

Changing Constellations

by Paisley Snail

Hermione had always assumed that if the war hadn't defeated her, nothing could. Constantly going in and out of St Mungo's as a patient with a rare autoimmune disease was not how she would have chosen to spend the six months after Voldemort's fall.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 10

Hermione had always assumed that if the war hadn't defeated her, nothing could. Constantly going in and out of St Mungo's as a patient with a rare autoimmune disease was not how she would have chosen to spend the six months after Voldemort's fall.

October, 1998

'I'm afraid, Miss Granger, that you have tested positive for Belby's disease.'

Hermione drew in a ragged breath as she struggled not to choke on her panic.

In.

Out.

In...

I'm going to be sick!

Not here! Breathe, for Merlin's sake!

...out.

During the many hours Hermione had spent lying in bed lately, either at home or at St Mungo's, she had often entertained the possibility that her various symptoms – joint aches, fever, fatigue, photosensitivity, palpitations, rashes and magical instability – were the result of something serious.

Something chronic and *scary*.

However, even in her darkest moments, Hermione had always held on to the tiniest shred of hope that there was a simple answer waiting for her. Perhaps all of her symptoms really were just a delayed side effect of the gruelling year that she had spent on the run with Ron and Harry. It could just be a form of magical shock; she certainly wouldn't be the first person to present with serious physical and mental scarring after the battle at Hogwarts. Stress and physical exhaustion were logical; stress and physical exhaustion made sense.

Belby's disease did not make sense.

Somehow, in the midst of all her fear and worry, Hermione had never seriously considered herself as a real candidate for an autoimmune disease. Hadn't she already been through enough? A small part of her was still in denial, despite the Healer's words.

Things like this just didn't happen to people like her.

As a young girl, Hermione had always pictured her life unfolding in a very orderly way. She would go to school, receive top marks and study at whatever university she chose. After she graduated, the real world would be glad to open its door for her, and she would rise in her chosen field through a mixture of natural intelligence, hard work and sheer determination...

Of course, turning out to be a witch and learning that most wizarding folk went straight into the workforce after school had thrown all that off a little bit. Her parents had often told her how much fun university was; it was much, much more fun than school, they'd said. Hermione hadn't really believed them, anyway. School was her favourite place in the world; how could university possibly be better? As such, she had not felt a huge pang when she had crossed 'Go to university' off her 'Things to Do in Life' list so that 'Achieve top marks in A levels NEWTs' had been immediately followed by 'Secure job at institution of choice'. It was vague, but she knew better than to think she could plan every little detail of her life. There were very good reasons why things like 'Meet man of dreams' had to be left vague. There were *some* things she didn't want to know.

For a long time after starting at Hogwarts, Hermione forgot about the list she had made as a child. Learning magic, having real friends (!) and having an unofficial extracurricular activity which involved waging a war for good against evil took up a lot of her energy. In fact, she had spent so much time trying to keep Harry alive during their school years – precious things like friends had to be protected – that she had never given more than a cursory thought to her future career path. She had come out of her career interview with Professor McGonagall with more brochures than she had gone in with. So many options to consider! But that pesky war had kept getting in the way, and she had never had the time to make a final decision. Her list, if she had still kept one, would have said something like 'On hold pending survival'.

It had all seemed so black and white during the war. She would live, or she would die. On an intellectual level, she knew that there was a grey area, too. Survivors with mental and physical wounds that no amount of magic could heal. Hadn't she met Neville's parents in her fifth year? In any case, through either blind optimism or severe pessimism, Hermione had never considered that such a fate could await her. She had always assumed if she did manage to survive the war, she would be able to get her life back on track and follow her dreams, whatever they turned out to be.

Now, as difficult as it was to accept that this... this *disease* was really happening to her, Hermione was relieved. Relieved to have an answer, at last. Months of testing, months of ineffective treatments and months in and out of St Mungo's as a patient had not been how she would have chosen to spend the six months after Voldemort's fall.

'I understand that this must come as a bit of a shock; we discussed this as only the remotest possibility before doing the tests. Is there anything I can get for you, Hermione? Some tea, perhaps?'

The mere thought of ingesting anything just at that moment whether tea or water or even a deep, full breath of air only made Hermione's stomach churn more. Taking another very measured breath to quell the nausea, Hermione focused her attention on the Healer.

'No.' The word got stuck halfway in her throat, so she tried again. 'No, I'm quite all right. How do we proceed from here?'

Even to her own ears, Hermione felt that she sounded somewhat detached. Even now, when her world had just changed permanently for whatever she had left of a future, she willed herself to get over the hurdles in front of her just as she always had. Through relentless determination and strength of will.

The Healer was obviously so pleased that his patient was not about to go into hysterics that he gave Hermione the benefit of the doubt and immediately started outlining treatment options.

'Well, as you may know, it might take us a while to work out the exact combination of potions that will best keep a flare-up at bay. There are also long-term side effects to consider, now that it seems clear that you will be on these medicines for a long time. However, based on the small amount of relief you got from the valerian-based potions, I would suggest we start by increasing your dosage of that—'

Hermione could feel weariness settle in her bones when the Healer rattled off a number of potions that she was to begin taking daily, some she had already tried and many that she had not. Determination to hold it together and not break down was one thing. Actual motivation to begin the long process of the medicinal experimentation she was about to go through was altogether different. There were so many unknowns and variables in working out a suitable mix of medications Hermione did not even want to begin thinking through it herself. Not in her present state. For now, it was enough that the feelings of nausea and panic had subsided.

Slumping further into her chair, Hermione listened, nodding when appropriate. She would place herself in the hands of her very capable Healer and do what she was told.

Energy and motivation would have to wait for another day.

AN: This fic was written for Lifeasanamazon for the TPP Every Flavour Auction – apologies that it has taken so long to post! I won't write the story prompt here for fear of ruining any surprise. I'll aim to put up a new chapter every week, but this will be dependent on my work/study commitments. Many thanks to my wonderful beta and friend JunoMagic.

Chapter 1 - Circumstances Change

Chapter 2 of 10

Hermione had always assumed that if the war hadn't defeated her, nothing could. Constantly going in and out of St Mungo's as a patient with a rare autoimmune disease was not how she would have chosen to spend the six months after Voldemort's fall.

December, 1998

Minerva McGonagall regretted her decision to come down to the dungeons on the first day of her Christmas holidays as soon as she had made it. She should have taken the time to do something pleasant before putting herself into a terrible mood for the rest of the break, but she had already avoided this particular task for far too long. Steeling herself against what she might find within, she glared at the life-size, semi-nude painting of Salazar Slytherin's third mistress and invoked her power as Hogwarts' Headmistress to force her way into the rooms which lay beyond the portrait hole.

Sure enough, a moment later, the silly chit in the painting dropped the sultry, seductive act and pouted childishly, reluctantly swinging open in the face of a higher power. Minerva stepped through with a sniff of disdain at the sheer rudeness of some of the older portraits. She immediately regretted inhaling at all when a rather pungent, very *ripe* aroma assaulted her senses, causing her to hastily cast a Bubblehead Charm.

Disgusting.

Looking around, she also began to take more care about where she trod; she did not wish to inadvertently step on something dead and decayed. Because surely only something rotting could create the truly gods-awful smell that assaulted her senses.

Minerva pressed her lips into a line so thin they turned white when she stepped into the living area and saw what a state the rooms were in. Books, parchment, clothes and all sorts of half-eaten food and dirty utensils were strewn around at random, all over every available flat surface, including the floor. Even worse than the clutter of things was the fact that there were unidentifiable stains everywhere. Blood? Urine? She decided she didn't really want to know.

She began to feel slightly queasy at the thought that she had just inhaled a small fraction of the filth in this room and decided that she wished to venture no further into it. Since the elves had informed her that none of the food they left was ever touched, Minerva took the sign that there was food lying around as a good one. If the inhabitant of these rooms was well enough to procure his own meals, he must at least be alive, never mind at the moment whether he was well enough for the task that she hoped would get him out of her hair.

'Severus Snape,' she barked, 'come out where I can see you, at once!'

Minerva's words lanced through Severus' throbbing temples like a slicing hex. He could not even remember the last time he had awoken without a hangover, and today was no different. Groaning, he waited a moment or two before trying to roll off his bed and stagger into the bathroom. He wondered what had finally brought Minerva to his door. He supposed that, although he had made it perfectly clear during their last conversation that he wished to be left alone, festering like a living sore in the school she was in charge of was probably not the best way to avoid contact with the new Headmistress.

After splashing his face with some cold water to no effect, Severus lurched through to the living room and deposited himself onto the nearest chair with a muffled grunt of pain. Courtesy of the plate and upturned fork he had left on the chair, he now had a sore arse in addition to the agony behind his eyes.

'What do you want?' he snapped.

Minerva struggled to contain her disgust for the filthy, emaciated figure that was all that was left of Severus Snape. Make no mistake, she had absolutely loathed the man from the moment she found out that he had killed Albus Dumbledore, and she had put forth every effort into making his life a living hell the year that he had returned to Hogwarts as Headmaster. However, when he had survived the end of the war (Merlin knew how) and shut himself up in his old quarters at Hogwarts, she had hesitated to throw him out. After all, according to Harry, Severus was a hero. The details remained somewhat unclear to Minerva, but she knew that Severus had purportedly been working for the Order all along. She supposed that he was at least *entitled* to her respect, even if she could not bring herself to bestow it.

The lingering sting of Severus' 'betrayal' aside, Minerva had known him since he was an eleven-year-old boy. She had watched him grow from an unhappy scrap of a child into a rather unpleasant colleague. Having watched his life unfold in that way, she found it impossible not to feel somewhat responsible for the way he had turned out. She was, she supposed, like a disappointed parent without ever having felt the overwhelming affection that was supposed to make up for it.

In short, Minerva's feelings towards Severus Snape were rather complex. After the single meeting that she'd had with him when she became aware of his presence at Hogwarts in late May, she had become embroiled in school affairs. It had been easy to 'forget' about his presence until now, Christmas time, when it occurred to her that she had better check that she was not unwittingly playing host to a corpse. Assuming that he was still alive, she had decided that it was her duty to try to get him out of the castle and moving forward in the life that she was entirely unsure he deserved.

'There are many things that I want, Severus, but right now I would settle for you being bathed and wearing clean clothes.'

Severus ignored her.

'Do you have any idea how long you have been here?'

His head jerked up, and he made eye contact with Minerva for the first time since he had entered the room.

'If you are here to tell me that I have outstayed my ever dubious welcome, just say so.'

Minerva nodded briskly, readying herself for what was to come. 'That is correct. When I allowed you to stay here, I imagined that you merely wished for a little seclusion and perhaps closure with Hogwarts before you took your life in a new direction. You have not changed your mind, have you, about refusing to resume your teaching duties here?'

His only response was his most unattractive sneer.

Minerva struggled to contain her temper. She had never liked his attitude. 'I thought so. I know that you have a house of your own, Severus. Why not go there?'

'I... I refuse to return to Spinner's End.' He was beginning to look panicked now, breathing heavily through his nose. His hands were visibly shaking. Minerva did not think that she had ever seen him so discomfited, but she was not in a mood to be gentle with him.

'Well, have you given *any* thought to what you might like to do with the rest of your life? You have been here for over seven months. Surely you do not mean to rot in this dungeon until kingdom come? If you cared about Albus at all...'

She stopped abruptly and inhaled through her nose, causing the bubble around her head to wobble. She had not meant to steer the conversation in that direction, quite the contrary, in fact.

'Say it.' Severus' voice had become deadly quiet. 'Finish that sentence, and tell me what else you think I should do for Albus, Minerva.*dare* you.' By the time he had finished, he was on his feet once more, white-knuckled as he gripped the chair for support.

Goaded by his mocking tone, Minerva threw all caution to the wind and obliged him. 'I was going to say, if you cared about Albus at all, the least you could do is live the life he so evidently valued above his own.'

'Have you ever considered that since I robbed Albus of his life, I might believe that living mine as if nothing had happened would be an insult to his memory? No matter. Do you even know whose life he was trying to protect when he died, Minerva? It was not mine, I assure you.'

Minerva frowned. 'If not your life, then whose?'

'Potter,' he spat. 'Always Potter, or perhaps even the Malfoy brat. Do you know what Albus told me when he asked me to kill him, Minerva? Do you know what he said when I asked about the price of my soul?'

Silenced, Minerva shook her head.

'You alone will know whether it will harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation', he said, mimicking Dumbledore's calm, assured tone. By this time, Severus' chest was heaving as he struggled not to explode.

Minerva's curiosity got the better of her. 'And?' she ventured softly.

'AND FROM THAT MOMENT, I MEANT TO DIE!'

With this outburst, Severus seemed to deflate, collapsing back into the chair. For the first time since the end of the war, Minerva felt that she was finally satisfied with the role that Severus had played in it. And the errand which had originally brought her down to Severus' rooms a task which she had fully expected him not to be suitable for now seemed rather appropriate, after all.

Staring at a point just above and to the side of his ear, she muttered, 'It seems that I owe you an apology.'

Severus turned his head away from her. Too little, too late.

'Contrary to what you might believe,' Minerva added, 'I did not come down here this morning to harass you about your role in the war. I have a proposition for you. Please clean yourself properly, and meet me in the Entrance Hall an hour from now. We can discuss it over lunch in Hogsmeade.'

He nodded. Truth be told, Severus was somewhat relieved that someone had finally come and broken his routine of sleeping, eating and drinking in the cold, lonely dungeon. Regardless of how little Minerva might care for his company, she was at least willing to speak to him. That was more than what most others could stomach.

He could only wonder what sort of job for it never crossed his mind that she wanted anything from him other than performance of a service she could possibly think him fit for.

'Oh, and, Severus?'

'What?'

'Kindly do not interfere with the house-elves I am going to send down to help you clean up.'

He shot a very dirty look at her retreating back. He was disgusted that he couldn't come up with a suitably cutting retort before she slammed his door behind her.

Exactly one hour later, Severus found himself showered, shaved, sober and wearing freshly laundered robes for the first time in months. Far from feeling refreshed, he was uncomfortable and self-conscious. For Merlin knew how long, Severus had not ventured out of his rooms even for food; he'd merely requested owl-delivery from the Three Broomsticks whenever the urge to eat had struck him. As a result, when he came up out of the dungeons, it was incredibly unnerving to see the castle back the way it had always looked.

It should not be spotless, but it was. The stone was unblemished and whole, the hourglasses for tallying House-points stood as proudly as they always had. Ravenclaw was in the lead. Where were the stains? Where were the scorch marks from spells and curses? Where was the darkness, the inherent wrongness in bringing war to a place of learning full of children? Why were there no marks to show what had taken place in the hallowed halls of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?

Severus shivered and tried to shake off the distorted, nightmare-like memories of what he had seen when he had been brought up to the school on a stretcher after the Boy Who Lived had thought to collect the Potion master's corpse. It had been the surprise of precious Potter's life to find his ex-teacher still breathing courtesy of a delayed-effect anti-venin that Severus had ingested daily for the past year. After two weeks in St Mungo's intensive care unit, and another week in a normal ward, Severus had been discharged with the affected internal organs (notably his windpipe) either re-grown or restored to normal functionality, with only a very unsightly scar to show for his injury. Most of the procedures hadn't been covered by the NHS, but as he found out later, Potter had paid for the whole. Guilt was a truly powerful motivator.

Struggling not to fidget with his hands, his robes, anything that would distract him from the fact that he was the only person standing in the cold, empty, damnably clean Entrance Hall, Severus felt an immense wave of relief when Minerva came briskly down the main staircase, already in her travelling cloak and a thick tartan scarf. She was scowling slightly, no doubt put out at having suggested lunch in Hogsmeade rather than a comfortable meal in the Great Hall. It was the middle of winter, after all.

Never one to dawdle, Severus just barely waited for her to reach him before moving towards the doors.

Behind him, Minerva smiled grimly. She could sense her companion's unease, but from her point of view, anything that finally got him out the doors and into the world could only be a blessing.

Walking in silence, Minerva tried to anticipate the sorts of objections Severus would have to her proposal. She had chosen the Three Broomsticks specifically because he might be less likely to cause a scene in a public place.

By the time that they had ordered their lunch (steak and kidney pie for him, soup of the day for her), she saw that Severus' frown had disappeared. He now wore the blank, inscrutable look he assumed when thinking hard. Minerva suppressed a slight smile. He was obviously itching to find out what she wanted of him.

'So, what is it?' he demanded.

Minerva swallowed her retort about rudeness and took her time folding back the cuffs of her robe before answering.

'As you know, Severus, you have been residing at Hogwarts for the last eight months, or so...'

He interrupted. 'I did not, at any time, use any school resources, and the only utility that I availed myself of was the occasional use of water.'

Minerva chose not to share her views on that particular subject. 'Yes, well, although that may be the case, since you refuse to teach, I am entitled, as Hogwarts' Headmistress to collect reasonable recompense...'

'I can't give you any money.'

'...collect reasonable recompense for your room and the use of water in any manner that I deem appropriate.' She glared at him, daring him to interrupt again, but it seemed that he would wait to fight another battle. 'As it happens, a task that I deem you suitable for has recently been brought to my attention. Should you see it through to completion, I will waive the twenty Galleon...'

'Twenty Galleons per year?'

'Twenty Galleons per week minus food and most utilities ten Galleons per week that you owe Hogwarts. I would also be willing to waive your expenses for another year after you return from completing the task.'

At the mention of twenty Galleons for what he thought was the year, Severus' eyes had temporarily lit up with eagerness, only to darken and dull as he calculated how much he already owed Hogwarts.

'Just tell me what you want me to do.'

Somewhat alarmed by his defeatist attitude, given that the former Severus would never have given up without a fight, Minerva made one more attempt to lure him out of his

shell. Even though she thought that any task would do him a world of good, she rather doubted that he was the man for the job she had in mind. Unfortunately he was just about the only *available* person who might just be able to be coerced into doing it.

'You really should consider going home, Severus. If you were to leave, I could probably rework the school's budget and simply write off your existing debt. Why not leave and start afresh?'

The look of pure loathing that twisted his face made Minerva unconsciously lean back into her chair.

'I am never going back to that... that *house*,' he spat, white-knuckled fingers desperately clutching the edge of the table.

Minerva knew better than to offer him any pity. 'Very well, then,' she said, back to her usual brisk tone. 'Your task is to escort Hermione Granger to Australia. You will assist her in her efforts to locate her parents and restore their memories if or when you find them. As I understand it, she sent them there before she went on the run with Mr Weasley and Mr Potter.'

'I beg your pardon?'

Neither Severus' icy tone, nor his furious gaze had any effect on Minerva. She countered his glare with a rather pointed one of her own.

'Don't make me repeat myself, Severus. I was very clear the first time.'

'And what,' he asked tightly, 'could the little know-it-all possibly need my help with? Assuming she has expressed a desire for assistance, what makes you think *that* mine will be welcome? Surely one of her usual sidekicks Potter, perhaps, or Weasley would be better suited to the job.'

Minerva felt her anger surge, boiling up and spilling over. 'You will listen to me, Severus Snape, without interruptions, and you will keep a civil tongue in your head, or Merlin help me, I will bind and gag you. While you shut yourself in your rooms and squandered your life and freedom in a manner that I find both disgusting and disappointing, the rest of the wizarding world has begun the painful process of moving on. Many things have happened, all of which you seem to be totally ignorant of. So when I tell you that Hermione Granger is in need of assistance, you will keep your unpleasant thoughts to yourself and accept my words as truth. Do you understand?'

Severus flinched and averted his eyes but said nothing.

Minerva inhaled deeply. Control. She did possess it. Normally. She continued more calmly, 'It is common knowledge that Hermione Granger has been ill for some time. What is less well known is that she was diagnosed some months ago with Belby's disease. Although her physical condition is more or less stable, her magic is still exceedingly weak. She is presently living at Grimmauld Place and has communicated to her friends a desire to locate her parents. I believe she feels somewhat guilty that her illness has prevented her from seeking them out earlier. However, the Healers will only clear her to leave Britain if she is accompanied at all times by a witch or wizard with at least a mediwizard Level V certificate. Unfortunately St Mungo's cannot spare an employee for the length of time this might take, and none of Hermione's friends even have NEWTs to their name, let alone higher qualifications.'

By the end of this explanation, Minerva was pleased to see that much of Severus' animosity had evaporated. Belby's disease was rare, unpleasant and incurable. It was the lupus of the wizarding world, but worse because it attacked the core of a witch or wizard's identity: their magic.

'Miss Granger developed Belby's disease?' he asked slowly, as if testing new words on his tongue.

She sighed. 'Unfortunately, yes.' Not wanting to dwell on a tragedy she was still coming to terms with herself, she added, 'Assuming that you agree to go with Hermione, your expenses will be paid by Mr Potter. Harry deeply regrets that he isn't qualified to accompany Hermione himself. Therefore, he has generously offered his financial services for Hermione's companion.'

'I don't want Potter's money.'

Minerva tried to suppress a certain smugness. Her fish was hooked, it seemed. Seeing resolution practically stamped across Severus' face, she raised an eyebrow at him. She knew that he could not have much money tucked away.

He looked uncomfortable, shifting slightly in his seat as he fixed his gaze on the table. 'As you *kindly* reminded me, I have a house. I'll sell what is left of Spinner's End and have the rest of my things moved to Hogwarts while I make travel arrangements with the Healers and the Ministry. Even if the house doesn't sell for much, I already have enough for a couple of months, in any case. Does Miss Granger have any idea where to begin her search?'

'I am afraid that you will have to discuss that with Miss Granger, Severus. Last I heard from her, she was still insisting that she would be able to go alone. I will send her an owl as soon as we get back to Hogwarts, and we can proceed from there. I can make your travel arrangements with the Ministry, if nothing else. A good friend of mine works for the Department of Magical Transportation. Would you be ready to leave after Christmas?'

Obviously lost in thought, with a strangely bewildered expression on his face, Severus nodded. But Minerva wasn't finished; she ploughed through and interrupted his internal melee.

'I know that you did not particularly enjoy teaching Hermione when she was at Hogwarts, Severus, but I would encourage you to forget what you know of her and start anew. She is not the girl that she was.'

