espresso, which had been laid out as a peace offering. Hermione took a deep breath and began to tell them about her plan.

Presto



he ritual could have taken place at any time, but given the amount of preparation necessary, it made sense to aim for a date some weeks away that had its own power. Since Hugo and Vic would be back in Rochester by Samhain, the blue moon would have to do. Hermione knew it would be torture to wait so long to see Severus, but she couldn't keep asking Percy for International Floo access without giving him some details, and it wasn't safe to do so yet. Besides, she knew if she had access to Severus at all times, she wouldn't be able to focus on finishing her open commissions and prepare for the ritual. It was bad enough that they texted as much as they did.

Readying the site at McCoy House had gone according to plan, which was to say that the contractor far exceeded the original estimate for excavation and building the footings and foundation moulds. Fortunately, the Hogarths were still wobbling over their entrance hall tile, so money wasn't an issue, and Hermione was well-versed in the problems endemic to building in the highlands, like magic-resistant granite (charm the block and tackle instead of the boulders) and wet surface horizons (Waterproofing Charms that she'd had the Ministry approve for archi-

tectural use), and had planned for copious delays. When the day of the ritual dawned, Hermione looked out the front window at the piles of material neatly arranged around the gaping hole in the earth and felt anticipation curl in her stomach. They were ready. All their production required now was a group of players.

Thankfully, Severus's flight into Heathrow was only delayed by an hour, because the MPS in the Peugeot had a few choice words about being complicit in harbouring criminals and dark magic, though Hermione suspected it was secretly thrilled.

As Severus descended the escalator to the baggage reclaim, violin case tucked under his arm, she felt her knees turn to water, but that didn't stop her from practically leaping into his embrace. Once they had convinced one another that their too-long separation was finally at its end through bestowing kisses on every bit of one another's skin that could be revealed in public, they gathered Severus's luggage from the carousel and made their way to the car.

The MPS was oddly polite as it zipped them through the busy streets, and Hermione wondered if Hugo hadn't warned it about Snape's temper. Regardless, they chatted about innocuous subjects most of the way, brushing fingers more than was strictly necessary.

When they got to McCoy House, Severus fell silent, and Hermione could tell his eyes were on the construction site near the end of the drive.

"Would you like to take a look at things once you're settled?"

He blinked and gave her a half smile. "You built this house, did you not?"

"I restored it and added a few modern conveniences."

The Peugeot came to a stop by the side door, and Hermione popped open the boot.

"It's a handsome setting," he said, handing her the violin case and a leather shoulder bag. "I'm glad others will soon have the opportunity to enjoy it."

"Assuming we don't blow up the foundations tonight," she said, returning his wry smile with one of her own.

He set his suitcase on the ground and shut the boot. "At the very least, it'll see a unique performance of Beethoven's 7th."

"That's more than some performance venues will ever see, I suppose," said Hermione, opening the door to the kitchen and ushering Severus inside.

She gave him a brief tour, and his gaze lingered on the rose garden and, surprisingly, her little chair in the corner of the living room. She paused outside Rose's room.

"If you're uncomfortable sharing a room with me or if you'd prefer to keep up appearances when the boys are in the house, you're welcome to take Rose's old room."

His hand was warm on the small of her back, and he pressed his lips to her forehead. "If you think your son capable of refraining from questioning my intentions too vociferously, I'd be much happier with you."

She smiled. "I'm glad. It would be undignified to have to tiptoe back and forth between their rooms like teenagers after the boys had gone to bed."

She ushered him into the master bedroom, which she'd redone in the past weeks, putting all the Chudley Cannons paraphernalia into the attic, along with the black-lacquer bed that Ron had picked out and the enormous wardrobe that seemed to spontaneously generate Doxies and moths. The room had always felt small due to the oversized furniture that accommodated her oversized husband and the autumnal colour scheme of russet and black he had favoured.

But now that the room was hers and hers alone, she took inspiration from the highlands outside her window and painted the walls the colour of the sky and added thick rugs in deep green, purple, and brown. There were touches of heather and bright green to offset the warm mahogany furniture, and the late morning sun poured across the window seat, which had always been Hermione's favourite place to read. The alcove the wardrobe formerly occupied was now filled with a book shelf containing her to-read pile. She watched Severus's eyes sweep over the room's contents, pausing at the books.

"It's not what I expected," he admitted.

"You expected Gryffindor red and brocade?" she asked, wrinkling her nose.

He smirked. "Or tartan. The house is quite traditional

on the outside. Though knowing you, I ought to have known the inside would be as beautiful as it is practical."

She felt her cheeks flush at the compliment and busied herself conjuring a luggage stand for his suitcase. After Levitating his suitcase and the stand next to the bookcase, she paced her hand on the doorknob of the cupboard and paused. "I know you've grown accustomed to dressing as a Muggle," she said haltingly, "but I have some of your old robes. They were part of a display at the Shack some years ago, but we kept them in storage in case they were needed again in the future."

