Summary

The true time-turner was slammed savagely into Hermione's throat. It shattered against her neck, bits of glass and gold piercing into her skin. The last thing she saw before blackness consumed her was a plume of metallic dust and vitreous fragments, tiny prisms dancing behind her eyelids.

(In which Hermione accidentally ends up in 1950, pitted against an ascending Dark Lord in his prime, caught in the entanglement of pureblood politics, dark magic, and Tom Riddle's interest)
Hermione's breath was steady. Her hands didn't shake, her heart didn't race. It did not matter that it was a frigid day in late December, the temperature well below freezing as snow coated the ground.

Hermione Granger did not tremble.

This was something for which she had planned for far too long, and she had already executed the first part with perfection.

December 31st, 1926.

Yes, she knew it could damage her body irrevocably, though she had taken precautions. Yes, she knew it could have unforeseen consequences. Was counting on that, in fact.

After all, what did she have to lose?

Hermione's life after the war was a deterioration. Returning to Hogwarts to get her N.E.W.T.'s had
resulted in a plethora of dramatic events, the most notable being her newly-born romance with Ron going up in flames, her estrangement from the Weasley family because of it, and, consequently, her friendship with Harry becoming distant and detached.

None of them hated her necessarily, it wasn't that—especially not Harry. Nothing could completely break Hermione's friendship with Harry.

It was just… isolation. And it had shocked her with its abruptness.

Before, Hermione had seen her life unfolding before her in what she thought would be a very happy and predictable path. She and Ron were supposed to get married, have children, be happy. She would go on to work in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, carry on with S.P.E.W., maybe…

After she and Ron had broken up, everything changed. Those who were at Hogwarts with her in Hermione's final year had looked at her differently, when they looked at her at all. Ginny was no longer the warm, pleasant girlfriend she had known just days before. Even Horace Slughorn, who had once said, 'Miss Granger, continue on at the rate you are, and I'll bet you're running for Minister of Magic by the time you're thirty years old!’, was more reserved around her. The rumors being spread made it seem like she had deserted Ron, like Hermione had done something wrong to become severed from the 'Golden Trio'.

Rita Skeeter always had always been excellent at painting Hermione in a horribly unflattering light, she would give the woman that.

The prospect of working in a Department where she would be in the same building as Ron all the time seemed unbearable, after those publications. Hermione's mind was only changed after she'd had a career orientation meeting with McGonagall, who, unlike everyone else in her life, had treated Hermione exactly the same after the onslaught of Prophet and magazine articles slandering her. Hermione had confessed that she, for the first time, was unsure of what to do with her life. Her former instructor and then Headmistress had slid a pamphlet across the desk towards her, telling Hermione to 'think about it'.

There was only a single word on the cover:

Unspeakables.

…And the information within, scant as it was, had been enough to persuade Hermione. Suddenly, being an outcast didn't seem to matter anymore.

In opposition to all the passive-aggressive hostility Hermione had been forced to deal with was, surprisingly enough, Draco Malfoy. She would never call it a friendship, what had begun to develop between the two social pariahs at that point, but… Well, it was something. Instrumental, even. Hermione would never have even considered it, were it not for the initial encouragement and support of that conniving Slytherin.

'What if it ruins people's lives, rather than improves them? What if people in the present get hurt?’ she'd asked in one of her weaker moments, questioning everything, remembering her third year and how it had almost fallen into chaos. Malfoy had shoved the sleeve up on his left arm, revealing the faded but still there, always there, eternally there Dark Mark.

'Show me yours,' he'd demanded in response. Slowly, she had.

Mudblood.
Faded, but still there, always there, eternally there.

The last time she'd seen Harry—had it really been months ago, now?—Hermione had asked him about his scar. That infamous lightning bolt that marked him as an impossibility.

'Does it ever hurt you, anymore?'

'No.' Harry had smiled. 'It hasn't hurt me in years.'

…But Hermione still burned.

…

December 31st, 1926.

Hermione walked along a snow-covered sidewalk on the outskirts of London. It was early in the afternoon, but the sun was already beginning to set. She spotted the clock tower in the distance. She'd arrived three hours ahead of time… according to plan.

Finding the records for Wool's Orphanage, though it no longer existed in the year 2001, had not been as difficult as Hermione would have thought. Tom Marvolo Riddle had been born at precisely 11:00 pm on New Year's Eve. And if the matron in the memory's retelling was any indication, it had been a very quick, bloody birth.

Of course Hermione had seen the memories.

Dumbledore's Pensieve, as it transpired, had been bequeathed to the Department of Mysteries in his will, as well as all the memories it contained. It was kept in the Time Room, which was still undergoing repairs thanks to the battle which had ensued at the end of their fifth year.

Once Hermione had officially become an Unspeakable, just a few weeks after graduation (a process which involved an extremely unorthodox 'test' which she could not tell anyone about, due to magical constrictions, but had passed with remarkable 'scores'), she'd been unable to not take advantage of this.

She'd watched everything.

The first time was out of simple but uncontainable curiosity, but she watched them again after she and Malfoy had begun to congregate and plan.

And again, and again, and again.

Tom Riddle: orphan, student, manipulator, murderer.

Hermione had watched the story of the Half-Blood Prince too. Memories which had surprised her when she'd first come across them, because they did not belong to Albus Dumbledore. Then it clicked. Hermione recalled the night that she unknowingly had gathered those memories herself. Severus Snape, dying in the Shrieking Shack…

Harry must have broken into the Headmaster's office, somehow. He must have watched them, and then, at the end…

That was why he'd left them…

So much pain, so much suffering.
'We could prevent it, you know.' Draco Malfoy, his dangerous suggestions, and his time-turner which was not bound by hours. 'We could change the world, Granger.'

Hermione had merely considered it at first. Not agreed.

For months, she'd studied the case files of Eloise Mintumble. A witch who had been irreparably damaged when, in 1899, she'd traveled to the year 1402 and had been stuck there for five days. Once she'd finally been rescued and brought back to her present time, her body had aged five centuries. She died shortly thereafter.

The consequences of this experiment had been… illogical, as far as Hermione could tell. Twenty-five of her descendants vanished, having been unborn. The Tuesday following her death had lasted two and a half days, while that Thursday had lasted only four hours. Yet time carried on.

Twenty-five people had died in that experiment. Only one would die in Hermione's.

…Well, two, technically.

She's dying, anyway, Hermione reminded herself. Merope Gaunt is already dead.

Hermione took another steadying breath. With Draco's help, she had prepared accordingly. It was fortunate that Malfoy had an endless supply of galleons—the provisions needed to create a body-stabilizing potion strong enough to withstand time-travel hadn't been cheap. Not that she intended to be here for five days, by any means. Still, she was confident enough in both her own and Draco's potion-making skills that the brew she'd consumed should ensure she shouldn't fall apart completely when she returned.

Hermione knew there was no guarantee of such a thing. But again… What did she have to lose?

Draco had offered to be the one to come instead, or to at least come with her, but no. Hermione had insisted that she come alone. She knew far more about time than he did, she'd studied it in part as an Unspeakable, and besides. He would distract her. Draco Malfoy wasn't a killer.

Hermione Granger was.

She never told Harry nor Ron about it afterwards, but she had cast the killing curse. Once. She'd thrown it at Bellatrix Lestrange. Hermione had wanted to kill the witch that scarred her with her own wand, and when she'd uttered the words 'Avada Kedavra' with truest intent, the flash of green had been immediate.

Too bad the bitch was good at dodging.

It had been Hermione's one opportunity to kill her, and she'd missed. She knew she was no match for a proper duel against Bellatrix Lestrange, and the element of surprise was gone after that. If Ginny and Luna hadn't stepped in to help, she probably would have been killed.

But I'm not going up against Bellatrix Lestrange now. Hermione kept a watchful eye out, concealed by the shadows of an alley near the orphanage. I'm going up against a weak, desperate witch. Practically a squib.

Hermione swallowed thickly, recognizing what a horrid murder this was going to be—despite everything—to kill a pregnant woman. She was happy that she had not allowed Malfoy to come with her.

Hermione had, however, let him give her a giant leather bag full of galleons.
'In case everything goes to shit, and you do get stuck for five days or whatever,' he'd said.

'And how will gold help me, if that's the case?' Hermione had responded dryly.

He'd looked at her like she was a complete moron—a look Hermione Granger did not often have aimed at her. 'Enough gold can work miracles, Granger.'

Hermione could feel the weight of those galleons in her pocket. Oddly enough, she was glad that she had them, if only because it served to remind her that someone cared about her. She had one hand in her pocket while the other was to her chest, her fingers twisting around the chain of the time-turner in anticipation.

Any minute now, Merope Gaunt would come stumbling down that sidewalk, already in labor, on the brink of death. She would never make it to the doorstep of Wool's Orphanage, Hermione would see to that.

She waited.

Finally, the peaceful scene of softly falling snow on New Year's Eve was disrupted by a woman's cries. Feeble and desperate.

"H…help… Somebody…"

Steeling herself, Hermione went to answer her call.

"Oh, thank… thank god…" The woman grinned painfully when she noticed what she assumed to be her savior. Hermione stopped short when she saw her face, illuminated by the ochre light of a street lamp.

It shouldn't have impacted her so much—Hermione had seen this woman in the memories many times, after all—but it did.

She was hideous.

"Help me," Merope gasped, her hands on her swollen stomach, shaking. When her knees buckled, Hermione instinctually went to catch her. "My baby, my baby…"

Hermione stared into the face of this dying woman, her hardened heart suddenly consumed with pity. No. No.

"Help me, I c-can't make it to… t-to the hospital…"

Kill her.

"Please—"

Kill her!

"I'm so sorry." Hermione retracted her wand. The street was deserted, the orphanage several blocks away yet. "I'm sorry, I… It won't hurt."

Merope's eyes, which had been looking in opposite directions before, focused singularly on her wand. Hermione didn't hesitate again. There were many spells which she could cast wordlessly, but the killing curse was not one of them.
Death demanded a declaration.

"Avada—"

The reaction was instantaneous.

Hermione's wand went flying from her hand at the same moment that Merope Gaunt screamed—a bloodcurdling cry that ripped across the winter air. She clawed at Hermione's chest with a strength that should not have been possible from such a weakened, frail woman. Hermione's body froze. Whether it was from terror or the fierce brand of magic that was emanating from the soon-to-be mother, sensing mortal peril, Hermione was not sure.

Either way, she was powerless to stop what happened next.

"Witch!" Merope screamed, digging her nails into Hermione's throat and finding purchase on the chain around her neck. "Witch! Witch!"

Merope's fingers curled around the time-turner. She surely had no idea what it was, but that hardly mattered. The dying woman was looking for something, anything to use as a weapon, and she had found one.

With one horrifically brutal motion, Merope Gaunt gripped the time-turner in her fist and slammed it savagely into Hermione's throat. It shattered against her neck, bits of glass and gold piercing into her skin. Merope's scream abruptly ended. The snowy streets of 1920's London fell away, and Hermione was sent somewhere, elsewhere, nowhere.

Her skin was being peeled backwards, her bones were being cracked and twisted and cracked again. The scream that was resounding in her mind was unable to escape her bleeding throat, which burned, burned, burned.

Hermione was certain that she was dead. The last thing she saw before blackness consumed her was a plume of metallic dust and vitreous fragments, tiny prisms dancing behind her eyelids.

Death, she thought emotionlessly, is beautiful.

She exhaled blood and gold.
Like Glass

The world was blinding.

Hermione's body felt like it had broken into a thousand fragments, burning pieces lost in a dark suspension, just to come snapping back together all at once. Her limbs were spread out at awkward angles on a cold, hard ground. Her eyes flew open to a light like a ray of piercing sunlight, making her wince. She inhaled through her burning throat and immediately rolled to her side and coughed, a horrible, raspy sound. Blood splattered across the concrete.

"Oh—oh, good lord!"

Hermione heard a woman crying out, shrill and panicked. The sound assaulted her like nails being thrust directly into her eardrums.

"Carl—Carl! Go knock on someone's door, call an ambulance!"

The woman was kneeling at her side. Hermione whimpered when she shouted in such close proximity to her, curling into herself and covering her head with her hands. She felt something warm and sticky on her neck. She was bleeding; her skin felt like it was on fire from where Merope had stricken her.

"Don't worry dear, don't worry... we're calling for help…"

Hermione peered up through her lashes, her vision blurred. She saw the hazy outline of a woman, and she was... sparkling...

An ambulance, she'd said...

"Oh, dear, oh, no…" The woman began rummaging through her purse, quickly pulling out a handkerchief. "Here, let me put this on that wound, you should apply p-pressure—"

Hermione's addled mind was struck with a crushing wave of clarity, the kind which was only brought on by adrenaline and fear. Her eyes focused, her heart froze. An Ambulance. These were muggles, and—and she had just been attacked, and she'd dropped her wand—

Hermione started to push herself to her feet. "No, dear! You shouldn't move!" the woman cried, reaching for her shoulder with the hand which did not hold the handkerchief. Hermione shoved it aside and stood anyway.

The blood rushed to her head, but she shook off the spell of dizziness, remaining on her feet. Her wand. She had been disarmed, her wand had flown... That way...

Hermione looked wildly in the direction in which it had gone, but she saw nothing in the empty street—no wand, no feeble mother about to give birth, nothing. It was night, she realized with a start. That blinding light from before was not blinding at all, only the dim streetlight which she had landed under.

The muggle man came running forward. Hermione noticed that he was wearing a smart, vintage suit, and that the woman herself hadn't really been sparkling, she was just wearing a bejeweled necklace and hat, as well as a bright, poufy dress. "No one answered the door—should we take her to the orphanage? They must have a nurse, or—"
"No!" Hermione screamed, backing away a few paces. The unexpected ferocity in her voice made them both jump.

Slowly, breathing deeply, Hermione removed her hand from her bleeding neck, wondering how bad the injury was. The second she did, the man gasped, and the woman let out a high, quick yelp. They both looked horrified.

Pretty bad, then.

"I'm not going to that orphanage," she snarled. The muggles raised their hands defensively, clearly much more afraid of Hermione than for her, now.

Hermione was about to take off, to flee, but then hesitated. She took a quick step forward and snatched the handkerchief from the woman's hand, who let out another shrill yelp in response.

Hermione held the lacy fabric to her neck. "Thank you," she muttered before turning away and heading to where she thought her wand might have gone. She could heal herself, if she had her wand…

At least, she hoped she could.

Hermione could only imagine what kind of injury she had, now—or what she even looked like, for that matter. Had the stabilizing potion she and Draco made worked? It felt like she'd splinched a thousand times when Merope Gaunt slammed the time-turner into her…

Heart racing, Hermione reached for the chain around her neck. It wasn't there. Merope must have ripped the entire thing off her…

The time-turner, a true time-turner... Draco's time-turner…

Hermione turned and looked back where she'd landed (the muggles must have decided that she did not need their help, after all, and were now practically running in the opposite direction), but she didn't see even a trace of glass or golden fragments.

The time-turner was gone.

Draco is going to murder me for having lost that, Hermione despaired. She pulled the handkerchief away from her neck; it was already half saturated in blood. If I can get back to him, that is.

She wondered how long Draco would wait in the year she had left before trying to find her. Would he try at all? She supposed it all depended on what she did here. If she was able to get back to that time before her body was too badly affected, then it wouldn't matter…

But if she couldn't…

Hermione forced her mounting panic aside, focusing instead on looking everywhere in the vicinity for her wand. With each beat, she felt like her heart might give out. It must be here, she thought, it must be, it must…

But it wasn't. Hermione tried summoning it to her, she tried shouting Lumos! in hopes that it would light up so that she could see it. Nothing.

Her wand was not here.

"Fuck," Hermione swore, happy in that moment to be on a deserted street at night. Wool's
Orphanage was still a few blocks away, a dismal, gray building that looked more like a prison than a place where children lived.

She swallowed thickly, her throat burning when she did. Maybe she would have to go to that Orphanage, after all…

How long had she been passed out? What kind of horrific magic had Merope struck her with, to make her experience such disorienting, terrible pain? It couldn't have been too long, or else someone would have found her sooner, before that muggle couple…

Unless…

Hermione started to examine her surroundings properly.

The clock tower in the distance stood just as it had before, reading twenty minutes until midnight. Wool's orphanage looked the same… but the rest of the street didn't.

Those little shops with the 'closed' signs weren't there before, Hermione realized, her blood running cold. Neither were all those nice houses. They were more run down before, weren't they? These looked remodeled…

The scenery was different.

Her wand was gone.

The time-turner was gone.

Hermione started to hyperventilate.

She stumbled sideways, leaning against a tree as she struggled to breathe. Her muscles ached and her neck continued to burn, but the pain was hardly noticeable over the fear which now threatened to overwhelm her. Her vision was blurring again, she could taste bile clawing its way up her throat. She was either going to pass out or be sick—possibly both.

*Hold it together, Granger.* Hermione closed her eyes and forced herself to take a deep breath. *Focus on your breathing. Count to three... Breathe in, breathe out... Remember your training, you didn't let Holloway attack your mind for months just to lose it over something like this... Breathe in, breathe out...*

It took longer than it usually did, but Hermione soon calmed her racing thoughts enough so that she was no longer on the brink of a panic attack. Six months of Occlumency training—standard for all new Unspeakables—had come in handy more times than she could count. It was more about finding an inner peace and sense of control than it was about being defensive, and that was a skill which was applicable to nearly all situations.

Hermione opened her eyes again. She was wandless. She knew *where* she was, but not when. She did not have a time-turner.

She had...nothing.

*No,* she realized suddenly, the tiniest spark of hope igniting in her chest.

'*Enough gold can work miracles, Granger.'*

Hermione reached into her pocket with her free hand, laughing breathily at the weight of galleons in
a leather pouch. God bless you, Draco Malfoy, she thought with a smile.

Right, then. Hermione cleared her expression as a short-term plan formed in her mind. Of utmost importance was to acquire a wand, but first and foremost, she had to deal with this injury… and get off the streets of muggle London.

Hermione turned a corner into a shady alley, stuck her wand arm out, and waited.

The Knight Bus came, and with it, a sense of irrational security.

Hermione took the Knight Bus quite often in her daily life in her own time. She smiled at its familiar, purple paint, but couldn't help but notice that it didn't seem to be nearly as… chaotic in its approach. It pulled up to where she stood slowly, not at all like it was being driven by a half-blind man who somehow retained his position.

The door opened, and a short, stout woman stepped out. "Welcome aboard the—Oh, Merlin's beard! What's happened to you?"

And she hadn't even moved the handkerchief yet. "I've been mugged," Hermione said, and she hardly had to pretend to act despairing. "I've been attacked, I was hit with some curse—he took my wand—"

"Oh, you poor thing!" the conductor cried. "Let me see, let me—"

The moment Hermione moved the drenched fabric from her neck, the woman's face paled. It was really bad, then. "What kind of curse were you hit with!?"

"I don't know," Hermione snapped, placing the handkerchief back over the wound. "He didn't exactly stop to tell me before he took my wand! Just—do you mind healing me, please, ma'am? I'm sort of bleeding all over the place."

The conductor's face paled even further. "I only know basic charms, I-I'm no proper Healer…"

It was really, really bad, then. "Well, I'm very good at curative magic, if you don't mind me borrowing your wand? If I can board and use the restroom, so I can look in the mirror and see what I'm doing…"

When the conductor didn't immediately react, only continued to stare at her neck dumbfoundedly, Hermione nearly screamed. "I have the fare," she said. "And I'd be happy to give you extra if you let me use your wand for just a few moments."

"You… you can pay to get on the bus?" the conductor balked. "But you just said you've been mugged!"

Hermione realized her blunder too late, but quickly recovered. "Yes, well, I always keep an extra bit of money hidden in my inner pocket. Here." She pulled out a single galleon and offered it up. "Apply this to my fare, and keep the extra as a thank you for letting me use your wand. Please."

The conductor's eyes widened in shock at that statement. Hermione wondered if maybe she had made another mistake. How much more were galleons worth, in this present? Was inflation as severe in the magical world as it was in the muggle world?

All questions Hermione had never bothered to consider before her trip. She suddenly wished Draco had come with her after all.
"Well?"

The conductor stared for a moment before pocketing the galleon and nodding firmly. "Of course, of course! R-right this way! Miss…?"


The conductor blinked but didn't comment. Well, Hermione thought, if she had to work on an alias later, she would do much better than that.

Hermione climbed aboard the Knight Bus. The driver, too, was someone unfamiliar to her: an older gentleman with dark hair, who was clearly much better at his job than Ernie Prang was. He glanced at Hermione and looked as concerned at the conductor was. Hermione ignored him.

"Your wand, then, if you don't mind," Hermione said as soon as she'd boarded.

The conductor reached into her pocket. "My name is Maryanne, by the way," she said, standing proudly and handing over her wand. "Maryanne Williams, conductor of the Knight Bus for almost five years, now."

"Charmed," Hermione said, far more concerned with her injury than familiarities. She turned and headed towards the bathroom at the back of the bus before Maryanne could direct her. Fortunately, the Knight Bus was a much less unpredictable vehicle under this driver's care. It was also nearly empty, having been hailed at such at late hour.

She found the women's restroom and slammed the door shut behind her. Bracing herself, Hermione slowly removed the handkerchief and faced the mirror.

She nearly fainted on the spot.

It wasn't that the jagged cut looked too terribly grave, no. It was simply how... unreal the injury appeared.

But Hermione was only able to examine it for a second before the trickle of blood obscured it. Forcing herself to concentrate, she pointed the wand tip at the wound, and murmured the words, "Vulnera Sanentur."

The gash slowly sewed itself shut. Her skin mended, and the bleeding ceased. She wiped away the excess blood.

The bizarre markings remained.

Hermione stared in awe and shock as she examined the lines that swirled around the center of her throat, radiating from the point of injury which was just above her collarbone on the left side of her neck. They were... strangely beautiful, in an outlandish, horrific way. Gleaming, golden arches that glimmered almost as though they were flecked with bits of diamonds.

Like glass...

Hermione almost screamed at the comprehension.

The time-turner had been smashed into her neck, right there, and when she'd woken up, she'd found no trace of it: not a shard of glass, not a bit of fragmented metal.
It hadn't simply vanished. Not all of it, anyway, if it had left such a scar.

Hermione leaned forward with both hands on the sink, her entire body trembling, though whether it was from blood loss or pure shock, she wasn't sure.

*Focus, Hermione,* she berated herself yet again. *Focus.*

*You need a wand. You can figure something out, you always do—but you first need a wand.*

Hermione cleaned the rest of the blood from her face and neck, and as much as she could rinse from her hair. She then purposefully arranged her unruly locks so that they fell on that side, hiding the whirling, shimmering markings as much as possible.

She made her way up to the front of the Knight Bus again, where Maryanne sat in the conductor's seat, looking expectant. "Thank you," Hermione said, returning her wand.

"You're welcome, Miss Johnson," Maryanne responded, looking much less pale now that Hermione was no longer covered in blood. "Should we take you to St. Mungo's, would—"

"No," Hermione interrupted. "No, I'm fine. Really. I… I would like to go to Diagon Alley, actually."

Maryanne looked at her for a long moment before finally nodding. "All right," she said. "We have two stops to make before that, and they're a bit out of the way. Would you rather us go to Diagon Alley first, since we're in London? We could be there in an hour… Or we could make these few rounds first, if you'd prefer to sleep through the night in the bed you paid for and arrive downtown early in the morning. Unless you have plans tonight, yet…?"

Hermione frowned. "Plans? No, no plans. I would very much like to just rest through the night, thank you. Please, make the other stops first," she said.

Maryanne gave her a sort of sympathetic grin. "All right, dear. Pick any curtained space on the second floor that you like. And you let me know if you need anything."

Hermione nodded wordlessly in response, feeling exhausted. Then, just as she was about to climb the steps to the second story, she paused. "Oh, actually… Do you have today's paper? I missed it."

"Sure. Here." The conductor handed her an issue of *The Daily Prophet.* "Happy almost New Year," she added in a thick, sarcastic drawl. Hermione didn't respond to that comment, and made herself wait to read the full headline.

She picked the space furthest from the front of the bus and covered herself in the blankets which were provided. Only once she had taken many deep breaths and lulled herself into a state of calm did Hermione allow herself to pick up the *Prophet.*

December 31st, 1949.

Her brain seemed frozen as she read that date over and over again.

December 31st, 1949.

Simple math seemed such an impossible task, suddenly.

She'd watched the memories. Hermione had memorized every date of importance which concerned Tom Marvolo Riddle and the deformed witch who had birthed him.

If Hermione had failed to kill Merope Gaunt—and she was pretty damn certain that she had failed,
spectacularly—that meant that Tom Riddle…

Hermione was very glad that she was sitting down. Her head was swimming as the horrific truth of what year she had landed in—and what it meant about the wizard she was trying to kill—sunk in. She was undoubtedly about to pass out, now.

In about ten minutes, it would officially be January 1st, 1950.

Somehow, she thought through a delirium of panic and near hysteria, somehow, she imagined that it was going to be much more difficult to murder a twenty-three year old Tom Riddle than an unborn one.
Hermione tried to rest on the bus ride to Diagon Alley, but was unable to sleep at all. Her already over-active mind raced more than ever, making her toss and turn on the small cot as rural England passed her by.

She wondered what was happening in her present—in 2001, where she had just left Draco Malfoy in her flat. Where he would be waiting with the door locked for her sometime before eleven in the evening their time? Hermione had told him that if she didn't reappear before then, it meant that she had failed.

What would he do, when she did not return at all? Would he go to the Department of Mysteries to speak to her boss, Armand Holloway, admitting to the Ministry that he owned such a dangerous, magical devise?

Probably not. An offense that large would mean a very heavy sentence in Azkaban, and Draco Malfoy had barely avoided that fate after the war ended.

What would he do?

Hermione covered her face in her hands. She had no idea how Draco would deal with this on his end. Hell, she had no idea what she should do at the moment.

Her first thought was to find another time-turner.

The same one, technically, the true one, the one which… Draco’s grandfather? His great-grandfather? Someone in the Malfoy family probably owned in this time—illegally so.

It was a notion that was dismissed nearly the second she'd had it. Time-turners went backwards in time, not forward, and the only one which would have been able to transport her to her present had been smashed into her throat.

Hermione ran her fingers along the side of her neck, where the skin felt smooth now that she had healed it, but which she knew was anything but normal-looking. She wondered if there would be any repercussions beyond a strange, dazzling scar of golden loops, or if the broken artifact was affecting her in some other way. It didn't seem to be. She had no way of knowing until she had a wand, and could run some tests.

At least it doesn't hurt, she thought. At least it's not burning anymore…

Hermione let the devastation of her situation truly settle in: The time-turner was gone, and the only way she would be able to get back to the present was if someone from her time came and rescued her.

She shook her head, trying not to think of poor Draco pacing her apartment, anxious and confused. Hermione knew she had no power over what people in the year 2001 did, only what she could do, here.

It was 1950.

Tom Riddle had just turned twenty-three years old, and… what was he doing, these days?

If she remembered her dates correctly—and Hermione always did—Hepzibah Smith was not
murdered until 1955, sometime in February. Riddle was still working at Borgin and Burkes as a shop boy, then.

Though he surely was doing much more than that in his spare time. Whatever Riddle was up to while he was not helping Mr. Borgin acquire rare, magical artifacts to sell them for a profit, it was undoubtedly not good.

This was before he had vanished from Britain entirely, and not even Dumbledore knew what the young Dark Lord was up to, then.

But he wouldn't disappear for a while.

Hermione had five years in which she knew that Riddle would be in London. She knew where he worked, and she knew when he would kill that old woman and bewitch her poor house elf into thinking she had done it.

Those were about the only advantages she had.

Hermione swore under her breath. Why couldn't she have been dumped sometime in the 1940's, when Tom Riddle was still a child, or at the very least a teenager? She could have taken him, then. He may not have been easy to kill, but she could have done it. She could have murdered a child knowing that she was preventing the deaths of so many more.

She was not so sure she could kill Tom Riddle as he was now, and it was a comprehension that had nothing at all to do with morals.

It wasn't that she wasn't confident in her own skills; she was. Hermione was an excellent duellist and proficient at everything she put her mind to. But this was Tom Marvolo Riddle she was talking about, and on this date, he was actually a few years older than her… not to mention the small fact that he had already committed several murders.

This was, Hermione realized with dread, possibly the most dangerous version of the Dark Lord she could have been put up against. One who had already proved himself capable of killing unflinchingly, as he'd commanded the basilisk to kill Myrtle, as well murdered his father and his grandparents… But he'd also split his soul twice.

The diary and the ring.

He was lethal but probably not insane. He was young but not naïve. He was confident, and arrogant, surely, but still living under the guise as a harmless, charming shop boy.

And immortal.

Even if Hermione did think herself capable of catching him off guard and murdering him in some dark alleyway (which she didn't, and she was not stupid enough to try), it wouldn't matter. She would have to destroy the horcruxes, first.

Had he already hidden the ring in his uncle's shack? And the diary, where had he kept that, before handing it off to Lucius Malfoy so many years later?

Hermione turned on her side, staring out the window. She was getting ahead of herself. She needed to focus solely on getting a wand, and then she could begin to investigate, and—

And what? Just waltz into Borgin and Burkes, run into Tom Riddle, and strike up a conversation with the charismatic, young murderer?
Hermione recalled the time she had followed Draco Malfoy into that very same store, trying to figure out what it was he'd been interested in having fixed back when they were still in school. She almost laughed at her horrible acting; it had been spontaneous and ridiculous. In hindsight, it was mostly amusing, as now she and Draco sort of were friends... though she would never think to buy him a cursed necklace for his birthday.

Okay, then. She needed a backstory, a good one. She would come up with everything she needed to convincingly be someone else... But she couldn't be from England. She couldn't have gone to Hogwarts. Tom Riddle may realize that he'd never seen her in the castle before, and if she was caught in a lie, she was doomed. She would have to be from somewhere else, from a different school, with a different life.

_It's a damn shame I don't know French, _Hermione thought humorlessly. _Or Bulgarian. I should have learned more from Viktor._

Hermione sighed. She would figure all that out later.

_Wand, _she repeated to herself. _Everything else can follow after we have a means of spell-casting._

She lamented the loss of her own wand viscerally already—vine, dragon heartstring, 10 ¾ inches long. It was lost somewhere in an alleyway in 1920's London. Probably run over by a car or something, she thought, morbid but honest.

In the year 1950, it was highly unlikely that it had been created yet. She couldn't imagine that Ollivander kept many wands on the shelf for over forty years... Or did he? Hermione wasn't sure. Yet even if he did, that would mean that she'd be purchasing her own wand before her eleven-year-old self could in 1991... didn't it?

Hermione's head was spinning. It looked like she was going to alter history in more ways than one, but she recognized that the least of her concerns should be how it would change if she'd ended up with a different wand.

Maybe, she thought, if she was fortunate, she wouldn't make any significant changes at all. She kept peering through the curtain around her cot, half-hoping and half-dreading that Holloway might apparate suddenly, looking livid and firing her (and probably far worse—who was she kidding, this act of vigilantism was incredibly illegal and she knew it), but at least not before taking her back to the right year.

It didn't happen.

The Knight Bus made a few stops before taking her to Diagon Alley, right around the time the sun was rising, and Hermione faced the new day having hardly rested at all.

_God bless Draco Malfoy._

Hermione found herself thinking that every time she reached into her leather satchel to reach for galleons.

Since it was New Year's Day, many of the shops were closed. Hermione was fortunate to be able to get a room in a dingy little motel which edged dangerously close to Knockturn Alley. She didn't like it, but it was the only place with any availability. It didn't matter to her that it was a bit dodgy, what bothered her more was how close it was to certain sinister shops with even more sinister employees.

She distracted herself by staying in the brighter, cheerier sections of Diagon Alley, thankful that a
few food vendors were open. Hermione ate a double serving of chocolate ice cream, because damn it, if ever there was a time to indulge herself, it was now.

"God bless Draco Malfoy," she murmured as she finished the last of it, licking the spoon clean.

There were surprisingly few differences in the layout of the magical shopping center, all things considered. The items being sold were, of course, in alignment with the era—the **Clean Sweep 7** was the fastest broom of the day, and the robes on display in the windows were, in Hermione's opinion, a bit more stylish—but overall, if felt pleasantly familiar.

She could have cried when she saw that Ollivander's shop was closed. *Tomorrow*, she thought, reading the sign on the door which said they would be open at nine. *Tomorrow, I'll be back.*

Then a miracle happened.

Hermione wondered just how she was going to keep herself busy until then, when she found the library…and it was open.

Open, on a national holiday! Open, open, open!

"There is a God," she breathed to herself, elated. Hermione practically danced her way up the steps as she entered in through the front doors. She couldn't check anything out, as she had no form of identification on her, but she could read while inside.

The library was almost empty. Hermione went straight to the non-fiction section, finding herself texts on the history of Magical Education. She ran her fingers over the spines of dozens of books, pausing in reverence as she encountered *Hogwarts, a History*—but she left it on the shelf.

What other schools existed, where English was the main language, and where she could begin to build her story?

Her eyes came to rest on a thick, black text—*Ilvermorny School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: From Irish Beginnings to the 20th Century.*

Hermione smiled and did what she did best. She read, she learned…and she began to plot.

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Ollivander's shop was also nearly just as she remembered it.

Hermione only made one stop beforehand on the morning of January 2nd, 1950, and that was to purchase a scarf at a clothing store. The marks on her neck were something she would have to figure out how to get rid of, eventually, or at least hide with a glamour… as well as the scar on her arm.

All things she would be able to do after today.

The small wand shop looked very much the same, but Ollivander himself did not.

He was much younger, naturally, but it was unmistakably him. His hair, while blonde instead of white, was just as thick as before, and his eyes gleamed like silver when they looked up from his work to see a witch entering his shop.

"Hello," he said, setting his quill aside. "May I help you?"

"Yes. I would like to buy a wand, sir."

Hermione might as well have just said, 'I would like to bear your child, sir', he looked so perplexed.
Ollivander stood and came around the counter to speak with her better.

"You'd like to buy a wand?" he asked, baffled.

"Yes." Hermione's eye twitched, but she forced a smile. What was so shocking about a woman coming into a wand shop to buy a wand?

Her irritation must have been obvious, however, because he inclined his head politely. "My apologies, it's just not very often I have adult customers—in January, no less! I'm used to having hordes of eleven-year-old's in the summer, and copious amounts of downtime the rest of the season."

Hermione's annoyance swiftly vanished; she had not considered this. "Oh. Well, I was robbed, unfortunately. So I'll be needing a replacement wand. I heard you were the best, so I decided to come to you."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," Ollivander said, looking genuinely sad for her. "May I ask who you purchased a wand from before?"

Hermione was suddenly extremely grateful that she'd had the entire day yesterday to research. She would not have had answer to this question prepared, otherwise. "Shikoba Wolfe," she responded effortlessly.

"Oh! American then, are you? I've heard good things about Wolfe's wands. Is it true she tends to carve them a bit...ornately?"

"I'm from the states, yes, but I've been in England for several years now. And Wolfe's wands are a bit ornate, that's true," Hermione replied. She recalled the moving images in one of books on international wand making she'd found, having committed them to memory. "My own was quite beautiful. It had lovely ivy cravings on the side."

Ollivander made a face like this did not impress him. "Looks can be deceiving. One should never judge the power of an individual nor their wand based on appearance. Wouldn't you agree, Miss...?"

"Smith," Hermione answered easily. Though it was another overly common name, she at least had good reason for using this one. "And I would agree with you, Mr. Ollivander. Appearances can be deceiving."

He smiled. "Right, well. Miss Smith. You'll find that I make and sell my wands a bit differently, here. I don't allow customers to bring in their own cores or peruse my shelves and pick out whichever one they think best based on their own, usually misconstrued notions, but require that the customer try out a variety until the right one is in their hands. The wand chooses the witch, Miss Smith."

"I've heard that's how you operate," Hermione said, looking only slightly amused. "Other wandmakers say that it's an eccentric practice, but I think it sounds fascinating. So."

Hermione looked around the shop with its many shelves full of wands. "How do we begin?"

Ollivander clapped his hands together joyfully before reaching for several boxes. "How exciting! An adult customer, such a treat—what was the length of your old wand? No! Don't tell me, I don't want to be swayed. Put your arms out, Miss, if you please—"

Hermione obeyed, and a tape measure began hovering around her and taking her measurements. It dropped to the floor at the same time Ollivander handed her the first wand.
"Cherry, ten inches, unicorn hair core," he said. "Quite flexible. Try it out."

Hermione couldn't help but feel giddy with excitement as she took it. She remembered getting her wand the first time around, and what a magical, whimsical experience it had been—her parents behind her, clapping and whooping with pride as their spontaneously magical daughter made sparks of bright pink emit from a piece of wood...

Muggles in Ollivander's Wand Shoppe, and everyone involved had had a wonderful time.

"Nope, that won't do—"

Ollivander plucked the cherry wand from her fingers and handed her another one. "Here—12", ash, unicorn hair again—"

Hermione had barely swished it before it was taken from her. "No, no, no—maybe one of these—"

He gave her wand after wand, then finally decided to set aside the entire pile he'd accumulated and grabbed a few others from a different section. "I must rid myself of the practice of trying to read people," he said, sighing. "I confess, I thought I knew what brand of wand would suit you, but clearly I am mistaken. Don't judge on appearances, Ollivander—ah, I must learn to practice what I preach!"

"Sorry, but… what do you mean?" Hermione asked, watching warily as he pulled out another wand—one which was much longer than any of the others thus far. "What kind of wand did you think would suit me?"

"Something about you struck me more as one who would be inclined to practice Charms, or Potions, perhaps," he admitted. "Not light, healing magic, necessarily, but not offensive spells, either. Practical. No-nonsense."

Hermione laughed. "Well, I would venture to say that your preconceived notions are correct," she said. "That about sums me up."

Ollivander didn't respond, only handed her the long wand in his hand. Hermione hesitated before she took it. As Ollivander began listing its characteristics, she realized with a start that she had seen this wand before.

"12 ¾", walnut, dragon heartstring…"

She had used this wand before.

"Extremely unyielding."

She had dueled with it against its own master at the final battle of Hogwarts, she had tossed it into a pyre after the war.

It was the wand which had belonged to Bellatrix Lestrange.

Hermione's stomach dropped. She willed away the bile which clawed at the back of her throat, keeping her composure. It wouldn't matter. This wand wouldn't work for her, either.

She touched the handle, and knew that she was wrong at once.

The walnut felt nothing at all like it had when she had fought in the castle, spiteful in her hands as she cast the one killing curse she ever had at its rightful owner, full of hatred, forcing it to cooperate.
It felt warm beneath her fingers, now, pleasant. Hermione hardly moved it through the air before sparks emitted from its tip, silvery white and brilliant, like stars. It was such an unexpected burst of magic that she forgot to be horrified at the implications—they were beautiful, dancing lights like a night sky come to life in the wand shop.

Ollivander applauded loudly once the sparks vanished. "Oh, bravo, bravo!" he cheered, grinning merrily. "A heavenly match, perfect, wonderful!"

The wave of nausea which Hermione had forced away came rushing back. "I don't want this wand," she said, thrusting it towards the wandmaker. Ollivander's brows shot up, disappearing behind his white-blonde hair. "I can't take it."

"You can't not take it!" Ollivander shouted, looking scandalized and refusing to take the wand. "That wand chose you—wants you!"

Hermione swallowed thickly, her entire sense of self torn. She did not want the wand which had belonged to the witch who'd tormented the Longbottoms into insanity, who had killed Sirius Black… who had scarred her forever…

Mudblood.

But those things haven't happened yet, said a quiet voice in the back of her mind. And besides, it's not the wand's fault that it performed such dark magic. It was just in the wrong hands.

But it's Bellatrix's! was her own instant, childish sounding response. I feel disgusting touching it!

Do you?

Hermione wet her lips, turning the walnut over in her hands. The truth was that she didn't. The wand thrummed with power beneath her fingers, pulsing with a dull but inviting warmth. It felt right.

Besides, came that small, academic tone that Hermione often heard during her internal arguments, it's sort of extremely satisfying, isn't it? Taking Bellatrix Lestrange's wand from her before she's even born.

Hermione's lips twitched.

"All right," she said, looking up at Ollivander and nodding. He beamed.

"I'll take it."
Hermione was elated.

With a wand in her hands, her perspective had changed dramatically. All things were suddenly possible, she could still complete her mission, she could succeed.

She had checked out of the inn in Knockturn earlier that day, and was now headed towards Diagon Alley, where she could rent a nicer room near the shops that were of a less dangerous variety. Though she was sorely tempted to go into Borgin and Burkes right away, she would not let her curiosity get the better of her. She was not the same girl who acted with little to no plan. She was no longer a teenager hiding under a cloak with two reckless boys, spying on a schoolmate.

Hermione Granger was a woman, an Unspeakable… and from this moment on, she was a Smith.

Smiling to herself, Hermione entered a cozy looking inn next to the ice cream parlor. She checked into a room, the cost easily covered by the galleons Draco Malfoy had, thankfully, forced her to take.

That was another obstacle she would have to overcome, Hermione thought as she pocketed the bag of gold again, heading towards her new, temporary home. She had a significant amount of gold, but it was not endless.

Hermione set that concern aside. There was a far more pressing matter that weighed on her mind, one that needed to come before worries about gold, false identities, or even the fate of Tom Riddle.

She closed and locked the door to her room behind her, much more pleased with these living accommodations than her previous ones. The bed was larger, and there was even a desk and small pantry to store food. It felt… homey. Comfortable.

Hermione shrugged off her coat before pulling her newly acquired scarf from her neck. She took a deep breath and entered the bathroom, wand in hand.

The scar was dazzling.

Was it just her paranoia, or had it grown? Hermione's heart fluttered, her fingers lightly tracing the mysterious, golden lines. They were perfect spirals, all extended from the very spot where Merope had struck her… too perfect. They made her think of the golden ratio, in fact, mathematical in their precision.

The thought made her laugh out loud. Golden markings of a golden ratio—how delightfully nerdy. "Only me," she muttered, grinning crookedly at her own reflection. "Such a thing would happen only to me."

Hermione swallowed back her amusement, forcing herself into an emotionally detached state. Analytical. She needed to learn more about the extent of this injury.

"Egritudo," she murmured, pointing her wand at her neck.
The golden lines shone more brightly upon being struck with a spell, gleaming. Then the magic traveled, a tingly warmth that spread… and Hermione was petrified at what she witnessed.

The light from the spell did not stop on her neck as she expected it to. Instead, it traveled all over her body, glowing from under her skin… it was traveling everywhere, in a very specific, intricate way…

"It's in my blood," Hermione whispered, staring at her surreal reflection where convoluted lines shone across her body, pulsing with every beat of her heart. The broken time-turner, the fragments of enchanted glass and charmed gold…

It was in her bloodstream.

Hermione waved her wand again, her fingers shaking as she ended the diagnostic spell. "Oh, no," she breathed, so close to the mirror that her breath fogged the surface. "Oh, fuck."

Whatever Merope Gaunt had reduced the time-turner to in her fit of wandless, passionate magic, it was now coursing through Hermione's veins. Therefore, it was saturating her entire body.

She couldn't exactly get a new body, could she?

Hermione counted to ten and closed her eyes.

**Remember your training. Don't panic. Breathe.**

Once her pulse had slowed to something less sporadic, she opened her eyes again.

**Focus.**

…Nothing she did removed the scars.

Hermione tried everything she could think of—and she had researched scar removal extensively. She'd once dreamed that she could rid Draco of his Dark Mark, that she could erase the lightning bolt scar from Harry's forehead.

That she might could vanish the word Mudblood which was crudely carved into her arm.

Yet she had come to learn with a despairing clarity that powerful magic lingered. For once, Hermione Granger, brightest witch of her age, had been unable to figure something out. She couldn't remove the scar on her forearm in the past, and nothing she thought of now made the glimmering lines on her neck vanish, either.

She knew it was silly that this bothered her so much.

Not being able to erase another scar—the shallow, surface issue—should have been the least of her concerns. Who cared what she looked like, what did it matter if she had another permanent brand on her body?

Barring the fact that these marking were incredibly suspicious, of course.

Sighing, Hermione cast a concealment charm over her neck. It was a temporary solution to the problem. Concealment charms were effective but not perfect; they had a sort of sheen to them that very apt wizards and witches could perceive—not to mention the much larger issue, which was that they were a serious drain on magical energy. Hermione had tried to go a whole day with one over her forearm in her early days as an Unspeakable, and had nearly fallen asleep during one of Holloway's less enthralling lectures on how to properly clean a Pensieve.
She lived with the word *Mudblood* being visible, after that.

There were other ways of hiding scars. Hermione had once considered purchasing an enchanted ring which essentially kept a specific kind of concealment charm cast, depending on the brand and how the wearer set it, but it was extremely expensive. That, and Hermione had never been one to wear jewelry. She didn't like the feel of rings, and she was worried that she may misplace it or have it stolen. As much as she detested the mark on her forearm, at least it did not physically bother her.

Hermione glanced down at the scar now, and decidedly cast another concealment charm. Immediately, she felt the drain on her magic, and knew that this was not something she could maintain.

Hermione Granger may not have been the type to wear jewelry… but Hermione *Smith* was. She thought of the galleons waiting in her coat pocket, knowing that she would need to spend whatever it cost to purchase an item which would hide her flaws as soon as she could. It was extremely fortunate that she had the luxury.

*God bless Draco Malfoy.*

Yet the physical scar which Merope Gaunt had graced her with was not what threatened Hermione with a panic attack. It was how the magic could be affecting her *internally* that was scaring the piss out of her.

Hermione shook her head and stepped away from the mirror. She cast a few more spells to see if she could divine anything else about what the annihilated time-turner may be doing to her, but came up emptyhanded. Her tests yielded no results—she seemed to be perfectly healthy.

…But for how long?

Hermione's mind raced as she recalled all the specifics of Eloise Mintumble's case files. Had that witch's body been damaged while she was still in 1402, or had she not aged irreversibly until she was returned to her present? The details had been unclear. Was Hermione's entire being set to deteriorate unexpectedly at any moment? The stabilizing potion that she and Draco had prepared could not last indefinitely…

Hermione took another long, steadying breath. There was no point in dwelling on that, because if that was going to happen, there was little she could do about it. The same was true for the time-turner magic coursing through her veins—if it was going to affect her in some fashion, she was powerless to stop it. She could hardly go to St. Mungo's for help and openly admit that she'd had a time-turner smashed into her neck. Besides, the year was 1950. Though she was not a Healer, Hermione probably knew more advanced medical practices than the Healers of the day.

"All right, then," Hermione said out loud to herself, deciding to not waste another moment. She put her coat back on and re-wrapped her scarf around her neck, hiding even the concealment charm and all evidence of glistening spirals that may or may not have been growing. She hoped not. She forced herself not to dwell on it.