Sadness gripped Minerva. She knew that she spoke no more than the truth. Except for voicing this desire to see her parents, Hermione had been alarmingly passive and despondent even after her health had started to improve again due to the complex medical cocktail she received from St Mungo's. Minerva thought that in addition to the love, kindness and caring that a reunion with her parents would hopefully supply, the girl needed a swift, hard smack to make her realise that her life was not over. Of course, Hermione would now have to work with more stringent physical and magical limitations than she had been accustomed to, but whenever Minerva had attempted to discuss such options with her, Hermione had always changed the subject. While Minerva had been happy to be harsh with Severus to get him moving, she did not have the heart to take the same hard line with one of her all-time favourite students.

As she sipped on her soup, Minerva mused on the wisdom of sending a clearly troubled, pardoned ex-murderer alone with a magical invalid to the other side of the world. However, she quickly quashed her misgivings. She had high hopes that forced into each other's company, neither Severus nor Hermione would be able to drown in their own self-pity. For all his other faults, Severus had always managed to hold himself together well enough to discharge his responsibilities. Hermione could definitely learn a thing or two about perseverance from her former teacher.

Totally unaffected by her companion's total silence, Minerva thoroughly enjoyed the rest of lunch and walked back up to the castle with a spring in her step.

It was not every day that she successfully managed to kill two birds with one stone.

Many thanks to my beta, JunoMagic.

Chapter 2 - Places Change

Chapter 3 of 10

Hermione had always assumed that if the war hadn't defeated her, nothing could. Constantly going in and out of St Mungo's as a patient with a rare autoimmune disease was not how she would have chosen to spend the six months after Voldemort's fall.

Exactly one week after speaking to Minerva, on Boxing Day, to be precise, Severus found himself knocking at the door of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, ready to escort Hermione Granger to Stonehenge for their portal stone to Australia. He had spent almost the whole week clearing out the house at Spinner's End. Everything he owned had been packed neatly into boxes and left in his now-spotless quarters at Hogwarts.

In the end, he had sold his former home to Minerva. Buying rundown cottages and Transfiguring them into beautiful, quaint homes had become a hobby of hers during the more peaceful summers of her teaching career. Though nothing at or in the vicinity of Spinner's End could rightfully be called a cottage and would likely never be considered quaint, Minerva had taken one look at the dank, dilapidated place and announced her intention to take it before speculating about the possibility of buying adjoining blocks as well. Unable to fathom what possible return she hoped to get from doing the place up, Severus had, nevertheless, happily sold it to his former colleague for her very reasonable offering bid.

Now, shivering slightly in the December cold, Severus wondered how many Gryffindors it took to open a door before Harry Potter himself did the honours.

'Professor Snape? Is that you?'

Harry looked bewildered; it was an expression Severus had become well acquainted with during his time as the boy's teacher. His jaw clenched.

Typical.

'Of course it's me, Potter,' he said, tilting his head slightly forward in reflex before recalling that his hair could no longer be used as a screen to hide his face. The new haircut was still bothering him two days after the fact. He reminded himself for the umpteenth time that it was *practical*. Not only was he supposed to be blending in with Muggles for the foreseeable future but everything he had read in preparation for this trip had told him in no uncertain terms that Australia in December was going to be *hot*.

Harry ran a hand through his own untidy hair. 'Er, I mean, it's really great to see you up and about again, sir. Brilliant, really. Hermione's ready to go, but if you've got any time before you've got to leave, why don't you come in for a cup of tea?'

'Unfortunately, we can't spare the time, Potter,' said Severus. The lie rolled smoothly off his tongue. Talking to Harry Potter was just as difficult as talking to Minerva, albeit in a different way. Harry, at least, had thoroughly acquitted Severus of any wrongdoing in relation to Albus Dumbledore's death. In fact, after Harry had testified on Severus' behalf and proved instrumental in securing a pardon from the Minister, Severus had felt himself obliged to accede to the boy's only request: Harry had wanted to know more about his mother. Severus was keen to avoid any rehash of that particular conversation. 'Does Miss Granger need any assistance with her bags?'

Harry frowned. 'Hermione doesn't like me doing magic for her,' he muttered. 'We had a bit of a row when I insisted on shrinking her things, even though I showed her the letter Professor McGonagall sent us explaining about portal stone travel yesterday.'

Twenty years of teaching had ingrained Severus with a sort of sixth sense concerning when he needed to prod a bit further for the whole truth.

'A bit of a row?' he enquired flatly.

'It got a bit out of hand.' Harry grimaced as he reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a wand, mutely offering it to Severus. Putting on a more mulish expression, another one that Severus was well acquainted with, Harry added, 'She didn't put up much of a fight, but she'll need all the energy that she can get if she doesn't want to pass out or have an attack when she reaches the other end. She grabbed her bag from me as soon as I'd finished shrinking it and stormed upstairs. We haven't spoken since.'

Although Severus wanted to curse Potter for 'helping' his friend in such a bull-headed fashion, he could not fault the boy's reasoning. There were a few options for magical travel to Australia, all of them tiring. Portal stones at least had the advantage of being quick, no stop-overs necessary. They did, however, require a degree of magical input from each traveller, nothing a healthy witch or wizard would notice after a good night's sleep and certainly a piffle compared to the energy needed for the multiple Apparations required to cover the same distance. But the power required by the stone was enough to weaken the health of someone with an existing illness, particularly if proper precautions were not taken.

'Don't bother coming in. I'm ready to go.'

Severus did not recognise the voice at first; he had never heard it so expressionless. Looking beyond Harry, he noticed Hermione's small figure at the bottom of the staircase. He wondered how much of their exchange she had heard.

'Good evening, Miss Granger.'

'Mr Snape.'

Ignoring Harry altogether, Hermione swept past both men and out onto the doorstep of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, putting her hands in the pockets of her coat to ward against the winter chill.

'Well, what are we waiting for?'

'Erm, have a safe trip, Hermione.'

To Severus' relief, Potter looked more concerned than unhappy. The last thing he needed was hysterics from the Boy Wonder.

'Goodbye, Harry.'

Severus was not the most sentimental soul, but the coldness of this farewell made him uneasy. With Hermione giving both men the cold shoulder and Harry trying (and failing) to appear stoic, Severus awkwardly cleared his throat. Just because he felt she could have said more did not mean he was about to take up the mantle of peacemaker.

'I suppose we best be off, then. Goodbye, Potter.'

'Take care of her, Professor.'

Good Lord, were those tears shining in Potter's eyes?

Severus hurriedly assured Harry that he would make every effort to assist Miss Granger, then forcefully grabbed Hermione's arm and dragged her into the darkness.

'Are you ready? I will Apparate on three. One, two thr...'

With a *pop!* they were gone, and Harry Potter had nothing left to do but close his front door with a sigh. With Hermione away for a little while, maybe Ron would finally remember that he had two best friends living at Grimmauld Place, not just an ex-girlfriend and the bloke who thought that he had treated that ex-girlfriend pretty poorly. Failing that, there were always dark wizards to be dealt with at work. It always boosted his mood to successfully capture another piece of filth and throw them to the Dementors...

Severus and Hermione arrived at Stonehenge at six o'clock, a good two hours after all Muggle visitors should have left. It was dark and freezing. Severus was beginning to heartily regret wearing only light clothing under a thick coat. Precautions taken so that he would not boil in his own skin once they arrived in Australia would not help him if he froze solid before he managed to get there. A glow of wandlight illuminated a huddle of people not too far away. Severus started stalking towards them, leaving Hermione to trail a few steps behind.

'Why are we here?'

She sounded petulant. Like a sulky child.

Severus bit back a curse. Minerva had told him the girl had changed, that she had been somewhat listless of late, but never in his wildest dreams would he have thought that Hermione Granger was capable of asking such a remarkably stupid question. Until now, Severus had grudgingly acknowledged her to be less dunderheaded than the rest of his ex-students. Stretching the limitations of his kindness (solely for the sake of her illness, of course) and trying very hard to believe that she really had been too tired and out of sorts recently to take even a cursory interest in how they were getting to bloody *Australia* to look for *her* bloody parents, he kept most of the impatience from his voice.

'We will be travelling with the aid of one of the Ministry portal stones. The Stonehenge to Ayers Rock portal is reputed to have the most stable connection due to the strong magic imbued at both sites. You needn't worry about what to do the Ministry officials will instruct us as necessary.'

'Surely, it would have been easier to just Apparate or take a normal Portkey.'

Stung by her attitude in the face of his restraint, Severus decided that illness had certainly not made Miss Hermione Granger humble or less irritating.

'As I once explained to your friend Potter,' Severus replied tightly, 'time and space matter in magic. Do you have any idea how far away Australia is? If I attempted to Apparate us both even a quarter of that distance, I can assure you that we would not survive. And, before you ask, since I have never been to any of the five or six other countries between here and there, such an undertaking would be foolish in the extreme. As for why not use a Portkey, a portal stone works on the same basic theory as Portkeys, but again, to travel such a vast distance requires a more involved magical process, as you will see.'

Belatedly, he remembered that he needed to give her wand for the travel. 'Here,' he said, shoving the wand in her direction. She stared at it, but made no move to take it. He waved it in her face, causing sparks to fly from the tip. How embarrassing. 'What are you waiting for, Granger?'

After what felt like an age, she took the wand and put it somewhere inside her coat. Since they were close to joining their fellow travellers, he was content not to question her just yet, and thankfully, Hermione said no more. After joining the group they were the last to arrive it was all a matter of appearing to attend while the Ministry wizard droned on about safety protocol, then gripping the ring-shaped portal stone with both hands as demonstrated. Planting his feet shoulder-width apart, Severus bent slightly at the knees as instructed and took a deep breath.

They were off.

Travelling by portal stone was at once weightier and somehow more unsettling than any Portkey Hermione had ever encountered. Although she was thankful that they were not spinning wildly the sensation was actually much more akin to moving through treacle the experience of being *stretched* excruciatingly slowly through time and space was... unpleasant. The worst part of the feeling was the nagging suspicion that they were not actually moving at all.

Hermione breathed deeply, as the Healers had taught her to do, and slowly let go of her fears, relaxing into the inexorable force carrying her through goodness knows what. Just as she began to catalogue the various sensations of portal travel in the most detached fashion she was capable of, the pace increased in a rather alarming fashion. Breathing and calm forgotten, she felt her bones shriek in protest as they plummeted towards their destination.

Thankfully, it was over almost as soon as it had started. Wobbly-kneed and exhausted, but otherwise physically intact, Hermione found herself heaving in warm, moist air. As she struggled to get used to the sensation of standing on firm, solid ground once more, she thought that she felt a steadying arm slowly unwrap itself from around her waist. Turning to her travel companion, she thought she must have imagined it. He was absorbed in staring into the distance, probably trying to ascertain exactly where they were.

And good luck to him. From what Hermione could see, they appeared to be in some sort of large cave or rock overhang. The dirt beneath her feet was all the same distinctive shade of red-orange. As the initial disorientation wore off, Hermione also found herself squinting into the distance. Had they arrived at the right place? This was not what she had expected of a trip to the Australian desert. For a start, it wasn't particularly warm. She had expected to start sweating the minute she set foot on Australian soil, but she was quite comfortable in her winter coat. Even though the sun was up, it was impossible to see very far past the tangle of low shrubs and thick white mist at the mouth of the cave. No wonder the Ministry directed portal stones here; there was no chance that they would be seen by anyone.

'Whew! That was quite a kick at the end there, wasn't it? Just slowly lower the stone to the ground, now, everybody. Easy does it.'

Hermione had not caught the name or even really been able to see the British Ministry official who had travelled with them from Stonehenge. Upon closer inspection, she was glad that she had not seen the excitable man entrusted with their safety earlier. Not only did he remind her of Stan Shunpike in the worst possible way but judging by his expression, he had found their harrowing descent absolutely thrilling.

P-P-POP!

Just as they were about to gently lay the stone ring on the ground, the sound of multiple Apparations caused Hermione to jump. Severus' reflexes were even quicker. He let go of the stone and whirled around to face the 'enemy' with his wand drawn before most others had even registered the presence of newcomers. Ignoring him and the rest of the travellers, the incoming wizards and witches turned their backs to the travellers and chanted in unison to raise a light blue, bubble-like shield stretching from the dirt floor to the high rock ceiling.

'Relax, mate.' The British Ministry official still sounded disgustingly cheerful. 'A couple of Australian Ministry workers are just here to check you haven't brought in anything illegal. Put your wand away and just wait until it's your turn. Mrs Anderson has the right idea just take a seat next to the stone they'll run a few spells on you, ask you a few questions, and then you'll be free to go. Don't leave without your piece of chocolate.' He produced a block of Honeydukes' best chocolate from a pocket.

Her fears allayed, Hermione sat on the hard ground and had a closer look at the object that had brought them to Australia. The 'portal stone' did not appear to be made of stone at all, and now that she thought about it, it hadn't been particularly heavy. About two inches thick in diameter, the ring had streaks of a dark grey and a brilliant orange intertwining through it. It was not smooth, but slightly rough to her hand. Closer observation confirmed that it was definitely not stone, but it did not seem to be wood or metal, either. Whatever it was, it was definitely old. Hermione could feel a sort of ancient solidness to the object, a magical resonance. However, just as soon as it occurred to her that she might like to know what it was and how it worked, Hermione's spirits sank and her interest dwindled. She pulled her hand away and turned around to dispassionately observe the Australian Ministry workers do their round of the travellers.

Hadn't the whole point of coming to Australia been to put the magical world behind her?

Once he realised that he had overreacted to the appearance of the Ministry officers, Severus hurriedly stowed his wand and tried to look as if he hadn't just been about to attack a group of innocent civil servants.

His studied nonchalance lasted for all of two minutes before a Ministry official approached him. Automatically sizing up his opponent, Severus decided that the man was definitely bigger than he was, and no doubt a confident magic user, though not likely to be creative.

The man (his nametag said 'Daniel') yawned widely before drawing his wand to conjure a quill and a clipboard.

'Sorry if we gave you a bit of a fright when we Apparated in. We know you lot have all been a bit jumpy since that nasty business with what's his face we would usually already be here when you arrive, but we were running late this morning because a bloke on the five-thirty Adelaide stone tried to bring in a live Grindylow. Now, what's your name?'

Severus struggled to remember the last time that he had needed to tell a complete stranger his real name. He didn't even try to remember the last time he had done so without garnering an adverse reaction. With a feeling of dread, particularly as this man seemed to have some knowledge of recent events in Britain, he muttered, 'Severus Snape.'

There was no reaction. Literally none. All Daniel did was flip through a few pages on his clipboard before he exclaimed, 'Ah, here you are. Severus Tobias Snape.'

Daniel followed that remark with a series of what Severus found to be rather impertinent questions, many of which he couldn't really see the point of. Asking about potions ingredients or raw food seemed reasonable, but why any wizard would carry a firearm when they had a wand was totally beyond him. The last question, however, alarmed him considerably.

'So far so good, Mr Snape. Just one last question and I can let you go. Do you have any prior criminal convictions?'

Severus debated for a moment whether it was worth asking why the man needed to know before deciding that to do so would basically be an admission in itself.

'I do.'

'How are you feeling? Hermione Granger, isn't it?'

Looking up, Hermione smiled thinly at the Stan-lookalike Ministry worker and accepted the piece of chocolate he offered her.

'Fine, thanks.'

'Right, just eat that, and you should be good to go. I'll be around for another few minutes before I Apparate back to the Australian Ministry with this lot. The nearest tourist information centre is straight in front of us; take the path through the bushes for ten minutes or so. You can't miss it. At this hour, there should definitely be a witch or wizard at the desk. They'll help you.'

As he walked away, a female Ministry worker approached Hermione. Though her face was kind, she had a distinctly businesslike demeanour, reminding Hermione of the customs officers she had come across while travelling Muggle-style with her parents.

'Good morning, I'm Claire. I just need to run a few questions by you...'

Hermione settled easily into the pattern of being checked for various contraband; it was all very familiar until she asked, 'And I'm assuming that's another 'no' for whether or not you have a criminal record?'

Hermione inhaled sharply and immediately turned to look for her travel companion. At present, even though his interview had started before hers, he was surrounded by not one, but *three* customs officers, all with very serious expressions on their faces. She was recalled to the present by Claire clearing her throat.

'I'm sure you don't need to worry, Miss Granger. Your Ministry would have had to clear you before allowing you to take a portal stone. This is just for our records so we know whether or not we've let a mass murderer into the country.' To show just how ridiculous she thought this was, Claire chuckled good-naturedly. No doubt she thought that Hermione was worried about a Ministry warning about truancy or something equally minor.

Hermione smiled weakly. 'No, I don't have a criminal record.'

She didn't, even though her conscience told her that she deserved one more than most. She couldn't imagine what Severus was going to say, though. Even though his pardon had been all but signed even before he went to trial due to Harry's evidence and influence, there had been no denying the cold, hard facts.

Claire seemed oblivious to her unease. 'Is this your first time travelling to Australia?'

'No, I came here by plane to visit my grandparents when I was much younger.'

Claire nodded. 'Muggle-born, are you? Probably seems a bit strange to you that we do customs clearance like this for magical visitors rather than in a nice clean room, but the stone speaks to the stone,' she said, with a casual wave at the portal stone on the ground, 'so we don't really have a choice. If you would just lift your arms for me, yes, just like that, I'm just going to do a quick wand scan of your clothing and cast a few cleansing charms, and then I'll have a quick peek at your luggage, and that'll be it.'

Hermione inhaled deeply and closed her eyes, savouring the sensation of strong magic washing over her head and down to the soles of her feet. Just for a moment, she didn't have to be Hermione Granger, Harry Potter's friend and war hero. She was just Hermione Granger, unimportant English tourist. Hopefully, by the time she opened her eyes again, Professor Snape would not have been hexed, arrested, or a combination of the two.

'What do you mean, one conviction of murder? Don't tell me you've already served a life sentence! Record says you're thirty-eight. Unless you're telling me you did it when you were a kid?'

'I was convicted last year and subsequently pardoned,' Severus explained tightly. Minerva was going to be on the wrong end of his temper when he returned home. She had told him that it had been arranged, that there wouldn't be any problems. The only thing not problematic about this situation was that these Australian wizards were obviously the product of a less suspicious society. Their wands were in their hands, but they weren't pointing at his chest.

Yet.

'I don't know, Dan,' one of the other men said. 'The records say he definitely has clearance to travel. Signed by their Minister and ours.'

'Well, I'd feel a bit more comfortable signing this off if we at least got him to swear a section fifty-four oath,' Dan replied.

Severus stiffened. 'No oaths,' he snapped. He had absolutely no desire to explain that horrible night on Hogwarts' Astronomy Tower to these fools, but compared to swearing another oath, even that would be preferable.

'He does not mean any harm to this land or its people.'

Three pairs of eyes honed in on the speaker, an older man with very tanned, weathered skin and striking pale green eyes.

'Really, Benny? You're going to pull that shit on us here? For this bloke?'

It was Dan who had spoken. Severus looked on with interest as Benny's cheerful gaze turned witheringly cold.

'You want to repeat that, Dan? Here, under the shades of Uluru?'

When Benny said 'Uluru', it somehow sounded more guttural, more meaningful, and the hairs on the back of Severus' neck rose as he felt a shift in the magic around them all. As suddenly as it began, however, the feeling passed and the tension loosened. Severus hoped it wasn't noticeable that he had broken out in a cold sweat. He had not read much about the magic of the native Australian Aboriginal people, but he did know that Uluru was considered a sacred place. The magic in the huge rock was why the portal stone attuned to it was considered one of the safest in the world.

'Fine,' Dan grumbled. He made a rather vicious note on the clipboard. He glared at Severus. 'It's down on record that Benny vouched for you. Try anything funny and his lot will track you down. It won't even matter if you stop using magic they'll still find you.'

Severus struggled not to let his impatience with such threats show. He didn't think it would make any difference if he told Dan that the only reason he was even in Australia was to find Hermione sodding Granger's very Muggle parents so that they could all piss off back to England. Instead, he just nodded to show that he was listening and hoped that they would go away.

The sooner he could collect Hermione and drag her away from this bloody orange rock, the better.

When she opened her eyes, Hermione let out a sigh of relief when she saw that the situation around Severus had diffused. He was now standing at the very edge of the cave, obviously eager to leave. Handing her shrunk suitcase and her wand to Claire, Hermione felt some of her curiosity return. 'I see that none of you are wearing robes. Is that common for wizards in Australia?'

Claire smiled. 'Robes are rare down here, sweetheart. Ministry workers wear them if they work in one of the big offices, but the magical community down here is pretty spread out, so we're forced to mix with Muggles a lot.' Claire looked at Hermione's thick coat, and a sly grin appeared on her face. 'Might have been pretty cold when you left Stonehenge, and the morning air here can be chilly, but today is going to be a scorcher. Hope you're wearing something light under that thing.'

Handing Hermione her luggage and wand, Claire also dug a small blue card out of her pocket, tapped it with her wand, and gave it to the younger girl. 'Keep this with you at all times during your trip. You can even show it to Muggles and it will appear to them like a passport or other travel identification. You've got permission to stay for ninety days, but after that, you'll need to make contact with the Ministry for an extension. There are a few major Apparation points and other contact details on the back.'

Flipping the card over, Hermione saw a series of little moving pictures, each showing a different location. Mistaking the cause of Hermione's doubtful expression, Claire added, 'Just touch the pictures with the tip of your wand, and they'll become big enough to see properly.'

Hermione's heart sank a little at the reminder of wands and magic and her recent failures in connection to both.

'Thanks,' she said, trying to inject some enthusiasm into her voice. Claire really had been very kind.

'No worries. If you have any more questions, just go to the information centre, and they can help you there. Enjoy your visit.'

With a careless wave, Claire was off to check the next person. Hermione watched her go, feeling conflicted. She wanted company, but at the same time, she wanted to be left alone. It had been a while since she had been around people who had not fussed over her health and treated her like an invalid. It was frustrating enough not being able to do magic in a reliable fashion, but having it rubbed in her face a thousand times a day had been unbearable. She dearly hoped that Professor Snape it was too strange to call him 'Mr Snape' in her mind would not care about her enough to concern himself with her physical or magical state at all. It would be easier that way.

Speaking of her travel companion, now that Claire had left, he approached her with quick strides. He looked very odd without robes and with the new haircut, Hermione decided. Rather like an awkward, newly shorn sheep. A very irritable, menacing sheep.