She opened the cupboard and retrieved three sets of robes: the familiar buttoned-up high-collar teaching robes, his Death Eater robes, which she privately wanted to burn but felt that he should have the honour of doing so, and grey worsted robes with smart piping along the seams and shiny onyx buttons. She laid them out on the bed and sat next to them. "You needn't wear them, of course," she said, "but they are yours, if you want them."

He ran his fingers over the worsted. "I bought these robes for my first job out of Hogwarts. Old Archie Jigger advanced me a month's pay so I wouldn't turn up to work in second-hand robes."

His gaze fell on the teaching robes and he smirked. "Harbouring naughty thoughts for teacher, are we?" he asked.

Hermione fought not to blush and failed. "I rather thought you might use them to put the fear of Merlin

into our sons if they misbehave," she said. "But if you wish to give me detention, I might actually show up at the appointed hour."

He pressed a quick kiss to her lips that was filled with heat and promise and ended far too soon.

"You know what these are," he stated, gesturing at the black silk robes.

She nodded.

"It was good of you to bring them," he said, gathering up all the robes and returning them to the cupboard.

She squeezed his hand when he sat down next to her. "Would you like to see the site?"

He kissed the crown of her head. "I'd like to see everything."

She raised her face and kissed him, and he responded enthusiastically.

"Of course," she said breathlessly, "the site will still be there in half an hour."

Severus began to undo the buttons of his shirt. "Quite."



By the time the boys arrived, the sun was low in the sky, and Hermione had a light supper waiting.

Hugo had barely set down their bag before hovering over the food on the counter. "Is it all right if I eat?"

"That's why it's there," said Hermione, handing them plates, which were soon piled high with charcuterie, cheese, fruit, and bread.

"Where's Dad?" asked Vic, brushing the soot from his sleeve.

"Napping," said Hermione. "Muggle international travel is exhausting."

Vic made a face. "I remember. We went to Spain on holiday once, and I never wanted to fly again after that."

"Do you think we're ready?" asked Hugo when they were all seated at the table.

"As ready as we can be," she said. "I'll never be a virtuoso pianist, but I have the piece under my fingers now, and it's inextricably in my head."

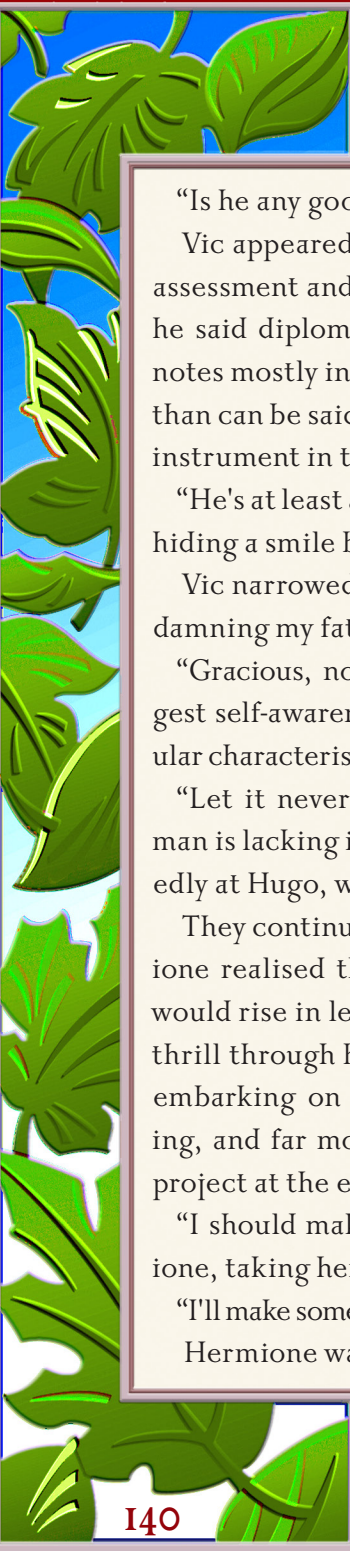
"Good," said Hugo. "The latter's even more important than the former."

"What about you?" asked Hermione, looking at Vic.

Vic chewed a bite of food thoughtfully and swallowed. "It's been odd, to say the least. I mean, I've known he was hiding something about his past for as long as I can remember, but it's still weird to walk into the kitchen and see him grinding beans with his wand. He doesn't do a lot of magic when I'm around, although I know he's brewing again, and not just beer."

"Well, he's been hiding it for practically your entire life," said Hugo, smearing brie on a slice of baguette. "Maybe he's still getting used to doing magic around you."

"Could be," said Vic, popping a grape into his mouth. "But overall, I think it's a change for the better, despite the fact that both of us have to go outside to practice now."



"Is he any good?" asked Hermione.

Vic appeared to be torn between giving an honest assessment and family loyalty. "He might have been," he said diplomatically. "As it is, he can play all the notes mostly in tune in the right order, which is more than can be said of most people who haven't played an instrument in thirty years."

"He's at least as good on violin as I am," added Hugo, hiding a smile behind a slice of apple.

Vic narrowed his eyes in mock sternness. "Are you damning my father with faint praise?"

"Gracious, no!" exclaimed Hugo. "That would suggest self-awareness, and everybody knows that particular characteristic is beyond the grasp of Weasley men."