That would be a waste of her time and effort… and she had other things to concentrate on.

Hermione had a plan half-concocted in her mind, and now that she had decided that her body was not in any immediate danger of falling apart, she would begin to put it into action.

Tom Riddle would not kill and split his soul again for several years (at least, as far as she knew). Hermione decided that this meant she could allow herself to take her time. If she was going to try and
trick the cunning and powerful Tom Marvolo Riddle—a Legilimens—than she was going to do this right. She was going to need to be someone worthy of grabbing his attention, and she was going to need to look and play the part flawlessly.

After all of her Occlumency training, Hermione knew that the best way to tell a convincing lie—short of being psychotic and truly believing a falsity yourself—was to have it stem from some kernel of truth.

She needed details, affluence, and connections. She needed a reason for being where she was, for doing what she planned to do. She needed a fake identity that was so flawlessly grounded in reality that no one, not even a Legilimens, could sense that it was a lie.

Hepzibah Smith was the solution to all of this.
Hermione once more spent the day where wonders and miracle were born: the library.

Being a 'Smith' was much like being a 'Potter' or a 'Brown'. There were many magical families who considered themselves pureblooded, but because their surnames were so horrendously common, they were excluded from Britain's prestigious Sacred 28. And though there were countless Smiths in Britain, there was only one 'Hepzibah Prudence Smith'. Hermione had discovered where she lived in the library's archives, after reading a semi-recent newspaper article. Just over a month ago, Hepzibah had acquired the original copy of 'Confronting the Faceless' by Sabastian Fawley in an auction, and had stated that if anyone were interested in such a text that might benefit them in their careers, to owl her at the following address.

Hermione was mentally rolling her eyes the entire time she read the article. It was hardly surprising that Hepzibah had damned herself to an early grave, if this was the sort of thing she did. Purchasing desirable, dark artifacts only to flaunt them to the general public in whatever seemingly philanthropic manner she could, just so that she could show off... Well, it was no wonder Borgin eventually sent his charming, young shop boy to her home with flowers in hand, ready to persuade and collect. Especially considering that Hepzibah had purchased the locket from Borgin himself at some point, Hermione remembered suddenly... and he was assuredly planning on getting it back someday.

Shame for all parties involved that Tom Riddle had decided that the locket belonged to him, instead. Hermione intended to intervene first.

Sighing, Hermione set the old paper aside, having already copied the address down on a scrap piece of parchment. She had made herself a bit of a book fortress at the table she'd claimed, piles of texts surrounding her as she'd decided she needed to do further research for her backstory. She was fortunate in that the public library had a decent section on muggle culture, as well as a sizeable arts, philosophy, and international section. Hermione educated herself on all the current political happenings, both in Britain and North America, both muggle and magical. She studied Ilvermorny so deeply that she almost felt like she'd walked the castle halls, having committed every single image of the school which she could find to memory. She'd read the first-person account in the biography of a previous President of the Magical Congress, Seraphina Picquery, and was fascinated by the school's sorting ceremony and what their four houses represented.

Hermione knew as much as she possibly could without actually going to New York, which she seriously considered... but no. She didn't have the gold to do so, now, not after her latest purchase.

She held her hand out, admiring her most recent acquisition. A beautiful, gold ring, perfectly polished and inlaid with diamonds. It was the most expensive option available for a piece of jewelry which would continually keep up a flawless concealment charm, one powerful enough to hide all of her magically induced scars. She could have gone with a necklace that would have done the job, but it wasn't as nice, and besides, a ring was much easier to keep on at all times. That, and she was no longer the frugal girl who could care less about owning nice things—she was a pureblooded witch who only took the best.
She'd needed to confound the poor wizard who sold it to her, though. Not because she wanted to steal it—she would never be so tactless—but only to modify his memory just slightly after the transaction. When the shop keeper, Arnold Williams, would attempt to recall the witch who'd needed to purchase such a specific, expensive, and suspicious item, he would only recall vaguely what she looked like, and would not at all remember her name.

Hermione was not taking chances.

That, and she'd also wanted to practice her confounding and memory modification spells. She knew she was good at them, she always had been. Even before her training as an Unspeaking, Hermione had been able to make her parents forget their own daughter, believing that Australia was where they'd always wanted to live…

Hermione's heart ached at the thought of her parents' smiling faces. It had been such a beautiful day, that morning when she'd tracked them down in Sydney after the war was over in order to restore their memories… She could seem them so clearly, how they'd started to cry tears of happiness in the same moment she had begun to weep with gut-wrenching guilt, begging them to forgive her. Of course, they had.

That was back when everything seemed so hopeful, that summer that had felt never-ending—before she had gone back to school to take her N.E.W.T.'s. She and Harry had stayed for weeks at the Burrow, dealing with all the fan mail and attending parties in their honor, just as they'd organized and attended funerals… So much drama, so many highs and lows…

But throughout that entire summer she'd had Harry's friendship, her proud parents, the Weasley family's support, Ron's—

Stop it, Hermione hissed at herself. She rubbed her eyes, willing away the tears that threatened to form there. Stop throwing yourself a pity party. You are on a mission, whether you like it or not. That world doesn't matter anymore.

This is your world, now.

…If she could trick her own parents into forgetting her, then Hermione was more than confident that she could trick Hepzibah into suddenly remembering her beloved niece from the states.

Still, it was nice to practice on the shop owner of Williams' Jewelry and Finery, first. The old wizard had seemed happy enough afterwards, too, considering he'd probably just made his largest sale of the new year that day.

And really, Hermione thought, watching the way the diamonds caught the light from the ring finger on her right hand, it was quite lovely, wasn't it? And it didn't even feel uncomfortable; she barely noticed it resting on her finger at all. She'd never owned a diamond before. Now she owned twelve, all in one, golden ring. Effective, too. Hermione had examined herself tirelessly in the mirror that evening, and it was only when she was really, really looking for it that she could see the slightest shimmer of some kind of magic radiating about her… and even then, it was so fleeting and discreet that she wondered if she was just imagining it herself.

Hermione checked the time. It was getting late, and the library would be closing in about an hour. She still had plenty of money left to live easily for the next three days, which was how long she'd rented a room in Diagon Alley for. She would use that time to continue researching familiarizing herself with the current times before putting her plan further into motion. Perhaps, she mused, if she had enough gold, she would get herself some new robes before then. Hers were rather old and drab, frayed, even, and would not do at all for the fabulous Hermione Smith…
Looking forward to spending a nice evening alone in her room with a cup of hot tea, Hermione began to gather the many books surrounding her into a single stack, knowing she would need to put them back. She’d fabricated for herself a lovely new fake ID, and while it supported her false identity, it would not grant her the beauty of a library card for a British establishment—an American passport.

Hermione Jean Smith, female, born September 19th, 1929 in New York City. Her own cheeky picture smiled up at her, though Hermione wasn’t exactly pleased with the image. Her hair really was a mess of a lion's mane, wasn't it? It certainly didn't look very proper…

Just one more thing she was going to have to change. Had Sleekeazy's Hair Potion even been invented yet? Hermione seriously doubted it.

Becoming someone else, Hermione lamented, carrying the heavy stack of books and beginning her rounds of placing them back on the shelves in their proper places, was exhausting.

She'd only just put the old Daily Prophet back in archives and the books on Ilvermoney away when her blood ran cold.

"Good evening, Miss Taylor. How are you?"

That voice.

She heard that voice from behind her, near the front of the library. Hermione looked over her shoulder, convincing herself mid-action that it couldn't possibly be him. It was just someone with a similar tenor as the smooth-talking boy in the memories. He could not possibly be here, now.

"Mr. Riddle! I'm doing well, always such a pleasure to see you here! How are you? Is there something I can help you find?"

Oh, fucking hell.

Hermione had glanced just long enough to see a tall, pale man with dark hair greeting the librarian, an older woman who sounded so positively thrilled to see Mr. Riddle that there was no doubt at all about who that was, just a stone's throw away from her, leaning over the counter.

And here she was, holding a very tall stack of incriminating books, fuzzy-haired, disheveled robes, not at all ready.

Hermione began to walk away as quickly as she could without actually running. If she could just get between the aisles, there, then she could go unnoticed, she could sneak out while he was looking the other way…

But Fate, having evidently decided that it had not fucked with Hermione Granger enough… had other plans.

She tripped.

Like some four-year-old with poor coordination, Hermione, in all her sudden nervousness, tripped over her own feet. Her tower of books went flying out of her hands in all directions and she fell to the floor, landing on her hip in manner which she could tell at once meant a nasty bruise.

"Actually, yes. I was hoping to—oh!"

Hermione did not turn to look. They had just witnessed her fall, were surely coming over to do the
chivalrous things and help her up—

No, no, no. You are not ready. You cannot let him see your face, this ring, your wand—nothing.

"Are you all right, Miss…?"

Hermione ran.

Immediate, full-blown retreat. She left the pile of books scattered across the floor, making for the exit with her head down, just narrowly avoiding colliding with Tom Marvolo Riddle himself on her way out. She passed so close to his chest that their shoulders brushed, that she inhaled the scent of cologne clinging to his robes—sandalwood and something else.

But she didn't look up to see his face, and was certain that, with her chin lowered and the fact that he was much taller than her, he only saw a mass of bushy hair and black robes escaping from the library in a frenzy.

The second she made it outside of the public building's wards, Hermione disapparated.

That night, when Hermione was safely back in her room, she came to a very firm decision.

She had swaddled herself in a mountain of blankets after stripping off her clothes, feeling far too tired and frazzled to heal herself properly. The bruise on her hip was a spectacular shade of blue-violet; such natural injuries not concealed by her ring, which specifically covered magically-induced makings. While the injury on her side throbbed, it wasn't too awful. She would heal it in the morning.

One of many things I shall do in the morning, Hermione thought, looking across the room at the bit of parchment which bore Hepzibah's address on it.

She would reach out to her soon-to-be Auntie tomorrow.

There was no time to lose.

Dear Miss Hepzibah Smith,

I apologize for being so forward with this letter, but I was recently informed by a colleague of mine that you have acquired the original copy of 'Confronting the Faceless'. I am the current Director of Collections at the Museum of Magical Texts located in New York, and was wondering if, perhaps, you would allow me to examine such a rarity? I happen to be in London on business for a time, and I was told that you are a most generous philanthropist. If your schedule would allow it, I would be delighted to discuss our shared interests over tea sometime.

Please respond via owl at this address, where I am currently staying for the next several nights in Diagon Alley, with attention to my name.

Your Sincerely,

Miss Victoria Alexandria Hawthorne

Hermione folded up the letter and sealed it inside of a heavy envelope, sending it away with a owl from the public owlery. It was all a lie, of course—but it was a story which Hermione hoped would result in a quick and simple yes. Someone important from a collections department of some museum
seemed like the exact kind of person Hepzibah would want to show off to, and Hermione was certain she would hear from her soon. The how and why of it didn't matter—Hermione only needed an invitation to her home, as she was certain that an old, pureblooded witch with a lot of money lived in a place as warded as the Black’s. Just because she had a mailing address, she doubted she could just show up with her wand drawn.

Once she was in the door, however…

Having such a keen eye for details was becoming taxing, and Hermione's lies were starting to compound. She had needed to confound the innkeeper at Diagon that her name was Victoria Alexandria Hawthorne that morning, so that when Hepzibah replied, the letter would be given to her. Exhausting, Hermione thought again. She left the owlery, resisting the urge to look over her shoulder every five seconds, as though Tom Riddle might appear at any moment. Because he had, and he could, and why the blazes hadn't she considered that he might go to the library?

He was that sort, wasn't he? The bookworm-ish type, the kind who would frequent a massive library…

Just like her.

None of that, now, Hermione scolded herself—allowing one quick glance over her shoulder, after all. There were no young Dark Lords in sight. Don't go comparing yourself to him. Just because you're both interested in being well-read doesn't mean you're anything alike.

Obviously.

She had just made it to the town center, about to disapparate, when Hermione realized something.

Her hip.

Last night, it had ached with a dull and consistent throb. But this morning, she had felt nothing, and it should feel worse, not better by now, surely? It was rather nasty looking…

She vanished with a pop and appeared outside of her inn. "Morning, Miss Hawthorne!" the man at the desk greeted. Even if Hermione would have remembered to respond to that name, she wouldn't have—she rushed up to her room, heart racing.

The moment she had the door closed and locked, Hermione pulled up her shirt, and shoved the hem of her pants down.

Gone.

The bruise, which had been so massive the night before, was gone, not so much as a trace of it left.

She stripped.

Hermione whipped her clothes off faster than a wizard being seduced by a throng of Veela. She let her clothes fall where they may and slid off her ring, and when she stood in front of the full-length mirror, naked, her breath hitched in her gilded throat.

The golden lines were definitely spreading.

They were not only on her neck, but they were now coiling down her chest, grazing her collar bone and the tops of her shoulders in shimmering spirals. Hermione ran her fingers over them, astonished.
What did it all mean? The dazzling lines, the bruise vanishing—

Hermione nearly fainted at the sudden recollection from the Department of Mysteries… and not from a time when she'd worked there.

It was a memory of a Death Eater that struck her, a man she had stunned… Rabastan, and his head aging and de-aging within a glass jar, forever stuck in a loop…

Hermione swallowed thickly and grabbed a letter opener from the desk. She went to the bathroom and, holding her hand over the sink, swiped it across her palm. Blood blossomed along the cut, and she watched with numb detachment as blood dripped and fell to the floor.

She noted the time and waited.

The blood coagulated a few minutes later, but the injury remained, a sharp pain on her palm.

Still, she waited.

It took a few hours, but then Hermione's outlandish hypothesis was confirmed.

The cut was, very slowly, healing. Her skin was closing itself up, almost in slow motion, in the same yet opposite manner in which she had caused it—it stitched closed from the bottom to top, like it was healing—

In reverse, Hermione thought, thunderstruck.

It took over an hour, but eventually, the wound had disappeared.

"My body is on a cycle," Hermione murmured to herself, staring at the mirror. A golden-lined girl with the word Mudblood still carved into her arm stared back at her… stunned, confused, and more frightened than she'd ever been in her life.
Hermione stood there, stark naked and staring at herself for what must have been the better part of an hour.

Her body was healing itself, it was stuck on a cycle… But what kind of cycle? Was her physical form perpetually reverting itself to the moment in which she'd been struck with the time-turner? But the time-turner itself had caused a brutal injury, and that wound on her neck wasn't disappearing and reappearing…

Hermione trailed her fingers over her throat, tilting her head and watching the way the markings caught the light. They shone brilliantly, like someone had painted perfect spirals of liquid gold onto her skin, and she couldn't help but think that they were rather gorgeous… Beautiful, even… Beautiful, but terrifying.

Maybe, she thought, maybe the injury on her neck wasn't constantly coming back because the time-turner had not yet dissolved fully into her bloodstream. Perhaps she had healed herself before the vitreous fragments made it throughout her body, and she was in a cycle which focused on some point in time just a few hours later…

It would explain why the word Mudblood wasn't going away, at least. That was a marking she'd had before…

But then, if her body were stuck in some kind of loop based on that night… what were the lasting implications? Was she physically never going to age beyond that day? Was the cycle going to remain the same, or would it someday wear off…? It was in her blood, and that meant it was everywhere, and so—

What about her mind? Hermione's heart raced at the notion, her reflection paling. If it was flowing through her blood, that meant it was flowing through her brain, and so did that mean her mind was in a loop as well? Were the axons and dendrites between the neurons in her brain firing impulses on repeat, was she doomed to continuously forget and remember all which she knew from that night onwards?

Oh, God, Hermione thought with terror, what if my mind was permanently damaged? What if this is just some delirious fabrication my psyche has invented, and I'm actually sitting in St. Mungo's, pressing candy wrappers into strangers' hands alongside Frank and Alice Longbottom?

Panic—cold, paralyzing, and all-consuming—threatened to consume her again. Her reflection looked foreign with how white her skin had become.

No, don't do that, Hermione berated herself, closing her eyes, focusing.

Breathe in, breathe out… Remember your training, remember…

She opened her eyes again several minutes later. She wasn't laying in a hospital room somewhere. This was real, she was in 1950… and she had to hold herself together if she wanted to complete her initial task.

Though it did beg the question… If the time-turner was cycling her body, focused around a precise moment which was shortly after her injury, then why wasn't her mind being affected? She felt as lucid and as rational as she always felt—or as rational as she could feel, given the circumstances. So,
why was this the case? The brain was just another vital organ; the human mind, brilliant as it could be, was only the result of electrical signals being passed from one cell to another, which ultimately controlled the entirety of the nervous system…

Or was it?

Was the fact that her body was clearly being affected by the time-turner, yet her mind was not, some indication that this was idea was false? Was there something beyond the body that went untouched and unaffected by cells, tissue, and blood? Was she, right here, right now, the living proof that the intangible did exist… The ethereal mind—the soul, perhaps?

No amount of analyzing her pale reflection brought Hermione any closer to enlightenment. She stood there for a long while, staring at the gilded loops like she might catch them in the act of spreading.

A knock on the door shocked her out of her stupor.

"Miss Hawthorne! An owl came for you!"

Hermione hurriedly began to dress herself. "Just a moment!" she called as she tugged her shirt over her shoulders and pulled on her pants. She slipped the ring back onto her finger, and the mysterious scars vanished from sight.

There will be time for endless philosophizing later, she thought to herself firmly. She tossed her mass of hair over one shoulder and went to get the door.

She had so much to do.

The very next day, Hermione found herself on the doorstep of Number 32, Cadogen Street, London.

Having been invited and given the address by the rightful owner of the property, Hermione was assured that the home would become accessible to her once she passed the first ward.

Hepzibah Prudence Smith lived alone in Chelsea, which Hermione was well aware was an affluent area in London by muggle standards. Evidently, this extended to the witches and wizards who lived there as well. Hepzibah’s house appeared to her much in the same manner that Grimmauld Place had the first time she'd seen it, after reading the handwritten letter from the then-secret keeper, Albus Dumbledore. The buildings labeled 31 and 33 moved aside, revealing a structure which had not been present before. The muggles passing by didn't so much as look up at the sudden shifting of bricks and mortar right in front of them.

Hermione stared at the home in awe.

It was gorgeous, built of what looked like limestone in a gothic style. The door was impossibly tall, painted black with a huge, wright-iron knocker in the center. A lovely, stained glass window shone in the morning light on the upper level, directly over the front door—a circular, abstract pattern made completely in gemstone hues.

The house was more of a mansion, really. Hermione knew she shouldn’t have been surprised—she was aware that Hepzibah Smith was rich, had even seen the memory of some of the interior of the home, and that room alone had been lavishly decorated—but still, Hermione gaped.

"I think I'm going to like it here," she murmured to herself. Hermione smirked as she squared her shoulders and gripped the metal knocker, banging on the door. It swung open almost at once, and before her stood a tiny, familiar house-elf.
"Welcome to the home of my Mistress, Madam Hepzibah Smith, Miss Hawthorne!" the elf squeaked, bowing her head as she opened the door for Hermione to walk through. "Madam is waiting for you in the foyer for tea, ma'am. Hokey will be showing you there!"

Hermione smiled fondly down the poor, unfortunate thing, knowing what had happened to her in the future she had left behind. Tom Riddle had given her a false memory, forcing this dear, loyal creature to honestly believed that she had accidentally poisoned her mistress… Hermione could only imagine the strife she had suffered afterwards, until Dumbledore had found out the truth…

But by then, Hokey was even older and frailer than she was now—and she was easily the oldest house-elf Hermione had ever seen in this year—and she had died before she could be proven innocent.

_Not on my watch_, Hermione thought, stepping into the house and looking to see if Hepzibah was in sight. She wasn't. Hermione turned and pulled out her wand, kneeling so that she was at eye-level with Hokey.

The elf was so small that it took her entire body weight to push the front door closed. When she turned back around to see Hermione on her knees in front of her she jumped, confused. "M-Miss Hawthorne?"

"No, dear thing," Hermione said quietly. She raised her wand and smiled. "Not quite… _Obliviate_."

After erasing the last fifteen seconds from her memory, Hermione quickly began weaving the lie of who she wanted Hokey to think she was, implanting the memory in the elf's mind. It was relatively simple; the minds of house-elves were less complicated than those of humans.

"Your Mistress may prove more difficult," she murmured once she'd finished. Hokey blinked at her dazedly, her large eyes out of focus—a normal reaction. Individual's whose memories were tampered with usually felt a bit off afterwards. Then, feeling only slightly guilty, Hermione cast a wordless stunning charm, catching the elf before she hit the ground.

"You'll feel much better after a bit of a nap," she said, picking Hokey up and laying her on a nearby sofa.

Right. And now, Hepzibah.

Hermione turned and made her way towards where she assumed the foyer must be. She tried not to become distracted by her extravagant surroundings—Hepzibah certainly had garish, profligate tastes.

"Madam Smith?" she called tentatively, opening a set of double doors, wand held tightly in one hand. She smiled brightly at the sight that met her: Hepzibah was sitting in the very same sitting room where should would one day welcome Tom Riddle into her home… only there was no empty vase sitting expectantly on the table, now.

Which was all well and good, because Hermione certainly hadn't brought flowers.

Hermione only allowed Hepzibah one look of surprise at her appearance—whether it was because she did not look like a sophisticated Director of Collections at some museum in New York, because she had burst in without being led by Hokey the house-elf, or because Hermione had her wand pointed directly at Hepzibah's chest in a very impolite manner, Hermione wasn't sure. Probably a combination of all three.

She didn't ask for clarification. "_Stupefy_," Hermione said, and Hepzibah went out like a light.
Unconscious minds were much easier to manipulate. Hermione promptly got to work.

"Hermione… dearest."

Nearly two weeks had passed, and Hermione had made herself right at home at Number 32, Cadogen Street, London.

The sad truth of the matter was that Hepzibah Smith was extremely simple to manipulate, and it wasn't just that her mind was easily tricked by memory modifications.

Hepzibah was not a stupid woman, nor was she weak, slow, or senseless.

She was lonely.

Hepzibah may have been a very philanthropic witch—she frequently invited guests of importance into her house, she hosted teas and attended lavish fundraisers—but she had no family left, no children. Hepzibah had countless acquaintances but no truly close friends. Hermione had rifled through her memories enough to see why. Many times, Hepzibah had been burned by someone whom she thought was honestly interested in her companionship, but who turned out to be far more interested in her gold, instead. It had made her a bit resentful and much more reclusive in her old age.

And yet you still fell for the charm of Tom Riddle, Hermione had thought with a sigh.

But not this time. This time, you have me.

Hepzibah Smith lived only with Hokey in her huge home. She was the sole heir to the Smith family fortune, and had been ever since her younger sister had died a few years ago…

Which was a lie.

Hepzibah Smith did not have a younger sister… but she firmly believed as much, now.

A much younger, more outgoing and daring sister who had decided that America was where she wanted to be, and who had moved to the United States in the 1920's. Monica, Hermione had decided to name her fabrication, in honor of the false name she had once given her true mother.

The lie had worked then. Hermione believed that it would work now.

The imaginary Monica Jean Smith had moved to New York City, and had eventually given birth to her one and only daughter, Hermione Jean Smith, in 1929. In Hermione's fake past, she was raised alone by her mother in the Upper East Side of Manhattan, until she eventually left home to attend Ilvermorny School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Alas, tragedy occurred, and Monica Smith fell ill to the dragon pox epidemic which struck the city the very summer after Hermione had graduated, filling her poor daughter with grief. Hermione Smith, having recently come of age, had then decided that she needed to travel, to leave Manhattan for a time, to see the world…

Which, eventually, led her to Britain, where she had an aunt that she had only met a few times. Little memories of she, Hepzibah, and Monica having Christmas dinner here in Hepzibah's home in London, on the few years that Hepzibah was not too busy during the holidays with some philanthropic event… And, of course, the fabrication of a funeral, of the death of Monica…

No loose ends, Hermione had thought, feeling guilty as she wove the memories of fake but still
tangible grief into the witch's mind.

It was tragic, that fiction which she'd written… even if it wasn't real.

But how happy was Hepzibah to have her niece here to stay!

It was absurdly easy to convince Hepzibah's unconscious mind that she had a deceased sister and a niece. The older woman desperately wanted the closeness of family, of someone to care for. Her closest confidant was Hokey, and while Hermione could appreciate the fondness she had for the elf, and praise her for treating Hokey well, it was not enough. Hepzibah was craved human closeness.

Hermione was all too happy to fill that gap.

It was tempting, to just modify Hephzibah's memory and move forward with her plan right away, but Hermione made herself wait. Certain things, such as false memories, were easy to fabricate—for Hermione, at least. Implanting the story of Monica and her daughter was simple.

Other things, however, were impossible to manufacture, even for someone as skilled as Hermione. …Like love.

No one could replicate true affection. If a skilled Legilimens bothered to delve into Hephzibah's recently modified mind, they could, conceivably, see that there were no real emotions of attachment where Hermione was concerned. Her memories would then look suspicious, and could therefore be discovered to be falsities. Memory charms could be broken.

It was too risky.

Hermione would take no chances. She committed herself to creating real affection between herself and Hepzibah before she proceeded.

That, and Hermione wanted to be comfortable in this lavish building she was now living in—she wanted it to feel like home. Hermione needed to be familiar with Number 32, Cadogen Street, London… as well as all its hidden treasures.

It hadn't taken long. Hepzibah had been so very excited to show who she believed to be a family member the cup of Helga Hufflepuff ("Your grandmother passed it down to me, of course, as I was the oldest... Your mother was ever so jealous!") as well as the more recently acquired locket of Salazar Slytherin.

Hermione had seen them both, had held the golden chalice and heavy chain in her hands… Completely whole, untouched by dark magic…

Safe… for now.

She would see to it that they stayed that way.

By the second week, Hermione was truly beginning to feel cozy. She had a huge bedroom with a balcony all to herself; there was a furnished roof deck which she could go on and stare at the stars; Hepzibah even had a glorious, personal library which was so well-stocked that Hermione would never need to frequent the public library and risk running into certain individuals ever again.

Hepzibah had also given her a key to the Smith vault in Gringotts, thus forever solving her financial issues. Hermione had pretended like she'd had her own money and simply wanted to keep it safe in a vault while abroad. A lie, naturally, and Hermione had been sure that Hepzibah remembered the
balance of her vault accordingly, later.

It almost felt like being on vacation.

Hepzibah may not have been her first choice of company, but she was kind and warm, and Hokey was a delightful little elf. They both doted on her, so happy to have a guest staying in their huge, usually empty house. Hepzibah had been nothing short of motherly towards the girl she believed to be her niece.

Hermione was therefore very distraught by the nervous tone in her voice just now.

She looked up from her book, concerned. They were spending a lazy Sunday afternoon in the sitting room, reading by the fire. Hokey served them tea, happy to have two people smiling and thanking her for her good work.

"Yes, auntie?" Hermione said, lowering her text on contemporary charms... of the 1940's. Hepzibah's brows were deeply furrowed, and she was looking at Hermione in a very uncharacteristic, scrutinizing manner.

"You're a young, pretty witch," she said after a pause, like she was choosing her words carefully. "And... Oh, I remember when I was your age."

Hepzibah set her own book aside, leaning forward, her eyes suddenly alight with enthusiasm. "I had hair just like yours, only it stuck out even more, because of the color," she said, eyeing Hermione's wild locks. "And I never wore make-up, either. Couldn't be bothered with any of it, especially not my hair. I thought I was a lost cause."

Hermione was honestly surprised by this confession: Hepzibah had worn make-up every day in Hermione's presence, and her curly, red hair was always up in a perfect bun.

"And then I went to Melissa."

"Melissa?"

"Melissa the miracle, as I call her," Hepzibah said, grinning. "She's the best beautician in London. If I didn't go to her once a month, this hair would be as frizzy and out of control as yours... no offense, darling, but the Smith hair, it is a curse! Of course, mine would also be silver rather than ginger, at this point."

Hermione smirked and closed her book. "Perhaps I like my frizzy, out of control hair."

Hepzibah was obviously unconvinced. "Oh, don't give me that. You're an even worse liar than your mother was," she muttered, and Hermione had to hand it to herself—she really had done a fabulous job on creating fake memories. "Monica was a free spirit, I always appreciated that about her, and know you're just the same way—but you're in London now, dearie, and I have a reputation to uphold."

She took a sip of her tea, looking a bit haughty—but she was smirking. Hepzibah had a very dry sense of humor, Hermione had come to learn. "Well!" Hermione said, crossing her arms and pretending to be deeply offended. "I would hate to shatter your reputation, Auntie. That would be so rude of me, considering you are being such a generous host."

"Quite. The reason I bring it up now is because there is a gala next week being hosted by WAG, the Wizarding Artist's Guild. I've been a great patron for years, and their gala's are always wonderful—they have a dinner, an auction, drinks and dancing... It's fabulous. You're coming with me." She
lowered her tea cup, which Hokey instant refilled. "And you can't go looking like *that."

Hermione might have been affronted… if she didn't secretly agree.

She had been thinking about it for a while, now. Hermione remembered very clearly how most of the girls—Pansy Parkinson and her gang of Slytherins in particular—had carried themselves, how they styled their hair and wore fancy make-up and perfume…

If she wanted to play the part convincingly, she was going to have to start doing that, too. She knew it, she was just… delaying the inevitable.

It still stung a bit to hear the suggestion coming from her fake aunt, first.

"…All right," Hermione said. "I'll go see this Melissa."

"Excellent! I made you an appointment for tomorrow afternoon. What? I knew you'd agree to go, and she books out weeks in advance. This way she can show you how to make yourself marvelous. Oh, I already can't wait to see you when you get back!"

"You're not coming with me?"

"And ruin the surprise? Of course not!" Hepzibah shouted. "I want the whole effect. I've got some errands to run tomorrow anyway, so I'll tend to those while you're with her. She's going to do your hair and your make-up, show you how to make yourself look a proper lady, and then I want you to treat yourself to some new clothes—all on me, of course. Go to the nicest boutique afterwards. Her parlor is in Diagon Alley, so you'll have plenty of places to choose from. Then you can just summon Hokey and have her alert me when you're all done, and we can meet up again and go out to dinner afterwards. To *celebrate!*

Hepzibah's enthusiasm was palpable. Hermione didn't have the heart to let her see that she was anything but excited.

"Of course," she said, and Hepzibah clapped her hands together gleefully. "To, er, celebrate."

They clinked their tea cups together, like they were toasting some grand event. Hermione went back to her book but failed to take in a single word.

Later that night, she laid wide-awake in her silk sheets and king-sized bed, unsure what she was more nervous about—her first real encounter with Tom Riddle, or this 'miraculous' Melissa.

She was leaning towards the latter.
"My, my, my."

Hermione felt more anxious than when she'd had the Sorting Hat placed on her head. She relived that moment now, mentally rejecting the reality of her situation in a beauty parlor, being analyzed at length by a very critical woman. Hermione recalled being in Hogwarts' Great Hall, eleven years old, excited, nervous… and still secretly unconvinced that she was a witch at all.

It had been a silly fear, of course. She'd gotten her letter and spoken with a Hogwarts representative, purchased a wand, and had even tried out a few spells on her own—all of which had worked. She'd memorized textbooks and committed new, magical histories to memory…

But still, in that moment before the Sorting Hat had begun to speak, Hermione had feared that it was going to never say anything at all. That she would sit there for minutes on end, and that finally, after an unbearable amount of silence, McGonagall would take the Hat off and say there must have been a mistake—that she wasn't a witch, that magic wasn't real, not for her. That she would wake up and the idea of Hogwarts would feel like something out of a dream, and she would go back to her life of being the bushy-haired bookworm with buckteeth that was just… different.

But then the Hat had begun to deliberate.

'Smart, yes… a great thirst for knowledge… Brave, too, very bold… Oh my, I don't think I've ever seen such a clever and cunning mind in years! But, ah… Alas… Ravenclaw or Gryffindor, then, Ravenclaw or Gryffindor… Tell me, Miss Granger, what is more important: to know, or to act?'

Hermione had considered this for a time. 'Well… What's the point of knowing anything, if you're not going to act?'

The Hat had laughed. 'Considered like a Ravenclaw, but answered with the conviction of a GRYFFINDOR!'

And the rest was history. The last word had been shouted out loud, and Hermione Granger was sorted into the house of the brave and the bold.

She did not feel brave nor bold, now.

Melissa was a witch in her late thirties, perhaps, with platinum blonde hair and bright, hazel eyes. Hermione could see at once why she was the most sought after beautician in London—her face was made up flawlessly, her hair was a cascade of enviable, silvery waves that reached her shoulders. Even her nails, while kept short, shone like they had just been painted in liquid emeralds, a hue that matched the green in her mottled eyes perfectly.

She was stunning.

She was… extremely judgmental.

Melissa walked around Hermione like a predatory cat encircling its prey, trying to figure out the best plan of attack. Hermione sat in the chair before the mirror with her fingers twisted together in her lap, her eyes lowered.

"So. Miss Smith… Hepzibah warned me when she made the appointment," she said, pausing to
wrap a perfectly manicured finger around one of Hermione's bushy locks, "but I don't think she warned me enough."

Hermione laughed feebly. "Am I a lost cause?"

"You? Or no, not at all." Melissa then moved so quickly that Hermione squealed. She reached down and grabbed her chin, blatantly examining her features. "Your face is the perfect canvas," she said. "But first I must address the hair, or I won't be able to focus properly. Tell me, what's your daily routine?"

Hermione stared. "Er," she said, feeling completely out of sorts, for once not having an answer to a question. Her 'daily routine' was exactly nothing, except perhaps throwing her hair up in a ponytail or putting on lip balm.

A few moments of silence and Hermione blushing was enough for Melissa to understand. "Right. Well. The hair," she said, business-like, "Are you opposed to going short? Bobs are very fashionable right now, and you have the face for it."

Hermione instantly paled. She had not thought about it before this very moment, but what if her hair was on a cycle, too? What if she let this woman cut it, only for it to grow back to exactly how long it was before in a few hours' time?

Well, truthfully, that was not why her heart thrummed with anxiety. Her hands flew up to her unruly locks, suddenly viscerally protective. "No," she said, shaking her head. "Don't cut it."

"None of it?"

"None of it."

"Not even a trim?"

"Not even a trim."

Melissa looked at her like Hermione was the biggest idiot alive. It reminded her very much of the look Draco had given her when she'd questioned his gift of gold.

"…Okay, then," Melissa said at length. "If you want me to transform you but you will not allow me to cut any of it off..."

She stepped behind her, grabbing one curly tendril and pulling it taut. She grinned at Hermione in the mirror.

"How would you feel about straight hair, Miss Smith?"

Hermione laughed at once, far louder than before. "My hair? Straight?" she balked. "The last time I attempted that, it took two hours and several bottles of Sleeky's Hair Potion."

"Bottles of what?"

"Er… It's an American thing," Hermione murmured, shaking her head.

Melissa put her hands on her hips and frowned. "I'm not the most successful stylist in all of London for nothing," she said, pulling out her wand. "I don't use potions, here. I use charms and spells of my own invention. I've come up with a permanent straightening charm—and no one has come close to mimicking it thus far, and only I know the counter-spell to undo it! Which means you'll have to come
back to me every month or so, as your hair grows out, or if you ever want it undone… What do you say? Are you ready for a new look?"

Hermione's mouth felt dry. She wondered if she would have to come back, if her hair was growing like it normally would. Trying not to overthink things too much, she nodded, saying nothing.

"Excellent! Get comfortable, Miss Smith."

Melissa spun the chair around so that Hermione was no longer facing it. She rolled her sleeves up and stretched, like someone about to run or race, or perhaps go to war.

"This is going to take a while."

Over two hours later, and it was done.

Melissa turned Hermione towards the mirror again, having not allowed her to see her reflection until she was finished. The poor beautician looked exhausted, having cast spells repetitively for such a length of time. Hermione, as she'd pointed out more than once, had a lot of hair.

But Melissa was relentless and persistent, Hermione had to give her that. She never complained once, and when Hermione looked at her reflection, she actually thought it might be some kind of trick.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Melissa murmured, watching Hermione's eyes go wide. "How changing one's hairstyle can alter an appearance so much? Well? Go on, give it a feel!"

Hermione stood like she was in a trance. Her hair…

It was so smooth and flat it was unworldly. Hermione had thought she'd done a good job when she had straightened it in her fourth year, but now she realized that she had been novice. It was now not only straight, but soft, shiny, and long, so long… Her hair in its curly state had reached just below her shoulders, but straight, it fell past her elbows…

"Whoa," she breathed, running her fingers through it from her scalp all the way to the end—a feat she had never been able to accomplish before.

"Do you like it?"

Hermione looked at herself for a long time.

She was… unsure.

There was no denying that it was beautiful; Melissa definitely knew what she was doing. Her hair looked like something out of a magazine ad.

It wasn't her.

Which is exactly what it needs to be, Hermione thought, forcing away whatever crippling emotion was threatening to overwhelm her at the loss of her frizzy curls. I'm not a fuzzy-haired bookworm anymore. I am a poised, confident, arrogant, pureblood witch.

"It's perfect," she finally said, grinning.

Melissa beamed. "It is, isn't it? Really works for your face shape… Now, about that face!"
Melissa grabbed her by the shoulders and all but threw Hermione back in the chair. "You don't usually wear make-up, that much is obvious," she said, pointing her wand about the salon, where drawers flew open and brushes, poufs, and various items that looked like they might be torture devices hovered around her. Hermione swallowed thickly.

"But you should! Such a lovely face deserves to be highlighted, now that it's not concealed by a mass of tangles. You have good skin, high cheekbones, full lips… bottom one is a bit large, but it works. And your eye color is quite nice."

Hermione couldn't help but gape, particularly surprised by the last bit. "My eye color?" she asked. "But… my eyes are just… brown. Nothing special."

Melissa made a scandalized noise. "I have seen a lot of people, Miss Smith," she said, walking around her and looking at Hermione in the mirror again. "And one thing I can tell you is that everyone's eyes are special. No set is the same—often, the two even differ from each other! I have seen blues that are light and icy like a winter's morning frost, and blues that are navy like a midnight sky. I have seen greens that are deep like the moss that grows in the shadows of a forest, and greens that are as vibrant as an unforgivable curse… And I have seen thousands of brown eyes. They, too, are infinitely varied. Browns like a deer's fur, browns like the bark of an oak tree… Browns so dark that they border on black, tunnels that pull you in…"

Melissa leaned down so that her chin nearly rested on Hermione's shoulder, keeping eye contact with her in the mirror. "And what would you call yours?" Hermione asked, noting that Melissa's eyes were a mix of brown and green.

"Unimportant," she responded easily. "Right now, my eyes are all for yours… And they are exquisite. You see how your irises have a dark ring along the outside? That's called a limbal ring. Not everyone has them, but they're considered attractive in any hue. Your eyes are dark on the rim, but they're actually quite light near your pupil, practically amber, golden-brown…"

Hermione leaned closer to the mirror to see more clearly. She had never taken the time to examine her eyes so critically before… But as she looked at them, now, she could see that Melissa was right. They were a sort of amber hue, near the center…

"There's a misconception that make-up is mostly meant to conceal flaws, to trick people. It's not. When done correctly, make-up is a tool to highlight our best features. It's meant to draw attention to the places we want it, to make people notice the beauty that they may otherwise miss. So, take notes, Miss Smith."

Melissa snatched a few items out of the air. Hermione had a momentary instinctive need for a quill and parchment, to take her instructions literally and write down everything she said. "You're going to look a whole new witch by the time I'm done with you. Now… let's bring that gold out."

Hermione left the parlor in a daze.

Melissa the miracle surpassed her wildest expectations. Hermione had gawked at her reflection for an embarrassingly long time after she'd finished, stunned. Her eyes looked so warm and vibrant that Hermione wondered if it wasn't actually another side-effect of the time-turner, or if that truly was the power of shimmery, violet eyeshadow and the magical equivalent of mascara—which was a simple charm that Melissa was kind enough to show her.

For some things there were spells; for others, physical, enchanted make-up worked better. Hermione learned what she needed to and bought everything else, unconcerned with the cost.
She felt far too elated for something as simple and contrite as a *make-over*.

And yet she was. *Elated.* Hermione couldn't stop smiling as she walked through Diagon Alley, catching her reflection in shop windows. She saw the way heads turned when she shopped, the way that people stared. She'd never felt so ridiculously confident… all because of a hair style and some artfully placed blush.

Hermione truly did feel like a whole new witch.

She'd purchased herself a new set of robes, too, just as Hepzibah had instructed. Dress robes of the highest quality in a cut that she never would have considered before. The neckline was lower, the skirt beneath the cloak a bit higher. Nothing inappropriate, of course, but a just bit more… *daring*.

They were all black.

Looking at herself in the dressing room mirror, Hermione felt there was a stranger staring back at her —some mysterious, gorgeous woman, the kind seen on the arms of powerful politicians at lavish parties.

*I am ready,* she thought with a sly smile.

It was just as she was leaving Twilfitt and Tatting's in her new attire, about to summon Hokey, when that last thought repeated itself in her mind... but as a question.

*Am I ready?*

Hermione checked the time on her watch, which was also newly purchased—gold and thin, a delicate piece of jewelry. It matched her ring perfectly.

It was only half past five.

Hermione deliberated.

She was feeling confident. She was dressed the part, she had her face recently and impeccably made up by the best beautician in London. She had her story memorized, she had gone over and over in her mind exactly how she wanted her first encounter with Tom Riddle to go—what she would say, how she would say it…

Borgin and Burkes was just a five-minute walk away. She was *here.* Would she be any more prepared tomorrow, or the next day, or next week, than she was right now?

*Unlikely.* Hermione bit her lower lip, contemplating. *I know my lines, I've been preparing for this for weeks. Besides, it's only going to be a few minutes. A short but critical exchange…*

*I am ready.*

Hermione straightened her posture and walked with purpose, making her way towards a dark alley with equally dark intentions. She lifted her hood over her head. *Considered like a Ravenclaw,* she thought, smirking.

…*but answered like a Gryffindor.*
The Adventurer

Hermione fastened the top buttons of her cloak and kept her hood carefully drawn as she turned a corner, her face hidden beneath the shadows. There was still the barest hint of daylight, but already Knockturn Alley was beginning to take on the ominous characteristics that came with such places at night.

Hermione was unafraid.

She blended in seamlessly with the other witches, wizards, and questionable beings that stalked slowly through the streets, all with their cloaks concealing their features as well. She made eye contact with no one, and did not notice anyone turning their heads to spare her a second glance.

Hermione passed a few shops that she recalled from before, such as *Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe* and a pub called *The White Wyvern*, and a few she did not. One of these was a store that must have been shut down at some point—*Talons and Fangs*, a shop that sold what looked to be dangerous and probably illegal creatures.

A few moments later, and Hermione hovered outside of the entrance to *Borgin and Burkes*.

It looked much as it had the day she'd gone in as a teenager, leaving Harry and Ron outside under the cloak. She glanced to the side, remembering it all so perfectly, how the three of them had stood right there, how she and Ron had bickered right there, Harry rolling his eyes at their squabbling…

Hermione drew in a deep breath and banished such recollections from her mind. That was a different life. She was someone else, now, and her current mission was far more perilous. She exhaled slowly, checking that her mind was clear and her undetectable Occlumency barriers intact and in place, just as they always were.

Hermione Smith entered the shop, and left Hermione Granger out in the cold, January air outside.

It was large and dimly lit store, full of glass cases and wooden shelves holding everything from shiny antiques to what appeared to be human bones. Rusty, spiked instruments hung from the ceiling, and sinister-looking masks stared down at her with empty eye sockets from the walls… masks which looked suspiciously like the ones that would later cover the faces of Death Eaters, Hermione realized with a cold wave of clarity.

*Or were they already?*

It was possible, Hermione mused, but she did not think it likely. Just because Tom Riddle had begun using a contrived title for himself while he was a student did not mean he had started branding his followers and calling them Death Eaters, yet. The Dark Mark was a very complex bit of magic; a dark curse that she doubted he would have been foolish enough to focus on developing while in school—not with Albus Dumbledore around.

She theorized that he was working on it, now. That in the years after his graduation while pretending to be a mere shop boy, Tom Riddle had two true points of focus: collecting artifacts connected to the four founders of Hogwarts, thus completing his goal of seven vessels for his soul, and learning as much as possible about the Dark Arts so that he could create a permanent, binding mark to unite his followers.

What better place to find such items and learn about the Dark Arts than in a shop which specialized
in exactly that?

A bell chimed softly behind her when the door closed, and Hermione spotted two men at the front of the store—one behind the counter, whom she presumed was a young Mr. Burke, and an unfamiliar wizard on the other side who must have been a customer. The two were speaking in low voices when Hermione entered, but Mr. Burke fell silent as she drew nearer.

Hermione kept her composure, quickly looking away from the shop owner and his current client. Tom Riddle was nowhere to be seen. Hermione internally swore; was he not working this evening? Or was he out somewhere, doing Mr. Borgin or Mr. Burke's bidding and procuring items from some other poor person?

Well, I'm in it, now, she thought, realizing that to turn around and leave so soon could be disastrous for her plans. She began idly examining the items on the shelves, like perusing dark artifacts in dodgy shops was the sort of thing she did all the time.

Mr. Burke cleared his throat. "Can I help you?" he called, and only then did Hermione make eye contact with him.

"Just looking, thank you," she answered, lofty and unsmiling. She turned her attention almost at once back to the object nearest to her—a silver, ornate hand mirror. She picked it up with one hand and slowly pulled her hood down with the other, revealing for the first time her perfectly straight, smooth tresses and the kind of face that Mr. Burke rarely saw on his clientele, Hermione was certain.

Her clothes, her jewelry, her hair, her haughty demeanor and pretty face—Hermione knew she looked like the sort of young witch who had money. No respectable store owner would be stupid enough to let someone so potentially loaded—and, with any luck, naïve—wander about their shop without someone dogging them, making sure their every whim was catered to until they were parted with a significant amount of gold.

Hermione was not disappointed. She heard Mr. Burke mutter a quick 'excuse me' to the wizard he'd been speaking with and quickly make his way over to her.

"An excellent choice, ma'am," he said, and his tone could not have been more different than the one Mr. Borgin had used with her years ago.

Mr. Burke was not suspicious nor rude, but the epitome of courteous. He had thick brows, dark hair, and smile plastered on his face that looked well-rehearsed as he nodded towards the silver mirror. "If you feel you have the need for protection, of course. This mirror is made of foe-glass. Allows you to see your enemies in the reflected surface, should you find they are getting too close. They first appear as dark shapes behind you, when physically near, but you only truly must worry when the whites of their eyes become visible. That's when they're aware…"

Hermione's blood ran cold. She watched with trepidation as a shadowy figure formed itself on the surface of the silver—close, but with an obscured, featureless face…

He was here.

Tom Riddle was here, somewhere, just… not in this room, not directly behind of her.