'Is it too much to hope that you have given some thought to where you wish to look first, or shall I pick our next destination out of a hat?'

She could have done without the sarcasm, but as it happened, she did have a starting place in mind. 'I'd like to go to Sydney first, if possible. My grandparents used to live there. Can we Apparate directly from here?'

He raised an eyebrow. 'I was told you were no longer a know-it-all, Miss Granger, but somehow, I must have misunderstood when I assumed that you still had at least an ounce of common sense. Let me make this simple for you. Your home was in Kent, I believe? Have you ever attempted to Apparate from your house to Bulgaria to visit your friend, Mr Krum, and taken a friend along with you?'

Hermione felt tears gather in the corners of her eyes and struggled hard to keep them from rising any further. Whenever she had imagined the person who was to accompany her on this trip, she had assumed that they would be a kindly, middle-aged to elderly lady. It had never crossed her mind that her assistant in all things magical would be anyone remotely resembling Severus Snape, let alone the man himself. No wonder Professor McGonagall hadn't told her who the person she had found was until after all the arrangements had been made.

Not yet finished, he added, 'At least in Europe, if you were foolish enough to try such a thing, you would likely splinch yourself between your home and some other small township. Were we to try that here, it is likely there would not even be a farmhouse within the range of a Sonorus spell wherever we ended up. That is, assuming that one of our mouths and my wand hand were lucky enough to end up together.'

She tried so hard to let the words roll off her and not take his comments on her lack of magic personally. It was no more than the truth, after all.

I will not cry.

'So we'll go to the information office, then?' she asked hollowly. After all she had been through, it grated to have to submit to his authority like a student once more. But since she was so unsure how to start treating Professor Snape as Severus Snape, her only choice was to fall into the old student/teacher authority pattern. It was the only one she knew with him, after all.

'That would be the next logical step.'

Not even waiting to see if she was following, he strode off out of the cave and into the mist.

Despondently, Hermione forced herself to keep up with her former teacher's long strides.

Emotions now under control, she sighed when she thought about how different her life and this situation would have been if she had recovered her magic quickly after the first, initial flare-up of Belby's disease. She had come to accept her illness. She had. After all, thanks to the many Healers who had worked with her on finding the best combination of potions for her to take, the prognosis was not all depressing. She would be dependent on the specialised potion that had been developed for her for the rest of her life, but that shouldn't stop her from being 'normal' in most ways. If only the last phase of her recovery the restoration of stability to her magic would come within her reach!

The worst of it was that no one seemed to understand how distressing being without magic was for her. When she tried to raise her concerns with the Healers, they simply told her that it would return in time and not to worry until it did; she had not become a Squib. She had asked if there were any basic spells or magical focusing exercises she could do to help coax it back, but so far, she'd had no success in calling magic to her hands at will. It was hard to be positive about the occasional outburst of uncontrolled magic she experienced when she was upset or angry. In the meantime, the Healers told her to take care of herself and not to tire herself physically. Apparently, that last direction seemed to be the only part of the recovery process that her friends, Harry in particular, had latched on to.

She was sick of it. Of everything. She was sick of her friends, and she was sick of waiting around for her magic to return. She could exist without magic. She had done so for eleven years. No doubt when she found them, her parents might be able to help her reintegrate herself into the Muggle world. At least among Muggles, she could still be useful and competent. And here, in Australia, hopefully the story of her failure wouldn't make it into the *Daily Prophet*. The last thing she needed was the combined pity and contempt of the magical community back home.

Hermione kicked angrily at a stone which just happened to be in her path.

She wished that her motivations for coming to Australia in search of her parents had been purer. As things were, it had been a convenient escape.

A/N: For those who didn't know I'm Australian. Where I can, I'll try to add little bits of extra information at the end of each chapter for those who are interested.

Aboriginal Australians In a relatively short period of time post-British settlement, the Aboriginal population was decimated by illnesses they had no immunity against, and significant numbers were killed in defence of their tribal lands. In modern Australia, the Aboriginal people make up less than 3% of the total population. Ayers Rock, (officially now renamed using the traditional Aboriginal name 'Uluru') is the giant red rock in the middle of Australia, more or less in the desert. Although it is common for non-Aboriginal tourists to visit and climb the rock in good weather, to the Aboriginal people, it is a sacred place that is defiled by such activity.

This chapter was inspired by customs officers in Australian airports everywhere. I have yet to visit a country with a quarantine/declaration/inspection process as rigorous as the one I go through every time I come home from an overseas holiday.

Many thanks to my beta, JunoMagic.

Chapter 3 - People Change

Chapter 4 of 10

Hermione had always assumed that if the war hadn't defeated her, nothing could. Constantly going in and out of St Mungo's as a patient with a rare autoimmune disease was not how she would have chosen to spend the six months after Voldemort's fall.

Since Hermione and Severus had been the first English visitors to leave the cave, they were surprised to find that they were not alone when they arrived at the Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre. It was only six thirty in the morning, Australian time, but several people

Hermione smiled as they drew nearer to the building a low-lying structure which seemed to be comprised of several circular buildings joined together. It was a very Muggle place. Garish plastic signs said 'Welcome' in a handful of different languages, and large arrows pointed up every path to the 'Entrance'. Her mood lightened even more when they reached the doors and walked through into a sort of tunnel. Apparently, they were to follow a 'path of discovery' to get to the information desk. On the walls around them, colourful pictures and simple text described the history of Uluru and the Australian Aboriginal people. More big fluorescent arrows (this time built into the floor) guided them through this little 'maze'.

The main source of Hermione's amusement stalked in front of her without a single glance at the walls. She couldn't catch everything he muttered under his breath, but it was clear he was not impressed by what he deemed to be an 'architectural insult, belittling to the intelligence of man'.

Hermione didn't agree. Central Australia had never been high on her list of travel destinations, but now that she was here, she regretted that more urgent matters would take her away so soon. As she paused to take a slightly closer look at the very basic 'history' portrayed on the walls, she grimaced slightly. Or maybe it was just that being in the Muggle world comforted her. There was nothing to jump out at her, nothing to explode in her face and best of all, nothing to *talk* to her. After Harry had told all the mirrors and portraits in Grimmauld Place that she was supposed to be resting and not using magic, she had been forced to go outside every time she had wanted to try a few basic spells.

When she and the professor reached the information desk, they politely queued behind an elderly couple until another young woman attendant appeared at the far end of the long desk and waved them over. As they approached, she gave them, or rather Severus, a long appraising glance. If her smile was any indication, she seemed to approve. Although it was easy enough for Hermione to read the woman's body language, she struggled to understand what the woman her name badge said 'Anna' approved. In Hermione's decided opinion, Severus Snape's good qualities, such that he had, were not apparent at a glance.

'Hi, how can I help you this morning?' Anna's voice was almost unnaturally husky, a sort of low purr.

Hermione wasn't annoyed that the woman addressed the professor. She wasn't. It was only logical, of course. He was obviously the older and more experienced of the two. Or, was he? After a long moment of silence, Hermione glanced at the professor. He was eyeing Anna with great suspicion and even... anger? She wondered whether she should speak up. After all, it was very possible that he wasn't accustomed to either Muggle small talk or women propositioning him. However, just as she was about to open her mouth, he said, 'We have just arrived here in Australia and would like to travel to Sydney as soon as possible. We were given to understand that someone at this desk would be able to assist us.'

Hermione shivered. Good thing she hadn't said anything. Judging by his tone, Severus Snape was not just angry. He was *furios*.

Not phased by the threat, Anna smiled. A slow, lazy, smug smile that made Hermione itch to slap her for being so... *sæbvios*. Anna's answer, however, took Hermione completely by surprise.

'Of course I can help you. But you haven't told me whether you would prefer a Portkey or Apparation coordinates, Mr...?'

He ignored her blatant ploy to find out his name.

'How?' he hissed. 'How did you know what we are?'

Anna dropped the playful attitude and narrowed her own eyes. '*I looked*. My people are not so busy playing with wands that we have forgotten how to do such things.'

Hermione felt Severus tense next to her.

'You're one of them,' he stated flatly.

Anna's glare intensified, and Hermione felt the temperature in the room literally drop several degrees. She subtly observed Anna more closely. Golden brown skin, sun bleached blonde hair, light blue eyes. If, as Severus had insinuated, Anna was of Aboriginal descent, Hermione couldn't see it at all in the woman's features. Of course she couldn't. However, it was quite one thing to have *read* that the genes of Aboriginal Australians were recessive; seeing it was another thing altogether.

'I met a man called Benny earlier today.' Even with his hostility curbed, Snape still sounded churlish. When Anna kept glaring, he must have realised that he would have to do a bit better than that, and he added, 'Benny vouched for me.'

As if those were literally 'magic' words, Anna relaxed, though the tension in the air did not dissipate completely. Her demeanour was much more businesslike when she finally said, 'I'll need to see your travel documents.'

Severus fished around in his pocket for the cards and placed them on the counter.

After inspecting their cards, Anna looked up and gave Hermione the same long glance she had bestowed on the professor earlier, an unreadable expression on her face. Hermione shifted a bit as she felt an icy tingle wash over and through her. It was similar to accidentally walking through a ghost; no wonder the professor had reacted like a grumpy dragon when Anna had done the same to him earlier.

'I was going to suggest a Portkey,' said Anna, 'but since you both have your Apparation licences, I can just give you a picture of the Apparition point in Sydney to fix on as your destination. Have a look and let me know what you think.'

Hermione found herself staring at a magical picture of a sandstone arch engraved with large letters proclaiming it to be 'The Lowest Basement'. It didn't move like a normal magical photograph, but it seemed to have more depth than any Muggle prints she had ever seen. The arch jumped out of her as a focal point; it really appeared to be three dimensional. Even though there were no people in the frame, Hermione could hear faint noises movement and indistinct voices the type of white noise encountered wherever there were more than a handful of people.

From somewhere above her, she heard, 'We would like to take a Portkey.' In stark contrast to before, the professor now sounded very mild. Just a ~~shad~~*shad*oo mild, in fact. Hearing him, Hermione felt shame and anger rise within her. That two people who had almost come to blows a minute before should now adopt this... this transparent and insincere civility to spare her feelings completely and totally enraged her.

More reminders of inadequacy and incompetence. More reminders of *failure*.

Hermione felt Anna's eyes searching, assessing her again, but this time, she did not feel any discomfort. Her anger spiked as she remembered that this woman this woman who could apparently see or sense magic had not even noticed that there was a girl standing next to the professor until a few moments ago. Hermione had never asked for this life for the magic, for Hogwarts, for the war. But now, even her worst day in the magical world seemed better than any ordinary day. She was not sure how many more days of being coddled, belittled or treated like an imbecile she could stand.

Anna's bland, 'Perhaps a Portkey *would* be best,' was the last straw. Hermione felt almost nauseous as the sheer force of her rage and frustration jumpstarted her magic and sent it racing through from deep inside her to the very tips of her fingers. She could taste it and embrace it, a raging fire burning in every ounce of her blood, bone and flesh.

It was glorious. She hadn't felt this powerful since the war.

'Don't waste your time,' she snarled, she wasn't sure to whom. Without thinking of the consequences, without thinking of anything other than proving she was a witch a very good one, in fact Hermione focused every cell of her being, all her will and power, on the 'Lowest Basement' with its sandstone arch. The world seemed to slow for a second, just long enough to catch a glimpse of Professor Snape's eyes widening with alarm, as she felt her way into the darkness and turned on the spot...

...*CRACK!*

Severus caught himself at the last moment, stilling the hand that had instinctively shot out to grab Hermione Granger. At that moment, he couldn't have explained why it was imperative that he let her go. He had wanted to go with her, he had known that he *must* go with her, but some impulse stronger than conscious thought had caused a momentary hesitation.

He broke out into a cold sweat when his mind finally dredged up the reason, and he realised how close he had come to Splinching them both, possibly beyond repair.

...*have you ever attempted to Apparate from your house to Bulgaria to visit your friend, Mr Krum, and taken a friend along with you?*

Merlin.

He had absolutely no idea if she could manage the distance alone, but he knew for certain that she'd have had no chance with him as unanticipated baggage.

'Did you see that? I didn't think she even had it in her to make it to Alice Springs!' If Anna's grin was any indication, she found the situation vastly entertaining.

Severus would have liked to scream himself hoarse at the idiotic woman, but there was simply no time. He had to find Hermione and confirm whether she had arrived at the Apparation point in one piece or...

He was going to be sick if he thought too much about the consequences of 'or'.

Breathing deeply and striving for calm to ensure that ~~he~~ did not arrive in several pieces, Severus completely forgot about all the gruesome things he would like to do to Anna as he concentrated on forcing his body through the one and a half thousand miles to Sydney.

Merlin help him if any harm had come to Hermione Granger.

When Severus arrived at his destination, directly underneath the apex of the sandstone arch, it took no more than a moment for him to get his bearings and fix on a small crowd not far away from where he was standing.

Striding over, he saw that a handful of people it wasn't quite a 'crowd' were indeed gathered around a small figure lying on the tiled floor. He elbowed his way through the onlookers and good Samaritans until he was kneeling at her side.

'Hermione!'

On her other side, a rather elderly gentleman had his fingers on her wrist and his wand out. He was muttering spells that Severus didn't recognise.

Since the man did seem to know what he was doing, Severus held his tongue. He bit the inside of his cheek as he watched helplessly, looking for signs of life on Hermione's face. She was so pale, so still. He was so focused on willing her eyes to open, he started violently when he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder.

'Don't worry. My husband is Healer, or he was until very recently. I'm sure she'll be all right in a minute.'

Severus ignored the kind voice and gentle hand. Did the woman really think that she could make him feel better? However, the emptiness of her words reminded Severus that he *could* help Hermione.

'She has Belby's disease,' he urgently told the Healer. 'She shouldn't have been Apparating, but we've just come from Ayer's Rock.'

The old man did not look at all impressed when he finally had time for a glance in Severus' direction. 'Belby's disease, is it? She came very close to burning herself to a crisp, you know. She's stable now, but she'll need to be monitored at least until she wakes up. Helen,' he looked at the woman who had spoken to Severus. 'I'm taking this girl to emergency. You go to the sales and get those things you promised Elliot and Georgie. I'll see you at home later.' He conjured a stretcher and made sure that Hermione was comfortably settled on it before stalking off down the street without another word.

'You'll have to forgive John's bad manners.' The woman caught Severus' arm before allowing him to follow. 'He got quite a shock when he saw her Apparate in with such a loud noise and faint.'

Severus nodded dumbly. He supposed good manners dictated that he should thank Helen for her kindness, but he was up and moving before he completed the thought. He had absolutely no idea where the hospital in this city was, or why there were so many people shopping in this crowded street at seven in the morning.

All that mattered at the moment was not losing sight of Hermione Granger.

The first thing that Hermione became aware of as she struggled slowly back to consciousness was the sound of quiet conversation.

'So, is the whole shopping district underground?'

'Yes. We had to move a few things once the Muggles put the train system and some of their shops underground, too. But most of wizarding Sydney is still a series of interconnected tunnels like the one I took us through to get here. If you prefer air and sunlight, you're always free to use the Muggle roads on the surface there's a lot of entrances to the tunnels all over the city but that's less useful when you're carrying or wearing something obviously magical.'

'I see. Would you happen to know any places to stay close to this hospital?'

'The fancier hotels around here have harbour views, but if you're on a tighter budget, you can't really go past the Golden Niffler down in the Lowest Basement, not far from where I found you. It's close enough to all the shops as well as the sights.'

Professor Snape and... someone else?

'Mmmmfph.'

As soon as she made the noise, Hermione felt a cool hand on her forehead.

'How are you feeling, Miss Granger?'

Hermione opened her eyes and felt a moment of panic when she realised that she couldn't move her arms and legs. Giving up, she croaked, 'Thirsty.' A strong hand held her down as her bed bent itself into a more upright position at the flick of a wand.

'Here, have this.' It was the voice that Hermione had not recognised from before. An elderly man she had never seen in her life came into her field of vision. He was offering her a cup of an electric blue liquid. 'It will help to rehydrate you.'

'Miss Granger, this is John Sanders. He is the Healer who brought you here after you fainted.'

Hermione almost choked when she heard the professor. He kept his words neutral, but that tone forcibly reminded her of some of Neville's more memorable Potions disasters. As she carefully sipped the sweet blue potion through a straw, she tried to recall the sequence of events that had occurred prior to her waking up in a hospital bed.

'Thank you, Mr Sanders,' she whispered. She wondered where this hospital was. Had she made it all the way to Sydney, or were they still in the middle of nowhere?

'Not a problem, my dear,' he replied. 'I'll leave it to Healer Matthews to explain more fully what happened to you, as well as the steps you will need to take to recover. You need to rest, now.' The lines on his face deepened as he smiled. 'I should go and check that my wife hasn't bought half the Lowest Basement. Boxing Day sales, you know. I hope you enjoy your trip once you've recovered.'

With that, John Sanders made his way out of the ward, and Hermione closed her eyes once more. She felt a bit less... charred and toasted... after the blue potion, but her head still ached, and now, added to the pain were terrible feelings of guilt. She was a burden on her friends, on her acquaintances and now, apparently, she had even inflicted her problems on complete strangers.

'You will be pleased to know that you made it in one piece to Sydney.'

Hermione knew that the professor was livid, but nevertheless, his presence was oddly comforting.

'I want you to know that were it not for the timely aid of a highly experienced Healer who just happened to be out this morning to catch the post-Christmas sales, you would not have lived long enough for us to have this conversation.'

Hermione heard the words, but her mind was too sluggish and her body too weak to care beyond the bare facts. She had almost died. She certainly felt like it. She bit her lip and let a single tear squeeze out from behind her shut lids. Everything *hurt*.

Thankfully, the professor said no more.

Once the Healers had given Hermione a few more potions and forced her to eat lunch, they said that there was nothing more they could do for her. All she needed was bed rest, at least for the next two or three days, and she was banned from attempting any magic for ten days, though they had assured her that after that time, she would be ready to attempt basic exercises to increase her strength.

Such was the temptation of magic, though, that the Healers had made Hermione give her wand to Severus and told him to refrain from using magic in her presence, as well. Hermione had expected him to object, but he had only thanked the Healers for their assistance and asked if that meant he shouldn't take her Side-Along anywhere. It did.

Shortly after this conversation, Severus asked the Healers for a little time to arrange accommodation for them both before Hermione was discharged from hospital. Hermione fell back asleep before he had returned. When she finally awoke again, she found herself in a small, clean hotel room. Warm afternoon sunlight streamed through the single window on her right.

Turning her head slowly, Hermione was surprised to see that Professor Snape was sleeping in a chair with his feet up on her bed, his head lolling slightly to one side. Even in sleep, his features were marred by a slight frown. Trying not to wake him, Hermione feebly attempted to sit up but immediately realised that she didn't have the strength. Every muscle started to cramp, every joint screamed with agony. She whimpered, and her companion jerked into wakefulness. He hurriedly removed his feet from the bed and rubbed his eyes with his hands. She could hear him muttering invectives under his breath. Something about how 'it should be the middle of the bloody night'.

He glared at her through bloodshot eyes. 'You're awake.'

'I can't sit up.' Her voice was barely more than a whisper. Somehow, it hurt more to talk now than it had at the hospital.

He sighed. A long, tired sound rather than an impatient one. Hermione eyed him warily as he stepped closer to her. She doubted he would hurt her on purpose, but somehow, she doubted he was going to be gentle, either.

'I'm not supposed to use magic.'

Hermione nodded. She closed her eyes, gritted her teeth and tried not to cry out as he put his hands under her arms, as if she was a baby, and slowly lifted her into a sitting position.

It was not comfortable. Hermione had so little strength, she sagged weakly against the hard, flat headboard, whimpering again as she slowly crumpled back down onto the bed. She kept her eyes tightly shut, as if somehow not seeing would protect her against the pain. She heard another muttered curse and felt, rather than saw, him cast a large enough cushioning charm beneath her to keep her upright.

When she opened her eyes, she saw that he was standing with his arms crossed, wand in hand. The look on his face was slightly pinched; there was a certain tightness around his eyes, and his lips were pursed more thinly than usual. As it was, Hermione was far too grateful for the comfort to have even the smallest urge to tell him off for disobeying the Healers' orders.

'Thank you.'

Wordlessly, he uncrossed his arms and flicked his wand to conjure a glass and fill it with water. He then levitated it to her.

Hermione was confused. This seemed far less like a single instance of overlooking his instructions and much more like wilful disregard of them.

'Are you hungry?'

Hermione took a long moment after sipping a few mouthfuls of water to consult her stomach. It seemed that water would be fine for now.

'Not really.' Ahh, her voice was coming back.

He promptly settled himself back in the chair beside her bed. Once he was comfortable, he just sat quietly and looked at her.

And looked at her.

And kept looking at her.

Finally, Hermione could bear the silence no more.

'You said you wouldn't use magic.' She hadn't wanted to accuse him, but she didn't mean to sound like a whining child, either.

His eyes narrowed. 'Your Healers suggested that I not use magic so that you would not be tempted to either, Miss Granger. However, I have a suspicion, which you are free to correct, which tells me that temptation is not your problem.'

Dead tired, sick, lonely and frustrated, something inside Hermione snapped.

'Of course it isn't!' She was furious that she couldn't stop the tears running down her cheeks. 'I can't do magic anymore. Why do you think you were sent here with me? I... I'm not a witch anymore.'

A moment later, her mattress sunk as it accommodated the weight of another person. She felt a rather tentative hand touch her shoulder for a moment, retreat, then come back with conviction this time.

'Look at me, you silly girl!'

Hermione immediately obeyed, blinking away tears furiously in an attempt to prove that she was *not* a silly girl. She couldn't say why, but it appalled her to show weakness in front of him. Bitterly, she wondered what polite platitudes he would think it appropriate to utter this time.

'I have tried to be patient with you, Miss Granger, but I draw the line at listening to utter idiocy,' he snapped. 'People with no magical powers do not travel over a thousand miles in the blink of an eye. They do not have the potential to burn themselves to a cinder if they misuse their gifts, whatever they may be. If you could not do magic, I would be sitting in front of a good fire reading a book in England, and you would be free to search for your parents in whatever tedious Muggle manner you wished!'