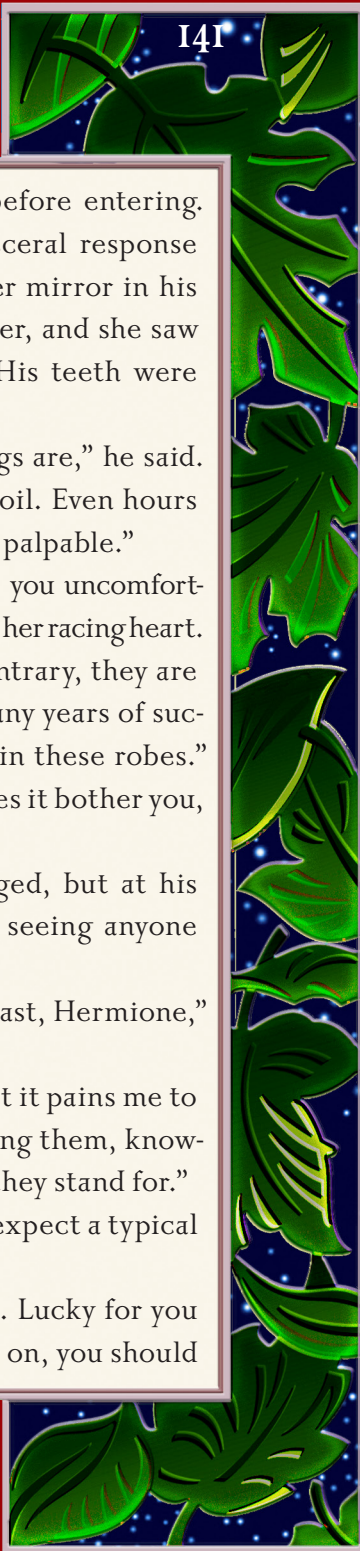
"Let it never be said that this particular Weasley man is lacking in penetration," said Vic, smiling wickedly at Hugo, whose ears turned pink.

They continued to eat and chat amiably until Hermione realised that the sun was down and the moon would rise in less than two hours. The thought sent a thrill through her. In two hour's time, they would be embarking on an unprecedented magical undertaking, and far more depended on its success than the project at the end of her drive.

"I should make sure your dad's awake," said Hermione, taking her plate to the kitchen.

"I'll make some coffee," said Vic. "He's going to need it."

Hermione was surprised to see the light of her bed-



room on, and she knocked quietly before entering. She had to ruthlessly squash her visceral response to seeing him standing in front of her mirror in his Death Eater robes. He spun to face her, and she saw that he was clutching his forearm. His teeth were bared in a disgusted grimace.

"I forgot how loathsome these things are," he said. "They cling to one like a thin film of oil. Even hours after one takes them off, their taint is palpable."

"You needn't wear them if they make you uncomfortable," said Hermione, voice calm despite her racing heart.

He gave a bitter laugh. "On the contrary, they are precisely what I should wear. I had many years of success undermining the darkest magic in these robes." He shot her a perspicacious look. "Does it bother you, seeing me wear them?"

"They're a potent symbol," she caged, but at his expression, she sighed. "I don't like seeing anyone wear them. You most of all."

"This is an inextricable part of my past, Hermione," he said, voice harsh.

"I know that," she said. "I meant that it pains me to see one of the best men I know wearing them, knowing full well how he feels about what they stand for."

He stilled. "It was foolish of me to expect a typical response from you."

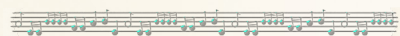
She held out her hand. "Yes, it was. Lucky for you I like occasionally foolish men. Come on, you should

have something to eat, and you should give the boys the opportunity to get used to seeing you like this."

"I can flap my arms, if you like," said Severus sarcastically.

"Vic was right. You do need coffee," said Hermione, threading her arm through Severus's and deliberately resting her hand over his forearm.

His response was a growl, but it was an affectionate growl.



Hermione Apparated to the Shack in advance of the others, since she was the only one who could dismantle the wards, and Severus, Victor, and Hugo were to arrive an hour later. The work was methodical and required enough concentration that she didn't have time to worry about what could happen. When the final magical lock had been released, Hermione sighed and sat down next to the stain on the floor. She thought about the beautiful blue magic that had risen to meet Vic's, and hesitated only a fraction of a second before placing her hand in the centre of the stain.

She thought about the night she watched Severus die, and she allowed the energy of her fear, horror, and sorrow to travel down her arm and into the floor. The stain didn't glow the way it had when Vic called it to life, but she felt it, quiescent but present, gently draw the unpleasantness from her as poison from a wound. Heartened, she sent the affection she felt for Severus

through the palm of her hand, and she felt an answer echo against her palm before retreating into stillness.

Of course. This wasn't the Severus she knew. It was Professor Snape who had died that day, who had given everything up to defeat Voldemort and was confident of nothing but his love for Lily and the necessity of Harry Potter's sacrifice. In her mind's eye, she saw Professor Snape, who had died to save Harry lying near Vic, the version of Severus that should have been, and her own Severus, scarred and strong, and understood that it wasn't simply the book that Severus wished to bury tonight.