Not aware.

Hermione hurriedly set the mirror down. She was unsure if Mr. Burke had seen the same entity in the silver that she had, or if only the holder could see their own enemies in the shadows. His brows were furrowed and his expression curious, making her fear the former.
"Interesting, but not the sort of thing I'm looking for," she said, forcing herself to remain calm. If he had seen that Hermione had an enemy floating on the outskirts of her reflection, Mr. Burke chose not to comment on it. "And what are you looking for, Miss…?"

"Smith," Hermione answered. "Miss Smith." He inclined his head deferentially. "My name is Caractacus Burke. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Hermione allowed him to take hold of her gloved hand, where he held on just a bit too long, his thumb sliding against the silk on her wrist in a way that was too intimate for a normal handshake. "May I ask what brings you to my humble shop this evening? I mean no disrespect, but you do not fit my typical… clientele." He gave her a wry smile, and the way his eyes darted down her frame made her internally scowl. As it was, she pretended to be used to such shamelessness. "No, I suspect I don't," she agreed dryly. "I sought your store out, Mr. Burke, because my aunt has spoken very highly of your establishment. Says she's acquired some of her most valued possessions here. I'm new to England, and she's been so dear to me, letting me stay with her, showing me around the city, and, well… I wanted to find some way to repay her for her kindness. I thought I might find her a gift of some kind, here."

Hermione could see the recognition sparking to life in his eyes as he divined who she was most likely talking about. Triumph swelled in her chest, but outwardly, she made of show of looking around the store with great judgement. "I must admit, by the way she spoke of your shop and the items she's supposedly purchased here, I expected something… different."

Hermione smiled thinly. Mr. Burke swallowed her story whole, a hungry glint in his gaze. "Ah, but the objects on display are often far more than what they seem," he said adamantly. "And Knockturn Alley may be a… questionable place at times, but I assure you—you will find no greater treasures than on this street, in this shop."

"I'm sure," Hermione said, clearly unconvinced by her tone. She glanced at the wizard still standing by the counter; an older man who looked very annoyed that Mr. Burke had left him to attend to a young witch instead. "I would hate to distract you from your business, Mr. Burke. I am just looking, after all."

Caractacus was visibly torn. He did not want to abandon his first customer, but he didn't want to let Hermione slip away from the shop without purchasing something, either. She hoped he came to the obvious solution to this problem. Who else would be better to entertain a pretty witch then their very own, charismatic shop boy? "Of course," he said, inclining his head once more and backing away. "If you have any questions at all, Miss Smith, please, don't hesitate to ask."

Hermione nodded but said nothing. Rather than go straight to his previous client, Mr. Burke made his way to the back of the shop and disappeared behind a door there. Hermione quickly turned and resumed her nonchalant, somewhat bored meandering through the store, her mind racing.

He was going to go get him. Caractacus Burke was probably briefing Tom Riddle right now in the back somewhere, informing him of the obviously wealthy and ignorant witch in their midst… One who was related to a previous customer who they must keep in good graces with, for the sake of
their business…

Hermione didn’t turn at the sound of the door opening a few moments later, though adrenaline was rushing through her veins. She instead pretended to be intrigued by a tapestry that was draped over a fixture like a coat rack. The fabric was silvery blue and white in color, with a pattern on it, almost like stars…

She was just about to reach out and touch it when she remembered herself. She was in a store full of dark artifacts, and just touching things was idiotic. She was lucky the mirror had been something as harmless as foe-glass.

"It won’t hurt you."

Hermione’s heart leapt in her throat.

She hadn’t heard him walk up behind her, she hadn’t noticed him approach at all—and she had been listening intently, despite feigning disinterest in her surroundings. Hermione very nearly jumped, but managed to retain her calm disposition just barely. She glanced up, and it was like the world came to a brief but irrefutable standstill.

Just as no amount of seeing the woman in a memory had prepared Hermione for the hideousness of Merope Gaunt… nothing could have readied her for the reality of Tom Riddle.

He was striking in every conceivable way. The Slytherin heir had high cheekbones, flawless, pale skin, black hair that fell in pristine waves above his eyes… and those eyes. How had Melissa described such irises? So dark they bordered on black, tunnels that pulled you in…

Those dark tunnels were focused on her, now, and they certainly had that effect.

Tom Riddle's appearance was of the variety that was thought obliterating. Hermione's mind went blank as she inhaled the scent of that sandalwood cologne, as she stared into a set of eyes that were like two bottomless, black holes.

"That fabric, I mean," he continued, nodding towards the tapestry Hermione had nearly grabbed. His voice was smooth and low, nothing like the high and inhuman pitch Hermione half-expected it to be.

"It won't bite."

He smiled. His curling lips revealing a set of white, perfectly even teeth.

Hermione's brain lurched back to life, a thousand thoughts crashing into each other in their fight for prominence. She returned her attention to the tapestry, ignoring her thundering heart. "What is it, then?" she asked.

"Something fascinating."

He reached for the fabric, and Hermione's mouth went dry.

_The ring._

The Peverell ring, the resurrection stone—Tom Riddle was wearing it, it was on his left hand, middle finger—

_His second horcrux._

It vanished.
"It's a cloak of invisibility," he said, draping what Hermione had thought was some decorative tapestry over his arms. They disappeared beneath the cloth, and he smirked at Hermione's shocked expression, misinterpreting it completely. "One of the highest quality, guaranteed to last at least a decade."

He handed it to her. Hermione refocused and stood a bit straighter. "Oh," she said, taking the cloak from him. "I've heard of these, but I've never seen one before."

Only somewhat of a lie, really. She'd never seen a typical cloak of invisibility—Harry's hadn't had a pattern on it, it had been pure silver and pristine. Because it hadn't just been a cloak, it had been a hallow…

*Just like that ring.*

"Interesting, and quite pretty, but not particularly useful, is it?" Hermione hung the fabric up again, regaining her lofty demeanor. "A proper disillusionment charm would be more practical."

Riddle inclined his head. "I agree," he murmured. Hermione had to crane her neck to look at his face properly—God, he was so tall, she hadn't realized how tall he was in the memories.

She raised a single brow at him, channeling her inner Narcissa Malfoy and reminding herself of what brand of witch she was supposed to be playing the part of—pureblooded, rich, and entitled. "I take it you work here, then? And Mr. Burke sent you to help me find something to my liking?"

"I am but a humble servant… and Mr. Burke does hate to leave anyone in his shop without the attention they deserve." Riddle's eyes gleamed as he extended his hand. "Tom Riddle," he said, the words rolling off his tongue quite sinuously for someone who supposedly hated his name so much.

Hermione thought to give her first name as well, but stopped herself at the last moment. "Miss Smith," she offered instead. Unlike Mr. Burke, Tom Riddle's handshake was careful, gentle, and nothing short of courteous.

He caught her staring at his left hand. "I like your ring," she said, deciding that transparency was less suspicious than poorly masked disinterest.

"I like yours," he responded, eyes glancing towards her diamond encrusted ring.

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. She forced a grin, quickly convincing herself that she must be imagining the playful gleam in his eyes. He couldn't possibly know that it was enchanted just by looking at it… could he? "Oh, thank you. A relatively recent acquisition," she said, holding her hand up and pretending only to be flattered—not unnerved. "But yours, yours is obviously old, vintage. You can tell that it's unique, truly one of a kind. Such things are rare. Wherever did you get it?"

Rather than act complimented, Riddle lowered his hand, clearly not wanting to discuss just how rare a treasure it was. "I inherited it, I'm afraid," he lied effortlessly. "It used to belong to my grandfather, before he passed away."

Well. Not a complete lie, Hermione supposed. "That's lovely," she said. "You're lucky to have something precious to remember him by. Family is so important."

"…Yes," Riddle responded after a pause. He spoke again before Hermione could, carefully shifting the focus away from himself and onto her. "Mr. Burke has informed me that you are new to England," he said. "May I ask where you're from?"
"America, originally. But I've been traveling quite a bit over the past few years. I finally came to stay with my aunt here in London a few weeks ago."

"America?" Riddle looked honestly curious. "You grew up in the United States?"

"New York City, born and raised," she replied, looking away from him when she spoke and taking interest in a medium-sized, wooden box on a shelf, one with markings carved on its surface.

"And yet you have no accent whatsoever, as far as I can tell."

Hermione glanced at him and grinned, prepared for this. "I can't tell you how happy it makes me to hear you say that," she gushed as though making a great confession. "My mother was from London, and I was very close to her. I thought her English accent made her sound so sophisticated—as did everyone else, truthfully. I emulated everything about her, especially the way she spoke. I even called her 'mum' rather than 'mom'."

Hermione turned her attention back to the wooden box, eyes narrowing as she examined the markings there. "Those are Ancient Runes carved into the surface," Riddle explained. "They mean —"

"Beware… and something about greed, and the lunar cycle…" Riddle's eyes widened a fraction when Hermione lifted the box and began turning it, investigating it in earnest as she attempted to translate from the crudely drawn markings. She pursed her lips as she looked from one side to the other, thinking…

Ancient Runes were always at least somewhat difficult to decipher. It wasn't like reading a sentence, one word at a time—one needed the whole picture before the message was clear.

"It can only be opened safely on the full moon…" she said slowly, though that didn't explain the last symbols, nor a few on the first side…

Just when Riddle opened his mouth to speak, she figured it out. "Oh! Unless it's opened by someone who only wants to place something in the box, but not take something out." She looked up at Riddle, her cheerful expression at having solved a puzzle quickly turning to one of apprehension. "And what happens if someone with the intent of removing whatever's inside opens it on the wrong day?" she asked.

Riddle's face became blank. He was no longer smiling like the charismatic shop boy he was supposed to be emulating, but staring at Hermione with a thoughtful look in his eyes. "…We do not know," he said slowly. His lips slowly curled, bemused, and it was far darker than his previous smile.

"Buyer beware."

Hermione set it down and shrugged like she was unimpressed. She began walking down the aisle, looking around at a few other items on the shelves. She could feel Burke's eyes following her as she moved, distracted once more from his own customer.

"I take it you've studied Ancient Runes extensively, then," Riddle said, staying close to her.

"Yes. I took it for years at Ilvermorny. One of my favorite subjects. What is this?"

She pointed towards a polished, golden sphere on a stand. "An Entrancing Orb," he answered. "Stare at it for too long, and the only way you can look away again is if someone calls your name."
Hermione looked away so quickly that Riddle laughed. What a predicament she would be in, if she needed to confess her true name just to be able to leave the damn shop! "Another cursed object," she muttered. "I'm beginning to sense a pattern, here. It's no wonder Mr. Burke asked you to attend to me. Clearly just looking in this store in a safety hazard."

Riddle laughed again, a soft and charming sound. "This is not the type of shop where people come to peruse the shelves casually," he said. "Our typical clients come with a specific object in mind; or, more often than not, to sell."

"Well, I am not a typical client," Hermione said curtly.

"No," Riddle agreed, his voice lowering. "That much is perfectly obvious."

There was a beat of silence. Hermione looked up into his eyes and could see nothing there at all.

"You said you attended Ilvermorny," he continued after a moment, his voice politely interested once more. "I'll admit that I know very little about that school. Did you enjoy it, there?"

"Oh, yes," Hermione said wistfully. "Very much. It's the very best Wizarding School in the world."

Riddle's eyes narrowed slightly. "I would venture to say that is a matter of opinion, Miss Smith."

Hermione laughed. "Of course. I expect that you're going to tell me that—what is it?—Hogwarts is the best?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "Yes, my mother went there, she's told me all about it. How you sit on a stool and have a ragged old hat tell you what House you should be in? Forgive me, Mr. Riddle, but that sounds a bit... crass."

She turned and let her focus drift to a set of silver instruments which reminded her of dental tools. "Enchanted utensils for the purpose of extracting extremely lethal venom from the bodies of magical creatures," he explained quickly. "Beautiful and nearly indestructible tools, but unless you intend to harvest something like basilisk venom, there's hardly any use for them."

"Perhaps I intend to harvest some basilisk venom in the near future," Hermione murmured. She picked one up, a small, thin knife, and twirled it in her fingers. She briefly entertained the notion that maybe she should buy something today, after all.

"Then you best purchase a blindfold, as well."

Riddle's expression was perfectly composed. Hermione smirked. "Or a rooster whose vocal chords are enchanted with an amplifying charm," she said, placing the silver instrument back in its place.

Riddle chose not to respond to that. Instead, he once more shifted the topic back to Hermione. "How do they sort in Ilvermorny, then?" he asked. "If you find the idea of the Sorting Hat so crass."

"It's much more interesting," Hermione gushed. "At Ilvermorny, you stand in the center of the Gordian Knot on the floor of the entrance hall. There are four statues there, symbolizing the four houses, and they react if they want you—the crystal on the Horned Serpent's forehead will glow, the Wampus will roar, the Pukwudgie will raise its arrow, and the Thunderbird with beat its wings."

"Which one wanted you?"

Hermione paused, turning to face Riddle with a slightly disdainful expression on her face. "...Nosy, aren't you? For a shop boy."

There was the slightest tensing of his jaw before Riddle inclined his head again, slipping back into
the role of subservient, innocent employee. "My sincerest apologies," he murmured, eyes downcast. He acted so convincingly humbled that Hermione would have believed his charade without question, had she not known better.

But she did.

"...It's quite all right," she carried on, acting unaffected. "Ilvermorny is fascinating. As it happens, I was a rarity. More than one house wanted me. Three, in fact. All but the Pukwudgie. I suppose my heart wasn't pure enough for that little creature to be interested. Ever heard of one before? They're a bit like house else, pukwudgies... Anyway." Hermione waved her hand flippantly, as though she were dismissing the importance of such creatures. "The three other houses were all interested in me, and so I was able to choose. No hat whispering in my ear, telling me where I might fit in best. It was my decision, in the end."

Hermione looked down and checked her watch. "Oh, look at the time! It's nearly six." She frowned and glanced towards the door. "I'm afraid I must go soon, I have dinner plans."

"If you give me some idea of what kind of object you are looking for, I could help you find something suitable," Riddle offered. Hermione noticed Mr. Burke perking up from the other side of the store. His customer was now gone, and she was certain he was listening with rapt attention.

"Well, I was hoping to find something to use as a centerpiece for my aunt's new dining room table; it's just such a large, empty space, completely gone to waste—but I don't see anything here even remotely close to what I had in mind. I was hoping for something beautiful, not deadly." She sighed. "I confess myself... disappointed."

Riddle's expression was unreadable.

"...We do acquire new objects on a regular basis," he said after a brief but poignant pause. "Perhaps we shall have something more to your liking, soon."

Hermione smiled but promised nothing. "I must be going," she said instead.

"Here." Riddle procured a bit of parchment out of thin air. If Hermione weren't so determined not to be impressed by him, she might have reacted to such wordless, wandless magic. "My card... just in case."

He pressed it into her palm, and were she any other witch in the world, Hermione probably would have melted under his dazzling grin. He had abandoned being professional in favor of being flirtatious.

But Hermione knew it was hollow, and neither tactic would work on her. "In case I decide I would like tools to obtain basilisk venom or buy a mysterious, cursed box?" she asked wryly, pulling her hand away and not taking the card. His eyes widened fractionally in surprise. Hermione doubted that Tom Riddle had ever been rejected in any manner—man or woman, professionally or flirtatiously. "If I decide I require something like that, then I know where to find you, don't I?"

She smiled and took a step backwards. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Riddle," she said, turning away from him and facing the door. She had just reached for the handle when he spoke again.

"Which did you choose?"

Hermione's lips twitched. She turned and looked over her shoulder. Riddle was standing there with his card still in his hand, his
face an impenetrable mask of no discernible emotion. "If three houses wanted you, and the decision was yours… Which one did you end up choosing, Miss Smith?"

There was something different about his tone. He had completely dropped any façade, now, and was asking from some place of interest that had nothing to do with his job.

_He_ was intrigued. Tom Riddle wanted to know this for _himself_.

"…If you must know, Mr. Riddle," she said at length, "I chose not the House which favors warriors and represents the body, nor the one which favors scholars and prizes the mind… but the House representative of that which is the most powerful, yet least understood."

She smiled when Riddle's head tilted to one side, waiting for an explanation. "I'm speaking, of course, of the soul."

Hermione hardly needed Legilimency to see the intrigue flickering in those dark, tunnel-like eyes. Her smile widened. "I fancy myself an _adventurer_."

She bowed her head slightly in farewell before pulling her hood up over her face, concealing her features in shadows once more. "Have a pleasant evening, Mr. Riddle," she said quietly.

She did not wait for a response.

Hermione left. The bell chimed behind her, but she was already halfway down the street when she heard its peal.

It was fully dark, now, and at some point during her short time in the shop, it had begun to snow. Snowflakes landed softly on her shoulders as she went.

She felt almost as though she were floating, she was so giddy with success and relief. All things considered, that exchange had gone better than she expected. With the exception of that initial hiccup in the beginning—she _really_ hadn't expected him to be wearing the ring, still—she had accomplished all that she had set out to do.

If she had played her part well enough, she would be seeing _Mr. Riddle_ again very soon… though that was now up to Mr. Burke. Hermione hoped he would act the way she anticipated he would. He was a greedy man, predictably so; she had no reason to think that he would not.

Her plan was officially in motion.

Hermione would scatter intriguing words behind her like alluring morsels, leading Tom Riddle further and further along her deceitful path until he was so distracted that he tripped…

And when he did, Hermione would make sure that he _never_ got up.
Thank you all for the wonderful feedback! I'm glad you're enjoying the story so far.

In case it's not obvious (though I believe it is), scenes written entirely in italics are flashbacks. I don't anticipate a ton of them, but there will be a few.

Also, if you're interested, I have a TUMBLR where there are some aesthetics and such posted in reference to this story (and where I am sure there will be more later as it progresses, but I just can't not). I also tend to respond to questions much better on there than I do to reviews, here. I'm there under the same username, Obsidianpen.

For Natalie and Olivia XOXO

"The Love Chamber."

Hermione hesitated at this door, the only one which she had not yet passed through in the Department of Mysteries. A door that remained locked always; a door she had once branded with an X when she was a teenager on a rescue mission that had ended in death, anyway.

Hermione was in her first official week as an Unspeakable, and she was the only recruit to have come straight out of school. Holloway, her new boss, explained that they usually only accepted witches and wizards with impressive resumes and years of experience. Often, they were officials who worked in other departments at the Ministry and transferred over.

Hermione Jean Granger, naturally, was the exception.

The Department of Mysteries did not operate like the rest of the Ministry. It was the only one that didn't answer to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and its structure was simple. There were two kinds of Unspeakables in the Department of Mysteries: Transients and Perpetuals. The Transients did not specialize in a subdivision, but flowed freely in their research from one specialty to another. The Perpetuals, in contrast, focused solely on one subdivision, becoming an expert in their field of choice.

Hermione had been shown each of the main corridors in accordance with these subdivisions, and she felt horrid feelings of nostalgia as they went from room to room. The Time Chamber was still in a state of semi-disrepair; the Death Chamber was as horrifically eerie as it had been when she’d first seen it…

But the Love Chamber… this was new territory for Hermione, and she was nervous.

Holloway touched his wand to the door and it swung open at once, no incantation necessary for him. Hermione followed, feigning bravery.

"Of all the sectors within the Department of Mysteries, this one is the most… intricate," Holloway said as they walked down a dimly lit hall, settling for the last word like he was not satisfied with it. "As I explained before, you'll need to work as a Transient for at least five years before declaring a specialty, if you wish to do so… But this does not apply to the field of Love. This sector requires a minimum of ten years prior experience as an Unspeakable, and even then, those who apply must go through a series of rigorous, mental tests. In fact, we only have three Unspeakables who are currently employed as Perpetuals in Love."

"Why is it so much more difficult, sir? To specialize in this subdivision…?"

Hermione could not fathom how the study of emotion should be so much more perilous than Thought or Death. Holloway gave her a humorless grin. "Because to study love is to study far more than it seems. Let's just say that this field of interest requires a certain… temperament that few have. Here we are."

They entered a rounded corridor, and Hermione was shocked to see that it was set up much in the same way that the Death Chamber was. The atmosphere was significantly different, though—the air was pleasantly warm rather than chilly, and instead of an ominous archway with a flickering veil, in the center of this Chamber on a raised platform was a massive, white marble fountain.

Amortentia.

It was spilling from a geyser in a centered cascade, overflowing with its mesmeric, mother-of-pearl sheen as tendrils of smoke rose from the liquid in spirals. Hermione held her breath as Holloway led her to it.

"Amortentia… though I'm sure you could guess as much," Holloway said. "The most powerful love potion in the world. Just one of many tools here which the Unspeakables use to study this mystery."

Hermione finally closed her eyes and inhaled through her nose, allowing the scent to momentarily overwhelm her. It smelled like freshly cut grass and new parchment… and a discernible note of ink which she did not recall being there before…

She was relieved that it didn't smell like Ron.

Ron. Months had passed since their dramatic break-up, but the betrayal still felt like a fresh wound. Hermione forced the image of his vibrant hair and freckled face away, letting the enthralling scent of knowledge obliterate her thoughts.

It was heavenly…

"Intoxicating, isn't it?" Holloway said, and when Hermione opened her eyes, it was to see that he looked like he was fighting to urge to laugh at her.

Hermione blushed. "S-Sorry, sir," she stuttered out, certain she must have looked a fool.
"Don't be. You did quite well, actually. This particular brew is far more potent than any other love potion in known existence. The last recruit I brought through here nearly fainted, he was so starry-eyed."

He did laugh, then. Hermione smiled and tried to compose herself. "Amortentia..." she said thoughtfully, watching the spirals twist and turn as they evaporated into the air. "Professor Slughorn said it was one of the most dangerous potions to exist."

"And he is quite right," Holloway agreed, his tone grave. "The fact that it is available for purchase—that any love potion is on the market, really—is appalling, in my opinion."

Hermione thought about this. "It is," she said tentatively. "However. I suppose the argument against banning them completely is that people would brew their own, anyway—and that incorrectly brewed potions are far more dangerous than elixirs whose effects are potent but short-lived."

"A terrible rationalization, don't you think?"

Hermione frowned but didn't disagree.

She remembered back to how Romilda Vane had attempted to seduce Harry with a love potion, and it was distressing, wasn't it? How easy it was for people to acquire such perilous brews?

"But surely few people use them," she said. "Surely..." Hermione's own arguments died before she could make them. "...How many people use them, do you think?"

Holloway shrugged, looking sullen. "It's impossible to know. While the effects of love potions are short, cases of people admitting to being tricked into drinking it are almost never reported."

"Really?" Hermione balked. "People who have knowingly been seduced don't try and get justice for the crimes against them? Why on earth not?"

"The same reason most rape victims don't come forward when they've been wronged, I imagine," Holloway growled. "And yes, Miss Granger, no matter how willing a participant may seem, whenever a love potion is involved, it is rape."

Hermione's blood went cold. The enticement of the flowing amortentia abruptly lost its effect. Such a lovely looking concoction for something so atrocious.

Hermione stared at the fountain, suddenly recalling a conversation she'd had with Harry last summer—back when life had seemed so promising in the aftermath of the war. It was just the two of them, she and Harry, and maybe it was only because Ron and Ginny were not around that he had been willing to talk about it at all.

Harry could tell Hermione anything.

...He'd admitted that he felt so, so guilty.

Harry, with his perpetual 'saving people' thing, felt a heavy weight for the death of Tom Riddle that he was unable to voice to anyone else. He told Hermione in confidence that he'd seen what was to become of the Dark Lord; of the horrible fate that awaited someone who split their soul without remorse. Harry hadn't wanted that for him. He wouldn't wish eternal limbo on anyone, not even Lord Voldemort.

"I think what really gets me," Harry had said, one hand in his hair, "is that he just had a horrible life, you know? I mean, neither of his parents wanted him—his father had been tricked into taking a
love potion, and his mother didn't care enough for him to stay alive—he grew up during a war in an orphanage, thinking he was freak... He never really had a chance, did he?"

Hermione had needed to reassure Harry for a long time afterwards that he had done the right thing—that for some people, there was no salvation. Harry had offered Tom Riddle the opportunity for remorse in the Great Hall, and Tom Riddle had refused.

It wasn't his fault.

Harry still had a sadness in his eyes that never quite abated. He was such a gentle soul, Harry. Hermione missed his constant companionship dearly. She felt like she had changed without his compassionate influence in her life...

Hermione willed such depressing recollections away, hesitating before asking a question that had bothered her ever since that very conversation. "What about the children?"

Hollow's brows rose in confusion. "I mean, children who are conceived under the influence of a love potion. Does it affect them? Are there any documented cases of such a thing?"

Holloway was silent for a time, watching the fountain of amortentia with a detached expression. "In fact, there are," he said. "There are two for certain. I forget what exact years they were born, but it was sometime in the 1800's. They grew up with their mothers, both of whom had been the ones to have been drugged. The children appeared to be completely healthy, physically and mentally."

His eyes darkened. "Then there was a boy born in 1969. His mother abandoned him and he grew up in an household that was later discovered to be... quite toxic. Have you ever heard of the series of murders by a wizard that happened in the 1980's? The ones characterized by a murderer who always killed by summoning his victims' hearts straight through their ribcages and nailing them to their door? Muggles, usually."

Hermione shuddered. "My god, no, I haven't," she gasped.

"I thought not, with you being a muggle-born and this being before your time... Well, it happened. His name was Edmund Thompson, and he committed thirteen murders... he was so young, too... Well. He was eventually caught and sentenced to the dementor's kiss. It was obvious that there was something very, very wrong with this man. The Department of Mysteries requested his soulless body for further study. It took the combined efforts of Perpetuals in both the Thought and Love subdivision, but we were able to conclude that he was absolutely incapable of love. It was... like nothing we'd ever seen before."

Hermione stared, horrified. "Are you saying that he was conceived under the influence of amortentia? That that's why he couldn't love...?"

"We can't be completely certain, but that's what we believe, yes," Holloway answered. "Something powerful and magical had affected his cognitive development, that much was obvious."

"But the other children, they were okay," Hermione pointed out. "So such people aren't entirely hopeless, right?"

She wondered why she was even asking. Holloway shrugged again. "There's always hope. The problem isn't that people can't recover from such tragedies—if working in the Department of Mysteries has taught me anything, it's that there is nothing more fascinating and malleable than the human psyche—but something greater. It's will, Miss Granger. People can heal... but they must want to heal."
Hermione nodded but said nothing. She knew only one thing with certainty in that moment—if she ever chose to specialize as a Perpetual, she would be staying far, far away from the subdivision of Love.

"I think that's enough for one day. Come on," Holloway said, guiding Hermione from the fountain and back towards the hallway.

"This stuff is starting to give me a bloody headache."

That night, they feasted.

Hepzibah had absolutely fawned over Hermione's new appearance, declaring her a legitimate danger to all wizards in Britain—no, the world.

They went out to eat at a fancy restaurant, where Hermione ordered a steak and didn't give a damn about lady-like proportions, despite her much more lady-like appearance. She and Hepzibah ate heartily and drank wine that was ridiculously expensive, reminiscing about a shared history that hadn't actually happened, until they were both torn between laughing and crying over the memory of a woman who had never been born.

But did that make their laughter or tears any less meaningful? Hermione did not think so. Monica Smith may not have been real, but the essence of what she and Hepzibah mourned was. Hepzibah grieved over the non-existent family she so dearly yearned for; Hermione grieved for her actual mother, whom she realized that she may never see again.

Hermione tried not to dwell on the reality that she was likely trapped in 1950 permanently, but the fact that no one had come to save her made her believe that this may be the case.

At least she and Hepzibah had each other.

Hermione went to bed that night with her mind buzzing, too lazy to remove her new make-up and barely managing the monumental task of stripping off all her garments. She fell asleep with a smile on her face and a hope in her heart that might have been misplaced, but which she clung to nonetheless.

Days passed before it happened.

It was a little after ten in the morning on a Wednesday, and Hermione and Hepzibah were just having a delightfully appropriate discussion as they relaxed in the sitting room when the doorbell chimed.

Hepzibah's eyes widened in surprise. "Did you invite someone over, dear?" she asked. Hermione shook her head, looking equally confused. "Strange… Hokey, see who it is, won't you?"

It was strange that the doorbell should ring—the wards were set in an elaborate manner; one could not simply walk up to the Smith's doorstep, even if they were a wizard. It meant that whoever it was had either been invited to Hephzibah's home before, or knew someone who had.

Hermione had a feeling she knew exactly who it was.

The elf bowed and dispparated with a nearly silent pop. When Hermione made to get to her feet and see for herself, Hepzibah touched her arm and stopped her. "Oh no, dearie. Let Hokey go. That way if it's a salesperson or something she can just dismiss them for us."
Hermione barely stopped herself from laughing. "Of course, Auntie," she said.

Hokey reappeared a few moments later, and Hermione held her breath when the elf spoke. "There is a wizard here, Mistress Smith. He is saying he is here representing a Mister Burke, Mistress, if you would be so kind as to be allowing him a moment of your time."

"Burke?" Hepzibah's brows rose so high on her head they disappeared beneath her bangs. "Caractacus Burke? I haven't spoken with him in months… He's sent someone here in his place, you said?"

"Yes, Mistress. He is being a young man… He brought flowers, ma'am."

Hermione's pulse quickened. It had worked. Burke had heard her tale of how Hepzibah Smith, her aunt, extremely wealthy witch and dear client, had a tragically empty dining room table in desperate need of an expensive new centerpiece… and he had sent their darling shop boy on a mission, years earlier than he otherwise would have shown up at the Smith residence.

Perfect.

"Flowers, hm?" Hepzibah pursed her lips, frowning. "Still is rather rude to show up without sending an owl first…"

"Maybe he thought you would refuse him," Hermione chimed in pensively.

"With good reason; I'm still a bit miffed at how much I paid for that locket, considering how little he paid for it in the first place…"

Hermione's smirk faltered at that—she would need to make sure Hepzibah did not mention the locket in Tom Riddle's presence. "Well, all right, then. Hokey, go ahead and let him in, and bring him back to the sitting room."

Hermione quickly checked her reflection in a mirror hanging on the wall, adjusting her hair. Her make-up was light but still flawless (and though she was no miraculous Melissa, Hermione did have an aptitude for that mascara charm), her clothing was just casual enough to say, 'I wasn't expecting company' while still looking refined and proper.

Hermione turned back around to see that Hepzibah had noticed her unusual and sudden caring for her appearance, and was looking suspicious because of it. Hermione smiled innocently.

"Mr. Riddle, Mistress Smith and Mistress Smith."

Hokey bowed and moved aside, allowing Tom Riddle to step into the room.

…Was it the lighting? The weather? Had she eaten something strange that morning and it was affecting her perception? Hermione wasn't sure, but Riddle's presence was momentarily mind-numbing, just as it had been when she'd first met him in the shop.

Only now… Now, he was dressed much more nicely, in black clothes adorned with shining, silver clasps that were rather form-fitting for robes—were his shoulders so broad, just days ago?—and in his hands was a huge bouquet of pink and white roses which simply must have been enchanted, their aroma so quickly filled the room. Tom Riddle was like a vision from a romance novel.

His eyes found Hermione's first. They lingered there, two endless, black holes that made her feel like she was falling.
Hepzibah stood, and the sound of her chair moving backwards caused Hermione's mind to snap back to reality. "Mr. Riddle," she said, and though Hepzibah extended her hand politely in greeting, Hermione thought there was a frostiness to her tone. "My name is Hepzibah Smith."

Riddle's eyes left Hermione's to settle on Hepzibah, and he gave her his most charming, flawless smile. "Miss Smith," he said, taking her hand in his. "It is so wonderful to meet you, I have heard nothing but great things. Thank you for receiving me."

"An owl might have been a nice forewarning."

Riddle laughed softly. "I said as much as well, but Mr. Burke is nothing if not a… stubborn man. I do believe he thought you might have said you were busy and refused to see me, were it not a bit of a surprise."

"Is that what the flowers are for, then?" Hepzibah eyed the roses with an odd mixture of irritation and partiality. "To soften an old woman up?"

"He said it was a token of his gratitude for your consistent and great patronage… But yes, I would venture to say that they are more of a preemptive apology for his boldness."

Riddle's smile was dazzling, and Hepzibah accepted the roses with a wry grin. "That man," she sighed, shaking her head. "Hokey, be a dear and get me a vase, won't you?"

Hokey nodded and disappeared. Hermione finally stood as well, feeling substantially more composed than she had a few moments ago. "Mr. Riddle," she said, her voice carefully light. "What an unexpected surprise."

There was brief pause, then, where Hermione knew what the polite thing to say would have been. Tom Riddle had, after all, given her his first name, and it would only be fitting that she do the same now.

She didn't. Hermione wasn't sure why it suddenly seemed important—temporarily keeping her name from him—but there was something oddly satisfying about withholding this vital bit of information for the time being.

When Hermione did not say anything, Riddle continued speaking in a voice as smooth as velvet. "It's lovely to see you again… So, this is your aunt?"

Riddle glanced quickly from Hermione and Hepzibah and back again. His lips were curled with what Hermione could swear was a hint of amusement. "The family resemblance is… uncanny."

Hermione's heart fluttered in her chest. She felt her face instantly flushing at his words and at how sincerely he said them, because she knew nothing could be further from the truth. Hepzibah was a plump woman with a round face, wavy red hair, watery blue eyes, and the kind of pale skin that burned if you merely looked at it too intensely.

Hermione, on the other hand, was rather lithe with a heart shaped face, brown hair that was now perfectly straight, large eyes, and a skin tone that definitely tanned when she was fortunate enough to see the sun.

They did not look related, and Hermione felt the stirrings of panic on the periphery of her mind. She willed herself to stop blushing, to be confident—but why had she not considered
family resemblance…?

Well, he doesn't exactly look like anyone on his mother's side, either, Hermione thought with a secret bitterness. Somehow, this succeeded in making her feel more self-assured.

Hokey returned with a soft pop. "Wait—you two have met?" Hepzibah asked sharply, all but throwing the roses down to the tiny elf. Hokey almost fell under the weight of them, there were so many, but she managed to stay afoot and place them in the vase. Hepzibah hardly noticed; her eyes were darting back between Hermione and Riddle, suspicious once more.

"We have," Riddle answered. "Miss Smith came into Borgin and Burke's just the other evening."

"You what?" Hepzibah looked absolutely appalled. "You went to Knockturn Alley? By yourself? In the evening? That's no place for a lady to go wandering around alone! Whatever were you doing there?"

"Well." Hermione cast Riddle a quick and scathing glance before looking back to Hepzibah. "I went there because you mentioned that you got so many of your most treasured items there, and I wanted to get you a gift for how good you've been to me… A centerpiece, I thought, for the living room table… Something which would have been a surprise…"

She glared at Riddle again, who had the audacity to smile more brightly. "My sincerest apologies. I did not mean to ruin your kind intentions," he murmured, but he was smirking in a way that Hermione knew was anything but apologetic.

"Oh… Well, that's very sweet of you, dear, but still. Never go to Knockturn Alley again! It's a shady place full of all sorts of dodgy people and creatures! No offence." She added the last part hastily, looking once more to Riddle.

"None taken," Riddle answered effortlessly.

Hepzibah sighed and glanced down to Hokey, who was magically adjusting the roses in the vase which she had hovered to the middle of the table. "Hokey, bring some tea for us and for our guest, won't you?"

"Yes, Mistress." The elf bowed and disappeared at once.

"Please, sit."

Riddle inclined his head politely at the offer, and Hepzibah and Hermione sat as well. "You have an absolutely enchanting home, Miss Smith," Riddle said, aiming his compliment at Hepzibah. "Was that banner I spotted on the wall of the foyer an original possession from the Flamel line, or is it just an antique sporting the same coat of arms?"

"It's an original, of course," Hepzibah said, straightening her posture and looking proud.

"Then everything Mr. Burke has said of you is correct—you have impeccable tastes and sophisticated interests."

His flattery was so expertly done, his smile so convincingly charming. Hermione had known that he would be a skilled actor, of course, but still—it was such an impeccable façade that it was almost easy to forget what he was.

Hokey returned with a gilded tray. While all Hepzibah's china was lovely, Hermione noticed that the elf had gone with the exceptionally good porcelain, today—a teapot and cups that were a
shimmering black, rimmed in brilliant, warm gold. Hokey magically poured them all a cup and rested the tray with milk and sugar on the table silently, as was expected of a proper house elf in the midst of company. Hermione had to resist the urge to thank her or pat her on the head as she usually did, and instead accepted her cup as though beverages magically floating into your willing hand was something to be expected when you were such a refined, pureblooded witch.

"Why, even the china, Auntie?" Hermione spoke first as she accepted her cup. "I know you are proud, but still..." Hepzibah looked confused at Hermione's words. "These are your old house colors, no? From school?"

Recognition dawned on Hepzabah's face. "Ah, yes. The Hufflepuff house colors are yellow and black."

"We were just discussing our family history when you arrived," Hermione explained, looking to Riddle. "I know next to nothing about my British ancestors, as my own mother cared little for such things—but my Aunt is obviously very knowledgeable. Evidently, we're related to the woman who founded her house while in school."

"You're descended from Helga Hufflepuff?" Riddle asked, and though his voice was light, Hermione saw intrigue flickering in the depths of his eyes.

"Oh, yes," Hepzibah said. "The Smith family line is related to many of the most noble, pureblood houses—most notably Helga Hufflepuff herself."

"I still think it all sounds made up, personally," Hermione added dryly.

"Whatever do you mean?" Riddle's voice had definitely lost its charismatic edge at that question. He was looking at Hermione with a genuine, intense curiosity. "The founders of Hogwarts were incredibly skilled witches and wizards; I can assure you none of their legendary histories were made up."

"It does sound a bit far-fetched, though, doesn't it? Honestly, their names all sound like they were selected from a poorly written children's story. What were they all again, Auntie?"


"Ah, Slytherin, that one I know," Hermione said, nodding before taking a sip of tea. She could feel Riddle's eyes burning as he stared at her, no doubt wanting to ask, but not wanting to appear too interested in his own, secret ancestor.

Fortunately for him, Hepzibah asked. "Well, how is that you know about Salazar Slytherin but not Helga Hufflepuff, the founder whose very blood runs through your veins?" she balked.

"Because Salazar Slytherin's descendents traveled to America, of course," Hermione answered, shrugging. "The founder of Ilvermorny, Isolt Sayre, was related to him. It's a long story—she could understand snakes and even used Slytherin's own wand until it was rendered inactive—but I won't bore you with the details."

Hermione took another sip of tea, relishing the fact that Tom Riddle had shifted forward in his seat, unable to contain his interest which he should be concealing. "I didn't know that," Hepzibah said, looking far less interested in the history of a founder to which she was not related.

"But the Hogwarts founders all sound a bit fictitious, don't they?" Hermione asked, looking to Riddle and shifting the conversation back to Hogwarts. "And completely illogical, most of them. For
example, why would Ravenclaw pick an eagle as opposed to a raven for her emblem? And Gryffindor—well, clearly a griffin would be more appropriate, no? The only one that made any sense was Slytherin, choosing a snake."

"What's wrong with the badger Hufflepuff chose?" Hepzibah asked, looking almost offended.

"That one is the least logical of all!" Hermione set her cup down, grinning. "You were just saying that Helga Hufflepuff was known for being kind and accepting, and yet she chose a badger for her animal!"

"So?"

"Have you ever seen a wild badger, Aunt? They may look harmless, but they are vicious creatures. Honey badgers in particular." Hermione smiled wryly and lifted her cup once more to her lips. "Badgers eat snakes for breakfast," she murmured before taking another sip.

Hermione couldn't help it; her eyes flickered to Riddle's after she said it. He did not look amused. Good, Hermione thought. Let's see that façade crack.

"Well, that's all very interesting," Hepzibah said, sounding a bit annoyed that Hermione was not awestruck with all things Hufflepuff, "but I daresay that Mr. Riddle was not instructed to come here merely to deliver flowers and hear about our family history."

Riddle's attention snapped back to Hepzibah, his slight look of annoyance turning so swiftly to one of charm and pleasantness that Hermione was astounded. "No, unfortunately, that was not why Mr. Burke sent me."

"Based on my experience in your shop, I would venture to say that Mr. Burke has a specific motive, Aunt," Hermione said, eyes gleaming as she looked at Riddle. "I believe he is here to come and steal away your most beautiful, valuable things."

Riddle smiled in a manner that was more predatory than anything she had seen on him yet. "Perhaps I am," he murmured. He lifted the gold rim of the teacup to his lips, the Peverell ring glinting on his finger, but his dark eyes never left Hermione's as he took a drink.

Hermione was still for a moment before she realized just how perfectly she'd set him up for that … suggestive statement. For a moment, she was entirely flustered—she could feel her face turning crimson, and though she tried to look unaffected, knew she failed spectacularly as she was the first to break eye contact, looking down at her lap and clearing her throat.

The insinuation was not lost on Hepzibah.

"Well, that's all well and good, but I'm not interested in selling anything at this time."

Riddle's brows rose in surprise at the sudden iciness in her tone. "Oh," he said, setting his cup down. "Well, as it transpires, that is not why I am here. Mr. Burke sent me to see if you might be interested in one of his newest acquisitions. We just came into ownership of it yesterday."

Riddle pulled something from his pocket, a tiny, shimmering thing, as well as his wand. Hermione's muscles instinctually went rigid at the sight of Tom Riddle with a wand in his hand. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, noting the way her posture stiffened, but didn't comment on it.

He cast a wordless spell, and the small, silver item grew. "A 17th century, enchanted candelabra," he explained as it became the height of the bouquet of roses. "Goblin-made, in excellent condition. It
has been charmed to remain lit perpetually, if need be—the lighting spells interwoven into it are flawless. Indestructible, with inlaid sapphires and pearls. It is currently our most valuable item in stock, and we already have a few interested buyers—but Mr. Burke thought to extend the offer to you, our loyal and most valued patron, first."

It was beautiful, even Hermione could attest that that. The silver was so polished it was nearly blinding, and the sapphires so large they looked unreal. It reminded her of the tiara Fleur wore on her wedding day.

Hepzibah, however, glanced at it for only a moment before looking decidedly unimpressed. "I'm not interested," she said coldly. "It's a bit too plain, for my tastes."

A blatant lie, and an intended one. There was absolutely nothing plain about this exquisite piece at all. Riddle froze, a brief expression of shock on his face. "Plain?" he repeated.

"Plain," Hepzibah said firmly. She waved her wand at the candelabra as though it bored her. "You can take it back with you. Tell Mr. Burke he may sell to one of his other, more willing buyers."

Hermione nearly covered her mouth in amazement.

Because it was amazing, wasn't it? How very differently Hepzibah Smith was treating the handsome Tom Riddle. When Hepzibah had been the sole focus of his charm and flattery, the witch had been nothing but sweet and accommodating.

Now that he had unwittingly but undeniably showed interest in her pretty, young niece, however, her attitude could not have been more drastically different. Hepzibah was no longer a desperate, lonely woman, but a protective aunt… and she was not about to let some shop boy from Knockturn Alley swoon her darling niece.

Riddle appeared stunned for only a moment longer before quickly slipping back into his role of humble, modest employee. "Mr. Burke will be very sorry to hear that you have been disappointed, I am sure," he murmured, shrinking the candelabra with a quick wave of his wand.

Hepzibah chose not to respond to that. She stood abruptly. "If you don't mind, Mr. Riddle, you must be on your way. My niece and I have lunch reservations at Rosie's downtown and shall be leaving soon. Hermione, why don't you go upstairs and get ready?"

Another obvious lie; they had no such reservations anywhere. Hermione blinked once in surprise before setting her cup down and standing. "Oh… Oh, right. Of course. I nearly forgot."

Riddle got to his feet as well, pocketing his wand and the shrunken candelabra. And though he should have been focusing on Hepzibah, perhaps trying to rectify her dissatisfaction just then, his eyes were once more glued to her supposed niece.

"Hermione," he said, and Hermione's heart leapt in her throat. His dark eyes shimmered with something like triumph. "Your name is Hermione."

Hermione stared. "I… Yes," she breathed, unable to think of anything else.

A beat of silence. Hermione felt like the room was filled with an electric charge; a ridiculous sensation for something as contrite as mere eye contact.

The moment was broken by Hepzibah's stern voice. "Hokey, please show Mr. Riddle to the door, won't you?"
Hokey arrived to do exactly that. Riddle bowed in a most subservient manner, but Hepzibah's smile could not have looked more insincere. "It was an honor to meet you, Miss Smith," he said.

She didn't respond in like. Hermione was just about to dash up the stairs, feeling overwhelmed, when she found her hand suddenly, inexplicably, caught in Riddle's.

"And a wonderful surprise to see you once more… Miss Smith."

Then, in a motion that was as fluid as it was brief and polite, Riddle lifted her hand in his and brushed his lips over his fingers, looking like some prince out of a fairy tale as he did.

Hermione felt like her hand was on fire long after he let go. "Mr. Riddle," Hepzibah said sharply. "If you wouldn't mind."

And with one last bow, the Dark Lord was dismissed.

"Well?" Hepzibah barked once he was gone, making Hermione jump. "Do you mind explaining what all that was about?"

She put her hands on her hips, looking very motherly indeed. Hermione shook her head and came back to herself, holding her hand which Tom Riddle had just kissed to her chest. "Mr. Burke wanted to sell you his wares," she answered robotically.

"Yes, I could see that." Hepzibah pursed her lips and walked around the table, her annoyed expression softening. "He was cute, I'll give him that," she said, placing one hand on Hermione's shoulder. "But a shop boy from Knockturn Alley? Please, dear. You are a pureblood, you are Smith—you are a beauty and a gift. You deserve much, much better."

"Of course," Hermione murmured coming out of her admittedly dazed state. "You're absolutely right."

Hepzibah smiled fondly. "There's my smart girl. Now, I think we really ought to go out to lunch. Then I thought we'd go shopping. The gala is in a few days, and trust me when I say that we will want to be wearing nothing but the latest, most fabulous gowns and accessories. The other collectors are absolute wolves when it comes to fashion, and I don't intend to get eaten alive, do you?"

Hermione laughed weakly. "No," she said, smirking. She dropped her hand to her side, remembering what it was she had traveled back in time in the first place to do—what was still to be done.

"No, I don't intend for that at all."
Hermione spotted him before he intended to be seen. He was lurking in the atrium of the Ministry near the lifts, checking his watch and pretending to be waiting for someone, surely.

He technically was, she supposed.

Hermione walked right past him at a brisk pace. Perhaps if she moved quickly enough—

"Hey—hey! Miss Granger!"

Hermione internally groaned.

"Miss Granger, do you have a moment?"

Hermione glanced up at the supposed stranger. A young man, tall with dark eyes, but ah, his hair, it was a dead giveaway…

"No, Malfoy, I don't have a moment."