Hermione blinked, then smiled for what seemed like the first time in months as his words sank in. She felt a strong urge to giggle, then laugh as she realised that what he said was true.

She was still a witch. After weeks of fruitless attempts to levitate objects in her bedroom, she had Apparated from Ayer's Rock to Sydney and lived long enough for Professor Snape to bite her head off for it.

Life was good.

AN: Apologies to those who were hoping for an outback adventure. I have visited Alice Springs and Uluru, but not at length or, I'm ashamed to say, with great interest. I was a bit of a bratty teenager travelling with my family at the time.

The main shopping district in Sydney is a badly designed mess comprising of a handful of malls mixed with shops accessible only via the street. A lot of these buildings link to each other on various floors above ground, but they are also linked to the underground train station and each other through tunnels. The tunnels aren't just thoroughfares they are lined with more shops/food outlets. We'll explore the city a little more in the next chapter.

Many thanks to my wonderful beta, JunoMagic.

Chapter 4 - Positions Change

Chapter 5 of 10

Hermione had always assumed that if the war hadn't defeated her, nothing could. Constantly going in and out of St Mungo's as a patient with a rare autoimmune disease was not how she would have chosen to spend the six months after Voldemort's fall.

Severus was mystified when Hermione dissolved into fits of giggles in response to what he had thought was an eloquent set down. She was barking. All women were. He decided to take advantage of her sudden good cheer to disclose a few... less congenial facts about some of their recent dealings.

'Before you accuse me of taking liberties with your person while you were unconscious, or some other such rot, you should know that a female Healer changed your clothes.'

She stopped laughing for long enough to feebly pluck at the large T-shirt she was wearing but otherwise seemed unconcerned.

Good. Things were bad enough without adding prudishness to the list of 'Things Wrong With Hermione Granger'.

'You should also know that while I considered that you might like your own room, and I would certainly prefer my own space,' the mother of all understatement 'this morning's little adventure effectively rendered you dependent on me, and as such, I thought it much more convenient for us to share.' He glared at her, daring her to contradict him.

'Thank you,' she sighed, smiling.

Severus sniffed. Well, of course *she* was pleased. She wasn't even capable of wiping her own arse. The more he had considered the Healer's orders, the more he had become inclined to disregard them. It just wasn't possible to care for an invalid without magic.

They sat in silence as Hermione waited for him to say more, and Severus tried to puzzle out exactly how he was going to aim his wand at her from around the bathroom door. After a prolonged silence, he said, 'I have a few questions for you,' and at the same time, she asked, 'Where are we?'

Severus responded first. 'We're at a small hotel called the Golden Niffler in the Lowest Basement. I booked us in for a week.'

She nodded. 'So, what did you want to ask me?'

'You could start with a brief explanation of the circumstances which led to this trip. You seem... somewhat knowledgeable in some respects and woefully ignorant in others.'

'Well, before I went off with Harry and Ron...'

Good Merlin, she was going to tell him her life story. Or the part that involved the war. He didn't want to hear it.

'Try to be as precise as you can, Miss Granger. I only need the salient facts, not the novel-length recount.'

She sighed and shifted herself slightly on the cushioning charm. 'You really like the sound of our own voice, don't you?'

Severus immediately opened his mouth, ready to tell her off for impudence before he remembered that she didn't really have to mind her manners around him any more. His lips twitched when he realised that he wasn't the only one struggling to adjust from Professor Snape, teacher, to Mr Snape, travel companion. If her cheeks became any rosier, he would have to check her for fever.

'Perhaps I do. Now, get on with your story.'

She blinked. 'Right. So, after... I mean, at the end of my sixth year, I knew that a lot of things had changed. I wouldn't be going back to Hogwarts for my seventh year, and I knew that my parents would likely be in danger whether I was with them or not.'

Severus fought for composure. No matter what words she had actually used, he still heard 'after you killed Dumbledore, things got worse' as clearly as if she'd shouted it. He felt his face turn stony and blank as he forced down the tide of emotions within.

Totally oblivious to his distress, Hermione rushed on with her story. Judging by the way she focused her eyes on the wall past his right ear, she was not completely comfortable with this conversation, either. 'Anyway, I'd always intended to go back home to my parents' house for a week before joining the Weasleys at the Burrow for Bill and Fleur's wedding, but I knew we'd have a huge argument if they knew that I planned not to go back to school. I suppose that makes sense, because they've always valued education very highly, and so do I, but I couldn't think of a way to explain the danger we were in without telling them far too much about my involvement in the Order and Harry's task. So, on the last day of my stay, I did a spell on them that I found in the Hogwarts library.' Her words almost tripped over each other as she forced them out.

By this time, Severus had sufficiently escaped his own private hell to ask sharply, 'What spell?'

She swallowed. 'I... I removed all their memories of me. They don't remember having a daughter.'

His first thought was to be impressed by her determination to keep them safe.

His second thought was that she was a damn fool who had no idea what she had been playing with.

'And what spell did you use to achieve that result?' He carefully moderated his tone to conceal his horror. People do not just forget their seventeen-year-old child. He fervently hoped that Hermione Granger had had more sense than to take a blunt axe like Obliviate to the delicate flowering shrubs that were her mother and father's memories.

She answered slowly. 'It's similar to Obliviate in theory more about memory locking than memory removal. I took all their memories of me and made a... a sort of closed bubble around them so they couldn't access them.' With her nose slightly upturned, she added, 'I did make sure there was a counter-charm before I did the spell.' A bit of the know-it-all was back.

For all his experience in other morally dubious branches of magic, Severus did not have any knowledge of Memory Charms outside the garden variety done in haste and intended to be permanent. In fact, probably as a result of his proficiency in Occlumency, he was often quite generous with his assumptions that people were as averse to the idea of their mind being tampered with as he was. He had only ever used Memory Charms when it was quite literally a matter of life and death.

What did she hope to achieve by using that charm?

Severus' mind worked double trying to piece it together. If the charm could be broken or removed, hadn't she made her parents *more* suitable subjects for torture than if she'd just wiped them clean? If not that... Severus cast his mind back to her words. '... *I knew we'd have a huge argument if they knew that I planned not to go back to school...*' Had she gone to such extreme measures to avoid conflict? This was not a pleasing thought.

'And you will require me to undo this obscure Memory Charm.'

She hesitated. 'You may not have to do it. It will probably be a while until we find them, and since my magic seems to have returned, if I do the exercises the Healers recommended, it might be steady enough so I can do it.'

Merlin, he hoped so.

'Where does Australia come into this story you've told me?' he asked. 'All I have so far is memory removal and you going to stay with the Weasleys.'

She looked at him as if it should be obvious. 'Well, there wouldn't have been much point in making them forget me if I didn't also get them out of England. On top of the Memory Charm, I turned them into Monica and Wendell Wilkins, dentists whose life's aim was to relocate to Australia.'

So, not just memory removal, but thought implantation. This was just getting worse and worse. It was obvious enough that the Grangers would have been a target. Even so, Severus thought that sending them to Australia as they were would probably have been enough. Even at the height of his power, the Dark Lord's influence had been largely confined to Britain; Severus highly doubted that he would have gone all the way to the other end of the world in search of Hermione's parents. That aside, since he supposed it was reasonable for Hermione to be overly cautious rather than make assumptions about the behaviour of a madman, it still troubled him that she didn't seem to realise that what her actions amounted to was, at best, mild coercion and, at worst, not much short of Imperio.

Did she even give them an opportunity to disapprove before acting for their 'good'?

Severus suspected not. Six years in the company of the likes of Potter and Weasley had given Hermione a very marked tendency to think ~~for~~ for others rather than allowing them to exercise their own judgment. It had occurred to him more than once during her schooling that, although her courage and determination might not have developed so fully had she not been a Gryffindor, some of her greatest flaws may well have been curbed and smoothed if she had been a Ravenclaw, constantly challenged by her classmates. For now, though, he kept his doubts to himself. She was still very weak.

'And you mentioned that you had grandparents in Sydney?' he enquired.

She shook her head. 'They did live in Sydney, but not any more. My mum's parents moved to Sydney when my grandpa retired. They usually came back to England for Christmas, but one year we visited them down here. Both Gran and Grandpa are gone now. I just thought I'd like to see their house again.' She looked wistful, like her thoughts were a hundred miles away. 'I also thought that Mum and Dad might have vague memories of Sydney, so maybe they came here.'

Severus was quite relieved to hear that he would not be required to socialise with Hermione's 'Gran' and 'Grandpa'. He had never met either set of his own grandparents, probably for the better. One last question before he let her rest again. She looked terrible. He should probably have considered feeding her.

'And what are your parents true names?'

'Thomas and Alexandra Granger.'

Sensible names for undoubtedly sensible people. If Thomas and Alexandra Granger turned out to be as Severus suspected, Hermione would have a lot to answer for when she was finally reunited with them.

Not long after his conversation with Hermione, Severus found himself stalking the tunnels of the wizarding shopping district once more. However, this time he did so for no better reason than that he had nothing else to do. With Hermione asleep, he thought it safe to leave her, at least for a little while, so that he could get his bearings. It also wouldn't do to doze off again during his first day in Australia, no matter what his body was telling him about what time it should be.

He hadn't appreciated it before, but the Lowest Basement was quite picturesque. The air was clean and relatively cool, surprisingly so given how far underground the basement was situated. The tunnels were a little wider than what he was accustomed to in Diagon Alley, and they had high ceilings, which made it impossible to feel trapped. Everything Severus had seen so far gave the impression that it had been built to a plan rather than having grown haphazardly over time.

It was the floors, however, which drew the majority of his attention. Countless small, colourful tiles had been arranged in different geometric patterns, themselves arranged to form larger shapes all down the tunnels in seamless harmony as far as the eye could see. Unlike the general tendency in the wizarding world for design to lack uniformity and proliferate with unpredictable patterns, Severus quite liked the strict precision of the tiles. Colour, contrast, balance. A sight that was pleasing to him.

Returning to the Apparation point where they had arrived, Severus realised that the sandstone arch actually marked the end or start, depending on the viewer's perspective of the Lowest Basement. Rising before his eyes was a wide stone staircase. When he climbed to the top, he was shocked to find himself inhaling very stuffy, hot air in the middle of a very busy Muggle shopping centre. He was, in fact, standing right in between two escalators which purported to take chattering Muggles to 'Victoria's Basement'. Well, that explained the 'Lowest Basement'. Clearly, there was more than one.

Looking about in a leisurely manner, as he tried to appear unruffled by the swift transition to the Muggle world, Severus noticed another thing (after the uncomfortable heat): the colourful tiles on the floor of this building were the same as the ones which graced the floor of the Lowest Basement.

Interesting.

Whatever problems seemed to exist here between the settled and Aboriginal populations, it was clear that the wizard/Muggle divide was much less strained in Australia than it was back home.

In an attempt to escape the crowds and the stuffy underground heat, Severus took a few wrong turns before he managed to make his way up another floor and out onto the bustling streets of Sydney. The air was a little cooler in the open, but he was still sweating in his thin shirt and trousers, and there seemed to be just as many people above ground as below it. However, as he took a proper look around at all the Muggles with their shopping bags and children eating ice cream, he began to relax as he soaked up the lazy feel of the summer afternoon. He had told himself that he would try to locate a *White Pages* or other helpful directory while out and about, as a starting point for finding Hermione's parents, but he promptly decided that it could wait. Judging by how much Hermione was sleeping, it would just be temptation for her to push herself beyond her limits if he did manage to get his hands on one.

For now, he was going to enjoy anonymity. It had been a long time since he'd been able to walk around and have no one whisper behind his back. Even more intoxicating about that simple freedom was that here no one in the wizarding world seemed to recognise him, either. He supposed that this was not completely surprising. In some respects, the wizarding world could be slower and less integrated than the Muggle one. Unlike the Muggle newspapers, the *Daily Prophet* did not run a regular foreign affairs section for its own sake; when the papers did report foreign news, it tended to be only European affairs that had a direct impact on Britain. By the same token, he knew only very little of the current affairs of the foreign magical communities.

Perhaps he would pick up a local newspaper before he went back to the hotel room. If he was in a very charitable mood, he might let Hermione help him with the crossword.

For those who are interested, the particular building I was describing is the Queen Victoria Building. 'Victoria's Basement' is an aptly named shop in the basement of that

building, accessible only via escalator. For pictures of the tiles and the Muggle side of the building, see the link on my LiveJournal at <http://paisleysnail.livejournal.com/46233.html>.

Chapter 5 - Feelings Change

Chapter 6 of 10

Hermione had always assumed that if the war hadn't defeated her, nothing could. Constantly going in and out of St Mungo's as a patient with a rare autoimmune disease was not how she would have chosen to spend the six months after Voldemort's fall.

Chapter 5: Feelings change

Hermione hated that she needed to be looked after.

On the second day after their arrival in Sydney, after having done no more than sleep and eat, she was already thoroughly bored of the small hotel room. Since it was underground, the 'window' was rather like those at the British Ministry. She got light and the weather, but no actual view or noise.

However, there was some novelty to her situation. Unlike in Grimmauld Place, her frustration was almost solely confined to her circumstances; she had very few complaints of her roommate.

It was quite obvious that Professor Snape did not feel comfortable around her. Yesterday, their first day in Sydney, Hermione had awakened in the evening to find him gone. He had left a note to say that he would not be out for more than a couple of hours, and that he would be back with dinner. That had been all well and good, except that, at that time, Hermione had needed to use the loo.

Really, really, really needed to use the loo.

The look on his face when he had returned fifteen minutes later to find Hermione, on the floor at the foot of her bed, whimpering that she needed 'the toilet~~ow~~', had been one of co-mingled horror and discomfort. However, he had immediately spurred himself into action and done all that was necessary to assist her. That he felt somewhat guilty for leaving her in the first place was made apparent through his attentiveness to her for the rest of the evening. He allowed her to determine what they should eat for dinner, then entertained her by allowing her to help him with the crossword in the newspaper he had obtained, albeit that he did both these kindnesses with the demeanour of a small child told to share his cake with a friend he didn't much like.

This second day of Hermione's convalescence had already proved to be more trying for them both. Unwilling to leave, but obviously unhappy to stay, Severus had paced the room to the window, to the chair, back to his bed, back to the chair so many times that Hermione had needed to grit her teeth tightly in the effort not to snap at him to just leave!

Eventually, with what she had thought was an unremarkable conversation starter, she had managed to push him out at last.

'So, what were you doing with yourself before you came with me to Australia?'

He had stopped his pacing and whipped around to face her as if stung.

'That is none of your business, Miss Granger. It should be enough for you that I had the time to accompany you on this little jaunt to the other side of the world.'

Although it had been mildly satisfying to get a rise out of him just to break the monotony of the day, Hermione had been unwilling to provoke him further. She was, after all, still dependent on him for simple things like food and toilet breaks.

After a moment of silence, he had abruptly added, 'I will assist you to the bathroom now, and then I will go out for one hour. I should send Minerva a letter to let her know that we arrived safely.'

When he returned an hour later as promised, he appeared to be in a much better mood. He indulged in a lengthy rant about the price of international owl postage, but he was, at least, content enough with his expedition to sit still. More than that, after they ate lunch, he pulled a small package out of his pocket and after enlarging it, unceremoniously dumped it on Hermione's lap.

Books.

A short history of Australian wizardry and a very Muggle street directory.

Hermione's confusion must have shown on her face.

'The fact that you have been awake for most of today means you are getting stronger,' he explained shortly. 'If you can prove to me tomorrow morning that you are able to go the distance from your bed to the bathroom unaided, I will begin our attempts to find your grandparents' house. I may be overestimating you again, but do you at least have a vague idea what their address was?'

She did have a vague idea, but that was hardly helpful when what she needed was a specific place.

'The street was called something "view". Forestview? No, something to do with water. Riverview? No. Harbourview. Something to do with water. I can't remember the name, but I can describe it for you. I have a clear picture of what it looked like when I last went to visit.'

In the end, her attempts at verbal description were so feeble, she offered him permission to ~~view~~ the house as she had last seen it.

'We don't have a Pensieve.' His expression was closed and cold again.

'I had thought...' She faltered. Harry had never told her the specifics of his Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape, but from what he had described, it had sounded like he could get into someone else's mind at will. 'I thought there might be another way. Perhaps Legilimency?'

'I am not a Legilimens.'

So, he was going to be difficult. 'Well is there a spell, then? One that will allow you to have a quick look at my memory of the house?'

'Perhaps. The extent of your trust astounds me, Miss Granger, and that is not a compliment. Allowing another access to your mind is the most intimate of gestures...' He cut off abruptly and glared at her.

She shifted in her bed. 'Well, you've seen into Harry's mind. You didn't become his best friend,' she replied tartly.

'That was in the context of attempting to teach Mr Potter to close his mind. I did not enjoy it, I assure you,' he retorted.

The sarcasm was back, but Hermione sensed that he would give in soon.

'Look, I do trust you, and you only need to see one thing. If there's an accident and you see something I don't want you to see, I'll take responsibility. You're never going to find the house if you don't have a reasonable idea what it looks like.'

'Do not just assume that you can "take responsibility",' he countered, but since his wand was already in his hand, Hermione considered the battle won. 'I see that you will only learn through practical demonstration, foolish girl. Focus on the house. I will enter your mind on three. One, two, three, *Legilimens!*'

His entry into her mind was brief, but more than enough for Hermione to gather that she didn't much like the sensation at all.

'I felt you fighting me,' he said quietly after she had regained her equilibrium.

She glared at him. 'You still saw the house, didn't you?'

He ignored her comment. 'I am going to shower. Oh, and, Miss Granger?'

'What?' she snapped.

He smiled. It was nothing more than a slight upward tilt of his lips, but Hermione found it unnerving to see his face so softened. 'I was only going to say that when you are allowed to practice magic once more, should you ever wish to master Occlumency, I believe that you would have more success than most.'

Hermione frowned. 'So, I'll be better than Harry, but I'll never be as good as you.'

'Correct.' He smirked, and then his face took on a more serious cast. 'Let us both hope that you never need to be.'

After that conversation, and since Hermione did prove that she could walk to the bathroom the next morning, the professor spent the majority of his time out looking for the house. Although he came back to the hotel several times a day, and seemed to stay as long as he could bear it, Hermione sensed that, on these days when he spent most of his time out, he seemed much lighter of heart when he kept her company in the evenings.

Even when he was obviously a bit tired and snappish from all the Apparating he had done during the day, he still actually seemed in the mood to talk to her and tell her about the various houses he had seen and what he planned to look for the next day. It also became somewhat of a habit for them to do the crossword together after Hermione had proved her worth on several counts by knowing (courtesy of the books he had brought her) various key developments and figures in Australian wizarding history. True to form, he always grumbled about how filling the crossword with local knowledge was unfair as he carefully noted the answer. Hermione wasn't sure if it was her imagination, but as the days passed, it seemed less and less like he meant it.

Severus greatly enjoyed his various jaunts around Sydney. Armed with nothing but a street directory and a slightly outdated wizarding map of various Apparation points around the city and suburbs, he found himself visiting a number of rather nice waterfront properties. It was not particularly surprising that street names having something to do with a 'view' over water Waterview, Harbourview, Riverview were often located near Sydney Harbour or one of either the Lane Cove or Parramatta Rivers. As a sort of extra bonus, most of these quiet suburban streets were lined with trees, providing some respite from the unrelenting summer heat.

In fact, his enjoyment would have been complete if it wasn't so stinking *hot* every day. Despite the city's proximity to water, it was mostly a dry, baking heat; the sun beat down on the land without even the most insubstantial cover of clouds. He could *feel* his skin burning whenever he was directly in the sunlight, and he had quickly become adept at performing a number of Sun-protection Charms at regular intervals to avoid coming home looking like a lobster. It was partly for this reason that he took to spending the middle of the day in the hotel with Hermione his ostensible excuse being that he needed to feed her but if he sometimes stayed well into the afternoon, she never mentioned it.

There were so many things to appreciate about the simplicity of life as an anonymous tourist in Australia. At first, he had avoided asking for even the most simple of directions, still wary that someone would recognise his face or description. However, after no one looked at him twice during more than a few excursions to get supplies and food in the tunnels of wizarding Sydney, Severus finally began to relax. Confident that not even wizards had any idea who he was, Severus had no qualms about approaching various Muggles to ask for directions to some of the streets he was looking for. He found people friendly and open, and he found his own manners adapting to fit his changed circumstances. It was no longer necessary to scowl at absolutely everyone.

It was this new openness that led him to conversation with Greg, the innkeeper at the Golden Niffler on the eve of the new year.

'Is your niece well enough to get out and enjoy the celebrations tonight?'

Severus had told anyone who asked that Hermione was his niece. His sister's child. He wasn't sure why he cared, but he did not want to give people any chance to speculate about the nature of their relationship.

Now, Severus frowned. 'What sort of celebrations?' he asked slowly. He actually hadn't considered whether Hermione might want to celebrate the new year. The only, but quite major, drawback of mixing with Australian locals wizard and Muggle alike was the constant innocent reminders of how unused he was to peacetime.

Greg shrugged. 'The Muggles have a huge bash on the harbour every year. Fireworks and lights. They're not as good as magical ones, but the scale the Muggles do it on is still pretty impressive. While the Muggle police turn a blind eye to much of the underage drinking that goes on in the parks, the Ministry lets us get away with Apparating onto the roofs of buildings with a view so long as we're fairly quiet and subtle about it.' He grunted. 'Of course, most of the young people prefer to be down in the crowds, anyway.'

'You can just Apparate to any building?' Severus was thoughtful. There couldn't be that many witches and wizards within Apparating distance of Sydney. The number couldn't even be close to the number of buildings commercial and residential with views of the bridge.

Greg's eyes twinkled. 'Well, you have to avoid Muggle house parties, office functions and other witches and wizards. But what's life without a little bit of risk? Just pick a building, cross your fingers and turn on the spot. Worst that can happen is you have to Oblivate anyone who looks alert enough to actually remember what happened in the morning.'

Put that way, it didn't even sound like a risk.

Hermione's face lit up when Severus told her gruffly after dinner one night that if she could stay awake, they would be going out to see the fireworks. She hadn't even realised that the new year was upon them. The next thing she did was start giving advice.