She came back to herself at the sound of a car door slamming nearby, and she exited the shack to find Hugo and Severus fixing a wooden platform to the roof of the Peugeot while Vic sat on the steps tuning his cello.

"Can you do that a bit more quietly or go inside?" asked Hugo. "The last thing we want to do is attract attention."

Vic sighed dramatically, but he went inside as Hugo had suggested and nodded to Hermione as he passed.

When the platform was secure, Hermione stuck her head in the driver's side window.

"Everything set?" she asked the MPS.

We're going to be caught, moaned the MPS. *You're all going to be thrown into Azkaban and I'm going to be sold for parts, or worse, sold at auction to someone who keeps a car as a curiosity and spends every day reviewing routes that I will never be asked to navigate.*

"Good. You remember the signal?"

Of course I do! huffed the MPS. *I remember hundreds of thousands of maps. I ought to be able to remember a few notes.* It chimed in a reasonable impression of the quaver pattern that was to serve as its cue.

"Excellent. And whatever you do, don't get too far ahead of us, and avoid as many potholes as you can."

Don't try to teach your grandmother to drive manual transmission.

"Good luck," said Hermione, patting the console fondly.

Severus had removed his violin from its case and stowed the case in the back seat of the Peugeot while Hugo gave the wooden platform a final tug to test its fastness.

"I think we're ready, Mum," said Hugo.

Hermione glanced at the horizon where the full moon hung low in the sky. "Let's go."

They gathered around the stain, one at each cardinal direction, and Severus placed the small, leather-bound book in the centre. Even knowing what it contained, the object seemed unnaturally innocuous. Hermione did her best to avoid thinking about what the magic would accomplish, even though she doubted that Sallow had been a Legilimens, much less had the ability to weave it into the magic that protected the book. Still, there was no sense in taking risks. Vic conjured a chair for himself, and he sat so he and Severus could tune.

When they were satisfied, Severus nodded at Herm-

ione and Hugo. Hugo raised his hands, and Hermione held hers up against his. Hugo breathed on them, and their fingers pulsed with the orange fire that Hermione recognised as her son's magic. She flexed her hands as she had seen Hugo do before accompanying Vic in the shack all those weeks ago.

"We're ready," Hugo whispered.

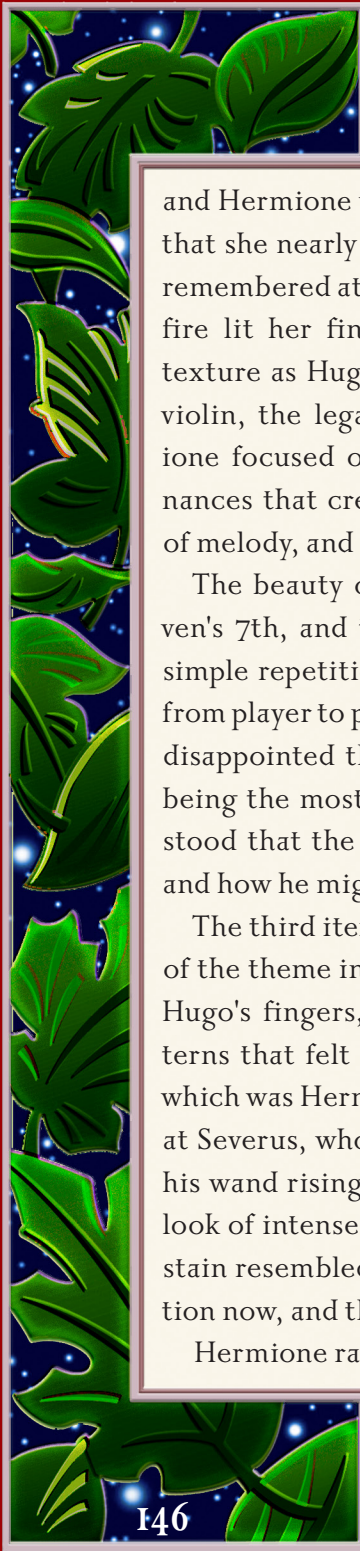
Vic lowered his head, which put his eyes in the shadow of his fringe in the dim light. He raised his bow, they all breathed together, and Hugo and Severus played the opening chord as Hermione and Hugo struck the first chord of the piece in the air. Though Hermione knew what was coming, she was still surprised by the powerful sound that filled the Shack, and the blood stain answered immediately with a shimmering pulse. Hermione grinned in relief. The worst of her imagined failures was when she struck the first notes in the air and nothing happened.

And then Vic and Hugo were playing together, a quiet ostinato of crotchet, quaver-quaver, crotchet, crotchet.

Tah tum-tum tah tah. Tah tum-tum tah tah.

From the repeated rhythm grew a melody, slow and mournful. As it grew, the bloodstain shimmered, and a tendril of light reached out and licked the tip of Vic's bow. On the next up-bow, he leaned towards it in invitation, and it leapt from the floor to the bow, encompassing it in blue fire.