Hermione took a second to appreciate his flustered expression and the way he glanced hurriedly over his shoulder—had anyone heard her say his name?—before continuing to walk towards the fireplaces.

Fortunately for him, the atrium was empty. It always was when Hermione left the Department of Mysteries; it was why she left work when she did. "Wait—hold up!"

Against her better judgement, Hermione paused. "What do you want?"

"How'd you know it was me so fast?" he asked, quickly catching up to her.

Hermione barely stopped herself from rolling her eyes. "Well, for one, this is the third time you've tried to catch me unawares under the influence of Polyjuice potion—"

"So? Random people try and bother you all the time, don't they?"

Hermione's expression turned cold. "Your hair is starting to turn blonde," she said coolly.

Draco Malfoy blinked and ran a hand through his mottled, slowly transitioning hair. "Is it really? Damn, it hasn't even been an hour—"

Hermione snorted. "Wow, Malfoy. I was able to make a more effective Polyjuice Potion than you when I was twelve."

"I didn't brew mine," Malfoy drawled. "I bought it."

"Wow. I'm even more impressed."

Hermione turned and began to walk away again. "Wait! Just—just give me one damn minute of your time, Granger!"

"Why should I?" Hermione kept walking, and the poorly disguised Draco Malfoy fell into step beside her. "I have nothing to say to you."
"But I have things to say to you, and I know you're interested in hearing them."

Hermione looked at him warily out of the corner of her eye. He appeared far friendlier in this fake, temporary form. She wondered whose hair he’d used. The idea that he more than likely stole some muggle man's appearance was highly amusing to her. "Why do you bother with the Polyjuice Potion, anyway? You're a free man. You can walk into the Ministry if you want, no one can stop you."

"The same reason you leave every day at seven rather than five like almost everyone else who works here," Draco answered darkly. Hermione appreciated briefly just how committed he was to talking to her—he had bothered to learn her unconventional work schedule. "Because I don't want to risk running into anyone. Everyone looks at me and just sees an ex-Death Eater who got off easy. They all glare at me and whisper about me behind their hands, it's insufferable."

"Well, you are an ex-Death Eater who got off easy," Hermione countered. "You should be thankful. If Harry hadn’t stood up for you at your trial, you’d probably be in Azkaban."

Malfoy's expression became stony. He suddenly looked much more like Draco Malfoy truly did, despite the façade. "Gonna stand up for Potter now, are you?" he fumed. Clearly, Draco did not appreciate and admire Harry for the fact that he had gone out of his way to defend him in court—if anything, it seemed to make him detest his schoolboy enemy even more.

Hermione supposed she understood why, on some level. It was less that Draco hated Harry specifically and more that he was generally bitter about how things had unfolded for him. How he had all but been forced into being a Death Eater, how he had been raised to believe that everyone who was not a pureblood was the scum of the earth...

It was obvious that he still struggled with his ideals. Hermione could not wholly blame him for his internal conflict, considering his family. Still, it didn't make it right for him to despise Harry, who had done nothing but try and save him.

"Harry's my friend," she said. "Of course I stand up for him."

"Oh, is he? Is he your friend?" Malfoy's eyes lightened a fraction, dark brown transitioning into its usual, steely gray. "Tell me, Granger, did he tell you himself about his engagement to the Weasley girl, or did you find out like the rest of the world in the Daily Prophet?"

Hermione froze, her jaw clenching. "Yeah, that's what I thought," Draco sneered. "Funny, most friends talk to each other that sort of thing. Guess he couldn't be bothered to invite you to grab a drink or even send you an owl when he was so busy with his new fiancé and his best friend, R—"

"Piss off, Malfoy."

She began to march away again, but Malfoy grabbed her by the wrist. "Wait, I didn't—"

Hermione whipped her wand out and jabbed it under his chin. Malfoy's eyes crossed as he looked down at it, releasing her at once. She was very glad the atrium was empty. "You didn't what?"

Draco slowly looked up to her face, raising both hands out on either side of himself rather than reaching for his own wand. "I didn't mean to bring that up. I just... I get it. I know what it's like, you know. Being slandered all the time like that. Rita Skeeter has had a damn field day dragging your name through the dirt. She was just waiting for something to happen, to find a way to separate you from the 'golden trio' and make you out to be some untrustworthy, scandalous witch again. She's turned you into an outcast... I know what that's like."
Hermione raised one brow at him. "So, what? You're looking for someone to wallow in pity with you? Sorry, but I'm not interested."

"You know that's not what I want," Malfoy snapped. "I want your help. I want to change things." He paused, checking over his shoulders again to make sure no one was nearby to hear him. "I told you, I have the only true t—"

"You shouldn't have that," Hermione instantly interrupted. "It's extremely illegal and I want nothing to do with it. I could turn you in, you know. And not even Harry would be able to save you from Azkaban for that."

"But you haven't," Draco said. "You could, but haven't turned me in, because you know you're interested, because you know I have some good points. We could do it. We could change time."

"No, we couldn't," Hermione said in a clipped tone. "You can't travel that far back without irreversible damage to your body. Eloise Mintumble tried to go back in time—"

"To 1402, yes, I know. She was stuck there for five days, and then died after she was brought back to the present."

Draco was clearly annoyed at how genuinely surprised Hermione looked that he had known something. "Yes, I've researched this at length, thank you very much. You're not the only capable of looking things up. But you're not Eloise Mintumble, you're Hermione Granger, prodigy and smartest witch of her age. With your brains and my resources and sense of self-preservation, we could actually do it."

Hermione gaped at him, both dumbfounded and slightly amused. "Am I going deaf, or is Draco Malfoy complimenting me?"

"I'm a changed man," Draco said dryly. Hermione's lips twitched—he had said the exact same thing at his trial, though he'd said it much more convincingly, then.

"Be that as it may, I'm still not interested. Time-travel is far too dangerous... and illegal."

She began walking again, finally making it to where the floo portals were. "Just—just consider this," Draco said, standing directly in front of the fireplace. "We make a stabilizing potion, we go back for just a few minutes, and—and eliminate the problem before it can... before it can, you know. Become a real problem."

Hermione stared, unsure if she should laugh or not. "...You're serious?"

"I'm dead serious." Draco's eyes, which now almost entirely gray, fell to her forearm. "Ever imagined a world where you don't have a scar on your forearm, one that makes it impossible to forget all the ghosts in your past? Because I have."

He lifted his sleeve, revealing the barest outline of the Dark Mark as it began to become visible. The Polyjuice Potion had nearly faded entirely.

Hermione was quiet for a moment. The truth was that of course she had thought about it; ever since Draco Malfoy first accosted her after work with the temptation of an illegal, true time-turner, she had been unable to stop herself from dwelling on it... What if she could go back and save everyone who had fallen, stop the second war from ever even happening... And she knew Dumbledore had donated his old Pensieve to the Department of Mysteries; she could research Tom Riddle's past in depth, make sure she was fully prepared...
Hermione shook her head. Such thoughts were tremendously dangerous; they were nothing more than fantasies.

Yet he expression of Malfoy's face was so uncharacteristically hopeful. She sighed.

"I'll think about it," she said, though she had no intention of taking this seriously. She would use any excuse to get Malfoy to stop pestering her, filling her head with impossible dreams of lives that neither of them could ever hope to live. "But you have to leave me alone while I do, all right?"

"Deal," Malfoy said at once. "I won't bother you for a full week."

Hermione rolled her eyes and grabbed a handful of floo powder. "Get better Polyjuice Potion next time," she said resignedly. She tossed the powder into the fireplace where green flames instantly ignited. "Or better yet," she added just before departing.

"…Be yourself."

Hermione feared she might be getting spoiled.

Hepzibah lived a lavish lifestyle, no doubt, and she had no qualms at all about dropping as much gold as she pleased on whatever she fancied.

When Hepzibah Smith shopped, she shopped.

She and Hermione went to the most upscale, magical clothing stores in London, chic boutiques that Hermione was almost positive no longer existed in her time. They tried on dresses of every kind, and though Hermione was not usually the kind to enjoy clothes shopping, found Hepzibah's enthusiasm infectious.

She didn't even mind that her 'aunt' was keen to repetitively dress her up like a doll, and the shop attendants even more so.

"This is a very popular style," the witch and seamstress who had been tending to them for the past hour said. Madame Hopkins, and she was rather like an older and less fabulous version of Hepzibah. "Black satin, trim fitting, very flattering—"

"Black! No more black, I'm tired of black," Hepzibah, who had already picked out a dress for herself, said. Oddly enough the dress she had chosen was black. "I want to see my niece in color. Oh, find us something yellow, maybe. We could go to the gala in Hufflepuff colors!"

Hermione laughed. "Your ancestral pride is admirable, Auntie," she said.

"As it should be!"

"Hm… I don't know if we have anything in yellow…" Madame Hopkins pursed her lips. "I suppose we could cast a color altering charm—"

"Good Lord, no. Those are always so dreadfully obvious, even the best ones," Hepzibah sneered distastefully.

The shop owner bowed, barely concealing her annoyance. "Yes, of course, Miss Smith… Well, what about gold?"

"Oh, gold would be excellent. Let's see it."
The seamstress shuffled away into the back room, taking the unwanted black dress with her. "Just go on into the fitting room, dear, and I'll bring it to you," she called over her shoulder.

Hermione did as she was told. A few moments later, and a long, gilded gown was being hovered into the room where she waited.

Even before she could put it on, Hermione knew she was not leaving without this dress.

It was long, shimmering and made of silk. The waist was covered with an intricate white and gold rose design made of lace, and there was a flowing quality to it all that made her think of Ancient Greece. It was beautiful.

When Hermione timidly stepped out of the dressing room, she could tell that the seamstress and her fake aunt shared her sentiments.

"Hermione," Hepzibah gushed. "You look ravishing… Come, come! Stand in front of the mirrors, here!"

The seamstress bowed and stepped away. "I'll just give you some space," she said, looking cheery that she would surely have a sale in a few moments' time.

Hermione allowed Hepzibah to once more guide her onto the dais where several full-length mirrors hovered. "Oh, this is much better," she gushed, fixing the fabric around Hermione's legs. "You're too special for black; everyone wears black at these things—little black dresses, as far as the eye can see! But this, gold, why, you're just glowing in it, aren't you!"

Hermione smirked, blushing slightly at how overzealous Hepzibah was. "But you've chosen a black dress for yourself, Auntie," she pointed out.

"Yes, well, I'll just have to accessorize to stand out. That's my preference, anyway—but you! I almost don't think you should wear anything else, except… Oh, you know what you should do? Wear your hair up in braids with some flowers in it. Gold roses, to match the lace pattern here." She smiled and ran her fingers over the flowers at Hermione's waist, looking at her fondly. "You'll be just like a modern-day Goddess. Like Aphrodite."

"Aphrodite?" Hermione said curiously. "Hm… I think I would prefer to be a modern-day Persephone, myself."

"Persephone?" Hepzibah continued to smooth the fabric of her golden dress. "Why would you want to be Persephone? Wasn't she the one who was abducted by Hades and taken to the Underworld, forced to marry him against her will and all that?"

"In the more popular versions of the story, yes, Persephone was kidnapped and even raped," Hermione agreed. "But that's likely not the original tale. In some older versions, it's questionable whether she was truly taken there by force, or if she allowed Hades to take her. She was a Goddess herself, after all. Regardless, she wound up in the Underworld, but Hades wasn't the evil ruler many people assume he was… and Persephone was anything but a damsel in distress. She liked the Underworld. She wanted to stay and be with God of Death, even if at the same time she missed the earth…"

Hermione brushed her long, straight hair over her shoulder, imagining how it might look if it was up and out of her way. "And when she became Queen, well… Hades might have worn the crown declaring himself the supreme ruler of the Underworld, but it was Persephonethat everyone feared."

Hepzibah looked mildly distraught for a moment before giving a small smile and shaking her head. "I
think you read too much, dearie,” she said.

The night before the gala, Hermione and Hepzibah shared in their evening ritual of drinking herbal tea before bed. The weather was oddly warm for early February, and so they decided to sit on the balcony outside of Hermione's bedroom. Magical containers full of bluebell flames illuminated the space around them and kept them warm. The tea in Hermione's steaming mug felt pleasant in her hands.

She was anxious about the next day. It would be the first time she attended a high-end social gathering with other rich, established wizarding families. Hepzibah had explained that there would be reporters present from the *Daily Prophet*, the *Witch Weekly*, and more. Cameras would be flashing and if they were lucky, they might make the paper.

Hermione wondered if Tom Riddle would be present.

Part of her seemed to think it likely—it was a *wizarding* event, one which the most prestigious pureblood families would surely be attending—but another part of her disagreed. It was an art auction, after all. Would Tom Riddle bother to attend some event where the whole point was to raise money for *artists*?

Of course, no one went to these things with such pure intentions. The supposed goal was always something noble and good, but really everyone went to be seen by and with the right people, as well as to make connections. This was the point in Tom Riddle's life where he was doing exactly that. He was no well-known Dark Lord, yet. His power was currently hinging quite dependently on the wealthy, pureblood followers he had acquired at school...

There was a decent chance that he would be in attendance, but she could not be sure. Either way, Hermione *was* certain that some of Riddle's most prominent peers would be there… and she would have work to do.

Hermione took a sip of tea, admiring the view from the balcony for a moment before finally speaking.

"So, I take it we'll be apparating to this gala tomorrow, then? Or taking the floo?"

Hermione had thought it an innocent question, but Hepzibah looked practically scandalized. "**Apparating? The floo?**" When Hermione merely looked confused, she shook her head and elaborated. "What, and miss the chance to show off? Absolutely not! We'll arrive in style, of course."

She lowered her mug so that Hokey could silently refill it. "You'll see," Hepzibah said in a vague response to Hermione's confused expression. "Trust me, you're going to *love* it."

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*A limousine.*

It pulled up to the Smith residence at a quarter to seven, black and glossy and, in Hermione's mind, very retro.

Hermione was stunned at first, confused by the fact that they would be taking a *muggle* form of transportation to a wizarding event—and then she remembered. For as much as witches and wizards looked down on muggle technology, this general distaste was somehow untrue of trains and the automobile. Magical people not only appreciated them, but created their own, superiorly enchanted versions of them all the time.
How hypocritical, Hermione thought, smirking.

She wouldn't deny that she and Hepzibah looked right at home in a limousine, though.

Their make-up was flawless, their dresses were elegant, and their hair was pristine. Hermione had gone with Hepzibah's suggestion, allowing the hairdresser to decorate her elaborate updo with many small, golden roses that were interwoven into the braids. It was utterly gorgeous, and Hermione was astonished once more on what something as simple as a hair style could accomplish in terms of both her appearance and her confidence.

The only thing that had Hermione nervous was the issue of her wand. She had no pockets, and so she had told Hepzibah that she wanted to bring a purse for the sole purpose of storing her wand.

"Your wand?" Hepzibah had asked. "Hermione, dear, you have no reason to bring your wand to events like these. We've been invited, we'll be ushered in without issue—besides, it breaks a sort of unspoken social protocol. Bringing a wand to a gala with high security and an entire staff would be like taking a knife to the opera. Leave it here."

Well, Hermione would sooner drink basilisk venom that be potentially anywhere near Tom Riddle without a wand handy. She'd crafted herself a garter out of some fabric and secured it to her thigh, enchanting it with a non-slipping spell and securing her wand beneath it against her upper leg. It was completely concealed by her dress, but if Hermione needed it, her wand was easy to get to.

…Not that she'd told Hepzibah as much. Hermione smiled widely and innocently at her as their limo driver got out to open the door for them. He was a very short, fat old wizard with a bushy mustache. "Miss Smith and Miss Smith," he said, bowing his head as he greeted them. He then opened the back door, and Hermione's jaw dropped.

It was fabulous.

The limousine was enchanted to be much larger on the inside, which was preposterous, really, as limos were already roomy. Floating lights that were like smaller versions of fairies were floating around inside, making it look like the heavens were contained within a car. They illuminated the leather seats and made the currently empty champagne glasses which sat on the armrest shine brilliantly.

"What do you think?" Hepzibah asked, clearly relishing Hermione's expression.

Hermione quickly composed herself. She was supposed to be at least somewhat used to this finery, even if she had made it seem as though her fake mother was not as interested in decadence as Hepzibah was. "I think it's lovely," she said calmly.

"Only half as lovely as us," Hepzibah said, motioning for Hermione to climb in before her. The driver closed the door behind them, and immediately a bottle of champagne came out of a compartment, magically hovering as it filled the two empty glasses on its own. They flew into Hermione's and Hepzibah's outstretched hands. "And if you think this is marvelous," Hepzibah said, clinking her glass to Hermione's, "just you wait until we get to the gala."

The champagne was light and sweet. Hermione was only slightly disappointed with herself that she felt equally bubbly with excitement.
He was waiting for her exactly one week later.

Right at seven o clock, Hermione spotted him once more in the atrium of the Ministry of Magic. Draco Lucius Malfoy—and, for once, he was not under the influence of Polyjuice Potion. His hair was its characteristic white-blonde, his eyes were light and silvery. He was standing with his arms crossed, continually looking over his shoulders and tapping his foot, extremely anxious. Hermione smiled.

Twitchy little ferret.

Draco spotted her the moment she stepped out of the lift. He made a beeline straight for her, eyes bright with expectation. "Well?" he said, skipping a greeting altogether.

He didn't need to elaborate; Hermione knew what he was asking.

A week ago, she had tried to convince herself to let this drop. To not research this.

To not stay after work and look into Dumbledore's Pensieve which shimmered and swirled with memories of Tom Marvolo Riddle.

…The temptation had been too great.

Hermione had never been one to deny herself knowledge, and besides, what was the harm in just looking? She could observe a few memories without committing to anything. There was nothing wrong with a bit of extra information.

But as the days went by and she watched more and more… As she nonchalantly asked the Perpetual Unspeakables who worked in the Time Department questions as they went about repairing the damage from years past…

Hermione looked at Draco's hopeful expression, with his truthful, pointed features and bright, wide eyes. She jerked her head towards the fireplaces, motioning for him to follow her. Draco beamed.

"Let's talk, Malfoy."

They stepped out of the limo into sheer decadence.

Hermione and Hepzibah were far from the only ones to arrive in an ostentatious, enchanted form of transportation. Magically influenced limousines seemed to be a favorite, but there were also sleek and brightly colored cars, as well as a few glorious looking carriages—one of which was even being pulled by actual unicorns. Hermione gaped at them, wondering if that was legal in this time and how they had enchanted the creatures to make them undetectable to muggles.

The questions were gone from her mind nearly the moment she had them. Hermione was quickly distracted by the flashing lights of cameras and crowds of people outside of the arts center where the gala was being held. There were witches and wizards everywhere, and Hepzibah had been correct—it was a sea of little black dresses and masculine dress robes in black and white, men in top hats and women in silk gloves and high heels.

Hermione stood out, to say the least.
Where most witches wore black, Hermione Smith was draped in a long gown of gold; where most of the women sported the short, stylish bobs that were so fitting of this era, Hermione's hair was pinned and braided and adorned with golden roses. She got more than her fair share of looks as they ascended the stairs towards the entryway, but Hermione did not think they were bad. Cameras flashed in their direction when they approached the doors, and under Hepzibah's prompting Hermione smiled prettily, posing with her aunt for a reporter.

When a wizard who must have been working as a guard held the door to the arts center open for them, Hermione's jaw dropped.

The atrium was packed with people, all dressed in their finest, but it was not the witches and wizards which had Hermione astounded. The atmosphere was superb. Fairies were everywhere, illuminating the space in their jewel-colored lights; shining trays of delicious looking appetizers and full champagne flutes floated through the crowd, where people would grab a drink as they past; and there was a massive bar set up in the back where Hermione saw a few wizards gathered, requesting hard liquor or other drinks which were made upon request by bartenders in crisp white shirts and bowties.

"Hepzibah, my dear—it has been too long!"

An older gentleman spotted them when they'd only taken a few steps into the atrium, immediately greeting Hepzibah with a swift kiss to her cheek. His beady eyes then quickly went to Hermione, where he looked both delighted and surprised to see her arm linked around Hepzibah's. "And who might this charming young lady be?"

Hepzibah began introducing her as her niece from America, only to need to start explaining her presence in Britain all over again once a few other witches and wizards whom Hepzibah knew arrived. Hermione shook hands and smiled and was introduced to far too many people far too quickly—all older witches and wizards, with names like Nott and Abbot and Selwyn, greetings accompanied by genial smiles and sympathetic looks as Hepzibah explained why Hermione was here in London.

It was incredible how flawless her story unfolded coming from Hepzibah's lips. Hermione's pride at her ability to create false memories intensified as Hepzibah talked briefly about her wayward sister, the one she rarely mentioned because Monica Smith had left to go to America, who had died tragically from Dragon Pox not so long ago…

It was the sort of conversation no one wanted to have at a party, so, thankfully, no one asked for details about Monica Smith. They were far more interested in Hermione, her beautiful and lovely daughter—how it was she had no American accent, what was Ilvermorny like, and wherever did she get such a lovely dress?

"I daresay we'll have plenty of time to talk at dinner," Hepzibah had interrupted, perhaps sensing Hermione's aversion to so much attention all at once. "We're seated together, I already checked the charts, and my dear niece can indulge you in all of your curiosities about her torrid American lifestyle while we eat—but I was hoping to show her around the arts center first. And, with any luck, finally manage to grab a drink!"

Hepzibah's friends laughed good-naturedly. "Of course," said one of the women—Rachel Abbot, Hermione thought. "I'm sure they'll be ushering us into the hall for dinner any minute now. We'll see you shortly."

Hermione internally sighed as Hepzibah guided her away from her throng of elderly peers. "Sorry about that, dearie," she murmured as they wove through the crowd in the opposite direction. "That lot can be rather demanding, it's just in their nature, old bats… Not that I can blame them for being so
interested in you, of course."

A tray full of champagne glasses hovered past them, and Hepzibah deftly grabbed two of them and handed one to Hermione. "Finally," she said. "Thought we'd never get our hands on some!"

She clinked her glass to Hermione's. Hermione smiled, and was just about to take a sip when she nearlydropped her glass. "Oh my god," she gasped in disbelief.

She knew that man. That slicked back, white-blonde hair, those silvery eyes, those familiar, pointed features. But how? Had he come for her, had he somehow acquired another time-turner? Was he here to save her and bring her back to their time?

Hepzibah followed Hermione's stunned gaze and made a low sound of understanding. "Ah… Yes. Abraxas Malfoy."

Hermione exhaled slowly, quickly composing herself. Abraxas Malfoy. Of course that was not Draco.

It was his grandfather…

He looked so much like his future grandson that it was uncanny. He was currently surrounded by a group of witches and a wizard his own age, all of whom were dressed lavishly and laughing, drinks in hand.

Hermione took a sip of champagne, willing her racing heart to slow. She did not know Abraxas Malfoy. Hermione Smith, young witch from New York, had never met a Malfoy. She knew nothing about his family. "Sorry," she murmured. "I just… thought he looked familiar for a moment."

"I wouldn't be surprised; he's rather… notorious," Hepzibah said, grinning wryly. Her voice lowered, and she leaned in to Hermione when she spoke next. "He's the most sought-after bachelor in Wizarding Britain. Sole heir to the Malfoy family line. His mother passed away when he was a child, and after his father died a few years ago, it left him to inherit an ungodly amount of gold—as well as a massive manor—all to himself. He's quite the philanthropist though; donates money to all sorts of things, from non-profits like WAG to various departments at the Ministry… Always hanging around the Ministry, just like his father used to…"

Hermione smirked. Evidently, the men in the Malfoy family had a long history of popping in and out of the Ministry of Magic.

"Witch Weekly published an interview with him a few months ago," Hepzibah went on. "Focusing largely on his status of being single, of course… He was rather blunt in the interview about his desire to stay unattached for the time being. Doesn't look as though he has a date with him tonight, either…"

Hepzibah craned her neck to get a better look, and Hermione couldn't help but do the same. Abraxas Malfoy did not seem to have any one specific witch on his arm, but he looked right at home holding court with a group of them, all of whom fluttered their lashes at him and smiled flirtatiously.

"But there, to his left, do you see the gentleman with the dark blonde hair?" Hermione nodded—he was the only other man in the group. "That's Irving Lestrange and his fiancée, Victoria Rosier. Just got engaged a few weeks ago, it was in the Prophet. And I don't know most of those witches pining over Mr. Malfoy there, but the one with the black hair looks familiar…"

Surprisingly, Hermione had thought the exact same thing—the witch with bright red lipstick and dark hair let out a shrill laugh that carried even in the loud and bustling hall. Her face was so pug-like
that she simply had to be an ancestor of Pansy Parkinson. Hermione knew she should not harbor any ill-will towards this woman she'd never spoken to, but she couldn't help the feeling of spite that festered in her mind when she looked at her.

She tore her eyes away from her to examine Irving Lestrange again. As she looked more closely, she could see it—he was one of the boys from Slughorn's memories, one which Dumbledore had collected and left in his Pensieve long ago… Lestrange had sat with several other Slytherins in Slughorn's office, casting Tom Riddle admiring looks…

Hermione wondered if this was Rodolphus's father, or uncle, perhaps…

So, these were two of the future Dark Lord's current, most prominent followers, Hermione thought as she looked between him and Abraxas. The Knights of Walpurgis, at the moment… Unless they had already been renamed…?

Abraxas happened to look up and catch Hermione's eye. Hermione quickly looked away, blushing and cursing herself for having been caught ogling him so blatantly. Even stupider still, she chanced looking at him again a moment later, unable to stop herself.

He was still staring straight at her.

He smiled.

"I think Mr. Malfoy noticed you," Hepzibah said astutely, touching Hermione's elbow.

"Don't be silly," said Hermione, yet she hoped that Hepzibah was right. Hermione had every intention of catching the attentions of Riddle's followers… and Abraxas Malfoy, supposed notorious bachelor and sole heir to the Malfoy fortune, had just made the very top of her list.

She turned her back to the young, sophisticated group of witches and wizards. Hepzibah smiled amusedly, but before she could say anything a voice reverberated in the atrium, announcing that cocktail hour was over and instructing everyone to move into the main hall for dinner.

"I hope you won't feel too attacked by my… associates while we eat," Hepzibah said as she once more hooked her arm though Hermione's. Empty trays were now hovering all around, and Hermione and Hepzibah deposited their empty champagne flutes on one as it past. They then followed the crowd into the room where two large double doors opened before them.

The dining hall was even more spectacular than the atrium, filled with fairies and chandelier lights and luxurious drapes hanging from the ceiling. There were dozens of tables with name cards on them, all set with golden silverware which was currently empty. In the back was a stage, where Hermione assumed the live auction would soon be happening. "Especially that Walden," Hepzibah went on. "He's on the board for WAG and just loves to pick people's brains; I daresay he'll have a thousand questions for you about Ilvermorny…"

Hermione nodded, only half listening as she scanned the crowds. She had not seen Riddle yet. Was he not in attendance? She frowned, spotting Abraxas Malfoy and Irving Lestrange as they took their seats at a table behind them. Irving's fiancé, Victoria Rosier, sat with them, as did another wizard that Hermione vaguely recognized. Avery, that was the Avery boy from the same memory in which she had seen Lestrange, but Hermione did not know his first name… Three future Death Eaters then, all at once table…

No Riddle.

Not wanting to get caught staring again, Hermione turned to face the table which Hepzibah had led
her to. A name card which read 'Hermione Smith' written in elegant script sat atop a golden plate, next to 'Hepzibah Smith'. Smiling, Hermione and Hepzibah took their seats, and within moments the rest of their table had joined them.

Hermione was by far the youngest witch at the table. The rest were around Hepzibah's own age—her 'associates' as she had called them—all major donors to the Wizarding Artists Guild, board members, or art collectors. And while they were friendly enough, Hepzibah had been absolutely right about their fascination with Hermione. They'd barely sat down before Walden Travers began assaulting Hermione with questions about her life in New York, and everyone else was just as intrigued. Hermione was simply glad she'd done her research and was able to answer all their questions convincingly.

Dinner manifested itself on their plates in a manner which was reminiscent of the feasts at Hogwarts—seared salmon, chicken farro risotto, arabica crusted steak, black pepper fettuccini—whatever they had selected with their RSVP appeared before them all at the same time, and one of their glasses filled with water. But they each had a wine glass as well, and Hermione watched in mild confusion as Walden—who had just asked her if it was true if the pukwudgie statue fired an arrow at the students it wanted—picked his empty glass up.

"Pinot noir," he said into his goblet, and instantly it filled with red wine. All around the hall Hermione saw other witches and wizards doing the same, their glasses filling with the drink of their choice.

She might not have followed suit—she wanted to keep a clear head, after all—had Walden not given her a large, toothy grin and all but shoved her own glass into her hand. "You simply must try the pinot, I convinced the head caterer to serve this brand, it's a made in the Burgundy region of France, best there is."

He took a large drink and Hermione immediately knew she would not be taking him up on his suggestion—his mouth was already stained purple. "I think I ought to stick to champagne," she said, smiling demurely. "Red wine doesn't always agree with me."

Her glass immediately filled with a light and bubbly liquid. "They do say it's smart to stick with one sort of drink," Walden said, shrugging. "But I've never had an issue! Anyway, about this pukwudgie…"

As the dinner went on, Hermione found herself becoming more and more comfortable in the high-heeled shoes of Hermione Smith. She had discreetly checked every table in the hall, and confirmed that no, Tom Riddle was not present. She wondered why this was the case. His closest 'friends' were in attendance; surely he could have acquired an invitation? Perhaps he was simply not interested in coming to an art auction. Perhaps he thought it a waste of time.

Or, perhaps, Hermione mused darkly, considering this was happening early on a Tuesday evening… Perhaps he simply had to work.

Whatever the reasoning, Tom Marvolo Riddle was not here. This had disappointed Hermione at first, but once she knew with certainty that she would not be confronting the future Dark Lord this evening, Hermione was able to relax a bit. His absence would make it easier to focus on catching the interest of his present, almost equally important followers.

Hermione held court nearly all through dinner. It was almost too easy to pretend to be an American witch with a British mother and aunt, and no one suspected that a thing was amiss as she shared with them silly anecdotes of her Ilvermorny days that simply did not exist.
"Well, it sounds like a superb school, but I'm afraid no other institution can hold a candle to Hogwarts," said Walden's wife, a witch named Esmerelda who had light blue eyes and beautiful, silver hair. "It's an amazing castle, Hermione. If you ever get the opportunity to visit Hogwarts, you absolutely should. Headmaster Dippet may even allow visitors during breaks and such."

"That sounds lovely," Hermione murmured, though her stomach twisted uncomfortably. As wonderful as it would be to see Hogwarts again, she had no intention of returning to the castle.

"Isn't he here?" Hepzibah asked. "Armando usually comes to these things—ah, yes, there he is, at the table on the left side of the stage."

Hermione followed her aunt's finger to look behind her, and nearly dropped her glass for the second time that evening. It was not Armando Dippet, current Headmaster of Hogwarts that startled her so—but the man he was speaking to.

There was no doubt in her mind that that was Albus Dumbledore.

His hair was ginger rather than white, and unlike most of the wizards who wore black or dark-colored dress robes, Albus Dumbledore was wearing robes of vibrant fuchsia... And next to him was a slew of other witches and wizards she recognized: Elphias Doge, the small wizard who had spoken at Dumbledore's funeral; Horace Slughorn, slightly less round and with hair that was blonde rather than gray; and was that Bathilda Bagshot? It was difficult to tell, seeing as the one and only time Hermione had seen Bathilda she had technically been dead, her body occupied by a venomous, massive snake—but this woman did resemble that particular animated corpse, if she tilted her head just so.

Hermione wondered how on earth she had missed Dumbledore in his bright clothes before in her careful scanning of the hall—perhaps he had arrived later, or been in the bathroom when she'd looked that way? Or maybe she had just been that intent on looking specifically for Riddle, that she had completely overlooked such notable and familiar faces. Regardless, it was definitely Dumbledore, Slughorn, Dippet, and Doge who sat together, looking cheery as they ate their dinner and drank wine.

"Oh, that's the Transfiguration Professor at Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore," Hepzibah explained, probably assuming Hermione's affronted look was simple shock at Dumbledore's attire. "Absolutely brilliant wizard."

"I know who Albus Dumbledore is," Hermione said, because she would know, if she were a well-read witch of this time. She turned away from his table as though she feared Dumbledore might suddenly make eye contact with her from across the hall, know at once what she was, and theatrically scream 'Time traveler!' for all the world to hear.

But they do not know me, Hermione reminded herself, breathing deeply. They have never seen me before, no one will recognize Hermione Smith...

Still best not to catch their attention.

"Of course she knows who Albus Dumbledore is!" Walden shouted incredulously. "Half the world knows who he is! He defeated Grindelwald in the finest duel this world has ever seen!"

"You'll have to forgive his enthusiasm; my Walden's a bit biased with his affections towards Dumbledore," said Esmerelda, rolling her eyes at her husband. "Walden was a Gryffindor, and Albus Dumbledore was a few years older than him in the same house."
"You say that as though there is something wrong with being a Gryffindor," Hermione said, smirking as she took another sip of champagne.

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with being a Gryffindor, of course!" said Esmerelda. "They just tend to be a bit brash is all. I was a Ravenclaw, myself."

"Had her nose in a book ninety percent of the time I saw her," Walden said. "I had to drag her out of the library some days to see the sunlight. The only reason she ever noticed me was because I literally pried a book out of her hands to ask if she'd go with me to Hogsmeade."

"I supposed Gryffindor recklessness is good for some things," said Esmerelda.

The older couple shared a fond, tender look, and Hermione wasn't sure if she found it beautiful or sickening, how in love this older couple clearly was.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" The booming voice from before resounded throughout the hall, only now its source was clear. A young, charismatic wizard in dress robes and a top hat nearly as bright as Dumbledore's clothing (only his were aqua rather than fuchsia, and sparkling with rhinestones) walked onto the stage, smiling widely. "Our live auction is about to begin, and I shall be your M.C., your Master of Ceremonies, your auctioneer, your host, your humble servant—whatever you'd like me to be! Your plates will vanish shortly, but fear not! Your goblets shall remain, ever overflowing!"

The crowd laughed. Hermione did as well, taking another sip of champagne and setting her glass down, switching to water for the time being. She was excited. Hermione had never attended a live auction before, let alone a wizarding one.

The plates and silverware suddenly vanished, and in their places appeared paddles with numbers on them. Hermione stared down at hers—number twenty-two—and saw that Hepzibah's was labeled as number twenty-one.

"Does everyone bid at these things?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Oh no, of course not," Hepzibah answered under her breath. "Though it is fun to just watch, especially when a good bidding war breaks out."

"And now, the entertainment you have all been waiting for—aside from the charming aesthetic of my voice—the art!"

The host in the aqua, rhinestone attire gestured to one side with his wand, and a large landscape painting came hovering out. Birds fluttered across a canvas decorated in cherry blossom trees before a setting sun. "Done by the emerging artist Emily Lesterfield, a work titled 'May', a beautiful piece, truly—it would look right at home above a lavish mantelpiece or fireplace, if I do say so myself—shall we start the bidding at, say, two hundred galleons? Ah, yes, the very first bid of the evening, thank you, number fourteen—I have two hundred, do I have two-ten? Yes, two ten over here—and now two twenty, thank you, ma'am—"

Hermione watched as paddle after paddle went up, the announcer darting back and forth across the stage and glistening like an aqua disco ball as he moved, pointing and speaking impressively fast. His enchanted voice was amplified so that he did not need a microphone, and he was half the show, really, aside from the actual bidding that was going on. Each time an artwork was won, he shouted 'SOLD' at the top of his lungs, and sparks of brilliant colors went flying from the tip of his wand, showering the stage in a cascade of lights.

Artwork after artwork was brought out on the stage, mostly magical paintings but also the occasional
sculpture which moved. Dumbledore had a short bidding war with a young witch over a bronze sculpture of a phoenix, which was amazing in that it started as an egg and transformed into a bird when tapped with a wand. Tapped again, and it became an egg once more. Dumbledore ultimately won the piece. Hermione was hardly surprised.

She kept looking at Hepzibah out of the corner of her eye to see if anything interested her, but nothing seemed to. Hermione was content to simply watch, alternating between sipping water and champagne, enjoying herself probably too much for something so ostentatious. Soon the auction would come to an end, and then, in the mingling which would occur afterwards, was when she would need to get to work.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, our last piece of the evening…"

One final painting was brought to the stage, and Hermione was instantly enamored.

She had never considered herself much of an art lover. She appreciated it, sure, but Hermione had never seen a magical painting that made her stop and think, wow. This one managed that feat.

It was a painted representation of a child in a garden. A girl, maybe four or five years old. She was sitting on the ground in front of a rose bush. It was dying; the leaves were black, the flowers were wilting, their petals nearly all fallen off. The girl held her little hands up to one of the dying roses and scrunched her face up, hard. Then, magically, the petals floated up from the ground and reattached themselves, and soon the rose and the blackened leaves around it were as good as new.

Then it started all over again. Petals falling and dwindling; a child's expression of sadness, determination, and delight. One moment, it looked like she was saving the rose bush, bringing the petals and leaves back to life. The next, it looked like she was the cause of its death; petals falling and leaves turning from green to black.


It wasn't just what the painting depicted that had Hermione so in awe of it though—it was how it was painted. Everything was so… dramatic. The shadows were dark and the red of the petals so vibrant when they were all attached to a thorny stem. The girl's dress was white and lovely but smeared in dirt and grass stains, like she had gone through hell on earth in lace to make it to that dying rose. Her eyes were bright and her hair a frizzy mess, and her face, her cherubic face was so full of contrasting emotion.

"'The Garden', a beautiful piece by Delilah Labarbera, an artist who had been practicing here in London for several years, previously located in Italy…"

"Wow," Hermione gasped after a moment, hardly hearing what the announcer was saying.

"You like it?" Hepzibah said, one brow raised.

"It's lovely," said Hermione.

Hepzibah looked at Hermione, then to the painting, then back to Hermione. "All right, then," she said simply. "Let's win it."

"Really?"

"Yes… but here." She handed Hermione her own paddle, which Hepzibah herself had not raised
once. "Use mine."

"Why me?"

Hepzibah smiled slyly. "You'll put on a better show than I will."

Hermione was about to ask what that meant when the announcer said, "Do I have three hundred as a starting bid?"

Hepzibah gave her a pointed look, and, reacting instantly, Hermione's arm shot up in the air with the practice of one who often raised her hand first in a large group setting. "Excellent! Three hundred to the lovely lady in gold! Do I have three ten—? Yes, sir!, Three ten to number forty-one—"

Hermione's eyes narrowed, turning to see who had bid against her so quickly. The glower slid from her face when she locked eyes with none other than Abraxas Malfoy.

He smiled at her.

"Do I have three twenty?"

Hermione gave Hepzibah a questioning look. Hepzibah was grinning wickedly. "Let's take him to the cleaners," she said.

Hermione's arm once more shot into the air, her paddle raised high.

A battle began.

A few other people bid in the beginning, but they were out of the game quickly enough. Five hundred, five fifty, six hundred galleons. Hermione tried to think of what that converted to in pounds and what that equated to in the year 1950, and simply knew that it was a lot. She also knew that Hepzibah had gold to spare, and though she probably should have been a little more concerned in terms of spending her fake aunt's money on a painting, she wasn't. Hepzibah only egged her on, and Hermione knew that this was probably the perfect way to meet someone like Abraxas Malfoy and make a lasting impression.

Everyone was watching with amazement as this unknown young woman, one who was sitting at a table of much older witches and wizards, went toe to toe in a bidding war against Abraxas Malfoy, most sought after bachelor in wizarding Britain. He and Hermione shared little smirks as the price of the painting continued to go up, up, up, and Hermione had to wonder if Abraxas really cared about artwork in the slightest. He hadn't bid on a single other piece all evening, after all…

He was flirting with her, she realized all at once. This was the most expensive, competitive form of flirting the world had ever seen.

Leave it to a Malfoy, Hermione thought as she raised her paddle again, setting the price at a bewildering six-hundred and eighty galleons.

The host was beside himself at how high the cost of the painting had risen. He was quite amusing to watch, now referring to Abraxas Malfoy as 'the golden man', presumably because of his hair, and Hermione as 'the golden lady', obviously because of her dress. Everyone was enjoying the spectacle, gasping and cheering as the price continued to skyrocket, but as it neared eight hundred galleons, Hepzibah started to look concerned.

"I don't think he's going to let us win, auntie," Hermione murmured as Abraxas raised his paddle again, where his peers surrounding him smiled and cheered.
"I think you might be right," Hepzibah responded.

The host instantly noticed Hermione's hesitation and the whispering going on at her table. "What's this? Is the golden lady throwing in the towel? Abandoning such a lovely work of art, so delicately crafted? Why, it's a one of a kind piece, you'll find nothing like it elsewhere—"

Hepzibah sighed and gave Hermione a little nod, as though to say 'one more bid'. Hermione lifted the paddle to cheers from her table, the price of the painting now at an even eight hundred galleons.

"Do I have eight ten, my good, golden man?"

Hermione turned to face him. Abraxas was looking at her intently, the slightest smile on his lips. He looked so much like Draco that Hermione could have sworn for a moment that it was him, having spotted her from across the vacant atrium of the Ministry, waiting.

But then he did something that Draco Malfoy would have never done. He inclined his head slightly as though in acquiescence, and he set his paddle down on the table as he did. The girl who resembled Parkinson stuck her lower lip out, then shot Hermione a venomous look. Hermione smiled brightly at her, gave Abraxas a small nod of her own, and turned back around to face the host. Hepzibah was positively beaming.

"My, it seems that the golden man is out of the race! Are you quite sure? I could do this all night—no, really, I've had so many pepper-up potions I don't think I'll be able to sleep for a week—no? Going once—going twice—I mean it now, this is the real thing, this is not a drill—going for a third time…. SOLD!"

A jet of golden sparks fired from the tip of his wand, covering the stage in a shower of gilded stars. Hermione feared he might set the painting on fire with how many there were, but then she saw them pass right through the frame, and realized they must have been illusory bits of light all along.

"Oh, excellent!" Walden said, touching Hermione's shoulder and looking to Hepzibah. "Well done!"

"Wonderful acquisition," said Rachel Abbot, who was sitting across the table from them.

"I'll say," added Esmerelda. But she was not looking at Hermione nor the painting, which was now being hovered off stage, but at Abraxas Malfoy. She then shared a knowing look with Hepzibah, both of whom were smirking.

Hermione was giddy with excitement. "Oh, that was exhilarating!" she declared, dropping the paddle and picking up her champagne. Perhaps it was just all the hand raising which had resulted in something far better than house points, but she felt exceptionally delighted. "I can't believe I just spent so much of your money on a painting though, Auntie!"

"Consider it your birthday present, dearie," Hepzibah said, smiling.

"How will we get it? Do we have to pick it up now?"

"Oh, no, they have a delivery system, it will be brought to my house later this week… once I send them the gold, of course…"

The host had finished giving his thanks to the crowd as they'd talked, exiting the stage and asking everyone to please move back into the atrium where more drinks as well as desert would be served. All around them people stood, and as Hermione got to her feet, she felt a rush of warmth and dizziness overcome her.
"Are you all right, dear?" Walden said, offering her his hand. Hermione didn't take it, and though the dizziness subsided, she did still feel a bit… off.

"I'm fine," she murmured.

"Probably just a bit too much champagne," Esmerelda said. "I know I overdid my first time at one of these things. They do make it easy…"

"But I didn't even…"

Hermione's voice trailed off. She was about to say, 'but I didn't even finish that glass', when, looking around, she saw that no one had. Everyone at her table had been drinking the whole time, but never once had they needed to repeat their drink request into the glass, nor had waiters been weaving through tables, refilling them…

'Your goblets shall remain, ever overflowing!'

The host hadn't been making a joke. The glasses had been magically refilling themselves the whole time.

*Oh dear,* Hermione thought, torn between being angry at herself and a bit annoyed at Hepzibah. Why hadn't she realized that was what was happening? How much had she drunk? And *why* hadn't her protective, fake aunt warned her?

*Because you're Hermione Smith, her niece from New York who has grown up equally wealthy her entire life. Surely she assumed that you'd attended one social function like this? Surely she did not think she needed to tell her twenty-one year old niece not to be an idiot?*

Hermione grabbed her water glass and drank deeply.

As they made their way back to the atrium, she realized it might not be as bad as she thought. She didn't feel drunk, just a bit… tipsy, and her she could easily blame her less than perfect coordination on these damn heels. Her mind felt lucid enough, at any rate.

She was fine.

The moment they settled into the post-dinner cocktail party, where trays of fancy pastries and other sweets hovered everywhere, being snatched up by the people they past, Hermione was bombarded by people she did not know. Random wizards and witches—only some of whom were familiar with Hepzibah—congratulated her on her purchase and made comments on what good taste she had. Hermione smiled and thanked them, carefully keeping an eye out for particular faces. She did not want to be locked in a conversation with anyone who taught at Hogwarts…

It was just as Walden once more forced her into a conversation about Ilvermorny—this time, asking if they had an art collection or classes like Hogwarts did—when Hermione once more made eye contact with Abraxas. This time, he was the one caught staring at her. He was currently locked in a conversation with Horace Slughorn. Upon seeing that his ex-student's attention was no longer on him, Slughorn turned and saw who he was staring at. Hermione instantly looked away. She did not want Slughorn to remember her face or come anywhere near her.

"Hogwarts has several art clubs, you know," Walden was saying, and Hermione nodded distractedly. "Both magical and the muggle kind, can you believe it? It's an odd tradition, but they find that learning how to paint the muggle way makes it easier to learn magical techniques."

"Is that right," Hermione murmured before drinking more water.
"Indeed! Some of the finest artists in wizarding Britain are muggle-borns."

"I would say that's arguable, Mr. Travers."

Hermione knew who it was before she even turned. She'd hoped this would be the moment that he would come to her, and she had been correct.

Up close, the differences between Abraxas Malfoy and Draco were more obvious. Abraxas's jawline was not as pointed, his nose not as long, and Hermione did not recall Draco being quite as tall. His steely eyes were the same though, and when he smiled, it was with a similar, mischievous quality to it. He was looking at Walden when he first appeared at Hermione's side, addressing the old man when he continued, saying, "The best artists in wizarding Britain are those who were raised to understand the complex, underlying magical techniques first. Like the renowned portrait artist Altair Black, who has been commissioned to do every painting of the Hogwarts Headmasters since he turned sixteen."

He turned his attention to Hermione before Walden could respond. "The golden lady," he said, calling her by the same name the host had given her.

"The golden man," Hermione responded in kind.

Hepzibah looked quickly back and forth between the two, then seemed to make a quick decision. "Walden, won't you come with me to find your wife? I think she's gone over there, by the bar..."

And without another word, Hepzibah had ushered Walden away, leaving Hermione to speak with Abraxas Malfoy alone.