'We're going to have to leave now if we want to be able to see them. The last time I was here, my parents took me, and we had a picnic for half the day so that we could reserve a spot. Have you thought about where to Apparate us?'

Severus had spent all afternoon thinking about where to Apparate, and needless to say, his plan did not involve being swarmed by hordes of Muggles. Also, as viable as Greg's cavalier attitude was for able-bodied adult wizards and witches looking for a bit of excitement, he had significant reservations about doing anything which might bring him to the attention of the Australian authorities. It was easy to forget in Sydney, which was really not all that different to home, that such things as the strange magic of the Aboriginal Australians existed. Severus was quite keen to keep it that way.

'If you have no objection,' he said a bit stiffly, 'we will sit and watch the fireworks from a rooftop that I have prepared for our arrival.'

If anything, her smile grew wider. 'That sounds lovely. I'm don't think I'm really well enough to handle a big crowd. Thank you for organising all this.'

He frowned. He didn't want thanks. Thanks presupposed that he had done it for her.

'I also think it wise to Disillusion us both.'

'This isn't illegal, is it?' she asked as he tapped her head. There was a note of disapproval in her voice.

Severus didn't smile until he, too, was invisible. 'We won't be caught.'

He had chosen a flat-roofed building at the top of a hill to the north of the bridge. The view was a bit more side-on to the bridge than he might have liked, but the building itself was perfect. From what he could tell, it was part of a school complex. At present, however, the gates were closed and barred; presumably, the students were still on holidays.

He regretted Disillusioning Hermione as soon as he had let her go. With his luck, she'd somehow manage to topple off before he even noticed that she had strayed too close to the edge.

'Oh, Professor! It's perfect!'

Ah. She had made her way over to the picnic rug he had strategically positioned so as to make the most of the view. He promptly joined her, casting another few Cushioning Charms on the ground before he sat.

'I believe the first set of fireworks is about to start.'

As if on cue, the first fireworks leapt high into the night sky over the bridge, sparkling orbs of red, gold, green and blue. Pretty as they were, Severus could not entirely forget Hermione's presence close by his side. Although he could not see her, she was close enough that he could feel the warmth emanating from her body. She was quivering with excitement.

It was not uncomfortable, he decided, to be in her presence. He wouldn't have invited her any closer, but he also didn't take pains to keep her literally at arm's length. Loath as he was to admit it, it was also... nice... not to be completely alone on such a beautiful night, where everything from the warmth in the air to the very Muggle cityscape across the water reminded him of just how far he was from home.

A new year...

Lost in thought, he started violently when something exploded a lot closer to them.

'Look!'

He wasn't sure how she did it while they both remained invisible, but she grabbed his arm and turned his attention upwards.

'It's almost above us!'

Indeed, there were fireworks shooting off a building only a couple of hundred feet away, exploding in the air above their heads. In the distance, Severus could see that this was occurring all around the harbour. Not just the bridge, but the entire city was glowing with the light of fireworks.

During the long moments of that evening, from the stillness and quiet after the nine o'clock firework display until the bridge literally exploded with colour and fire at the stroke of midnight, Severus felt as if he was caught in a dream. When he talked with Hermione, everything he saw and felt seemed to be part of some other person's life. A person without fears and guilt, one who was able to relax and be totally carefree.

The whole night was so surreal it did not even occur to Severus to feel uncomfortable when, on their way back through the Lowest Basement to the Golden Niffler, he realised that Hermione's hand was entwined with his.

AN: Thank you to everyone who has read and commented so far. I'm really enjoying sharing little bits of home with all of you. More thanks and hugs to my beta, JunoMagic. Without her, this story would be much worse.

Chapter 6 - Homes Change

Chapter 7 of 10

Hermione had always assumed that if the war hadn't defeated her, nothing could. Constantly going in and out of St Mungo's as a patient with a rare autoimmune disease was not how she would have chosen to spend the six months after Voldemort's fall.

Two days after the new year, Severus found himself standing outside an unexceptional house in one of the quiet, leafy suburbs just north of city proper. Based on what he had seen while searching, it wasn't a large house by Sydney standards, but it certainly looked comfortable enough. The house was situated on a rather narrow block and built in a terrace-like style: straight up and down with balconies on the upper floor, fronting the street, yet it was not actually connected to the neighbouring houses.

Just to be sure, Severus compared the house once again to the picture that Hermione had allowed him to take directly from her memories. Something was off, but after a whole day Apparating all over Sydney, the exact point of dissimilarity escaped him, and he couldn't be arsed to give it any more thought. It was the same dark brick he had been looking for and on a funny road that only had one side to it the other side of the street was just a fence with some bushland and other roads below. It had to be the house.

He circled the true address on the map he had been using and took one more look around to ensure that he would be able to bring Hermione the next day.

He was pleased with how quickly she was recovering. His plan, as it currently stood, was that after visiting her grandparents' old house, he would give Hermione the *White Pages* telephone directory he had acquired. There were only just over a dozen listings for 'Wilkins, W' in the directory. With Hermione still unable to perform magic, Severus thought he might suggest that she call all the numbers and ask for Wendell or Monica first before he went to assess any promising candidates.

He also hoped that taking Hermione out to see her grandparents' house would provide a boost to her spirits. He tried his best to entertain her and make her feel like she was part of what was going on, but after the excitement of the new year, he could tell that she was bored and frustrated at being left in the hotel, even as she struggled to regain her energy after that night's revels. If nothing else, her assistance, however minor, would begin to ease the strain on his shoulders. He needed a rest.

The raucous laughter of several kookaburras jolted Severus back to awareness. He fervently hoped that no one had noticed him loitering outside the house, staring avidly, while showing no intention of going inside. Cursing himself for appearing the fool after all, he didn't need witnesses to feel like an idiot he promptly turned on his heel and strode off down to street to find a more sheltered spot from which to Disapparate.

Curry for dinner tonight?

Hermione's reaction when she first saw the house was not what Severus had expected.

Eyes wide, she bit her lip then choked, 'Oh god, what happened to Gran's roses?'

Severus immediately gathered that the odd-looking, colourful plants that had been artistically arranged in the front garden were a change for the worse, in Hermione's opinion. He realised, too late, that the plants were the difference that he had been too tired to take in when he saw the place the day before. Most of the shrubs judging by the very prickly nature of everything he saw, they were probably Australian natives were still quite small. They looked quite recently planted.

'It... it looks so different...'

Severus could have reminded her that since her grandparents no longer occupied this house, she might have expected changes, but he held his tongue. Instead, he wrestled with whether or not to pat her on the shoulder. He decided against it.

Just as he was about to ask her if she was ready to leave, a car drove up the road and into the car port just to the left of the garden.

Bugger.

He knew that he should have Disillusioned them both, but he had become so used to walking around with no one giving him a second glance that he had overlooked the possibility of being caught on someone else's front lawn...

A middle-aged man, with brown hair streaked with grey, emerged from the car door closest to them. Severus' reflex was to stand in front of Hermione, but evidently, he did not manage to do this before the man caught sight of them both.

'Hermione? Is that you?'

The man sounded so stunned, he had frozen halfway out of the car, clinging to the top of the door for support.

'Hermione!'

The woman's startled voice broke through the fog in Severus' mind. These people knew Hermione.

They *knew* her.

As he tried to catch up with what was happening, the woman he didn't even see her start to move had somehow thrown herself across the intervening space and grabbed Hermione into the fiercest hug Severus had ever seen.

'Hermione! I can't believe it... I simply can't believe it. Oh! My darling girl!'

Severus struggled not to appear confused as the woman, whose rather bushy ash blonde hair marked her as Hermione's mother if nothing else did, continued to verbalise an odd mixture of endearments and commands as huge tears rolled down her cheeks.

'Tom! What are you doing over there in the car? Oh, sweetheart, I was so worried about you. Tom? Aren't you coming to say hello to your daughter?'

The man, who was still leaning on the car door as if it was the only thing stopping him from crumpling to the ground, at once seemed to unfreeze. Striding over to his wife and daughter, he all but picked Hermione up when she left her mother's embrace for his own. Recollecting himself somewhat, Severus wondered for a brief moment whether he should just quietly Apparate back to the hotel, but the choice was taken from him when a very bright-eyed Alexandra Granger clutched his hands in her own, happiness written all over her very expressive features.

'Hello. I'm Alexandra Granger, and that,' she said, turning slightly towards Hermione and the man, 'is my husband Tom. Please, do come in. I know that I definitely need a cup of tea.'

Severus tried to protest, but he was brushed off in a way that left no room for argument.

'Don't be silly. It's the least we can do after you brought our daughter to us. What is your name?'

'Snape. Erm, I mean, Severus Snape.'

'Ah, I've heard that name. Are you any relation of Professor Snape? Hermione often wrote to us about her teachers. She always spoke very highly of Professor Snape; she said that he always challenged her.'

Severus wasn't sure what surprised him more: that Hermione had always spoken highly of him or that Mrs Granger had a vice-like grip on his elbow and was forcefully steering him through the front door of her house. Before he knew it, he was seated in the Granger's living room while Alexandra fetched the tea things. Feeling like he was finally getting abreast of recent events, Severus supposed that it wouldn't hurt to sit for a little while. He was quite interested in hearing about how the Grangers had come to recover their memories.

As for Hermione, she was also sitting on one of the sofas, obviously still coming to terms with everything that had happened in the last five minutes. The extent of her scrambled thoughts and feelings was revealed when the first question she asked after her mother had served the tea was, 'Mum, what happened to Gran's roses?'

There was silence for a moment before Mrs Granger seemed to recollect herself enough to answer.

'Oh, dear, I didn't think that of all things would upset you,' she said, patting Hermione's arm affectionately. 'Without proper care, they didn't survive by the time we moved down here.' She then explained to Severus, 'My father was a barrister, and it must have amused him to write one of the most complicated wills known to man. He bought this house when he and my mother moved down to Sydney in their retirement. After they passed, my parents left me the house, but due to all the complications and delays sorting out parts of Dad's estate back in England, it was left untenanted for a few years before we reclaimed it.' Alexandra wrinkled her nose slightly. 'In any case, roses were always very much my mother's thing.'

Severus shifted in his seat and tried to relax. Mrs Granger, at least, seemed to be a very open person. In his experience of open people, they also tended to ask a lot of impertinent questions, hoping or expecting a return of openness. He hoped that Hermione would distract her parents sufficiently during his time at their house.

'So... how are you?' Alexandra smoothed one of her daughter's errant curls. 'You look like you've been ill.'

'I have been, but I'll tell you about it later, Mum. Tell me about you and Dad. I... I didn't expect to find you, well, as you are...'

Severus was not surprised to see Mrs Granger's face cloud over, not with anger, but with confusion and sadness. Seeing his wife's distress, Mr Granger spoke up for the first time.

'Well, I think you're going to have to tell us a little about how it all started first, love.' He spoke calmly without reproach, but his keen gaze demanded an answer. Severus could very much see this man as the peacemaker between his more tempestuous wife and daughter.

Hermione winced but raised her chin defiantly before responding. 'You remember everything I told you all about Harry and the prophecy made about him when he was a baby?'

While her parents nodded, Severus froze and struggled to contain an explosive rant about irresponsibility. So, Granger had told her very Muggle parents about sensitive Order-only information! Little wonder she had sent them wiped clean as Obliviated jellyfish to Australia! However, before he could interject and tell her exactly what he thought of her actions, Hermione had already launched into her story.

'You see, things got a bit more serious after my sixth year at Hogwarts when Professor Dumbledore was killed.'

Tom and Alexandra nodded. Severus' fingers twitched as he waited for one of them to call him a murderer, but other than a brief glance from Alexandra in his direction, as if to see how *he* would react, the moment passed.

'Everything is all right now, Voldemort is gone,' Hermione quickly added, 'but at the time, I was really worried that you would both be targets if you stayed in England. And I was right. Voldemort took over the Ministry and round up Muggle-borns and their families. He... he had so much power. I went on the run with Harry and Ron. I hoped that if you had no memory of me and I sent you here, you'd be safe. I couldn't let him find you, not when you couldn't even fight back.'

Hermione was in tears now, and Severus was acutely aware that Mr and Mrs Granger had absolutely no idea how bad the war had become by the end. He added quietly, 'While I do not necessarily approve of the way Miss Granger went about keeping you safe, Mr and Mrs Granger, I do believe that she acted on a well-founded fear.'

'There was fighting?' Alexandra's eyes had gone wide. She had been fixed on Hermione when she saw how upset her daughter was, but now she had her gaze on Severus, a horrified expression on her face.

Since Hermione seemed entirely unable to answer over her hiccupping in her mother's arms, Severus realised that, as usual, the most unpleasant task fell to him. Unable to sit still, he got up and moved to the window before turning to face the Grangers once more.

'There was fighting, and many young lives were lost.' He assessed the Grangers. There was no doubt that they were intelligent, and though he still did not know what they had gone through, he believed that they deserved an explanation. They did not seem to be angry or unforgiving of Hermione's actions, but he thought that they still needed to *understand*. 'I don't know how much Hermione has told you about blood purity in the wizarding world, but you need to realise that under the Dark... that is, You-Know-Who, life was very difficult for wizards and witches of non-magical heritage. The ones who fled were the lucky ones. The culmination of the conflict occurred on Hogwarts grounds. I was... incapacitated... for some time during the battle itself, but I know that students who had refused to be sent home were involved in the battle, and many others fighting were barely older than that. I believe you are familiar with the Weasleys?'

By this stage, both Tom and Alexandra were ashen. Tom was obviously trying to arrange his features into a fair impression of the stoicism, but Alexandra's eyes were filling as she stroked her daughter's hair while Hermione sobbed into her shoulder.

'Molly and Arthur lost their son Fred. Your daughter had many friends among the fallen. The actions of Miss Granger, Mr Potter and Mr Weasley were pivotal in paving the way for eventual victory. The British wizarding world is in debt to your daughter and her friends for their freedom.'

More silence.

At last, Tom croaked, 'Fred? One of the twins, wasn't he?'

Severus took a deep breath and tried to suppress the nausea that always rose within him when he considered the young people who had left the world while he was still in it.

'Yes. Fred was George Weasley's twin.' He turned back to the window as he saw Mr Granger blink a few times, both men struggling to get their emotions under control.

How odd it was that the sun should be shining and the sky a clear, cloudless blue while they spoke of such tragic things. Rather than curse it as a mockery, however, Severus concentrated on clearing his mind of everything except the feeling of sunshine warming his hand resting on the windowsill.

Grief was a reasonable response to such a tragedy, but no amount of guilt or self-loathing was going to bring Fred and the others back.

'I'm so s-sorry, Mum, Dad. I should have at least asked you first.'

It appeared that Hermione had recovered enough to stutter coherently, and not only that but Severus was pleased to hear her admit to some wrongdoing. He hoped that it would not be long until she regained control of her tear ducts and hiccups, too. At times like this, Severus wished that he could cast Muffliato on himself. He pretended not to hear the soft shushing noises Alexandra made, or Tom's gruff words telling his daughter that they were sorry, too, though for what, exactly, was unclear. Instead, Severus spent the time carefully inspecting his fingernails and willing his right leg to stop twitching. Perhaps it would be worth the rudeness of Disapparating out of the Grangers living room without warning to allow them to have this moment to themselves.

After a few minutes of quiet, the tension had all but left the room when Alexandra asked, 'I'm sure we'll need to talk about all of that again... later... but from what you just said, am I to understand that you didn't finish school?'

Alexandra's tone was gentle, but when Hermione went rather green around the edges of the puffy redness and tear tracks, Severus realised he would have to earn his keep. Again.

'Not many students from Miss Granger's year completed their schooling. I believe the majority of her peers started working right away, in an effort to repair the damage caused by the war.'

Mrs Granger was lost for words, her mouth frozen in a small 'o' of surprise. Severus saw this as his chance to get away for a bit, to leave the Grangers to themselves for a while and to get some much needed breathing space for himself. Watching the way Hermione's family troubles had been resolved made him feel something that he hadn't

felt in a long time. Envy. He was envious that Hermione had such a loving and understanding family. Envious that although she had been set apart like him by illness and the burdens of the war, she had a fold to return to, a new place to start if she wanted it.

He did not even make a show of checking his battered, old timepiece. 'Excuse me, Mr Granger, Mrs Granger. There are some things that I must attend to today. If it suits you, I will Apparate to the hotel where Hermione and I have been staying and return to bring her things here...'

'Oh! Of course, I completely forgot that you must have been staying at a hotel.' Mrs Granger instantly snapped back into full hostess mode. 'We have two spare rooms here. By all means, bring Hermione's things and your own. It is the least we can do after you came all this way to find us.'

Severus had to take a moment to think about whether his explanation had come out wrong. No, he had been quite clear. It was definitely Mrs Granger who had just taken the extra step from his assumption that *Hermione* would return to stay with her parents and proposed that he should likewise make their house his home.

'That won't be necessary,' he started to protest, only to be firmly overridden by Alexandra.

'I must insist, Mr Snape. We don't stand on formality, here. You are welcome to stay as long as you wish. I'm sure there are a lot of things that we have yet to talk about. At the very least, you must come back and eat dinner with us.'

'Please stay, Professor.'

Even here with her parents, she was not as comfortable as he had hoped. He could read it plain across her face that she was desperate for him to stay. She did not want to be left alone. He supposed that it might be best if he did stay close to her for a while longer. After all, the Grangers had yet to hear about their daughter's recent medical history. He was surprised that Hermione had lasted as long as she had today.

'Very well,' he agreed. 'I will settle our account at the hotel and return here with our things shortly.' He added for Mrs Granger's benefit, 'Please don't trouble yourself if your guestrooms are not prepared for guests. The least I can do in return for your hospitality is make them up with magic when I return.'

Thankfully, Mrs Granger was willing to accept that much at least. He had never been comfortable with charity.

Nodding once, briskly, Severus walked out of the room, took a deep breath and focused on the Lowest Basement.

Severus immediately sprawled on his bed when he reached the Golden Niffler and rubbed a hand tiredly over his face.

The afternoon's meeting with the Grangers had left him completely exhausted and thrown him off balance in a way that he sorely felt the need to come to terms with before confronting them again.

I actually found them...

When he had agreed to accompany Hermione to Australia, Severus had assumed that the task would take weeks, if not months. It was clear that she had not expected to find her parents so quickly, either. Severus now realised that he had sub-consciously assumed that in the time it took to find Hermione's parents, he would also have time to slowly start thinking about the war, England and whatever was left of life.

Apparently not.

The temptation to go downstairs and ask for a double shot of Firewhisky was strong, but when it came down to it, he didn't even really feel like doing that.

What in Merlin's name am I supposed to do now?

Fifteen minutes later, the same thoughts kept swimming round and round Severus' head. He did not want to return to England, at least not yet. It had been such a long time since he had been able to breathe freely, and the novelty of new surrounds had not yet worn thin. He had almost no doubt that it would England was his home, and for his own pride's sake, he would have to go back one day.

Forcing himself to sit up, Severus cast a weary eye over his and Hermione's collective mess. He supposed that finding the Grangers had not derailed his hopes completely. Hermione, at least, still seemed to need him. In fact, he was obligated to stay close to her while her magic returned.

He wasn't avoiding his problems. He just wasn't ready to consider them yet.

Moving over to the small desk where Hermione had scattered a few of the books he had brought her, as well as some ideas that she had obviously thought worth transcribing in note form, Severus noticed that he had received a letter. Since he did not recognise the writing, he cast a few spells before opening it. He needn't have bothered. The author had not even thought it necessary to spell the thing for his eyes only.

Picking up the letter and opening it, Severus read it quickly before frowning and shoving it in his pocket. It was the last thing he wanted to deal with on top of an already difficult day.

Dear Mr Snape,

My good friend John Sanders happened to tell me the other morning that he had run into a couple of British tourists in town, a man named Severus Snape accompanying a young girl, Hermione. Being one of the few Hogwartians residing in Sydney, I do keep up with the Daily Prophet, and I was hoping that you might be willing to give me a slightly clearer picture of the current situation in England than I can get through the newspapers and the few correspondences I keep up with old friends.

Let me assure you, I have no desire to pry into details regarding your own estimable role in recent events. I merely wish to gain a slightly closer perspective on a few matters relating to the post-conflict power balance and hope you might be amenable to satisfying an old man's curiosity over tea.

Yours faithfully,

Julius Hardwicke

Professor of Magical History and Wizarding Relations

Faculty of (Magical) Arts

The University of Sydney

Waving his wand at Hermione's belongings, Severus was relieved when everything *did pack!* as he asked it to. Despite what he had told Mrs Granger, household spells had never really been his forte. Shrinking the result and putting it in his pocket, he strode out of the room and down the stairs to settle with Greg.

He wondered what Hermione was telling her parents about him while he wasn't there.

AN: So, we finally got somewhere. Thank you to all who are still reading/reviewing. Many thanks also to my wonderful beta, JunoMagic.

Chapter 7 - Memories Change

Chapter 8 of 10

Hermione had always assumed that if the war hadn't defeated her, nothing could. Constantly going in and out of St Mungo's as a patient with a rare autoimmune disease was not how she would have chosen to spend the six months after Voldemort's fall.

Hermione was quite relieved when she answered her parents' front door and found Severus Snape scowling on the doorstep. He had been gone for just over an hour, and although she had not *really* expected him to suddenly abandon her, nor had she been able to completely shake off her doubts. His reluctance to stay with the Grangers had been all too obvious.

Hermione wasn't even really sure what *she* felt about living with her parents one more. Despite her desire to rejoin the Muggle world, the thought of living in a Muggle household, entirely separated from the wizarding population, had caused her enough panic to ask him to stay. Though maybe it wasn't the wizarding world she needed, but *him*. Severus Snape was her connection to reality, the only person around her at this moment who completely understood who and what she had become. And she knew by now that he could be a very thoughtful and interesting friend when he cared to be.

'What took you so long?' Ever since their long conversation on New Year's Eve, Hermione no longer felt impertinent addressing such remarks to her former teacher. He didn't seem to mind, either.

'Someone,' he said, 'left her belongings strewn all over the room. It took me a while to sort out my things from yours and get it all packed. Now, are you going to let me in, or am I going to stand out here all evening?'