Vic's tone was sweet and simple, with little vibrato,



and Hermione was so powerfully compelled to listen that she nearly missed her entrance. Thankfully, she remembered at the last possible moment, and orange fire lit her fingertips as she filled in the musical texture as Hugo repeated the melody in the second violin, the legato tones lingering in the air. Hermione focused on the middle notes and added dissonances that created tension along the familiar path of melody, and released energy into the resolutions.

The beauty of the *Allegretto* movement of Beethoven's 7th, and the reason they'd chosen it, was the simple repetition of a simple theme that was passed from player to player, like a relay race. Hugo had been disappointed that there was no trombone part, but being the most experienced accompanist, he understood that the piece was perfect for their purposes and how he might best contribute.

The third iteration of the melody saw the entrance of the theme in the first violins, which danced under Hugo's fingers, and Vic began to weave quaver patterns that felt like waves in the middle of each bar, which was Hermione cue to stop playing. She glanced at Severus, who stood over the bloodstain and book, his wand rising and falling in time with the music, a look of intense concentration on his face. The bloodstain resembled nothing so much as a blue conflagration now, and the book glowed blood red at its heart.

Hermione raised her wand, and cast a silent *Wingar-*

dium Leviosa on the chair where Vic sat and gently Levitated him and his cello a foot or so above the floor. She let out an inward sign of relief that there wasn't a hitch in his playing.

Taking care not to break eye contact, Hermione she guided Vic down the stairs, through the garden, and placed him gently atop the wooden platform atop the Peugeot. He landed during a rest, and continued to play as though nothing had happened. Hermione glanced over her shoulder to see how things were proceeding.

The bloodstain's blue fire stretched from Vic's bow all the way back to the interior of the shack. Hugo stood a few feet behind her, luminous fingers playing in time with Vic's bow, and Severus was making his way through the garden with the book, which floated in front of him like a carmine will-o-the-wisp. The blue fire swirling around his feet like mist. His calm, focused expression suggested that he was very much in control of the situation.

Hermione swept her wand in a large arc that encompassed all of them and felt the cold ripple of her Disillusionment charm wash over them all. When they were all but invisible to the outside world, she flexed her hands, and the orange fire flared to life. On the high keys of her imaginary piano, she added high string and woodwind flourishes on the next iteration of the melody. The woodwind entrance was the MPS's cue, the Peugeot began to roll gently down the road

towards McCoy House with only the smallest grumble of engine, and they all followed like lucid sleepwalkers, the music guiding their footsteps ever forward.

Hermione glanced over her shoulder and saw that Severus had raised his violin to his chin and was bowing in time with them. The book still hovered in front of him, and its red fire had expanded to easily twice its original radius. As melody and counter-melody swirled around her, Hermione reached out with the oboes and bassoons on the off beats, sending the oboes forward to Vic and the bassoons back to Severus with gentle waves of her hands. Hugo caught her eye and responded to her by winding the second violin countermelody around them all and pulling it tightly. As the music swelled to fortissimo, the red light that encompassed the book grew even larger and pulsed with the crash of timpani as the trumpet and horn sang out the theme.

Hermione couldn't see Vic's face, but his back was straighter as they all played together, a powerful portent of things to come, and the blue light that was his connection to the bloodstain back to the shack flared like flame. The music was everywhere, filling her mind, beating in time with her heart.

When the theme faded and fragmented, Hermione plunged her hands into the development, pulling out string and woodwind motifs, her mind in focused chaos as she barrelled through Beethoven's acrobatic lines. She

was vaguely aware of the others around her doing the same, and before she knew it, bits of the theme were darting out of the inner voices. They were nearly there.

Hermione exited the melodic texture and peered out of the magic swirling around her and was delighted to see that they were only about twenty metres from the site. Everything was working as it needed to. She glanced behind her to check on Severus and her heart nearly stopped beating. Behind Severus was the trail of blue magic that connected their spell to the Shrieking Shack, but along it, some hundred metres behind him, floated a dozen circles of light that Hermione recognised as Lumos charms.

Someone was following them. Quite a few someones, in fact. Hermione squared her shoulders. Now more than ever they needed the spell to work, since it was likely that this would be their only opportunity.

Hugo glanced her way, and she shook her head and raised her hands. The strings were rising into a frenzy, and Hermione crashed her hands down in front of her, unleashing the brass and timpani once more on a partial recapitulation of the theme that faded suddenly to *piano* as they took their places at the edge of the gaping hole at the construction site. At her next rest, Hermione seized her wand and tapped the concrete, which came obediently to life. As Hugo's oboe and bassoon sang sweetly over Vic's ostinato and Severus's dancing violin line, Hermione tapped her wand



to liquefy the magic concrete and sent it sweeping down into the pit, filling the wall forms and covering the dragon-bone floor supports.

As the music quieted to its softest level yet, Hermione caught Severus's eye, and he nodded.

She raised her hands a final time, joining them all on a final fortissimo rendition of the theme, strings, brass, winds, and timpani combining into an ecstatic statement of permanence and strength, even as pianissimo interjections suggested that it was all an illusion. The fiery magic connecting them all grew brighter as they all poured the music into the red protections surrounding the book, as Severus lowered the book gracefully into the pit. The blood red glow dimmed as the book sank into the cement.