Or as alone as two people could be, in the middle of such a large crowd. Hermione was simply relieved that he had come alone, not bringing his friends with him—or worse, Horace Slughorn. "You acquired a lovely work of art this evening," Abraxas said. He had a glass of some hard liquor in his hands, which he raised towards her in a toast.

"Does it really matter how someone won, if, at the end of the day, they've acquired their heart's desire?"

Oh, he's good, Hermione thought as Abraxas gave her a charming smile. Very good.

But would he transpire to be as good as Riddle?

"That depends. In this particular instance, I would say yes, it does matter... Now I'll always look at that painting and remember the golden-haired man that allowed me to win it."

"How very unfortunate for you," Abraxas said, his smile widening. He offered her his hand. "My name is Malfoy, Abraxas Malfoy. You might have heard of me."

Hermione resisted the urge to laugh, and instead allowed him to take her hand. "Hermione Smith," she responded as he kissed her hand. "You shall have to forgive me; I'm new to London, so no, I haven't heard of you."

Rather than look offended, Abraxas looked somewhat pleased. "I thought that might be the case. I'm certain I would have noticed someone like you before... So, Miss Smith. What brings you to London? Where are you from?"
Hermione launched into her story, sensing that she was gaining Abraxas's interest with every word she spoke. Hepzibah Smith's niece from America, wealthy, beautiful, pureblood witch… Completely unknown territory, just exotic enough to be frightfully interesting; so different from the other witches he surely had pining over him all the time here in London…

Abraxas had just begun to talk about his beautiful manor when the booming voice interrupted him. The host announced that the gala was coming to an end. The guards would soon be ushering them out, escorting them to their various forms of magical transportation or, if they preferred, seeing them to an activated floo outlet.

"The floo," Abraxas said amusedly. An empty tray hovered by, and he and Hermione both set their glasses on it. "These events are rather funny in that aspect. Nearly everyone shows up in some extravagant carriage or something, only to be too intoxicated to bother with it for the journey home. The floo isn't as fun, but it is efficient."

Indeed, they could see witches and wizards stumbling into the atrium now, where fireplaces that had been concealed by the massive bar were now visible. They disappeared in flashes of green, their departures supervised by the guards stationed by each one.

"I'm surprised no one is apparating," Hermione murmured. Abraxas laughed like she had just made a joke.

"Can you imagine? If this too-drunk crowd all had their wands on them and decided to try apparating home? The walkway outside would be littered in body parts; it'd be a nightmare."

Hermione blushed, realizing how true that was. Apparating was difficult enough to do sober, and some people never got the hang of it at all.

"Do you plan on taking the floo home?" Hermione asked curiously. She had a suspicion that the carriage with unicorns might belong to him.

"Well, yes, actually, but that's only because I'm having—"

"Abraxas!" The witch who so resembled Pansy appeared, and behind her a few others, including Irving Lestrange, Victoria Rosier, and Avery. "There you are! Are we still going to your manor?"

She then noticed Hermione, and shot her an ugly look. "Of course," said Abraxas. "Ah, Miss Smith, this is my good friend Alice Parkinson. And here, Marie Greengrass, Adam Avery, Irving Lestrange, and his fiancé, Victoria Rosier. Everyone, this is the golden lady, otherwise known as…"

Alice Parkinson came as no surprise to Hermione, who had the same nose and hair as Pansy. Marie Greengrass was a very short, petite blonde with green eyes that were dark and mysterious, Adam Avery was a brunette man with a bit of a baby face, and Victoria Rosier was tall, curvy, and absolutely gorgeous, with light brown hair and blue eyes like a summer's day sky.

"Hermione Smith," Hermione finished, not taking any offense to the fact that Abraxas had not recalled it. "I know, it's a bit of an odd name."

As she said it, she realized that maybe remaining Hermione in this era had been a stupid idea. It was an uncommon name. Perhaps she should have gone with Sarah or something…

Well, it was too late now. "I think it's pretty," Marie Greengrass said, shaking her hand first. "And I simply adore your dress," she added, smiling.

"It's very… unconventional," Alice Parkinson said, not in a friendly manner. Hermione wasn't sure if
she was referring to her name or the dress. She shook Hermione's hand like it pained her.

The others seemed kind enough though. Hermione found Victoria the most intimidating of all of them; in her heels, she was just a bit taller than her fiancé. Irving had a handsome face and dirty blonde, curly hair, but his smile was warm and friendly, and Adam Avery seemed far too eager to kiss her hand, smiling toothily at her after he did.

The host's voice once more instructed them, in a less patient tone, to please leave the arts center. Hepzibah found her way over to Hermione, where she quickly noted the crowd around her and smiled.

"Miss Smith," Abraxas greeted her at once. Hermione wondered when and how they had met. Had Hepzibah known Abraxas's father before he past? "Lovely to see you."

"You as well," Hepzibah said curtly. "But it would seem the evening has come to an end. Come along, Hermione. Our limousine is waiting."

"Actually," Abraxas said, smoothly stepping in front of Hermione before Hepzibah could take her arm, "I was just about to invite your niece to come to my manor. I'm having a bit of an after party; many of my friends who were unable to attend the gala shall be there—Oliver Mulciber, for example, had another engagement and so he had to decline his invitation to this, as well as a few others—but Hermione mentioned that she was new to England, and I would love to introduce her to some of London's finest."

His smile was dazzling. Hepzibah looked conflicted, but Hermione knew that this was a perfect opportunity. Many of his friends who were unable to attend, hm?

"Oh, can't I, Auntie?" she said pleadingly. "He was just telling me about his manor, and it sounds simply divine."

"It truly must be seen to be appreciated," Abraxas agreed.

Hepzibah continued to look torn for a moment, but then she gave in. Hermione could tell that Hepzibah secretly wanted her to go, and was merely putting on a bit of a protective show.

Clearly, while shop boys working in shady stores in Knockturn Alley were nowhere near good enough for her precious niece… this was not the case for someone like Abraxas Malfoy.

"Oh, all right," she said. "But do have her home before midnight, won't you?" she went on, her expression becoming serious as she looked at Abraxas. "I'll be up all night worrying about her if she's not."

"Of course," Abraxas said.

Hepzibah gave Hermione a swift kiss on the cheek. "Be safe, dearie," she said, and then, a bit quieter, "I mean it, be home by midnight. And don't hesitate to call for Hokey if you need anything."

"I assure you, you have nothing to worry about in concerns for your niece's safety while she is with me," said Abraxas, offering Hermione his arm. Hermione waved goodbye and Hepzibah watched them walk away with a smile on her face; Alice Parkinson glowered when their elbows linked and began whispering behind her hand to Marie Greengrass.

Hermione ignored them. They made their way to the fireplaces on the far side of the atrium, which were continually lighting up with green flames as more witches and wizards departed, supervised by guards. Hermione discreetly grazed her free hand over the fabric of her dress as they walked, where
she could just barely feel it—the reassuring presence of her wand held securely against her thigh.

She could do this.

Abraxas looked at Hermione with another charming smile and, just as he reached for a handful of floo powder, said, "There's no safer place on earth than Malfoy Manor."
Hermione stepped out of the whirling green flames and blinked at the sudden brightness of her new surroundings. Her eyes quickly adjusted, focusing first on the polished, marble floor on which her heels made a sharp clicking sound. She then looked up. Hermione's breath caught, frozen in her throat as though the air in her lungs had just been turned to ice. In the exquisite glittering of a great chandelier, she saw horror. In the flickering of an ephemeral rainbow shining in a crystal, there was a nightmare.

"Wait… All except… except for the Mudblood."

Dark, heavily lidded eyes bored into hers, gleaming with a merciless intensity. Fenrir Greyback grunted like a pleased animal.

"No! You can have me, keep me!"

Ron's cries were met with a powerful, resounding blow to his face. The sound echoed in the drawing room; everyone standing there, even the Malfoys, winced as though they too had been struck.

Bellatrix Lestrange was a force to behold.

"If she dies under questioning, I'll take you next. Blood traitor is next to Mudblood in my book…"

Hermione's heart had begun pounding too loudly for her to make out Bellatrix's next words; it was all she could do then to remain standing. Bellatrix withdrew a silver blade and cut her loose from the others, and she was being dragged away by her hair from the rest of them—Harry, his features all puffed up and shiny and unrecognizable due to her own hex; Ron, face ashen, eyes sparkling and blue and locked onto hers—

And she knew, in that fleeting second when they made eye contact. She knew then what she had been unsure of for so long; what she had questioned every time their fingers brushed or he smiled at her with his cheeks turning so red that his freckles seemed to vanish—what she had been certain was not true when he left them in the woods, only to come back, always to come back—

He loved her.

Ronald Weasley loved her, and now she was going to die.

Hermione was forced to her knees. Bellatrix towered over her, black hair wild about her pale and livid face, her wand in one hand, and the long, silver blade in the other. It shone as she brandished it, pointing it towards Hermione's throat.

Hermione, terrified, wanting to look anywhere other than at the mad woman before her, glanced towards the Malfoys. They were standing against the grandiose fireplace, as still and as lifeless as light fixtures.

Draco still had his back to them. He had turned away as soon as he'd declared that it might be Potter. That it could be Granger, that it could be Arthur Weasley's son. He'd walked away from the situation, reluctant to damn them, but unwilling to do anything to help them either.

But Hermione caught his unwitting eye in the mirror. A great, silver thing with an intricate frame above the fireplace. He looked as frightened as Hermione felt.
Save us, she screamed with her wide, panicked gaze.

Draco did nothing.

"I'm going to ask you nicely once, ickle Mudblood," Bellatrix murmured, and Hermione's stomach dropped at the sound. Her voice was condescending, a sickly-sweet coo. The way someone might address a child.

"Where did you get this sword?" Bellatrix pointed towards the sword of Gryffindor with her blade, which she had set aside. The polished rubies shone like fresh blood in the firelight.

"We f-found it," Hermione whispered in a trembling voice. "We f-found it in the woods—"

"Lies! Crucio!"

Pain, unfathomable pain. Hermione felt it in her bones, roaring up and down her spine like wildfire. She screamed with a primal savagery that she had never known before. Hermione fell to her side, back arching, hands twisting in her mess of hair. She did not think pain like this was possible. Somewhere, perhaps in her imagination, she thought she heard a phantom crying her name. She couldn't tell over the sound of her own screaming.

It ended. Hermione's body shook. Her eyes watered, but she could still make out Bellatrix's sinister form quite clearly.

"Tell me the truth, Mudblood. Where did you find it?"

"In the woods, we—"

"Crucio!"

A maelstorm incinerating her nerves. Hermione thrashed, screaming, hot tears streaming down her face. There was an inferno trapped beneath her skin.

"I'm going to ask you again," Bellatrix snarled after she lifted the curse. "Where did you get this sword? Where?"

"We found it—we found it—please!"

It was useless. Bellatrix bellowed 'Crucio!' once more, and Hermione screamed—a broken, strangled sound. As the agony became paramount, her mind sought some kind of reprieve. Her roving eyes caught the flicker of a rainbow, colors dancing along one of the crystals of the chandelier. Pretty, she thought as her neck snapped backwards.

She wondered how long it took for someone to go mad from this.

She wondered how long Alice and Frank Longbottom had lasted under the point of this wicked woman's wrath.

Bellatrix paused in her onslaught to shout at her, her words vicious and horrible. Hermione couldn't make them all out over the ringing of her ears—something about her vault in Gringotts, how they must have broken into it. Hermione supposed the details didn't matter at the moment though, because Bellatrix hardly drew a breath afterwards before she lifted her wand again.

Hermione watched the way her wrist twisted through a haze. Her mind drifted, and she seemed to observe the manner in which Bellatrix's lips moved and her wand flicked as though in slow motion.
Perfect annunciation, she thought. A precise, purposeful motion.

Bellatrix Lestrange's spellcasting was truly impeccable.

"Crucio!"

'The Crucius Curse does not inflict real damage to its victim; at least, not in the physical sense. The spell only affects the mind, creating a false sense of excruciating pain, while in reality, the target's body is not being harmed at all.' Chapter seven of 'Dark and Formidable Magic' by Rolande Robinson.

The curse was lifted again. Hermione had stars in her eyes, rainbows occasionally flitting in and out of her vision. She heard something clicking with the regularity of a metronome as though from a thousand miles away, and it wasn't until it had stopped and she was being yanked up by her hair that Hermione realized what it was. Bellatrix's heels on the hard floor. She was behind her now.

Hermione whimpered when she was pulled roughly to her feet. Her body was limp, hardly able to stand as Bellatrix's arm snaked around her chest, the knife pointed under her throat. "Do you know what will happen to you, ickle Mudblood?" Bellatrix cooed. Her breath fanned against Hermione's ear, making her shudder. "Do you know what Greyback will do once I am through with you? You can't even imagine the horrors that that filthy half-breed shall inflict upon you... If you are unfortunate enough to live that long."

She laughed. Cold and pitiless. Then, in a dark and suggestive voice, she whispered, "Let's play a game."

Bellatrix yanked Hermione's arm out and held the blade against it. Hermione struggled, but it was pitiful, useless. Bellatrix held her tight. Hermione felt like a newborn lamb, trembling in the arms of her death.

For a spell that supposedly only affected the mind, the Crucius Curse had certainly taken a toll on Hermione's body.

"I'm going to spell out a word here. If I finish it before you confess where and how you got my sword, maybe I shall grant you a small mercy."

Without warning, Bellatrix dragged the blade across Hermione's arm—a straight line down. Hermione barely bit back another scream. The silver burned like acid on her skin; it must have been cursed. "I'll kill you before the werewolf can have you," Bellatrix whispered in her ear. The letter M was now etched into her arm, weeping blood. The pain was horrid, but it was nothing compared to that of the Crucius Curse. Hermione could feel her lucidity returning. She shook her head, saying nothing as clear thoughts came back to her.

"Your little friends won't have to hear your screams as he rapes you," Bellatrix went on leeringly. She cut again with the blade, moving faster.

M-u-d-

"We found it," Hermione gasped, barely audible. Bellatrix ignored her.

"They won't hear the sounds of you being raped and shredded to bits, because corpses don't scream."

M-u-d-b-l-o-
"Isn't real," Hermione croaked, doing her best to ignore the implication of Bellatrix's demented words. She weakly tugged her arm, but Bellatrix's grasp was ironclad around her wrist.

"What was that, Mudblood? You're going to need to speak up." More searing pain, more dripping blood. It was making a mess on the marble floor.

M-u-d-b-l-o-o-

"Sword's a fake. We've n-never been in your vault. It isn't real."

Bellatrix froze. There was commotion as Lucius barked some order to his son—'get the goblin, he will tell us if it's a fake'—and Hermione watched as Draco left, refusing to look at her before he went.

"Better," Bellatrix purred.

She finished the word anyway.

"Miss Smith?"

Hermione came back to herself.

She blinked owlishly up at Draco—no, Abraxas—and realized that she no longer had her arm linked with his. She was standing, trembling slightly, her right hand clutching at her left forearm.

Mudblood.

But the word was not visible now, thanks to her enchanted ring, and neither were the mysterious, golden spirals that swirled along her neck and chest. Abraxas's eyes flickered down to her forearm, where Hermione quickly released her death grip on it. "Are you all right?" he asked, one brow raised in concern.

Hermione drew in a deep breath and stood straighter, forcing herself to be calm. "Yes, of course," she said, smiling. She looked up towards the glittering chandelier, ignoring the nauseating coiling of her stomach. "I'm just a bit dazzled by your manor already, I suppose."

A wide smile stretched across Abraxas's face. Hermione heard one of the girls scoff before she and the others walked past—Hermione had a feeling as to who had made the condescending sound—but she and Abraxas both ignored it. "Why, this is just the drawing room," Abraxas said, taking Hermione by the arm again and guiding her further into the manor. Be calm, Hermione thought as though pleading with her own racing heart. That was a lifetime ago. You're fine. You can do this.

"If you're dazzled by this, just wait until I show you the gardens."

"A bit cold for a stroll through the gardens, don't you think?"

Adam Avery, Abraxas's friend who had kissed Hermione's hand a bit too overzealously, appeared at her other side. The others had gone ahead, claiming spots on some grandiose furniture surrounding a low table in the center of the drawing room. They looked right at home as they sat there, their relaxed dispositions giving Hermione the impression that they were invited to Malfoy Manor at least somewhat frequently.

"Wouldn't want Miss Smith to be catching a cold," Avery finished, flashing Hermione a grin.

Abraxas scoffed. "A cold? Please Adam, don't be so daft. My gardens have been enchanted to
remain at a moderate temperature all year round." Avery's expression soured, but Abraxas didn't seem to notice—he quickly turned his attention back to Hermione. "I just had all the grounds redone last season. The flowers are most impressive, though they're far from the only beautiful part of this property."

"I don't doubt it," said Hermione, glancing around the drawing room. Now that she was not in mortal peril, she was able to take in all the details of this luxurious space. There was a tall, impressive grandfather clock with many gilded hands next to a gleaming, grand piano; there were gorgeous, framed paintings lining walls covered in intricate wallpaper; there was a thick rug beneath the table with an elaborate, snake-like design. On top of the table's mahogany surface were a few thick books, as well as a wizarding chess set. The pieces appeared to be made of onyx and gold. Hermione's eyes lingered on them before she smiled demurely up at Abraxas. "It's apparent to me that you have an impeccable eye for beauty, Mr. Malfoy."

"That I do. But please, call me Abraxas."

"Very well… Abraxas."

Abraxas's eyes were gleaming. He held Hermione's gaze for a moment, then looked away and called, "Maldey!"

At once, a house elf appeared before them. He was a male, Hermione thought, and though he was still small, he was larger than any house elf Hermione had ever seen. His ears hung low as he bowed towards Abraxas. "Yes, Master Malfoy?"

"Drinks for our guests. The usual should be fine—unless anyone would like to surprise me with a special request?"

Abraxas looked inquiringly down at those who had already taken a seat, all of whom shook their heads. "I'd prefer firewhisky this fine evening," said Avery, who was still standing on Hermione's other side. "Straight." He gave Hermione another smile before he sat in a vacant love seat.

"Not your usual butterbeer, Adam?" Irving Lestrange asked. "Sure you can handle it? I remember the last time we fed you too much firewhisky."

Avery's expression darkened when everyone laughed. "That was one time," he muttered.

"It was brilliant, was what it was," said Victoria Rosier, Lestrange's beautiful fiancé. She looked up at Hermione with a wicked smile. "Adam here turns into quite the performer when he's had enough to drink. Come, have a seat, it's a funny story."

She motioned for Hermione to sit across from her, next to Avery. Feeling it would be rude not to do so—and wanting very much to be on at least one of these women's good sides—Hermione did. Avery instantly sat up straighter, and Hermione couldn't tell by his expression if he was excited or worried about whatever tale they were about to tell. "I do love a good story," Hermione said, and Avery's face flushed slightly.

Abraxas pursed his lips when Hermione slipped from his arm, a mildly annoyed expression crossing his features. She was next to Avery. The only other place left to sit was in an armchair on the other side of the table. Abraxas begrudgingly took this spot, but he clearly wasn't fond of the seating arrangement. "Well, what about you, Miss Smith?" he asked, gesturing towards the house elf who was still waiting patiently. "What's your drink of choice? Wine?"

"Oh, please, if I'm to call you Abraxas then you must call me Hermione," Hermione said. "And in
continuing to trust in your good tastes… I'll have whatever you're having."

Abraxas's smile returned. "You heard the lady," he said to the elf, not taking his eyes off her. "Make it quick, Maldey."

The elf disappeared.

"When will the others be coming?" Marie Greengrass asked, twisting a lock of blonde hair around her finger.

They all stared at Abraxas. "I said any time after eleven, as I wasn't sure how long the gala would go on." Hermione glanced at the grandfather clock. It was only a quarter till eleven now.

She was just about to ask who else would be joining them when Rosier spoke. "So," she said, leaning forward and folding her hands on her knee. Hermione was momentarily caught up in just how refined she looked—her nails were polished and red, her black dress was flawless, and her heels were so tall and pointed they looked lethal, putting even Hermione's strappy, golden shoes to shame with their height. Her blue eyes were icy, almost unnerving, but undeniably captivating. They were currently glittering mischievously as her full lips curled into a grin. "When we were in school, our seventh year, Abraxas snuck in a few bottles of firewhisky from Hogsmeade," she said in a rush, clearly excited to tell this story. "And—"

"Hogsmeade is a town outside of Hogwarts," Abraxas cut in. "Miss Smith is from America, Victoria; she didn't go to Hogwarts."

This caused everyone to look at Hermione with peculiar expressions. "Oh?" Victoria said, completely distracted. "You didn't? I just assumed you were in a different year or house than us."

"That explains your interesting fashion choices, at least," said Alice Parkinson. Hermione met her judgmental eyes, and though she was definitely prettier than Pansy, Hermione still saw far too much resemblance there for her liking. "Do all Americans wear flowers in their hair in winter? Seems an odd choice for January."

Hermione forced a grin. "Beauty is never out of season… much like Abraxas's enchanted gardens, I'm sure," she answered, casting Abraxas an admiring look. She caught the way Parkinson's smirk faltered and Abraxas's eyes lit up, relishing all of it.

"I think they're lovely," said Avery, drawing Hermione's attention to him. "They're enchanted as well, no? But this one seems to be falling out of place. May I?"

Hermione didn't much like the idea of him touching her hair, but she nodded all the same. Avery leaned towards her and gently pushed one of the flowers back, and it wasn't until his fingers grazed her cheek on the way back down and he was smiling at her that she realized that no flowers had been about to fall out of her hair at all. "That's better," he said, now much closer to her.

While he was not as handsome as Abraxas, Hermione had to admit that move caught her off guard. She felt her cheeks flushing when he winked at her, and she supposed he was rather charming in a sweet, friendly manner. His rounded face made her think of Neville, had he been a confident, flirtatious wizard.

A soft *pop* made everyone turn. Maldey had returned, hovering a tray with many drinks. They each floated into their hands, and Hermione accepted a glass filled with a liquid which was so dark it was nearly black. Only she had Abraxas had such an ominous looking drink; Lestrange and Avery had firewhisky, and all the women had wine glasses which they caught by the stems.
"Cachaça," Abraxas explained, lifting his own glass. "Finest there is, imported from Brazil. This variety is aged with mandrake leaves, which is why it's so dark. Makes it much smoother."

Hermione eyed the dark liquid warily. She knew of mandrake leaves having their uses in potions, but she'd never heard of them being used for alcohol. "How interesting," she said, wondering how she was going to get around drinking all this without being rude. Abraxas took a sip of his own, and, seeing no way out of at least trying it, Hermione followed suit.

It was not as bad as she had feared. It was thick like syrup and semi-sweet, though the burn of alcohol was very apparent. She wondered how potent this drink was. She lowered her glass and smiled up at Abraxas's expectant face. "It's very good," she said.

"Good lord, I don't know how you can drink that stuff," Greengrass piped up. She looked around from Avery and Lestrange, then to Abraxas and Hermione. "Every time I try to drink something like firewhisky straight, I just shudder—I can't stand it by itself."

"It's not for everyone," Abraxas agreed.

"It's certainly not for Adam," said Rosier. She smirked at him and then refocused on Hermione. "As I was saying—we had some firewhisky. And at Hogwarts, your seventh year is your last year, and so we essentially owned the common room at that point."

"We owned it long before we were seventh years," Lestrange murmured before taking a sip of his firewhisky, smirking.

"Sure, sure," said Rosier distractedly. "And so we decided to have a bit of fun with dear Avery one night. He'd lost a bet, you see—"

"He said he could persuade some of the merfolk to attack a group of Gryffindor quidditch players the day before a match," Abraxas interjected gleefully. "I bet that he couldn't. The merfolk had been playing a prank on him, turns out—they pulled poor Adam into the lake when he got too close, it was hilarious."

"They said they would do it!" Avery shouted, and though his face was flushing, he was smiling, too.

"What do you mean they said they would do it?" Greengrass shouted, but she was also grinning. "For the hundredth time, Adam, you can't speak Mermish!"

"I can so!"

"Say something then. Say something in Mermish."

Avery screwed up his face like he was concentrating very hard, then made a series of squawking, grunting noises. Hermione raised her brows at him, unsure if she should be impressed or not. It could have been Mermish, she supposed. It sounded somewhat like the noises she'd heard Dumbledore making to the merfolk after the Triwizard Tournament.

"That wasn't Mermish," Abraxas drawled.

"Was so."

"What'd you say, then?"

"Same thing I said when they dragged me into the lake. You slimy traitors!"
They all laughed. "Well, it's like my mother always says," said Rosier. "Never trust a creature or a half-breed; they're born to be deceitful. Anyway, Avery lost that bet, and so as punishment we decided to send him to the kitchens to steal us all some food after hours—but not without a good deal of liquid courage first."

"They had me absolutely smashed," Avery groaned, looking equal parts annoyed and amused. He grinned sheepishly at Hermione. "Sneaking into the kitchens at Hogwarts isn't really that hard; the house elves just give food away—but making it from our common room, through the castle, and back down again to the kitchens when I was that drunk wasn't easy. Hogwarts is a complicated castle. It seems to change all the time, just to mess with you. And I always miss the fake stair! Could've died, I could have. Or worse, been caught by Pringle, that arse—he's the caretaker of Hogwarts, and he loves to cane those whom he catches out after hours—"

"At least we didn't send you off alone," Greengrass said, stifling a laugh.

"Your one mercy," Avery muttered.

"You're just being dramatic, Adam," Abraxas said. "You wouldn't have gotten caught. I was with you, and it's kind of hard to get in trouble when you have both a prefect and the Head Boy with you."

Hermione perked up. Avery looked far more incredulous now. "You two were the reason I got stuck in the stair at all!" he yelled, his face still a mixture of anger and amusement. "Told me it was the next step, then just laughed, watching me floundering about!"

"You were drunk. You're clearly remembering things wrong," Abraxas said, but his smile indicated otherwise.

Hermione couldn't help but grin as well. It was a bit of a surreal thought, imagining someone like Tom Riddle with Abraxas Malfoy, laughing as their drunk friend attempted to pull himself from the false stair. It sounded like the kind of thing Fred and George might have done to their friend, Lee Jordan.

At the image of Fred's face in her mind, Hermione's smile became strained. Dead. In her time, Fred Weasley was dead, and George didn't pull pranks or laugh hardly at all anymore.

The thought was a visceral, cold reminder of why she was here, of what she meant to do.

"Whatever," Avery scoffed. He looked at Hermione, motioning towards Abraxas when he murmured, "He's a right arse, this one. Don't let his pretty blonde hair fool you. He's a snake."

"We're all snakes, Adam," said Rosier, uncrossing and re-crossing her long legs. "Slytherin's house mascot," she explained to Hermione. "The best house, of course."

"Well, I've no personal opinion on the matter," said Hermione, "but my aunt would say otherwise. She was in Hufflepuff."

"Ha! Hufflepuff!" Alice Parkinson let out a shrill laugh. "Sorry to break it to you, Miss Smith, but that house is a bit of joke at Hogwarts. It's just filled with all the students who didn't fit in anywhere else."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Sometimes, not fitting in can be a marvelous thing," she said slowly, looking about at all of them, in their black dresses and robes. She did indeed stand out from the rest of them, but it was her golden gown and flowers that had snagged the most eligible and sought-after bachelor's attention.
"Cheers to that," said Avery. He lifted his glass, and Hermione, smiling, clinked hers to it. They both drank, and Avery winked afterwards. Hermione wasn't sure if the rush of heat to her face was from the alcohol or his flirty grin.

"Adam," said Abraxas suddenly, "really is quite the performer though. He was such a laugh that night, after we got him back to the common room with a fair amount of sweets. Which was a challenge, as he kept falling over himself, but he managed."

"With little help from you," Avery said dryly.

"While his general coordination is not the best," Abraxas went on, "he is an excellent musician. Aren't you, Adam?"

Avery blinked once in surprise, then puffed up at the praise. Hermione could tell that Abraxas did not often hand out such compliments. "I've composed a song or two in my time," he said, grinning at Hermione.

"Composed?" Hermione asked. "What do you play?"

"Adam is an amazing piano player," Greengrass gushed, her dark green eyes lighting up. "Oh, play us a song, won't you Adam?"

"Yes," added Abraxas. Hermione thought there was something devious in his grin. "Play that one composition you played last time. You know, the long and impressive one."

"Well, I suppose I could," Avery said, looking about at their eager faces. Hermione was equally intrigued, and upon seeing her smile and nod, he said, "All right. Sure, why not?"

He stood and went over to the grand piano. He took a long sip of whisky, set his glass down, and cracked his knuckles. Then, with a flourishing of his fingers, he began to play.

It was a lovely song, lively and energetic. Hermione thought it reflected his personality perfectly.

"Wow," she said quietly. "He is quite good, isn't he?"

The others nodded. Abraxas slid into Avery's now vacant seat. "He's all right," he said, suddenly much less complimentary—and then Hermione understood his ploy.

By encouraging Avery to show off, Abraxas had forced him in to giving up his spot at Hermione's side. Avery was now chained to the piano, metaphorically speaking, and Abraxas wasted no time swooping in and engaging her in conversation.

"So, Hermione," Abraxas said over the piano song, "How are you enjoying London so far? Do you prefer it to New York?"

The conversation revolved around Hermione for a time. Though the others appeared just as curious about her life in America—except for Parkinson, who so clearly adored Abraxas and was jealous that he seemed interested in Hermione—Abraxas constantly geared her attention towards himself. Hermione caught Avery looking up when Abraxas touched her shoulder again, and as his eyes darted back and forth between the two of them, she thought he might have realized he'd been tricked. He played faster, the song clearly about to come to an end.

"Oh, but where are my manners?" Abraxas said abruptly, probably noting this as well. "Here I am,
having invited you into my home, and I haven't even shown you more than the drawing room!" He stood and set his drink down, then extended a hand to Hermione. "Come, I'll give you a bit of a tour. A short one, of course—your shoes, lovely as they are, don't look as though they would make long distances enjoyable."

Hermione laughed and set her own drink down, accepting his hand. "No," she said as she was pulled to her feet. She swayed slightly, proving his point, but held her composure. "They certainly do not."

"We'll be back in a bit. Maldey!" The house elf reappeared with a soft pop. "Make sure out guests are well taken care of."

The elf bowed. Abraxas led Hermione away from the drawing room just as the piano song came to an end.

_He's good_, Hermione thought again as they headed down the hall, away from the others. _He's very good._

Malfoy Manor was larger and more luxurious than Hermione might have imagined. There were crystal wall sconces everywhere, so many paintings that Hermione now thought it no wonder that Abraxas didn't bid on anything else at the WAG auction, because where would he have put them? And when they came to a large bay window, she was struck nearly breathless by the sight.

"Oh," she gasped, looking out into an impossibly beautiful view. There, in the middle of January, was a stretch of lush green lawn, as well as some of the most beautiful gardens she'd ever seen. White peacocks strutted about, pristine, proud birds decorating the foliage.

"Like I said, it's all been recently redone," said Abraxas. "I was opposed to the peacocks at first, but my designer said they would really make everything look more elegant. I daresay he was right."

Hermione smirked as one peacock spread its wide, white tail. "They are rather pretty," she commented.

"I'll show them to you later. But the garden entrance is back through the drawing room, and you simply must see the library while we're on this side of the manor…"

True to his word, Abraxas kept the tour relatively short. He kept Hermione's arm linked with his the entire time, flashing her charming smiles, his eyes sparkling. Hermione acted equally flirty and sophisticated, doing her best not squeal like a school girl when he showed her the vast and impressive library. Everything was _so_ luxurious, _so_ refined, that Hermione was beginning to understand why Draco had grown to be such an arrogant, spoiled git. To live here was to live like a prince.

They were heading back towards the drawing room—Abraxas prattling on about some wine cellar he planned to expand—when a loud cry of delight cut him off.

"Oliver!" someone shouted, and Hermione thought it must be Greengrass. "So good to see you! And Tom!"

Hermione stiffened, her heart leaping in her throat. Greengrass couldn't have said his name any more adoringly. Hermione swallowed thickly. She looked at Abraxas and smiled, hoping he did not notice her sudden rigidity, but he didn't seem to. In fact, he seemed to have gone a bit stiff as well. Hermione just caught a flickering of unease on his face before he looked down at Hermione, another charming smile forming on his lips.

But Hermione had seen it. That slight unease.
"Your other friends have arrived?" Hermione asked unnecessarily.

"It would seem so." He checked his watch. Hermione glanced at it as well; it was a little past eleven. "Excellent, we still have nearly an hour before your dear aunt wants you back home," he said. "Come, I'll introduce you to the others, and we can have another drink. And the gardens! I'll show you those as well."

"That sounds lovely."

Hermione knew it was silly, but she felt oddly reassured when he tightened his hold on her arm. She wondered what Riddle would think when they entered—the mysterious Hermione Smith, already on the arm of the man who was considered the most sought after, eligible bachelor of London… as well as one of Riddle's undoubtedly most important followers of this time.

Hermione discreetly checked for her wand. Still there. Good, she thought, lifting her chin and straightening her posture. Hermione felt a thrill of anticipation as they drew near to the drawing room, where she could hear giggling followed by a familiar, smooth voice. She smiled.

Let's play, Riddle.
Cinderella

Hermione knew how critical the smallest of moments could be—particularly those which were unanticipated, and, in the grand retelling of things, would seem inconsequential to the naïve eye.

It was what she always looked for in a good book, when she was in the mood for a riveting romance, or an autobiography, perhaps. All skilled authors took their time painting the picture in words—poetically, sensibly, or artistically, according to their style—but the great authors knew which moments to emphasize.

More often than not, the most pivotal moments in a story were not the obvious ones.

One would think to describe the moment that the two lovers first kissed, or the manner in which eternal enemies finally faced one another on the battlefield, eyes locked and weapons raised. And those heart-stopping seconds of the tale were important too—there was no denying that—but the real tension happened in the moments leading up to those scenes. The subtle actions right before the kiss—the graceful or predatory advances as one's paramour was forced against a wall or led into a darker corner; the shy smiles or possessive hands being pressed against thighs quivering with need. The shaky steps taken towards the battlefield as the antagonist obsessed over their foe, wondering how their enemy's eyes would look without the light in them—knowing that their adversary's obsession was of an equal measure.

…Or not. It depended on the picture being painted, what story was being told.

It was with this arsenal of knowledge that Hermione entered the drawing room on the arm of Abraxas Malfoy. As they turned the corner, she was in complete control of the moment—the seemingly inconsequential moment—before they made eye contact. As the light from the chandelier fell across her face, Hermione was grinning as though Abraxas had just made some great joke, and her laughter was still a ghost on her lips: the kind of smile that spellbound men would want to chase with their own. She made certain to not look at the faces of the new arrivals right away, but rather let her gaze slide to the side of the room, where she spotted a glass door leading out to the enchanted gardens. She let her eyes linger there like she found the world on the other side vastly more interesting than this one, a manor illuminated by a gaudy chandelier.

And though only a few seconds had passed, Hermione knew without a doubt that Tom Riddle's eyes were already on her, had fixated on her the second she walked in. She waited a heartbeat longer before finally meeting his gaze.

Her smile fell.

Hermione knew the element of surprise was on her side tonight. How could Riddle possibly know that she would be here? The gala, he might have presumed she would be in attendance, but here? In Malfoy manor? How unlikely.

Hermione had thought that seeing her unexpectedly in this setting, dressed like this, would garner a more useful reaction. She had hoped that seeing her in gown of gold and a crown of gilded flowers, accompanied by the dashing Abraxas, would have made him give her the same look Draco had given her at the Yule Ball. An unexpected beauty on an impressive man's arm, a moment of weakness that she could capitalize on.

One split second of eye contact with him, and Hermione knew she had miscalculated gravely.
Oh, she was certain she had caught him off guard—there was no doubt in Hermione's mind on that account. Riddle's face was not entirely expressionless. His lips were slightly parted, and it was clear he was surprised at her presence. This was her first true look at the Riddle behind the mask.

But there was no semi-stunned look in his eyes; no wistful, slightly dreamy stare which bordered on awe or longing. There was only one word Hermione could think to describe those eyes as they bored into hers:

**Cold.**

Black, frigid holes that seemed bottomless. There was only a hint of emotion in them, but it was nowhere near strong enough that Hermione could think to label it. Her skin prickled. She nearly shuddered.

His eyes were just so… **cold.**

"Tom, you came!"

The icy moment was gone so quickly that it might never have happened. Greengrass was on her feet—as was everyone else—but as Hermione and Abraxas drew nearer, it was apparent that the small, enthusiastic blonde had stood first. Riddle's attention was now on her as she bounded forward, looking overjoyed to see him. Hermione watched, ignoring her inner voice which longed to scream 'Get away from him, you stupid girl!' as Marie Greengrass went dangerously close to the most lethal wizard of all time—even for someone who was a Slytherin, pureblood witch, Hermione thought.

Far more astonishing was how fluidly Riddle allowed this advance. Mask now firmly back in place, he smiled beatifically and took her hand, greeting her like the perfect, most charismatic gentleman. "Marie," he murmured, and the one word had her blushing. He kissed her fingers, his smile blinding. "You look as lovely as ever."

She giggled, and Hermione barely prevented her jaw from dropping at the impeccable flirtatiousness of it all. Was that how **she** had looked, when Riddle had held her hand? Surely she hadn't turned such a bright pink as that.

The action was repeated nearly identically with Parkinson and Rosier, both of whom seemed equally smitten and excited at the arrival of Tom Riddle. Riddle was dressed not in lavish robes, Hermione noticed, nor in anything extravagant and impressive, but in the dark, simplistic attire he had been wearing at Borgin and Burke's—the kind of flowing black fabric that would blend into shadows and disappear in dark alleys. The only part of his attire that stood out was the ring on his finger—a black stone set in bright, luscious gold. It glinted at Hermione in the chandelier light like a mocking wink.

Hermione tore her eyes away from Riddle to examine his companion, and it truly spoke to the magnetism of Riddle's person that she hadn't looked at him first. He was a massive man, nearly as tall as Riddle but almost twice as wide. He was not fat; far from it. He was stocky, with a large, barrel chest and arms like thick tree branches. His hair was dark and wild, making Hermione think achingly of Harry for a moment—but that was where their similarities began and ended. This man could have eaten someone Harry's size for breakfast and had room for more. Standing next to Riddle, he looked like a sinister body guard.

Not that Tom Riddle needs protection from anyone, Hermione thought darkly.

When this large, unknown entity met Hermione's eyes, his severe features brightened. His prominent brow rose. After a second of looking pleasantly surprised, he smiled. Hermione tried to smile back, but her mouth had decided to stop cooperating. Her face felt frozen in the aftermath of Riddle's
unforeseen, cold stare.

It was Avery's voice that snapped her immobile features back into action. "Tom!" he said, clearly trying to appear the epitome of pleased—but there was something trembling in his voice that made alarm bells go off in the back of Hermione's mind. "Y-you came!"

Surprised. Avery sounded very surprised by this.

Why?

"Adam," Riddle said, his smile a bit less dazzling as his focus slid from the gorgeous Rosier to him. "So good to see you again."

"Yes! Very good!" Adam said at once, a bit too enthusiastically. Hermione caught the way the muscles in his neck tensed when he shook Riddle's hand. "Yes, it has been too long!"

Riddle chose not to respond to this. He instead looked to Irving Lestrange and, rather than call his name or shake his hand, he merely nodded. More familiar, Lestrange nodded back. If he was surprised to see Tom Riddle make an appearance tonight, he did not show it.

At this point, Abraxas and Hermione were near enough that Abraxas could address them without needing to shout. "Tom," he said cheerily, and Abraxas's voice did not waver like Adam's had. "So glad that you could make it this fine evening!"

Hermione was already gauging their reactions, putting the pieces together. Tom Riddle was invited to these social interactions often. He did not often come. So, why had he come tonight? It couldn't have been for her; that look of surprise—glacial and unsettling though it was—had been surprise nonetheless.

What made you decide to come out tonight, Riddle?

Abraxas checked his watch. "I wonder where—?"

"Orion and Linus send their deepest regards for not coming," Tom said. His voice was low, but it cut through Abraxas's words like a smooth, sharp blade through butter. "They are… terribly busy." He smiled. Macnair smiled behind him.

Neither offered up further explanation.

Hermione's mind instantly went reeling. What do you have them doing for you, Riddle? What are you up to? And why is Abraxas not in on this plan—has he done something to displease you? Orion is a Black—but from what family line is Linus? Who are these people to you?

"Oh," said Abraxas, plainly unsure how to respond to Riddle's vagueness. Then he cleared his throat, quickly regaining his dapper disposition. "Well, I know how those old boys get; they've probably had one too many drinks and are now lost to downtown London."

"Typical Orion," Parkinson said. She was looking yearningly up at Riddle; Abraxas, evidently, ceased to exist in his presence.

"I pity the women they come across," said Abraxas bracingly. "But it's their loss, I say!"

He then looked down at Hermione, his handsome grin back and brighter than ever. "Allow me to make some introductions," he said. "I did say I'd have you meet the best magical London has to offer… These two fine gentlemen are both very good friends of ours—they were also in our year and
House at Hogwarts. This is Oliver Macnair—" the huge man bowed his head towards her; Hermione was glad that being on the arm of Abraxas seemed to make it so that social protocol of taking her hand was unnecessary—"and this is Tom Riddle. This lovely lady, my good fellows, is Hermione Smith. We were fortunate enough to meet at the gala."

For the second time, they locked eyes.

For the second time, Hermione froze, though she was not assaulted with the sensation of being swept up in a cold wind again. Tom Riddle's amiable façade had returned, and with it his welcoming and prince-like temperament.

Was she supposed to acknowledge it first, that they were already acquainted? Or was it unwise to do such a thing? Would it be rude, to admit that she had already met him in a dodgy shop in Knockturn Alley, working? A visceral reminder to all present that Tom Riddle was not rich and affluent, did not come from a prestigious, magical family…

At least, not publicly.

She decided to acknowledge it—but to leave it to him to decide what story to tell. "My, magical London must be much smaller than I anticipated," Hermione said, surprising herself at how cool and level her voice was. "I heard Miss Greengrass shout your name from down the hall, but I didn't dream that I would be seeing you again this evening, Mr. Riddle."

Hermione wondered if Riddle found her smile alluring or vicious. She had said it without saying it at all:

Common name, Tom.

Glints of coldness, like the broken remnants of an iceberg, surfaced once more in the depths of his eyes. Hermione didn't let his stare unsettle her this time.

"You… you two have met?" Abraxas said, his tone notably strained. Hermione felt his hand twitch, tightening around her arm.

"We have," Riddle confirmed. The iciness melted away, disappearing beneath the currents of his warm, velvety voice. "We met just a few days ago. On a… business-related venture."

Hermione wasn't sure what sparkled more: the light gleaming on his teeth when he smiled, or the chandelier glinting above them ostentatiously.

"You mean while you were working?" Parkinson, seemingly oblivious to any tension—or misinterpreting it entirely—all but pouted as she spoke, moving nearer to Riddle and seeking his attention as brazenly as Greengrass had. Her boldness was almost admirable; Parkinson stood directly in front of her, as though by doing so she could shunt Hermione to the side of the drawing room and force her to retreat. She was so close to Riddle that Hermione—little though she liked this woman—once more fought the instinctual need to yell and drag her away to a safer distance.

"You're always working, Tom, I don't know how you stand it!" Parkinson wet on in a whiny voice. "Such a dingy little shop, Burgin and Burke's. My father would give his left hand to have someone like you as his protégé. I know I've told you before, but I'm sure his offer still stands. He's constantly lamenting how unpromising the up-and-coming officers are that he oversees, swears he'll never be able to retire if someone sharper doesn't come along. You could be taking over the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in five years, if you wanted."

"And how is your father, Alice?" Riddle asked, courteous and polite. "I read in the Daily
"Prophet last week that his frontline team finally apprehended the elusive 'gem thief' in West Sussex."

"Oh, yes," Parkinson gushed. Hermione was admittedly impressed, though hardly surprised. How easily Riddle had shifted the conversation away from himself, and how charmingly too. "It took them four weeks to catch him in the act. Turns out the thief was a nothing more than a disgusting muggle-born operating alone—unless one counts the muggles he was placing under the Imperius. Should have known, seeing as he was breaking into muggle homes."

Parkinson spat the words muggle-born and muggle as though saying them made her feel ill. Hermione's jaw tightened, but her smile remained fixed in place.

"Naturally," Rosier drawled. "Only someone of that deplorable standing would sink so low. Just when you think they can go no lower… Stealing gems from muggles…"

Hermione decided that Victoria Rosier did not look beautiful at all with that sneering expression on her face.

"Speaking of gems. Miss Smith," she said, turning her brilliant, blue eyes to Hermione. "I meant to tell you earlier—I simply adore your ring. Wherever did you get it? Is it enchanted?"

Hermione's heart froze, and her hand flew to her chest. Could they somehow tell that it was imbibed with concealing magic? "S-sorry?"

"You know, enchanted. With a never-dull charm, or reflective-enhancement charm. The finest jewelry always is; Irving just bought me these earrings before the gala, and they look of a similar quality to the diamonds in your ring."

She tossed her long, brown hair back, revealing two huge, diamond studs. They glinted with an unnatural clarity. Hermione could breathe again. "Oh," she said. "Yes, I imagine this one is. But I'm not entirely sure. It was a gift."

Hermione looked briefly at Riddle. His face was blank, unreadable.

"A gift?" said Parkinson. "You must have quite an admirer, Miss Smith, to be giving you such lovely jewelry."

Hermione could tell that Parkinson wanted very much for Hermione to declare that she was committed to someone; some convenient, rich wizard in America, perhaps, that she would soon be returning to. Hermione grinned as she destroyed that hope. "Actually, if was from my aunt," she said.

Parkinson's returning smile looked painful.

"Well, it's beautiful," said Rosier. "There really is just no comparing magically crafted jewelry with mediocre, plain stones. Which is why it's so amusing to me, that some muggle-born wizard would go around stealing normal jewelry from muggles. Honestly, how uneducated—were they unaware of finer gems? You would think they would at least try and steal something worth stealing, if they were going to take the risk!"

Several of them laughed. "I am so sorry to sound… naïve," Hermione said, inspiration striking in the midst of their haughty laughter, "But what do you all mean by the word muggle?"

They all stared at her. Hermione forced herself to look at anyone but Riddle, choosing to focus on the face of the most friendly entity in the room, Avery. He looked mildly concerned. "It's the word for non-magical people," he explained.
When Hermione feigned recognition, he smiled. "Oh!" she exclaimed, then laughed herself. "My apologies. I thought I'd heard my aunt muttering about them once, but I hadn't asked… In America, we refer to them as nomadges."

"Nomadges?" Abraxas asked. "What a peculiar word!"