'Come in,' she said, making a grand show of standing to one side to allow him into the house. However, as soon as he was over the threshold, Hermione grabbed his sleeve and dragged him through the hallway, past the entry to the living room and into the kitchen at the back of the house. Her mother and father were both at work. Tom was cutting potatoes while Alexandra tied string around the meat, getting ready to start the roast.

'I'm taking the professor upstairs to show him his room,' Hermione called as she passed the kitchen and led the professor up the rather narrow stairwell that led to the second storey.

Her 'guest' stopped firm in his tracks when he saw that there were two bedrooms, the third door leading to what was obviously a bathroom.

'Your mother said there were two *spare* bedrooms?' he hissed. From the expression on his face, Hermione could tell that he was contemplating the rather awful thought that even here, they might have to share.

'These are the spare bedrooms. My parents' bedroom is downstairs, just off the living room.'

'I see.'

Hermione almost laughed aloud when she saw how much the admission seemed to relieve him, not that she could blame him, exactly. Although they had been getting along well enough as roommates, she was more than happy to have her own space again. Maybe it was an only child thing, but even after six years at Hogwarts, Hermione had never become completely accustomed to sharing a room. Not even casting a dozen privacy spells around her four-poster every night could recreate the feeling of being in a room without Lavender and Parvati. Even Ginny was a trying companion at times.

'My mother found us both some spare bed sheets, but she said that she would allow you to make your own bed if you really wanted to. I've already done my own.'

Guiding him into the room on the left, Hermione briefly wondered if she should go and leave him to it, but then decided to stay, standing in the doorway as she watched him draw his wand and point it at the bed sheets and force them to smooth themselves on the mattress and tuck themselves securely around it. Unlike when she had seen Molly Weasley do it at the Burrow, Hermione noticed that Severus' version was a little lopsided, and although the sheets did fold themselves as he directed, they were a loose in places and stretched tight in others. It was serviceable, however, and she wisely chose not to comment.

'Now, do you have nothing better to do, Miss Granger, or are you loitering in the hope that I will once again find ways to distract you while you wait for food?'

'Actually, I did have something to say.'

He raised an eyebrow, arms crossed. 'Go on, then.'

She moved from the doorway closer to him, close enough that she actually had to tilt her head to look up at him. Taking a deep breath, she gathered her courage, took one more step even closer and threw her arms around him, causing him to grunt in surprise as he stumbled back. With her eyes closed, she wasn't sure whether he was deliberately trying to shake her off or merely flailing to keep balance.

'Miss Granger, what...'

'Thank you,' she said softly but clearly against his shirt. 'For everything.'

Not daring to stay long enough to wait for a reply, Hermione then promptly let go of him, almost tripping over her own feet in her haste to get out of his room and into her own where she could hide her beaming smile in her pillow. She was glad he was staying. She had wanted to thank him for a while now, and something about Severus Snape's presence made her feel brave again.

Severus was so shocked when Hermione impulsively threw her arms around him that, for a moment, he couldn't even understand what was happening beyond that fact that he needed to stop this bumbling assailant from tackling him to the ground.

When he regained his balance, he was just in time to hear her thank him and was left completely dumbfounded when she bolted out of his room. He heard the loud *clang!* as she slammed her own door behind her.

Bloody hell.

Sinking down onto his bed, Severus rubbed his face vigorously with his hands and tried to make sense of what had just happened.

Had Hermione Granger really just hugged him?

No she had *thanked* him. Then she had hugged him.

Him. Slimy Snape. Git of the Dungeons.

It had been such a simple gesture. A hug from... a friend. Yet his hands shook slightly, and he wasn't sure how much longer he would be able to contain his nervous laughter.

Severus had never had any illusions about how his students saw him. He had carefully cultivated aspects of the Great Black Dungeon Bat persona to inspire awe and healthy amounts of fear in his more impressionable pupils. He was also very aware of the fact that, throughout his teaching career, he had deliberately favoured his Slytherin students and done his utmost to stifle the pretensions of the more conceited Gryffindors and Ravenclaws beyond what was necessary for his work with Albus and the Order, if truth be told.

When had he started to think of himself that way?

Severus saw himself clearly for the first time in decades. All his previous thoughts of striking out on his own looked ludicrous from this new perspective. He was as ready for peacetime as a newborn Hippogriff, and the only thing forcing him to lock his knee joints and stay upright was the influence of Hermione Granger. Perhaps that wasn't so surprising. Despite everything she had been through, Hermione was still one of the most *normal* people he knew. Severus resolved there and then that he would not take her for granted. Merlin knew he needed a strong dose of normal if he was to have any hope of pulling himself back together in a way that would stick.

He should be the one thanking her.

Bravery had limits, and after her impulsive decision to hug the professor, Hermione could not bring herself to face him again until she had to, preferably over the dinner table with her parents. Neutral territory, as it were.

Peeking down from the top of the staircase, she saw that he was already downstairs offering her mother and father assistance by setting the table.

She sighed. That should probably be her job.

Trying to look unconcerned, Hermione walked downstairs in what she hoped was an inconspicuous manner.

'Hermione! There you are! I was just about to send your father up to get you. Help Severus set the table. Dinner is almost ready.'

As Hermione got caught up in the flurry of activity preceding the meal, she did not give another thought to the professor until she found herself seated opposite him being offered potatoes.

'Have you taken your potion today?' he asked softly.

She smiled. 'Of course. I took it just before dinner.'

'Hermione told us about her illness and the reason that you accompanied her to Sydney to find us.'

That was her father. Hermione wasn't too concerned that, up to now, he really hadn't said much about anything. Her mother was always very much the outspoken and slightly rebellious only daughter of a successful barrister while her father often acted in times of stress like he was still the youngest (and smallest) of the town cabinet maker's four sons. However, for all that he didn't say, her father was an excellent judge of character. She wondered what he thought of Severus Snape.

'Yes. It's unfortunate that Miss Granger wasn't well enough to make the trip of her own accord.'

'Surely you could call her "Hermione"? You've been travelling with her for almost a week!'

'As with students, so with teachers, it is hard to shake old habits. Hermione has yet to stop addressing me as "Professor".'

Alexandra smiled. 'So, you are the same Snape who taught Hermione Potions.'

'Yes. I was the Potions teacher at Hogwarts for over fifteen years. Hermione was in my class until her sixth year.'

Hermione held her breath for a moment, hoping against all the odds that one of her parents would change the subject rather than ask the next question. It was not to be.

'So, what do you do now that you're no longer teaching?'

Sure enough, Hermione saw that the professor's expression immediately became unreadable. She knew very little of what he had been doing since the war; habitual respect for him and his privacy had stopped her from prying into his personal affairs. For a moment, there was a tense silence, and then he sighed.

'I don't know how much your daughter has told you about my past, but the war was difficult for me,' he said. 'I no longer wish to teach, but I have yet to determine what else I might be qualified for. To answer your question, I am currently unemployed.'

Hermione was surprised at Professor Snape's willingness to meet the question head on. Over the last week, he had often been restless, jumpy and ill at ease with her as well as others. She could not be sure how difficult it was for him to present an appearance of ease and relative openness, but she was grateful that he was making an effort with her parents.

'So, why didn't you just send Hermione off on a plane if the magic was the problem?' Tom asked.

It was now Hermione's turn to struggle with her emotions. Despite her progress over the last week, it was still a sensitive topic. She took deep, measured breaths, willing away her sadness and frustration. She concentrated on carefully slicing her meat into bite-sized pieces. She knew that she should speak for herself, but somehow the words wouldn't come. She could almost feel the weight of the professor's gaze on her before he answered.

'I am afraid that as condescending as this will sound, there is rather more to it than the fact that Hermione can't use her magic as a result of her illness. Her magic is not gone. She is just having problems channelling it in a stable, controlled manner. In fact, now that she's feeling a bit better, I need to supervise her while she works through a range of magical exercises designed to help her regain control of her power. That is also the reason I accepted your kind offer to stay,' he said, inclining his head in Alexandra's direction. 'Until Hermione regains that control, it's safer for her to have a magical companion.'

Since both Tom and Alexandra seemed satisfied with his answers, the conversation turned to more general topics for the rest of the meal. When they removed to the living room afterwards, Hermione could have kicked him when the professor said, 'If you don't mind me asking, how did you recover your memories? From what I was given to understand, Hermione intended to reverse the spell herself.'

It wasn't that she didn't want to know. Of course she was curious as to how Wendell and Monica Wilkins had recalled their existence as Thomas and Alexandra Granger. But she had wanted to bring it up in her own time. Preferably after she and her parents had re-established a bit of routine and normalcy.

Now fed, watered and in the sort of good mood that only a nice roast can create, Hermione saw that her father was ready to talk. Tom sat back in his chair with his hands comfortably rested on his stomach. 'Well, I suppose that is the question, isn't it?' Turning to his wife, he said, 'Alex and I have talked a lot about what happened ever since we recovered our memories, but there are some parts we still can't make sense of. I hope that Hermione can help us to complete the picture.'

Hermione took a deep breath and told herself that she was ready for this. She would tell her parents exactly what she had done to them and take responsibility for the hurt and confusion she had caused. She would be an adult and hear their account without flinching.

She was petrified.

'Of course, Dad. You start, and... and I'll take over when you need me to.'

'All right, well, hmm. I suppose it makes sense to start with the evening Hermione did whatever it is she did to our memories.' His forehead wrinkled slightly as he cast his mind back. 'I can now remember that we all ate dinner together, but when I started watching the telly after that, I... It was an odd feeling, but I froze for a moment, and then everything went black. The next thing I remember is waking up in bed thinking that my name was Wendell Wilkins.' He frowned, obviously still bothered by the fact that he couldn't piece the events together properly.

It was not difficult for Hermione to cast her mind back to that evening. She had replayed it over and over again in her mind during the long lonely nights in the tent, wondering if she would ever be able to undo what she had done that night.

'Hermione? Where are you? Weren't we all going to eat a slice of cheesecake and finish that game of Scrabble?'

'I'll be down in just a minute, Mum. I just remembered that I left the extra quills I bought in Hogsmeade in the study.'

There were no extra quills. Hermione was sitting on her bed, looking at the little beaded bag on her lap. She took a deep breath, calming her nerves. There was not even the shadow of a doubt in her mind.

This must be done.

It was the right thing to do.

Fingering her wand, feeling its familiar power as it called to her, she silently sent a plea into the ether for strength and courage. She wasn't religious, far from it, but that night she asked whoever or whatever might be listening to watch over her and, more importantly, to watch over her parents.

Disillusioning herself and casting a Silencing Charm, Hermione got up and started what she considered the first major step in the campaign against Voldemort. He would never have the pleasure of meeting Thomas and Alexandra Granger.

Wand in hand, each step she took down the staircase felt heavy and loud, even though she knew that she made no noise as she walked. Her heart hammered in her chest, and she felt acutely aware of everything around her. There were lots of family photos scattered around her home. On the walls, on the tables, on the mantelpiece.

They would have to go.

Despite what Mum had said about cheesecake and Scrabble, she was still in the kitchen, just finishing off the washing up since Dad had cooked their dinner; he always cooked on Sunday. Observing her mother from around the doorframe, Hermione squeezed her eyes shut for a moment as she focused on the older woman's unprotected back.

Only cowards hexed from behind.

Snapping her eyes open once more, Hermione concentrated all her mental energy on the incantation she wanted.

Stupefy!

Her mother hit the sink and started falling, Hermione moved into the room and quickly levitated the body to the ground just in time. Now that her mother was down, Hermione had to move fast. She did not want to take the chance that her father had heard the sound and would come to see what might have happened in the kitchen.

Almost running into the living room, Hermione saw that her dad was totally engrossed in whatever he was watching on the BBC.

Good.

Casting another Stunner, Hermione was relieved that the force did not make him fall flat on his face off the chair. He only jerked and then slumped sideways. With both her parents unconscious, Hermione refused to allow her emotions to intrude but went directly to the next step in her carefully thought out plan. When she had levitated her parents up the stairs so that they were lying in their bed, she cast a number of spells on them both.

First, she locked away their memories of her. Watching her life through her mother's eyes was bad enough. She had expected nothing less than fierce love and protection from her excitable mother. However, going through her father's mind and both seeing and sensing the deep love that he had for his daughter was much worse in a way. She had never realised just how often he was watching or just how proud of her he was until she took it all away from him, burying it deep within his mind.

Forgive me...

After she had removed their memories, she planted a strong suggestion in their mind that all their affairs had been settled in England. They wished to move to Australia immediately. Her own childhood memories of that country were weak, so she had specifically borrowed a book of photos from her local library and memorised every detail so that she could now transmit those images into her parents' minds.

Confident that her parents would not wake while the Stunners wore off naturally, Hermione then went through the house, every room, one by one, and removed pictures, papers, anything and everything with a reference to her name or face, shoving it all away into her old school bag, which she had extended in a similar way to her beaded bag.

Spell, after spell, after spell. Remember that X is breakable. Y should be made Impervious just in case.

At last, she stood in the middle of her bedroom and looked for one last time at the place where she had grown up, at her empty bookcase, empty cupboards and clean desk. Panting for breath, and physically hurt by how painful it was to remove herself from this house and her parents' lives, she summoned the last of her courage to change the colour of the walls and the linen on her bed to something neutral. The type of room used for infrequent guests.

Moving to her desk like one in a trance, she slung her backpack over her shoulder and grabbed her small beaded bag.

One more thing, just one more thing.

Dashing back to her parents' bedroom, Hermione was shaking with fear and sorrow and exhaustion as she took one final look at her parents' frozen features. She gently kissed her father, then her mother.

Please, just be safe...

'... and, after casting a few spells on the house, I Apparated directly to The Burrow a little after midnight.'

Hermione wiped away the tears that had started rolling down her cheeks halfway through her narration. She did not tell her parents that she had collapsed in the middle of the Weasley's orchard and cried until she had no more tears left to shed. Nor did she mention that she had given Molly Weasley the fright of her life when she was found there the next morning, curled up asleep on the grass.

It was Hermione's mother who broke the silence after the long narrative. Uncharacteristically, Alexandra did not focus on the person to whom she was speaking but stared intently at the wallpaper. When she spoke, her tone betrayed the fact that her mind was far away.

'When I woke up, it was very abrupt like coming to after anaesthesia. It was early morning, but even though I got up and started making breakfast, I felt very groggy. It was like I'd had a migraine the night before, and it was taking a bit longer to get going than usual. There was nothing alarming about how I was feeling; it just seemed like it wasn't my day. I couldn't for the life of me remember where I had left my keys the night before, and I had no clue why there was a half-eaten cheesecake in my fridge. It wasn't anyone's birthday that I could recall...'

Alexandra frowned, letting her words trail off as she struggled to remember that morning. After a moment, Tom took over.

'It was different for me. I woke up with an urgent need to start packing our things so that we could move to Australia. It annoyed me that I couldn't clearly account for how the first week of my time off from the clinic had passed, and it frustrated me even more when I realised that between your mother and I, we hadn't even decided what pieces of furniture to ship down and what to sell or put in storage. And we were leaving at the end of the month!'

Here, Tom paused, giving Alexandra just enough time to jump back in. This time, she addressed Hermione and Severus directly. It was obvious that she had no trouble recalling this part of the story.

'We had so much to do; we spent a lot of time at home packing our things and making arrangements for the move. The first time the outside world found us was quite a shock. Sarah Overton was the first to drop by. Do you remember Georgia Overton from prep, Hermione? Sarah is her mother.'

Hermione nodded, but she was at a loss as to why or how her mother was still in touch with the mother of a girl she had never been particularly friendly with all the way back in prep school. She and Georgia had played together once or twice, that was all. However, looking back, Hermione realised with a sinking feeling that it had always been Mrs Overton, not Georgia, who she had wanted to avoid. Even though Hermione had been young at the time, Georgia's mother had always struck her as odd. Mrs Overton had always somehow *known* when Hermione and Georgia made plans to tease Michael, Georgia's little brother, and once, Hermione had seen her friend's mother pick up the phone just before it started ringing. It had never occurred to Hermione until this moment that Mrs Overton's uncanny foresight might be exactly that a minor magical gift that might make her immune to the Muggle-Repelling Charms Hermione had left on the house.

Alexandra continued. *'Well, one morning at about the time your father and I had managed to turn half the house upside down putting things away, Sarah came knocking on the door about the book club we had talked about starting.'*

'Alex! How are you? I hope I'm not too early. I had a few errands to run this morning, but they didn't take as long as I expected.'

Monica felt slightly dizzy. Now that the woman was here at her house, she remembered that she had been expecting Sarah they had recently bumped into one another while shopping and, after a long chat over coffee about... well, about something, they had discovered a mutual interest in forming a book club. But why hadn't she remembered that Sarah was coming before today? And why on earth had the woman called her 'Alex'?

It seemed that Monica wasn't the only one who was slightly disoriented. 'Are you doing a spot of spring cleaning before you return to the clinic?' Sarah asked as they passed through yet another room littered with half-filled boxes on their way to the kitchen.

Monica felt awful. How could she have forgotten to tell Sarah about the move?

'I'm afraid it's a little more than spring cleaning. Wendell and I have decided to relocate to Australia. It's a dream we've always had.'

'Wendell?' If Sarah's eyes opened any wider, they would be in danger of falling out of her head.

'Yes, Wendell. My husband,' Monica repeated. She was uncertain what Sarah was thinking, but something seemed to have shocked the woman deeply.

'Oh, I'm so sorry. It's my mistake. I thought your husband's name was Tom. So, when are you flying off?'

For a moment, when Sarah said 'Tom', Monica was overcome by the same dizzy, light-headed sensation she had experienced when the woman had addressed her as 'Alex'. Again, it passed quickly. Sarah must just be terrible with names.

'Oh, we need to get all the packing done this week. We're flying off at the end of the month.'

'So soon? You aren't even waiting for Hermione to go back to school?'

Another unfamiliar name. However, unlike with 'Alex' and 'Tom', this one caused no dizziness, no sensation of a half-remembered person.

'I'm afraid I don't quite understand what you mean. Why should the school terms affect us? Wendell and I don't have a child.'

Sarah's surprised expression had turned into one of anger. 'What's the matter with you today, Alex? Do you think it's funny to say such a thing!'

Monica swelled with indignation. 'Before I answer your questions, Sarah, perhaps you might be so good as to tell me why you persist in calling me "Alex"? You know very well that my name is Monica!'

'...I can't even remember the last time I had been that angry or disliked a person so much. After a little more of the same, Sarah stormed out, and I remember thinking that we couldn't leave England fast enough! Alex tried to smile, but it turned out somewhat crooked.

Hermione felt sick. Like a heavy weight had dropped into her stomach and settled there. At the time, she had felt so in control, so supremely confident that her plan was foolproof. She hadn't thought twice about magically forging her parents' signatures on letters to the water and electricity companies to let them know that their services

would no longer be needed. She had organised locums for her parents' dental clinic indefinitely when she had found out that the legal process of selling it off would be too slow for her needs. She remembered feeling completely sure that her wards would keep out any unwanted visitors. She had trusted in those wards to keep her parents safe until they boarded the plane using the tickets she had bought them.

'Who,' she asked. 'Who else came to see you?'

Her father answered. 'The day after Mrs Overton had tea with your mother, Inspector Reed paid us a visit.'

Hermione cringed. Another figure from her childhood. Once, immediately after one of her more frightening displays of accidental magic at school, Hermione had run away. She hadn't gone any further than the playground just down the road, but she could remember wishing over and over again that the teachers wouldn't find her. If they couldn't find her, she wouldn't get in trouble.

Hours later, after countless men and women had walked straight past the swing she was sitting on without giving any hint they were aware of her presence, a young police officer had sat down directly in front of her and asked her to tell him what had happened. Since he had kind blue eyes and a cheeky smile, Hermione had had no qualms about pouring out her troubles to the kind man. After being a very good listener, Constable Reed had even given her some very good advice about finding ways to distract herself when she was upset or angry. He had then taken her home to her parents.

'That wouldn't happen to be Inspector Kyle Reed, by any chance?'

Hermione had almost forgotten that the professor was still in the room. He hadn't moved a muscle since her parents had started telling their story.

Her father raised an eyebrow in surprise. 'It was, actually. Do you know him?'

The professor shrugged. 'Reed is a wizard. Department of Magical Law Enforcement, I believe. I didn't realise they planted the odd new recruit into the Muggle police force.'

Alexandra smiled. 'I'm glad they did. I'm not sure how he found out about us, but he was very understanding during his visit. He patiently showed us records, various documents, even photo identification that marked us as the Grangers, and he never got frustrated when we kept insisting that we were Monica and Wendell Wilkins. He did seem a bit troubled when he left us, but he promised that he would get to the bottom of the confusion.'

Tom sniffed. 'I suppose he must have done some magic on us as well. By rights, we should have been at our wits end, hearing from a police officer we knew and trusted that our identities were a lie.'

'Oh, well, we muddled through. Tell Hermione and Severus about MI5, Tom.'

Tom gave Alexandra a long-suffering look.

'I wasn't about to forget to tell her about bloody MI5. Where was I? Well, after Reed's visit, we continued clearing the house and preparing for the move to Australia. We were in the middle of a discussion about the merits of the Gold Coast over Brisbane one evening when the doorbell rang very insistently...'

'Are you the man who currently calls himself Wendell Wilkins?'

Wendell looked the man up and down with a great deal of suspicion. The stranger was dressed neatly, in slacks and a plain white shirt, no tie. He appeared to be around thirty, physically nothing special, but with keen eyes and a serious expression.

'I am. Can I help you with something?'

At Wendell's admission, the stranger didn't wait to be invited in, but stepped authoritatively over the threshold and closed the door behind him.

'Is there anyone else in this house but yourself and your wife, Monica?'

'What is the meaning of this? Who are you?'

'My name is David Walker, and I am an employee of The Security Service. Your situation has come to our attention, and it is of great importance that I speak privately with you and your wife, Mr Wilkins. Perhaps we might all be able sit down over a cup of tea?'

'Who is it, Wendell? What do they want?' Monica called from the study.

'He says he's from MI5,' Wendell replied, doubt lacing his tone. 'Says he wants to talk to us.'

After a moment, Monica appeared, hurriedly trying to straighten her rumpled clothing.

'MI5, is it? What, didn't we warrant a visit from MI6?'