Dazzling red light shot through the foundation, and Hermione blinked to clear the afterimage. She could barely make out a dark shape descending upon the spot where the book had disappeared, and she smiled, recognising Severus's black silk robes. She continued to play the final notes, encouraging the cement to grant a final resting place to the vestiges of Severus's youthful mistakes, and the robes sank into the cement as the music grew softer and softer until it was only Vic and Hugo playing.

Hermione and Severus joined on the final chord, and the red light that enveloped the foundation flared once more. But as the sound faded, so did the light,

until there was nothing left but the sound of heavy breathing, the moonlight overhead, and, as Hermione gradually became aware, dozens of Hogsmeade residents surrounding them — Madam Rosmerta, Mayor Methuselah Suggs — all bearing silent witness.

Hermione fell to her knees, exhausted physically and magically. Her Disillusionment Charm was still in effect, but a hand that was unmistakably Severus's found her elbow and helped her stand.

"It is done," he whispered in her ear before planting a kiss on her cheek.

"Mum," whispered Hugo from somewhere behind her. "What do we do?"

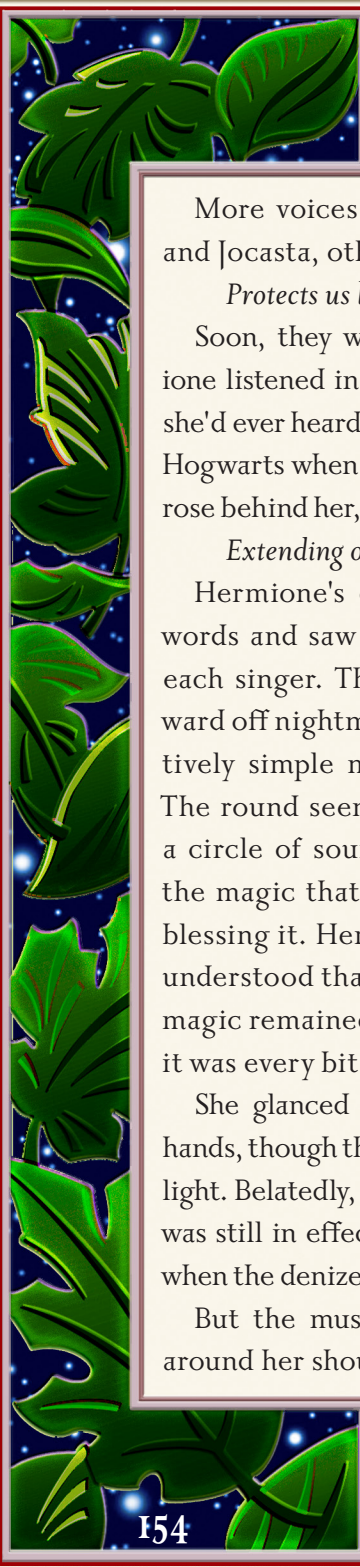
Hermione's mind and body were both exhausted, but as attractive as doing nothing sounded, it was not an option. But to her amazement, the decision was no longer in her hands.

The village Mugwump, Methuselah Suggs, stepped forward to the pit with his wand lit. In the wandlight, Hermione could see that his cheeks were damp with tears. But he raised his chin and began to sing in a reedy voice.

When walking in the darkest night,

Hermione immediately recognised the canon by Thomas Tallis, a piece she had learnt in school, for all that the words were different than any she'd heard. Automatically, Methuselah's wife Jocasta added her voice to her husband's, but a bar behind so that they were singing in a round.

We know our magic's blessed light



More voices joined in, some joining Methuselah and Jocasta, others starting the melody over.

Protects us like a dragon's wing

Soon, they were surrounded by singing, and Hermione listened in slack-jawed amazement. The only time she'd ever heard magical people sing was her first year at Hogwarts when they sang the school song. Hugo's voice rose behind her, and Vic's ethereal voice twined with his.

Extending o'er us as we sing.

Hermione's eyes widened when she grasped the words and saw aureoles of white light grow around each singer. This wasn't simply a children's song to ward off nightmares. The simple words and the deceptively simple music that carried them were magic. The round seemingly had no beginning and no end; a circle of sound surrounding them and honouring the magic that had been done tonight, cleansing it, blessing it. Hermione's heart swelled with joy as she understood that despite the official ban, some music magic remained in the collective consciousness, and it was every bit as beautiful as Vic and Hugo's.

She glanced behind her and saw the boys holding hands, though they appeared to be only white outlines of light. Belatedly, she released the Disillusionment Charm was still in effect, and half expected the music to stop when the denizens of Hogsmeade saw Vic and Severus.