"It's far less peculiar than muggle," Hermione pointed out. "Nomadge, at least, stems from two recognizable words—'no' and 'magic'. Muggle sounds like some strange breed of dog."

They nearly all laughed at that, like she had made a truly hilarious remark. The only one who didn't seem amused was Parkinson, whose eyes narrowed on Hermione.

"What do you Americans call muggle-borns, then?" she asked. "Nomadge-borns?"

Hermione met her gaze unflinchingly. "We call them wizards and witches," she said coolly. The warmth in the air brought on by her unintended joke vanished. Hermione didn't remove her eyes from Parkinson's, didn't dare glance at Riddle.

"My, what a terrible host I have been! We are in dire need of drinks!"

Abraxas was suddenly shouting, his voice forcibly jubilant as he removed his arm from Hermione's. Hermione glanced at the table where everyone's glasses sat, mostly full. "Maldey!" Abraxas called, clapping his hands together. The house-elf appeared. "Another round for our guests. The usual for you Oliver?"

Oliver Macnair grunted in response—evidently, this was a 'yes'. "And for you, Tom…?"

It was a different question, one which was waiting for a specific response. Ah, Hermione realized. Tom Riddle did not even come to this manor often enough for Malfoy's house-elf to have his drink preference memorized. Hermione couldn't help but be intrigued: What *did* young Dark Lord drink when he chose to imbibe?

"Do you have any *Aeternum*?" Riddle asked lightly of Abraxas, and his smile indicated that there was a history accompanying this request.

Abraxas grinned knowingly. "But of course," he said. "Make it the same for me this round, Maldey."

The elf bowed and vanished. "Come, let us all sit, not point in standing around—here—"

He reached into his robe pocket, pulling out his wand, and Hermione felt a strange stab of annoyance stir within her at the sight. It took her a moment to realize why. Hepzibah had said something about how it was unusual for people to bring their wands to events like the gala, but as she watched Abraxas vanish their old glasses, conjure up a chintz chair, and then another, and then another, she realized this statement was inaccurate. *Witches*—in their revealing, unforgiving dresses—didn't bring wands to such events. Where would they go? How would they carry them? If Hermione hadn't fashioned a garter and strapped hers to her thigh, there would be no place for it.

*Women's dress robes should all have pockets,* she thought sourly.

"Please. Ladies first."

Hermione walked past Abraxas's sweeping arm, choosing to sit not on the couch or one of the loveseats, but in one of the chairs Abraxas had just conjured. She did not want anyone finding an excuse to worm their way closer to her, touching her hair or holding her arm. She crossed her legs and rested her elbows on the chair's carved, wooden arms, ignoring Abraxas's and Adam's ill-
concealed disappointment at her choice.

The rest settled around her—Rosier and Lestrange occupying the snug loveseat that Abraxas had cornered her on just moments ago; Abraxas on the couch next to her and Adam grudgingly taking the spot next to him; Macnair in another unattached seat; and Parkinson and Greengrass collapsing onto the other loveseat.

Across from her, in a chair identical to hers, sat Riddle.

"Your spellwork is rather impressive, Abraxas," Hermione commented, her red-painted nails drumming along one of the mahogany arms. Her diamond-encrusted ring glittered lusciously when she moved her fingers. Enchanted, indeed. "Did you conjure these from nothing?"

There was a second in which Abraxas did not immediately answer. His eyes flickered to Riddle's, whose returning stare was seemingly impassive.

Abraxas turned back to Hermione in a flash, but Hermione had caught that silent, nearly imperceptible interaction. "I wish I could say that was the case," he said, laughing. "But alas, it is not. I merely relocated them from somewhere else in the manor."

"Ah," said Hermione. "Well, still. Silent teleportation spells are no easy feat either. Silent spell-casting in general is beyond most people. You are quite impressive, Abraxas."

"Abraxas," Tom said. His voice had lowered an octave with the word, dark and suggestive. Hermione could tell at once that he was not addressing his so-called friend when he said it—he was looking at Hermione, speaking to Hermione. He wasn't smiling. "You've just met this evening, and already you are on a first name basis with someone as prolific as the infamous Malfoy Heir. How… lovely."

It was abundantly clear—to Hermione, at least—that Riddle thought there was nothing lovely about this quick familiarity at all. One glance at Abraxas showed that he realized this too; his already fair complexion paled. Another look towards the rest of them revealed that it was obvious to nearly everyone present—with the exception of Greengrass, perhaps, who looked agreeable rather than nervous.

"Abraxas is always such a gentleman," she said, twirling another stand of honey-blonde hair around her finger. "So quick to help and befriend. And you two really did hit it off at the gala! I've never had so much fun watching a bidding war. Congratulations on your excellent purchase and victory, by the way, Miss Smith."

Greengrass lifted her wineglass to her. Hermione decided that, of the lot of them, Marie Greengrass was the purest. Why, unless it was a greater act of Slytherin cunning than she had seen yet, Hermione thought she might even be sweet. "Thank you," she said.

But there it was again—without even looking at him, Hermione could feel the indescribable sensation of Riddle's cold eyes on her. A chill swept up her spine, her skin broke out into goosebumps. She tried to ignore it, but her overactive mind began to race, and the alarm bells in the back of her mind grew louder and louder.

Why? Why was Riddle radiating with such an inhospitable energy right now? Hermione was sure she was not imagining it; she could feel the spiteful waves being aimed towards her. She didn't understand. He had been nothing but charming and, more importantly, intrigued before. But now that she was here, aligning herself with sort of people Riddle himself had chosen to surround himself with, making it easier for him to—
And then it hit her.

Hermione had been looking at Tom Riddle all wrong.

She had been analyzing him and setting up a ploy which considered him through the lens which she knew him—with the knowledge of what he would one day become, what he would accomplish. She was thinking of him as a young Dark Lord who would one day raise armies, bewitch the very creatures he discriminated against, slaughter hundreds, and become a twisted, serpentine monster with only a fraction of a soul and a shred of sanity… when that was not how she should be gauging him at all.

She was allowing her own, personal knowledge of Riddle to influence her decisions too greatly. She had allowed the future which had so scarred her to guide her, when what she should have been doing was looking at Riddle in relation to his past. He was nowhere near the snake-like man who had gone eleven years without a body. In this time, he was much closer to the orphan boy who had clawed his way up the social hierarchy of Slytherin House—the ascent no doubt a challenging one, considering he had arrived at Hogwarts with no name and hand-me-down robes.

Riddle had undoubtedly needed to carve his place into magical society through an excess of cunning, charm, and a most impressive display of power. The fact that he was Slytherin’s heir was one which he had chosen to share with a precious few. No, his sparkling reputation hadn't been handed to him—he had needed to work for it.

Hermione could relate… but that was not the role she was playing.

No, she was pretending to be a privileged witch. And now here she was, having only been in London a few weeks, and already she was being pulled into Abraxas Malfoy's inner circle, gaining his attention by purchasing the most expensive artwork on a whim, then shortly after found drinking fancy liquor at his manor, calling him by his first name. No effort, no cunning (as far as Riddle knew). Just a pretty face and a good name, the right family relations, and she was in—and it hadn't been Riddle who had done it. Hermione had slipped right in to this prestigious gathering herself, right beneath his notice at a profligate gala that he either hadn't wanted to go to or couldn't attend. He had not been in control.

Of course he was feeling spiteful.

Hermione's heart beat faster. She had been so confident that she was on the right track before, that she would have Riddle's undivided interest completely by the end of the night. And perhaps she would—but now it felt very much like she would be earning his malevolence, not his favor.

She needed to rectify this. Hermione did not want to make an enemy of Riddle—not now, not like this.

Breathe, she thought to herself. Everything is fine. You can fix this.

A pop sound echoed in the drawing room as Maldey reappeared, and drinks hovered into their hands. Hermione almost made a face—she had not thought to ask for something else besides the strange, dark liquor that now floated into her unwilling grasp. It was much too strong. She would have rather had wine. Or, better yet, water.

"Let us share a toast," Abraxas said. It was painful how obvious he was trying to change the atmosphere to one which was bubbly and light. Hermione’s mouth felt dry; she was suddenly much more aware that she had not imagined Riddle’s icy stare. "Shall we?"
"Of course," Hermione agreed at once, smiling widely. "To what shall we toast?"

"How about to great art and greater acquaintances?" Greengrass offered.

"To beautiful women," said Macnair, the giant man who was probably Riddle's personal murderer on-duty for the night. He grinned wolfishly at Hermione, revealing yellow teeth that made her think unwittingly of Fenrir Greyback.

"To Slytherin," Lestrange drawled. He raised his glass, his chin lowered almost reverently and his eyes on Riddle.

"To Slytherin!" Avery agreed heartily at once. He smiled at Riddle like an anxious child seeking approval.

Riddle looked amused as the rest quickly followed suit. It was an interesting dichotomy. The men were all varying levels of anxious and reverent, but the women… the women were just _fearless_ in their adoration, weren't they? All except Rosier, who kept a slightly more respectful, dignified distance… But Greengrass and Parkinson looked like they were barely resisting the urge to crawl into Riddle's lap.

Hermione internally scoffed—his little peons, all full of admiration and secretly toasting _him—but outwardly she raised her glass as well, pretending not to realize this. Riddle let them all hover with their arms raised like he simply enjoyed watching the light dance along the crystal rims, his own tumbler held comfortably at his side. After a moment he said, "To all the great founders of Hogwarts... and to our noble blood."

He looked across the table at Hermione. His lifted his glass directly towards her, somehow making the simple motion look enviably elegant. His long, pale fingers held the crystal so delicately, and the liquid within—something dark with a ruby tint, rather reminiscent of blood—swirled and shimmered. His gold ring glinted. Though his smile was perfectly dashing, it didn't reach his eyes, which were as cold and hard as stones.

"To our noble blood," Hermione repeated softly.

The others repeated her words or murmured their agreement before they drank. Hermione hesitated a fraction of second—a moment in which Riddle's lips quirked the tiniest bit—before she took a drink and closed her eyes, needing to get out from under his stare.

Hermione's heart was pounding hard as she tasted the sweet, thick cachaca on her tongue. She drank only a sip, lowering her glass and looking to the grandfather clock as she swallowed audibly. It was nearing half past eleven. Soon, she could leave without seeming rude, and regroup.

"As usual, Abraxas, you have an impeccable eye," Riddle said, and her eyes snapped from the clock to him. He _had_ addressed Abraxas this time, clearly, but his gaze was still fixed on Hermione. He leaned back languidly in his chair, propping one ankle on his knee and swirling his glass lazily. For all the world he looked like an indolent king, ready to watch his subjects dance for his entertainment.

"Miss Smith is related to the Hufflepuff line—which, as you probably all know, means that she is distantly related to the Shafiq's, the Flints, the Weasleys (Hermione's heart stuttered like car tires driving over a bed of nails), and, a bit closer to home, the Malfoys." He smirked at Abraxas. "One could say you are like distant cousins."

Hermione forced a laugh. "Well met, cousin," she said, grinning at Abraxas like she found the notion that they may be related silly. Abraxas's smiled weakly.
Hermione refused to let the fact that Riddle was admitting to having studied magical blood lines panic her. She had already known he was an expert in that field, and she had personally done the same research. It was why choosing Smith as her surname had been such a stroke of genius—there were so many Smiths that no one bothered to record them all in the same fashion as the Blacks or the Malfoys of the world might. He could find Helga Hufflepuff if he dug far enough, but there was no way to know if there were Smiths related to her one way or another.

No—the best proof anyone with such a common last name (or any last name that was not one of the Sacred 28, for that matter) had of being related to a prestigious line was a family heirloom. Which Hepzibah had, of course, but that didn't really mean anything either when it came down to it. Case in point—Dolores Umbridge, passing off Slytherin's locket as an heirloom, claiming the S stood for Selwyn.

It was all nonsense.

"Of course, such matters are probably rather meaningless to you," Riddle went on, eyes settling on Hermione again. "Blood purity isn't something that is much celebrated in America, is it? And it has no bearing on your house sorting at your school."

"It doesn't?" Parkinson balked. Her nose wrinkled like she thought that a scandalizing idea.

"No," Hermione responded. "It doesn't."

"But Ilvermorny has houses, like Hogwarts?" Greengrass's deep, green eyes were shining with interest. "Oooh, how fun! How many are there?"

Hermione nodded, but Riddle was the one who spoke. "Indeed it does, Marie," he said, and Greengrass instantly gravitated towards him like a sunflower chasing after the sun. "Four houses, just like Hogwarts. In fact, the entire structure was based on Hogwarts, as it was the only magical school that those who'd formed it knew of. Of course, there are many differences—their sorting ceremony is quite unique, and the traits deemed desirable for each house vary somewhat from ours—but much is the same. For example—ah, how discourteous of me."

Riddle broke off, smiling up at Hermione so demurely that she was instantly wary. "Forgive me, Miss Smith… If anyone should be holding court and talking about Ilvermorny, it's you. I confess, after you mentioned a few things about your school during our last encounter, I decided to go learn about its history. I have a rather insatiable need to research things. I should be thanking you, truly. It made for some delightful reading. Ilvermorny certainly has a fascinating… backstory."

His eyes glinted playfully at the word. Hermione felt like a heavy stone had been dropped in the pit of her stomach. The metaphorical alarm bells were now screaming in her ears—

He had been researching her, and he knew, he knew what she was, and—

No, he can't know, Hermione snapped at herself. That was impossible. He might be suspicious of her in general, but there was no way that he knew her true story. There was no evidence to be found, she had made sure of it. Magical schools were secretive and very private. He might have been able to read about Ilvermorny, but it wasn't like he could go there, or even contact their Headmaster and request old rosters or information about past students. That was absurd; magical schools didn't even reveal their precise locations, let alone personal information about students to unrecognized sources.

He was just trying to fluster her. She wouldn't allow it.

"It truly does," she agreed. "A thrilling tale—but I am sure it pales in comparison with the story of how Hogwarts, the very school which it was based on, was formed… I admit that I also have a
pennant for researching. Perhaps I should set aside my current studying of advanced calculative arithmancy, and finally satisfy my aunt's relentlessness to read about this Hogwarts—as well as our supposedly prestigious family tree."

"Advanced calculative arithmancy?" Riddle asked.

"Slovin's theory on dream interpretation in particular," Hermione said comfortably. For as much as muggle technology had changed, she had been relieved to find that magical theory in 1950 was much the same as it was in her time. "I appreciate his dissection of language in terms of translating words into proper mathematical equations; I find it leads to cleaner and more logical predictions."

"Do you?" Riddle's brows raised a hair, his eyes trained on Hermione carefully. He seemed to be considering his next words carefully. "...I must disagree," he said at length. "I find Portier's methods superior."

"Portier's methods are too simplistic, in my opinion," Hermione said smartly. "I understand the appeal to his methodology, and recognize that his technique generally results in a wider array of applications, but I feel it is too straightforward to yield exact results. It's the way the letters correspond directly to the numerical values. It puts too much emphasis on the word which is chosen to be the sole subject."

"That is why one must be certain of what they have dreamt, and very aware of what it is they are hoping to divine," said Riddle. "And use Latin, of course," he added.

"Well, obviously," Hermione said, annoyed that he would think that she might use anything but. "Seeing as that is what his entire theory is based on. Can you imagine what one might divine if they were to apply Portier's theory using their mother tongue?"

They both laughed. No one else joined them.

"Something absurd, no doubt," Riddle said, smiling. He was no longer reclining back in his seat, but leaning forward, eager. "But that doesn't dismiss the superiority of his methods. They are accurate when used correctly. And you're quite right—the greatest appeal to them is that the information gleaned can then be applied to a multitude of subsequent calculations. It's a larger net with which you can catch more fish."

"A larger net means a weaker hold, Mr. Riddle. You might catch more fish, but you'll only catch the small ones. Slovin's theory, on the other hand, leads to a metaphorical harpoon. You can gather guppies all day long if you want... but I prefer to hunt the shark."

Hermione smirked and took a sip of her drink, holding his gaze the same way he had held hers over the gold-rimmed, porcelain teacup at Hepzibah's. Riddle said nothing—he simply stared, an expression that was somewhere between intrigued and irritated gracing his features.

It was only when someone cleared their throat that Hermione lifted her eyes from his. She had quite forgotten, in the midst of that small debate, that anyone else was there.

Something grazed her neck.

"My goodness!" Avery exclaimed. Hermione was breathing very quickly as she turned back around,
confused. "Are you all right, Miss Smith?"

"Y-yes," Hermione said. "I just thought I felt something…"

She could feel Riddle's eyes like weights on her. Hermione would not look at him. Had he somehow done that?

"Oh, dear. It was just your hair." Parkinson stood, set her wine glass down, and sauntered over to Hermione, leaning down over her and giving Hermione a rather unobstructed and personal view of her cleavage. She caught a strand of Hermione's hair between her fingers. "One of your braids has fallen loose. I daresay you have Adam to blame for that—he must have messed something up with those thick fingers of his when he was playing with your flowers earlier."

Avery choked on his drink at the words. Hermione could imagine the glare Riddle was now shooting his way, but she didn't chance looking. "Come with me, I can show you to a little powder room down the hall," Parkinson said.

She smiled so sweetly that Hermione could feel her teeth rotting. When Parkinson offered her hand, Hermione could not see a way to refuse it politely… though this kindness was undoubtedly a trap. "That would be lovely, thank you," she said, setting her drink down and flashing a smile of her own.

Hermione nearly tripped over herself when she stood. These damn shoes, she thought viciously, though a small part of her thought the alcohol deserved some of the blame. Why had she let Hepzibah talk her into wearing these shoes again?

She might have fallen, too, were it not for Parkinson steadying her. "My, someone is rather clumsy!" she said, giggling. Hermione repressed a scowl. "One would think you've never walked in heels before!"

Hermione laughed as well, but it sounded altogether too high and nervous even to herself. Stupidly, her eyes flickered to Riddle. He was staring, not at her face, but at her legs—hard. And not in a lecherous way, no. A calculating way. An intense way. Like there was a secret written in ancient runes along the hem of her dress, and he was on the precipice of an epiphany. Hermione could practically hear the thoughts in his mind, they were so clearly whirling about.

She didn't have time to consider what that look might mean before Parkinson was guiding her away. Hermione turned and walked quickly at her side, happy to get away from that analytical stare.

What was Riddle thinking?

"It's not far, don't worry," Parkinson said. "Just a little nook around the corner here. Isn't Abraxas's home just gorgeous?"

"Yes, it is."

"I've been coming here for years—our families have been dear friends for ages, the Malfoys and the Parkinsons have always been very close—but Abraxas really has put his own signature on the place. Before he redid the gardens he had that beautiful chandelier installed. He really has a splendid style, wouldn't you agree? It's very art nouveau."

Hermione nodded and made a noncommittal, humming noise. She did not think much of the chandelier in the drawing room, but then again, her opinion was a rather biased.

More concerning was Parkinson's innocent prattling's. Hermione half-listened as she led her to a mirror, which was, indeed, tucked away in a corner. Hermione had a dark feeling about it. It was not
far, but the inability to see or hear the others in the drawing room made it feel far too isolated for her liking.

Hermione did not like the idea of being alone with Alice Parkinson, but she was far from afraid of her. She released Hermione's arm. While Hermione re-braided the wayward strands of hair and pinned them back into place, Parkinson's dark eyes watched her intently, fixed on her in the glass.

"You're nothing special, you know."

*And there it was.* Hermione had just been waiting for her fake, saccharine sweetness to twist. Parkinson had hardly been containing it before, and now that they were out of earshot of the others, her malice was, for the moment, unconcealed.

Hermione pretended not to understand. "I'm sorry?" she asked, meeting her eyes in the mirror.

"You think they're sincere, that they're fawning over you, those boys, don't you? That you're so special," Parkinson said. "You're wrong. Adam, well, he would flirt with a cow if it would give him the time of day; Oliver is all but betrothed to Marie, their parents have been talking about it for years; and Abraxas… He might be intrigued now, but that's not surprising. You're just a shiny, new toy that he'll get bored with soon enough… just like all the rest."

She grinned cruelly. Hermione turned to face her head on. "I think you misunderstand, Miss Parkinson," she said, forcing a smile that hurt her jaw. "I was merely accepting Abraxas's generous offer to see his manor. I have no intention of being a toy for anyone."

"Oh, of *course* not, darling," Parkinson said, her voice sweet and condescending once more. She hooked her arm through Hermione's and started leading them back towards the others; Hermione's skin crawled even as she once more allowed it. "And I didn't mean in *any* way to offend. I am only trying to help you. Woman to woman. Adam is a simple soul, Oliver is taken, Abraxas changes his mind all the time, and Tom, well…"

Hermione waited for only a moment when Parkinson's voice trailed off. "Yes?" she prompted, impatient.

"You are just entirely wasting your time there," she finished softly, not looking at Hermione.

Hermione wondered when and how she'd been rejected.

As they walked towards the drawing room, Hermione listened hard. Abraxas was talking to Macnair and Lestrange in voices too low for Hermione to make out, but Rosier and Greengrass were fawning over Riddle, smiling bashfully at him and speaking in high, loud voices. Hermione tried not to outwardly gape when Greengrass even had the boldness to lean over and touch his arm when she spoke—something about how he simply *must* make time to see them more often—and was she actually telling Riddle *he* had to do anything? Hermione was astonished at the casualness of it all; what was she *thinking*?

Tom Riddle had begun building him empire while he was in school, Hermione was certain of it. He had started to call himself by a new name *at Hogwarts*; he had gathered around himself the precursors to his Death Eaters, *his Knights*; he had opened the Chamber of Secrets and who knew what other dark magic he had gotten up to in the dark corners of the Slytherin common room; didn't she have a healthy enough fear of him to keep a bit of distance? Didn't she—

Like the tumultuous crashing of a tidal wave, it hit her. A second, damning realization.

*She didn't know.*
Marie Greengrass, Alice Parkinson, Victoria Rosier. They didn't know. They did not know the Riddle behind the mask, not in the same manner that the men did. And just as Hermione was beginning to think this a ludicrous notion—how could they not know?—she realized that it was not ludicrous at all.

This was 1950. In the memories Hermione had seen of a young Tom Riddle, there had been no girls seated around a table in Slughorn's office, enjoying a fancy dinner and talking like proper gentlemen. Sexism was not a plague in this time period, it was normal.

Why had she not considered this?

Hermione answered herself with a single name: Bellatrix Lestrange.

That notoriety of that one woman was so large it cast the infamy of twelve male Death Eaters in its shadow, but she was still only one woman. And here, now, in 1950, Bellatrix Lestrange—Bellatrix Black—had not even been born yet.

And what had Bellatrix needed to do, to prove herself worthy as his first female Death Eater? What tribulations had she needed to suffer through, how many of her male colleagues had she needed to crush beneath her heel before Voldemort decided to mark her—before she became his closest and most powerful lieutenant? Hermione didn't know, but she was certain it had not been an easy path.

But this realization changed everything. Hermione had thought that it would be an easy path. That by simply placing herself in the right place, with the right name, seen with the right people—so easily within reach—that Riddle would snatch her up at once. That her intelligence would be enough of an enticement that she would become a part of his inner circle, that she could gain enough of his trust…

Now she realized that no, it would not be easy. It would not be easy at all.

Because why would Tom Riddle take another pretty, rich young witch seriously? If the way these women were acting was any indication, they must have thrown themselves at him when he was in school and continued to do so now. He probably looked at them and the way they batted their lashes at him and laughed inside. More likely than not, Riddle let them worship his body just to leave them broken and wanting, and Hermione bet that still they pined for him afterwards. How unimpressive he must have thought they were, to so easily become charmed by him. How weak.

Hermione glanced up at Parkinson with a fresh, new spite which was severely judgmental. How could you be so blinded by his pretty face? How could you not have any suspicion at all for the devil sleeping in the dorm next to yours?

How could you be so stupid?

Well, not her.

Rather than let this comprehension discourage her, Hermione felt a new spark of determination flare to life, the heat of which incinerated her earlier apprehension. The former alarm bells were drowned out by a sound like a lion's roar. It didn't matter that it was 1950. She was the brightest witch of her age—of any age. If Bellatrix Black could gain his favor in twenty years' time, then she could do it now.

"So, Hermione," Parkinson said loudly as they drew nearer to the others. Hermione's jaw clenched at the use of her first name. Everyone stopped talking to look at them. "I was just wondering—you said you're Hepzibah's niece, yes? And that it was your mother who was her sister?"

Parkinson's smile was nauseating. Hermione's stomach churned—she knew exactly where Parkinson
was going with this, just as she knew there was nothing she could do to stop her. This was not what Hermione had planned. This was not how this conversation was supposed to happen, not with an audience of pureblood bigots, not with her.

But it was happening, and Hermione had to stick with her story. "Yes, that's correct," she answered tersely.

"Well, why ever would you have you mother's surname and not your father's? How… delightfully unconventional!" Parkinson threw in a small giggle afterwards for good measure. Hermione pulled her arm free. They were still standing, and the others were watching silently from their seats, glasses in hand. "Unless your father's name was also Smith? I suppose it is very common…"

She laughed again. The sound grated on Hermione's ears; her spite for Parkinson was swelling larger with each passing second. Hermione drew in a sharp breath, and in a quiet voice, said, "I never knew my father."

The silence was deafening. Parkinson blinked once in surprise… and then her smiled widened like that of a sardonic, gratified crocodile.

"Alice, why don't you—"

Whatever Abraxas might have said in an attempt to diffuse the situation failed spectacularly. "You never knew your father?" Parkinson plowed on, ignoring him. Her fat smile switched to one of false pity with the speed of a light switch being flicked. "Do you mean he passed away while you were young?"

"No. I don't know," Hermione said softly. "I never met him, and my mother never spoke of him."

"Oh, you poor dear!" Parkinson put a hand on her shoulder. Hermione bristled; she wanted to rip her fingers off. "Well, I can only imagine why—someone as prestigious as that, a pureblood witch descended from the Hufflepuff line. She must have made a terrible mistake, a scandal; not telling you was probably a mercy. Probably some deplorable mud—"

Hermione moved faster than she ever had. She didn't even notice how or why she'd done it, she only knew that she had retrieved her wand in a flash of rage, fury simmering beneath her skin like a pot that had finally boiled over. She had her wand up beneath Parkinson's chin, the tip of the wand flickering like a flint. Parkinson's hand flew off her shoulder like Hermione's skin had burned her, and she stared, wide-eyed at the wand, her condescending expression gone as though Hermione had slapped it from her face.

In that moment, her act had vanished. She was not Hermione Smith and this was not Alice Parkinson—she was Hermione Granger: bushy-hair, buckteeth, bookworm, mudblood, and this was Pansy she was drawing her wand on—Hermione was a thirteen-year-old girl getting ganged up on by Pansy and her cluster of Slytherin girls, cornering her in the girls' bathroom where Harry and Ron were not around to defend her.

But Hermione had always been able to fight for herself.

"Finish that sentence," Hermione hissed. Parkinson's eyes left the tip of the wand and locked onto hers. Fear. Hermione could see the fear on the surface of her eyes, and she relished it.

"…and see what happens."

Hermione's hand was trembling slightly, but her mind was set. Say something, she silently dared. Give me an excuse.
Fury was broiling within her; Hermione was prepared to unleash it without so much as an incantation uttered—she would set this girl ablaze in a flash of her mudblood magic; she could feel it, sweltering hot, burning, burning, burning—

_Burning—_

"Fire!"

Greengrass shrieked behind them. Parkinson screamed too, stumbling backwards, away from her, and when Hermione followed her terrified gaze, her body locked up in shock.

_Fire. An actual fire…_

As though remembering something from someone else's life—the same girl who had been tortured, seeking solace in a crystal's flickering rainbow—Hermione recalled another vivid detail from that day. When Bellatrix had roared in rage, full of fury and fear, a flame had emitted from the tip of her wand. It was unintended magic, that stream of fire which had burnt a hole in the carpet…

It seemed this wand reacted just as powerfully to Hermione's emotions as it had to Bellatrix's. A flame had been born the moment she'd touched the wood, pulling her wand from beneath her skirt, and now the bottom of her dress was _burning_ because that unintentional flame had caught on the fabric.

_I am on fire_, she thought in a state of complete shock. Somewhere in another world, women were screaming and people were jumping to their feet. _I am on fire._

Hermione was just about to redirect her wand, to cast the spell—_aguamenti_—when there was a sharp snapping sound, and several things happened at once.

The flames died. The chandelier flickered. Hermione felt an unnatural chill against her legs and waist. It was like winter had just bled into the room and wrapped itself around her, snuffing out the fire and sinking into her bones.

Hermione stared down at her dress. One side was completely ruined—the fabric was incinerated all the way up to her leg to where the garter was, the edges of the gold now singed and turned a charcoal black. Hermione ran a hand over her exposed thigh. She felt a moment of relief—the fire hadn't lasted long enough to do any damage to her skin. Had she done that, had she put it out? Had she stopped the fire as unintentionally as she had started it?

Shivering, Hermione looked up. It was perfectly clear at once that no, she had not.

Riddle was sitting, the only one of the group who had remained in his chair. He was leaning back again, that languid, royal look about him, effortlessly debonair. He had one arm raised—it was obvious by the way he held his hand out that he had just snapped—and his other elbow was propped against the armrest. Tom Riddle had put that fire out… and he hadn't said a word, he hadn't drawn his wand.

He hadn't even set his drink down.

His face held no expression. Hermione gaped at him, swallowing thickly. Everyone was staring, their heads swiveling back and forth between Hermione and Riddle with huge eyes, unsure of how to react.

Then Riddle smiled, and the tension in the room cracked like ice being doused with hot water.
Parkinson was the first to laugh.

It was a shrill, familiar sound, that laughter, and everyone else began laughing soon thereafter. Everyone except Riddle, who loftily lifted his glass to his lips and took a drink. His eyes glinted amusedly as he lowered the tumbler, his gaze slowly trailing down the length of Hermione's now scorched dress where most of her leg and a makeshift garter were now visible. He was grinning wickedly when his eyes returned to hers, his head tilting slightly to one side as if to say, not bad.

Hermione could feel her entire body turn red.

"A… Are you all right, Hermione?"

Abraxas, it seemed, was the only one able to control his laughter well enough to bother asking. Everyone else, besides Riddle, was doubled over. Parkinson was laughing so hard that she could hardly stand; Greengrass was clutching her stomach and seemed to be crying; Lestrange was holding onto his fiancé, who had dropped her wineglass at some point but didn't seem too fussed about it at the moment; Macnair's booming laughter would have put Hagrid's to shame; and Avery had his face in his hands, shoulders shaking with laughter so hard it was silent.

Hermione's already furious blush deepened. "I'm fine," she snapped. She could only meet Abraxas's gaze for a second—he was barely choking back laughter of his own in his attempt to be a courteous host. Which she supposed meant making sure his guests weren't badly burned.

"I think… I need some air."

And with as much dignity and grace as she could muster, Hermione walked away from them, heading towards the glass door, leaving the drawing room and going outside.

Hermione could hear their laughter even after she had slammed the door behind her—the sound loud enough that it caused an albino peacock to squawk in alarm and rush off into the bushes. Feeling more mortified than she ever had, Hermione marched away from Malfoy manor, her wand held tightly in her fist. She stared down at the walnut accusingly. "Don't do that again," she muttered, like the wand was a sentient thing and could take instruction.

"You can't blame the wand, Hermione," she scolded herself. "It's only a magical conduit that responded to your emotions. That magic was your own fault. Control your emotions. Focus on your plan."

Somehow, Holloway's voice had crept into her subconscious again. It usually did when she was berating herself for having done something stupid. Hermione grit her teeth and walked.

She may have considered some things… incorrectly, and she may have just made a complete fool of herself… but all was not lost. Her story was still solid, she had not allowed any cracks to show through the surface of her own mask, not really. Victory was still attainable.

She thought of Draco in her own time, of everything they had gone through. Hours and hours of research, of planning. She couldn't let it all be for naught.

"I can do still this, Hermione thought. Just one foot in front of the other, one step at a time."

She was on a smooth, cobblestone path, one which was leading her towards the gardens that Abraxas had been so boastful of. There was huge, iron gate in the distance. Hermione remembered it vividly. That same metal had once contorted into a mouth, demanding to know who dared come to Malfoy manor when Fenrir Greyback had captured them…

Forcing the memories from that day aside for the hundredth time, Hermione returned her attention to
the path. Abraxas had been right—the grounds were not chilly as they should be for a night in January. The air felt pleasantly warm, and the foliage was all a lush green, full of life. She turned a corner behind a tall hedge, and was so awestruck by what she saw that she momentarily forgot her turmoil.

_Wow._

The garden that Hermione had just entered was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. There were flowers, hundreds of them, all vibrantly pink. White fairy lights illuminated the greenery, floating near the hedges like stars that had been dragged down to earth and set in place. Hermione breathed in, and the sweet smell of flowers filled her like a drug, an aroma far more intoxicating than any perfume. The walkway went in a circle here, decorated with tall, marble columns, and in the center of the ring which they formed was a stone basin. A pool. Hermione approached it, and the water within was as smooth and shiny as glass. Her awestruck reflection stared up at her, and…

Frowning, Hermione leaned closer to the water's edge. What was that, whirling around in there? Something white, like tiny, tiny fish, maybe…

Then Hermione looked up, and she gasped.

_Snow._

The white dots weren't in the lake—it was only another reflection. Several feet above her, Hermione could see the snow falling, only it stopped at a very precise point. It must have been where the wards were in place, keeping the warmth in these enchanted grounds. Beyond that point winter reigned, but here, in these magnificent gardens, it was eternally spring.

Hermione wasn't sure how long she watched the snow flutter towards her. It was so surreal—like being in a reverse snow globe. The snowflakes fell, blankets of them, evaporating long before she could ever hope to catch one on her tongue.

"…Beautiful, isn't it?"

Maybe the voice should have startled her. Probably. Any rational human being who knew what she knew would have been alarmed. He hadn't made any sound at all when he'd appeared. Who knew how long he had been standing there? Perhaps as long as Hermione had been staring up at the sky, entranced by the snowfall beyond reach.

But she wasn't startled. She wouldn't pretend to have known that he was going to come after her, but now that he was here, she was not at all surprised. "Yes," she answered. "It is."

Then she lowered her gaze from the sky to look at him, and the serene moment was gone.

Riddle was standing with his arms folded across his chest, leaning against one of the marble columns. His skin was as white as the stone, his hair blacker than his dark robes, and his lips—which were currently curled in a slight smile—were redder than what should have been permissible without the aid of cosmetics. How could such a beautiful person be so monstrous on the inside? Standing there as he was, illuminated by the soft glow of fairy light, he could have been a male version of Snow White.

Hermione scowled. She knew better. "Come to mock me, have you?"

"On the contrary, I came to make sure you were all right." Riddle unfolded his arms and stood straighter. Hermione's hand once more tensed around her wand. "And to make sure that there weren't any new fires in need of dousing," he added, his eyes having caught the slight action.
"Well, there aren't, so you're free to go," Hermione said stiffly. "But your chivalry has been duly noted."

"Has it, now?" Riddle, naturally, did not go. He took a step closer to her, his black cloak billowing behind him. Hermione wondered which pocket his wand was in, how fast he could have it aimed at her. She was surprised he didn't have it out now. She was glad that her own was in her grasp, ready to be put to use. "I was chivalrous enough to stop the entirety of your dress from going up in flames... not that the alteration is entirely disastrous." He paused. Smirked. Hermione could feel her face once more flushing with heat. "If such chivalry was noted, one might expect a thank you."

"I could have put it out myself," Hermione muttered.

"Could you have?" Riddle drawled. "Because from my point of view, it looked very much like you were incapable of movement."

"I was just in shock."

"I think we were all in shock by that... interaction." Hermione's body burned hotter. "Careful," Riddle went on, his eyes gleaming as he stared pointedly at her blushing face. "You wouldn't want to catch on fire again. I might have to resort to more drastic measures to put you out."

This, of course, had the opposite of a desirable effect. Hermione's skin flushed more than ever, and she turned away from him, glaring down into the pool of water with such toxicity she thought she might turn it to acid. Riddle laughed softly behind her.

"She insulted my family," Hermione bit out, choosing to ignore his comment. "I should have lit her on fire."

"Ah, you'll have to forgive Miss Parkinson. She and the others were raised in a far different world than the one that you were raised in, no doubt. Here, pureblood children from certain families are raised to believe that they are, to put it simply, magical royalty."

"I don't care who they are—I don't have to forgive anyone who doesn't deserve it," Hermione snarled.

"Fair enough."

Hermione looked up at that unexpected response, confused. Riddle's expression resembled something like understanding. "I don't forgive those who insult me either," he said simply.

"Hm."

They fell into silence. Hermione's focus returned to the pool, where she watched the snow whirl about in the reflection. It was rather hypnotic, the way the snowflakes danced. Soothing.

After a long moment, Hermione drew in a deep breath, and bit back her pride. "Thank you," she said, turning her attention back to Riddle.

He smiled. "I would never let a good witch burn, Miss Smith."

No, you'd do far worse things to a good witch. Hermione thought contemptuously. Torture them, maim them, kill them without a second thought. Leave a skull with a snake slithering out of it written in stars like a grave marker.

"It's Hermione," she said, giving him the most genuine smile she could muster. "Please."
He raised one brow and then nodded, acquiescent. "As you wish… Hermione."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. What was it about the way he said her name that caused such a visceral reaction?

"Get it together, Hermione," Holloway scolded her from some dark corner of her mind. It was a sobering voice. Focus.

"That was impressive," Hermione said then, careful with her flattery. "That magic—putting out fire like that without a wand. More impressive even than making business cards appear from nothingness. I can't help but wonder…” She gave him a sweeping, appraising look. "What else are you capable of?"

"What do you think I'm capable of?"

Hermione's brows furrowed, feigning deep thought. "…Magically making the bottom portion of incinerated, golden dresses reform themselves," she said.

Riddle laughed. "Such a specific talent," he said. "But you have knowingly set me up for failure. One cannot restore something which has been destroyed by fire. It's—"

"Explained thoroughly in the third law of magic, yes, I am perfectly aware," Hermione said, waving one hand dismissively. "Doesn't make it any less depressing. This was a nice dress."

"At least your garter didn't burn."

Hermione looked down. Her handcrafted garter where she had stashed her wand was, indeed, untouched… and clearly visible, as it now were. "Nice wand holster," Riddle added slyly.

Hermione scowled and blushed again at the same time. "You know, I wouldn't have needed to resort to that if—if women's dress robes had pockets!" she shouted heatedly.

Riddle looked genuinely confused. "You could have worn something over your dress with pockets," he said, like that was the most obvious thing in the world. Which was infuriating because it was.

Hermione thought to make several arguments to this—that no one did that, that wearing a cloak over a fancy dress defeated the purpose of wearing a fancy dress in the first place, that Hepzibah wouldn't have allowed her to do that anyway, seeing as she wouldn't even let her bring a bag—but then stopped short. Hermione was not about to open up a discussion about fashion with Tom Riddle of all people. "Oh, never mind," she said. "I knew it was a bad idea when I did it—basic wand safety and all that. I'd have been better off tucking it behind my ear. Or maybe woven in to my braids, under all these stupid flowers."

Hermione reached up and pulled one of the golden roses from her hair. It glinted and shimmered, magic radiating about it which made it sparkle. She tossed it into the pool where it floated, turning in circles in the now rippling pool.

"What do you usually do with your wand?" Riddle asked.

Hermione frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"When you go to events such as the gala this evening. What do you usually do with your wand?"

Hermione then realized the reasoning behind his question. Right. She was an affluent witch who went to those sort of things all the time… "Normally, I don't bring it with me," she lied. "In New
York I didn't, at least. But this is different. I know very few people in London, and trust even less. I won't go anywhere in this city without a wand."

"A smart move," said Riddle approvingly.

"I'm a smart girl," Hermione responded, shrugging. "My mother taught me well."

There was a pause. Hermione waited, holding her breath, wondering if he would breach the subject.

"...That was extraordinarily rude, the manner in which Alice questioned you," he finally said. Hermione's pulse sped up. "She should have held her tongue."

"Trust me, it isn't the first time someone has questioned me about my surname and my parents," Hermione said. "I'm usually much better at handling it. Something about her tone just... got to me, I suppose," she admitted.

"She does have a rather grating tone," Riddle murmured, and Hermione gasped.

"Why, have you just insulted a fellow Slytherin?" She put one hand to her chest, pretending to be deeply scandalized. "And here I was, thinking your house loyalties so very important! And you've just told me she is magical royalty!"

"There are precious few who should think of themselves so highly," said Riddle.

"Like who? You, perhaps? Is your surname passed down from some ancient, pureblood King, Mr. Riddle?"

"No."

Riddle's tone was suddenly sharp, his face hard. Hermione's heart stopped, but a moment later he was smiling again, faultlessly charming. "And it's Tom," he said in the same, gentle tone she had used.

"...Please."

Hermione swallowed thickly. Her heart stuttered back to life, beating too fast. "As you wish," she said, hating how her voice came out in a whisper. "...Tom."

Another moment of silence fell. Hermione turned away, suddenly needing to look anywhere but at Riddle, seeking some distraction from those alluring, damning eyes. She stared at the tall bushes, focusing on one of the bright pink flowers.

"Roses," Riddle said, having followed her gaze.

Hermione glanced quickly to the golden rose in the pool. Of course the color was wrong, but despite that, they could not have looked more different. The flowers growing around them only had five petals. "These aren't roses," she disagreed. She nodded towards the fake flower in the pool."That's a rose."

"You are both right and wrong," said Riddle. Hermione could hear the smirk in his voice before she even looked at him. He moved to stand closer to her, his long fingers grazing one of the pink blossoms. "These are wild roses. The kind which can grow and survive without human intervention, which have been around much longer than us. They grow spontaneously out of wreckage, they grow without the careful pruning and care of people. The thrive, and die, and thrive again, all on their own."
He turned to look at her, his eyes lingering on the flowers which remained fixed in her braids. "The enchanted roses which you wear in your hair are, in fact, roses, but they are garden roses. Roses that were purposefully cultivated and altered for a more alluring appearance. More petals, different colors. And it worked—cultivation led to the flowers that you typically think of when you hear the word 'roses'. The kind you see in shops, available for purchase in large bouquets and given as gifts when one wishes to impress."

He winked. Hermione's heart jolted in her chest. "But there are drawbacks to such selective breeding. Garden roses, while pretty, are delicate. They require far more care—temperate weather, pruning, frequent watering. Most of them have no scent at all. Makes them perfect to grow with the intent of sacrifice. Most women melt under the weight of a dozen roses being pressed into their arms."

He gripped the stem of one of the wild roses, tight, like he was about to rip it from the bush. "But you don't strike me as one of those women, Hermione."

Riddle released the flower. His fingers grazed the petals as his arm dropped, and when had he gotten so close to her?

"Y-you don't?" Hermione stuttered, unable to think of anything else to say. Riddle was standing so near to her that she had to crane her neck to look up at him.

"No, I don't. I don't think a bouquet of flowers would impress you much. I think the story behind how roses have been cultivated impresses you more. Beautiful, meaningless things do very little for you… but knowledge. That piques your interest."

He shifted closer. "I have to go," Hermione said, unthinking. Her voice didn't sound like her own—it was small, feeble. "I have to be back home before midnight."

"Or what?" Riddle said. Closer. "Will the rest of your dress disintegrate into ashes when the clock strikes twelve? Is that when the magic will fade, the spell effectively broken, and the truth beneath the dazzling façade shall be revealed?" His eyes were dark tunnels—pulling, pulling, pulling. "Are you Cinderella?"

His tone was smoother than silk. He knew something, but how could he know?

Hermione feigned ignorance. She was supposed to be the sort of witch who thought Cinderella might be a disease, not a princess from a fairy tale. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about," she said numbly, even as the lines of evil stepsisters from the familiar tale echoed in her mind—the version her mother had told her, her favorite bedtime story.

_Cinderella, Cinderella. Don't you know your place?

"Oh, I think you know far more than you let on."

Riddle's stare was more paralyzing than the basilisk's had been. Hermione couldn't move, couldn't think. "But perhaps I'm still off the mark," he went on. "Maybe just knowledge all on its own isn't enough to hold your interest either. Perhaps it's something more—words carefully crafted to convey meaning that otherwise would be incomprehensible. Perhaps you live for poetry."

He plucked one of the remaining flowers from her hair, holding it agilely between his fingers. He was so close that Hermione could count the lashes framing his eyes if she wanted. They were long and black like spider's legs, reaching out, pulling.

"A rose by any other name…"
Hermione could smell the cologne clinging to his robes, mixing with the scent of the wild roses. She could see fairy lights shining in his eyes.

"...Would smell as sweet," she finished without thinking.

Riddle smiled, and though there was something undeniably dangerous in the curve of his lips, Hermione couldn't dwell on it. The golden rose fell from his grasp, and he lightly touched her chin to tilt her head back. His fingers were soft and cool against her skin, and he leaned closer, closer—

Hermione closed her eyes. She could feel his breath on her lips.

In the same moment that he grazed her bottom lip with his own—the lightest ghost of a kiss—the grandfather clock from within the drawing room, a thousand miles away, struck twelve. The resounding chime was like a bolt of lightning straight to Hermione's heart.

She shoved him, hard.

Something flared, bright and blinding, and Riddle was sent stammering backwards—but how far he had been forced away, Hermione did not know, for she did not stay to watch. She shoved him and ran, tearing out of the garden, sprinting as quickly as she could toward the gates.

*Cinderella, Cinderella. Don't you know your place?*

Hermione was too panicked to think logically; all that mattered was that she escape from this place, this nightmarish manor, those magnetic eyes. She tore across the enchanted lawn at breakneck speed, and just as she was nearing the gates, she fell. Fate was an unseen root twisting around the heel of her shoe, and Hermione flew forward as it caught her, landing on her hands and knees. The shoe was ripped from her foot, and a horrible, stinging pain shot up her leg when her ankle twisted—but she ignored it, pushing herself up and running on, leaving the shoe behind—Was Riddle chasing her? She did not know, she would not look—the gate was so close; Hermione raised her wand, ready to blast apart the iron—

But there was no need. For as imposing as the gates had been when someone wanted to enter the manor, they had no such discriminations against those wishing to leave. The gates flew open before her, and Hermione escaped the grounds, bursting beyond the wards. Cold air hit her like a wall of ice, so sudden and hard that Hermione nearly choked on it. The snow here, in this real, *wild* world, made it all the way to the ground. Hermione left a single mark in it, her bare foot sinking into the soft, white snow before she exhaled, gripped her wand like a talisman, and vanished with a *crack.*
O, Romeo

Hermione ran.

The sound of clock striking midnight reverberated in her ears, a metronome of cataclysmic chimes. The world became a bit darker with each note, a bit colder, a bit wilder. Her dress was falling apart around her, deteriorating into cinders, turning to dust that was snatched up by the wind. Something was chasing her. It was at her heels. A monster sunk its teeth into her shoe and yanked it backwards, keeping it, snarling, laughing. Hermione fell and scraped her knees, getting dirt on her hands and breaking the skin on her palms. The flowers fell from her hair and turned to ashes. The clock stopped chiming.