'David' if that really was his name sighed. Bravado gone, he almost looked hurt by the insinuation. In the light, he looked tired and slightly pathetic; there was a tea stain on his shirt, and his tie was too short.

'It isn't about importance, Mrs Wilkins. MI5 deals with internal matters, and MI6 with international ones. You and your husband are British citizens, and your problems, as far as I know, don't have any international connection. This matter falls within our jurisdiction.'

By now, Wendell and Monica were standing shoulder-to-shoulder, effectively blocking the hallway. 'David' seemed to realise that a change of tactics would be necessary.

'Please, I only want to sit down and have a chat with you both. Your situation came to our attention through a local police report, and shall we say, this is not the first case of identity confusion that we've dealt with recently.'

Monica nodded shortly, tugging her husband's arm when he seemed ill inclined to let 'David Walker' any further into their home.

'Come along, Wendell. It wouldn't hurt to hear the man out over a cup of tea.'

Fifteen minutes later, they were sitting around the kitchen table (such a rude, unexpected visitor did not warrant the living room), and Monica was pouring steaming hot tea into three cups.

'Are we being recorded?' she asked abruptly, stopping and looking out the kitchen windows as if expecting to see someone looking back at her.

David shifted uncomfortably. 'I was going to ask you before I recorded our interview. Do you mind?'

'We do mind,' Wendell stated emphatically. 'We will not be recorded. Now, what is it you came to tell us?'

Reluctantly, David fiddled with the pen which had been clipped to his shirt pocket and flipped open his notepad, opening it to a blank page.

'As I said before, I work for MI5. For a number of years, my department has been investigating similar incidents, all relating to sudden and dramatic loss of memory or identity confusion in British citizens, often with absurd results. I can't tell you much more than that, but only a couple of years ago, we found a campsite owner on the moors who could remember his name, but he had scattered memory loss for at least a year and a week that he couldn't account for at all. During the week he couldn't remember, his books showed an unprecedented rise in activity at his campsite. Nearly every available spot was taken, and he couldn't remember it at all.'

Their initial reluctance all but overcome, Wendell and Monica hung onto David's every word. Memory loss, change of identity, mysterious circumstances. Were they really part of some sort of conspiracy?

David continued, 'When your case came to our attention, I thought it might be pertinent to ask you a few questions. Do you think you could help me with this? Of course, in return, we would do our best to get to the bottom of this phenomenon and keep you informed of our progress.'

Monica and Wendell looked at each other. Of course, neither of them thought anything was wrong, but would it harm to answer a few questions? He must have heard about them from Kyle.

However, before they had made up their minds as to whether to trust David or not, there was a loud CRACK!, and all of a sudden, a tall man wearing a pinstriped dress materialised in the Wilkins' kitchen.

Waving a stick of wood at David, this new man muttered something indistinct, and David immediately slumped over the table, face first into his tea.

Clutching each other in fright, Wendell and Monica didn't say a word as the man turned to face them, a look of calm superiority on his face.

'Thank you for your assistance in the apprehension of David Walker. I work for another government agency, the specifics of which do not concern you. We have been after Mr Walker here for some time.'

'What are you?' Monica sounded half-strangled.

Irritation passed over his face, quickly suppressed. 'Not that you need to know, but my name is Ulysses Redmond. With half of tonight's mission complete, it is my unfortunate duty that I require your active assistance with the other half. You both have a choice. Either you come with me of your own accord, or I do to you what I just did to Walker there, and you come with me whether you like it or not. Which shall it be?'

'... he led us to his car, parked outside next to Walker's, and drove us to a small house just twenty minutes away. We have absolutely no recollection of what happened after we entered the house. The next thing we both remember is waking up in the living room, Tom and Alexandra Granger once more, with no sign that David Walker had ever been there with us. The only thing left of our experiences at the strange house was a memory of Ulysses Redmond's voice telling us that going to Australia was a very good idea and to 'make the necessary arrangements with all haste'. Once we managed to get our thoughts back in order, we put our affairs in the hands of the family solicitor and changed our plane tickets to the first flight out to Sydney.'

Tom frowned, remembering the confusion and discomfort of that time. He looked directly at Hermione as he drew in a long breath and added, 'We realised that it was you who had done those things to our memories originally, but we never found out what Ulysses took away, or why any of it was necessary, until today.'

'That man sounds like Mr Roberts,' Hermione whispered to herself.

'What did you say, dear?' Alexandra asked, her eyes shining with unshed tears as she struggled to pull herself out of the bad memories.

'The man David Walker referred to, the campsite owner, Mr Roberts. He was Obliviated several times during the Quidditch World Cup.' Hermione couldn't keep the horror from her voice. She should have known, she should have foreseen the consequences. Magic was not a toy, it was power, it was responsibility, and she had, despite the advantage of growing up in a Muggle household, managed to forget that important fact.

The sound of the professor clearing his throat softly was enough to break all three Grangers out of their respective reveries. 'I believe that I can shed a very small amount of light on what happened to you while under the care of Ulysses Redmond.'

He took their silence as permission to go on.

'When I was at Hogwarts, Ulysses was a year or two above me in Ravenclaw. After gaining Outstandings in several of his NEWTs, he entered the Ministry of Magic, originally as an Obliviator. However, I remember hearing through the grapevine that, not long after I started teaching at Hogwarts, he was promoted to the Department of Mysteries. Since he was an Unspeakable, I have absolutely no idea what he did after that time.'

'But don't Unspeakables only concern themselves with all the obscure subjects in the Department of Mysteries like the brains and time and such? Surely they don't routinely break into people's houses and restore their memories!' Hermione panicked at the thought that her parents had come to the attention of the Ministry of Magic. That had been exactly the outcome that she had hoped to avoid.

Severus glared at her. 'I wasn't finished. As I was saying, he was an Unspeakable for many years, and I didn't hear again of him until after the Dark Lord had taken over the Ministry. As your parents may have gathered from his attitude and appearance, the Redmonds are an old wizarding family; most of its members have been Sorted into Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. He was never a supporter of You Know Who, but he was safe under the new regime. Based on certain remarks Lucius Malfoy let fall at times, Ulysses was certainly intelligent and influential enough to keep a very tight grip on whatever department he did, and continues to lead, at the Ministry. I believe he appeared to comply with the new regime, and he never really attracted much notice because, ultimately, no one ever had any idea what he and his co-workers did. Based on your story, I would guess that, with his background in Obliviation and the Mysteries, he now leads a wizarding equivalent of MI5 and that his duties include keeping an eye on the activities of similar Muggle organisations.'

Hermione rolled this idea back and forth in her mind. It was possible that there was such a thing as a wizarding MI5, but its role must be narrower. After all, the nature of magical administration was all about keeping the Muggles in the dark. Security was a huge part of what several Ministry departments worked on. However, before she could mention that, she wanted another question answered.

'So, this Ulysses essentially went along with Voldemort while he was in power?'

The professor flinched. Hermione supposed that despite what Professor Dumbledore had always said, using the name was probably never going to be *en vogue* among Tom Riddle's former associates.

'Redmond used his particular situation and position to his advantage to continue his work, whatever that is. There's a difference.'

'If he was so concerned with maintaining his position, why did he let my parents go?'

'You should let Redmond's actions speak for him, Miss Granger,' the professor replied softly. His voice was still even, but his gaze intense as he fixed it on her. 'Just as you chose your path, others chose theirs based on what they believed and what options were available to them at the time. Perhaps you would not have done the same in Redmond's position, but you cannot deny that Redmond specifically made sure to tell your parents to leave. At his own risk, I might add, had your parents been found and their memories searched.'

His explanation was met with silence until Tom ventured, 'Well, is it at all possible that we might be able to regain the memories Ulysses took from us?'

Severus looked troubled. 'Perhaps. There may be a way to reverse the spell, but I couldn't help you with it. Without knowing what Redmond did, there is a far greater chance that anything I tried would damage your memory, perhaps permanently.'

Tom nodded. He seemed to have expected nothing else.

Severus took advantage of the following lull in their conversation to address Alexandra. 'Today has been rather tiring, so if you have no further questions at this stage, I might go to bed.' That was obviously the truth; his eyes were red rimmed and he looked pale, even for him.

'Of course, Severus! You don't mind if I call you that, do you? "Mr Snape" just seems so formal,' Alexandra said quickly. 'You have everything you need, don't you? I think I forgot to mention that Tom and I are both on holidays at the moment, so how about we talk about any plans for the rest of your stay over breakfast tomorrow?'

Hermione could see that the professor's smile was rather strained.

'Of course. Until tomorrow.'

Having gone far above and beyond his normal endurance of small talk, he wasted no more time or energy before sweeping out of the living room and up into the house. Hermione would have dearly loved to do the same. She felt like she had been through the wringer at least twice today, but she recognised that although the professor might well be very tired, he had also left them so that they could sort things out as a family.

'I wish I could say that I didn't realise how hard things would be for you after what I did, but I honestly thought that I acted for the best.' Since Hermione was all out of tears, her confession came out rather flat, but her distress almost choked her as she moved to sit on the floor near her mother and father.

Alexandra stroked her daughter's hair, tucking a few loose strands behind Hermione's ear. 'It's over now. What we've haven't been able to understand, though, is why you didn't simply explain the situation to us. We could have found a solution together. We...'

Alexandra seemed to falter for a second but visibly steeled herself to say the next part.

'...we do understand that because of who and what you are, Dad and I are no longer the people you most often turn to for guidance in your life, but we've always encouraged you to share things about your new world with us, and we've really tried to keep up with it all, as far as possible. I suppose what is hardest for us to grasp is why, despite all our effort, when it came down to it, you chose to treat us as ignorant Muggles, to be changed and sent away at your will.'

Her mother's disappointed words cut deeply. She had no excuse. None that would hold up for more than a minute, anyway.

Despite how difficult it had seemed at the time to run away with Harry and Ron, Hermione now knew that there was nothing more painful than being held accountable for her actions by those she loved and being found wanting. Despite the fact that their ordeal had ended well, despite the fact that her parents were safe and happy and they still clearly loved her, she knew that she would forever regret having broken their trust in her.

Hermione apologised to her parents once more. But she knew that the words themselves would make no difference. They had already forgiven her as fully as they could, but she had no answer that would assuage their need to understand.

When she made her way up the stairs later, Hermione was surprised to see that the professor was still awake, leaning against his doorway, waiting for her.

'What you did for your parents was very brave,' he said quietly, his eyes fixed on hers. 'I mean that as the highest praise I can give a Gryffindor.'

At this point, it was all Hermione could do not to scream with frustration.

'How can you say that?' she asked flatly. 'You heard what happened. What I did.'

...and how badly I failed...

'I did. And I think you were a very young woman with an impossible burden on your shoulders and very little time to find a solution. I am not saying that you were right but merely that you should not judge yourself so harshly.'

The words were close enough to what Hermione so badly wanted to hear that she allowed them to soothe her. However, after a moment she looked at him suspiciously. 'Why are you bothering to tell me this?'

He looked up and met her eyes. Used to the intensity of his dark eyes, Hermione did not look away, but searched his features for any meaning beyond his words.

'Perhaps because I am well acquainted with the consequences of allowing such guilt to fester.' Without another word, he gently pushed her forward into her room and softly closed the door behind her.

Hermione turned around and stared at her door for a moment, trying to come to terms with what had just happened.

Perhaps, in time, she might be able to acknowledge that he was right.

AN: My apologies that this chapter took so long to post. It took a long time to write and even longer to edit. Many thanks to my beta, JunoMagic.

Chapter 8: But Some Things Remain the Same

Chapter 9 of 10

Hermione had always assumed that if the war hadn't defeated her, nothing could. Constantly going in and out of St Mungo's as a patient with a rare autoimmune disease was not how she would have chosen to spend the six months after Voldemort's fall.

Tom Granger was keeping a close eye on his daughter since she had returned home a week ago. He would be fooling himself if he tried to pretend that he wasn't worried about her.

At first, he had been concerned when she had turned up on their doorstep with a man much older than she was... and then immensely relieved when it had turned out to be not like *that*. This wasn't to say that he didn't trust his daughter's judgement in choosing her friends. But it would be just like Hermione to choose a partner who in her opinion needed to be 'helped' or 'fixed'.

Like mother, like daughter...

Alexandra's conservative, slightly snobbish parents her mother in particular had not approved of their daughter marrying a cabinet maker's son. Then again, they hadn't really approved of her wanting to become a dentist, either. If she hadn't wanted to follow her father and brother into the law, the least she could have done was become a *real* doctor, a nice family GP and not a plumber for other people's mouths, dealing with nasty things like fillings, extractions and plaque. Dentistry had been Alexandra Fairfax's rebellion, and at university, she had met Tom Granger. At the time, Tom had been very much one of the lads, albeit that unlike most of their peers, he received a bursary. She had seen the heart beneath the unpolished surface and leapt at the chance to clean him up. Almost thirty years later, she had more or less succeeded. At least on the surface.

'What are Harry and Ron up to these days? Are you three as close as you used to be?' Alexandra asked one morning at breakfast.

'Harry and Ron are both working for the Ministry as Aurors. But as far as I know, Ron plans to quit eventually and help George at the joke shop the twins set up after leaving school.'

'The Ministry? I remember that Molly was so proud when one of her older sons got a job at the Ministry. Did Harry and Ron finish school?'

Tom could almost see Hermione roll her eyes even through his newspaper.

'No, Mum. Not many students from my year went back to Hogwarts to finish their NEWTs. The Ministry almost begged Harry and Ron to join them, and I heard that even St Mungo's relaxed their normal entry requirements for a couple of the girls in Ravenclaw who helped Madam Pomfrey a lot during their last year.'

'So, what do you think you'll do now that you're feeling better?'

'I'm not better, Mum. I still can't do magic most of the time.'

Alexandra pushed a little bit further. 'Well, what would you like to do when your magic comes back?'

Hermione frowned. 'I don't know. I thought I was about to spend the next few months of my life searching for you and Dad. I never thought I'd find you so quickly.'

'Are you still interested in campaigning for the rights of magical creatures, or do you think you'd prefer to join your friends at the Ministry?'

'Neither? Can you please leave it alone, Mum? You're beginning to sound just like Professor McGonagall.'

Although Tom could sense that his wife was absolutely itching to dig deeper and get to the bottom of Hermione's reluctance to talk about the future, Alexandra held her tongue and decided to bide her time.

Thinking about their guest, Tom was forced to acknowledge a very healthy respect for Severus Snape. Not just on the basis of what Hermione had told them about him being a hero and all that but because he was a good sort of bloke. He wasn't the easiest of houseguests; he was occasionally awkward about ordinary pleasantries and liked to keep to his room, but he was always very helpful with chores and using magic to make their lives a bit easier when he could. However, what really made Snape a good man in Tom's eyes was the patience and dedication with which he assisted Hermione.

The first time Tom had seen one of their magic sessions, he had been quite alarmed that the school he had sent his daughter to for her secondary education had seen fit to inflict this man on eleven-year-olds.

Severus had been seated in a comfortable chair in the back garden, one in which Alexandra often used to read when it got cooler in the afternoons. Hermione had been standing in the middle of the little patch of grass that passed for a 'lawn' at their place, waving her wand at various harmless pieces of garden debris that had fallen from the trees at the edges of the garden. Observing Severus' tense stance and deep frown, Tom had been certain that the man was doing nothing but taunt and criticise Hermione.

'Is that how you hold your wand? Do not waste my time by forcing me to repeat elementary wand use lessons, Miss Granger.'

'You don't have to help me, you know,' Hermione had shot back. 'I can do the exercises you've described to me very well by myself.'

'Very well, do the first one. Levitate that stick for three minutes.'

After twenty minutes of the stick half-heartedly picking itself off the ground before dropping again, even Tom was beginning to wonder what end the exercise was supposed to achieve when Hermione really lost her temper.

At her enraged half-snarl, half-shriek, the stick she had been trying to levitate burst into a fireball of blue flames, a fire far larger than the stick should reasonably have been able to provide the fuel for. However, before Tom could even think about running out the kitchen door with the fire extinguisher, Severus had wordlessly whipped his own wand out and contained the fire within a sort of bubble he cast around it.

The glare Severus had shot in Hermione's direction after the fire had burned itself out was truly chilling. 'That is enough for today, I think,' he had said coldly. 'Until you can prove to me that you possess the control over both your magic and your emotions not to burn down your parents' home and worldly possessions, I believe I will continue to supervise your exercises. Your wand?' He had held out his hand, and even from his vantage point in the kitchen, Tom had seen that his expression brooked no disobedience.

Hermione had thrust her wand in his outstretched hand without a single word of complaint. After she had stormed inside and gone to her room to sulk in peace, Tom had noticed that Severus had sat outside for a long time playing with Hermione's wand, occasionally giving it an experimental wave himself and shaking his head.

He had looked so focused, as if he was trying to solve a puzzle and the last step, before it all fell into place, was just beyond his reach. After returning to the house, Severus had briefly informed Tom that he was going out for a spot of shopping in the magical world. He had seemed restless; Tom got a strong impression that Hermione's teacher was just as frustrated as she was.

That very afternoon while Severus had been gone, Tom had overheard Hermione approach Alexandra and ask about working in the Muggle world. Perhaps she could be a receptionist at the new clinic? Alexandra hesitated, not really giving an answer either way. They already had enough receptionists, and the ones they had were mostly bilingual to best serve the ethnically diverse clientele of their practice in Sydney's west. Later in the evening, Alexandra had admitted to her husband that she wasn't sure what to do about Hermione's idea that she could rejoin the Muggle world.

Tom himself was in two minds about it.

On the one hand, it would be wonderful to have his daughter back, doing things he knew how to teach her. However, the other side of that coin was that Hermione ~~was~~ different. She had taken a very permanent step into a new world the moment she had opened her Hogwarts letter. She should be doing fantastic things like making letters fly and blowing things up, not answering phone calls and scheduling appointments.

It might be different if she had any skills that would enable her to undertake a more stimulating occupation in the Muggle world, but Hermione didn't always realise how very magical she had become over the last seven years. It was simply part of her. One minute, she'd be telling her mother that she wanted to learn to cook the ordinary way, but in the next breath she would be engaging in a heated debate with Severus about what herbs and goodness knew what other exotic substances would be best to deter the strange pixies in the garden. Eventually, unable to really come to any satisfactory conclusion about how they could help, Tom and Alexandra had determined that they would not talk about the future until Hermione did, but that they would try to dissuade her from denying her magic and burying herself in a menial Muggle job, if possible.

Dissuading Hermione, once she had made up her mind on something, proved as difficult as it had been when she was five and she had wanted to wear the pink dress to shops, not the yellow one. When Hermione had brought up the receptionist idea again over breakfast one morning and Alexandra had gently explained that this would not be possible, Hermione hadn't protested, but she had withdrawn into herself and hadn't talked to her parents again until dinner time.

By mid-week, Hermione obviously made some progress in regaining her magic. Tom watched as she successfully managed to keep the stick floating in the air for three, four, five minutes, and her radiant smile when she succeeded. But he also witnessed how her face fell the minute the feather dropped or combusted. In spite of her magical progress, however, Hermione did not stop badgering her parents about re-entering the Muggle world in various ways and guises.

'Dad, can you teach me to drive?'

'You want to learn to drive a car?'

She nodded.

Tom was stumped. 'But that time you went to the Weasley's, you told me that you could just teleport there! Why would you want to drive if you can teleport?'

'It's not teleportation, Dad, it's called Apparation, and right now I'm not supposed to do it. I've lost my magic, remember?'

'But, you will be able to do it again, won't you?' Tom asked slowly. He wasn't against teaching her to drive. Far from it, in fact, but he wanted to know if her heart was really in it, or whether it was just another way that she had found to wilfully ignore her magic. 'I don't really know how it works down here, but I know that I can't just teach you to drive if you don't have a learner's licence; I see those yellow L-plates on people's cars everywhere. Does the Muggle government even know you're here?'

She shrugged. 'I have a magical ID they'll accept. So, if I get the licence, you'll teach me to drive?'

Tom grunted. Her flippant tone as she ensured him that the authorities would accept her unusual identification card rubbed him the wrong way. He had forgiven his daughter, but he had by no means forgotten just what magic could make Muggles accept. 'Make some enquiries into whether you can *legitimately* get a licence, and we'll talk about it then.'

Despite the constant small setbacks, it only became clear that Hermione's magical progress came at a price when, one morning, Hermione failed to make it downstairs for breakfast. Since their daughter was usually a morning person, Alexandra went upstairs at about half nine to see what was the matter. Her panicked shouting brought Tom up the stairs at a run.

'Tom! Come quick! Hermione's not well!'

Running up the stairs as fast as he could, Tom understood Alexandra's distress when he saw Hermione. She was lying in bed, but from the expression on her face, even turning her head to look at her father was excruciatingly painful. Tears ran down her face, and slight tremors shuddered through her body every few moments.

'What can we do for you, darling? Would taking your medicine early help?'

Hermione tried to shake her head but winced in pain halfway through the small movement. Alexandra was at a loss. She turned to her husband.

'She says she's feeling really hot, Tom, but I touched her forehead, and I can't feel anything unusual. Severus isn't back yet.'

As Alexandra moved away, Tom gently touched his hand to his daughter's forehead. He, too, couldn't feel anything unusual, but he kept his hand there in the hope that Hermione might derive some comfort from it.

'Dad?' She was practically whispering. 'Where's Professor Snape?'

Snape had gone to visit a friend in town immediately after breakfast. Said he'd only be gone for half an hour.

That had been an hour ago.

Just at that moment, all three Grangers heard the door open downstairs.

'Is anyone home?'

Alexandra was out on the landing as soon as she heard the key scrape in the lock. 'Severus? Is that you? Hermione's not well. We don't know what to do.'

In no time at all, Severus was kneeling at Hermione's bedside while Alexandra and Tom looked on. While Tom stayed quiet, observing, Alexandra babbled on about everything she had seen since she went up to check on Hermione fifteen minutes ago.

'...Said she was hot, but neither Tom or I could feel any heat. If anything, she's a bit cool to the touch given how warm it is up here, and she says taking her medicine won't do a thing. Is there anyone else we could ask for help? A magical doctor, perhaps?'

'I see,' Snape murmured. He had initially pulled his wand out, but now he carefully touched the back of his hand to Hermione's forehead, immediately pulling away as though stung.