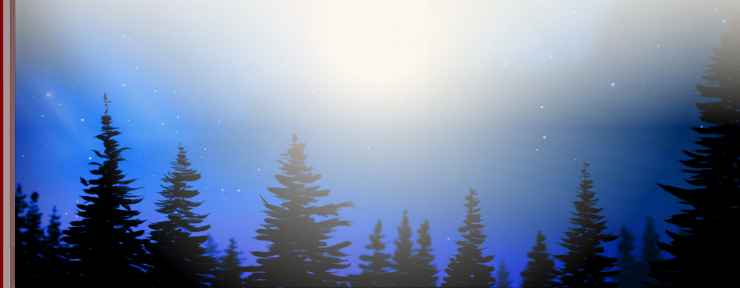
But the music continued, and Severus's arm was around her shoulders, supporting her exhausted body

and buoying her spirits. He was singing very softly, and her throat tightened with emotion to see that the robe he had buried in the concrete had concealed casual Muggle clothing. Though she knew her voice was little more than a croak, she began to sing with him, and his arm tightened around her.

She looked around at her neighbours, who were similarly transported by the strange magic they were making, their expressions ranging from awe to delight. There were curious glances Severus's way, but until Methuselah Suggs held them all on the last word, sent the final note ringing to the heavens, and pushed their collective magic into the foundation with a wave of his wand, no words were spoken.

In the bright moonlight, Hermione could see Suggs's eye travel from Severus to herself, and finally to the boys. A murmur went up from the assembled crowd, and someone whispered in the mayor's ear. After conferring with the woman for a moment, Suggs walked around the edge of the pit and extended his hand.

"Welcome back, Severus Snape. It's good to see you again."





Hermione was putting the finishing touches on the concept sketch for a fountain and playground at Fletcher Cove Park when Severus set a copy of THE INTERNATIONAL PROPHET on the desk next to her, along with a cafe Cubano.

"Merlin help us," he said. "Our sons officially have a viable livelihood."

Hermione glanced at the paper and tutted. "I never made the front page when the Wizengamot did a blanket reclassification of Reinforcement Charms at my behest."

"No offence intended, my dear, but Reinforcement Charms weren't previously classified as Dark, and you weren't 'a pair of devastatingly handsome men of international mystery'."

"I suppose not," she said, taking a sip of the coffee. "Thank you for this. I'm surprised Hugo didn't call to let us know about the verdict."

"I'm sure he's quite busy with preparations for the inaugural concert."

"You don't suppose he's still angry with me for leaving the estate to him, do you?"

"If he is, he's a fool," said Severus. "He's starting out his career with no student loans, in possession of a beautiful home and the only magical concert hall in Britain, all with no strings attached. If he has an ounce of sense, he'll come around."

"Perhaps I've given him too much and he resents it."

"I've always thought you were too generous," he said,

kissing her. "However, it would be churlish to characterise it as a fault, given that I am the primary beneficiary."

She gave him a mischievous smile. "Are you terribly disappointed that our sons have managed to upstage us?"

"As fascinating as it has been to have been treated to the *Prophet's* speculations about what Dark magic I used to snare the Widow Weasley and what sort of underpants I wear, I knew that one day I would have to pass the mantle on to some other unsuspecting sod."

"I'm owling a package to them today. Are there any American sweets that Victor would find comforting in this time of public scrutiny?"

"Peanut butter cups," said Severus. "But don't feel too sorry for him. Unless I'm much mistaken, Victor will be gorging himself on the attention."

Hermione kissed him fondly. "It sometimes stretches one's credulity to think that you two are related."

Severus harrumphed. "It has been dismaying to discover how much, but for the grace of Merlin, I might have had in common with Potter."

Hermione chuckled and signed the sketch with a flourish. "It's done. What do you think?"

He studied it over her shoulder for a moment. "Meticulous, whimsical, and witty," he said.

"But do you think children will want to play on it?"

"I've seen children create whole universes from cardboard boxes," said Severus. "If they fail to do the same in the environment you've created, the problem

is a failure of their imaginations, not yours."

She grinned. "Good. I'm sending it off to the city council today. I hope I get it. It'll go a long way towards establishing me locally."

"And if someone else wins the commission?"

She rolled up the sketch and slipped it into a mailing tube. "Then I'll retire and start a collection of garden gnome statues in the garden. Honestly, Severus, I'm not staking my self-confidence on the whims of local government. And speaking of whims, I'm taking you out for dinner tonight."

"What's the occasion?"

Hermione handed him a garishly decorated thank-you card that emitted pink and purple stars. "It's from the Hogarths."

Severus held it distastefully between his thumb and index finger. "There are Gothic cathedrals that took less time to complete than it took you to finish remodelling their home."

"I know. How I shall miss Antigone's owls at all hours and having to re-do my own work six times. But the good news is that they gave me a quite generous bonus, which is why I'm buying dinner tonight."

He looked at her suspiciously. "They haven't tried to rope you into another project, have they?"

"They want me to do their holiday home in Dorset. I've told them I'm terribly sorry that it won't be feasible for me to be on site, as I would need to be in order

to oversee the renovations.”

An owl tapped at the window and Severus opened the sliding glass door to the balcony. The sound of the sea followed the owl into the room, and it alighted on her drafting table. She took the heavy cream envelope from its foot and fed it a bit of crust from her leftover breakfast toast.

“If that's another bribe from the bloody Hogarths —”

“It's from the boys,” said Hermione, pulling out a handsome, silver-accented invitation and joining Severus on the balcony.

“The young idiots can't be getting married already,” said Severus.