Still, she ran.

Hermione burst through the gates and into the snow. Behind her, the iron twisted into a mouth, shouting ‘Mudblood!’ in Bellatrix’s voice. Hermione refused to turn and look back. She ran, her dress having been reduced completely to cinders, leaving her naked save for a thin layer of charcoal coating her skin.

It was so, so cold.

Her wand, where was her wand? Hermione was frantic, confused; she had just had it a moment ago, but now it was gone—her dirty, bleeding palms were empty. Bellatrix’s voice was laughing manically behind her. Hermione shuddered, held her arms tight against her chest, and ran on, bursting past the tree line into the woods. The trees towered over her with their bare, lifeless limbs, swaying in the snowy wind. She did not make it far before she tripped and fell again. Hermione landed face first in a snowdrift.

The impact of the snow enveloping her body stole her breath away; Hermione could feel the frigid, January air like something solid stuck in her throat. She rolled on to her side and began coughing violently. To her great horror, she hacked up roses and blood: pink petals coated in scarlet, blossoms staining the snow and turning it into a wounded water painting. They wouldn’t stop coming.

‘Help me,’ she thought, desperately clawing at her throat. She couldn’t breathe. She was going to die. ‘Someone, help me.’

Hermione felt something move against her leg. Eyes watering from her forceful coughing, she looked down in shock: her other shoe had turned not to ashes and dust, like the rest of her garments, but into a snake. Vibrant green and toxic-looking, it stood out shockingly in this world of white snow and black, dead trees. It coiled around her calf, was slithering past her bloodied knee and up her thigh. Hermione would have screamed, but the roses in her throat would not allow it. She could not even more to get away—the frigid air and snow had frozen her. Her skin was turning blue. She was helpless.

The snake slid up her hips, across her stomach, between her breasts. It lifted its head and stared into her wide, watery eyes. It flicked its forked tongue out curiously, hungrily. Hermione, still clawing at her throat, knew that it was over—the snake was going to unhinge its jaw and strike, and there was nothing she could do.

And then it let out a low, velvety hiss.

Hee-sah-iss.
To nearly anyone else in the entire world, that would have sounded like nonsense, but not to Hermione. She knew that word, that one word in that language—had listened to Ron struggle with it over and over and over again until finally the sink in the girl’s lavatory had revealed a hole, and she, a muggle-born, had followed the blood traitor into the darkness.

Open.

And before Hermione could even think to react, the snake lunged. It forced itself past her blood-stained lips and into her flower-riddled mouth, pushing itself down her throat; Hermione gagged and tried to pull it away, but its body was too slick, too powerful—

Hermione awoke with a violent start.

She sat bolt upright, clutching at her neck. She expected to find her windpipe blocked, and was shocked when she was easily able to draw in a long, unobstructed breath. Hermione could have cried in relief. A dream. It was only a dream.

Or a nightmare, more like, she thought, her hand falling to her chest. She could feel her heart speeding beneath her palm, beating against her ribcage. An extremely visceral, horrifying nightmare.


And that is why Slovin’s methods are superior, she thought dryly. I could use them all, then.

Once her pulse was no longer racing, Hermione forced herself to relax, and to focus on her reality rather than her disturbing dream. Sunlight streamed through the translucent curtains which blocked the doors to her balcony; the brightness of it made her wince. Her head pounded—no doubt the repercussions of last night’s alcohol—but other than that, she felt all right.

Hermione glanced at herself in the freestanding, full-length mirror which stood next to her dresser. The sight of her reflection startled her for a moment. She half expected to see herself covered in ashes, with her skin turned blue and snow in her hair.

As it was, she looked quite normal. She was in her nightgown, her hair loose and slightly tangled from sleep but otherwise as smooth as it always was now. In fact, if it hadn’t been for the remnants of some smudged cosmetics that she had been too lazy to clean off last night, she would have looked just as she did every morning when she awoke in Hepzibah’s home.

The clock on her wall chimed, and Hermione about had another heart attack, her pulse racing again in an instant—but the sound of her bedroom clock was nothing like that of the monotonous notes of her nightmare. It was a light, sweet chime that rang from the corner of her room, and it was not declaring midnight. But it wasn’t morning either. Hermione stared in disbelief at the clock face which indicated that it was noon. She had slept until noon! She couldn’t even remember the last time she had slept in so late.

Then, before there was time for her thundering heartbeat to slow a second time, another sound made her jump—a sharp, scratching noise. Hermione’s neck snapped towards the balcony, and she could see a dark shape outlined on the other side of the curtain. It was unmistakably an owl clawing at the glass of her door, flapping its wings and hooting. It was holding something.

Hermione, still feeling as though she was not fully awake, went to let it in, and the owl swooped down and landed on her dresser—a great bard owl with giant, amber eyes. It extended one leg and
held out its parcel to her, looking expectant. Hermione’s jaw fell open.

_Her shoe._

Hermione stared, unmoving for a long moment. _Her shoe._ This owl was delivering her shoe to her. Here, at her bedroom door, having come straight to her balcony.

The owl gave a disgruntled hooting noise as if to say, ‘What are you waiting for?’ and Hermione snapped out of her stupor. She stepped forward and took the shoe from the owl, which had been secured to its leg with a black cord.

There was no note.

Baffled, Hermione turned the shoe over in her hands, like maybe there would be a secret message written on the underside. There wasn’t. No letter, no scarp of parchment to accompany it, nothing. Just her shoe.

Hermione felt like she might still be dreaming. Her head pounded painfully. “What does this mean?” she whispered to herself, beginning to pace.

Could this have come from Abraxas? No, Hermione dismissed that notion at once. That was highly unlikely. _Riddle_ had been the one in the courtyard with her; _Riddle_ had made the Cinderella reference…

And then she had shoved him, possibly even harmed him—she wasn’t sure about that though; the feeling of her own magic was fleeting, and it had all happened so fast—before she sprinted away, tearing off across Malfoy’s lawn like her life depended on it…

What had Riddle thought, after that? What was he thinking now? Why had he decided to collect her shoe for her, why had he bothered to send it to her now, like this, straight to her room…?

Hermione turned, holding the shoe in front of her as though the pointed heel was a weapon. “What does this mean?” she asked—addressing an owl, she realized, as though _it_ might know. The owl ruffled its feathers at her accusatory tone.

Rather than be offended by its lack of an answer, Hermione beamed at it, a realization dawning on her. This was an _owl._ From _Riddle._ Was this Riddle’s own pet, then? Was this bird, right here, right now, about to fly back to wherever it was the young Mr. Riddle lived in the year 1950…?

As soon as she had the notion, Hermione’s hope evaporated once more. No. She very much doubted that Riddle owned a pet owl of his own. A rising Dark Lord would have no need or want of such an animal. A bird that flew to and from the place you slept at night was probably not the wisest thing when one was practicing questionable magic and forming illegal, dark groups. The smile slid from Hermione’s face.

“You’re from the public owlery, aren’t you?” Hermione murmured. The owl’s ruffled feathers flattened, and it raised its head, letting out a much more dignified hoot. Hermione could only take this as a yes. It then hooted again, a bit more sharply. “What is it?” Hermione asked. “Do you want water or something? It’s not like you flew very far—”

She paused, having figured it out mid-sentence. “A response,” Hermione said. “You’ve come from the public owlery, and you’ve been told by Mr. Riddle to linger in case I have a response.”

The owl hooted again. It was amazing how condescending these animals could sound without words.
Hermione immediately began to panic. A response. At this very moment, on the other side of London, Tom Riddle was sitting in the public owlery, having sent her the shoe she'd left behind… and he was waiting to see, perhaps, if she was going to send a message in return…

But he wouldn’t wait long. Of course he wouldn’t, no one would—what if she wasn’t home when the owl came?—but especially not someone like Tom Riddle. She had a very short window of time to respond if she wanted to.

*Did* she want to?

Hermione started to pace again, this time twice as fast and far less gracefully. A response, a response—what was her response? She had no idea how to respond to this very ambiguous and mysterious delivery of her shoe. He hadn’t sent a letter of his own! Was he angry at her? Upset? *Probably*, seeing as she had damn near shoved him into Malfoy’s pond—but maybe it hadn’t been as bad as she thought it was? For if it was, surely he wouldn’t bother sending her the shoe back to her in the first place?

Or was this a joke? A *trick*? There was *some* meaningful message being conveyed here, Hermione knew it, but there was no time to sit down and ponder it as she might like to—

The owl flapped its wings, hooting irritably. “I’m thinking!” Hermione snapped. What should she say? What should she do? She needed to rectify things, that was true; she had been rather… er, *rude*…

And she needed to be on his good side. Her entire plan rested on being in Riddle’s good graces, in becoming his *confidant*…

Hermione sat at her desk and grabbed some parchment and a quill. She started writing a letter, one that was kind and regretful sounding—but then shook her head, crumpling it up and tossing it aside. No, that would not do, not at all; she was the proud *Hermione Smith*…

But she couldn’t not say anything, either. After another minute of starting and throwing away unworthy letters, agonizing over what to say, Hermione ended up with a monumental note which consisted of exactly two words. She rolled the small piece of parchment into a tight scroll, then tied it to the owl’s leg using the same cord her shoe had been secured with. The owl took off as soon as she was done, flying out through the open balcony door towards the sun, taking her very profound message with it.

*Thank you.*

Hermione groaned, closed the door, and flung herself down on her bed. She rubbed her temples for a few moments, then mumbled, “Hokey?”

A soft *pop* resounded, and Hokey was there in the bedroom with her, bowing. “Mistress Smith is awake!” the elf said. “Hokey is being very happy, miss. Madame was beginning to be concerned!”

“But she’s gone at the moment, Miss. She is going and running errands.”

Hermione nodded, grateful but not too surprised that Hepzibah was not around by noon. She may not have had family to care for (except for her newly acquired niece, Hermione supposed), but Hepzibah always found a way to keep busy. She wasn’t one to stay inside all day; Hepzibah Smith liked to go shopping and visit galleries and make appearances at the Ministry from time to time, things like that. “All right,” said Hermione. “Do you mind bringing me some tea to my room then,
Hokey?

“Of course, Miss. Would you like some toast or fruit, perhaps, for breakfast?”

“No, thank you,” said Hermione, smiling. “Just tea.”

Hokey disappeared with another soft *pop*. Hermione stood, contemplated getting dressed, then decided against it. She instead sat at her vanity and began to disentangle her tousled hair. Despite everything, Hermione thought that being able to properly run a comb through her hair might be the wildest thing that had happened to her since the time-turner was slammed into her throat.

Hokey returned by the time that she was done, a tray with a steaming cup of tea levitating before her. The cup then floated into Hermione’s hand, and Hermione swore her headache receded slightly by the smell of Earl Grey alone. “Thanks, Hokey,” she said again.

Hokey bowed, but not before giving Hermione an odd, speculative look. “Hokey is happy to serve, Miss Smith,” the elf said, then disappeared once more.

The strange look only confirmed what Hermione suspected last night: Hokey the house-elf was on to her.

Hermione didn’t blame Hokey for being apprehensive, either—though the elf had no reason to be truly wary of anything. It wasn’t like Hermione had been stupid enough to apparate straight back to Hepzibah’s with her dress in tatters, the flowers from her hair gone or awry, and *missing a shoe.*

No, Hermione had apparated somewhere else. At the time, her panicked thoughts before disapparating had been a vague *somewhere, anywhere else*—the kind of directions that usually ended up in *splinching*, though this did not happen to her, thank the Gods—and then she had landed in the Forest of Dean, of all the bloody places. She supposed it was fitting, in an ironic, crude sort of way, but she didn’t linger on that long. Hermione only leaned against a tree until she could get her breathing under control, then did what she could to look presentable before going home. This included casting a glamour over her dress to make it look whole again (one really can’t restore that which has been destroyed by fire); fixing her hair as much as she could (which meant taking the rest of the flowers out, so she could act as though she’d discarded them all on purpose); and then replicating her remaining shoe to replace the one she’d lost.

Only, Hermione hadn’t been able to do that quite right. She was excellent at replicating things, of course, and she’d been able to perform the spell perfectly as usual—which resulted in two perfect, left shoes. It had been too cold to stand in the damn Forest of Dean to try and figure out how to invert one, and it had been far too uncomfortable to wear two left shoes, so Hermione had just taken the other one off as well, hoping Hepzibah just wouldn’t notice if she held her identical heels behind her back. Hermione was fully prepared to lament to her aunt about how she had taken them off because her feet hurt, and it was all because she’d been walking around so much with Abraxas in his huge, fancy manor with its huge, fancy garden—which was why she was fifteen minutes late, of course, and she was so sorry to have worried her!

But Hermione hadn’t needed to say any of that. When she walked through the front door, bracing herself for her aunt to scold her for her tardiness, Hermione almost laughed. Hepzibah, the sweet old thing, had been waiting up in the front room… but she’d fallen asleep. Hepzibah had dozed off in the armchair she’d been waiting in, a book open on her lap, a cup of tea beside her that had long since gone cold. Hermione was able to sneak upstairs, change out of her ruined dress (she shoved it and her two left shoes as far back in her closet as she could, where they would remain untouched forevermore) and into her nightgown, let her hair down, and only then did she go back downstairs to gently awaken her aunt.
Hepzibah hadn’t suspected a thing. In fact, she had apologized to Hermione for having fallen asleep when she said she’d wait up, and she had been all too happy to hear that her niece had a wonderful time with that charming Abraxas Malfoy.

Someone who was not so blatantly glad was Hokey, the tiny house-elf. When Hermione had first walked in, late, putting a finger to her mouth to indicate that Hokey should be quiet while she crept upstairs to change, Hokey had looked... concerned. She had nodded, ever the obedient elf, but her huge eyes had lingered on Hermione’s glamoured dress a bit too long for her liking. Could house-elves see through glamouring charms? Hokey had never once seemed suspicious of her enchanted ring, but then again, they were different sorts of charms... Had Hermione just not cast the glamour as well as she could have? She’d thought she had done an impeccable job at the time, but perhaps not...

Hermione had a feeling that Hokey noticed more than she let on.

Sighing, Hermione forced that thought aside and took a long sip of her tea. She had far more pressing things to worry about than whether or not Hokey knew she’d ruined her dress. Hermione set her cup down on the vanity and began to remove her make-up with a charmed cloth while she thought about the most major of concerns: Last night.

She had won a bidding war against Abraxas Malfoy, then been invited into his manor. She had sat and drank with the most elitist group of up-and-coming purebloods of magical Britain, holding her own fairly well. Then Tom Riddle had arrived, she set her dress on fire in front of all of them, he had put it out with the mere snapping of his fingers...

And then they had talked. Alone, in the garden.

Hermione stared at her reflection, now devoid of any smudged eyeliner. Tom Riddle had said far too many things last night which left her unsettled. She recounted them all as she began to wipe the rouge from her cheeks.

Ilvermorny certainly has a fascinating... backstory.

You wouldn't want to catch on fire again. I might have to resort to more drastic measures to put you out.

Will the rest of your dress disintegrate into ashes when the clock strikes twelve? Is that when the magic will fade, the spell effectively broken, and the truth beneath the dazzling façade shall be revealed? ...Are you Cinderella?

And, of course:

A rose by any other name...

Hermione nearly groaned. Shakespeare, he had recited Shakespeare at her... and she, unthinking, unwitting, had recited it back to him.

But a moment later, and Hermione realized that this was not damning. Her outlook brightened. No, the fact that she could not deny that she knew Shakespeare’s work was not damning at all—in fact, with a rush of relief, she realized that she could fit it into her story quite nicely. Her fake mother, Monica Smith, was not a conventional witch of 1950, after all. She was the kind of woman who ran off to America, leaving her parents and sister behind to chase her dreams of living in New York City. She was the kind of woman who didn’t want to track down the abandoning arse who was the father of her unborn child; she was the sort who decided to raise her daughter alone, and give her the Smith surname, traditions be damned. She was an open-minded, independent witch. One who liked to look...
at muggle art and read muggle literature and that was why her daughter’s name was Hermione—a name she’d read in *The Winter’s Tale*. Monica Smith was an adventurer, and she’d raised her daughter to be one too.

That was the story, at any rate.

*All right, then*, Hermione thought, nodding at the mirror approvingly. So that slip-up was rectifiable…

But then there was the kiss.

*Near-kiss*, Hermione mentally corrected at once. His mouth had barely touched hers. Barely.

Hermione’s grazed her lower lip with her fingertips, recalling that infinitesimal, soft feeling. Her face immediately flushed, redder than it had been a moment ago when the rogue still tinted her cheeks.

She dropped her hand and glowered at her reddened face. *Why* had he done that? *Why* had he tried to kiss her? Had she said or done something to make it seem like she wanted that? No, no, she knew she hadn’t—but then *why*?

*Perhaps it was because of Abraxas*, Hermione thought, trying to make sense of this most absurd and un-characteristic of actions from a future Dark Lord. She had gotten the feeling that Riddle was not exactly pleased with Abraxas last night. Maybe he had only shown up at all to remind them who was really in charge, despite who was being touted in *Witch Weekly* as Wizarding Britain’s most desirable bachelor. Maybe seeing Hermione on his arm had given Riddle the idea that he should swoop in and pluck her off it, just to prove a point. Just to show that he could.

Hermione’s glower deepened as she recalled how the other women had acted around Riddle. Greengrass, Parkinson, and even Rosier had all fawned over him like he was some kind of God, gracing him with his presence. She wouldn’t be surprised if he had used them all at some point—or had at least turned them down, but knew that with a single, charming smile and a word of encouragement, he could have them. Maybe he was just curious to see if Hermione Smith was the same.

Shame, deep and debilitating, curled in the pit of Hermione’s stomach. Because there was simply no denying it. Last night, when he had started talking about wild roses and making muggle references and reciting Shakespeare towards her…

She *had* been just the same.

Hermione had been as dumb-struck as every girl he’d ever fixed those dark, alluring eyes on; she had stood there like she’d been enchanted. She was completely at his mercy.

Hermione had been prepared for so much before she chose to travel back in time. She knew that Riddle was smart, cunning, manipulative, cruel; she was well-versed on his abilities with Legilimency and the Dark Arts and everything in between. But she had underestimated one of his qualities, a seemingly unimportant one, and vastly so.

He was just so *fucking* good-looking.

How humiliating! To think that, just moments before she’d talked with him in the garden, Hermione had judged those other girls so harshly. She had thought them so stupid for being caught up in something as shallow as his pretty face.

And then she’d gone and let him kiss her.
Nearly, she reminded herself firmly. She touched her lower lip again. *It was only a near-kiss.*

And that *could* have worked in her favor, too. If she’d had her head on straight, she would have allowed that kiss. She would have let him think that she was just another vapid girl pining to be invited into his bed, and—Hermione’s heart stuttered at the realization—maybe she *would* have been invited into his bed, *should* have been trying to make that happen, because that would be one way to find out where he lived, and there was a very high likelihood that wherever he lived was where he was keeping the diary, and that was the *entire bloody point of all of this.*

Hermione was breathing very quickly as these thoughts raced across her mind. *The diary.* Everything she was doing now was with the hope that she would find that horcrux. So long as the diary existed, Tom Riddle could not be killed. If he was willing to let someone like Lucius Malfoy know he had such an artifact, one which would open the Chamber of Secrets, she could get him to trust her with such knowledge too. Not to tell her what it really was, of course—she doubted he told any of his followers that he created items which contained *fragments of his mangled soul*—but just that it existed. But at this point, as she thought on it, Hermione realized that she probably didn’t need him to even confide that much information in her. If he was still wearing the ring, it stood to reason that he was keeping the diary very close as well. It was probably in his flat right now, under some protective wards and charms.

And maybe, last night, if she had been thinking clearly—she could have found out where that was!

Hermione exhaled slowly. She took a sip of tea and gave herself a disgusted look. The truth was that she had *not* been thinking clearly. She had been seduced by Tom Riddle’s beautiful damn face and his smooth-as-velvet words, irrevocably so… and in the moment when she realized what was happening, she had—for lack of a better way to describe her behavior—freaked the fuck out.

*I must have looked like a mad woman when I ran across the lawn like that,* she thought, setting her cup down again and holding her head in her hands. *He tried to kiss me, I shoved him, ran away, fell, lost a shoe, and ran some more until I could disapparate. And then he retrieved that shoe, sent it back to me without a note, and I just said… ‘thanks’.*

Exasperated, Hermione slammed her hands down on the vanity. The teacup danced against the wood, nearly spilling its contents. *Why* would he send it back? *What the fuck did that mean?* *What was he thinking?* And more importantly, *why could she not figure it out?*  

Was she really the same girl who was so effortlessly able to decipher the emotions of her peers when she was in school? How was it she had once been capable of explaining to Harry why Ron was being such a prat, or to Ginny why Harry wasn’t looking, or to Harry why Cho Chang was conflicted and crying when he kissed her? Had she regressed so greatly over the past few years in which she socialized with only her co-workers and *Draco Malfoy* that she had forgotten how to read people? Was her emotional range now that of a teaspoon?

“No,” Hermione seethed, pointing at her reflection accusingly. “That’s not true. This is different. Tom Riddle is *not* Cho Chang.”

Her reflection blinked, affronted enough by her pointing that it stopped mimicking her. “Never said he was,” it said loftily.

Hermione rolled her eyes and grabbed her cup. She did not know what to think, but at this point, it was out of her hands. She had already sent a response with the bard owl—*Thank you*—and so it was up to Riddle to respond. The ball was in his court, so to speak.

Heaving another great sigh, Hermione lifted the cup to her lips and drained the last of her tea. *Maybe*
he won’t respond at all, she thought miserably. Probably not. I don’t imagine I would want to pursue someone who did things like light her dress on fire or shoved me when I tried to kiss them...

It was just as she had come to this conclusion—that she had ruined everything, and would have to concoct a new plan in order to get her hands on that diary—when there was a scratching on the door. Hermione leapt up at the familiar outline against the curtains and sprinted across the room, almost tripping over herself in her haste. The same bard owl from before came flying in. Hermione’s heart was beating rapidly as she took the letter from the owl’s outstretched leg, her fingers were trembling as she unfurled the parchment. The owl did not wait for her this time but took off as soon as she held the letter in her hands. Hermione barely noticed it leaving. Her eyes tore across the words, which were written in an altogether too elegant script.

Miss Smith,

I seem to have offended you.

My sincerest apologies if this is the case; I swear that I never intended to do anything which would insult you. I fear, perhaps, that there is a barrier which has caused some confusion. Perhaps it is cultural. Perhaps it is something else. Regardless, I believe there was a misinterpretation on my part, and for that, I am remorseful. I do hope you will forgive my forwardness.

If you would find it agreeable, I would like the opportunity to rectify this. I feel as though there is something unfinished between us. But perhaps this is just my own wishful thinking.

Should you wish to write back, please send an owl to 13 Abbey Rise. It will find me.

Sincerely,

Tom

P.S. I reconsidered your opinion on Slovin’s theory on dream interpretation in advanced calculative arithmancy. I still think you’re wrong—Portier’s simply makes more sense, not to mention it takes far less time… and when it comes down to it, what do we have that is more precious than time?—but I did think about it.

Hermione read the letter twice through. Her heart was fluttering, her lips were curling into a smile. He was still interested in her. In fact, he seemed more interested in her than ever. Perhaps running away had been the right choice, somehow. She smirked as she considered this.

Boys did love to chase things, didn’t they?

Well, she must have done something right, because he had given her an address to write to! But the wording which followed that… It will find me… Was this not his address then? Or was it instead the address of one of his followers? Probably the latter; Hermione would not give her personal address out so easily were she in Riddle’s place… But still. She had something to work with. And that last bit, even though it had her bristling in annoyance—she was not wrong about Slovin’s theory—it also had her grinning like a school girl.

Hermione almost giggled at light sensation bubbling in her chest—and then her blood went as cold as though she’d been doused with a bucket of ice water.

This was not good, this light-hearted, fuzzy feeling. This was not good at all. She had, in her hands, the reassurance that Riddle was not spiteful towards her, that she could move forward with her plan…
But could she?

Could she trust herself not to fall prey to those alluring eyes again? After last night, Hermione was no longer certain.

Hermione took a deep breath and set the letter down. This time, at least, she had time to think before responding. Riddle would not expect a letter back right away. What I need, she thought, grabbing her empty tea cup and leaving her bedroom, is a metaphorical cold shower.

Hermione paid close attention as she relieved that fateful day.

Harry was lying in Hagrid’s arms, seemingly dead. Hagrid was crying tears the size of water balloons, drenching what she thought was her best friend’s corpse. Ron was shaking next to her, traumatized yet fierce, and Hermione herself looked like she wanted to scream and roar and wail all at once.

And Lord Voldemort spoke.

Hermione watched with eyes wide open as the Dark Lord swept back and forth before those who remained to oppose him outside of Hogwarts. She listened to his spitting words which were spoken in a high, cold voice; she focused on his grotesque face and serpent-like features. His skin was scaly and raw, his head was bald and his eyes were a bloody red, split by thin pupils like those of a deranged cat.

He was hideous. He was mad, he was vile, he was revolting.

This is what you are, Hermione told herself, hatred boiling in her blood as he ranted and raved. This is what you are, Tom Riddle. This is what you will become.

Just because she was trying to approach things more logically from now on, keeping in mind that in this time, Riddle was, admittedly, a long way off from this, Hermione could not let herself forget. This was what she was trying to prevent. This was what she would stop.

“Hermione? Dear?”

Hepzibah’s voice nearly scared the piss out of her. Hermione willed herself out of the memory in a hurry, landing in the drawing room a mere second before Hepzibah opened the door and entered.

“Hello, Auntie,” Hermione said, smoothing the fabric of her nightgown down. Her pulse was racing as she tried desperately to act nonchalant. Wouldn’t that have been wonderful, if Hepzibah had happened upon her in that memory? “You’re back from running errands, I see!”

“Yes, I am,” said Hepzibah slowly. Her gaze fell to the Pensieve in which Hermione had just been dwelling. The silvery tendrils within whirled, abstract and enigmatic in their movements. “What were you doing, using my Pensieve?” she asked. Then she smiled wryly. “Was last night so wonderful that you wanted to revisit it?”

Hermione shook her head, and even managed to blush. “No, nothing like that,” she said. “I was just… watching some older memories. Feeling nostalgic, I guess.”

Hepzibah’s smile faded. She looked suddenly sympathetic, even a bit heartbroken. “Oh, Hermione,” she sighed. She stepped forward and pulled her into a hug. “I understand. After your mother died, I spent my fair share amount of time in a Pensieve, too.” She pulled away to hold Hermione at arm’s length. Hermione blinked in surprise.
“D-did you?” she asked. That was mildly alarming information. How would her imparted, fake memories hold up in a Pensieve? Hermione wasn't sure.

Hepzibah seemed to think she had relieved fake memories at some point, at least. “Sure. I think most people who can afford to own Pensieves do the same thing. But it’s no way to live, Hermione. You can get lost in your memories if you’re not careful.”

Hermione nodded. “Yes, of course,” she said. “I was just. Reteaching myself an important lesson, is all.”

Hermione was extremely grateful that Hepzibah didn’t ask, only smiled another doleful smile. “Well, hurry up and gather your bearings,” she said after a moment, motioning towards the Pensieve. “Then come out to the dining room. I stopped by Dolce earlier, that muggle bakery we went to last week. I got us scones. Nothing’s better for a hangover than scones!”

And with that, she bustled out of the drawing room, leaving Hermione to ‘gather her bearings’. Hermione couldn’t help but grin as she turned towards the Pensieve. Hepzibah was really starting to grow on her.

Hermione dipped her wand into the basin. The memories clung to the tip of the walnut: strange, ghostly limbs of silver grasping at a lifeline.

Such beautiful conduits, Hermione thought, pouring them back into her mind. Far too gorgeous to contain something so ugly.

The trip down memory lane had the desired effect. That night, when Hermione went back to look over the letter Riddle had sent her with a clear mind, she did not feel giddy whatsoever. When she read the words ‘perhaps this is just my own wishful thinking’, she imagined the script being formed by decrepit, thin fingers from a hand that resembled a large, pale spider, and she shuddered. She envisioned livid, scarlet eyes scanning the parchment before furling it into a scroll, and Hermione cringed.

She could do this.

I am going to steal your diary, she thought as she dipped her quill into ink, flattening out a sheet of parchment. And I’m going to be around to know when you deposit your ring in Gaunt shack, and then I’m going to steal that too, she thought as she wrote a reply, a careful construction of demureness, intrigue, and something that might have bordered on apologetic for her actions. And then I’m going to destroy them both, even if I have to go back to Hogwarts after all and kill your basilisk just to get my hands on its fangs, she thought, grinning as she confessed in ink that she thought there was something unfinished between them, too.

And then I’m going to stab you in the back, she thought. She signed the letter Sincerely, Hermione.

Then, just because she couldn’t help herself, she added a post script of her own.

I hope you didn’t think about my argument against Portier’s inferior theory too long. After all, what do we have that is more precious than time?

Hermione mailed her letter early the next day, waking up at the crack of dawn to do so. Hepzibah didn’t own an owl of her own. She said it was because they smelled, and she didn’t want to deal with the mess, but Hermione thought she knew the real reason. Hepzibah liked going out to the public owlery. Needing to go there to send correspondences—which Hepzibah did often—was as
good excuse as any to be out doing something.

But Hermione didn’t want Hepzibah to know she was corresponding with that shop boy either, if she could help it. So, she left before Hepzibah had awoken, apparated to the owlery, and sent the letter off. Hermione then stopped by another bakery to pick up breakfast. To repay her aunt for getting them sconces yesterday, she thought… and so she would have an explanation for being out if Hepzibah was awake when she got home.

Hermione was anxious all day. She kept making excuses to linger in her bedroom, saying she had a headache and wasn’t feeling well, and left the balcony door unlatched when she wasn’t there. Hermione suspected that Riddle, when he sent a response, would do so in the same manner he had sent his first letter—to her bedroom door, directly to her balcony. Which begged the question of how he had known this was her bedroom in the first place, but Hermione tried not to think too hard on that. Hepzibah had told her to go upstairs and change the one time he’d been in their house. Perhaps he had remembered that and taken a gamble that this balcony must lead to her room.

Or maybe he told the owl to deliver it that way and knew he couldn’t lose, Hermione realized with a scowl. If the bard owl had brought her shoe straight to Hepzibah’s room on accident, well… Then Hermione would have had to deal with her aunt’s questioning (‘Why on earth has an owl brought your shoe home with no letter? What on earth happened at Malfoy manor last night?’), and maybe knowing that he had caused the pretty, spoiled witch who’d snubbed him some turmoil would have been amusing to him.

She… might be overthinking things.

Hermione finally left her room for dinner, not wanting to worry Hepzibah too much. The last thing she needed was for her aunt to become concerned for her well-being, thinking she was really sick, and therefore keeping a closer eye on her—or worse, having Hokey keep a closer eye on her. Hermione smiled as the house-elf served them an excellent meal of chicken and roasted potatoes, and when they were done she patted Hokey on the head and thanked her for her impeccable service.

When Hermione went upstairs afterwards to shower and change into her nightgown—the usual preparations before their nightly tradition of reading and drinking tea—she saw it. There, sitting on her pillow. Another letter secured by a black cord. Hermione rushed over to it, then closed the balcony door, as well as the door to her bedroom. She took a steadying breath, untied the cord, and unrolled the parchment. It was a short letter.

Tonight. Midnight.

I’ll come for you.

Dress warm.

He hadn’t even signed it.

Hermione was torn between being unnerved and annoyed. Midnight! Was that his idea of a joke? Tonight. And no explanation, just the vague instructions of ‘dress warm’. She supposed this meant she was sneaking out tonight, then.

That’s what I get for letting Tom Riddle call the shots, Hermione thought, shaking her head. She pulled out her wand and set the note ablaze, watching in mild satisfaction as the words went up in smoke, no incantation necessary.

Hermione agonized over what to wear.
Hepzibah always went to bed long before midnight, and usually Hermione did too. There was no reason for her aunt nor Hokey to think that she might ever sneak out at night.

Still, Hermione was cautious. She waited until twenty minutes to midnight to sit up from her bed, having feigned sleep until then while her mind reeled, very much awake. She illuminated her room with nothing but a wordless lumos spell, then began to dig through her closet as quietly as she could.

*Dress warm,* the letter had said. *Dress warm.*

She thought she’d known exactly what she was going to wear hours ago, but now, as she rifled through sweaters and leggings and scarves, she was unsure. For having lived with Hepzibah for such a short time, she had acquired a great deal of clothing. Hepzibah loved to shop, and she loved to shower her niece in fine garments and dazzling jewelry more than anything.

*At least I can forgo all that,* Hermione thought, casting a disdainful look towards her dresser where several jewelry boxes were, full of bracelets and necklaces she didn’t need. The only adornment she needed was on the ring finger of her right hand, covered in diamonds and shimmering with a subtle enchantment.

Once she’d finally settled on what to wear—a cozy but nice navy sweater, her long stockings, and a thick, black scarf with golden thread interwoven into the cable knitting (Hufflepuff colors, of course, from Hepzibah), as well as her coat, gloves, and a pair of knee-high, lace-up boots—Hermione sat at her vanity and stared at all the cosmetics there. Should she wear make-up? Was that ridiculous? Hermione mentally chided herself. Hermione *Granger* might think it was silly to wear make-up just to meet some boy, but Hermione *Smith* certainly didn’t. And besides, this wasn’t just some boy. This was Tom Marvolo Riddle.

*Not that I want to look like I’m trying very hard, though,* she thought as she waved her wand, a silent charm making her eyelashes look both longer and fuller. A bit of lip-gloss, and she decided that was enough. Hermione nodded, then flicked her wand, whispering the word “Knox,” into the night.

And then she waited.

Hermione was on pins and needles as she watched the second hand of the clock tick further and further towards midnight. The moon was full, so her room was not entirely dark. She had the curtains of her balcony door pushed open, and so moonlight streamed in through window, giving her a clear view of the currently empty street below.

*I’ll come for you.*

*How* would he come for her? That was very cryptic way of saying he would get her, wasn’t it? Yes, it *was;* it was extremely dark and sinister, and really, such vagueness could almost be considered rude, and yet Hermione found herself feeling a bit thrilled despite all this. Anxious, yes. Frustrated, absolutely.

But also thrilled.

*Remember,* she scolded herself, coming to an abrupt halt before the balcony doors. She envisioned a hideous monstrosity of a man, one with bloodshot eyes and waxen, sickly skin. *Remember.*

The clock had just struck twelve when she noticed it.

It was completely by chance. Hermione had just happened to be staring outside, across the street towards the sidewalk where she saw the slightest shimmering of *something,* and that was the only
reason she noticed it at all. At precisely midnight, at exactly the right moment, Hermione saw the way the air seemed to gleam as though the negative space had just come to life. It was a disillusionment charm. A damn good one too; a nearly imperceptible spell that was concealing whoever had just appeared across the street from Hepzibah’s home. Silently.

There was little doubt as to who that might be.

Hermione watched for a moment from her bedroom window, wondering what Riddle would do. He did nothing. In fact, if she hadn’t caught the moment of his arrival, which had only made the space he was currently standing in flicker for a moment when he apparated, she was sure she would have no idea he was there now. But she had seen it, so she watched, waiting. How long would he stand there, invisible like that?

Then Hermione realized—with a jolt that was nearly sickening—that she was not invisible, and she was just standing in front of the glass door of her balcony with the curtains wide open, and he could probably see her standing there, staring down at the sidewalk—

Hermione quickly composed herself and stepped outside. She let her eyes wander to the other side of the street, away from where Riddle was like she did not know he was there after all. She leaned with her elbows against the railing and turned her attention toward the moon. It was massive, round and bright as a reflective, circular mirror.

It almost felt like this moment had come together just for her to say those words which were not her own, from a story which did not belong to her—the very one which Riddle himself had tricked her into reciting the lines from. But she could not take back what she had already said; she could not pretend not to know what she had already revealed.

She could only move forward.

“O, Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?” Hermione sighed, barely able to contain a smile at just how overly dramatic it was. “Deny thy father and refuse thy name. Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love… and I’ll no longer be a Capulet.”

Somewhere in the midst of regurgitating those words, Hermione stopped finding it amusing. As she recalled the rest of Juliet’s speech, she realized just how pertinent those lines were. Too pertinent.

*Tis but thy name that is my enemy.

Hermione decided not to give Riddle the chance to respond with any lines of his own. Instead, she turned her focus towards where she knew he was standing, concealed by a charm, and smiled. Then, without a pause, Hermione swung her legs over the ledge of the balcony and leapt.

Her wand was held high above her head, and the spell she cast was both silent and effective. A mild hovering charm to make her descent slow and her landing soft. Hermione grinned as her feet lightly touched the ground, as elegant a landing as she could have hoped for.

It was only then, as she stood, facing him, that Riddle’s disillusionment charm faded.

Would she ever become accustomed to him? For even when she was expecting it, Riddle’s appearance was debilitating. He was not dressed in any particularly grand way—just the same, dark robes as before, though now he wore a black scarf and gloves as well—nor was he doing anything especially magnificent, he was just standing there; it was just… who he was. Those full lips, that wavy, black hair. That flawless, pale complexion and those razor-sharp cheekbones. Those eyes.

If he was amused by her quoting more Shakespeare at him, or impressed by the fact that she both
knew he was there and performed a silent hovering charm, he did not show it. Riddle’s handsome face was blank, composed—but there was something stirring in those bottomless eyes.

Hermione waited for him to say something. To explain his cryptic letter, for example, and tell her where they were going and why. He didn’t. Riddle only looked at her, that infuriatingly emotionless mask on his face. Hermione stared back at him. Her heart began to pound.

Then, just as she was about to say something herself, Riddle lifted his arm. In one, fluid motion, he offered her his hand and bowed slightly. It was the kind of chivalrous gesture a knight might make to ask the hand of a lady to dance. His eyes were locked onto Hermione’s, smoldering, moonlight dancing in their depths.

Hermione didn’t say anything either. She stepped forward, her heart beating a thunderous rhythm against her ribcage, and did the only thing she could do.

She took Riddle’s hand. His lips curled just slightly as he held her gloved fingers with his own, the ghost of a smile. As the sensation of side-along apparition gripped her, Hermione almost smiled back, allowing herself to be pulled into his orbit.
Hermione was assaulted by the smell of salt and cold, biting air the moment her feet touched the ground. The compressing feeling of apparition vanished, replaced by a sense of openness, and, as she took in her surroundings, she realized: vulnerability.

There were no buildings in sight; there was no sign of civilization whatsoever. Were it not for the clear sky littered with stars and the full, swollen moon hanging low on the horizon, it would have been difficult to see anything. As it was, the moonlight shone on the snow, making the world they’d landed in radiant with its light. Though she couldn’t see it where they were, Hermione could hear the ocean nearby, its currents drifting along some unseen beach. She focused again on Riddle, whose hand was still holding onto hers, and whose eyes, dark and mysterious, had not left her face.

Hermione wasn’t sure why it had not crossed her mind prior to leaving that she might be brought to a secluded place for an underhanded purpose, but now that she was here, in this barren landscape by the ocean, she was astounded that it hadn’t. How had she just accepted the hand of Tom Riddle without considering this very possible, grim outcome? Riddle was a murderer. He murdered people. At this point in his life, right after charming them.

Which was what he had been doing to her with those saccharine letters.

Before Hermione could say or do anything, Riddle pulled his hand from hers. “This way,” he said quietly, then began to walk.

Hermione had managed to go from cool and collected to paranoid in the length of two seconds. “This way to wh—?”

She didn’t get to finish the sentence before Riddle had turned around, shooting her a look that was not quite what she would consider hostile, but which was sharper than anything she’d seen on him yet. “Don’t shout,” he said, keeping his voice low. “You’ll scare them.”

This did little to pacify Hermione. “Scare who?” she hissed in a quieter tone.

Riddle didn’t answer, only smiled. He then turned and began to walk away again.

Hermione watched him for a moment, conflicted: Should she follow him, or was it wiser to turn back now? But it was a stupid question to even ask of herself, for she already knew the answer. Of course she was going to follow. This was all a part of the plan. And, now that rational thought had begun to trickle back into her mind, she knew that it was ridiculous to think Riddle would try and harm her. She was Hermione Smith, niece to the affluent Hepzibah Smith, who just made a lot of friends at a fancy gala. It would be very inconvenient to attempt to murder her for no other reason than she shoved him away when he tried to kiss her. People would notice. People would care.

So, Hermione followed—but not before reaching into her pocket to draw her wand. If she was going to follow Tom Riddle into the unknown, she was not about to do it unarmed, and—

“Don’t.”

He moved so quickly that Hermione barely saw him move. One moment, he had his back turned and was walking at a leisurely pace; the next Riddle was standing directly in front of her, facing her, near enough that she could feel the warmth of his breath on her face. He didn’t touch her, but his gloved hand was open, his palm hovering over her wand and motioning for her to lower it. Hermione stared up at him, too shocked at his sudden proximity to be unnerved. “It will frighten them,” he murmured,
nodding towards her wand. Then, after a beat in which Hermione merely stared at him, probably incredulously, he smiled. “You’ll see,” he said, his eyes glinting with moonlight.

Hermione half expected him to walk off again, but he didn’t. Riddle stood, his eyes on her wand, waiting for her to put it away. Hermione hesitated, but then relented and shoved it in her pocket. His grin widened. This time, before he turned, he once more offered her his hand.

“To make sure I don’t draw my wand while you’re not looking?” she asked in a whisper, eyeing his hand with skepticism.

“That’s half the reason,” he whispered back.

Unable to stop herself from mirroring his grin, Hermione took his hand, allowing Tom Riddle to lead her into the night.

The place where they had arrived was at an incline, and he took her up. Fortunately, the snow was not too deep, and because Hermione had dressed well (as instructed), she soon found that she was warm from trudging along after him, as well as a bit out of breath. She got the distinct impression that Riddle was moving slower than he normally would have to accommodate her, and though she had never once felt self-conscious about not being very physically fit before, Hermione was suddenly worried about it.

She didn’t have too long to linger on any of her potential shortcomings though, because a few moments later Riddle stopped and released her hand. They were near the ledge of a cliff, and when Hermione moved closer, peering over the edge, she could see the ocean to match the soothing sounds of currents and the smell of salt. Along the shoreline, Hermione saw what looked to be the entrances of caves, surrounded by tall, jagged rocks.

“Why are we here?” Hermione asked. She was surprised when she turned around, for Riddle was not where she expected him to be. He was now sitting, cross-legged in the snow, his black cloak fanned out beside him. She cocked her head at him.

“Sit,” he murmured, motioning to his side. “And you’ll see.”

Hermione looked behind him, anxiety pooling in her gut. There was nothing around save for their footprints, two tracks leading up to them in the snow. She opened her mouth to ask again, but when she looked back to Riddle, she closed it. He was giving her that same playful grin, and she knew he wouldn’t answer even if she did ask.

Reluctantly, Hermione sat, leaving enough space between them that they were in no danger of accidentally touching. “It won’t be long,” Riddle said, his gaze drifting off towards the snow.

There was a long moment of stillness in which the chill of the air began to become noticeable again. The sounds of the ocean fell into the background, and Hermione couldn’t stand the frigid silence. Her nervousness became too much, but when she drew in a breath to once more ask why he had brought her to such an inhospitable place in the middle of the night, Riddle put his finger to his mouth to quiet her.

Hermione glared at him. Riddle lowered his finger to point to her side, and when Hermione looked, she gasped.

There, crawling out of the snow, was a tiny, winged creature, no larger than the length of her middle finger. It was glowing and colorless, its wings glittering, thin and transparent like sheets of glass. Though it’s body resembled that of a human’s, its face was anything but. It had large, black eyes, a
round little face, and tufts of hair that were bright and fuzzy like cotton. It shrunk away when Hermione gasped, blinking its huge eyes at her. It flew off into the night.

“Oh,” said Hermione in surprise, for as she watched it go, she saw others—dozens of them, emerging from the snow. Those that were closest to her acted as wary as the first had, fluttering to a safer distance and staring. Their wings sparkled beatifically. “Oh, oh my goodness,” Hermione said. “They’re lovely.”

“They are,” Riddle said. “They’re—”

“Snow sprites,” Hermione finished impulsively. One of them, the sprite that had first emerged near her, had come back around, hovering at her eye level and examining her curiously. Its silvery light reminded Hermione of a patronus. “Distant relatives of the doxie, nocturnal beings, though they are only a class XX creature, as they are much more docile, and they tend to avoid humans as much as possible; snow sprites would never infest old curtains or something… They hibernate all summer underground, too…”

Hermione grinned. She had never seen a snow sprite before, though Professor Grubbly-Plank had tried, without success, to procure a few for their fifth-year class before Hagrid had returned.

“…Correct,” said Riddle softly.

But Hermione was still watching the sprites, her mind reeling. As more and more of them began to emerge from the snow, silent in their flight and glowing brighter than faeries, she frowned. “They’re extremely difficult to find, though,” she murmured, now as baffled at their presence as she was enchanted. “They despise witches and wizards.”

Riddle’s instruction at having her put her wand away now made sense, at least—Hermione was certain that, were she to draw her wand now, they would scatter at the sight. But the fact that they were not hiding anyway was cause for question. She’d read that they were some of the timidest magical creatures, which was why no one used them for lights as they did faeries, even though they were prettier. They were too easily frightened.

Hermione looked at Riddle expectantly. He was staring at her, a strange expression on his face that Hermione couldn’t decipher. “They do,” he agreed, nodding. “However, these particular sprites know me.”

As if on cue, another sprite flew directly between them. It cast Hermione a judgmental look before flying nearer to Riddle. Riddle grinned as it fluttered its sparkly wings at him—rather flirtatiously, Hermione thought—lighting up his face with its silvery glow. It then flew once around his head and zoomed off. Riddle laughed.

“How often do you come here?” Hermione asked.

“Often enough,” Riddle answered. Another sprite flew over, floating in front of Riddle where the last sprite had been, making it difficult for Hermione to see him. It spun once in midair, twinkling dazzlingly.

Hermione was shocked. “You come here often enough to endear yourself to creatures as shy as snow sprites?” she asked, sounding disbelieving despite all the evidence to the contrary. There was no question that Riddle had earned the affection of these creatures. One was twirling for him now. “You’d have better luck getting a unicorn to come near you.”

“You seem to know a great deal about snow sprites,” Riddle said, shifting so that he could see
Hermione’s face, “considering that they’re indigenous to Britain.”

Hermione froze. For a terrifying moment, her brain jammed, and she was unable to think of anything to say. Riddle smiled at her. She stared back at him, her lips parted uselessly.