'Are you all right? What did you feel?' Alexandra asked.

Another time, Tom might have been amused at his wife's clear conflict between hoping that her guest was unharmed and wanting to know what was wrong with her daughter *now*.

Severus ignored her. He had started waving his wand, muttering unintelligible things under his breath. After what felt like an age, he put his wand away and addressed Hermione.

'I did not think that the exercises were draining you so quickly.'

It was not a question.

Hermione's voice, still very soft, was dull as she explained. 'I went to the motor registry with Mum yesterday afternoon and had to Confund the woman so that she would register me for a driver's licence. Turns out there's a requirement that you have to have been here six months to apply.'

'You have another wand?' Snape's tone was sharp now, but Tom took no issue with it. He had watched his daughter hand her wand back to her teacher after every magic practice session this week, ostensibly for her own good so that she wouldn't be tempted to practice magic without supervision before she was ready. On her own head be it

if she had broken the rules which were supposed to protect her.

Surprisingly, Hermione smiled slightly in response. 'No, I did it wandless.'

Whatever Hermione's thoughts on this accomplishment, Snape looked far from impressed. In fact, Tom rather thought that the only thing stopping the man still very much a schoolmaster in manner, no matter what he said about having given it up from giving his temper free rein was the fact that her parents were in the room and so he was trying very, very hard to be civil. A few moments later, after Severus had managed to smooth the glare on his face, though his jaw was still rather tightly set, he explained the situation to Tom and Alexandra.

'It appears that Hermione's illness has flared up as a result of a completely unnecessary use of advanced magic yesterday afternoon. While she shows the same symptoms of magical exhaustion that I saw in her the last time she did such a foolish thing, she is also running a magical fever. I should call on a Healer to check on her and confirm my assessment.'

Without another word, he turned on his heel. The moment he was outside the room, he turned on the spot and disappeared with a small ~~pop~~ *pop!*

All things considered, Tom was in the mood to be rather forgiving of Severus' curtness.

Enough was enough.

Chronically ill or not, the moment Hermione was feeling well enough to go about her business as usual, she would be hearing a few choice words from her father, too.

Several hours later, after John Sanders had very kindly come to check on Hermione and prescribed her a couple of potions to boost her strength, Severus collapsed back into one of the Granger's garden chairs with a groan. He hadn't brewed the potions himself, trusting John's word that those sold by an apothecary in the Lowest Basement were of excellent quality, but he still felt completely drained.

What a day.

As much as he had been disinclined to meet with Julius Hardwicke, the friend of John's who had sent him the letter, Severus thanked Merlin, Morgana and every great wizard and witch he could think of that he had agreed. Julius had turned out to be as genuine and unthreatening as his letter, even if it had taken Severus a good three-quarters of an hour to relax in the older man's company. It turned out that while Julius had asked a few rather abstract political questions about the war and his friends in England who had been involved in it, halfway through their time together, Julius had revealed that he had been to school with Severus' mother and spoken fondly of his school days and the work he was doing at the university for the rest of the meeting.

Severus exhaled slowly. If nothing else, that small favour had also made it easier to summon John to check on Hermione. The Grangers had been very helpful there. As soon as Alexandra had grasped the situation, she had insisted that John and his wife come around for dinner the next week. The date was set for Tuesday.

'We almost called her Elizabeth Rose.'

Severus almost jumped out of his skin when he heard Tom's voice.

'What?'

'Hermione. Before she was born, Alexandra had picked out a name. She was going to be Elizabeth Rose Granger.'

Severus realised that he must have inadvertently pulled a face when Tom chuckled.

'Yes, it wouldn't have suited her, would it?'

Severus nodded, relaxing back into his chair as Tom did the same on the other one. The other man obviously had something to say, and Severus supposed that listening was the least he could do.

After a few moments, during which both men just lay in the shade and stared at clouds, sure enough, Tom continued. 'Point is, as soon as we met Hermione properly, we knew that she wasn't going to be an Elizabeth, or a Louisa, or a Susan.'

Severus had half a mind to point out that not all witches born of magical families were Mildreds and Etheldredas, but he understood what Tom meant. Hermione was not the daughter the Grangers had expected, and from the start, they had obviously made a real effort to try to embrace that.

'We did our best when she was a child, despite all the rather odd things she did when she was given anything besides books to play with it was almost a relief to us when she got her Hogwarts letter. Magic, once we believed in it, seemed to be a perfect explanation for it all, and judging by the letters she sent home, she loved every minute she spent at that school. For once in her life, she was where she belonged. And even if there were... well, difficulties for her fitting in sometimes, she really liked all the things she was learning and seemed to really excel.'

Severus found himself nodding along, quite sure he knew where this was going. It was something he had been thinking a lot about himself, lately.

'The problem is, now that Hermione is back here with us and she's having problems with her magic, she seems to actually want to turn herself into a Muggle. Alex and I are trying to be supportive, but we just... We are not in a position, I suppose, to get her to see reason and give her a push back into the wizarding world. We can't even have a conversation on any magical topic without revealing our glaring ignorance. I'm not asking for your help, as such; you've already helped us so much by bringing her here and doing those lessons with her. It's just that we're at our wits end about what to do with her from here. I know she's an adult now and can making her own decisions, but she seems to have lost her way a bit... It's hard that we can't even help point her in the right direction...' Tom trailed off, obviously unsure what exactly he was asking.

'And you wish you didn't have to ask me for advice, but you don't really have a choice,' Severus finished quietly.

Both men sat in silence for a long moment after that Tom rather glum and Severus wondering whether the idea he had been toying with might just work...

He decided that it was worth a try.

'As it happens, I do have an idea.'

'Where are we?'

Hermione puffed a little as she struggled to keep up with Professor Snape's long-legged stride. He had insisted that she accompany him to a meeting today with whom he had termed 'an associate'. She had a strong suspicion that her parents were in on his plan as well. Her mother had made a point of buying her a new blouse and skirt for this meeting 'so at least you won't look like you've been traipsing around the countryside for a year, sweetheart'.

At exactly ten minutes to eleven on the morning of this mysterious meeting, Severus Apparated them both into the middle of a dense a clump of bushes. He appeared totally unconcerned as he brushed the leaves off their clothes with a spell before pulling Hermione out through the bushes to a small fountain, then further down a path to the edge of a very wide, sweeping driveway. When she saw what lay at the end of the road, Hermione's mouth opened in a small 'o' of surprise.

Whereas most of the greenery that she had seen in Australia looked a bit washed out to her eyes, used as she was to the lush English countryside, rising up before her

was an immaculately kept lawn, split exactly in two by a wide path. However, what really intrigued Hermione was what lay at the end of that lawn.

A castle.

Not a castle of the Hogwarts variety; it was much smaller and more regular in shape. In truth, it probably wasn't even a castle. It was, however, a big Tudor Gothic-style building, made of huge blocks of golden sandstone. The whole place was rather eerily quiet, Hermione thought, looking around to find clues as to whom this building belonged to.

Jogging a bit to catch up with the professor, Hermione pulled on his sleeve.

'Where are we?'

'The University of Sydney.'

'A Muggle university? Where are all the students? Whom are we here to see?'

'I believe the students are off enjoying their summer holidays, so wherever they are, it isn't here. As for whom we are here to see, his name is Professor Hardwicke, and we actually have to Apparate directly to his study. I merely brought you this way because I thought you would appreciate a look at the buildings. Think of it as a small reminder of home.'

While they had been talking, they had made their way across the lawn and into one of the blessedly cool stone archways. The sun in this part of the world was really very harsh.

Just as she caught a glimpse of more grass on the other side of the arch, in the middle what looked like shady cloisters, Hermione found herself held tightly as Severus promptly Apparated them both to meet Professor Hardwicke.

'Welcome!'

Hermione blinked and struggled against a strong urge to cover her ears.

The man who greeted them did not speak particularly loudly, but Hermione's skull was ringing with the sound of bells clanging very nearby. Clanging was perhaps too strong a word. Another person might have described it as melodic, well-timed chiming, but still, it seemed to come from all around them, echoing off the walls in such a way that every new *ring!* was piercing.

'Ah, the bells are a bit much, aren't they? They just started. I forgot that I would have visitors today. I quite like the sound, but those not accustomed to them often find them too loud.'

The man waved his wand and the room fell quiet.

'Severus! Welcome back, my good fellow. And this must be Miss Hermione Granger! Very pleased to meet you. I am Professor Julius Hardwicke. As no doubt Severus told you, I teach Magical History and Wizarding Relations here at the university. Please, take a seat while I get a pot of tea on the boil.'

Hermione smiled at this warm welcome. Her hand was firmly grasped as she was ushered forward to one of the chairs in front of Professor Hardwicke's desk. It was a very odd-shaped room, now that she was at leisure to examine it. The study was triangular and filled with very large rolls of parchment. Maps, perhaps.

Her mind whirled with questions. The first one that popped out was, 'I didn't realise that wizards could go to university.' When both men turned to look at her, she blushed and tried to explain. 'University wasn't something we discussed during career interviews at Hogwarts. I was under the impression that for the vast majority of magical professions, training happens on the job.'

It was Professor Hardwicke who answered. 'Ah, you're right of course, my dear. Most witches and wizards don't bother with university. OWLs are ordinary wizarding level, after all, and everything beyond that is just icing on the cake.'

Why he was smiling so broadly, Hermione couldn't say.

'Professor Hardwicke and his associates take only a handful of students every year,' Severus explained. He picked a crystal paperweight off Hardwicke's desk and peered at it intently. In Hermione's opinion, he wasn't doing a very good impression of casual indifference, but she was more interested in why he was trying. He continued, 'A few students study by correspondence, but for the most part, the university is simply a research hub for a variety of independent projects. The Australian Ministry regularly consults with the various academics who study here. It's not dissimilar to Oxbridge back home.'

Hermione's eyes bulged as she took in this new information. 'They teach magic at Oxford and Cambridge?'

Surely he was having her on.

Professor Hardwicke shook his head. 'Not Oxford *and* Cambridge, Miss Granger. Despite the problems I hear you've been having lately, you aren't a Muggle. Witches and wizards study at Oxbridge.' He cleared his throat rather awkwardly. 'Of course, I didn't get in, so I can't tell you much about it...'

At the reference to her 'problems', Hermione's confidence shrank. Smaller and smaller, she almost wished she hadn't asked.

'...But then, other rumours say the campus is situated in Wales, so no one except the scholars really knows...'

Why *had* she asked? She had no hope of getting in. Not anymore.

Professor Hardwicke noticed her withdrawal. 'Come now, my girl! Not going straight up to Oxbridge isn't the end of the world, and you needn't be ashamed of your illness, you know. Courage in adversity! Weren't you a Gryffindor?'

Hermione tried her utmost not to look pathetic and woeful. She didn't need to try too hard. Hardwicke was now pacing around the room, still speaking.

'As Severus might have told you, I was quite anxious to meet you when I heard that you were here, Hermione. I've heard so much about you from my friend John Sanders. Now, tell me, what do you plan to do while you are here in Sydney?'

Hermione blinked. 'I'm afraid I don't really have a plan, Professor.'

As he turned to face her, Hardwicke's eyebrows twitched with excitement. Hermione hated the fact that whatever he was leading up to, she would have to disappoint him. She thought she may as well try to head him off before he even got to the point. 'I don't know what you've been told about me, Professor, but since my illness...' Even speaking the words made her chest constrict in sadness and shame. '... Since my illness, I haven't really been fit to live in the magical world. I couldn't even have come here today if Professor Snape hadn't brought me Side-Along.'

Hardwicke frowned, but it appeared to be a frown of deep thought rather than defeat. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, obviously searching for the right words.

Severus chose this time to cut in. 'I have spoken to Professor Hardwicke about your condition.' In stark contrast to the kindly Hardwicke, he was more than usually curt. 'We

believe that with a few alterations to your coursework and schedule, there is no reason why you could not study here. As a student at the university, you could also gain access to the vast array of student services. Professor Hardwicke has a few colleagues who may be able to help you regain control over your magic.'

Hardwicke's frown cleared. He nodded enthusiastically. 'Oh, yes. I haven't actually spoken to anyone yet, but Professor Chang in the East Asian Magics department is very knowledgeable in magical energy blocks, and he loves a challenge. It's all very difficult to understand what he does using the classic Greco-Roman magical theory we were taught,' he shrugged, 'but I can't deny that whatever it is seems to work for many people.'

Hermione struggled to breathe. She was torn between outrage that they had so obviously concocted this plan without consulting her and ecstatic joy that *they* had thought of a plan that would allow her to study. At a university!

She could already see so many advantages to studying in Australia. No one here seemed to know who she was. No one she met had any expectations regarding her ability or intellect. Studying magic, even if it was only theory, would also give her something to do while her parents were at work. Hermione also knew that just being able to tell herself and her friends back home that she was doing *something* in Australia would make her feel better. Almost normal. She hadn't wanted to go back to Hogwarts; the memories of the battle were still too fresh. She wasn't even sure that she wanted to visit, let alone live in the castle again, but here was a chance for something similar, yet completely different, at the same time. If only there weren't also many disadvantages to studying abroad...

She refused to look at either man but concentrated very hard on her hands tightly clasped in her lap. 'Thank you for all your trouble, but I don't think I can study here,' she stated quietly. 'Even if you can get around the fact that I can't really use magic right now, I never sat my NEWTs, so I'm not even theoretically proficient in a lot of subjects, and I'd need to talk to my parents about the fees...'

She was interrupted by Snape.

'Miss Granger, we could spend hours here discussing the details, but suffice it to say that none of those things are as insurmountable a problem as you seem to think. The question is, do you *want* to take up Professor Hardwicke's kind offer?'

His challenging tone caused Hermione to bristle with indignation. Was he trying to guilt her into acceptance her by stressing the kindness of Professor Hardwicke's offer? Why hadn't he warned her that this was coming?

She hands clenched tightly in her lap. None of this had been her idea, but now that it had fallen her way, this decision ~~was~~^{was} hers. Her life, her choice. And she was not going to sit and let an intimidating ex-teacher back her into a corner!

Hermione was just about to let loose a scathing retort when she looked up and saw Hardwicke's expression. The man looked totally bewildered ~~by~~^{by} her surprise and discomfort. No doubt he had expected her to be a bit more prepared to hear his kind offer. In an obvious attempt to close this gap in expectations, he took advantage of Hermione's pause to ask a question of his own.

'Is there anything at all you would especially like to study with us while you are here in Sydney, Hermione? When I spoke to Severus a few days ago, he gave me the impression that you enjoyed learning, but he seemed quite concerned that you hadn't shown interest in any particular topic lately. We would love to have you here, you know. Even if only for a little while.'

Successfully distracted from her anger at being made to feel manipulated and foolish in her ignorance, Hermione processed the information that she had been given. Professor Snape wouldn't lie, so it really must be possible for her to study here, if she so wished.

Did she wish to?

A slow smile spread over her face.

'If you could give me an idea of the courses I would be able to take, Professor Hardwicke, I would like to think it over a little before accepting. Perhaps we could meet again in a week's time? Will that leave long enough to make any preparations before term starts? I'm sure Professor Snape wouldn't mind bringing me back here.'

Even before she had finished speaking, Hermione felt something deep within her settle into place. It wasn't her magic, exactly, but she felt more alive, more in control, and more powerful than she had been since the beginning of her illness. And, as soon as they were out of earshot of Hardwicke's study, along with conveying her gratitude, she was going to give a certain meddling, utterly infuriating ex-professor a piece of her mind.

AN: Thank you for all your kind comments I apologise for the delay in getting the chapters up. Many thanks also to my beta, Juno Magic.

Epilogue

Chapter 10 of 10

Hermione had always assumed that if the war hadn't defeated her, nothing could. Constantly going in and out of St Mungo's as a patient with a rare autoimmune disease was not how she would have chosen to spend the six months after Voldemort's fall.

March, 1999

Severus sat in one of the stone arches of the Sydney University Quadrangle and idly admired how the afternoon sunlight fragmented through a crystal paperweight. It was the same paperweight he had picked up in Julius Harwicke's study only a few weeks before. After Julius had learnt why the younger man was so fascinated by it, he had laughed and begged Severus to keep it. It represented a choice, he'd said.

To Severus' surprise, there really had been choices, and he hadn't even had to look for them. Roughly a week after Hermione had started attending classes in March, Severus had been approached by one of the university's many academics when he Apparated into one of the classrooms to take Hermione home (all rooms used for practicing magic were only accessible by Apparation). Apparently, Hermione had mentioned to her tutor that she knew someone with potions experience, and before Severus knew it, he had been ushered in to fill a gap in one of the university's research teams. The position had opened up because a witch was going on maternity leave, and it seemed that the university had had trouble finding a replacement who didn't mind working on a contract for three months. Cue unemployed former school teacher.

Across the lawn, adjacent to the arch Severus had chosen to lounge in, a small group of students wandered out of one of the old building's many corridors. He could hear

them chatter about what they were going to do during the upcoming weekend. One boy seemed to be taking a quick poll to see who wanted to have a drink with him at Manning Bar before going home. Severus' mood lifted when he saw a girl with bushy brown hair among them.

Before he had taken the research position, Hermione had found excuses for him to stay just a bit longer in Sydney every time he had mentioned leaving. Minerva had been right; Hermione was no longer the same girl she had been at Hogwarts. Although the know-it-all, bossy side of her personality had begun to reassert itself with a vengeance almost immediately after their first meeting with Julius, she still had bouts of insecurity and vulnerability. She would Apparate herself to university for two days in a row, overextend herself in one of her classes, then ask him to take her Side-Along for the rest of the week. She was still brave and brilliant, but it pleased Severus to see that she was learning patience and empathy.

As he waited for the group of students to draw closer, Severus flipped the crystal over with his long fingers and peered at the university crest which had been crafted within. There was nothing very special about the insignia itself: a shield decorated with an assortment of things in Hardwicke's words, 'Argent on a Cross Azure and open book proper, clasps Gold, between four Stars of eight points...' and etc. Severus hadn't bothered to remember the rest. It hadn't been so much the shield as the motto stamped beneath it that had caught his eye.

Sidere mens eadem mutato.

Though the constellations change, the mind's disposition remains the same.

According to Hardwicke, the motto had actually been intended as a sort of homage to the great English universities; it was meant to encapsulate the idea that despite the distance, the English traditions would be continued in the Antipodes. In Severus' mind, however, the words were not merely aspirational or representative of new beginnings far away from home. Instead, for Severus, the words brought into focus the source of his inner disquiet. What he had left behind could not be thrown away or discarded; there was an uncomfortable gulf between what he had been and what he was now. Australia was a reprieve, not a cure.

Severus knew that it was true enough to say that things such as the pursuit of knowledge and learning would remain the same no matter where they were sought. He would bring the same skills and experience to his work regardless of whether his lab was in London or Sydney. Hermione had told him a few weeks ago that she had decided to study in Australia largely to regain a sense of 'normalcy'. Now, only a couple of weeks into the semester, she was already busy forming new attachments and getting into the swing of her new routine with an ease that Severus envied.

However, even for Hermione, Severus knew that, beneath the joy and comfort she gained from life under her parents' roof, she too suffered from a sort of cognitive dissonance. She never said it in so many words, but she needed his presence and the continuity he provided between past and present. Only Severus really understood why the mere sight of Alexandra's lime-green jelly made her feel ill. Severus was the person she wanted to talk to after she received a letter from home that made her feel guilty for not being there helping to patch things up.

He knew all of this because he needed her, too.

After years of scheming and subterfuge, Severus found it completely unnerving to work with a group of people who treated him with ordinary pleasantness. He had felt totally out of his depth the first time one of his colleagues had laughed at one of his snide comments rather than glared with disapproval. More than once, when his co-workers had done something like invite him to eat lunch with them or asked him out for drinks on a Friday evening, Severus had felt irrational urges to blurt out that he was a murderer.

In contrast, being around Hermione was... nice. It made him feel sane when he barked at her occasionally and she ignored him or snapped back rather than asking him what was wrong. When Hermione smiled at him, it never felt like he was cheating by hiding who and what he was. If truth be told, he was beginning to like the smile for other reasons, as well, but those reasons were much too new and frightening to think about for more than a split second. As far as he was concerned at this point, Severus felt sure that as cathartic as this little stint in the warmth and sunshine was proving, neither of them would resist the pull of home indefinitely. And when Hermione was ready to return to England, he would be clutching the portal stone right next to her.

The group of students finally drew abreast of Severus' seat. He shook himself out of his reverie as Hermione separated from the rest of the group.

'Severus! What are you doing here?'

He was not about to tell her that he had timed his 'afternoon break' specifically so that it coincided with the end of her class. Nor did he think she needed to know that he had been lost in thought, contemplating how necessary she was to his sanity and happiness.

'I escaped when Elliot brought in the fresh pus.'

Of all things, the series of experiments he'd been brought in to assist with involved super pungent strains of Australian Bubotuber pus. Some of these specimens had been known to penetrate even the most carefully cast Bubblehead Charm when delivered fresh.

Hermione grimaced. 'What time do you finish today?'

'Around half five. Aren't you going out to drinks with your friends?'

She nodded. 'That's what I'll do while I wait for you to finish. We did some Conjuring today; I'm quite tired.' There was strain and worry in her eyes. 'I might need your help over the weekend.'

The Grangers all three refused to hear of him moving out of their home, and while Hermione still needed magical assistance, Severus firmly told himself that it was really the most convenient arrangement.

'Meet you at the usual spot, then?' He stood as he spoke. If he was going to finish on time, he needed to get back.

'Thank you,' she whispered, giving him another of her unexpected hugs before hurrying to rejoin her friends.

He smiled slightly as he strode off to find a quiet place to Disapparate.

For now, at least, that was more than enough.

AN: '*Sidere mens eadem mutato*' is the real motto of the University of Sydney. There may be other or better ways to translate it, but I am no Latin scholar. I merely followed the translation I found on the university website.

Thank you to everyone who has read and reviewed. The prompt, for those who might have been interested, was:

'Hermione gets a form of wizarding virus. When she recovers, her magic is erratic and weak. Severus is still not the man he was after Nagini's attack, physically or otherwise. Minerva asks them to work together to try and make life easier for each other and to give them something to occupy themselves.'

Last and biggest thanks to my beta, JunoMagic.