Hermione threw back her head and laughed. “It's an invitation to the concert, you twit.”

Severus scowled and took the invitation. “They've addressed it to both of us.”

“Were you expecting to be excluded?”

“The concert will be held in Ronald B. Weasley Memorial Hall, on the anniversary of its namesake's death,” said Severus.

“I had noticed,” said Hermione drily. “I fail to see how that translates to Victor excluding his father from his professional solo début.”

“I was thinking about your son,” said Severus in an exasperated voice. “If I attend, he'll glower at me the way he did at Victor's senior recital.”

“It's nothing personal. Hugo and Teddy were best

friends growing up, but Hugo still glowered at him for months after Teddy and Rosie started dating. Besides, Hugo will be so busy schmoozing I'd be surprised if he has time to do much glowering. The more salient question is whether or not you wish to go. Now that you're registered with the Bureau of Magical Affairs and the Ministry's accepted your special service pension request, you don't have to fly.”

“That won't stop the press hounding us.”

“You know if they get wind of your attendance, it won't be from anybody in town. The last time a reporter came sniffing around when you were visiting, Rosmerta dumped a pint of ale on his head and threw him out of The Three Broomsticks for pestering her customers.”

Severus couldn't hold back a snort of amusement. “A lot of good their protection will do if my own son is determined to capitalise on my notoriety. You can't deny that he's likely to do everything he can to ensure the public eye will be on the event.”

“And if it is? That just means there may be a few more snide editorials about the proper duration for mourning,” said Hermione, rubbing his shoulders. “I endured far worse during the Triwizard Tournament.”

Severus leaned into her with an approving hum. “I seem to recall that the endurance was laced with more than a bit of revenge. Albus and I were quite impressed that a girl of fifteen was able to handle the situation so adroitly.”

"Just think what I'm capable of now," said Hermione, pressing a kiss into his shoulder.

"I shudder to think," said Severus shifting and putting his arm around her. "Very well," he said, sighing heavily. "I suppose we'll have to go."

"Gracious, I'm in danger of being swept off my feet by the depth of your enthusiasm."

Severus leaned in to kiss her soundly. "You may yet," he murmured into her lips.

As she returned his kiss, she became aware of an old Beatles song being played somewhere nearby, and the lyrics caught her memory.

*Though I know I'll never lose affection
Of people and things that went before,
I know I'll often stop and think about them;
In my life, I love you more.*

She wrapped her arms around him and deepened the kiss.

In my life, I love you more.



Notes:



There have been some questions about Vic's and Severus's sexuality and the seeming contradiction in them being presumably genetically identical and having ostensibly different sexual orientations. However, I don't see this as a contradiction at all. First of all, nowhere in the text does Vic or Severus describe themselves as homosexual or heterosexual, nor should sexuality be assumed from the fact that Severus is with a woman and Vic is with a man. Human sexuality exists on a spectrum, not a gay/straight binary. Or, if you prefer a biological explanation, numerous twin studies since 1950 show that somewhere north of 50% of identical twins have the same sexual orientation, but a large number of them do not. This is partially because identical twins don't always share DNA equally between them, but there are numerous other factors at play, including epigenetic changes. Since Severus was adult when Vic was created, he's had over 30 years to manifest changes in gene expression due to environmental stresses. Given that there hasn't been a great deal of research on reproductive cloning (magical or Muggle), there's not much literature on

the effects of creating an infant from adult genes (as opposed to gametes). Something tells me the creator of the spell in this story wasn't particularly interested in the safety or reproduceability of his work.



MCPS, PRF, ASCAP, and BMI certify that the following pieces were not harmed or mistreated in the writing of this fic:

Gabrielli, Giovanni (1557–1612): Ricercar Number 7
Puccini, Giacomo (1858–1924): “O mio babbino caro”
from GIANNI SCHICCHI

Richard Rogers (1902–1979) & Oscar Hammerstein II (1895–1960): “You’ll Never Walk Alone” from CAROUSEL
Wilson, Brian (1942–): “God Only Knows” from the Beach Boys album PET SOUNDS

Beethoven, Ludwig van (1770–1827): Piano Sonata No. 8, “Pathétique,” Symphony No. 7 in A major (II. Allegretto)

Mahler, Gustav (1860–1911): Symphony No. 8 in E-flat major, “The Symphony of a Thousand”

Tallis, Thomas (1505–1585): Evening Hymn, or Canon. (words by yours truly)

Lennon, John (1940–1980) & McCartney, Paul (1942–): “In My Life” from the Beatles album RUBBER SOUL.

For further study (pieces mentioned but not featured):

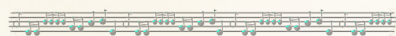
Debussy, Claude (1862–1918): La Mer

Beethoven, Ludwig van (1770–1827): Symphony No. 5 in C minor

Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus (1756–1791): “Tuba

Mirum" from Requiem in D minor, Symphony No. 35 in D major, "Haffner"

Shostakovich, Dmitri (1906–1975): Symphony No. 5 in D minor



Hermione drives a 1971 Peugeot 404.



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Colophon:



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www.aviewfrommyseat.com

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<http://www.redhen-publications.com>