Then another sprite flew by, now vying with the first one for Riddle’s attention. Hermione’s mind lurched back to life, and she straightened her posture, doing her best to sound haughty. “I am very well read,” she said, decisively not looking at Riddle. She watched a few sprites in the distance as they circled each other, bright and shiny in the moonlight. “I took Care of Magical Creatures for years at Ilvermorny. We studied all sorts of creatures, not only ones which are native to America. Though I’ll admit to having done a lot of research outside of the curriculum. I like to read. About everything. Terrible hobby of mine, truth be told; I know far more than I should about the most useless of subjects. Even muggle literature. Which is why I know Shakespeare. Guilty pleasure. It was also my mother’s.”

Hermione had the thought, *Oh god, I’m rambling,* somewhere in the midst of those words, but she still hadn’t been able to make herself shut up. Her heart was pounding. She took a deep breath and tried to calm herself.

“...I see,” said Riddle at length. There was a stretch of silence following his words, and because Hermione could tell he was scrutinizing her face, she kept her focus elsewhere, pretending to be absorbed in the way the sprites floated and glistened above the snow.

It wasn’t difficult to feign fascination. They were gorgeous, the way they shone—like silvery fireflies coated in diamonds. “So... You decided to go hunting for snow sprites one day, then?” Hermione eventually asked, careful to not start spewing words again.

“No,” said Riddle. Hermione finally returned her attention to him, and was astounded when she did. There were about twenty or so sprites surrounding Riddle, some hovering, some sitting on the snow near his legs. They all looked upon him with their huge, black eyes like they were content just to watch him breathe. Riddle waved one hand, a gesture as if to say *Go on,* and they floated away, joining the rest of their kin which hovered over the snow.

“I came here once in my youth,” Riddle said, his dark eyes drifting towards the ocean. “It was one of my favorite places. So, I come back every now and then, when I feel the need to get away from things. I suppose the sprites came to recognize me, though they only ever come out in the winter, of course. But they aren’t why I started to come. I like the ocean. Watching the water is peaceful. And at night, when the sky is clear, it’s nice to look up. See if the stars have any warnings for me.”

Riddle smirked at her before tilting his head back, then gave the sky an analytical look. His eyes darted across the stars like he was tracing the constellations with his eyes.

“You mean like... like Divination?” Hermione asked, shocked even further.

“Yes,” said Riddle, still scanning the heavens.

“You believe in in Divination? You?”

Tom looked at her, his brows raised in surprise at her tone. The sharpness of her voice caused several of the nearest sprites to brighten and zoom away. “Yes,” Riddle said slowly. “…I take it you don’t?”

“Of course not,” Hermione muttered, keeping her voice down so as not to startle any more sprites. “It’s complete rubbish.”

Riddle leaned forward, looking both bemused and perplexed. “Yet you believe in the practice of
Arithmancy for making predictions,” he said.

“Well, sure, yes,” said Hermione.

“How can one study and believe in Arithmancy, but not Divination?”

“Because Arithmancy is based on mathematics and science and— and data!” Hermione snapped, unable to stop herself from shouting any longer. “Whereas Divination is just a bunch of looking in tea leaves and crystal balls and hoping you see something. It’s rubbish.”

“Divination is an ancient, respected branch of magic. One of the oldest, in fact,” Riddle said. “It’s rather mysterious, granted, and difficult, but it has connections with many other branches as well, including Arithmancy. It’s just another method of predicting the future, is all… As well as other things.”

“Tell me you’ve seen a single, accurate thing in the bottom of a teacup. Or in a big, glass ball. Or in the stars,” Hermione drawled, motioning towards the sky.

“I have,” Riddle answered, unaffected by her sarcasm. Her eyes went wide, and Riddle laughed. “You look so shocked that I should believe in Divination. It is almost as if you think you know me.”

Hermione’s mind nearly froze again. “You just—you just seemed intelligent, was all,” she stuttered out. She cleared her throat, forcing herself to remain calm. “Perhaps I was wrong,” she added coolly, folding her arms across her chest.

“And here I was, having the exact same thoughts about you,” said Riddle in an equally cool tone.

“What is that supposed to mean? You now think I’m unintelligent because I don’t believe in something as ridiculous as Divination?”

“No,” said Riddle, “your intelligence is currently under question because you think Divination is rubbish while at the same time you think that Arithmancy is respectable.”

“Yes, because—”

“Because one uses mathematics and the other belief. Correct?”

Hermione’s eye narrowed on him as he smiled; she got the impression she was walking into a trap. “...Yes,” she agreed warily.

“Consider this, then,” said Riddle. “Arithmancy uses mathematical equations, yes, but why in the world should you believe that it will work in the first place? Yes, there are hundreds of texts with specific rules and guidelines; theories about which practice is best written by some of the most genius minds in magical history, but so what? It’s still belief, at its core, that allows you to trust in those equations.”

Hermione was not about to let him fluster her, not on this topic. “Yes,” she agreed, pointing one hand in the air and shifting closer to him, “but those equations which you speak of have been tested, again and again. Theories that have been put into practice and then improved upon. Evidence of functionality. Proof that it works. Data.”

“The same is true of Divination,” said Riddle. “The methods for divining the future are just as complex. One cannot simply enjoy a cup of tea and expect the leaves to show them something; one cannot just look at the stars and expect to see something of value. There are specific rituals that must first take place, pathways one must follow. There are rules. It can be done wrong. And new methods
are being suggested all the time, new theories being proposed.”

Hermione gawked at him. “New theories for stargazing?” she asked. She looked up at the sky, frowning.

“Yes,” said Riddle, also looking up.

“But it’s all nonsense from the start,” Hermione argued. “They can’t tell us anything about the future. They’re just a bunch of stars.”

“And words and just words and number are just numbers,” Riddle said, “yet you seem content with allowing them to tell you what may come. Divination is, therefore, just as sound a method for prediction as Arithmancy. It’s only a different method. A different way of thinking.”

Hermione glared at him. Riddle was smiling, such a smug yet charming grin. She tried to think of a good argument to his flawed logic. She couldn’t. Not at the moment, anyway.

“You’re wrong,” she said, stubborn despite this. “They’re nothing at all alike.”

“Perhaps I should give you the benefit of the doubt,” said Riddle, speaking a bit condescendingly. “Perhaps Ilvermorny did you a disservice in this regard, and you had an incompetent instructor on the subject, and so you are biased against Divination.”

“That’s not why,” said Hermione stiffly. Then, unable to stop herself, “well, yes, she was a right fraud. But that isn’t why I think Divination is a waste of time.”

“I see.”

Hermione glowered, still mystified to learn that he, Tom Riddle of all people—supposed genius—was defending Divination. “Why, did you have some amazing Seer for a professor, or something?” She was mildly curious; surely whoever had taught before Trelawney was at least a bit more proficient.

“I had a very capable instructor,” said Riddle. He didn’t elaborate.

And quite suddenly, Hermione understood why he might believe in such nonsense. “I bet you’re the type to put stock in things like prophecies, too,” she murmured, watching his face carefully.

Before he could respond, another sprite flew between them. It spun in a show-off-y manner, clearly trying to get Riddle’s attention away from Hermione and onto itself.

“They really like you,” Hermione murmured, effectively distracted.

“Not everyone finds me so terrible,” he said, smirking. “In fact, most find me rather charming.”

“Wow,” said Hermione dully. “That doesn’t sound arrogant at all.”

“I’m only being honest… Of course, some are more difficult to impress than others.”

Something, Hermione wasn’t sure what, changed. Her skin prickled beneath her many layers of clothing, and she shivered. Then, all at once, the sprites stopped glowing.

Hermione almost said something, alarmed, but before she could, they lit up again. Then they went out, then lit up. Again and again, all around them, the sprites began to glow and fade with a unified, pulsing silver, like glittering Christmas lights.
“Why are they—?”

Hermione’s question died in her throat when she looked at Riddle. He was grinning, a far more arrogant smile than before, his dark eyes gleaming with the methodic light from the sprites. A voice, unbidden, echoed in the back of Hermione’s mind. Riddle’s voice—though not as he was now, but from a memory, long ago; a child’s voice…

‘I can make animals do what I want without training them…’

“You’re doing this,” Hermione whispered. “You’re controlling them…”

She wasn’t sure if she was impressed or afraid.

“Not controlling, no,” said Riddle, shaking his head. “Just suggesting.”

“How?” As she looked, Hermione could see that the sprites did not look like they were being controlled, or even uncomfortable; in fact, they seemed rather happy, casting Riddle affectionate looks as they floated by him.

Riddle’s smile became softer, almost innocent. “Magic,” he answered.

Hermione took a moment to simply watch, mesmerized as the sprites began to fly in circles around them. They were lighting up in ripples now, swirling in an organized yet chaotic way. The feeling of magic was tangible, cool and vibrating in the air. “Incredible,” Hermione murmured without thinking.

“Yes,” Riddle agreed in a low voice. When she looked back at him, it was to see that same, smug grin on his face. It was as infuriating an expression as it was dashing.

As much as she wanted to act the part of unimpressed, Hermione couldn’t. Her curiosity was too great. “How do you do it, though? How do you use magic to get them to do what you want? Sprites are so sensitive, shouldn’t it be scaring them off…?”

“Not all magic is the same, Hermione,” Riddle said, and her heart skipped a beat when he said her name. “Pointing a wand and casting a spell is much more jarring. This sort of magic is subtle. Gentle.” He gave her a calculative look, as though considering her. “I can show you, if you like.”

Hermione, perhaps foolishly, didn’t hesitate. “Yes,” she said. “Show me.”

Riddle lifted one hand, and a sprite floated onto his open palm as though he had summoned it. It stopped flashing once it landed, staying a full, silvery white. He held it in front of his chest, bringing both hands together to hold it, and smiled. “Hello, lovely,” he said to the sprite, which preened.

Riddle then looked at Hermione. “Put your hands out.”

Hermione only realized then just how close she and Riddle had become. When had she edged so near to him? “You want me to take it?” she asked, anxious.

“Yes,” said Riddle. “Don’t worry. It won’t bite. Will you, pretty thing?”

The sprite flashed its wings, pulsing a brighter silver. “See?” said Riddle. “They’re harmless.”

But Hermione was not looking at the sprite, as she was completely caught up on Riddle's face. How was this the same man who would willingly one day drag a house-elf to its doom, all in the name of making sure a sliver of his soul would be safe? Right now, he was grinning at this sprite so fondly, so kindly, like he truly admired a creature for its beauty. It was an act, of course… but it was such a
flawless one! Right now, with that look on his face, smiling like he was… Why, he was almost cute.

It’s an act for you, Hermione told herself. This performance is all a show to manipulate you, to make you believe he is a sweet, charming person.

“You don’t have to,” Riddle said after a moment, misinterpreting her indecision. “If you’re—”

“No, no. I’m fine.” Hermione said. She cupped her hands and lifted them, grinning now at the sprite. “It’s all right,” she said soothingly. “I would never hurt you.”

The sprite looked at Riddle, who nodded, and then stepped from his hands to hers.

“Now focus. Concentrate on your magic. Think of what you would like it to do and will that suggestion—gently—towards it. Will it to stop glowing.”

Hermione took a deep breath. She wasn’t sure how to do any of what he’d just said, but if Riddle could make a whole field full of sprites do what he wanted, she could influence just one. Hermione willed her magic, yearning for it to impose itself on the sprite. The sprite stared at her, its eyes huge and uncomprehending. It glowed brightly.

Go on, she thought furiously. Stop glowing. Stop glowing, please. Stop it.

Hermione’s concentration was broken by a short, choking sound. She looked up. Riddle had a hand over his mouth, covering half his face.

“What?” Hermione snapped. The sprite jumped from her hands and began to hover, shooting her an indignant look, still glowing as bright as ever.

“Your face,” Riddle said, and when he moved his hands, it revealed a huge grin. Hermione then realized what the sound was. He’d been trying not to laugh at her… a task at which he was now failing. “You looked… You looked like you were about to burst a blood vessel,” he said, laughing between words.

Hermione scowled, embarrassed and annoyed. To make matters worse, her entire face began to burn, and she was sure she was blushing a bright, mortifying red. Riddle put his hand out, and the sprite landed there again, once more docile.

“It takes practice,” Riddle said, not unkindly. “Here. I’ll help you. Take it again.”

“I don’t think it will let me touch it,” Hermione mumbled. The sprite had its back to her.

“Sure it will. Won’t you, gorgeous?” The sprite once more fluttered its wings at the compliment, a vague gesture which Riddle seemed to think reassuring. He smiled at Hermione, saying “Take it.”

Riddle’s expression was gentle, his pale skin unworldly looking, bathed in such a soft, silvery glow as it was. Hermione’s breath hitched.

He was so beautiful.

She started like she’d just been struck with something. What was wrong with her? This was Lord Voldemort, she reminded herself, calling to mind that snake-like monstrosity she had visited in the Pensieve. He was a hideous, horrific person. He always was and always would be a hideous, horrific person.

...But she wanted to learn his tricks.
Moving slowly, Hermione raised her hands to accept the spite, which once more floated onto her palms. Then Riddle did something she had not expected. He cupped her hands with his, and though there were two layers of gloves separating their skin, Hermione’s pulse began racing. Her blush, which had only just begun to fade, was back with a vengeance.

“Don’t think too hard,” Riddle said, his voice low and smooth like silk. “Be gentle with your magic.”

Hermione was confused for a moment, having entirely forgotten what it was she was supposed to be trying to do. Right. The sprite; she wanted to make the sprite stop glowing…

She forced herself to breathe slowly, to focus not on Tom Riddle’s far too close and far too attractive face, nor on the fact that his hands were holding hers… She could feel her heart beating against her chest, could hear the thrumming of its pulse in her ears…

Then, quite suddenly, the sprite’s light went out.

“Oh!” Hermione gasped, then smiled. “It worked! I—”

One look at Riddle told her everything she needed to know. That fucking smug grin. “You did that, didn’t you,” she said with no inflection in her voice. Her own smile vanished.

“I did,” Riddle admitted shamelessly. The sprite lit up again, looking at Hermione and making a small noise that sounded suspiciously like laughter.

Hermione glowered, fixing her heated expression on the sprite, now angry with it. How could it willingly obey Riddle so easily, and not her? She bit her lower lip, fiercely determined, now, to do what Riddle had done. She would succeed; she would wipe the mocking little expression right off its little face, and its light would go out—

It disappeared.

There was a beat in which Hermione blinked, thinking she’d imagined it. But no. It was gone. Their hands were empty. She glanced at Riddle, who looked, for the moment, equally bewildered as he stared at her palms where the sprite should have been, but no longer was. Then he looked at her.

“You vanished it,” he said, his eyes wide with shock.

“No,” Hermione denied at once. She shook her head. “No, no I didn’t.”

“You did.” Riddle’s stunned expression was beginning to change; his lips were starting to curl on one side. “You vanished that poor sprite.”

“I did not!” Hermione shouted, a bit shrilly. The other nearby sprites flew away. Hermione pulled her hands from Riddle’s, holding them tightly to her chest. “I didn’t! I—”

“You wicked, wicked witch,” Riddle said. “And I once called you good.”

He was grinning maliciously. Hermione shook her head, but she was speechless. “To think, I brought you here, showing you some of my favorite creatures in a place that is dear to me, dazzling you with a display of, in your own words, incredible magic—why, one might even go as far as to describe the entire setting as romantic—and you repay me with murder.”

He couldn’t have looked more pleased.

“I did not—I did not murder it!” Hermione yelled. “I mean—vanishing things, according to the Fifth
Law of Magic, states that things that are vanished are actually only transfigured into a state of—"

“You killed it.” Riddle interrupted in a drawl.

Hermione swallowed thickly, her panic quickly transitioning into guilt. “I didn’t mean to,” she said weakly.

“Well, you must have meant to do something, because one moment there was a sweet, innocent sprite in your hands, and the next it was gone.”

“Oh, God,” Hermione lamented. “How could I have done such a thing? I love creatures, I didn’t mean, I would never have meant, I didn’t…”

Her voice trailed off, miserable.

“Honestly, I’m more impressed than anything,” said Riddle, his tone suddenly academic. “Wandless magic isn’t easy, but what I was doing was relatively simple. I was only asking magical creatures to do what they would do anyway, in a more organized fashion. But a vanishing spell? Without a wand or even a word?” He inclined his head slightly towards Hermione, almost deferentially. “That is most impressive.”

“I… is it?” Hermione asked. Her back arched involuntarily, and she sat up a bit straighter. “Is it really?”

“Oh, there it is.” Riddle’s smug grin was back, only it was infinitely darker now. Hermione had a strong sense of foreboding. “You say you care about creatures, and maybe you do; you say you like to read and learn about things, even useless things, and maybe you do; but what really satisfies you, Hermione…”

He paused, his voice dropping to a low purr when he finished, saying, “…is praise.”

For the third time that evening, Hermione’s wits abandoned her. Riddle said it all like he’d just discovered her greatest, most intimate secret, and he was smiling so… so knowingly, mischievously, and Hermione was certain that her body had not felt this hot even when she had literally lit herself on fire.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said in a most unconvincing, high-pitched tone.

“I should probably send the rest of the sprites away,” Riddle said casually, ignoring her statement. “To save them from your wrath.”

“I didn’t—I am not wrathful!” Hermione shouted… wrathfully.

“No, clearly not, not at all. My deepest apologies for even suggesting such a horrendous lie.” Riddle laughed. “I’m just relieved you didn’t set the poor thing on fire before you sentenced it to its transfigured state of non-being. Which is definitely not murder.”

“You think you’re just—that you’re so… You’re just awful!” Hermione spluttered. “You’re terrible!”

“Says the spite killer,” Riddle retorted, smirking.

Hermione’s jaw dropped, astounded that she should find herself in such a situation. She, Hermione, the champion of house-elves and founder of S.P.E.W., needing to prove herself as not a killer of creatures to Tom fucking Riddle! Who had murdered at least one rabbit and four people at this point
in his life, and who even knew what else!

Hermione shook her head and stood. “I am leaving,” she declared.

Riddle didn’t stand nor try to stop her. In fact, he fell back on the snow, putting his hands behind his head and making himself comfortable. Once he laid down, the sprites started to gather around him, resting on his legs and chest. “All right. Have a lovely evening, killer.” His lips twitched. “Let’s do it again sometime.”

Hermione resisted the urge to reach for her wand and send the sprites which had just landed on him, looking at him so adoringly, fleeing. “Careful what you wish for, Tom,” she said quietly. “Maybe next time, I’ll vanish you.”

She regretted the words nearly as soon as she’d said them, but Riddle clearly didn’t find her threatening. He looked up at the stars, his eyes once more following a specific, purposeful path. “...I’m not too worried about that,” he said a moment later.

Hermione gawked at him, then looked up at the stars, then looked back to him. What was it Riddle was seeing there—or thought he was seeing there, more like? Hermione glowered; she didn’t know, because she dropped Divination almost immediately, but it didn’t matter anyway, because it was all nonsense; but he was staring at the stars with an obnoxious glint in his eyes, and his smile was growing wider with every second that he ignored her. He was just waiting for her to burst and ask, she could tell.

*I won’t give him the satisfaction*, she thought. Hermione made an indignant, huffing sound, then turned on her heel to walk away.

She made it about three paces before she tripped.

The silver lining was that she didn’t completely fall; the unfortunate part was that she almost did, and so the sprites that had been near her quickly darted off, terrified as she fumbled forward in the snow. Hermione thought she might like to vanish herself.

“I wonder,” Riddle called, his voice lofty. Hermione froze with her back still to him. “If you are always so clumsy, or if it is something about me, specifically, that causes you to stumble.”

Something about that statement made Hermione’s blood run cold. She didn’t linger to figure out why in his presence. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she repeated in a monotone, not turning to face him.

When she disapparated a moment later, his laughter rang in her ears.
Hermione sat with perfect posture as Holloway lectured, his voice booming in the ominous corridor. The Hall of Time. It was still in disrepair, though it looked much better than it did the day Harry Potter, his band of devious, teenage friends, and some Death Eaters had left it years ago.

This was the third in the rotation of the sub-Departments for the newest Unspeakables of the Department of Mysterious: Hermione Granger, and two older men who had transferred from other Departments, Jackson and Selwyn. First, they had learned about Space, the sub-department for which Hermione had been least enthusiastic, and so she was happy to have gotten it out of the way. Then there had been a few months of research and spell training, lots of reading and learning about hexes and curses which were heavily reliant on Ancient Runes, and which Holloway said they would need to know later. Next had been the Hall of Thought, which was much less enthralling than Hermione had assumed it would be.

Now they had moved on to the Hall of Time—the one which Hermione was most excited about. This was largely because it had much to do with her current ‘extra-curricular’ activities; the ones that involved Draco Malfoy and half-concocted fantasies that would surely never come to fruition… but still. Hermione was intrigued to learn more about Time and, specifically, time-travel. Would have been intrigued anyway, considering her history. It was what Holloway was lecturing about today, and Hermione listened with rapt attention as he conjured up a stream of light, issuing from his wand in a bright, cobalt blue.

“Space and Time, which are in unison,” he said, and the light began to shimmer and swirl, like rushing water, “exist together like a deep, many-layered river. There is our current time, the present in which we live, which exists somewhere in the midst of this. The past, therefore, is somewhere else—above, below. Not necessarily behind, as one might think. Moving at its own rate, constantly a part of and influencing our universe.”

“Where is the future?” asked Jackson.

“It doesn’t exist yet, of course. If it’s the future you’re after, Jackson, the Hall of Prophecy is a few doors down. Don’t worry, we’ll get there eventually. Now.”

The shimmering light flashed, splitting into two layers which were distinguishable only because one was brighter. They mingled around each other, separate, yet at the same time a single entity. “When one uses a time-turner, they briefly jump from one current into the other. We have found, after many years of study, that the extent of this jump is a critical factor in the success of the excursion.”

Hermione’s hand instinctively shot up in the air before she spoke. “Is that why Ministry approved time-turners only go as far as five hours?” she asked.

“That is precisely why,” said Holloway. He looked impressed. Hermione half-expected him to award her points. “Five hours is the limit that has been proven to not shatter time-lines. Which is to say, if someone travels five hours or less in a single jump, it means that they were meant to make that jump in our present. Their actions remain in our current. Are necessary, even.” He gave Hermione a wry smile. “Though I suspect you would know all about that, Miss Granger.”

“I suppose I would.” Hermione agreed, blushing. “But, Mr. Holloway—if you don’t mind me asking—what happens when you go further than five hours back? Say, many years? Decades, even?”
Holloway’s grin faded. “Have you not read the case studies on Eloise Mintumble? I’m shocked, Miss Granger. They were a part of the required reading weeks ago.”

“Of course I read them,” Hermione huffed, “many times. But the reports are all very confusing and conflicting. Time was affected greatly, and yet, things carried on. Descendants ceased to exist, and yet, consequences of their existence prior to their vanishing remained.” Hermione folded her arms across her chest, frowning. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

Holloway sighed heavily and shook his head—something which he did often after Hermione asked questions. “Miss Granger, this is the Department of Mysterious. There are no clear answers here. Only conjectures.”

“All right,” said Hermione. “What are the current conjectures, then, sir?”

“That time has laws which are incomprehensible in the realm of our thoughts—our minds are distressingly limited, as you should know from our previous studies. However, the Time Perpetuals have proposed many theories. They relate somewhat to Space. And they are complicated. Should you decide to become a Perpetual in either department, you shall learn more about them.”

Hermione’s lower lip jutted out. “Can’t you tell us anything about them now?” she pleaded.

The other new Unspeakables voiced their interest as well, and Hollow sighed again, resignedly. “I don’t know much, as I’m not a Perpetual myself,” he said. “But I can tell you what I know, as I understand it.”

He lifted his wand, and the glowing spell flashed. “When one goes only a few hours back in time, the currents meld back into each other seamlessly,” he said, and one current broke off, making a loop and joining with the second. The currents flowed on undisturbed. “We call this Temporal Equilibrium. Safe. However, when one goes further back...”

The same layer which had looped around did so again, only this time it made a much larger arc. It tried to meet back up with the second layer, but then it paused. It twitched, and the light scattered suddenly, shooting off in another direction. “It can fail. Never to return, if there is no intervention.”

“Where did the rest of it go?” Jackson asked.

“Elsewhere,” Holloway responded vaguely. “Another realm.”

“As in, another dimension?” said Selwyn. “Like a separate timeline?”

“That is the conjecture,” said Holloway. “That there are countless other realms; alternative universes that exist under a different set of circumstances. But it’s as I said before—I am not a Perpetual. I know very little on the specifics of these theories. This, the idea of a many layered river, is just a metaphor to better illustrate my point. And the theories they are just that. Theories.”

“So... What do we call that, then?” asked Hermione. She pointed towards the stream which was broken, flowing in the wrong direction. “When it breaks off like that. If we call a successful time jump Temporal Equilibrium, what do we call it when it fails? When whoever made the jump goes too far and ends up... elsewhere?”

She’d asked because she wanted to be able to look it up later, but Holloway only grinned morbidly. “After the disaster of Eloise Mintumble, we call it, ‘not our problem’,,” he said, then waved his wand, and the glowing river of time vanished.
What is your stance on the recently proposed bill concerning lycanthropy?

Hermione smirked as she read the very short message which hardly constituted a letter. Just a question, no greetings nor a signature, but it was no mystery as to who sent it. Riddle’s elegant script was unmistakable, and who else would send such an inquiry?

Glancing once at the barn owl which waited for her to reply, Hermione decided not to hesitate. Riddle was looking for more than just her opinion on lycanthropy (of which she was certain he would disagree), he was also trying to find out whether or not she was well-informed of what was going on in politics.

Now, in the year 1950, was the first time a bill was proposed to limit the days which a werewolf could be employed. The only reason it was never taken into serious consideration was that in this day and age, werewolves were hardly considered for employment at all. Very few werewolves could get hired in this era, and Hermione, having done more than her fair amount of research on lycanthropy once she figured out Professor Lupin was afflicted with it, knew that this bill was largely ignored not because most witches and wizards thought werewolves should not be able to work these days, but for other reasons. To legislate lycanthropy in such a manner would open up a whole new discussion about part-creature policies in the workplace, and there were more pressing things to be worried about. No one was hiring werewolves anyway. Best to just ignore the issue.

It would not resurface until the 1980’s. This dismissed bill would be brought up again by none other than Dolores Umbridge, soon after the advent of Wolfsbane Potion. Hermione scowled at as she envisioned Umbridge’s smiling, toad-like face and her penchant for squashing true progression. Just as things looked like they might be turning around for werewolves, that horrid woman had found this old bill, tweaked some of the wording, and got it passed into law.

One step forward, ten steps back.

Of course, Riddle could not possibly know just how informed Hermione was on such matters. Hermione grabbed a quill and wrote her response, directly under his question on the same sheet of parchment.

*I believe that it was for the best that the bill did not go beyond the second reading. It is absurd to me that those suffering from lycanthropy should not be allowed to work two days prior to and following a full moon—the magical illness is only dangerous and potentially spreadable during the small window of time in which a full moon is present at night, and even then, only with clear skies. One does not choose to be a werewolf. That bill was discrimination, and it is the Ministry’s duty to create legislation which abolishes such practices, not reinforces them.*

Hermione folded the letter up neatly and sent it off with the owl.

Two days had passed since their midnight excursion into the snowy field by the sea, and Hermione was unsurprised that Riddle had chosen to reach out to her again. She was not, however, pleased. Hermione had done a lot of thinking over the last forty-eight hours, and she had come to a very difficult conclusion:

She would not succeed with this plan.

It was a hard pill to swallow, that reality, but it was the truth. She was not denouncing herself completely; there were many things about herself which Hermione took pride in and would not disregard. She was smart. She did not doubt that she was at least on par with Riddle in terms of intelligence, and when it came to recalling facts, dates, and laws, she thought she might best him. She was cunning too; Hermione could be just as clever. She felt she’d proved that to herself well enough
by fitting into the life of Hepzibah Smith, acquiring a notable ally and affluence.

What she did not have, however—and which she had *grossly* underestimated the power of—was his charm.

Riddle’s ability to twist words and cast dazzling smiles at just the right time was uncanny. He was not only smart and clever, he was *alluring*, he was *dashing*. He was a master of manipulation and seduction (not to mention obnoxiously handsome, which was why it worked), and it was a game he had been playing his whole life. Hermione didn’t stand a chance.

*And why would I?* Hermione thought, sighing as she combed through her closet, deciding what to wear for the day. Why had she been foolish enough to think that she could outcharm Riddle? He had been wrapping people around his fingers since the moment he set foot in Hogwarts, climbing that social hierarchy until he was Head Boy and Slughorn’s crowned jewel, and he had only continued to hone those deceptive skills working at Borgin and Burke’s. Tom Riddle as he was right now was at the very pinnacle of his manipulative expertise.

Inversely, Hermione had become a social outcast after she and Ron had broken up, and she then chose to become an Unspeakable, working with a small group who were not exactly the most socially adept people in the world. Unless one counted skulking around with Draco Malfoy from time to time, Hermione hadn’t exactly been refining her people skills.

She could not win.

After so many near slip-ups during their moonlit outing, Hermione knew her initial plan was doomed for failure. Her intentions to get close to Riddle, to pretend to become one of his little pawns so that she could learn where he kept that *damn* diary… It wasn’t going to work. If she carried on this way, he would catch her in her lie, and she would be—to put it in elegant terms—quite fucked.

This was not a game she could afford to lose.

Already, Hermione had begun to formulate a plan B, but she was not looking forward to progressing with it. It would mean getting as far away from Riddle as possible; it would mean leaving London and the comfortable home she had created for herself here.

*But I didn’t travel back in time to have fun,* she reminded herself—as though she needed reminding. *I came here to destroy Riddle… and one way or another, I will.*

The doorbell rang. Hermione quickly grabbed a set of blue robes and put them on, her heart already pounding. He wouldn’t show up here, would he? After that response? No, he wouldn’t—*would he?*

Hermione ran a comb through her hair then rushed downstairs. She let out a sigh of relief when she saw not Riddle—thank Merlin—but a few other wizards. One was an older man whom she recognized, and then there were two younger men in uniforms whom were carrying between them a large, rectangular package. Hokey watched them move it into the drawing room with huge, apprehensive eyes, like she thought *she* should be in charge of that.

“Yes, please, right over here—oh good! Hermione, you’re up!”

Hepzibah ushered Hermione into the drawing room, smiling brightly. “The painting we won from the auction is here,” she said.

“And what a fine painting it is!” Walden, the elderly wizard whom Hermione had spoken with at the gala, beamed at her. “Good to see you again, Hermione.”
“And you, Walden,” Hermione said. He took her hand and politely raised it to his lips, then turned his attention back to the movers. “Was it necessary to have it brought here by wizards, at full size?” Hermione asked. “Surely it could have been shrunk and sent by owl?”

“And risk the chance of damaging the artwork, and making the receiver perform an enlarging charm that could go awry?” Walden said, sounding scandalized at the very thought. “No, no, dear Hermione— as a board member of WAG, I make it my personal duty to ensure that all artworks purchased at the annual gala are delivered to their new homes safely. Especially to such generous donors as you and your aunt.” He winked.

“Yes, yes, very generous,” said Hepzibah distractedly, who was watching the movers like a hawk. “A bit higher, if you please—right above the mantle—and to the left a little more, that’s not quite centered—”

After a few moments where Hepzibah fussed over the exact placement of the work, she seemed satisfied. “Excellent,” she said.

“And now, for the reveal!”

Walden pointed his wand at the painting, which was still wrapped in semi-translucent packaging which Hermione could only assume was a highly protective enchantment. It melted away, revealing the image beneath.

Hermione was just as enamored as the first time she saw it. A little girl, her dress covered in mud in a wild, flowery scene, kneeling in front of a rose bush. Garden roses, Hermione now knew. The kind that had been cultivated and which needed much more care than their sporadic counter-parts.

“Very good,” said Walden. Hermione tore her eyes away from the painting to look at him again. “Well, we’d best be off—many more deliveries to make. Thank you again for your brilliant purchase… and congratulations!”

Walden shook both Hermione’s and Hepzibah’s hands, then bowed himself out.

“You were right, Auntie,” Hermione said, looking wistfully back to the painting. “It is simply perfect there.”

Hermione watched as the little girl furrowed her brows, lifting her hands over the bush. Flowers sprang into life, only to wither again soon enough, the petals falling to the ground and curling into something black and desolate. The longer Hermione stared, the more ambiguous it became. Was the girl bringing the rose bush back to life, or was the child covered in mud the cause of its demise?


“It really does look good there, doesn’t it?” Hepzibah agreed. “It fits just right. We got very lucky!”

Hermione blinked. She looked at Hepzibah, some part of her mind registering that she had said something poignant, but not yet knowing what it was. “What did you say?”

“I said it fits just right,” Hepzibah repeated. “We got lucky.”

Lucky.

Lucky.

“Oh, Hepzibah,” Hermione said. “Have I told you today how very much I love you?”
Hepzibah looked a bit confused, but then she laughed. “Not today, I’m afraid, seeing as you’ve just graced me with your presence. But thank you, dearie. I love you too. Now, for breakfast, I was thinking—oh, my!”

Hepzibah and Hermione both started when an owl came zooming down the stairs, flying straight into the drawing room and landing on the back of a chair. The owl stared at Hermione with wide eyes and held out its leg.

“Good lord, where did that owl come from?” Hepzibah said. “It must have come from the kitchen! Or upstairs!” Then a look of sudden realization spread across her face. She cast Hermione a shrewd look.

“Must have left the balcony open,” Hermione muttered. Why hadn’t this delivery bird just left the letter on her pillow, like the last one had? It must not have been as smart. Hermione took the parchment from the owl and unfurled it.

An interesting opinion, Hermione, but entirely wrong. I would like to explain the finer details as to why this is the case, if you would oblige me. This evening, perhaps?

Hermione read the message quickly, sensing that Hepzibah was standing on her tip-toes behind her, craning her neck to read over her shoulder. Hermione held the letter tightly to her chest and whirled around to face her.

“Who’s writing you?” Hepzibah asked. Then, smiling excitedly, she added, “Is it Abraxas Malfoy?”

Hermione stared at her blankly for a moment. “…Why, yes,” she answered slowly. She cleared her throat and, more confidently, said, “Yes. Yes, it is. We’ve sort of been owling each other since the gala.”

Hepzibah would frown upon her owling that shop boy from Knockturn Alley, but Hermione knew she would have no such issue with her corresponding with the dashing Abraxas Malfoy. How convenient, she thought, that Hepzibah had provided the cover story for her.

“Oh, how exciting!” Hepzibah exclaimed. “Since the gala? How could you not tell me?” She put her hands on her hips, frowning, but the angry expression was gone nearly at once. “Oh, never mind, I can’t possibly be upset. Abraxas Malfoy! Really and truly?”

“Yes, Auntie,” Hermione murmured, blushing.

“Well, go on, tell me—has he asked you on a proper date yet?”

“Er, actually, yes, he has. Just now. That’s what this letter is. He’s asked me out tonight, in fact.”

“Oh! Oh! Well, what are you waiting for? Write back! You want to go, don’t you? But of course you do, It’s Abraxas Malfoy—go on, shoo—go write a response—!”

Hermione laughed nervously as Hepzibah all but pushed her back upstairs. “And when you’ve got that sorted out, we can go out for breakfast, and then we must shop! New dress robes are certainly in order!”

Hermione nodded, glad that Hepzibah was not insisting on reading whatever she wrote. She went to her room and shut the door, her mind reeling as she sat at her desk.

Just minutes ago, she was prepared to throw in the towel—to completely give up on this quest to get Riddle’s diary. And she was still going to abandon most of her crazy plan, she was… but not yet.
If she could just get the diary first, then it would make taking Riddle down infinitely easier. She
needed to get her hands on those two items—the diary and the ring.

The ring would be easier. As soon as it was no longer on his finger, Hermione knew where it was
going. She could simply check the Gaunt shack periodically, monitoring it for dark enchantments,
and then she would have it. That was a waiting game.

A much shorter waiting game, she hoped, than the one she would have to play if she couldn’t get the
diary soon. True, she knew it would go into Lucius Malfoy’s care at some point, but he wasn’t even
born yet, and wouldn’t be a Death Eater for quite some time. No, Hermione wanted that diary, and
she wanted it now.

She knew it existed. She knew it was, more than likely, being kept wherever Riddle lived. And she
knew now knew what she needed to find it. She had the brains, she had the courage. She may not
have had the same silver tongue honed by years of manipulation that Riddle had, but she didn’t need
that.

What she needed… was a little luck.

Hermione picked up a quill and began her reply. Oh yes, she would meet Riddle this evening. She
would oblige him. But tonight, it was going to be on her terms.

Shopping was Hepzibah’s reaction to just about everything. There is a gala approaching—we must
shop! It is the first of February—we must shop! It is a Tuesday—we must shop! So, Hermione was
hardly surprised when, after being (allegedly) asked out on a date by the notorious Abraxas Malfoy,
she should find herself in one of Hepzibah’s many favorite clothing boutiques.

A saleswoman stalked them throughout the store as they browsed, asking Hermione what she was
looking for. “A special occasion?” she inquired lightly.

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, but Hepzibah beat her to it. “She has a very special date this
evening,” she said.

“Is that right?” asked the witch. “What a lucky wizard he is, to have the company of such a pretty
witch.”

“Who said he was a wizard?” Hermione said casually, pushing through the racks of clothes. “Maybe
it’s a muggle fellow I’m seeing.”

She took a moment to appreciate how the woman’s jaw dropped at this unexpected suggestion. “Is—
is he, now?”

“Don’t be ridiculous Hermione,” Hepzibah said chidingly. Hermione smirked. “He is not a muggle
at all, he’s a very proper wizard. Quite a well-known one, in fact.” Hepzibah gave the saleswoman a
meaningful look. “A very well-known bachelor. A very well-known, wealthy, desirable bachelor.”

“Hepzibah, don’t,” Hermione warned. The last thing she needed was for rumors to abound that she
was seeing Abraxas Malfoy when she wasn’t.

But the woman caught Hepzibah’s drift right away. “My goodness, do you have a date with Abraxas
Malfoy?”

“Don’t—don’t shout it to the entire store, please!” Hermione snapped.
The woman lowered her voice. “Abraxas Malfoy?” she repeated. Hepzibah nodded, grinning.
“Wow! You lucky girl!”

Hadjn’t he been the lucky one, just moments ago? Hermione rolled her eyes and pulled out a dress.
“How about something like this?” she said, holding it up.

“Red?” the saleswoman said in shock.

“Is something wrong with red?” Hermione asked.

“Forgive my niece, she’s from the states,” said Hepzibah. “She doesn’t appreciate the gravity of the whole house loyalty thing.”

“What on earth does the color red have to do with anything?”

“Oh, dear,” said the saleswoman, not unkindly, “it’s just that, red is a bit of a Gryffindor color, and Abraxas Malfoy is a very proud Slytherin. His whole family is. I don’t think he’d like red very much.”

Hermione scoffed. As if she didn’t know. “Well then, I suppose it’s a good thing Abraxas won’t be the one wearing it.” Still, she put the dress back on the rack.

“How about something more like this?” Hepzibah pointed out a green gown hanging on the wall, a stylish and dark set of dress robes.

Hermione frowned at it. “Not much of a green person,” she said. “What about purple—is there any reason purple might be offensive?”

She held out another dress that caught her eye. It was a little more reserved than the others, less flashy, which Hermione thought a good thing. The saleswoman and Hepzibah both eyed it critically.

“Hmm… Purple, the color often associated with royalty… I like it.”

The saleswoman grinned, and she flicked her wand, causing the garment to go soaring into her hands. “Come on, lucky lady. Let’s get you into a dressing room so we can make some adjustments. We’ll make this gown fit you like a glove! Oh, Abraxas Malfoy won’t know what hit him. Notorious bachelor, no more!”

Hermione had a good feeling about tonight, now.

She had needed to sneak away from Hepzibah to make a certain purchase, and it had not been an easy feat. She’d had to convince her that she wanted to buy some new perfume, but she was very picky when it came to scents, so it would probably take her forever, so how about I meet you at home, Auntie?

Hepzibah had finally relented, and so Hermione was able to go to the store she really wanted to go to… an apothecary.

Of sorts.

Hermione had never purchased pre-made potions before, always being the kind of witch who preferred to brew them herself, but time was not on her side. She needed this potion now.

She just hadn’t expected it to cost so bloody much! Six hours’ worth for seventy-five galleons! That was a ridiculous amount in her time, not to mention in 1950! But Hermione had payed it, and
thanked the store owner very kindly. It rested in her front pocket now, a tiny vial more valuable than a thousand galleons.

_Felix Felicis._

The thing about luck, Hermione had learned, was that it was not as simple as most people assumed it to be. Luck was not something random or sporadic. Like most things, there were laws to which it conformed—even if those laws did not make much sense, being a set of rules which were different than the ones people were used to. Still, Hermione understood somewhat how _Felix Felicis_ operated once ingested. She’d read about it extensively after Harry had cheated his way into winning a vial (she was not still bitter, really), and she came to understand why witches and wizards did not drink the stuff all the time—outside of the usual side-effects of potential toxicity and its ungodly price tag.

Luck existed within each individual, and it always found balance. When one experienced a great deal of good luck, typically, somewhere along the line, some bad luck would come to even it out. So, when someone drank _Felix Felicis_, they were not simply conjuring up good luck from nothing, but pulling it from somewhere else. This usually meant that whatever good luck the elixir brought on was met with bad luck of equal measure afterwards. In almost all the first-person accounts Hermione had read on the subject, those who took _Felix Felicis_ had the best day of their lives while under the influence of it… and often the worst one not too long afterwards.

Of course, there were exceptions to this rule. Fate truly did favor some people, Hermione thought, because there were also stories of those who had good luck that just went on and on and on, _Felix Felicis_ or no, and it really didn’t seem fair.

Hermione, however, was under no disillusion that she would be one of these people. She would never say that she had good luck, but she wouldn’t say she had bad luck, either. For all the horrible things she could think of in her life, she could think of just as many blessings. She was average in this regard, and so she suspected that she would have typical results with her _Felix Felicis_.

_Which is just fine_, Hermione thought, placing her hand over her pocket to feel that the vial was still there. _It doesn’t matter if I have some bad luck after. I won't be around Riddle then anyway, I'll be sure of it. Six hours should be plenty of time to get lucky enough to at least figure out where the diary is._

She was willing to give it a shot, at least. And if it didn’t work, well… on to plan B.

“Well, don’t you look gorgeous.”

Hepzibah couldn’t have looked happier as she examined Hermione in the mirror, having helped dress her. _These_ dazzling earrings, _this_ shining necklace. Definitely _this_ gold bracelet. Hermione had sighed and let her adorn her, because it truly did seem to make Hepzibah happy. At least her fake-aunt let her do her make-up on her own.

“Thank you, Hepzibah,” Hermione said. “This dress really is lovely.”

It was, too—the purple dress, which she had thought looked more conservative on the rack, looked almost too fetching now. It clung to Hermione’s body a bit tighter than what she was used to, showing off an hourglass curve to her hips she hadn’t realized she had. And the neckline was lower than she’d thought acceptable, but the saleswoman insisted on that cut for the fabric, and Hepzibah hadn’t disagreed, so here she was, moderate cleavage exposed.

But again, no pockets! Yet Hermione was not going to make the same mistake twice. She was
bringing a purse with her, Hepzibah’s annoyance be damned, and she was putting her wand in it.

“You are ravishing. You’re going to have the Malfoy heir eating out of the palm of your hand.” Hepzibah grinned and checked her watch. “Speaking of—when is he coming to get you again? You said eight thirty, right? It’s almost eight thirty now!”

“I did say eight thirty, but I didn’t say he was coming here,” Hermione said. “I’m meeting him out.”

Hermione might have just told her she was pregnant, Hepzibah looked so shocked. “He’s not coming here?”

“Er, no,” Hermione said. She hadn’t thought about it, but she supposed that might have been a social faux pas in this time. Proper wizards probably came to witch’s homes to pick them up in the year 1950. And Abraxas Malfoy was a proper wizard.

“Really? Well, he ought to!”

“Auntie, it’s fine,” Hermione said. “I asked him to meet me out. It’s no big deal.”

Hermione snatched up her bag and stepped away from the mirror. “And please, don’t wait up for me. I felt horrible that night I came back from the gala and you’d fallen asleep in your chair.”

Hepzibah gave her a wary looked. “I’m not a child, Auntie,” Hermione went on pleadingly. “I’m a capable, adult witch. I can take care of myself. I’ll be fine, I promise.”

Hepzibah scrutinized her for a moment more, then sighed. “I know you are,” she said. “Just don’t make any rash decisions, all right?”

“I won’t.” Hermione gave Hepzibah a swift kiss on the cheek, then headed towards the door. “Goodnight, then, Auntie! You too, Hokey!”

Hermione was almost skipping as she dashed down the front stairs of the patio, out onto the streets of London. She went a few blocks away from Hepzibah’s home before she turned into a semi-empty alley, then pulled out her potion, grinning widely at the *Felix Felicis.* Golden droplets bounced around in the vial, like happy little fish. Hermione was beyond eager. The last time she had taken *Felix,* it had been only a few drops, and she hadn’t really taken the time to appreciate it then.

Hermione undid the stopper and swallowed the contents whole, savoring the flavor of it on her tongue.

Her first thought—which was a bizarre and uncomfortable one—was that it tasted a little like Harry. Or the Harry Potter version of Polyjuice Potion, at any rate. A little sweet. She supposed that shouldn’t have been surprising, considering it was golden, just as that brew had been.

But that notion was fleeting, for then Hermione’s mind focused, and it focused quite sharply. *Right then,* she thought, tossing the empty vial into the nearest bin. She was off to meet Riddle. This evening would go splendidly, just splendidly, she had no doubts about that.

Hermione was on the verge of disapparating when she caught her reflection in the window of a closed shop. Hm, no, that wasn’t quite right. Some adjustments were in order. Hermione swept her long hair up into a bun, pinning it high on her head. She then retracted her wand—she was not worried about any muggles seeing her; they wouldn’t—and, casting a quick and wordless spell, stitched up the neckline a bit higher. And this jewelry had to go; the earrings were much too...much, and the necklace too; and this bracelet—no. Not the bracelet. Keep the bracelet.
Hermione nodded firmly to herself once she’d tucked the unwanted jewelry safely in her purse, along with her wand. *Much better,* she thought, unsure why it was much better, but knowing that this was undoubtedly the case.

She grinned. Hermione had been compared to Aphrodite by Hepzibah, called the Golden Lady by the gala’s host; she had been called Cinderella and spoken to as though she were Juliet by Riddle…

*But tonight, I am something far better than any of those.*

Hermione adjusted her hair, smoothed the fabric of her dress. There. Perfect.

*Tonight, I am Lady Luck.*

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